

Glitches delay Kashmir border crossing

AP, Islamabad

It is unlikely any civilians will be allowed to cross the Kashmir frontier between India and Pakistan on schedule because of procedural glitches, the Foreign Ministry said yesterday, one day ahead of the much-anticipated opening.

Neither country had sent the other lists of people approved to cross, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Tasnim Aslam told The Associated Press.

"It doesn't look likely. We have not yet received any list from India and our list has not gone to India," she said, adding that she hoped the paperwork would be exchanged on Monday. Each country would then have as long as 10 days to process the names, though they could do it faster.

Aslam said relief goods to help quake victims on either side of divided Kashmir were expected to be allowed through.

The announcement was the latest disappointment since India and Pakistan agreed late last month to open the heavily militarised Kashmir frontier to speed relief supplies to victims of the Oct. 8 earthquake. Originally, five crossing points were to be opened today. But India on Saturday said that just one would be

ready on time.

Meanwhile, forecasts of snow on the Pakistani side of the disputed Himalayan territory added to the ordeal for hundreds of thousands of survivors still without shelter nearly a month after the quake, as UN and other aid agencies struggle with limited budgets to deliver help before winter.

A strong aftershock jolted quake-hit Kashmir areas, but there were no immediate reports of injuries or damage from Sunday's magnitude-6.0 aftershock in Pakistan's portion of Kashmir, seismologists in the north-western city of Peshawar said. It was one of the strongest since the 7.6-magnitude quake last month that killed about 80,000 and left 3 million homeless.

The 1,190 aftershocks since that quake have sparked landslides that added to the debris blocking roads needed to distribute much-needed aid to remote mountain settlements. Sunday's jolt unleashed several landslides near the northwestern city of Balakot, some of which temporarily blocked traffic Pakistani army Lt. Col. Saeed Iqbal said.

After the quake devastated Pakistan's side of the divided territory of Kashmir, India and Pakistan reached a breakthrough agreement to

open five border crossings.

But India said Saturday that only one crossing would be ready a setback for the disaster diplomacy that has brought the nuclear-armed rivals closer in a time of need. It was also a blow for survivors eager to cross over to check on relatives, exchange provisions and seek help at relief camps being set up along the heavily militarised frontier.

Indian army spokesman Lt. Col. V. K. Batra said that two crossings were not ready because of the threat of land mines and landslides on the Indian side, but he also blamed Pakistan for delays in clearing another two routes, saying its work on bridges at the crossings was incomplete.

Pakistani officials, however, said their side was ready to open the crossings.

"All preparations on the Pakistan side are complete at the designated places," Pakistan's army said in a statement.

The Indian Foreign Ministry said two of the crossings may be opened by the middle of next week.

In Muzaffarabad, capital of the Pakistan-controlled part of Kashmir, Deputy Police Chief Ata Ullah said diplomats from both countries had been slated to meet Saturday to exchange a list of names of people

intending to cross over but the meeting was cancelled. He did not explain why.

Ullah said the cancellation raised doubt about whether any crossings would take place at all on Monday, even at the border post India said was ready.

Kashmir was split between India and Pakistan after the bloody partition of the subcontinent following independence from Britain in 1947. Both countries claim all of Kashmir in a dispute that has sparked two wars and kept families separated for more than half a century.

The two sides began a peace process last year, and last month's frontier agreement helped the warming of ties, raising hope among many survivors that they would be able to check whether lost relatives had survived the magnitude 7.6 quake.

"Hundreds of us are planning to go," said Mirza Irsan, a resident in the Pakistani Kashmir village of Chinari. "We have no telephone lines, no way of knowing they are safe. This is our only chance."

Chinari residents had planned to embark over the weekend on a 30-mile walk through the Himalayas to one of the border crossings, but those plans were thrown into doubt by India's announcement.



PHOTO: AFP
Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh walks from the premier's residence in New Delhi yesterday after a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. A UN report by former US Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker said Singh and the Congress Party were among beneficiaries worldwide allowed to buy Iraqi oil at below market rates in return for kickbacks to the regime of Saddam Hussein.

OIL-FOR-FOOD SCAM India to name panel to probe Natwar link

AFP, New Delhi

India's prime minister met Foreign Minister Natwar Singh yesterday to discuss allegations that the minister and the ruling Congress Party benefited from deals linked to the UN oil-for-food programme for Iraq.

