

Pakistan, India mull ways to end Siachen stand-off

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan and India yesterday exchanged ideas on ending a two-decade-old military standoff on Kashmir's Siachen glacier, as senior defence officials began a two-day meeting here.

The delegations, led by Indian Defence Secretary Aji Vikram Singh and his Pakistani counterpart Tariq Waseem Ghazi, met for three hours in the opening session in a "cordial and friendly atmosphere," an official statement said.

"Ideas were exchanged by both sides for a peaceful resolution of the Siachin dispute," foreign ministry spokesman Jalil Abbas Jilani told AFP, without elaborating.

The talks, part of a general

diplomatic thaw between the nuclear-armed South Asian neighbours, were to resume Friday and lead to a joint statement.

Pakistani officials earlier said they would push for a troop withdrawal from the 21,000 foot (6,300 metre) high glacier at the borders of India, Pakistan and China, to positions held more than three decades ago.

The dispute over Siachen has left more soldiers dead from extreme cold than from bullets. Analysts say it lost its strategic value when India and Pakistan became nuclear powers in 1998.

India's Singh sounded a note of optimism on his arrival late Wednesday for the talks, which were held in the garrison town of

Rawalpindi, near the capital Islamabad.

"We have been given directions by our respective political leadership to move ahead," he told reporters. "We have come with an open mind and ... the atmosphere is definitely positive."

When Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf met Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh last month, the two sides pledged to find a solution to the Siachen row.

Pakistan wants to see implemented what it says was an understanding reached in 1989, under which soldiers from both sides would pull back to where they were at the time of the signing of a historic 1972 agreement.

Musharraf said in an interview

published this week that India "backtracked" on the deal when both countries' defence secretaries met in New Delhi in 1992, but added that he believed the two sides would be able to end the stand-off.

A senior Pakistan foreign ministry official said it would "not be acceptable to Pakistan in any case" if India, which occupied most of the ice field in 1984, wanted to maintain its troops' positions.

India and Pakistan have rowed over Siachen since 1948 and the first of their three wars, when a ceasefire line was drawn in Kashmir up until a reference point known as NJ 9842.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Defence Secretary Tariq Waseem Ghazi (L) shakes hands with his Indian counterpart Aji Vikram (R) prior to a meeting in Rawalpindi yesterday. Pakistan and India have begun talks on a military stand-off over a Kashmir glacier, with Islamabad expected to push for a troop withdrawal to positions both sides held more than three decades ago.

Karzai sold country to US: Mullah Omar

AFP, Islamabad

Reclusive Taliban leader Mullah Omar Wednesday accused Afghan President Hamid Karzai of selling his country out to the United States, according to press reports.

"The pact in Washington between (US President George W.) Bush and Karzai is in fact a deed to sell the motherland of Afghanistan until an indefinite period," Omar said in a statement given by a senior Taliban member to the Pakistan-based private Afghan Islamic Press.

"The valiant people of Afghanistan will never accept it. This is not the Taliban's, but the voice of conscience of independent Afghan people," Omar was quoted as saying.

The statement's authenticity could not be immediately verified.

Landslides kill 12 in Nagaland

REUTERS, Guwahati

Landslides triggered by heavy rain damaged hundreds of houses in northeast India yesterday and killed at least 12 people, including four children, officials said.

They said police and rescue workers were looking for more bodies as 10 people were still missing and believed to be buried in Mokochong town in Nagaland, about 160km north of state capital Kohima.

"The landslides happened early in the morning after heavy rains last night. People were sleeping when it occurred," a senior police officer in Kohima told Reuters by phone.

He said 17 people were seriously injured.

MUSHARRAF SAYS

Islamabad, Delhi should boost economic coop

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf said Wednesday the ongoing peace process with nuclear rival India should move forward in tandem with economic cooperation.

"We have to move forward on the political front effectively for dispute resolution and also simultaneously look for developing trade and eco-

conomic ties," Musharraf told a visiting Indian business delegation here.

After years of hostility that sometimes spilled over to fighting, the two sides launched a peace process early last year.

They have since restored road and travel links, most notably a bus service across the disputed borders of Kashmir, the troubled region that has been the cause of two of their

three wars.

Musharraf said he hoped that increased interaction between the business leaders of Pakistan and India could bring about a better understanding of the issues between the two countries.

But he also warned that the root causes of the two countries' problems like the Kashmir dispute also must be addressed.

Gun battles in Kashmir villages kill 5 people

AFP, Srinagar

Three Indian soldiers and two Islamic militants were killed and four soldiers wounded in two separate clashes yesterday in remote villages of Indian-administered Kashmir, police said.

One gun battle left two Islamic militants and an Indian army soldier dead in the northern Kupwara district Thursday morning. Four soldiers were wounded.

"The fighting is continuing and reinforcements have been sent to the area," the police spokesman said.

Rocca talks war on terror with Musharraf

AFP, REUTERS, Islamabad

US Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca yesterday held talks with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, a close ally in Washington's so-called war against terror, officials said.

The talks focussed on bilateral relations, defence and anti-terrorism cooperation and the regional situation, Pakistani officials said.

