

Delhi, Islamabad fail to reach missile test pact

Pakistan test-fires short-range missile

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has failed to reach a formal agreement with nuclear rival India on giving advance warning of missile tests due to rows over sharing sensitive details on launch sites and trajectories, a minister said.

"They wanted more information than we are prepared to give," Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri told Japan's Kyodo news service in an interview published yesterday.

The South Asian neighbours were also unable to reach agreement on whether cruise missiles should be included when they met late last year in a bid to finally hammer out the long-

awaited deal, Kasuri said.

Pakistan and India, who both conducted atomic tests in May 1998, inform each other under an unwritten 1999 agreement before conducting any of their regular missile tests.

The agreement is designed to prevent misunderstandings leading to an accidental nuclear exchange.

The two countries are currently engaged in a 14-month-old peace process under which sporting, cultural and transport links have been revived.

Both had blamed the "complex" issues involved for failing to reach a formal deal on notification of missile tests but until now have not explained the details.

Meanwhile, Pakistan yesterday successfully test-fired a short-range, nuclear-capable missile, the military said in a statement.

The Hatf II, or Abdali missile is capable of reaching targets up to 180 kilometres (111 miles) away "and can carry all types of warheads," the statement said. "All desired technical parameters were validated."

"As part of the usual confidence-building measures, prior notification of the test had been given to all concerned," it added.

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missile launches.

On March 19 Pakistan tested a long-range missile capable of carrying conventional and nuclear warheads deep into India.

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Pakistan and India have fought three wars since independence from Britain in 1947. Two were over the Himalayan territory of Kashmir, which is divided between the two and claimed in full by both.

Strike paralyses Pakistan's restive southwest

AFP, Quetta

Businesses and transport shut down in Pakistan's violence-hit southwestern province of Baluchistan yesterday in response to a strike call by ethnic minority groups.

Bazaars and offices were closed in the provincial capital Quetta and other cities and towns, while buses were off the roads and pickets struck private cars on highways, witnesses said.

The general strike raised tensions amid a bloody revolt by tribesmen and nationalist militants who are demanding greater rights and economic benefits from the region's huge oil and gas reserves.

"We called the strike because we are opposed to colonisation of the land of minority nationalities," said Sannaulah Baluch, leader of the Pakistan Oppressed Nation Movement, an umbrella organisation of around 30 ethnic groups.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani activists of an ethnic group shout anti-government slogans during a strike in Peshawar yesterday. The strike was called by Pakistani ethnic groups to protest against President Pervez Musharraf's policies, including his plans for military garrisons in Baluchistan.



PHOTO: AFP
Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing (C) descends from a private aircraft upon his arrival at Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu yesterday. Minister Zhaoxing is on a two-day official visit to Nepal.

Chinese FM in Nepal to boost ties

AFP, Kathmandu

China's Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing flew into Nepal yesterday to boost ties with a neighbour shunned by much of the international community since King Gyanendra seized power two months ago.

Li discussed economic cooperation, trade, tourism, and other matters of mutual interest with his Nepalese counterpart Ramesh Nath Pandey, the Nepalese foreign ministry said.

He was later to meet with Gyanendra at the royal palace and attend a dinner with Nepalese officials Thursday night.

The two-day visit will be closely watched by Nepal's powerful southern neighbour India for any hints China will seek to sell military equipment to help the country fight a Maoist rebellion that has claimed

more than 11,000 lives since 1996.

India, along with Britain, cut military supplies to Nepal following Gyanendra's February 1 sacking of a four-party coalition government. Joined by the United States and European Union, it has called for the restoration of democracy.

Nepal, a landlocked Himalayan nation between India and China, has declined offers of military aid from Pakistan. But officials in the Gyanendra-led government have said the country would seek other sources of military supplies.

China, which supplied arms to Nepal in the late 1980s, has termed the takeover a Nepalese internal matter.

Upon his arrival in the capital, Li declined to answer a question about whether China would sell military supplies to Nepal.

India orders national census on wildlife

AFP, New Delhi

India will invite international experts to join its first-ever national census of tigers and other predators amid growing fears the animals are vanishing from the jungle, a top government official said yesterday.

Experts will also conduct the first head count of antelopes in the census slated to begin in November and end February next year, said Rajesh Gopal, director of India's Project Tiger, a state-run conservation effort launched in 1973.

New Delhi ordered the mammoth census after an official investigation into one of India's most prestigious wildlife sanctuaries found that all of its 26 striped cats had vanished, sparking a national uproar.

Manmohan welcomes US offers of strategic partnership

AFP, New Delhi

India Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has welcomed last week's offer from the United States to sell warplanes, nuclear reactors and missile systems, India's media reported yesterday.

Singh initially expressed "disappointment" in a telephone call with President George W. Bush on the offer because it included a decision by the United States to resume the sale of F-16 fighter jets to Pakistan.

However, speaking to reporters Wednesday on his way to the Indian Ocean island nation of Mauritius, Singh changed his tone to one of cautious welcome.

