

India's emergence seen unstoppable

It may help balancing China's might

AFP, Washington

India's emergence as a political and economic power is unstoppable and could play a key neutralising role over China's growing clout, according to experts and officials at a forum here Wednesday.

"We no longer discuss the future of India: We say 'the future is India,'" Indian Commerce and Industry Minister Kamal Nath said at the conference organised by the US-India Business Council.

In 30 years, he predicted, India would "certainly have achieved" 100 percent literacy, become a developed country, enjoy the same fundamentals as the United States, and should have resolved the thorny Kashmir problem with Pakistan.

The one-day conference assessed the US-India relationship over the last three decades and

debated what the next 30 years could hold for the partnership between the world's most populous and oldest democracies.

Nath cited India's potential as a key global foreign investor, saying Indian investments in Britain have already exceeded British investments in India.

Indian investments in Australia have also outstripped Australian investment in India, he said.

"Even with China, with whom our trade a decade ago was just a billion dollars a year, it is now more than a billion dollars a month," he said.

By 2035, "I am confident that we would have provided a standard of living for our people comparable at least to what developed countries enjoy today," a buoyant Nath told his audience of largely American and Indian business leaders.

Top Hurriyat leaders start Pak mission

AFP, Chakothi

Muslim separatist leaders from Indian Kashmir were given a rousing welcome when they crossed the heavily militarised ceasefire line here yesterday on an historic visit to the Pakistani zone of the disputed Himalayan region.

The prime minister of Pakistan-administered Kashmir, Sardar Sikandar Hayat, and other senior politicians hugged the leaders as they arrived in this town near the Line of Control (LoC), the de facto border between Indian and Pakistani Kashmir.

A police band played national tunes while a crowd released pigeons and hundreds of multi-coloured balloons.

The Indian Kashmir leaders walked across the Kaman Bridge on the Jhelum river, which forms part of the LoC, and then drove to Muzaffarabad, the capital of the

Pakistan-administered zone of Kashmir.

The entire 58-kilometre (36-mile) route from Chakothi to Muzaffarabad was decorated with welcoming bunting and banners.

The visit of nine moderate leaders of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), the main separatist umbrella group engaged in a 15-year campaign against Indian rule in Kashmir, is their first to the Pakistani zone.

The trip is part of a peace process between India and Pakistan to end a bitter dispute over divided Kashmir, the Himalayan region that has sparked two of three wars between the nuclear-armed neighbours.

Delegation member Bilal Gani Lone said he was happy and excited to be in the Pakistan portion of Kashmir.

"There is a hope and today's journey is the first step," he said.

"Let us hope this first step brings peace and best hopes for the people of India, Pakistan and especially the people of Kashmir," he said.

"The visit shows that both India and Pakistan have realised that involvement of Kashmiris is essential in resolving the dispute between the two countries," a senior Hurriyat leader, Moulvi Abbas Ansari, said.

Another Kashmir leader, Fazlul Haq Qureshi, said: "We are in our home. We are among our brothers. We wish success to the peace process".

The Hurriyat leaders will hold talks with the political leadership in Pakistani Kashmir on Friday.

"The visit is a major breakthrough in the ongoing efforts to resolve the Kashmir issue," said Raja Farooq, political advisor to the state government here.



Kashmir supporters of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) stage a rally in Srinagar yesterday. Nine moderate leaders of the main separatist umbrella group APHC travelled in private cars from the summer capital Srinagar to Salmanabad as part of their trip to the Pakistani zone of Kashmir.

GOHAR AYUB SAYS Kashmiris did not back Pakistan in '65

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Islamabad

A large number of some 4,000 Pakistani commandos sent to the Kashmir Valley in 1965 were butchered or caught by Indians after the local population failed to support them, former Pakistan foreign minister Gohar Ayub Khan says in another sensational disclosure.

Gohar says his father and then military ruler, Mohammed Ayub Khan, sent the commandos into India only after being fed apparently "doctored reports" that the valley's Kashmiri population was ready to revolt against "Indian occupation".

But this never happened, and the commandos ended up getting trapped in the region after the Indian Army cut off their escape routes, leading Islamabad to broaden the war front, Gohar, who is writing his autobiography, told The News in an interview.

Gohar said Ayub Khan was misled by "doctored" reports of Kashmiri leaders from across the border that painted "a rosy picture" that the entire population of the valley was ready to fight Indian forces and (that the Pakistanis) would help the commandos occupy territory if they were given weapons".

Tsunami aid deal Chandrika in India for talks

AFP, New Delhi

Sri Lanka's president arrived here yesterday for talks with Indian leaders that are expected to cover Colombo's plans to strike a controversial tsunami aid-sharing deal with Tamil rebels banned in India.

The Indians have kept mum on the agenda for the talks between Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Indian Premier Manmohan Singh and other senior Indian leaders on bilateral issues.

"It's a working visit," said Indian foreign ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna. "There's no agenda. When two heads of state meet, they're free to discuss everything."

But diplomatic sources said the discussions would touch on Colombo's plans for the tsunami aid-sharing pact with the rebels who have been fighting for independence in Sri Lanka's north and east where its two-million-strong Tamil minority is concentrated.

Indian news media reports said the talks would also focus on New Delhi's concern about reports that the rebels were developing their own air force.

UN suspends mine clearing in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

The United Nations suspended mine clearing work in southern and western Afghanistan yesterday after two of its workers were killed in the third bombing targeting the operation in two weeks.

Two Afghan deminers from the Mine Detection Dog Centre (MDC) were killed on Wednesday and five others injured when their vehicle was bombed on the outskirts of Grishk City in southern Helmand Province.

