

Chinese PM terms India trip historic & successful

AFP, New Delhi

Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao yesterday described his four-day India visit as "historic" and as having produced "rich results", while hailing a key agreement with India to resolve a decades-old border dispute.

"We have produced very rich results through this (India) visit," Wen told reporters in New Delhi at the end of a four-nation South Asia trip that included stops in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

"It is fair to say that this is a historic visit," Wen said adding that when he met host Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Monday, Singh had told him: "Prime minister, actually we two are making new history."

The two Asian giants, who fought a brief but bitter war in 1962, Monday signed a slew of accords including one that sets out a roadmap for resolving a dragging border issue.

India says China is occupying 38,000 square kilometres (14,670 square miles) of Indian territory in Kashmir illegally ceded to it by Pakistan in the 1950s.

Beijing, in turn, claims that the remote 90,000-square-kilometre Indian-administered state of Arunachal Pradesh belongs to China.

A formal ceasefire line is yet to be established but the unsettled frontier has remained largely peaceful, thanks to agreements signed in 1993 and 1996.

Wen Tuesday hailed the border deal as the "very first political guiding document signed since the resumption of negotiations" in the 1980s to sort out the border dispute.

"This is a sign that we have brought our boundary negotiations to a new stage," he said.

Beijing had taken a number of steps to maintain stability and tranquillity along its borders with India, he said.

"As long as we have sincerity

and patience and as long as we persevere in this effort, we will be able to build the India-China boundary into a bond of peace and friendship," Wen said.

The Chinese premier also hailed a joint statement he and Singh had signed in which the Asian giants agreed to establish an India-China strategic and cooperative partnership for peace and prosperity.

"...We have taken the relations to a new level," Wen said, listing the adoption of a programme to boost two-way trade from 13.6 billion dollars to 20 billion by 2008 and to 30 billion by 2010 as the third "major result" of his trip.

He said the status of the tiny Himalayan state of Sikkim was "no longer an issue" between the world's most populous countries.

He was referring to China Monday formally burying its decades-old dispute on New Delhi's claims over the former British protectorate of Sikkim after India reiterated Beijing's sovereign right over

Tibet.

Wen said China was working towards setting up a market for border trade adjacent to Sikkim.

"We hope the two sides will make earnest efforts ... to further develop border trade cooperation. This would certainly serve the interests of the people living on the borders," he said.

On the emerging trilateral cooperation between India, China and Russia, Wen said this move should not be construed as an alliance targeting other countries.

India, Russia and China have held several ministerial-level meetings to coordinate their positions on global and regional issues at the United Nations and other international forums.

Wen left New Delhi for Beijing early afternoon, a foreign ministry official said.