"India welcomes the develop-

ment," Singh told reporters covering his state visit. "The fact is that the US has expressed its willingness to engage in matters related to increased cooperation in matters related to nuclear as well as non-nuclear issues."

The United States cut all civilian nuclear sales and cooperation to India after the country tested a weapon in the desert state of Rajasthan in 1974.

As well, India has not signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty which bars the United States and other countries from selling civilian nuclear reactors to countries that test or acquire nuclear weapons outside of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

Pak forces net 6 terror suspects

AFP, Peshawar

Pakistani security agencies have arrested six suspected al-Qaeda-linked foreigners in a swoop on their hideout near the Afghan border, officials said Thursday.

The men, believed to be Afghans and Central Asians, were seized on Wednesday in an upscale neighbourhood of Peshawar, a major northwestern frontier town, following a tip-off by intelligence sources.

It is the latest round-up in key US ally Pakistan's crackdown on suspects linked to the network of Osama bin Laden, who has eluded a major manhunt since the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in late 2001.

The authorities seized two handgrenades, a pistol, computer disks and militant literature, an interior ministry official told AFP.

Tsunami panic killed 5 in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

At least five people were killed when thousands fled inland from Sri Lanka's battered coastal areas during this week's tsunami warning, police said Wednesday.

Three people died of heart attacks after hearing the tsunami warning on Monday night while two others died in road accidents in their haste to escape, police spokesman Rienze Perera said.

"We have... five deaths related to tsunami evacuation on Monday night," Perera said, adding that the deaths occurred in coastal towns in the south and east of the island -- both badly hit by the December 26 tsunami which killed nearly 31,000 people and left a million homeless.

The meteorological department issued the warning after an earthquake measuring 8.7 on the Richter scale struck Indonesia.

It withdrew the alert five hours later after it became clear that the quake had not stirred up the seas in the way the December 26 quake had.

Sri Lankan legislators Tuesday called for a single body to issue warnings on potential natural disasters after broadcasters complained of a lack of information about Monday's tsunami alert.

Kashmiris angry at death threats by rebels over bus journey

AFP, Srinagar

Kashmiris due to ride the first bus between the Indian and Pakistani zones of the divided region hit out angrily yesterday at rebels who issued death threats, amid concerns over the leaking of the passenger list.

Four guerrilla groups said in a joint statement Wednesday that those planning to ride the bus would face the consequences of being branded "traitors" by anti-Indian rebels.

"We humbly request persons selected to travel on the first and second bus to Muzaffarabad not to enter the coffin but if they do, they will find their names in the list of traitors," they said.

The statement, issued by the al-Nasireen, Save Kashmir Movement, Farzandan-e-Millat and al-Arifeen groups, was accompanied by the list of 40 people, complete with residential addresses, selected by India to travel on the maiden service.

"We feel pained at what has happened. We want to cross over to see our near ones not to do any politics," said Ghulam Fatima, 55, whose name appears on the Indian list along with that of her husband Mohammed Abdullah.

"No power on earth can stop me from meeting my daughter," a fuming Fatima told AFP.

"I appeal to the Mujahedin (militants) to withdraw their threat as my parents are desperate to meet their daughter," said their second daughter, Nazira Bano, 35.

Bano said her parents had many times been denied visas to visit Pakistan by New Delhi but now that they had a chance to visit Muzaffarabad "this threat has come up".

Another passenger, requesting anonymity, said those riding the bus were "innocent civilians who have nothing to do with politics".

"If militants had to ban this service they should have told us before we applied for the permits," he said.

The bus is scheduled to operate from April 7 between Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir, and Muzaffarabad, the administrative headquarters of the Pakistani zone of Kashmir.

The bus has been hailed not only as a historic boost to peace between the two nuclear rivals but also as a way of reuniting families divided for nearly six decades.

The rebel statement said the bus service would not be in the interests of the ongoing "jihad" (holy war) against Indian rule in Kashmir.

"It is a conspiracy to strengthen the Indian occupation," it said.

Afghan appeal court cuts jail sentence of 3 US vigilantes

AFP, Kabul

An Afghan appeal court yesterday slashed by at least half the sentences of three Americans accused of torturing suspects in a so-called private war on terror, a judge said yesterday.

Alleged ringleader Jonathan Idema had the 10-year sentence he was handed at a chaotic trial last September reduced to five years, Abdul Latif, one of the four judges hearing the case, told AFP.

Fellow appellant Brent Bennett will serve three years instead of 10, while Edward Caraballo's time behind bars was cut from eight years to two, the judge added.

However, the court in the capital Kabul did not overturn the men's convictions, the judge added.

