

Pakistanis pledge special steps for border crossings

Pak army sets up relief camps along LoC, talks over clearing mines today

AP, AFP, Muzaffarabad/Srinagar

Pakistan said yesterday it would make special arrangements to give earthquake survivors easy access to Indian Kashmir over concerns bureaucracy would hamper the efforts of thousands to cross the border.

Military officials from India and Pakistan are slated to hold talks today on the clearing of tens of thousands of mines along the de facto border of disputed Kashmir to facilitate earthquake relief, a top army official said.

V.K. Singh, army chief of staff who heads anti-insurgency operations in Indian Kashmir, told AFP Monday that commanders from both sides would attend the meeting at a point along the border called the Line of Control (LoC).

"We have requested a ... meeting and it may take place tomorrow," he said, indicating there had been a positive response from Pakistan.

"It is a pretty difficult task," Singh said. "Some of the mines were laid in 1949 and others have been taken out and replaced with new mines. Some of

the mines could have even shifted from the original points."

Anti-personnel and anti-tank mines were among those that needed to be cleared after their deployment across the border regions in Kashmir, claimed by both India and Pakistan.

"The clearing requires a joint agreement and the other side (Pakistan) should not object," Singh said.

Tuesday's likely meeting, at a yet to be decided location on the LoC, follows a decision on the weekend by arch-rivals India and Pakistan to open up the heavily militarised LoC at five points to allow the easier flow of relief for quake victims from Nov. 7.

They agreed that those wishing to travel would follow the same procedures as people who have used a cross-border bus service launched in March.

But that process, which involves six applications forms, exchanges of lists of applicants from the two sides and then laborious checks, can take up to a month.

The two countries said they would try to process applications within 10

days but there are doubts that can be done.

"Bureaucracy is slow, they're going to have to evolve a new system," an official in Pakistani Kashmir, who did not want to be identified.

"They couldn't cater for the demand from bus passengers -- thousands applied but only 500 went. If they're going to go for the same system they're not going to deliver and I think they're going to go for the same system."

However, Minister of Social Affairs Zubaida Jalal said there would be special arrangements for earthquake survivors.

"There will be specific arrangements, keeping the situation in mind, arrangements on both sides to facilitate that, so I think they'll be able to cope with it," she told a news conference in Muzaffarabad, capital of Pakistani Kashmir.

India has already set up three relief camps on its side of the so-called Line of Control, which has divided the Himalayan region for nearly six decades. The neighbours have fought two wars over Kashmir.

She did not elaborate, but said the opening of the Line of Control would be a big boost for divided families.

Ordinary Kashmiris welcomed the

news that they may soon be able to cross the line that has separated Kashmir since India and Pakistan fought their first war over the region shortly after their independence in 1947.

Pakistan's army has set up two relief camps and a field hospital for quake victims along its disputed Kashmiri border with India, an army spokesman said yesterday, a day after the rivals agreed to open the heavily guarded frontier to ease the delivery of aid.

The field hospital and one of the camps are in the town of Chakothi, one of the five points where residents will be allowed to cross the border starting Nov. 7, said Farooq Nasir, the army spokesman in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan's part of Kashmir.

Nuclear rivals India and Pakistan -- who have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir -- signed a historic deal early Sunday to open five crossings on the Himalayan territory's de facto border from November 7.

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Musharraf wants troops out of Kashmir

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf wants to demilitarise Kashmir, his spokesman said yesterday, a day after India and Pakistan agreed to open the border in the disputed state to aid earthquake survivors.

"I am for demilitarisation (in Kashmir). If they (India) agree to that, we will too," Musharraf told the Saudi newspaper Arab News at the weekend, according to his spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan.

"We are very flexible. We are absolutely open to moving forward to the ultimate solution. You cannot clap with one hand, you can only clap with two," the spokesman quoted Musharraf as saying.

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Musharraf himself originally proposed the opening of the heavily militarised Line of Control around a week and a half after the October 8 disaster, which killed more than

56,000 people in Pakistan and India.

