

India, Pakistan agree on new bus route

Peace moves to continue

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan Wednesday agreed to start a bus service in October linking two cities on either side of their only border crossing as part of an ongoing peace process, an official here said.

The agreement came after two days of talks in the Indian capital. It will be only the second bus service crossing India and Pakistan's international border.

"The trial run of the Lahore-Amritsar bus service being operated by both sides will take place in the second half of October 2005 with a view to starting regular bus service in the first half of November 2005," Dilip Sinha, a joint secretary at the Indian foreign ministry, read from a joint statement.

In April, India and Pakistan agreed on the first bus service to

link divided Kashmir in almost 60 years as part of a peace process begun in January 2004.

But the service, which crosses the ceasefire Line of Control separating the Indian and Pakistan zones of the Himalayan state, has been opposed by some separatist groups as well as by Islamic rebels fighting Indian rule in the disputed region.

The Lahore-Amritsar bus, covering 45 kilometres (28 miles), will link the two countries via the only international land crossing at Wagah in the state of Punjab, divided between India and Pakistan at partition in 1947.

A bus service linking New Delhi and Lahore, originally started in 1999 by former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee but suspended after a 2001 attack on India's parliament by suspected Pakistan-backed

militants, was restarted in July 2003.

The two sides also said Wednesday they would hold further talks on a proposed bus service between Amritsar and the Pakistani town of Nankana Sahib, the site of a Sikh shrine near Lahore.

The bus services are part of broader efforts by nuclear-armed neighbours India and Pakistan to normalise relations after coming to the brink of war after the parliament attack.

Both sides agreed in January last year to enhance economic, transport and cultural links while working to resolve a dispute over Kashmir, the cause of two of their three wars since independence.

An analyst said the latest confidence-building measure was important for people affected by the hostility between India and

Pakistan whose leaders held talks, seen as inconclusive, this month in New York on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly.

"One cannot say that this is a great leap forward but such people-to-people contacts are perhaps as important as the other steps India and Pakistan have initiated to improve relations," said Rajendra Dayal, a political analyst at Delhi University.

"And if you want to add momentum to such cultural links, then greater economic activity like higher volumes of trade through these transit routes should be allowed by the two countries which will also endorse their commitment to peace," he said.

"And the bottom line here is that divided families of the two Punjab, who suffered during our three wars, will benefit by this."



Visiting Indian political leader and Politbureau member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) Sitaram Yechuri (C) listens to General Secretary of Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist Madhav Kumar Nepal (L) and Nepali Congress President Girija Prasad Koirala during a meeting with seven political party leaders in Kathmandu yesterday.

Tom DeLay quits House post after indictment

AP, Washington

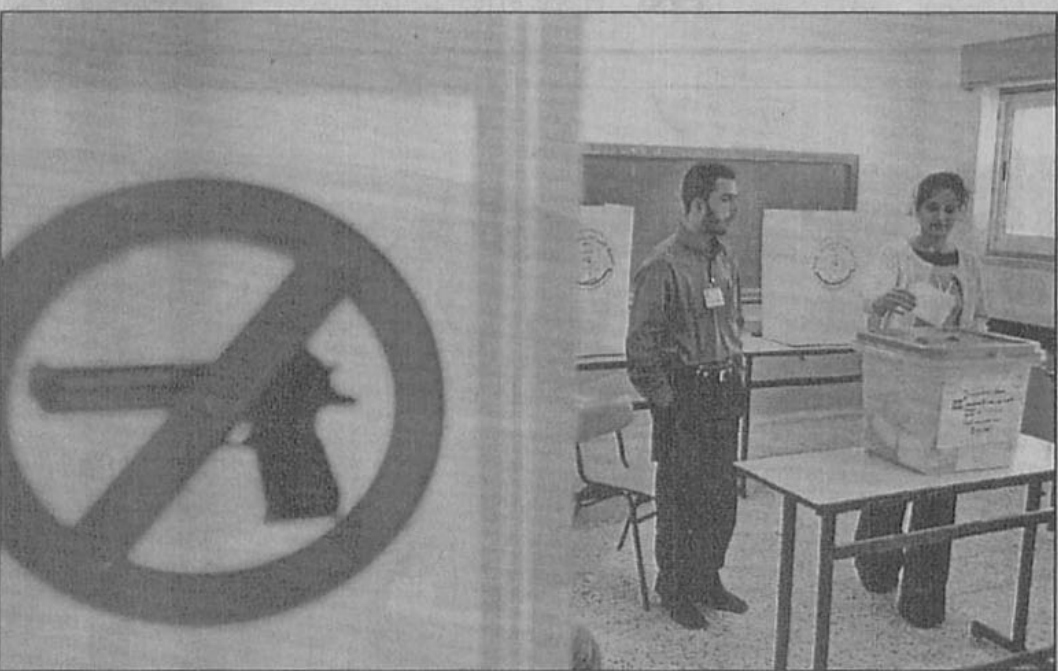
House Majority Leader Tom DeLay was indicted by a Texas grand jury Wednesday on a charge of conspiring to violate political fundraising laws, forcing him to temporarily step aside from his GOP post.

