

India appeals for end to US nuclear curbs

Peace process with Pakistan not firm yet: Pranab Mukherjee

REUTERS, AFP, Washington

Defence Minister Pranab Mukherjee appealed on Monday for a quick end to restrictions on nuclear and technology cooperation with the United States, saying they limit India's ability to become a stabilising force in Asia.

On his first visit to Washington since taking up his post, Mukherjee said such limitations were among factors "that prevent India from realising its potential to contribute to international peace, stability and development."

In a speech to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,

he said India and the United States have a "convergence of our security concerns," including "fundamentalist activism and terrorism" and weapons proliferation.

India is on the front line of this struggle and hence merits Washington's assistance, Mukherjee added.

Earlier, he met the Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and will meet Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld at the Pentagon.

Mukherjee is preparing the way for a White House visit next month by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

President George W Bush has greatly accelerated predecessor Bill

Clinton's initiative to strengthen ties between the world's two biggest democracies, at odds through most of the Cold War and the years immediately afterward.

Economic and diplomatic relations have mushroomed.

But nuclear, military and other technology dealings have been more cautious, largely because of US concerns over India's status as an undeclared nuclear power that has refused to join most international non-proliferation regimes.

The administration has begun to cooperate on nuclear-related safety programmes with India.

Earlier Mukherjee said that the

peace process with Pakistan was still not firmly in place despite positive results from negotiations launched one-and-a-half years ago by the nuclear rivals.

Mukherjee accused Pakistan of not doing enough to dismantle the "infrastructure for terrorism" in Pakistan-held Kashmir and challenged the neighbour to cooperate with India as it has done with the United States on the "war on terror."

The Himalayan state of Kashmir, divided between Pakistan and India and claimed by both in full, has caused two of three wars between the neighbours since their independence in 1947 from Britain.

Troops foil attack on Kashmir minister

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops shot dead two suspected militants on the Kashmir border while police arrested a militant seconds before a planned grenade attack on the state's home minister, police said yesterday.

The rebels were shot late Monday in the frontier of southern Poonch district minutes after they stepped into Indian Kashmir from the Pakistani-run part of the divided state, a police spokesman said.

Meanwhile, police in the southern town of Bijbehara Monday evening arrested a suspected militant about to hurl a hand grenade towards state home minister Abdul Rehman Veeri as he spoke to a crowd of people, a police spokesman said.

"He is being interrogated. He has already confessed to two grenade explosions in south Kashmir that had caused casualties," the spokesman said.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi (L) and his Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Kasuri arrive for the opening of an Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Foreign Ministers' meeting yesterday in Sanaa. The three-day meeting is expected to examine issues ranging from the creation of a fund to cope with tsunami-like disasters to Islamic representation in the UN Security Council.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani gang rape victim Mukhtaran Mai (C) smiles, flanked by well-wishers and journalists, while leaving the country's Supreme Court in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan's Supreme Court Tuesday ordered the arrest of five men while it hears an appeal against their acquittals for gang raping a woman on the orders of a village council.

Pak SC orders rearrest of gang rape suspects

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's Supreme Court yesterday ordered the rearrest of 13 men linked to the internationally condemned gang rape of a woman, including members of a village council that ordered the assault.

Victim Mukhtaran Mai, who has become an icon for her pursuit of justice and fight for women's rights in conservative Islamic Pakistan, has complained that her safety would be under threat if the suspects were allowed to roam free.

The 33-year-old launched an appeal on Monday against the acquittal earlier this year of five of the men who are to be detained. The other eight set to be arrested include some members of a so-called tribal jury, her lawyer said.

All 13 had been arrested earlier this year on the orders of the government but were freed this month, prompting worldwide anger that was compounded when Pakistan banned Mai from travelling abroad.

"I am very happy. I am feeling highly satisfied," said Mai as she embraced women's rights activists outside the court.

Supreme Court Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhry made the order after Pakistan's attorney general applied for the detentions. "Non-bailable warrants of arrest of the respondents... are issued," he told the court.

Mai was raped in June 2002 on the orders of a village council in the remote village of Meerwala in reprisal for her brother's alleged affair with a woman from a powerful rival clan.