His latest remarks come a year after he first suggested demilitarising Kashmir, currently split between Pakistan and India and claimed by both, and either placing it under United Nations mandate, joint control or giving it independence.

When asked if he thought the quake could help resolve the bitter dispute over Kashmir, Musharraf was quoted as saying: "This is an opportunity."

India has pledged 25 million dollars to Pakistan to help provide relief to more than 3.3 million people made homeless by the earthquake, but the two countries have struggled to overcome differences on other aid proposals.

Pakistan and India launched a slow-moving peace process in January 2004 but groups opposed to the peace moves came under suspicion after three blasts killed 62 people in New Delhi on Saturday.

Pakistan denounced the bombings as an act of "criminal terrorism" and called for a thorough investigation.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian school children pray for the victims of the October 29 bomb blasts at Rajghat in New Delhi yesterday. Police were sifting through mobile telephone call records in their hunt for those behind the deadly blasts at New Delhi markets.

UNSC divided over Syria resolution

AP, AFP, United Nations/Paris

The United States, France and Britain remained at odds with Russia and China Sunday over a tough UN resolution demanding that Syria cooperate with a probe into the assassination of a former Lebanese prime minister or face possible sanctions.

The foreign ministers of the five UN Security Council members met on the weekend in New York ahead of a vote Monday on a resolution aimed at securing Syria's cooperation with the probe into the murder of Lebanon's ex-premier, the French foreign minister said.

"The meeting was aimed at reviewing topics currently under discussion at the United Nations Security Council, including the appropriate follow-up to the report by Judge (Detlev) Mehlis," a ministry spokesman said, adding that the gathering took place Sunday.

The report by UN chief investigator Mehlis implicated senior Syrian security officials in former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri's murder in February.

But US Ambassador John Bolton predicted the resolution would be approved at a Security Council meeting Monday to be attended by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and other foreign ministers.

Rice hosted a dinner Sunday evening at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York for the foreign ministers of the four other permanent members of the Security Council: Russia's Sergey Lavrov, China's Li Zhaoxing, Britain's Jack Straw and France's Philippe Douste-Blazy. The meeting with the four other veto-wielding Security Council powers was the last opportunity to change the text ahead of Monday morning's vote.

The draft resolution strongly backs a report by the UN investigating commission led by German prosecutor Detlev Mehlis, which implicated top Syrian and Lebanese security officials in the Feb. 14 bombing that killed Hariri and 20 others. The report also accused Syria of not cooperating fully with the probe.

The court said this was a direct attack on the Indian government and by attacking the Red Fort they wanted to prove they could strike anywhere in India," the lawyer said.

Pakistani to die for Red Fort attack

REUTERS, AFP, New Delhi

An Indian court on Monday sentenced a Pakistani to death over a militant attack on New Delhi's famous 17th Century Red Fort five years ago.

Prosecutors had said Ashfaq Rehman, convicted of "waging war" on India, was a member of the banned Pakistan militant group that some analysts suspect of involvement in weekend bombings in New Delhi that killed at least 59 people.

Five others, all Indians, were jailed for between seven years and life over the Red Fort attack, in which three people died.

Mohammad Arif, who used the alias Ashfaq, was handed the death sentence for his role in the December 2000 attack that killed three people at the Mughal-era fort, the lawyer told reporters.

"The court said this was a direct attack on the Indian government and by attacking the Red Fort they wanted to prove they could strike anywhere in India," the lawyer said.

Israel vows to carry on offensive

AFP, Jerusalem

The men opened fire at the troops as they tried to flee, the army said. Israeli troops shot back and killed one Palestinian.

Twelve Palestinians have now been killed in Israeli army operations and air strikes since the suicide bombing in the northern Israeli town of Hadera.

Israel's pullout from Gaza in September had raised hopes in the international community of a genuine breakthrough in the peace process but such optimism has steadily crumbled amid persistent violence.

A senior official told AFP that Israel would continue to take action against militants as long as the Palestinian Authority did nothing.