He is the highest-ranking member of Congress to face criminal prosecution.

A defiant DeLay said he had done nothing wrong and denounced the Democratic prosecutor who pursued the case as a "partisan fanatic." He said, "This is one of the weakest, most baseless indictments in American history. It's a sham."

Nonetheless, DeLay's temporary departure and the prospect of a criminal trial for one of the Republicans' most visible leaders reverberated throughout the GOP-run Congress, which was already struggling with ethics questions surrounding its Senate leader.

Republicans quickly moved to fill the void, while voicing polite support for DeLay. Speaker Dennis Hastert named Missouri Rep. Roy Blunt to take over most of DeLay's leadership duties.



A Palestinian woman casts her vote at a polling station in Beit Liqya, west of the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday. Three Palestinian militants were shot dead by the Israeli army in the West Bank yesterday, casting a shadow over municipal elections in the territory being contested by the radical Islamist group Hamas.

Killings cast shadow over Palestinian polls

3 die in Israeli offensive

AFP, Jenin

Three Palestinian militants were shot dead by the Israeli army in the West Bank yesterday, casting a shadow over municipal elections in the territory being contested by the radical Islamist group Hamas.

One of the main leaders of another armed faction, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, said his movement was breaking off a truce after the killings, which ensured the sixth year of the Intifada began with a new round of funerals.

The spike in violence in the West Bank, which comes after a wave of bombings in Gaza, has punctured confidence engendered by Israel's recent round of pullouts from occupied Palestinian territory

which Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made clear was not about to be repeated.

Palestinian security sources said the three militants who were shot dead in the northern Jenin area included two members of Islamic Jihad and a local leader of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, Samer al-Saadi.

An Israeli army spokesman confirmed that three Palestinians had been killed "during exchanges of fire" in the latest phase of a mass arrest operation that was launched across the West Bank last weekend.

"We will no longer adhere to or respect the truce after the assassination of Samer al-Saadi," Zakaria al-Zubeidi, one of the most senior figures in the Al-Aqsa Brigades told

AFP on Thursday.

"This crime cannot go unpunished and we will respond to it," added Zubeidi, who is one of Israel's most wanted men.

Al-Aqsa signed up to the truce in March during talks convened by Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas in Cairo.

Hamas is in theory observing the truce, reiterating its commitment to the always shaky agreement after a barrage of rocket attacks on Israel over the weekend launched from its Gaza Strip stronghold.

Israel, charging that Hamas is still using other groups to carry out proxy attacks, had been conducting a string of air strikes in recent days on the territory that its ground forces left little more than two weeks ago.

TIGERS SAYS EU boycott a setback to Lankan peace

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday said a European Union boycott of them had caused "irreparable damage" to the island's Norwegian-backed peace process.

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The LTTE's political wing leader S. P. Thamilselvan was quoted as saying the hard-hitting statement could strengthen hard-liners among the majority Sinhalese community.

"The (EU) declaration has caused irreparable damage to prospects for peace and has ruined the trust the Tamil people had in the international community," Thamilselvan said.

"As an equal partner seriously committed to a peaceful negotiation, we are concerned that this will impact the future progress of the peace process."

He denied EU charges that the guerrillas continued to recruit child soldiers and asked EU member states to reconsider their decision.

