

India readies roadmap to demilitarise Siachen

AFP, New Delhi/ Muzaffarabad

The Indian army said yesterday it has prepared a roadmap for the withdrawal of troops from the world's highest battlefield, the Siachen Glacier, which overlooks Pakistan and China.

"We have given our viewpoint to the government on converting the Salto ridge and the glacier into a demilitarised zone," army chief general J.J. Singh said, declining to give further details.

Singh's statement came after South Asian rivals India and Pakistan announced late last month they would continue talks about their standoff on the glacier, but reported no substantive progress following two days of discussions.

The Salto ridge wedged between Pakistan-held Kashmir and China's militarised Aksai Chin has been a bone of contention between India and Pakistan since

1984 when Indian troops occupied its punishing heights.

During a visit to Siachen earlier this month, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh called for the 6,300-metre (21,000-foot) glacier be turned into a "zone of peace" between India and Pakistan.

The talks between India and Pakistan on demilitarising the glacier are part of a wider peace process between the neighbours who have fought three wars since gaining independence from Britain in 1947 -- two of them over divided Kashmir.

The nuclear-armed rivals agreed to a ceasefire in November 2003 along the Siachen front and the rest of their borders.

Thousands of Pakistani and Indian soldiers are eyeball-to-eyeball atop the glacier. But more troops have died from the icy temperatures, altitude and accidents than from enemy fire.

Analysts say Siachen is of little strategic value but India is concerned that Pakistan might send in its troops to occupy the ridge area if it withdraws.

In 1999, Pakistan-backed invaders occupied the icy heights of Kargil, triggering fighting between India and Pakistan that cost hundreds of lives and brought the two rivals close to war.

Meanwhile, Indian Kashmir's main rebel group yesterday rejected calls for a ceasefire in the troubled Himalayan region and instead told militants to prepare for "holy war".

Syed Salahuddin, supreme commander of Hizbul Mujahedin, also dismissed the ongoing peace process between South Asian rivals India and Pakistan, which centres on the fate of Kashmir, as "a waste of time."

Israel targets militants before summit

52 Islamic Jihad members detained

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli forces rounded up dozens of suspected West Bank militants in a sign of impatience with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas just hours before a summit on Tuesday with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

The operation, in which the army said 52 members of Islamic Jihad were taken into custody, was the biggest sweep against wanted militants since Abbas and Sharon declared a truce at their previous meeting on Feb. 8.

It followed an Islamic Jihad drive-by shooting that killed a Jewish settler in the West Bank on Monday and recent mortar bomb and rocket attacks by the group against Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and a town in southern Israel.

Islamic Jihad said the attacks came in response to recent Israeli raids in the West Bank against several of its men.

Israel's planned pullout from the Gaza Strip in mid-August will be high on the agenda of the first meeting between an Israeli prime minister and a Palestinian president in Jerusalem, a holy city at the centre of the Middle East dispute.

From Sharon's side, the talks will focus on steps to prevent Palestinian militants from disrupting the withdrawal and filling a potential power vacuum in Gaza afterwards. Israel says Abbas has not done enough.

"As things stand now, (Abbas's) powers have not been brought to bear in fighting terror," Israeli Vice Prime Minister Ehud Olmert told Israel Radio.

Abbas, whose election in January to succeed the late Yasser Arafat brought new hopes of peace, wants to be able to show militants he has won clear concessions from Israel in return for efforts to ensure calm during the pullout.



Indian policemen use water cannon yesterday to disperse workers from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as they hold a demonstration against fuel price hike announced by the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government in New Delhi. The BJP was protesting the price hike of petrol and diesel by Indian rupees 2.50 and 2 per litre respectively.



Lebanese security forces, journalists and onlookers gather around the damaged car of Lebanon's former Communist Party chief George Hawi following his assassination near his home in a Beirut residential neighbourhood yesterday. The ex-communist leader was killed in a car bomb blast hot on the heels of the first parliamentary elections free of Syrian influence.

Bomb kills anti-Syrian politician in Beirut

REUTERS, Beirut

An anti-Syrian politician was killed in Lebanon yesterday when a bomb ripped through his car, two days after parliamentary elections brought victory for an alliance opposed to Damascus' role in the country.

George Hawi, a former leader of the Lebanese Communist Party, died instantly in the blast in the Wata Musaitbi neighborhood of Beirut, witnesses and security sources.

"After the explosion, the car kept going and then I saw the driver screaming and he jumped out of the window. We rushed to the car and saw Hawi in the passenger seat with his guts out," Rami Abu Dargham, who owns a sandwich shop nearby, told Reuters.

