

## MANMOHAN TELLS KASHMIRI REBELS

# Delhi to cut troops if violence halts

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India indicated on Monday night that it could consider cutting troops in troubled Jammu and Kashmir if there is a cessation of separatist violence and infiltration of militants from across the border.

"The Prime Minister (Manmohan Singh) said that if there is a cessation of violence and end to infiltration, conditions will be created for the reduction of armed forces (in Jammu and Kashmir)," said a media statement released by the Prime Minister's media advisor Sanjaya Baru.

The statement came after Singh held the first-ever official talks with a delegation of Jammu and Kashmir's biggest separatist alliance All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) at his residence here Monday evening. The two-and-a-half-hour meeting included formal talks and a dinner.

prime minister also agreed to review all cases of detention and a time-bound review of those held under the Public Safety Act and the now-defunct anti-terrorism law Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA).

Singh also "promised to ensure that violation of human dignity would not be tolerated and the government would take all necessary measures to safeguard against human rights violations", Baru said.

Singh made it clear that violence has no place in democracy and reaffirmed his faith in a peaceful solution of all issues pertaining to Jammu and Kashmir and his commitment to ensure a life of peace, self-respect and dignity for the people in the state.

The statement said it was agreed to carry forward the dialogue process so that all shades of political opinion in Jammu and Kashmir are involved. But no date has been fixed for future round of talks.

Singh's meeting with a five-

member team of moderate separatists led by Hurriyat Chairman Mirwaiz Umer Farooq came ahead of the Indian prime minister's meeting with Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf in New York on September 14 on the sideline of UN General Assembly session.

The Hurriyat Conference has been seeking scaling down of security forces' strength in Kashmir valley, release of political prisoners and withdrawal of the Armed Forces Special Powers Act there.

The Hurriyat, for its part, emphasised that an honourable and durable solution should be found to the Kashmir issue through dialogue and it was agreed that the only way forward is to ensure that all forms of violence at all levels should end, the statement added.

Umer Farooq told reporters after the talks that Hurriyat appreciated the Prime Minister's decision for a time-bound review of the cases of political detainees in the state.

## Theatre fire kills 32 in Egypt

REUTERS, Beni Suef

A candle fell over and set fire to a crowded theatre in the Egyptian town of Beni Suef on Monday night, killing 32 people, Egypt's official news agency Mena said yesterday.

The candle, a prop in the play "Hamlet" at an experimental theatre festival in the town of Beni Suef 100km south of Cairo, set fire to carpeting and spread rapidly to the rest of the building, survivors of the blaze said.

Mena said the local hospital had received 32 bodies. Police gave a slightly lower death toll of 31 and said 37 others were injured.

Adel Hassan, the producer, said about 100 people were watching the Shakespeare play in a small auditorium with only one exit.

"All the people rushed to the exit and struggled to get out. But the fire spread very rapidly and many of them just couldn't get out in time," he told reporters.

Hassan was speaking in Beni Suef Hospital, where he was receiving treatment for burns to his face and arms.

Sixteen of the injured have serious burns of at least 60 percent, hospital officials said. More than a dozen bodies had yet to be identified.

# Bush under fire for slow response

REUTERS, Poplarville, Mississippi

President George W. Bush, under fierce criticism for his government's slow response to Hurricane Katrina, sought to reassure storm survivors on Monday as a veteran lawmaker complained that bureaucratic red tape was hampering relief efforts in Mississippi.

Bush made his second visit to Louisiana and Mississippi, where the storm has caused one of the biggest humanitarian crises in US history. On his first tour on Friday, five days after the huge scale of the disaster became apparent, the president acknowledged the initial relief effort had been "unacceptable."

Speaking to emergency officials gathered in a stifling auditorium at Pearl River Community College in Poplarville, Bush pledged that "we're here for the long term."

"I understand. I understand the damage. I understand the devastation, I understand the destruction, I understand how long it's going to take. And we're with you. That's what I want you to know," Bush said.