"I met the prime minister (Manmohan Singh) a short while ago. We discussed the Volcker report. We also discussed other pressing foreign policy matters," Natwar Singh told reporters after the meeting.

A UN report by former US Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker said Singh and the Congress party were among beneficiaries worldwide allowed to buy Iraqi oil at below market rates in return for kickbacks to the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Newspapers said the prime minister was likely to appoint a retired judge to examine details of the report. Several television channels said there would be pressure on the foreign minister to resign if such a probe was ordered.

A government source said the prime minister had decided to order a probe following talks with Finance Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram and Science and Technology Minister Kapil Sibal, both noted lawyers.

The Times of India newspaper said that after going through the Volcker report, Chidambaram and Sibal

advised the prime minister that Natwar Singh could not be cleared immediately.

But the two ministers felt confident that it would be possible to get the Congress party cleared, the newspapers said.

The prime minister's office refused to confirm that a probe would be announced later Sunday.

Last week the foreign minister rejected opposition demands to resign, saying he enjoyed the full confidence of his Congress party chief Sonia Gandhi and of Manmohan Singh.

The Volcker report named him as a non-contractual beneficiary of four million barrels of Iraqi oil allotted to a firm named Masefield AG.

The report said it found that Saddam's regime manipulated the programme to extract about 1.8 billion dollars in surcharges and bribes, while an inept UN headquarters failed to exert administrative control.

The ruling Congress party, India's oldest political entity, is also listed as a beneficiary of a separate allotment of four million barrels of oil as part of the transactions.

Smarting under opposition demands for Singh's scalp, Congress has said it was mailing a "comprehensive legal notice" to the United Nations to demand full disclosure of the Volcker report.



PHOTO: AFP
A Pakistani woman prepares food for her son in a relief camp in Balakot yesterday. Pakistan said it was ready to open five designated crossing points on the de facto border with India in Kashmir, even though India has said it is only ready to open one.

Blast kills 7 militants in Pak tribal town

REUTERS, AFP, Islamabad

Seven suspected militants, including some foreigners, were killed on Saturday when they triggered an explosion while making bomb parts in a Pakistani tribal region near the Afghan border, the Pakistan military said.

Military spokesman Major-General Shaukat Sultan said the militants, two of them women, were killed making detonators in a house near Miranshah, capital of the North Waziristan region.

"Some foreigners were amongst those killed, but we have no information on their origin," Sultan said.

"It seems the explosion occurred when these people were busy making an improvised explosive device for terrorist activity," chief military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan told AFP, quoting local administration officials.

Residents said the blast happened at about 1:30 am (2030 GMT Friday) in

a house near Mir Ali, about 20km east of Miranshah, the main town in the rugged tribal zone of North Waziristan.

He said there were no further details on their identities or whether they were wanted militants.

The blast during the Muslim festival of Eid-ul-Fitr came days after security forces killed an Arab al-Qaeda suspect and seized another in a shoot-out in Quetta, capital of the south-western province of Baluchistan.

Pakistani forces have been battling al-Qaeda-linked militants in the rugged region since last year and hundreds of militants and Pakistani soldiers have been killed in clashes there.

Many al-Qaeda militants and their Taliban allies are thought to have slipped into Pakistan after US-led forces ousted the Taliban government in Afghanistan after the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States in 2001.

LTTE to stay neutral in Lankan election

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels have decided to remain neutral in the presidential election this month, a pro-rebel website reported yesterday as minority Tamil voters emerged as potential king-makers.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) will not pressure minority Tamils to take part in or to boycott the November 17 election, C. Ilamparithi, a leader of the LTTE based in the northern city of Jaffna, said on the Tamilnet website.

"The LTTE will not exert any pressure on Tamils on this issue," he said.

The LTTE's political wing leader S.P. Thamilselvan told AFP in a recent interview that they were uninterested in the election because all majority Sinhalese leaders of Sri Lanka had let them down in the past.

However, Thamilselvan said they would not interfere with the election and invited candidates to campaign in

large parts of the island's northeast held by the rebels.

Sri Lanka's minority Tamils are concentrated in the embattled northern and eastern provinces and their vote becomes crucial if the majority Sinhalese community splits between the two main contenders.

Opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe is campaigning on a promise to push talks with the LTTE and revive a Norwegian-backed peace bid while Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse's main plank is a complete overhaul of the peace process.

Some 650,000 minority Tamils voted almost en bloc to elect 22 Tiger proxies to parliament at the April 2004 elections.

