

Kashmiri leader urges rebels to join political mainstream

AFP, Karachi

A senior moderate separatist leader from Indian Kashmir yesterday called on militants fighting New Delhi's rule in the restive Himalayan region to join the political mainstream.

"Now the time has come when political and militant wings sit together and formulate a strategy for the settlement of the Kashmir dispute," Mirwaiz Omer Farooq told foreign journalists in the Pakistani port city of Karachi.

He pointed to the example of Northern Ireland, where militants had backed a political solution to end decades of Protestant-Catholic violence in the British-ruled province.

Farooq is leading a group of moderate leaders from the All Parties Hurriyat Conference -- an umbrella group of more than two dozen Indian Kashmiri groups -- on a rare visit to Pakistan.

India, which had never before allowed Hurriyat to travel to Pakistan, agreed to the visit as part of an 18-month old peace process between the neighbouring countries.

"At this juncture, political leadership should play a leading role with the support and consensus of militant leadership in finding a just solution to the Kashmir problem," Farooq said.

He also offered to give militant groups representation in Hurriyat. Militant groups have waged a bloody insurgency since 1989 against Indian rule in mainly Muslim Kashmir, which is partly controlled by Pakistan. The insurgency has left tens of thousands dead.

India accuses Pakistan of arming and funding Muslim rebels, while Islamabad says it is doing its best to prevent rebel infiltration into the Indian side.

Both countries, which have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir, claim the region in full.

Xinhua adds: Pakistani Information and Broadcasting Minister Sheikh Rashid Friday said the Indians should immediately release the Kashmiris detained in jails as a new confidence building measure (CBM).

"There should be new CBMs on Kashmir such as instant release of

all those people detained in the India-held Kashmir and free access to the media of the entire region," Rashid told a private television channel.

Rashid believed that the issue of Kashmir would get settled in near future vis-a-vis the prevailing global conditions. "This is a changing world order, wherein golden opportunities have been opened for the resolution of both the issues of Kashmir and Palestine," he said.

Rashid said the start of a bus service in the divided Kashmir in early April would open new avenues of communication between the people of Kashmir on both sides of the Line of Control (LoC).

He suggested that the Kashmiris from the other side of the LoC be allowed to bring their fruits and handicrafts to the markets in Pakistan and the Pakistan-held Kashmir.

Rashid said the economic condition of the Kashmiris in the India-held Kashmir had been deteriorating for the past years and the mutual trade would provide them relief.

Manmohan visits Kashmir en route to Siachen Glacier

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh began yesterday a rare visit to a remote Buddhist region in Indian Kashmir, the first leg of a trip that will take him to visit frontline troops on the world's highest battlefield.

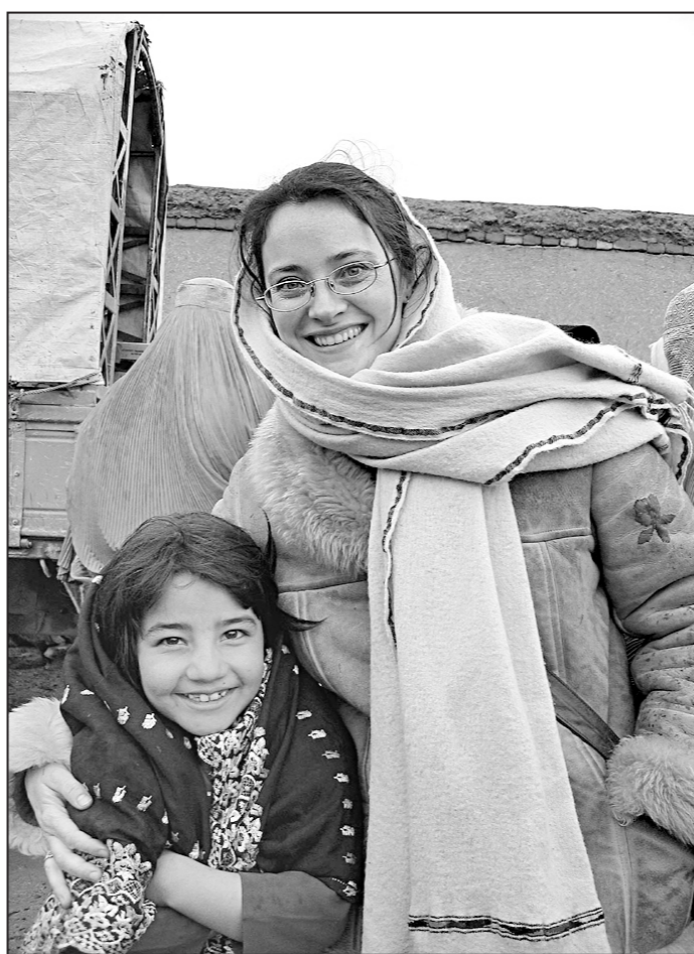
Singh took part in a ceremony in Leh, capital of the Ladakh region, to rename the airport after a renowned local Buddhist priest Kushok Bakula Rimpochhe.