Wednesday's blast was the third bomb attack against Afghan demining organisations in the past two weeks, the United Nations said.

It struck hours after a suicide bomber killed 21 people at a mosque in neighbouring Kandahar province.

Nepalese climber scales Mt. Everest peak for record 15th time

AFP, Kathmandu

A Nepalese climber has conquered the world's tallest peak, Mount Everest, for a record 15th time, Nepal's tourism ministry announced Wednesday.

Apa Sherpa, 48, reached the summit of the 8,848-metre-high (29,028-foot) Everest early Tuesday, the ministry said in a statement.

Apa first scaled Everest on May 10, 1990, and has been to the top of the world 15 times in as many years earning him the title of "Mr. Everest" among mountaineers and the Sherpa community of mountain guides, according to the website, Everestnews.com.

Thousands of Sherpas such as Apa from the Solukhumbu district, home to Mount Everest in north-eastern Nepal, depend on the earnings from the three-month climbing season to provide for their families the whole year.

Bodo rebels start truce in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

A ceasefire between the Indian government and a separatist group in the northeastern state of Assam began Wednesday with the aim of ending nearly two decades of insurgency, an official said.

The ceasefire with the National Democratic Front of Bodoland began at midnight, said Assam Home Commissioner B.K. Gohain.

"The ceasefire has begun with the cessation of military operations, and very soon the (rebels) will disarm and live in designated camps as per the truce pact," Gohain said.

The Indian government and the group signed the ceasefire pact on May 25 in New Delhi. The agreement requires the rebels to disarm

and move from jungle hideouts into designated camps.

The pact aims to end two decades of violence that have left thousands dead. It will be monitored by a committee of government officials and rebel leaders, Gohain said.

The Bodos, a largely Hindu and Christian tribal group, account for about 10 percent of Assam's 26 million people and live in the western and northern part of the state.

New Delhi has also invited the state's other frontline rebel group, the United Liberation Front of Assam, for peace talks, although the group wants four of their jailed leaders to be released before any negotiations.

More than 10,000 people have lost their lives in the insurgency in Assam during the past two decades.



Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (R) and his Indian counterpart Natwar Singh (L) speak to journalists during their meeting in Russia's Pacific port city of Vladivostok yesterday. The Russian and Indian foreign ministers discussed here some problems hindering the cooperation between the two countries in political and economic domains.

Maldives MPs debate multiparty system

4 dissidents detained

REUTERS, Colombo

The parliament of the Maldives looked set yesterday to allow political parties for the first time in the Indian Ocean archipelago in a move that would end centuries of autocratic rule.

But as the People's Majlis prepared to debate allowing the registration of political parties, police arrested four leading opponents of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, who have formed a party in exile in neighbouring Sri Lanka.

"We hope that by this afternoon the Majlis will approve the registration of parties," Chief Government spokesman Ahmed Shaheed told

Reuters by telephone from the archipelago off the toe of India, famed for its luxury resorts and world class scuba.

"We hope there could be 3, or 4 or 5 parties seeking pre-registration as soon as Sunday," Shaheed added. "Police are saying they have information that (the arrested) planned to set a mob on the parliament to intimidate members of the Majlis."

Gayoom, who has ruled the Maldives since 1978 and is Asia's longest-serving ruler, promised to ease his stranglehold on power with a raft of political reforms after human rights groups harshly criticised his administration's rights record.

The present constitution of the mostly Sunni Muslim nation of nearly 300,000 people does not allow the formation and operation of political parties, and the Majlis is made up of independent candidates.

The Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP), which operates out of Sri Lanka but whose independent supporters have won parliamentary seats in key atolls, slammed Thursday's arrests, saying they proved Gayoom was insincere.

The four arrested include MDP party leader Mohamed Nasheed, who returned to the Maldives in April after 18 months of self-imposed exile.

Ulfa seeks US help to end Assam insurgency

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Guwahati

The outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam (Ulfa) has sought the intervention of the US - which calls it a terrorist organisation - to bring an end to more than 25 years of insurgency in India's northeastern state of Assam.

The Ulfa, in a letter addressed to US President George W Bush, said the people of Assam and other northeastern states were being subjected to military repression in the name of countering insurgency.

"We sincerely believe that the United States is the only country that can use its influence to bring about a satisfactory solution to the Assam-India conflict and therefore, appeal for Your Excellency's intervention in the matter of resolving the conflict," Ulfa chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa said in the letter, a copy of which was received on e-mail by the agency.

'The couple at odds'

Growing disharmony clouds Sonia, Manmohan's future ties

AFP, New Delhi

Amid celebrations feting the first anniversary of the political union between India's ruling Congress party chief Sonia Gandhi and Premier Manmohan Singh, reports of growing disharmony cloud their future.

This has touched off fevered speculation among pundits and the opposition about who's really running the nation.

Is it Sonia who turned down the job of prime minister's job after leading Congress to a surprise election victory? Or is it the soft-spoken technocrat-turned-politician Singh who she nominated for the post?

"Sonia is the tail that wags the government," India's leading news magazine, India Today, said in an editorial.

"The Odd Couple," as they were dubbed when Congress took power,

have become "The Couple at Odds," the magazine said.

The opposition Hindu nationalists have painted Singh as a "puppet" of Gandhi, who was unanimously re-elected Congress president last weekend amid much fanfare.

Normally in Indian politics, the prime minister is also president of the ruling party.

But Gandhi, who brought the party back from the wilderness when she defeated the Hindu nationalists, decided to turn down the job while remaining head of the party and the Congress-led coalition.

She tapped staunch family loyalist Singh for the role of prime minister. Singh is known as the architect of India's economic reforms in an earlier stint as finance minister and commands wide respect as a man of impeccable honesty.