However, private poll monitors have expressed fears that escalating violence in the troubled regions could scare away the voters and a low turnout by them could favour Rajapakse.

There will be no polling in rebel-

held areas, but the election authorities have arranged transport from rebel territory to polling booths in government-controlled areas.

Both the prime minister and the opposition leader made separate visits to the main military garrison in the Tamil heartland of the Jaffna peninsula last week, but stopped short of travelling outside the high security zone.

Security officials said both were advised that it was too risky. The LTTE maintains a shadowy presence in the region even though security forces wrested control of Jaffna in December 1995.

The two sides have observed a ceasefire since February 2002. But Scandinavian monitors reported that over 190 people had been killed in violence related to the conflict this year despite the truce.

SNOW FORECAST FAILS TO SWAY Pak quake survivors vow to stay put

REUTERS, Khagan Valley

Barely a house is still standing in Pakistan's earthquake-shattered Khagan valley and in a few weeks time it will lie under a blanket of deep snow.

But sitting in a tent near the ruins of his electronics shop, 25-year-old Mohammad Ashraf says he has no plans to leave, despite pleas from the Pakistani army, which is trying to avert a new wave of deaths among earthquake survivors this winter.

Ashraf, who has lost both legs in a car accident, said he always stays in the winter and he has nowhere else to go.

He might though try to travel to the town of Mansehra, about 100 km (60 miles) and numerous landslides away, to buy food to last him until spring. The Pakistani army says opening the road may take another three to four days.

"Maybe tomorrow the road will be

open," Ashraf said by the light of a single flickering candle. "If not, then my friends will carry me over the mountains."

Ashraf then buries his head in his hands and cries.

Although temperatures are already bitterly cold at night, most of the subsistence farmers of the remote Khagan Valley in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province do not want to leave.

They say they want to stay with their cattle and are highly suspicious of the tent camps set up in the lowlands by the government and international aid agencies, where conditions are spartan at best and miserably squalid at worst.

"There is a lot of panic in those camps and no discipline at all," said 20-year-old driver Naveed Hussain. "And the food supply is just for one month --

what do we do then?"

The official death toll from the devastating earthquake that hit North West Frontier and Pakistani Kashmir stands at more than 73,000, with another 1,300 killed in Indian Kashmir.

The United Nations, struggling to provide shelter for three million homeless and food for a more than a million in some of the most forbidding mountain terrain on earth, now fears a second wave of deaths as colder weather takes hold in coming weeks.

Last week, President Pervez Musharraf told highlanders they would need to come down the mountains as they would not survive in tents. But many, like those in the Khagan valley, are reluctant to do so as they fear losing their livestock and land.

Stampede kills 6 in Indian flood relief camp

AFP, New Delhi

Six people were killed and 10 injured yesterday in a stampede at a flood relief camp in the southern Indian city of Chennai, a report said.

The six were crushed to death as some 300 people rushed to be the first to collect 2,000 rupees (44 dollars) of cash, food and clothes being distributed by the authorities, the Press Trust of India news agency said.

Ten others were injured in the incident, it said, adding that the authorities moved in quickly to restore order.

Hundreds of thousands of people in southern India were evacuated by the authorities last month as heavy rains lashed the region.

More than 70,000 people were moved to safer places and relief camps in southern Tamil Nadu state of which Chennai is the capital, the report added.



PHOTO: AFP
A Pakistani Kashmiri earthquake survivor dressed in a traditional Eid costume stands outside tents in Kamsar Saturday during the second day of the religious festival of Eid-ul-Fitr. Snow is forecast to hit quake-battered northern Pakistan in coming days and the United Nations warned that survivors urgently need heating to get through the winter alive.

UN chopper strays into Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

A UN helicopter on a relief mission for victims of the earthquake in Pakistani Kashmir accidentally strayed into the Indian side of the divided territory yesterday but was allowed to return, an army spokesman said.

"A UN chopper landed by mistake in Urusa village of Uri district near the Line of Control (LoC)," said army spokesman Vijay Batra.

"It strayed into Indian territory during a relief mission across the LoC (the de facto border)," Batra said.

"After verification it was allowed to fly back along with one pilot and 10 others on board," he said.

The South Asian quake killed some 73,000 people in Pakistan and 1,300 in Indian Kashmir and left millions homeless.

Indian army sources said arch-rivals India and Pakistan had relaxed flight restrictions along the frontier in the aftermath of the quake.