The 400-gram (one pound) charge was under the passenger seat of Hawi's Mercedes and detonated by remote control, judicial sources said. His driver apparently escaped serious injury.

It was the second killing of an anti-Syrian figure in Beirut this month. Newspaper columnist Samir

Kassir was killed on June 2 when a similar explosion destroyed his car outside his home.

The United States said after Kassir's killing it had information about a Syrian hit-list targeting Lebanese leaders. Damascus has denied the claim and denounced Hawi's killing.

Syria bowed to global pressure to withdraw its troops from Lebanon in April after anti-Syrian protests swept the country when former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri was assassinated in a truck bombing in February.

A UN team that visited Lebanon certified that Syria had ended its 29-year military presence. But UN chief Kofi Annan ordered the team back after Kassir's killing amid claims by Lebanese anti-Syrian opposition figures that Syrian intelligence agents were still running free in the country.

UN investigator Detlev Mehlis questioned the head of Lebanon's presidential guard as part of an international probe into Hariri's killing, a UN official said.

MANMOHAN SAYS Pakistan govt violated Kashmir bus accord

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh accused Pakistan yesterday of violating a bilateral travel agreement on the newly launched trans-Kashmir bus service.

Singh said Pakistan breached the pact earlier this month by allowing Kashmir separatists to travel beyond Pakistan-administered Kashmir to Islamabad where they held talks with President Pervez Musharraf.

People who travel on the bus service which started April 7 can only visit the divided zones of Kashmir under the agreement between the nuclear-armed rivals that was seen as a major achievement of their slow-moving peace process.

Pakistan's decision to "invite them to visit Islamabad and other cities in Pakistan violated an understanding on the procedures reached between the two countries for running the bus service," Singh said.

He made the comments in a letter to former premier Atal Behari Vajpayee who criticised the government's policy on the separatists' visit.

"It would not be, therefore, correct to state that the authorities on our side (had) mishandled the visit of the Hurriyat," Singh said.

The separatists' trip came as part of the peace process begun 18 months ago by India and Pakistan to settle all disputes between them, including over the Muslim-majority Himalayan region, the spark of two of their three wars.

The separatists, most of whom belonged to the separatist alliance, Hurriyat, said on their return in mid-June that they hoped their visit would help them become a formal part of the peace process between the South Asian neighbours.

On Monday, New Delhi rejected a demand by Hurriyat to be included in the dialogue process but said it could give its suggestions for solving the Kashmir issue.

"There is no question of involving Hurriyat in the India-Pakistan talks" but it can give its suggestions for settling the Kashmir issue, junior home minister Sriprakash Jaiswal was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India.

Left wins Kolkata civic polls after 5 years

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Kolkata

West Bengal's ruling Left Front on Tuesday returned to power in the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) after five long years, ousting the Trinamool Congress-Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) alliance.

The Left Front, led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), won 72 of the 136 seats declared. The Trinamool-BJP team managed to grab only 43 seats.

The United Democratic Alliance led by the Congress party bagged 19 seats. Two seats went to smaller parties.

Roh, Koizumi fail to mend history row

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul

South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun and Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi laid out their positions on Japan's history reinterpretation but failed to narrow differences in summit talks in Seoul Monday against a background of noisy anti-Japanese rallies protesting Koizumi's visit.

The two leaders, whose meeting went ahead only after reluctant and time-consuming arrangements by both governments over the past several weeks, met for two hours at Cheong Wa Dae's Sang Choon Jae house from 3pm and discussed contentious history issues and the North Korean nuclear standoff.

"We have reached an agreement at a minuscule level in regards to the history issue," Roh said at a joint news conference televised live after the summit.

Schroeder blasts British vision of Europe

AFP, Berlin

Days after a stormy EU summit collapsed in discord, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder launched a frontal attack on Britain's vision of Europe and its economic model.

Without naming British Prime Minister Tony Blair by name, Schroeder said that the continent's welfare state and its "values" were under threat in the wake of the failed budget negotiations in Brussels and the troubled bid to ratify the first-ever EU constitution.

"There is a special European social model to protect that has developed on the continent," said Schroeder, who will likely be facing early elections in September.

'Saddam misses Reagan'

REUTERS, New York

Saddam Hussein likes Doritos, washes his hands compulsively and thinks fondly of the late US President Ronald Reagan, according to American soldiers who guarded him and tell their story in the July issue of GQ magazine.

The jailed former Iraqi leader described how Reagan, who was president during the time of Iraq's 1980-88 war with Iran, sold him planes and helicopters. "Reagan and me, good," Saddam said, according to the article by Lisa DePaulo in the July issue that goes on sale June 28.

"He said, 'I wish things were like when Ronald Reagan was still president,'" said one of the soldiers who guarded him.