REUTERS SAYS US troops obstruct reporting of Iraq

Reuters, London

The conduct of US troops in Iraq, including increasing detention and accidental shootings of journalists, is preventing full coverage of the war reaching the American public, Reuters said on Wednesday.

In a letter to Virginia Republican Sen. John Warner, head of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Reuters said US forces were limiting the ability of independent journalists to operate.

The letter from Reuters Global Managing Editor David Schlesinger called on Warner to raise widespread media concerns about the conduct of US troops with Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who is due to testify to the committee on Thursday.

Schlesinger referred to "a long parade of disturbing incidents

whereby professional journalists have been killed, wrongfully detained, and/or illegally abused by US forces in Iraq."

He urged Warner to demand that Rumsfeld resolve these issues "in a way that best balances the legitimate security interests of the US forces in Iraq and the equally legitimate rights of journalists in conflict zones under international law."

At least 66 journalists and media workers, most of them Iraqis, have been killed in the Iraq conflict since March 2003.

US forces acknowledge killing three Reuters journalists, most recently soundman Waleed Khaled who was shot by American soldiers on August 28 while on assignment in Baghdad. But the military say the soldiers were justified in opening fire.

Conditions primitive in Texas after Rita

AP, Woodville Houston

Five days after Hurricane Rita came ashore, conditions remained primitive in parts of Texas, where some residents were taking baths and brushing their teeth using water from the Neches River and others were sleeping in tents.

The plywood sign outside the home in East Texas where eight Beaumont families had sought refuge from Hurricane Rita carried a simple message: "Help Needed. Ice and Water. 43 People."

The evacuees had no electricity and little water or food after the storm. As temperatures neared triple-digits, adults used paper towels dampened with bottled water to keep children from overheating. A campfire was built to keep mosquitoes away.

"The only thing we could think of to survive was to put out that sign," said Tiffany Moten, 24, who

was staying at the home near Livingston. "Luckily, we were blessed, and we have a lot of friendly people who came up and brought us water and ice and things like that. We are trying to make it."

The Federal Emergency Management Agency delivered ice, water and packaged meals Wednesday to residents who rode out the storm, but some officials in hard-hit areas criticized the agency's response, with one calling for a commission to examine the emergency response.

In Houston, FEMA closed a disaster relief centre just hours after its doors opened when some of the hundreds of hurricane victims in line began fainting in the heat. FEMA officials said they were caught off-guard by the roughly 1,500 people who showed up, but said it would reopen the centre Thursday morning.



The Marcel family sits on their porch in the flooded area of Chauvin, Louisiana, some 80km south of New Orleans after the area was flooded by Hurricane Rita. From left to right are Kirby, 12, Caralina 4, Kirtis, 10, Caralynn, 8, and parents Caroline and Kirt Marcel.

Pakistan backs nuke free Koreas

AP, Seoul

Pakistan's prime minister said yesterday his country supports a nuclear weapons-free Korean Peninsula and has shared what little information it had about North Korea's nuclear programme with South Korea.

"As regards any limited information we had in the past it has been shared with the Korean government," Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz told reporters on the first full day of his visit to South Korea. "It's a closed chapter. Pakistan is against proliferation in any form."

Pakistan's relationship with North Korea was a focus of international attention after revelations that A.Q. Khan, the South Asian nation's top nuclear scientist, provided nuclear weapons technology to the communist country as well as to Iran and Libya.

'England's jail term exposes US hypocrisy'

Reuters, Baghdad

Iraqis expressed fury on Wednesday over the three-year jail sentence for Lynndie England, the US soldier notorious for holding a naked inmate by a leash in Abu Ghraib prison, saying it exposed American hypocrisy.

They said the sentence would have been more harsh had she been convicted of abusing Americans.