In a sign of the political pressure facing Bush, Mississippi Republican Sen. Trent Lott, a former Senate majority leader, said he has been battling the

Federal Emergency Management Agency and its Mississippi counterpart for help for his state and urged Bush to cut red tape.

After a one-on-one meeting with Bush in Poplarville, Lott said: "I am demanding help for the people of Mississippi to recover from the devastation of Hurricane Katrina."

The recovery effort will require "an unprecedented public and private effort that can't be hampered by a process geared toward much lesser disasters," Lott said in a statement issued after Bush left Mississippi.

In Washington, Senate Democratic Leader Harry Reid of Nevada backed calls to create a commission, like the one that examined the September 11, 2001, attacks, to study how the hurricane response went wrong.

"Serious mistakes were made," Reid said.

Bush has been under fire from Democrats and Republicans alike for a sluggish federal response to a flood that has made hundreds of thousands homeless and is feared to have killed thousands along the northern Gulf of Mexico coast.



PHOTO: AFP  
Two people are helped by rescuers in east New Orleans, Louisiana after their reluctant evacuation from their home Monday. Tragic New Orleans got a much needed ray of hope as engineers closed the football pitch sized hole in a levee breached when Hurricane Katrina unleashed murderous floodwaters.

# Monks back Lankan PM after pledge to drop federal solution

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's influential Buddhist party said yesterday it had pledged support to Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse in the upcoming presidential election after he reportedly promised to drop a federal solution to the island's ethnic conflict.

The all-monk National Heritage Party (NHP) said it had promised support to the premier during a meeting with him on Tuesday. A formal deal will be signed at one of Buddhism's holiest shrines in the island, the Temple of The Tooth, next week.

"We are supporting the prime minister on the basis that any solution will be based on preserving the unitary character of the state," NHP spokesman and Buddhist monk legislator Athuraliya Ratanatold AFP.

State-run Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation confirmed that the premier had secured the support of the Buddhist monks'

party, a day after a similar deal with the main Marxist party the JVP, or People's Liberation Front.

Both parties are seen by political analysts and diplomats as nationalistic groups appealing to hardline elements among the majority Sinhalese community.

The NHP has nine seats in the 225-member parliament and bitterly opposes a federal solution. President Chandrika Kumaratunga, the main opposition and the ruling Freedom Alliance of Rajapakse had earlier accepted such a solution.

Nearly 70 percent of Sinhalese are Buddhists while the minority Tamils are mainly Hindus.

The government and Tamil Tiger separatist rebels agreed during their peace talks in December 2002 to work towards a federal state as a way of ending violence in a country where 60,000 people have died in ethnic bloodshed.

Those talks, however, have remained on hold since April 2003.

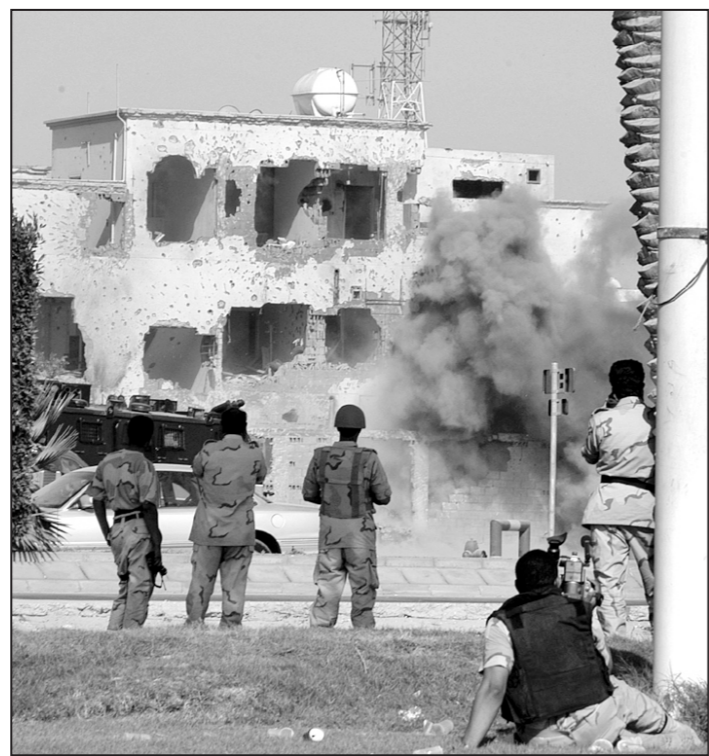


PHOTO: AFP  
Saudi security men bombard a building near the site where police was exchanging fire with suspected al-Qaeda militants in the eastern oil city of Dammam yesterday. Explosions were heard in the area where six to 10 militants were holed up.