Anger mounts in India over Delhi blasts

REUTERS, New Delhi

Anger is mounting in India over bomb attacks in the capital a week ago that have been blamed on militants based in Pakistan, further hampering New Delhi's slow-moving peace talks with Islamabad.

Sixty percent of Indians polled in a mobile phone text survey last week said New Delhi should call off the talks.

While India is not expected to take such a drastic step, the outrage sparked by the blasts will force Prime Minister Manmohan Singh to do some plain speaking during talks with his Pakistani counterpart Shaukat Aziz this week, officials and analysts said.

Singh and Aziz are due to meet on

the sidelines of a Nov. 12-13 South Asian summit in the Bangladeshi capital, Dhaka.

At least 59 people were killed and over 200 wounded in the simultaneous bomb blasts in crowded Delhi bazaars on Oct. 30. Singh has said there were indications the bombers were linked to Pakistan and reminded Islamabad of its promise to curb anti-India militants based there.

"After the Delhi blasts, I think it would be fair for us to expect that they should now deliver on their promise," said C. Uday Bhaskar of New Delhi-based Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses.

"We've had enough rhetoric on the subject from Pakistan. Now we need to see how Pakistan would be able to match deed with word," he

said.

On Saturday, India's foreign ministry said it was opening only one border crossing on Monday between the two countries in disputed Kashmir to provide relief to earthquake victims instead of five as planned. Two more will be opened later in the week.

Indian authorities said mines needed to be removed from the heavily militarised border zone and landslides cleared.

There was no sign that the decision was linked to any disquiet over the bombs in India but it came as a blow to hopes that the old enemies could show some cooperation in helping victims of the deadly Oct. 8 earthquake, which devastated Kashmir on both sides of the border

and Pakistan's North West Frontier Province.

Hindu-dominated India and Islamic Pakistan were both born out of British colonial India in 1947. They have gone to war three times, twice over Kashmir, which is divided between them and claimed in entirety by both.

The South Asian rivals launched the peace process after teetering on the brink of another war over Kashmir in 2002. Those tensions were sparked by an attack on India's parliament by Pakistan-based groups opposed to New Delhi's rule in Kashmir.

While the peace moves have helped mend ties and established a new warmth between the two sides, they have made slow progress over resolving the Kashmir territorial

dispute.

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's promise to curb all Pakistan-based militant groups fighting Indian forces in Kashmir and New Delhi's pledge to negotiate the territorial dispute were central to the progress of the peace process.

The Kashmiri group, which claimed last month's Delhi blasts, Islami Inqilabi Mahaz, is a front for outlawed, Pakistan-based militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba, experts say.

The claim, along with increasing indications that no other militant group had the capability to carry out such an attack -- despite Islamabad's pledge nearly two years ago to crack down on them -- has forced even moderates in New Delhi to harden positions.

14 drowned in Pak boat accident

AFP, Karachi

Divers have recovered the bodies of 14 women and children and 21 people are still missing after a boat capsized in the sea off Pakistan, officials said Saturday, lowering earlier estimates of 70 dead.

The overloaded boat was ferrying 70 mourners from Jangisar town, about 100km southeast of Karachi, to a funeral in a nearby village when it sank on Friday, a Sindh provincial government spokesman said.

"About half those on board have been rescued. But the bodies of 14 women and children have been recovered and at least 21 boat passengers are missing, feared drowned," spokesman Salahuddin Haider told AFP.

Myanmar moving key ministries out of Yangon

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's military junta on Sunday began moving officials from key ministries including the foreign ministry to a secret location in the north as part of a massive relocation plan, officials said.

The relocation of the commerce, foreign, home affairs and post and telecommunication ministries to Pyyinmana, about 200 miles (320 km) north of the capital Yangon, began early on Sunday, they said.

Analysts have said the move, which has been under preparation for several months, was prompted by fears of an invasion by the United States, one of the junta's staunchest critics.

They said the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq apparently reinforced Yangon's fears.

While there was no official announcement on the relocation, a ministry source told AFP that the junta ordered all the ministries on Friday to move half of their staff including deputy ministers to Pyyinmana.

But the source said ministers can stay in Yangon. The government ordered the relocation process to be completed by April 2006.

Onw foreign ministry official told AFP that staff began leaving at 6 am for Pyyinmana.

"We have no time to prepare for this. I left my wife and my two children here. I worry for them. But I have no choice but to go there," the official said.