Muslim party resolves row with Lanka govt

India backs tsunami aid deal

AFP, Colombo

A key Muslim party in Sri Lanka's ruling coalition has withdrawn an ultimatum to the government that it drop a controversial deal to share tsunami aid with Tamil Tiger rebels, party officials said yesterday.

The National Unity Alliance (NUA) had given President Chandrika Kumaratunga until Tuesday to roll back Friday's deal with the rebels.

The party had however since decided to stick with the coalition, the party said.

"Following talks with the president, the NUA will not rock the boat,"

a party official said.

The president's office said she had agreed in talks with Muslim legislators to address their concerns.

"Their concerns were discussed in depth with the president," a statement said. "They proposed some options with the objective of resolving the issues causing their community apprehension."

The Muslim party had argued it was marginalised in the Norwegian-brokered deal to establish the aid-sharing mechanism, widely hailed as a prelude to restarting peace talks between the two sides.

Meanwhile, India said Monday it supports a controversial tsunami aid sharing deal agreed between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tiger rebels last week.

India's foreign ministry said in a statement New Delhi hoped the implementation of the deal would "strengthen democratic processes and uphold pluralism" in Tamil Tiger-controlled parts of Sri Lanka.

Under the agreement signed on Friday last week, the Sri Lankan government and the Tigers will jointly handle millions of dollars in foreign aid for survivors of last year's tsunami disaster.

Iraqi MP, 4 others killed by bomb

10 others die in separate attacks

AFP, REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq's oldest member of parliament, Dhari al-Fayadh, died yesterday with his son and three bodyguards in a suicide bombing north of Baghdad, while ten people were killed and almost 30 wounded elsewhere.

Fayadh, 87, and his son were killed when "a vehicle packed with explosives and driven by a suicide bomber was detonated alongside his two-car convoy in Al-Rashidiyah," an interior ministry source said.

Chief of the Albuamer, a powerful and predominantly Shia tribe, Fayadh had presided over the first sessions of Iraq's new parliament before a speaker was elected.

Sheikh Humam Hamudi, head of the parliamentary committee currently drafting a new constitution, told AFP: "Those who killed Sheikh al-Fayadh are criminals trying to destroy the country, and those trying to negotiate with these criminals do so with the enemies of Iraq."

He was referring to US Defence

Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who has acknowledged contacts with some insurgent leaders.

"Sheikh Fayadh was a patriot, all know how loyal he was to his country. He loved Iraq," Hamudi said.

Fayadh was also lord of the mud huts around his gated villa complex in the orange and palm groves of his rural fiefdom in Diyala province just north of the capital.

He won election to the 275-member national assembly in landmark January polls after running as an independent in the victorious Shia-dominated United Iraqi Alliance.

The octogenarian was enjoying a political comeback after losing his parliamentary seat in 1958 when Iraqi army officers overthrew the British-backed monarchy.

In other Iraqi violence Tuesday:

- Three police commandos were killed and five injured in Samarra, north of Baghdad, when a home-made bomb blast slammed into their patrol, according to army Captain Hassan al Juburi.

SAUDI ARMS DEAL

Ex-German minister admits accepting bribe

AFP, Augsburg

A former German junior defence minister, Ludwig-Holger Pfahls, admitted in court yesterday to accepting bribes, at the start of his trial on separate tax evasion and corruption charges over an arms deal with Saudi Arabia.

Pfahls, who served as state secretary for defence from 1987 to 1992 under then chancellor Helmut Kohl, surprised the court in the southern city of Augsburg by acknowledging that he accepted about one million euros (1.2 million dollars) for facilitating the sale of armoured vehicles to the United States.

The 62-year-old said the money was transferred to a Swiss bank account for him in 1990 by arms dealer Karlheinz Schreiber, who is currently fighting his own extradition to Germany from Canada.

"I cannot explain how this blunder came about," Pfahls, who is also a former head of the German domestic intelligence agency, told the court. "I somehow got caught up in things."