"If the Palestinian Authority continues to do nothing about terrorism, we will," an aide to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said.

"We are waiting for the Palestinians to decide to dismantle terrorist organisations before renewing contacts at the leadership level and moving forward," the source added.

US lawmakers call for White House shakeup

REUTERS, Washington

US President George W. Bush, whose top adviser Karl Rove remains in jeopardy in a CIA-leak probe, needs to shake up his White House staff if he hopes to revive a presidency reeling from multiple setbacks, Republican and Democratic lawmakers said on Sunday.

The lawmakers also urged Bush to investigate the office of Vice President Dick Cheney, whose chief of staff, Lewis Libby, resigned on Friday and was indicted on perjury and other charges in connection with the probe.

It also came as the White House sought to fight out from under deep political trouble linked to the case for war in Iraq after Vice President Dick Cheney's chief aide was indicted in a CIA-leak investigation on Friday.

"I think Karl Rove should step

down," Senate Democratic leader Harry Reid of Nevada said on ABC's "This Week."

Mississippi Republican Sen. Trent Lott said the Bush administration needed "new blood, new energy, qualified staff," and that he expected the president to address his problems.

"I'm not talking about wholesale changes, but you've got to reach out and bring in more advice and counsel," Lott said on "Fox News Sunday."

Rove remains under investigation in the probe into who leaked the identity of covert CIA operative Valerie Plame, whose diplomat husband is a prominent Iraq war critic. The White House's credibility has been hurt by disclosures that Rove and Libby leaked Plame's identity, despite earlier official denials attributed to the two men.

'Bush losing faith in Cheney, top aides'

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush's confidence in his top team of advisors, including all-important Vice President Dick Cheney, has fallen sharply in the wake of the CIA leak scandal, Time magazine reported Sunday.

In the wake of Friday's indictment of Cheney's top advisor for lying to a grand jury over the case, Bush's faith in his own top aides Karl Rove and Andrew Card, as well as Cheney, has dropped, Time reported.

"He's lost some of his confidence in the three people he listens to the most," Time quoted an unnamed White House adviser as saying.

US auditor calls for anti-corruption drive in Iraq

REUTERS, Washington

Corruption continues to cost Iraq billions of dollars each year, and Washington and Baghdad should be doing far more to stop it, the top US auditor for Iraq's reconstruction said in a report released on Sunday.

Stuart Bowen, special inspector general for Iraq reconstruction, said US efforts to help Iraq build strong anti-corruption institutions were urgently needed and called for an American-Iraqi summit to battle a legacy of corruption.

"Creating an effective anti-corruption structure within Iraq's government is essential to the long-term

success of Iraq's fledgling democracy," Bowen wrote in his seventh quarterly report to Congress.

It was released days after the United Nations concluded that 2,200 companies including DaimlerChrysler, Siemens and Volvo made illicit payments totalling \$1.8 billion to Saddam Hussein's government under the UN oil-for-food programme.

Bowen's office, which has 20 auditors and 10 investigators in Iraq plus staffers in the United States, has made significant progress on cases charging fraud, bribery and kickbacks involving US citizens -- government officials and contractors -- in Iraq, he said.

Bush picks judge for SC

AFP, Washington

Emboldened US President George W. Bush yesterday nominated a conservative appeals court judge, Samuel Alito, to the Supreme Court in a move expected to heal a rift in his Republican party.

In a joint public appearance at the White House, Bush called Alito -- who would replace retiring Justice Sandra Day O'Connor -- "one of the most accomplished and respected judges in America."

The announcement came after Bush's previous pick, longtime aide Harriet Miers, withdrew amid charges of cronyism and a revolt within the president's Republican party from conservatives who doubted her ideological purity.

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PHOTO: AFP

Local resident, Thelma Mosley, holds a portrait of civil rights activist, Rosa Parks, as she waits in line to enter the US Capitol Rotunda to pay her respects to Parks on Sunday in Washington, DC. Parks is the first woman and the second African American to lie in honour at the Rotunda of the US Capitol.