

## Kashmir rebels accept Manmohan's talks offer

AFP, Srinagar

Kashmiri separatists agreed yesterday to hold talks with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and said they would "proceed with courage" to press for an end to decades of violence in the Himalayan state.

Leaders of the moderate faction of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) met in the summer capital Srinagar to set an agenda for the September 5 meeting, the first between the separatists and Singh who took power in May 2004.

"The APHC today unanimously decided to accept the invitation for talks with a view to proceed with seriousness, imagination and courage to find an acceptable and durable solution to the issue of Jammu and Kashmir," Hurriyat spokesman Abdul Majeed Bhanday told reporters.

During Thursday's meeting Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, overall leader of the APHC moderate faction, got support from all its constituent groups for opening fresh talks with India, Bhanday said.

He said the Hurriyat delegation would be led by Farooq but did not name the other members. Last year

Farooq's uncle was shot dead and his house attacked by lesser-known rebel groups after he opened talks with India.

Singh called for the talks as part of a peace process with Pakistan begun in January 2004 that seeks to resolve a 60-year dispute over the state claimed by both countries.

Singh is scheduled to meet Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York on September 14.

The Kashmiri moderates had held two rounds of talks in 2004 with the previous Hindu nationalist government.

All the top moderate separatists, including Farooq, Maulana Abbas Ansari, Abdul Gani Bhat and Bilal Lone, attended Thursday's meeting.

"Our outlook on the talks has evolved," Farooq told reporters on Wednesday. "Our thrust will be on the political dimension of the Kashmir problem. We also have proposals for improving the ground situation, like the release of prisoners and bringing an end to human rights violations."

## Nepali Congress drops support for monarchy

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's largest political party yesterday dropped a 60-year-old written pledge to uphold constitutional monarchy, seven months after King Gyanendra seized complete power in the impoverished Himalayan kingdom.

The Nepali Congress party said a party convention had approved a resolution deleting the reference to constitutional monarchy from its constitution.

"Constitutional monarchy is no more the objective of our party," said Nara Hari Acharya, a senior party member.

Political parties in Nepal have been protesting against Gyanendra's seizure of power, which he justified by saying it was needed to crush a Maoist revolt during which more than 12,500 people have died since 1996.

Though Acharya did not say whether the party was now pushing for a republic, analysts said the king's action had shifted the political spectrum towards republicanism and the Nepali Congress move was a response to pressure from its cadre.

"It is being used to put pressure on the king to compromise," Kunda Dixit, editor of the weekly Nepali Times, said of the Nepali Congress's decision.

"The alarm bells should be ringing in the palace. It could be the beginning of a more radical shift in future."

The palace has yet to respond to the Nepali Congress move.

Nepal is the world's only officially Hindu nation, where many of its 26 million people consider the king as an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, one of the trinity of Hindu gods.

Gyanendra, officially a constitutional monarch, fired the multi-party cabinet on Feb. 1, jailed politicians and curbed civil liberties in his surprise takeover.

His move was widely criticised and key donors including Britain, the United States and neighbouring India have urged him to restore democracy.

But he is no closer to any deal with parties or the rebels, who want to topple the monarchy and set up a communist republic in the landlocked nation tucked between China and India.

## Top Indo-Pak officials review progress

Peace process format on talks agenda, troops kill Kashmir rebels

REUTERS, AFP, Islamabad

Top diplomats from India and Pakistan began talks in a slow-moving peace process yesterday, hours after Indian troops shot dead nine rebels trying to cross into its part of disputed Kashmir from the Pakistani side.

Pakistani Foreign Secretary Riaz Mohammad Khan and Indian counterpart Shyam Saran shook hands as they sat down to review the peace process, that has made little headway over the main dispute in Kashmir since it was relaunched early last year.

They were putting their focus on possible restructuring of the complex and slow-moving peace process and were reviewing the progress of the ongoing "composite dialogue" launched by India and Pakistan in January 2004.

"The talks have started," a Pakistani foreign ministry official told AFP. A statement on the talks may be issued later.

The peace process has so far produced a number of largely symbolic steps, including a historic bus service across the divided Himalayan territory of Kashmir and the resumption of sporting ties.

The two countries also recently agreed to set up a hotline and other measures to stop an accidental nuclear exchange.

But progress has been sluggish on central issues such as Kashmir itself. The restive region is divided



PHOTO: AFP  
Indian Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran (2L) talks with his Pakistani counterpart Riaz Mohammed Khan (2R) during a meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Senior officials from India and Pakistan are holding talks in the city with a possible restructuring of the complex and slow-moving peace process between the nuclear rivals.

between the two nations but claimed in full by both, and has sparked two of their three wars since independence in 1947.

