

India, Pakistan to talk Kashmir quake relief

AFP, Muzaffarabad

Indian diplomats were due in Pakistan yesterday for talks on getting relief across the frontier dividing quake-shattered Kashmir and saving the lives of thousands of survivors who are still at risk.

The two sides were due to meet today to discuss their differing plans on how to help Kashmiris, who were the worst hit by the October 8 disaster and make up the majority of the 55,000 dead.

Officials said UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and former US President Bill Clinton may also visit Pakistan in the near future in a bid to secure more aid from the international community before winter sets in.

"The Indian delegation is arriving in Islamabad late in the evening. The talks will be held tomorrow," Pakistani foreign office spokeswoman Tasnim

Aslam told AFP.

India said on Thursday that it had pledged 25 million to its traditional rival Pakistan following the quake, but efforts to let aid flow across the highly militarised Line of Control in Kashmir have been beset by problems.

Despite warnings that tens of thousands of survivors trapped in remote villages in Pakistani Kashmir may die of exposure before relief workers can reach them, they have been unable to reach a compromise.

Early last week Pakistan's President Musharraf proposed opening five crossing points on the Line of Control, which Kashmiris on both sides of the divide could use to reach stricken relatives.

India's counterproposal is to establish relief camps at three points on the frontier and it has already stockpiled aid at the locations -- Teetwal in the district of Tangdhar,

Kaman Post in devastated Uri district and at Chakan Dabagh in southern Kashmir's Poonch district.

Pakistan and India have fought two wars over the Himalayan region since independence in 1947 but have been engaged in a slow moving peace process since January 2004.

Meanwhile the foreign office's Aslam said Annan and Clinton may visit Pakistan, but said the timing of their trips was still being finalised.

"There is a possibility that UN Secretary General Kofi Annan may visit Pakistan," she said. "One possibility is that his visit may coincide with a donors' conference being held in Islamabad on November 18."

The spokeswoman added that if Clinton visited it would echo the tours he made of areas devastated by the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Thousands evacuated as storm batters India

AFP, REUTERS, Hyderabad

Five people died and thousands of people were evacuated from coastal areas as a powerful storm, which had been hovering in the Bay of Bengal bore down on the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, officials said.

"Five persons have died due to rains and cold winds so far," said T. K. Dewan, the chief secretary of the state.

"Relief and rescue operations have also been launched in the affected areas. Officers have been stationed at vulnerable places to monitor the situation."

In advance of the storm, the coastal areas of the state were put on cyclone alert and fishermen were warned not to venture out to sea.

More than 10,000 people were evacuated from the state's southern coastal areas and people were cautioned against crossing rivers and lakes, which are overflowing.

But the storm was weaker than expected when it hit the mainland, a

weather official said, predicting it would dissipate over the next 48 hours.

Heavy rains in the past three days have severely affected the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

Officials said 64 people have died due to rains and flooding in Tamil Nadu, where some 50,000 people were evacuated to higher ground, while another 26 lost their lives in Karnataka.

Weather officials say the rains have marked the arrival of the monsoon season in southern India.

"The annual monsoon rains have arrived earlier than usual over southern India. Now this wet weather will last for at least another two months. It is a huge challenge for the administration," a Tamil Nadu official said.

Unlike the rest of India, which experiences monsoon rains between June and September, the south gets monsoon rains in November and December.



Nepalese rickshawpullers wait for passengers at Basantpur in Kathmandu during a general strike called by an alliance of Nepalese political parties yesterday. A day-long general strike to overturn a government ban on FM radio news broadcasts brought life to a halt in the Kathmandu valley, witnesses said.

Change of old guard in Kashmir

Ghulam Nabi Azad to be new CM

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

In a change of old guards under a power-sharing pact in India's insurgency-wrecked state of Jammu and Kashmir, senior Congress leader Ghulam Nabi Azad was named new Chief Minister of the state replacing Mufti Mohammed Sayeed of People's Democratic Party (PDP).

Azad, 56, who is considered a staunch loyalist of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, will be the first Congress party leader to occupy the top post in the state after nearly three decades. He would be sworn in as Chief Minister on November 2.