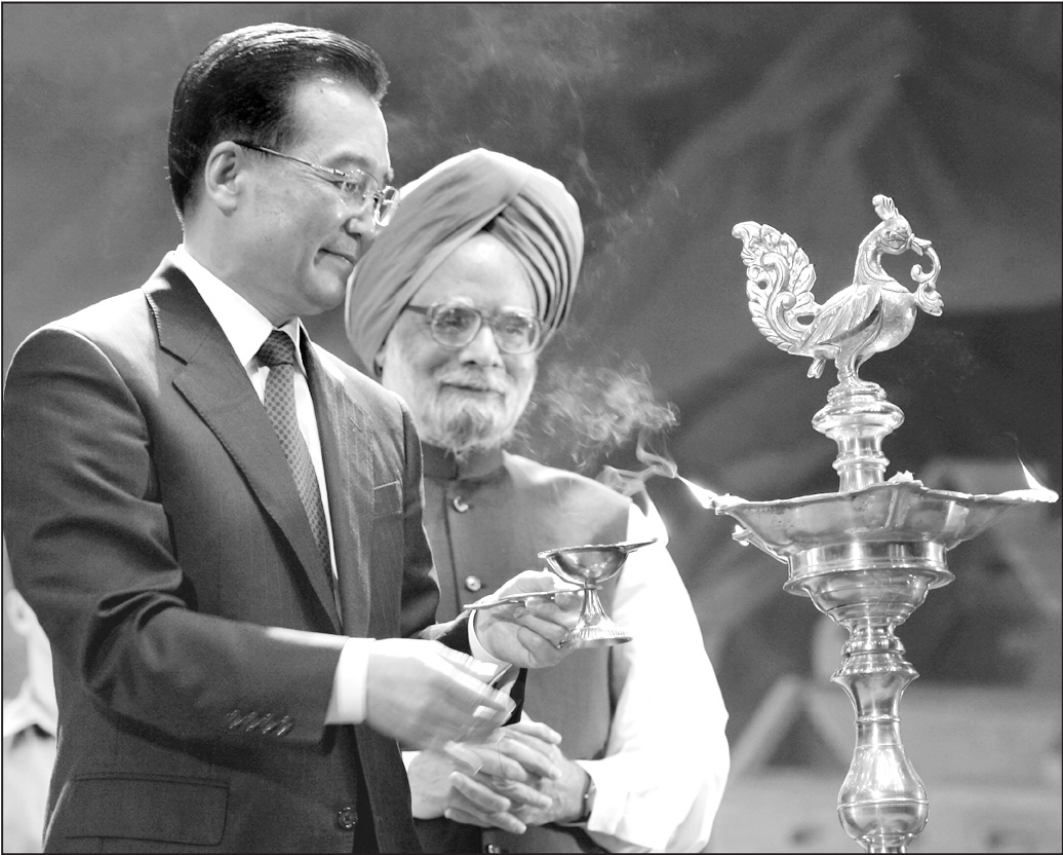


PHOTO: AFP

Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao (L) lights a lamp as his Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh looks on during the inauguration of a Chinese cultural programme in New Delhi Monday. China and India signed a historic accord setting out "guiding principles" to resolve their decades-old border dispute, a move expected to boost economic cooperation and bilateral ties between the two Asian giants.

'China-Pakistan nuke cooperation in line with NPT'

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

China asserted yesterday that its nuclear cooperation with Pakistan is entirely for peaceful purposes and under the safeguard of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"Nuclear cooperation between China and Pakistan is completely for peaceful purposes," Premier Wen Jiabao said.

"China-Pakistan cooperation is entirely compliant with the NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty)," he said and added that it was under IAEA safeguards.

He was responding to a question whether China's military assistance to Pakistan, particularly for its nuclear and missile programme, would come in the way of realising the full potential of China-India relations.

India and China on Monday agreed to set aside their border dispute and work towards establishing a strategic and cooperative partnership for bilateral peace and prosperity.

Wen, winding up a four-day India visit, told reporters in New Delhi that China's nuclear ties with Islamabad are subject to "the supervision and the safeguards" prescribed by the International Atomic Energy Agency.

Prakash Karat replaces Surjeet as CPI(M) general secretary

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

In a generational change of guard in the 41-year-old Communist Party of India (Marxist), British-educated Prakash Karat has taken over as its general secretary replacing 89-year-old Harkishan Singh Surjeet.

Not only that, 56-year-old Karat's wife Brinda, a Bengali in her fifties, became the first woman to become a member of the party's highest policy-making forum the Politburo.

However, the party did not accept the request of 91-year-old former chief minister of West Bengal Jyoti Basu to relieve him of being a member of the Politburo because of his age and failing health. Both Basu and Surjeet, who had offered to step down as party general secretary, have been retained in the Politburo.

The choice of Karat as the party general secretary came at the CPI(M)'s party 18th Congress which concluded on Sunday.

Prakash Karat, who had had part of his education in Britain, joined CPI(M) in 1970 and shot to fame as the leader of the party's students' front in Jawaharlal Nehru University here.



PHOTO: AFP

US President George W. Bush (R) walks with Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to their joint press conference at Bush's Prairie Chapel ranch Monday in Crawford, Texas. Sharon reaffirmed his support for a Palestinian state with contiguous territory in the West Bank after meeting with Bush.

Bush pushes Israel to stop settlement expansion

AFP, Crawford

US President George W. Bush on Monday backed Ariel Sharon's plan to withdraw from the Gaza Strip, while urging the Israeli premier to stop all expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank under the Middle East peace roadmap.

As the two stood side-by-side outside the US leader's private ranch in Crawford, Texas, Bush praised Sharon for his "strong visionary leadership" in initiating the Gaza withdrawal, known as the disengagement plan.

"I strongly support his courageous initiative to disengage from Gaza and part of the West Bank," he said, referring to the withdrawal of more than 8,000 Jewish settlers from Gaza and four isolated West Bank settlements.