Rocca also signed a memorandum of understanding with Pakistan

minister for economic affairs Hina Rabbani Khar, under which US will provide 147.6 million dollars to improve education and health services, officials said.

She also met with Pakistani foreign minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri and MPs from both ruling and opposition parties at Pakistan's federal parliament.

However Rocca's expected meeting with opposition leader Fazalur Rehman, whose alliance of Islamic parties has called for countrywide protests over alleged abuse of the

Koran at Guantanamo Bay, did not take place.

"We are not turning down the offer to meet her but we would have liked a one-on-one meeting that would have given us an opportunity to explain many things," Rehman told AFP.

Protests erupted across the Muslim world after a May 2 report in Newsweek magazine that US investigators had found that interrogators at the US detention centre in Guantanamo Bay threw a Koran in a toilet to rattle Muslim inmates.

India, China plan joint training for troops

REUTERS, New Delhi

The armies of India and China, which fought a border war four decades ago, plan to hold unprecedented joint counter-terrorism and peacekeeping training programmes, the Indian army chief said yesterday.

General Joginder Jaswant Singh said the plans had been discussed with visiting Chinese chief of general staff, General Liang Guanglie, who began a six-day tour on Monday.

Military ties between the two Asian giants have vastly improved and their soldiers have gone on joint mountaineering expeditions, played volleyball matches, exchanged gifts and shared meals on the frontier, Singh said.

"The momentum given by the leaders of our two countries is being enhanced further by the two militar-

ies," he told reporters, referring to the upswing in diplomatic ties between the world's two most populous countries.

"On the roadmap of military-to-military cooperation in the future (are) exercises where both countries could carry out together to counter terrorism or on UN missions," he said on the sidelines of a defence technology conference in New Delhi.

Indian army officers visited China to witness military exercises last year and Chinese officers were invited to see manoeuvres by the Indian army and air force this year, he said.

These may be small steps for two of the world's largest defence forces but they indicate the growing warmth between them considering more than 3,200 Indian soldiers were killed in the brief border war in 1962, Indian defence officials said.

Nepal releases student leader held since April on court order

AFP, Kathmandu

The Nepalese royal government Wednesday released a prominent student leader held for the past month after the country's Supreme Court said his detention was illegal.

Pro-democracy student leader Gagan Thapa, former Nepal Student Union general secretary, affiliated to the Nepali Congress, was released from the Bhaktapur District Court on the eastern outskirts of Kathmandu, witnesses said.

Thapa was arrested in April after weeks on the run for mounting protests against the February takeover by King Gyanendra, who sacked a four-party government for failure to stem a Maoist rebellion that has claimed more than 11,000 lives since 1996.

Hurriyat leaders' Pak visit may hit roadblock

PTI, Srinagar

The plans of Hurriyat leaders of the moderate faction to travel to Pakistan may hit a roadblock with the Regional Passport Office in Srinagar citing non-availability of travel forms for the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service at present.

With only a week left for the leaders to board the June 2 bus, the usual 15-day duration for travel form verification may also add to their woes.

"We are out of forms for the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus service at the moment, Regional Passport Officer SL Sreeramulu said.

Asked if the Hurriyat leaders would be allowed to board the bus, Sreeramulu said there are certain verification processes that need to be followed.

"Nobody applies to us with preference for travel on a particular date. There is a list prepared on the basis of 'first come first serve' basis which has to be followed," he added.

Sreeramulu said the list of passengers to travel on the bus on June 2 was almost complete.

However, the passport officer said he would oblige to accommodate the Hurriyat leaders in the list if the Centre issues a specific order in this regard.

The moderate faction of the Hurriyat, led by Mirwaiz Omer Farooq, had on Wednesday accepted Pakistan's invitation to visit the country and also the part of Kashmir occupied by it.

However, the hard line faction, led by Syed Ali Shah Geelani, has said that they would take a decision on accepting the invitation.



PHOTO: AFP

Former US president Bill Clinton (L) meets with former Indian prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, at his residence in New Delhi yesterday. Clinton arrived in India on Wednesday to boost the fight against Aids and tour the tsunami-ravaged southern coastline as a UN special envoy.

CLINTON TELLS INDIANS

No time to waste in fighting Aids

AFP, New Delhi

Former US president Bill Clinton yesterday told India, which has the world's second largest number of people with HIV/Aids, that it has no time to waste in combating the disease.

Clinton, who has used his celebrity clout to become a global anti-Aids campaigner, welcomed new Indian health ministry figures suggesting a sharp slowdown in HIV infection rates in the country of over one billion people.

But speaking at a national business conference, Clinton -- whose Arkansas-based William J. Clinton Foundation, has struck deals with drug firms to buy costly

Aids drugs and distribute them in Africa, India and elsewhere -- said the numbers were no reason for complacency.

African nations, which had India's rate of HIV infection of less than one percent just a decade ago, were grappling with Aids epidemics of "unimaginable proportions", he told a national business conference on Aids.

"If India acts now," it can save itself from going down that road, said Clinton.

"You have come too far, worked too hard" to follow another course, Clinton said, referring to India's emerging economic superpower status, driven by its booming outsourcing industry.