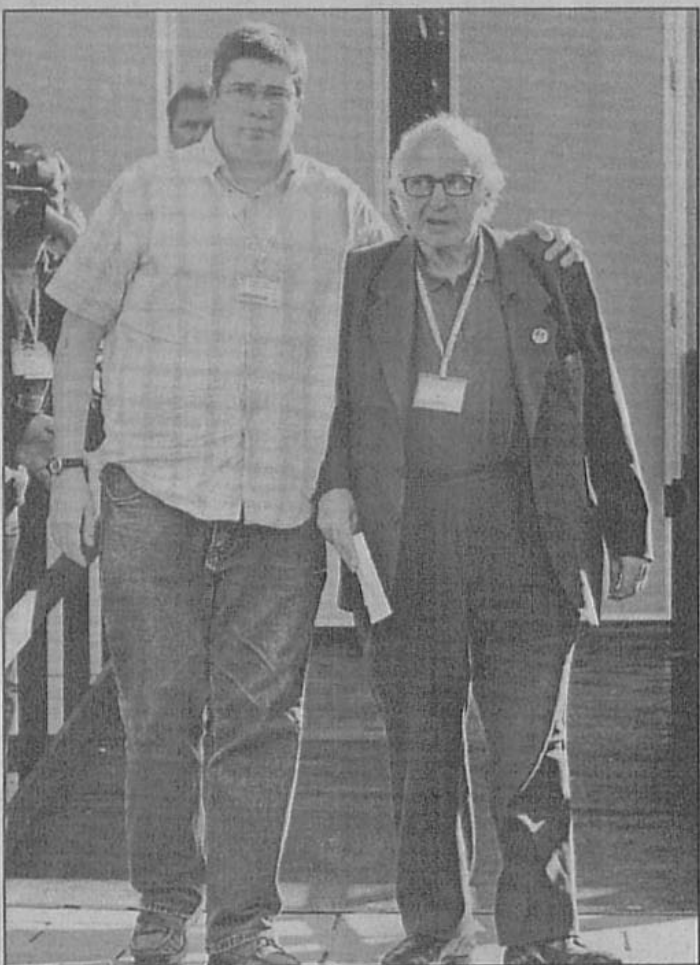
"America should be ashamed of this sentence. This is the best evidence that Americans have double standards," said Akram Abdel Amir, a retired bus driver in Baghdad.

"There are Iraqis in jail without any charge, just based on suspicion. But when it comes to Americans, the matter is totally different."

England, 22, was sentenced on Tuesday by a US military court after being convicted of abuse, including being photographed pointing to the genitals of a naked Iraqi prisoner.

The former West Virginia chicken factory worker, who had faced a maximum sentence of nine years, was also given a dishonorable discharge.

She is the last of a group of US soldiers to be convicted of abuse at Abu Ghraib, including her former boyfriend and the father of her child, Charles Graner, who is serving 10 years.



Walter Wolfgang (R), 82, emerges from the security checks in the Brighton Conference Centre, on the last day of the Labour Party Conference in Brighton yesterday. Wolfgang was roughly thrown out of the party conference Wednesday for heckling Foreign Secretary Jack Straw during his speech on Iraq. Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party belatedly apologised to the 82-year-old member.

Laden considered seeking asylum in UK: Ex-minister

AFP, London

He might be the self-professed enemy of the West, but a decade ago terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden considered seeking asylum in Britain, the country's interior minister of the time has said.

Michael Howard told The Times on Thursday that the request from the al-Qaeda chief appeared to be serious.

According to the newspaper, in 1995 bin Laden wanted to abandon his then-base in Sudan and asked some of his followers in London to sound out whether he would be able to move to Britain. At the time, the Saudi-born radical was little known in the West, although al-Qaeda had already planned an abortive plot to destroy a series of airliners, seen as a precursor to the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

A number of bin Laden's brothers and other members of the wealthy family construction empire owned properties in London at that time, the paper added.

"In truth, I knew little about him, but we picked up information that bin Laden was very interested in coming to Britain," Howard, now leader of the main

opposition Conservative Party, told the paper.

"It was apparently a serious request. He already had people operating here, and who knows how history could have been rewritten if he had turned up here?"

Howard noted that if bin Laden had come to Britain to plot the September 11 attacks, in theory he could not have been sent for trial to the United States as British laws prevent the extradition of suspects to countries where they could face the death penalty.

However, no application was made as Home Office officials investigated bin Laden and Howard issued an immediate banning order under immigration laws.

The Times cited Home Office officials as saying bin Laden used a Saudi businessman, Khaled al-Fawwaz, to sound out his chances of coming to Britain.

Fawwaz was described by British security officials as bin Laden's "de facto ambassador" in Britain, the paper added.

According to some reports, the teenage bin Laden went round Europe with his family, even becoming a fan of London football club Arsenal, although there is no concrete evidence to back this up.

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