He also urged the Palestinians to coordinate with Israel over the evacuation, which is due to start on July 20.

"The prime minister is willing to coordinate the implementation of the disengagement plan with the Palestinians. I urge the Palestinian

leadership to accept his offer," Bush said.

Affirming the internationally drafted roadmap as "the only way forward", Bush urged both parties to comply with the obligations laid down in the peace blueprint.

The president urged the Palestinians to "combat terrorism in all its forms", and took a strong line with Israel, calling on the US ally to live up to its roadmap commitments and not push ahead with plans to expand West Bank settlements.

"I told the prime minister of my concern that Israel not undertake any activity that contravenes its roadmap obligations or prejudices final status negotiations," Bush said.

"Therefore Israel should remove unauthorised outposts and meet its roadmap obligations regarding settlements in the West Bank," he said, later driving the point home: "The roadmap clearly says no expansion of settlements."

Reaffirming his commitment to the roadmap, Sharon pledged to remove unauthorised outposts, and to meet all commitments with regard to West Bank settlements.

"I will fulfil my commitment to you, Mr President, to remove unauthorised outposts and settlements. Israel will also meet all its obligations under the roadmap," said Sharon.

Bush's comments about settlement expansion -- mentioned three times at the joint press conference -- came as something of a surprise to the Israeli delegation which had been hoping the issue would be sidelined amid a flare-up of violence in the southern Gaza Strip.

But speaking to reporters after the summit, Sharon insisted that despite the US leader's comments, there had been "no disagreement whatsoever" over the expansion of Maaleh Adumim in his talks with Bush.

Last year, Bush signalled his support for Israel to hold on to large West Bank settlement blocs within the framework of a final status agreement, in what amounted to a sea-change in long-standing US opposition to settlement activity.

However, Israeli plans to enlarge Maaleh Adumim, the largest settlement in the West Bank, have caused concern in Washington.

And even after promising to comply with Israel's roadmap obligations, Sharon said he was keen to see "territorial contiguity" between Jerusalem and Maaleh Adumim, which lies some five kilometres (three miles) east of the Holy City.

Rumsfeld warns Iraqis against corruption

REUTERS, Baghdad

Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, on a surprise visit to Iraq, warned the country's leaders yesterday against political purges and cronyism that could spark "lack of confidence or corruption in government."

He said the United States also opposed any move to delay the political schedule in Iraq, which includes drafting a new constitution by mid-August and elections in December.

After meeting Rumsfeld, Iraq's recently named prime minister, moderate Islamist Ibrahim Jaafari, said he would fight corruption in the transitional government.

"I don't deny that there are challenges," Jaafari told reporters after the brief meeting.

"I am sure we are going to form very good ministries. All of them (workers) they are good technocrats. They are very effective from different backgrounds. So I think we can cooperate, all of us, and face these challenges successfully."

Rumsfeld's ninth visit to Iraq since the 2003 invasion came as the US military hopes to cut troop numbers there next year, as long as Iraqi security forces continue to improve.

"The presence of (US) security forces is not going to be something that is going to go on forever," he told reporters on his military transport plane that flew direct from Washington.

Despite progress last week with the naming of Jaafari and President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd, to lead the transitional government, political factions are still jockeying for power.

Rumsfeld said decisions such as ministerial appointments should be for the good of Iraq and not based on party loyalties.

"It's important that the new government be attentive to the competence of the people in the ministries and that they avoid unnecessary turbulence," he told reporters.

"We have an opportunity to continue to make progress politically, economically ... anything that would delay that or disrupt that as a result of turbulence, or lack of confidence or corruption in government, would be unfortunate."

He noted a legal provision allowed for a delay of up to six months in writing a new constitution before the next round of elections but said the United States would oppose such a move.

"If someone wants to hang around waiting for perfection in this business, you are unlikely to find it. And you are never going to have a political process," he said.

He began his day in Iraq with talks on the military situation with US Army General George Casey, the top American commander in Iraq, and Army Lieutenant-General John Vines, commander of multinational forces.

Maoists end road blockade

Nepali army keeps on armed escorts, Kathmandu to allow UN rights monitors, govt official slain

AFP, Kathmandu

An 11-day road blockade called by Nepal's Maoist rebels to protest against King Gyanendra's power grab ended yesterday but the army said it would keep escorting vehicles to prevent guerrilla attacks.