Singh called the priest a "great teacher" and said it was "only appropriate" to call the airport after "this distinguished son of Ladakh and man of God," in remarks broadcast on India's Sahara news channel.

"We pay tribute to the memory of the architect of modern Ladakh," said Singh, whose agenda also included the inauguration of two power projects in the energy-starved region.

Leh is situated in Buddhist-dominated northeastern Kashmir, held in part by nuclear rivals India and Pakistan but claimed fully by both.

On Sunday, Singh will make the first visit by an Indian premier to the Siachen Glacier, the world's highest battlefield.



This undated photo released by Care International shows Italian Care humanitarian worker Clementina Cantoni in Afghanistan. Cantoni was released Thursday after more than three weeks in captivity in Afghanistan.

Freed Italian hostage flies home

AFP, Kabul

Italian aid worker Clementina Cantoni flew home Friday after spending more than three weeks as a hostage in Afghanistan, amid reports the Afghan government cut a deal with the kidnappers for her release.

The 32-year-old, who works for aid group Care international, left Kabul on a private jet accompanied by her mother, father and brother hours after officials announced that her ordeal was finally over.

Afghan authorities insisted no ransom was paid but Italian newspapers reported that they had released the jailed mother of Cantoni's abductor, the alleged head of a criminal gang, in exchange.

Cantoni was snatched from her car at gunpoint in the centre of the Afghan capital on May 16, in an incident that spread fear among the Afghan and foreign communities in Kabul.

A Falcon 900 jet plane carrying Cantoni took off for Rome at 12:45 pm (0815 GMT) from Kabul military airport, Kabul civilian airport director Mohammad Qasim Jarar told AFP.

Cantoni's mother Germana, who appeared on Afghan television this week to beg for her release, her

father Fabio and one of her brothers flew over from Italy to be with her as soon as they knew she was free, officials said.

"Her mother, father and brother had come to Kabul to take her back home," a source at the airport said. Dark-haired and bespectacled Cantoni, last seen publicly with two guns pointed at her head in a video released by the kidnappers, appeared frail but in good health.

"They treated me well. I was being watched by a group of women," Cantoni was quoted as saying upon her release by Italy's La Repubblica daily.

Her main hostage-taker, identified as Timur Shah, reportedly demanded the release of his mother, held prisoner on charges that she had helped her son in a previous kidnapping, La Repubblica and Corriere della Sera reported.

The Italian government had to convince reluctant Afghan authorities to release the woman, La Repubblica said. She was finally freed Wednesday, clinching the deal with the kidnappers, the reports said.

A local businessman then brought Shah's mother to an apartment in the Afghan capital and Cantoni was handed over in exchange, Corriere reported.



PHOTO: AFP

Myanmar workers sit on boats to cross the famous Yangon River in the south of the capital city Yangon Thursday. Myanmar's junta rejected a US State Department report as "lacking in objectivity" for placing this military-ruled country among the worst human trafficking violators in Asia.

Abbas wins fresh truce commitment

REUTERS, Gaza

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas won a commitment from militant groups in the occupied Gaza Strip on Thursday to maintain a truce with Israel that has been hit by a flare-up of violence.

Abbas sealed the pledge in talks with leaders of 14 Palestinian political factions including the Islamic militant group Hamas and the smaller Islamic Jihad. But militants said they would still respond to any Israeli attacks.

"When we behave wisely we will be the winners and we will put Israel in the corner, rather than have Israel put us in the corner," Abbas, calling on militant groups not to take unilateral action, said later on Palestinian television.