The article recounts the stories of five US soldiers from the Pennsylvania National Guard who watched over the captive for nearly a year. All five have completed their tours of duty and returned home, the article said.

President Bush and his father, former President George H. W. Bush, are "no good," while former President Bill Clinton was "OK." Saddam told his captors. The former president led a UN-coalition that defeated Saddam in the 1991 Gulf War after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.

No date has been set for the trial of Saddam before an Iraqi Special Tribunal on charges of crimes against humanity.



Saddam said he wants to talk to Bush "to make peace with him," they said. "He knows I have nothing, no mass weapons. He knows he'll never find them," they quoted him as saying.

He told the soldiers he had never dealt with Osama bin Laden. The toppled leader, whom the Iraqi government wants to put on trial for mass killings, seemed convinced he would return to power, they also said.

"He still thinks he's the president," one soldier said. They said Saddam told them "when this was all over," he wanted them to stay in his palace and see how beautiful Iraq was.

Bush acknowledges tough going in Iraq

Republicans question admn's rosy optimism

REUTERS, Washington

President Bush acknowledged on Monday the Iraq war was "tough" going but refused to back down from assertions that progress was being made despite Republican complaints about the administration's rosy optimism.

Bush's approval ratings have fallen to the lowest levels of his presidency in part because of growing pessimism about Iraq. Some prominent Republicans have openly questioned whether the administration's upbeat statements match events on the ground.

Asked if he agreed with Vice President Dick Cheney's assertion that the insurgency was in its "last throes," Bush replied that he understood "how dangerous it is there," adding: "I think about Iraq every day, every single day."

"And the report from the field is that while it's tough, more and more Iraqis are becoming battle-hardened and trained to defend

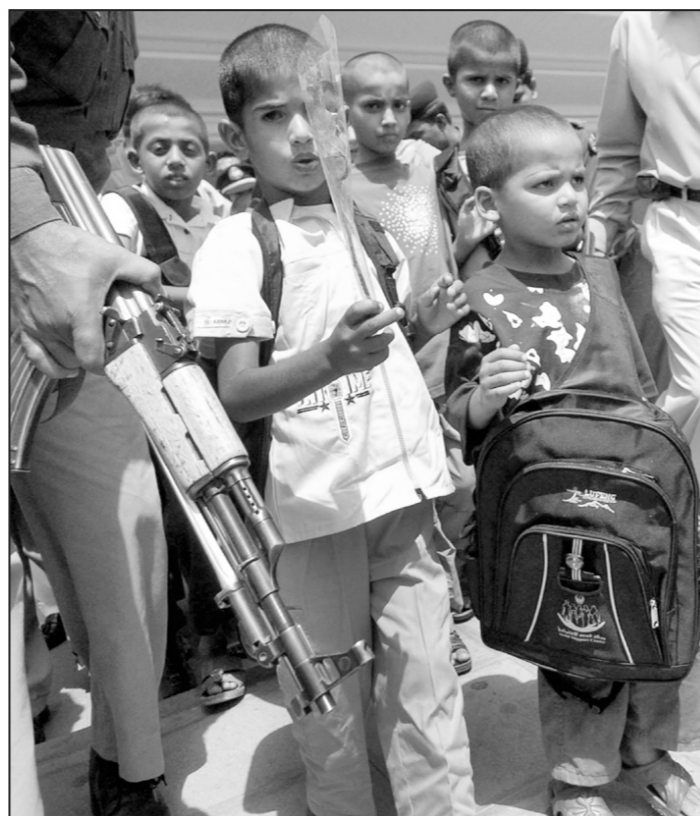
themselves. And that's exactly the strategy that's going to work. And we will, we will complete this mission," Bush told a joint news conference with European Union leaders.

Lawmakers have also questioned administration assertions about the number of Iraqi troops that have been trained. Sen. John McCain, an Arizona Republican, predicted on Sunday that it will be "at least" two years before US troops can pull out.

"Too often we've been told and the American people have been told that we're at a turning point," said McCain, who described Cheney's characterisation as inaccurate.

Another top Republican, Sen. Chuck Hagel of Nebraska, was quoted by US News and World Report as saying the White House was "disconnected from reality" in its optimism over the war.

"Things aren't getting better; they're getting worse... It's like they're just making it up as they go along. The reality is that we're losing in Iraq," Hagel said.



Pakistani children are escorted by police and officials outside the Allama Iqbal International Airport upon their arrival from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in Lahore yesterday. Some 22 children, who were abducted and smuggled to the UAE to be used as camel race jockeys, were repatriated after a rescue operation conducted by Pakistani officials in collaboration with the Unicef.