"Army escorts of vehicles coming in and going out of the capital (Kathmandu) will continue for some time," a security official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. "We're serious about protecting vehicles and the public."

The Maoists called the nationwide blockade to protest against Gyanendra's decision February 1 to dismiss the civilian government and assume absolute power in what the

monarch said was a move to end the deadly insurgency.

The protest was the latest in a series called by the rebels who have been battling since 1996 to topple the monarchy and install a communist government.

The blockade launched on April 2 cut the number of buses and trucks on roads in the Kathmandu valley by about 50 percent to 1,500, the security official said.

A senior official of the Federation of the Nepalese Chamber of Commerce and Industry, P.R. Pandey, expressed relief at the end of the protest.

Nepal's Maoist rebels have shot dead a government official in the country's remote southwest, police

said yesterday.

The rebels late Monday barged into the home of Balananda Kafle, acting chief district officer of Bardiya district, and gunned him down, a senior police officer said.

Meanwhile, Nepal has agreed to immediately allow United Nations monitors into the country to help prevent human rights abuses, the UN's top human rights official announced Monday, after authorities there came under pressure from their main aid donors.

"Breaking the cycle of serious and systematic abuses will be the first essential step toward achieving peace and reconciliation in Nepal," UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Louise Arbour said.

China-Japan row escalates as both sides demand protection of nationals

AFP, Beijing

A row between Japan and China intensified yesterday as the Asian powers each demanded protection for their nationals and Beijing insisted Tokyo did not deserve a cherished permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Three days after thousands of Chinese took to the streets to vent fury at Japan and its past aggression, the Japanese trade minister described China as a "scary country" and Tokyo repeated demands for a Chinese apology.

But there were also calls for calm, with Beijing's envoy to Tokyo telling Japan it had nothing to fear from his nation's economic and military rise.

The Chinese government, which largely tolerated the rare demonstration in Beijing, on Tuesday backed protesters' view that Japan should not win a Security Council seat until it faced up to its bloody past.

"Only a country that respects the history, takes responsibility for the

past history and wins over the trust of the people of Asia and the world at large can take greater responsibilities in the international community," Premier Wen Jiabao said on a visit to fellow Security Council aspirant India.

"I think the whole issue in China-Japan relations is that Japan needs to face up to history squarely," said Wen, whose nation is the only Asian power with a veto-wielding UN seat.

Japan has made winning a prestigious UN seat a key foreign policy goal to show it is a global power 60 years after its defeat in war.

Tokyo's global aspirations and its approval last week of a nationalist history textbook have triggered fresh bitterness in China, which suffered a brutal occupation by Japan from 1933 to 1945.

But Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi dismissed as "wrong" the idea that Japan ignited the rallies through the way it remembers its past.

Taliban vow new attack after 12 militants killed

AFP, Gardez

The Taliban vowed yesterday to assassinate a former Afghan commander after a failed bid to kill him sparked a US air strike which officials said killed up to 12 militants.

The insurgents died in a day-long battle with Afghan and US-led forces in the southeastern province of Paktia on Monday which ended with US helicopter gunships and tankbuster jets being called in, Afghan officials said.

Two US servicemen were also injured in the firefight, the US-led coalition said. The target of the attack -- Kheyal Baaz Khan Sherzai, the former commander of neighbouring Khost province -- survived.

Taliban spokesman Mullah Abdul Latif Hakimi said only one of its fighters had died and Sherzai remained on the ousted Islamic regime's hit list.

"Our Mujahideen are back and safe in their origins. Khan Sherzai is our target, he survived this time but we will get him soon," Hakimi told AFP by satellite telephone from an undisclosed location.

"He will face the music."

The bloody battle came amid a renewed spring offensive by the Taliban, who have emerged from Afghanistan's harshest winter for a decade to launch a string of recent attacks on US and Afghan forces.

More than 18,000 US-led forces, including some 2,000 American airmen, are based in the country to help root out the remnants of the Taliban. The US-led coalition ousted the Islamic regime in late 2001.

Afghan officials said 12 suspected Taliban were killed when US aircraft were called in to help after Sherzai was ambushed on a road between Kabul and Gardez, the capital of Paktia province.