Israeli warplanes broke the sound barrier over Gaza throughout the talks, which came a day after an Israeli aircraft fired three missiles at a Palestinian rocket crew in Gaza in response to mortar fire at a Jewish settlement.

That was the latest escalation of Israeli-Palestinian violence since Abbas coaxed militants into the truce he agreed with Israel in February.

Israel wants Abbas to enforce calm to ease a planned Israeli pullout from Gaza starting in August.

"So far we are committed to calm ... but if they (the Israelis) violate it, we will respond. If they abide by it, we will abide by it," said Khaled al-Batsh, an Islamic Jihad leader.

Officials from Hamas, which is sworn to the destruction of the Jewish state, said the group would also maintain calm if Israel did the same. But a Hamas spokesman, Sami Abu Zuhri, said: "There will be a reaction to every (Israeli) assault."

In the latest flare-up, militants vowed revenge after Israeli forces killed an Islamic Jihad leader and a Palestinian policeman in the West Bank on Tuesday. The army said the militant had planned to dispatch suicide bombers.

Rocket and mortar fire by militants later killed two Palestinian farm workers and a Chinese labourer at a settlement in Gaza.

Israel has held off on any large-scale military response apparently because of its reluctance to inflame the situation, which could complicate its Gaza pullout plans.

Hamas says it is committed to the truce, which has sharply reduced

violence but not stopped it altogether.

But the group is furious over Abbas's decision to postpone Palestinian legislative elections that had been scheduled for July 17 and in which it had been expected to mount a serious challenge to Fatah's dominance in parliament.

Israeli officials believe the latest mortar and rocket attacks are Hamas's message to Abbas of the clout it wields.

Abbas, under pressure to set a fresh date for the legislative ballot, agreed at the meeting to urge parliament in writing to approve an election law in line with understandings reached with factions in ceasefire talks in Cairo in March.

The elections are not expected to be held before Israel completes its evacuation of all 21 settlements in Gaza and four of 120 in the West Bank in a plan Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon bills as "disengagement" from conflict with Palestinians.

Speaking on television, Abbas said he would press Sharon, at a meeting scheduled for June 21, for clarifications over whether Israel would also withdraw from a Gaza border corridor with Egypt, where militants smuggle in weapons through tunnels.

New Bolivian president promises early polls

AP, SUCRE, Bolivia

Bolivia's new president began his first day on the job yesterday by pledging to call early elections and take steps to calm protesters who have paralysed the country for nearly a month with street marches, road blockades and oil-field takeovers.

Eduardo Rodriguez automatically became president, after Congress accepted President Carlos Mesa's resignation late Thursday and two congressional leaders first in line for the post declined the job.

A 49-year-old Supreme Court chief justice, Rodriguez was sworn in to replace Mesa, whose 19-month-old US-backed free-market government crumbled this week in the face of the mounting protests and violence in the streets.

Hoping to quell the fury of tens of the protesting indigenous poor, stu-

dents, miners, coca leaf farmers and labour activists, Rodriguez declared he would work with lawmakers on key reforms to heal growing rifts in South America's poorest nation.

"Bolivia deserves better days," Rodriguez told lawmakers after he automatically became president and Congress accepted Mesa's resignation. Two congressional leaders first in line for the post declined the job. "I'm convinced that one of my tasks will be to begin an electoral process to renew and continue building a democratic system that is more just."

Under Bolivia's constitution, Rodriguez must call presidential elections within 180 days.

Evo Morales, an outspoken critic of the United States who has been a key figure in the opposition protests that brought down Mesa this week, said early national elections are key to defusing the country's political and social crisis.

Lanka govt under fire for aid sharing plan with Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka plunged into deeper crisis yesterday as a key coalition partner gave the president five days to back off from an aid-sharing deal with Tamil rebels and Buddhist monks threatened to set themselves on fire over the issue.

The Marxist JVP told reporters it would block any attempt by President Chandrika Kumaratunga to enter into a "joint mechanism" with the separatists to distribute foreign aid to survivors of the December 26 tsunami disaster.

"We will leave the government on the 16th of June if the president does not withdraw the joint mechanism plan with Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) by the end of the 15th," JVP leader Somawansa Amarasinghe said.

International donors have called for Colombo and the rebels to jointly disburse billions of dollars in tsunami aid, but critics fear this will help legitimise the rebels' separatist campaign.