Iraq calls for end to UN Gulf War compensation

REUTERS, Geneva

Iraq yesterday called for ending a United Nations programme under which it pays compensation for damage done to the environment being sought by Iraq's neighbours, including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Iran, at this week's three-day session.

The Iraqi delegation held 30-minute private talks with a Kuwaiti delegation led by Khaled Ahmad Al-Mudhaf, chairman of Kuwait's Public Authority for Assessment of Compensation for Damages Resulting from Iraqi Aggression.

"Their reaction now was positive but we need to speak about details case-by-case. Maybe they will accept to speak about government compensation but not individuals," Hamud Bidan said.

Kuwaiti officials in Geneva had no immediate comment. "They just floated the idea," one Kuwaiti official said.

out \$19.2 billion out of \$52.1 billion of claims approved so far.

But some mega-claims are still on the table, with demands for \$50 billion in compensation for damage done to the environment being sought by Iraq's neighbours, including Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Iran, at this week's three-day session.

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N INDIA FACES BLACKOUTS Floods force closure of key power project

AFP, Shimla

Northern India, including the capital New Delhi, was facing blackouts yesterday after one of the country's largest hydro power projects was shut down to avoid silting from river floods from neighbouring Tibet, an official said.

The 1,500 MW Nathpa hydro project was closed down after flood waters on the Parechu river in China's Himalayan region of Tibet rose up to 15 metres (50 feet), destroying infrastructure downstream on the Sutlej river in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh.

"The discharge of water has receded, but it is the high silt content in the river, which is worrying and forcing us to keep the project closed," a dam official, who did not want to be identified, told AFP.

The flood came when a Tibetan lake that was formed by rubble from a landslide burst its banks, sending a torrent of water down into India, where it destroyed a national highway, bridges and houses.

The official said the silt content was some fifteen times higher than normal at 31,000 parts per million (ppm).

"We can run our turbines if it drops to 5,000 ppm, even though

the normal silt content in the river is around 1,000 to 2,000 ppm," he added.

Authorities said they were maintaining a flood alert although the level of the water had dropped.

Himachal Pradesh state government officials said the floods had caused some eight billion rupees (186 million dollars) worth of damage to property, besides closing the power project.

The 80 billion rupee (1.85 billion dollar) power project came into operation last May and since then has generated 7,423 million units of electricity for northern states including the power-starved capital.

It is equipped with Asia's largest underground power house complex, desilting chambers and the longest power tunnels in the country.

Meanwhile, plans have been drawn up to evacuate hundreds of villages in the south of the divided Himalayan state of Kashmir Tuesday because of rising water levels on the Chenab river.

The Chenab is one metre (3.3 feet) above the danger mark as the heaviest snowfall in two decades in Indian Kashmir melts amid soaring temperatures.

Thailand vows to curb violence in south

AFP, Pattani

Six people including a mute labourer have been shot and killed and teachers' homes attacked in southern Thailand, police said yesterday as authorities vowed to boost security funding to curb growing violence.

Srang Saewong, 56, a Buddhist mute highway worker in Yala province, was shot dead Tuesday in Bannang Sata district as he drove to work.

"I don't see a motive such as personal conflict. He was mute and his wife was also mute so it's just part of the campaign of unrest," police Lieutenant Colonel Sakarin Bumpensamai of Bannang Sata told AFP.

Chicken trader Tonkui Saephoo, 72, was shot dead at a food market in Yaring district of Pattani province by unidentified gunmen on Tuesday, while 52-year-old Thanat Nilvisut, a janitor at Pattani Technical College, was shot dead the same day as he traveled to work, police said. Both men were Buddhist.

More than 730 people have now died in near-daily attacks or clashes with security forces since January 2004, when a bloody raid on a weapons depot triggered an uprising in the three majority-Muslim southern provinces bordering Malaysia.



PHOTO: AFP

A Thai security officer examines the site of a shooting incident in which a teacher was injured in the Sungai Padi district of Thailand's troubled southern Narathiwat province yesterday. Six people including a mute labourer and a possible foreigner have been shot dead and teachers' homes attacked in southern Thailand as authorities vowed to boost security funding to counter rampaging violence in the south of the country.