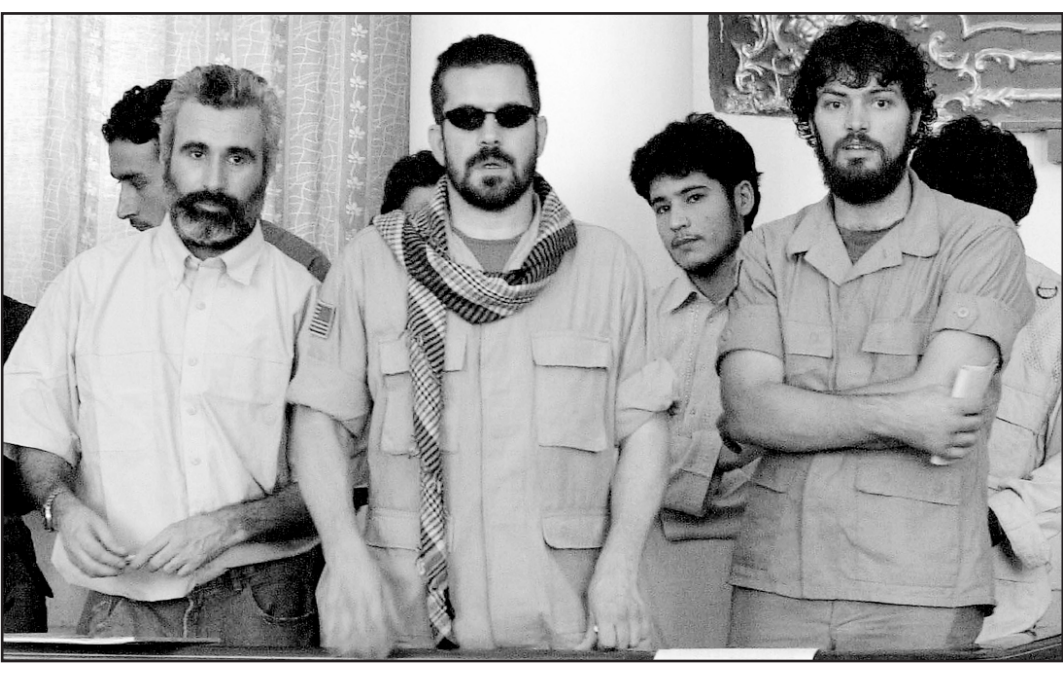


PHOTO: AFP
File photo dated September 15, 2004 shows US citizens (L to R) Edward Caraballo, Jonathan Idema and Brent Bennett at a Kabul court on charges of illegally running a private jail and torturing suspects in a "private war on terror". An Afghan tribunal yesterday slashed by at least half the sentences of the three Americans accused of torturing suspects in a so-called private prison. However the tribunal did not overturn the men's convictions.

Amnesty calls on UN to avert catastrophe in Nepal

AFP, Geneva

Amnesty International on Wednesday urged the UN's top human rights forum meeting here to take action to prevent a "human rights catastrophe" in Nepal.

"This year the Commission on Human Rights must act forcefully and decisively to reverse the situation that could turn a human rights crisis into a human rights catastrophe," said Irene Khan, the secretary general of the advocacy group.

Khan said the 53 member states in the rights commission faced a test with a draft resolution condemning violations in the Himalayan kingdom, amid "widespread" torture and an increase in killings by security forces.

King Gyanendra dismissed Nepal's four-party coalition government on February 1, clamping down on political opposition. A Maoist insurgency has also claimed more than 11,000 lives since 1996.

"The Maoists have also committed massive abuse of human rights: they regularly abduct civilians, torture them, force them to join their ranks or kill them," Khan said.

She insisted that failure to take action on Nepal would prove that the UN body was not only powerless to face up to violations in big countries because of "powerful political interests, but that the Commission is

incapable of acting to prevent a human rights crisis in any country."

Switzerland has been circulating a draft of resolution which it hopes to formally submit to the commission next month, diplomats said. Khan said it appeared to be "very comprehensive".

Nepal has had the highest number of disappearances in the world for the last two years, according to Amnesty.

Meanwhile, at least 19 Nepali Congress (NC) activists were arrested Wednesday across Nepal for protesting against King Gyanendra's February 1 power grab, the country's main opposition party said.

"Police arrested at least 19 NC activists from four different districts of the country for holding anti-king protests," it said in a statement.

"The NC has been holding peaceful and non-violent protest programmes since March 18 against the king's proclamation," it added.

Authorities could not be reached to confirm the arrests.

Around 50 political and student NC activists were detained around the country on Tuesday, a day after police arrested at least 138 others. Scores more have also been detained in recent weeks.

Human rights body blasts Gayoom

AFP, New Delhi

A Maldivian opposition party and an Asian rights organisation Wednesday lashed out at President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom who is currently visiting India, accusing him of scuttling democracy and responsibility for custodial deaths.

At a news conference in New Delhi, the Maldivian Democratic Party spokesman Mohammed Lateef and Suhas Chakma of the Asian Centre for Human Rights accused Asia's longest-serving leader of using all possible means to stay in power.

Lateef, who lives in exile in Sri Lanka, said the Maldives was a small country of just 300,000 people but its defence spending was very high.

"Where is all this money going? It is just to keep him (Gayoom) in power," he said.

Gayoom held talks with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Tuesday and was in the southern city of Madras on Wednesday.