

Indo-Pak bus drivers honoured to be part of history

AFP, Srinagar

The Indian and Pakistani drivers of the first buses to link divided Kashmir in nearly 60 years yesterday said they were honoured to be taking part in the historic service.

"I am prepared for the job, both mentally and physically," Khursheed Ahmed, 53, told AFP. "I am happy I am becoming part of history."

Ahmed was one of the drivers of the two coaches which left from Srinagar to connect with Muzaffarabad in the Pakistan-controlled zone of the divided Himalayan state for the first time since 1947.

Militant groups in Indian Kashmir have threatened to attack the buses and target the drivers selected to launch the service.

But Ahmed's colleague, Abdul Majid, 42, said he was not worried.

"My family members were a bit worried but I had to do my job," he said. "I think we are doing a great job by uniting the divided families."

Their counterparts on the Pakistani side also said they were honoured to drive the historic service.

"I am happy that I am putting my name in history," Raja Pervez, who is in his late 40s, told AFP shortly before his coach was due to leave the revamped bus terminal in Muzaffarabad, capital of the Pakistani zone of Kashmir.

"I am very excited that I am getting the honour of driving the first bus in nearly six decades," he added.

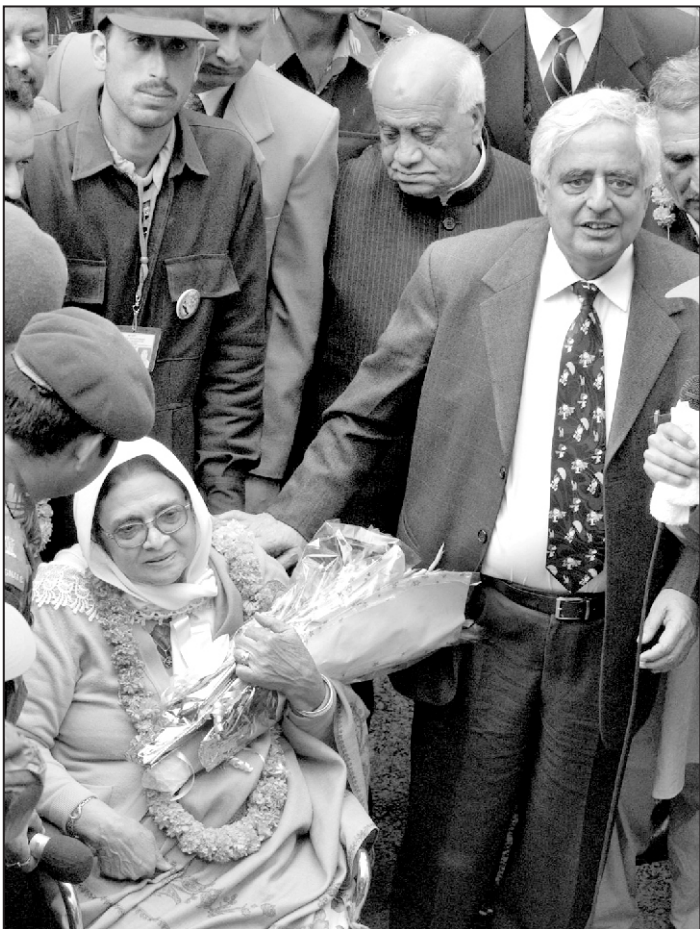


PHOTO: AFP

Indian Kashmir Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed (R) welcomes passengers from Pakistani controlled Kashmir after they crossed Kaman Bridge, the de-facto border between India and Pakistan, on the Line of Control yesterday. The first bus service to link divided Kashmir in nearly 60 year, was flagged off under tight security. Passengers boarded buses in Pakistan's Muzaffarad and India's Srinagar to reach Kaman Bridge before crossing over on foot to board buses on the other side of the border to reach the respective cities across the divide.

Hiccups hold up tsunami aid deal with Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's warring parties have yet to agree on how to disburse millions of dollars in foreign aid for tsunami survivors more than three months after the disaster, a senior minister admitted yesterday.

Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar said there was no deal so far on a mechanism to handle tsunami relief in the island's embattled northeast and the government awaited a response from the rebels.

The government had to work with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the troubled regions because the writ of the state did not apply there on a "day to day basis," the minister said.

"In this situation, we have to deal

with an organisation (LTTE) that you would not normally like to deal with," Kadirgamar told reporters.

He said the government's own machinery could not function freely in rebel-held areas without the approval of the guerrillas.