Police on Friday fired teargas and used water cannons to douse Buddhist monks who also oppose the aid-sharing proposal and threatened self-immolation outside Kumaratunga's tightly-guarded residence here, witnesses said.

Teargas canisters fell outside the deluxe Hilton hotel in the heart of the financial district of Colombo. At least two of the demonstrating monks were wounded in the police action, the witnesses said.

"We will not go empty handed," a monk said over a public address system minutes before he and his

group were forced to flee. Saffron-robed monks of the hard-line National Heritage Party vowed self-immolation, a threat widely used but not carried out in Sri Lanka in living memory.

Anti-riot squads and heavily armed police and troops were seen behind barbed wire barricades while a small group of protestors were allowed into the high-security compound for talks with Kumaratunga's aides.

The Heritage Party monks appeared to be in competition with the JVP in opposing the controversial aid sharing deal.

Another group of monks backing the Marxists took to the streets for a separate protest shortly after the JVP issued its threat to quit the government on June 16.

Iranian hardliners fear polls defeat

AP, Tehran

With a week to go before presidential elections, a strategist for Iran's hard-line politicians is advising several conservatives to drop out and unite behind a single candidate or face losing to the reformers.

But there is little sign any will pull out. That leaves them trailing and former president Hashemi Rafsanjani who advocates improving relations with Washington as the apparent front-runner.

Rafsanjani is presenting himself as the only candidate the world can rely on in negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, which the Bush administration alleges is a front for

developing atomic weapons.

He is running under the slogan "Let's work together." It is interpreted as a conciliatory gesture, because he has moved frequently between the hard-line and moderate camps in a country where conservative clerics have maintained control despite strong electoral showings by reformers.

The June 17 election will choose a successor to outgoing President Mohammad Khatami, who came to power in 1997 but whose attempts to bring reforms were thwarted by hard-line clerics loyal to supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Khatami is barred by law from seeking a third term.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh (L) speaks with his Sri Lankan counterpart Lakshman Kadiragamar during a press conference in Colombo yesterday. Singh is on a three-day visit to the island to boost bilateral cooperation.

US worried about Syria's Lebanon 'hit list'

REUTERS, Washington

The United States is concerned about the possibility of a "pattern" of political killings in Lebanon, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said on Thursday as two newspapers reported the Bush administration had word of a "Syrian hit list" targeting Lebanese leaders.

"What we don't want is that there is a pattern now of assassination of key figures, because that would be very, very destabilising in Lebanon, and I think it would have to point a finger at those forces that have been

destabilising in Lebanon," Rice said in an interview with Charlie Rose on PBS.

Bush administration officials say the United States has received "credible" word that Syria has developed a "hit list" targeting prominent Lebanese political leaders, The New York Times and The Washington Post reported on their Web sites.

Both newspapers cited a senior administration official as saying Syria's plan was aimed at creating instability in an attempt to regain control of Lebanon.

Jerusalem mufti slams Israeli 'Quran abuse'

AFP, Jerusalem

The mufti of Jerusalem added his voice yesterday to allegations that copies of the Quran had been abused in an Israeli prison as hundreds of Palestinians staged protests in the occupied territories.

"The occupation authorities have followed the American example in profaning the holy Quran," Sheikh Ekremah Sabri told worshippers attending the weekly prayers at Jerusalem's flashpoint Al-Aqsa Mosque.

"The media have reported the abuse committed by the jailers and the police who tore up copies of the Quran in front of the heroic detain-

ees at Meggido prison to provoke and humiliate them, and we have corroborated this information," he added.

Palestinian detainees at Meggido in northern Israel accused the authorities earlier this week of deliberately ripping out pages of the Quran during a search of their cells, claims which have been rigorously denied by the Israeli prison service.

Around 900 prisoners at Meggido began a three-day protest hunger strike on Wednesday, although the prison service said the fast had ended within less than 24 hours.

Dozens of Israeli police rein-

forcements were deployed to occupy east Jerusalem on Friday for fear of widespread protests at the end of prayers as well as on the perimeter of Al-Aqsa where access was denied to men aged under 45.

Around 6,000 Muslims attended the prayers while several hundred more were kept outside, said police. There were no reports of any disturbances.

However, the mufti was fiercely critical of the restrictions, saying that they had transformed east Jerusalem into "a giant prison".

"The border police and policemen are outnumbering the worshippers," he added.