# 21 dead or missing as typhoon hits Japan

AFP, Tokyo

A powerful typhoon cut across Japan yesterday, leaving at least 21 dead or missing and injuring 45, as 100,000 people were ordered to flee their homes, officials and media reports said.

Hundreds of flights were cancelled and Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi called off campaign stops in the main southern island of Kyushu before the typhoon's onset.

Nabi, packing winds of up to 126km per hour, headed toward the Sea of Japan (East Sea) late Tuesday as it swept over Kyushu in a matter of hours, the Meteorological Agency said.

Moving north at just 25km per hour, the typhoon has swamped the archipelago with more than 1,000 millimetres (40 inches) of rain since Sunday afternoon.

The typhoon was weaker than Hurricane Katrina but it brought violent winds of 90km an hour or more across a radius of nearly 300km, wider than the 220km Katrina covered at its peak.

# Katrina may prompt new 'black migration'

REUTERS, Houston

If refugees end up building new lives away from New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina may prompt the largest US black resettlement since the 20th century's Great Migration lured southern blacks to the North in a search for jobs and better lives.

Interviews with refugees in Houston, which is expecting many thousands of evacuees to remain, suggest that thousands of blacks who lost everything and had no insurance will end up living in Texas or other US states.

Officials say it will take many months and maybe even years before the birthplace of jazz is rebuilt.

"We advise people that this city has been destroyed," New Orleans Deputy Police Chief Warren Riley told reporters on Monday. "We are

simply asking people not to come back to this city right now."

Many evacuees like Percy Molere, 26, who worked in a hotel in New Orleans' famed French quarter, say they cannot keep their lives on hold for very long.

"If it took a month, I'd go back, but a year, I don't want to wait that long," said Molere. "Hopefully we're going to stay in Houston just to stay out of New Orleans" for the time being.

Experts caution that it is too soon to clearly predict the long-term impact of the devastation of New Orleans, a city of less than half a million people more than two-thirds of whom are black. But one scenario would be massive resettlement elsewhere.

"You've got 300,000, 400,000 people, many of them low income without a lot of means, who are not going to have the ability to wait out a

year or two or three years for the region to rebuild," said Barack Obama, the only black member of the US Senate.

"They are going to have to find immediate work, immediate housing, immediately get their kids into school and that probably will change the demographics of the region," he told Reuters on Monday during a visit to Houston, the largest single gathering point for the refugees.

Because of the legacy of slavery, southern states including Louisiana, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina have historically been home to the greatest concentration of US blacks. In 1900, 85 percent of US blacks lived in the South and as early as 1830, more than 58 percent of Louisiana's population was black.

# Nepal king cancels NY trip for UNGA

## 30 arrested during protests in Kathmandu

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's King Gyanendra has cancelled a trip to New York next week to attend the UN General Assembly, an official said yesterday, apparently rattled by mounting opposition to his taking power.

"He is not going to go now," a top government official told Reuters. "This is taking into account the current situation in the country." He did not elaborate.

The decision came three days after Nepal's Maoist rebels unilaterally announced a three-month ceasefire in their deadly war to overthrow the monarchy, which has killed thousands.

Days before the guerrillas announced the ceasefire, Nepal's seven main political parties said they would consider joining hands with the rebels to launch joint protests against King Gyanendra for

sacking the government earlier this year and taking power.

The king dismissed the landlocked nation's multi-party government on Feb. 1, saying it had not been able to control the Maoist rebellion.

