

India, Pakistan to launch second train link by Jan

'Chances of opening Kashmir border slim'

REUTERS, AFP, New Delhi/ Islamabad

India and Pakistan will reopen a second cross-border rail link by January, more than 40 years after it was severed following a war between the south Asian rivals, a senior Indian official said yesterday.

The train would connect the Indian village of Munabao in the western desert state of Rajasthan and the small town of Khokrapar in southern Pakistan, Indian Railways Chairman J.P. Batra said in a statement.

The statement did not give details.

The neighbours are already connected by a train service through the Wagah border in their northern Punjab region.

The two countries snapped all transport links amid heightened tension over Kashmir -- at the heart of decades of enmity -- as they were near the brink of war in 2002.

The links were restored after New

Delhi and Islamabad launched fresh moves to make peace in 2003. Both countries say they want to open more routes between the two countries to help easier movement of people and boost the peace process.

The Khokrapar-Munabao link was earlier scheduled to reopen this month but it was delayed as new tracks on the Pakistani side were not ready.

Meanwhile, the chances are dimming that India and Pakistan will reopen their disputed Kashmir border after nearly six decades in the wake of the earthquake tragedy, Pakistani disaster relief chief said Friday.

"My concern is that time is running out. If there are long parleys on the modalities then the window is closing," Major General Farooq Ahmad Khan told reporters when asked about the proposal.

Pakistani President Pervez

Musharraf offered Tuesday to throw open the Line of Control, which has split the Himalayan territory since 1949, to let families help one another after the quake.

India welcomed the proposal but said it was awaiting details. Indian officials later said Pakistan had not made any concrete proposal.

Pressed on whether Pakistan had submitted a proposal to India, Khan signalled that Musharraf's remarks to the media were enough.

"Let me put the question in the correct perspective," Khan said. "Should the time be wasted... or should you wait forever that the proposal in writing would come?"

"At this time, on the Line of Control, the divided families need to join together. That's the bottom line," he said.

India has sent Pakistan three

shipments of aid since the October 8 earthquake but their rivalry has repeatedly stymied cooperation to aid the desperate survivors in Kashmir, which has brought them to war twice.

The two countries failed to agree on a proposal for India to send badly needed helicopters after Pakistan said it would only accept the choppers without their Indian pilots.

India has in the past been sceptical of Pakistani calls to open the border in Kashmir, fearing that Islamic militants opposed to New Delhi's rule would take advantage of an open frontier.

The earthquake killed more than 51,300 people in Pakistan including its zone of Kashmir, Khan said. More than 1,300 people died in the two-thirds of Kashmir administered by India, according to Indian police.



PHOTO: AFP

A elderly Pakistani man sits by fire outside his tent in Balakot yesterday. With nearly 50,300 dead and 3.3 million people left homeless in impoverished northern Pakistan and Kashmir, the quake is considered the country's worst disaster.

Tetanus kills 5 as Pak quake wounds fester

AFP, Balakot

Five people have died from tetanus in the aftermath of Pakistan's devastating earthquake and 42 other cases are being treated, the health ministry said yesterday.

Pakistani and international aid workers have launched a massive campaign to vaccinate millions of people who survived the disaster but whose wounds could become infected, it said.

"Five deaths from tetanus have been reported" among people who were evacuated from devastated northern Pakistan and Kashmir to hospitals in the capital Islamabad and nearby Rawalpindi, health secretary Anwar Mahmood said.

"We are treating another 42 tetanus cases and they might increase. People who have been recovered late are developing it," added Mahmood.

In the ruined northern city of Balakot, battalion commander Colonel Saeed Iqbal said the World Health Organisation had informed him of "cases of diarrhoea and a few cases of tetanus".



PHOTO: AFP

Foreign tourists play with their children inside a shelter in downtown Cancun Thursday as hurricane Wilma heads toward Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. Wilma, the most powerful storm ever recorded in the Atlantic, is "extremely dangerous" and is expected to roar into a category five hurricane again on the Saffir-Simpson scale by the time it makes landfall in Mexico.