Kadirgamar said some of the rebel leaders who were handling the proposed "joint mechanism" were out of the country. "We would have to wait for them to return."

He said donors wanted an equitable distribution of the aid and the government had no intention of hijacking the relief work. The December 26 tsunamis killed nearly 31,000 people and left a million homeless in Sri Lanka.

Kadirgamar had announced two weeks ago that efforts with the LTTE following the tsunamis were

focused on relief rather than reviving the Norwegian-brokered peace talks stalled since April 2003.

Both sides had broadly agreed to establish a federal state in Sri Lanka to resolve the long-running separatist conflict which had claimed more than 60,000 lives between 1972 and 2002. But the negotiations remain inconclusive.

Despite the suspension of face-to-face discussions in April 2003, the two parties are abiding by a ceasefire arranged by peace broker Norway and put in place from February 23, 2002.

Norway had expected a tsunami relief deal in February or March, but the two sides had failed to agree on the wording of an agreement, diplomatic sources said.

Nepali king to attend Asia-Africa summit in Indonesia

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal King Gyanendra will travel to Jakarta on April 20 for the Asian-African Summit in his first foreign trip since he grabbed power two months ago, state-run radio announced yesterday.

The King will travel with Queen Komal, the report said.

Gyanendra will join about 45 other Asian and African leaders, including Chinese President Hu Jintao, whom the Indonesian foreign ministry said would attend the April 22-24 meeting in Bandung, West Java.

The Asia-Africa Summit was first held in 1955 in Bandung.

Girl married to dog to ward off tigers

AFP, New Delhi

A girl in eastern India has been married to a dog in a bid to ward off tigers, a report said yesterday.

The tribal wedding took place to the beating of drums in a slum on the outskirts of Orissa state capital Bhubaneswar, the Press Trust of India news agency said quoting witnesses.

Local people said the girl had developed abnormalities in her teeth which made her prone to "being devoured by a tiger".

The tribal ritual is believed to rid her of the danger, they said.

Pakistani slays 6 including wife and in-laws

AFP, Multan

A man shot dead six people including his wife, her parents and three other family members over a family dispute in eastern Pakistan, an official said yesterday.

Police arrested Ghulam Mustafa after the shootings in Bahawalnagar, some 170km southeast of the central Pakistani city of Multan, police officer Mirza Ghaffar told AFP.

'Basic healthcare can save lives of millions of women, children'

AFP, New Delhi

The lives of millions of newborn babies and thousands of women around the world could be saved each year by improving access to basic health care, World Health Organisation chief Lee Jong Wook said yesterday.

Lee said that worldwide half-a-million women die annually during pregnancy and childbirth.

"More than three million babies are stillborn and four million newborns die within the first days or weeks of their lives," he said at the release in New Delhi of the World Health Report 2005 on the occasion of World Health Day.

The report focuses on the health of newborn children and mothers.

"Over six million of these children can be saved with simple health methods like rehydration and breastfeeding. Likewise, thousands of women can be saved if they have access to skilled childbirth care," he said.

According to the report, almost 90 percent of deaths among under-fives in the world are due to just six conditions, including acute neonatal conditions such as premature birth, asphyxia at birth and infections (37 percent), pneumonia (19 percent), diarrhoea (18 percent), malaria (eight percent), measles and HIV/AIDS.

Most of those conditions could be easily treated with rehydration

therapy, antibiotics, antimalarial drugs, vitamins or minerals, greater breastfeeding, immunisation or skilled care during pregnancy and childbirth, the report said.

"Health of mothers and children is the foundation of our society," Lee said.

"Our message today is one of hope ... about the potential waiting to be fulfilled," he said.

According to the report, nearly 136,000 women die each year in India due to maternal complications. Only 42 percent of births are attended by skilled midwives. India also accounts for 1.05 million neonatal deaths.

Nearly 2.3 million children under five years of age die in India each year, most of which deaths could be prevented by simple health measures, the report said.

Meanwhile in Bangladesh Health Minister Khandaker Mosharraf Hossain said at least three pregnant women die each hour in the country because of complications during delivery.

"At least three mothers die each hour across the country due to complications even though the country has marked rapid progress to minimise the maternal mortality rate during the last decade," the official BSS news agency quoted Hossain saying at an event to mark World Health Day.

Beijing would never seek to dominate Asia, says Wen

AFP, Islamabad

Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao said Wednesday that Beijing would never seek to dominate Asia or pose a threat to other countries.