Azad is at present the Federal Minister in charge of two key portfolios Urban Development and Parliamentary Affairs in the government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

The decision to nominate Azad as the Chief Minister was taken by Congress President Sonia Gandhi after consultation with senior party leaders and leaders of some other constituents of India's ruling coalition in the last four to five days, resolving Congress party's dilemma whether to give Sayeed an extension or take over the reins in the state.

Capping days of debate within



Congress, Congress general secretary Ambika Soni announced Azad's nomination as Chief Minister at a news conference here Thursday night. She said Sayeed and Mehbooba have assured Sonia Gandhi that PDP would extend full cooperation to Azad at the helm of power in the state.

After the last assembly election in Jammu and Kashmir in 2002, Congress emerged as the single largest party with 20 seats followed by PDP, headed by Sayeed's daughter Mehbooba Mufti, which secured 16 seats.

EU warns Lanka to clean up polls act

AFP, Colombo

The European Union yesterday warned Sri Lanka that it will organise no more election monitoring missions to the troubled island unless Colombo implements recommendations to reduce fraud.

John Cushman the head of the 72-member European Union mission for the November 17 presidential election said Sri Lanka had failed to implement suggestions made after observing three previous elections.

"As a friend of Sri Lanka, it would be remiss of me not to point out that if, at the end of this election, no attempt is made to implement our recommendations, any future request from Sri Lanka for election observation will fall on deaf ears," Cushman said.

He said the EU was "clearly frustrated" with the lack of follow up by Sri Lankan authorities after national elections.

"None of the key recommendations

of three previous missions to strengthen the democratic process have been implemented," Cushman said. "They have merely been left on the shelf gathering dust."

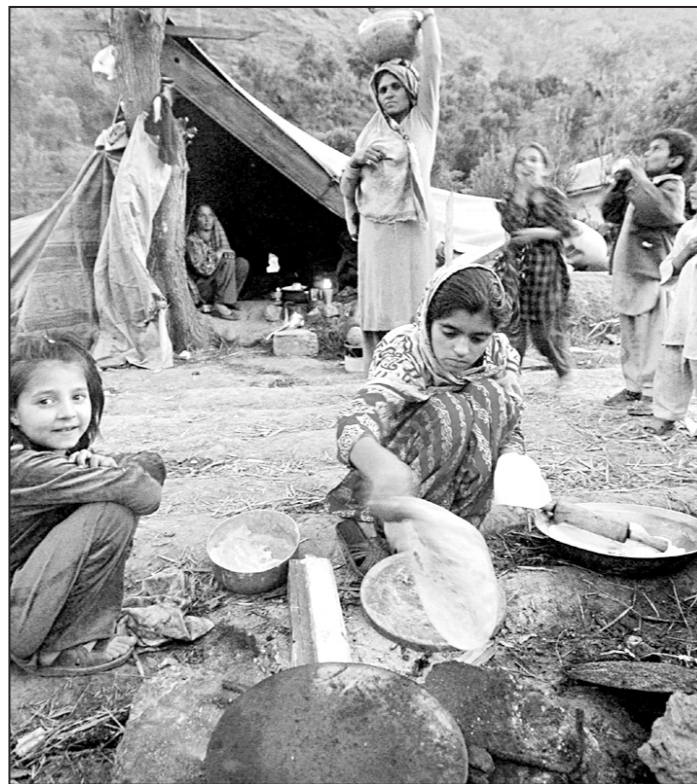
He had demanded the national identity card be made mandatory to ensure no impersonation at future elections.

Two weeks ago, Sri Lanka's main opposition called for international observers to monitor the election amid fears of violence.

Sri Lanka has a history of violent elections at which candidates have been killed and party supporters have attacked each other.

Elections chief Dayananda Dissanayake announced last month that he will allow full access to poll monitors.

Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse and opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe are the main contenders for the presidency.



A homeless Pakistani Kashmiri woman makes bread for her family outside their makeshift tent in Chinari, some 58km from Muzaffarabad Thursday. Relief officials warned that world aid pledges for Pakistan's quake may be too late to save lives.