9 more killed in Indian tribal violence

120 homes torched

AFP, Guwahati

At least nine rebels were killed and 120 homes torched in tribal clashes yesterday in India's northeastern state of Assam, taking the toll in three weeks of violence to 89, police said.

A police official said heavily armed militants belonging to the Dima Haram Daogah tribe killed nine rival Karbi tribal rebels in the Karbi Anglong district, 295km east of Assam's main city of Guwahati.

"According to preliminary reports 12 armed Karbi rebels were involved in burning down houses belonging to the Dimasas tribe when they were challenged by a group of militants," a senior police official who did not wish to be identified told AFP by telephone.

Police suspect the victims were members of the outlawed United People's Democratic Solidarity, a rag-tag rebel army fighting for an independent homeland for the majority Karbi tribe in eastern Assam.

"Witnesses said the rebels were killed by the rival group with automatic weapons and they managed to burn down some 120 houses before the encounter took place," the official said.

India Thursday said it will disarm two rival tribal groups to end more than three weeks of ethnic clashes that have claimed 80 lives in the restive northeastern state of Assam.

A senior home ministry official said authorities in Assam had been given orders to seize weapons from all militants belonging to the United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) and the Dima Haram Daogah (DHD).

"We have decided to disarm rebels of both the DHD and the UPDS immediately in view of the escalating ethnic clashes," Rajeev Agarwal, joint Secretary in India's home ministry, told reporters.

He was part of a team led by junior home minister Siprakash Jaiswal that visited the violence-hit Karbi Anglong district in eastern Assam Thursday.

Alarm bells ring for 2m quake survivors

REUTERS, Muzaffarabad

Alarm mounted across the world yesterday for an estimated 2 million survivors of the Pakistan earthquake still awaiting help two weeks after their world collapsed, with a freezing winter looming.

The top United Nations aid official was so incensed by what he saw as a woefully inadequate international response to the most difficult relief operation the world has ever seen he called on Nato to stage a massive airlift to get survivors to safety.

That would mean helicopters, the only means of getting quickly deep into the rugged Himalayan foothills of Pakistani Kashmir and North West Frontier Province where 50,000 people are known to have died, a number expected to rise substantially.

"You must rest assured that Nato fully realises the gravity of the situation," Nato Secretary-General Jaap de

Hoop Scheffer said. "Nato will act accordingly."

But Nato, which was to consider UN emergency relief coordination Jan Egeland's airlift demand in Brussels on Friday, doesn't have many of the kind of helicopters such an operation would require.

The closest source of helicopters would be India, but it has fought two of its three wars with Pakistan over Kashmir, which both claim.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has told India he would accept helicopters, but only if they came without crews given the enormous political sensitivity of the issue.

India said no and Egeland called on the two governments to figure out a compromise fast.

"These discussions are now holding up a bigger operation and they shouldn't," he said. "I would want them to work out a compromise immediately."

The few roads into the high hills were crumpled, buried by landslides, even swept away by the October 8 quake and aid officials on the ground are frightened that countless more people, without adequate shelter, cold and miserable, could die.

The lack of roads means supplies cannot be got to them in any significant quantities by an aid fleet of fewer than 100 helicopters. Pakistani soldiers are using mules, horses and donkeys, even carrying supplies up on their backs. So are villagers.

"We went to one village at 1,300 metres and temperatures were dropping to minus five at night and there were old people whose only shelter was plastic sheeting," said Mia Turner of the World Food Programme.

"Shelter is crucial and people don't get that soon there will be a crisis of a different kind -- people will start dying of exposure."

Syria, Lebanon involved in Hariri killing: UN

AP, United Nations

Top Syrian intelligence officials approved the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and their Lebanese counterparts helped organise it, according to a UN probe that officially linked Damascus for the first time to the slaying of the popular opposition leader.

The exhaustive report into the Feb. 14 car bomb that killed Hariri and 20 others was issued to the UN Security Council late Thursday and will almost certainly inflame tensions in the region.