More than 12,500 people have died in the Maoist revolt since 1996 and hundreds more have disappeared.

The kingdom's political parties have opposed the king's first trip to the United Nations saying he was not the true representative of the nation, wedged between India and China.

The king met UN General Secretary Kofi Annan in Indonesia in April. In July, Annan sent his envoy Lakhdar Brahimi to Nepal who advised the king to quickly restore democracy.

Analysts said the widespread international disapproval against

the assumption of power could have forced King Gyanendra to cancel his visit.

"The cancellation is because of the legitimacy question raised by political parties at home and the hostility he was going to face there from the international community," said Yubaraj Ghimire, editor of Samay, a weekly magazine.

Meanwhile, at least 30 people were arrested and nine injured in the Nepalese capital Kathmandu yesterday in a third straight day of major protests against King Gyanendra's rule, police said.

"In the scuffle between the protesters and riot policemen, at least six student leaders and three police were injured and 30 others arrested Tuesday afternoon," the Kathmandu Valley police office told AFP.

# 'Pakistan, Israel kept secret contacts for decades'

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan and Israel engaged in secret diplomacy for decades before embarking on historic talks in Turkey last week, reports quoting Pakistan's foreign minister said yesterday.

Khurshid Kasuri was reportedly speaking after meeting his Israeli counterpart Silvan Shalom in Istanbul on Thursday, the first official high-level contact since the two countries were formed almost six decades ago.

"As far as this process of engagement (with Israel) is concerned ... there had been back-channel contacts for decades and now a lot started appearing in the newspapers as well," Kasuri told state TV.

"But, we felt that the time has come that we must go public," Kasuri said.

Leading English-language daily The News reported that Kasuri said

Pakistan and Israel were engaged in "secret contacts with each other for the last more than 10 years".

The meeting in Istanbul followed the Jewish state's unprecedented pullout from the Gaza Strip last month, which was welcomed by mainly Muslim Pakistan.

"The main reason driving us is that we feel, we ought to play a role in the peace process between Palestine and Israel and you cannot play any role whatsoever if you are not even prepared to talk to one party," Kasuri was quoted as saying.

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf has denied the move is a prelude to finally recognising Israel, saying that will only happen when a Palestinian state is created with Jerusalem as its capital.

However, there have been reports for years of behind-the-scenes meetings between the two countries.

# Afghan warlords to face polls ban

## US, Afghan forces kill 13 Taliban

BBC ONLINE, AP, Kabul/Kandahar

Up to 21 candidates in Afghanistan's elections are to be disqualified for being militia commanders or having links to armed groups, officials say.

Under election law, anyone linked to an armed group is not allowed to run.

An announcement about disqualifications is expected in the next few days, but there are concerns about the impact of the decision so close to election day.

Campaigning is already under way for the parliamentary and provincial elections due on 18 September.

The final number to be excluded from the ballot could still change. But officials, who spoke to the BBC on condition of anonymity, say the decision to announce it before polling day has been taken, confirming a BBC report last month. It's a controversial last-minute move.

The ballot papers are already printed, which means people will still be able to vote for these disqualified candidates and the officials admit there is a real chance some may win enough votes to qualify for a parliamentary or provincial council seat.

Meanwhile, two hundred Afghan police, supported by US-led coalition forces, killed 13 suspected Taliban fighters in southern Afghanistan following a spate of guerrilla-style strikes in the area over the weekend, an Afghan official said Monday.

Earlier a C-130 US military plane carrying US Ambassador Ronald Neumann suffered an engine failure as he returned from a trip upcountry to see preparations for the upcoming Sept. 18 elections. The failure was blamed on an oil leak. Emergency crews were on hand in Kabul when the plane landed safely in Kabul using its remaining three engines.



PHOTO: AFP  
Activists throw rocks at riot police who fired tear gas during a protest by political parties defying the ban on anti-King demonstrations in the restricted area in Kathmandu yesterday. For the third consecutive day of protest, several thousand demonstrators representing the seven political parties who marched in the restricted area, were dispersed by riot police firing tear gas.