"Some people are worried that a stronger and more developed China will pose a threat to other countries. Such a worry is completely misplaced," he told a conference of Asian and Middle Eastern ministers in the Pakistani capital.

Wen is on his maiden tour of four South Asian countries, amid worries in Beijing about a changing geopolitical climate as the United States looks to boost New Delhi as a major power.

"China will never seek hegemony," Wen, who is on a three-day official visit here, said in his keynote address to the Asian Cooperation Dialogue's 26 member nations."

Washington has recently put an emphasis on strengthening ties with New Delhi, a move that analysts said would likely be seen by China as an

attempt by the United States to contain Beijing's rising power.

The Chinese premier said Asian countries should focus on trade and economic links, adding that Beijing would continue to broaden and deepen its cooperation with the rest of the region.

Wen is expected to woo India when he visits New Delhi on April 9 for four days. He will also spend a day in Bangladesh and another day in Sri Lanka after leaving Pakistan on Thursday.

New Delhi has previously been sidelined by Beijing, which traditionally placed greater importance on relations with India's main rival Pakistan.

China and India have gone to war over border disputes, but relations improved dramatically after a visit to China in 2003 by then-prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

During that visit India acknowledged Tibet as a part of China and China gave up its territorial claim over the tiny Indian state of Sikkim.

Nepali parties to protest king's power grab

Maoist blockade of Kathmandu bites

AFP, Kathmandu

Five Nepalese political parties plan to hold a protest against King Gyanendra's power grab today to coincide with the 1990 establishment of parliamentary democracy in the Himalayan country, party sources said.

"We have been making hectic preparations for a massive show of strength during our joint demonstration in the capital Friday to mark the 30 years of the partyless panchayat rule in Nepal," a party source said.

In 1960 then king Mahendra seized power and suspended parliament and party politics, a year after Nepal adopted a multi-party constitution.

Current monarch Gyanendra sacked the government and declared emergency rule on February 1.

The king said his power grab was necessary to tackle a Maoist insurgency that has killed more than 11,000 people since 1996.

But the parties have called on him to restore democratic rule.

Dozens of senior political leaders, including former prime minister Girija Prasad Koirala, have been released in the past month after being held under house arrest following the

king's power grab.

Koirala's Nepali Congress party and the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist, both part of the sacked government, said they would join hands with three former opposition parties -- the Nepali Congress (Democratic), the People's Front Nepal, and the pro-India Nepal Sadbhawana Party (Anandi Devi) -- to protest the takeover.

The five parties issued a joint statement last week saying they would hold three days of demonstrations in Lalitpur on the southern outskirts of Kathmandu from Wednesday to Friday and invited the public to join.

Meanwhile, a Maoist strike to blockade Kathmandu has slowed traffic on Nepal's highways to a trickle, police said Wednesday, as political parties began a separate protest against King Gyanendra's power grab two months ago.

At least six people were arrested by riot police at the tourist town of Patan on the outskirts of Kathmandu for taking part in a demonstration against the king's sacking of the government and imposition of emergency rule on February 1, witnesses said.

There was calm, however, on the nation's roads as a blockade called by the Maoist rebels from Saturday

began to bite, witnesses and police said.

The government, in response to the 11-day blockade called to protest the king's power grab, has banned travel on major roads without armed escort and has slapped an overnight curfew on main highways between 9:00 pm and 3:00 am.

A police official said that on Tuesday, some 400 vehicles had left Kathmandu while 350 had arrived in the Nepalese capital carrying passengers and commodities.

Officials said that on a normal day, 500 buses, 500 to 600 trucks and around 170 other vehicles entered Kathmandu.

"Security forces are escorting vehicles along all the major road links ... We have not allowed any vehicles to operate on their own on these highways due to security reasons," said the police official, who asked not to be named.

"The number of buses operating on the highways has decreased significantly despite the assurance of escort services as the operators fear for their safety," he said.

Dozens of vehicles were seen lining up Wednesday at Nagdhunga checkpoint, the main entry-exit point to the Kathmandu Valley, awaiting a security escort out of the capital.



PHOTO: AFP

Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi (C) and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (centre R) greet the main marchers at the closing ceremony of the re-enactment of Mahatma Gandhi's famous 'salt march' in the west Indian village of Dandi in the state of Gujarat Wednesday. Hundreds of people arrived in the village after a 26-day walk from the city of Ahmedabad, covering a distance of 388km on the 75th anniversary of the 1930 'salt march' which shook the British empire.