The Security Council is likely to use the findings to renew pressure on Syria to ease its continued influence on Lebanon. The council is expected to discuss the report on Tuesday, and may consider sanctions against Syria.

While the report from chief investigator Detlev Mehlis stopped short of fingering Syrian President Bashar Assad or his inner circle, it accused the

regime of failing to cooperate in the probe and alleged Syrian Foreign Minister Farouk al-Sharaa lied in a letter to the Mehlis' commission.

It also cites one witness as saying Assad's brother-in-law, who is the Syrian intelligence chief, set up a false confession.

Syria rejected the report.

The decision to assassinate Hariri "could not have been taken without the approval of top-ranked Syrian security officials and could not have been further organised without the collusion of their counterparts in the Lebanese security services," the report said.

At the time of Hariri's assassination, Syria had about 14,000 troops in Lebanon and essentially controlled the country along with its Lebanese government allies.

Mehlis was careful not to assign blame but cites witness testimony that strongly implicates several officials suspected of conspiring to assassinate

Hariri. Lebanon has already arrested four of them, all Lebanese generals close to Syria.

The report also raised questions about Lebanon's pro-Syrian president, Emile Lahoud, who received a phone call minutes before the deadly blast from the brother of a prominent member of a pro-Syrian group. The same man also called one of four generals arrested, Brig. Gen. Raymond Azar, who at the time was head of Lebanon's military intelligence.

Lahoud's office said it "categorically denies" that the president received such a phone call.

The 53-page report outlines Hariri's worsening relationship with Syrian officials and said the motive for his killing appeared to have been political. Hariri had fallen out with Syria and eventually resigned in October 2004, a month after a decision to change Lebanon's laws and extend Lahoud's term.

Iraq scrambles to fix Saddam trial glitches

AFP, Baghdad

Embarrassed US and Iraqi officials are working overtime trying to fix technical glitches that disrupted the globally-televised opening day of former president Saddam Hussein's trial.

An intermittent courtroom audio signal, an informal English translation that constantly broke up, and the inability of reporters and witnesses to see the defendants' faces -- just some of the problems that bedevilled the first day.

But by the time the trial reopens on November 28 the most pressing issues should be fixed, said US embassy spokesman David Culklin.

Washington allocated 75 million dollars in May 2004 to help fund court security and building infrastructure, as well as train Iraqi judges and collect evidence of abuses during Saddam's regime.

"They spent 75 million dollars and had months to prepare, and this is the best they could come up with?" shouted one television reporter in a fit of exasperation when the audio

system broke down.

Both reporters and a gallery of 25 some witnesses, which included big names such as Deputy Prime Minister Ahmed Chalabi and speaker Hussein Sharastani -- imprisoned during Saddam's regime -- had similar problems following the proceedings.

US marshals and Iraqi security guards with automatic weapons ushered journalists and guests into large machines for a full body X-ray scan before entering the complex.

To enter the fourth floor courtroom visitors had to walk into another full body X-ray machine.

When the trial finally opened and Saddam entered into the courtroom, some 25 reporters from around the world witnessing the historic event from behind a glass partition could not hear the defendants.

As Saddam lectured presiding judge Rizkar Mohammed Amin on the legality of the court and there was still no audio, reporters became agitated.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas (C) speaks with Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R), R-TN, and Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (L), D-NV, during a visit to the US Capitol to meet with Congressional leaders Thursday in Washington, DC. Abbas met earlier with US President George W. Bush at the White House.

Taliban bombs kill 2 Afghan officials

AFP, Kandahar

Bombs planted by suspected Taliban rebels killed a top policeman and a senior intelligence officer in the latest attacks against the authorities in Afghanistan, officials said yesterday.

The police director of southwestern Nimroz province and a guard were killed late Thursday when a remotely detonated car bomb tore through their vehicle as they were going to evening prayers, an interior ministry spokesman said.

Haji Nafas Khan was the second-most senior policeman in the province.