Other issues covered by the peace dialogue include a decades-long military standoff on a glacier high up in the mountains of Kashmir and boosting trade and cultural ties.

Officials said privately that the two sides were also expected to discuss changing the format of the process, under which each individual topic is discussed by relevant

ministries at different times.

Instead India is likely to propose setting up ministerial commissions on each side to discuss all subjects at the same time and cut down on the number of meetings.

An Indian army spokesman said on Thursday troops had encountered a large band of infiltrators overnight in the Nowgam area northwest of Srinagar.

"A heavily armed group of terrorists tried to infiltrate in Nowgam sector. Nine were killed in a night-

long gun battle," spokesman

Lieutenant-Colonel V.K. Batra said. India has expressed rising disquiet over militant activity in Kashmir, describing Pakistan's efforts to halt infiltration by insurgents across the border as half-hearted.

Islamabad denies involvement in the revolt in Indian Kashmir but accuses New Delhi of dragging its feet in discussing the dispute over the Himalayan region, cause of two wars.

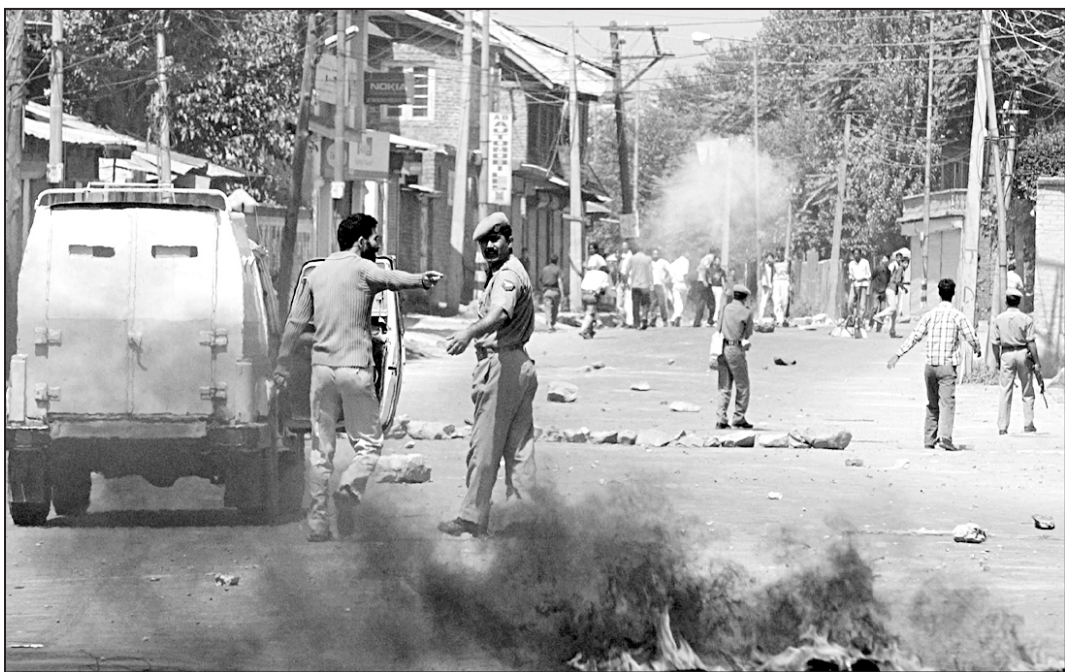


PHOTO: AFP  
Indian paramilitary troops disperse demonstrators during a protest by Kashmiri Shia Muslims who shouted anti-US slogans and hurled stones in Srinagar yesterday. They staged the protest in Srinagar against the US after at least 965 people died on Wednesday in a stampede near Baghdad when pilgrims panicked at rumours of a suicide bomber in their midst.

## 'South Asians isolated in UK cities'

AFP, London

South Asian enclaves in British cities are growing in size and isolation, British newspapers reported yesterday, citing a study.

The segregation in conurbation such as Bradford, Leicester and Oldham is as severe as in the black ghettos of divided American cities such as New York or Chicago, The Daily Telegraph and The Guardian said.

The broadsheets cited a study of British conurbation led by Mike Poulsen, a geography lecturer from Macquarie University in Sydney.

"It's alarming that UK cities are rising up the world rankings in terms of segregation," Poulsen told the annual Royal Geographical Society meeting in London.

"The idea was that people would assimilate. The danger is that the assimilation process is so slow that for many it is just not possible."