Another policeman and four civilians were wounded in the blast in the provincial capital Zaranj, ministry spokesman Yousuf Stanizai said.

He blamed the attack on the "enemies of peace and stability", a term officials use to refer to loyalists of the Taliban regime ousted in late 2001.



PHOTO: AFP

A South Korean protester holds a placard during an anti-US rally in front of the Defence Ministry in Seoul yesterday protesting Rumsfeld's trip. Rumsfeld is in Seoul for the annual security talks with South Korea.

Lanka boosts security ahead of election

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka beefed up security for the island's two main presidential candidates on Thursday, mindful of a Tamil Tiger suicide bombing that nearly killed outgoing President Chandrika Kumaratunga ahead of her re-election in 1999.

Sri Lanka's two-decade civil war was halted by a 2002 truce, but relations between the government and the rebels are at their lowest ebb since then amid continued violence in the island's east, which is piling pressure on the ceasefire.

Kumaratunga lost an eye in the 1999 bombing, which political analysts say stirred a sympathy vote that helped her defeat main opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe, who is set to go head to head with Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse in a Nov. 17 vote.

"The Prime Minister has ... been provided a contingent of trained and experienced personnel from the Presidential Security Division," Kumaratunga's office said in a statement, adding that both candidates had been given additional security and

vehicles.

Rajapakse has pledged to take a tough line on the Tigers if elected and has ruled out their demands for a separate homeland and self-rule, which political analysts say makes him the Tigers' No. 1 foe.

Sri Lanka is already under a state of emergency following the August assassination of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, which the government blames on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

The European Union last month condemned Kadirgamar's murder and barred the Tigers from visiting its member states, saying it was considering listing the group as a terrorist organisation.

How to forge peace with the Tigers is a central election issue that is overshadowing efforts to jumpstart stalled efforts to convert the truce into permanent peace.

However, observers expect the ceasefire to hold, and say that any return to a full-scale war that killed more than 64,000 people and displaced hundreds of thousands more from their homes is unlikely.

PALESTINIAN STATEHOOD

Hamas slams Bush for dropping timetable

AFP, Gaza City

The radical Islamist movement Hamas slammed US President George W. Bush yesterday for dropping any concept of a fixed timetable for the creation of a Palestinian state and warned against pressure to disarm "resistance" factions.

Hamas said Bush broke his promise a day after he hosted Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas at the White House for their first meeting since Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip last month.

"Bush said he wanted to see a Palestinian state, but without a timetable," Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri told AFP in Gaza City.

"He went back on his last promise," Abu Zuhri said, referring to comments made by the US leader when he was re-elected last November.

Standing next to Abbas on the lawn of the White House, Bush said he believed his two-state vision was

possible but acknowledged he did not know if a Palestinian state would be created by the time he left office in January 2009.

"I can't tell you when it's going to happen. It's happening," he said of the state he had once said would come into being by the end of this year.

"If it happens before I get out of office, I'll be there to witness the ceremony. And if doesn't, we will work hard to lay that foundation so that the process becomes irreversible," Bush said.

His comments were at odds with remarks made in November 2004, when he said: "I would like to see it done in four years. I think it is possible."

The internationally drafted Middle East peace roadmap, which was launched in June 2003, laid out steps for the creation of a Palestinian state by 2005.

However, Palestinian officials in Ramallah played down Bush's reluctance to adhere to a timetable.

"It is the first time that President Bush has said he would use his influence for the formation of a Palestinian state," chief negotiator Saeb Erakat told AFP. "The deadline is not important when he uses such strong words."

The Hamas spokesman also took a swipe at Bush's call for Abbas to crack down on "armed gangs", and urged the Palestinian Authority to resist international interference in Palestinian affairs.

"Bush focused on putting pressure on the Palestinian Authority to confront the factions. This is dangerous," Zuhri warned.

Bush had been widely expected to push Abbas to do more to rein in militants following a weekend shooting attack which left three Israeli settlers dead.