

Pakistan, India reopen main Kashmir crossing

REUTERS, Friendship Bridge, Pakistan/India

Old rivals Pakistan and India reopened the main border crossing in divided Kashmir yesterday to help survivors of last month's earthquake that devastated the region.

The crossing between the Pakistani town of Chakothi and the Indian town of Uri was one of five points along the Line of Control the South Asian rivals agreed to open to facilitate aid and allow divided families to meet.

No people crossed at Friendship Bridge on Wednesday, but the two countries exchanged almost identical batches of relief goods.

"The concept is to restore confidence," said Pakistani commander Lieutenant-Colonel Mohammad Chiragh Haider. "It is a step towards the right direction. It is very necessary."

The crossing was closed after the bridge, which spans a stream at the frontier, was damaged by the Oct. 8 quake. A temporary wooden foot-bridge was used on Wednesday to carry across supplies.

After civilian and military officials shook hands, Pakistan sent over

blankets, foodstuffs, tents and medicines while porters brought over similar supplies from the Indian side.

"Sometimes it's not the need necessarily; sometimes you need that to restore confidence," Haider said of the relief supplies.

After decades of tension and two wars over Kashmir, Pakistan and India agreed last month to reopen Friendship Bridge and four new border points to allow aid and survivors of the earthquake to cross. People were to be allowed across on foot.

Pakistan says it is ready to open all five border points, but India says that will take several more days and paperwork means no people have yet travelled between the two sectors of Kashmir.

A border crossing in southern Kashmir was opened on Monday.

On Tuesday, the United Nations, heading a big relief effort after the disaster killed over 73,000 people in Pakistan and 1,300 in Indian Kashmir, said the crossings must be opened rapidly to get aid to thousands of homeless survivors before a bitter Himalayan winter sets in.

It said there was a desperate need for much wider access to hundreds of

thousands of people in remote valleys and a land route for aid from India would save thousands of lives.

Pakistan has expressed frustration at the delay on the Indian side. On Monday, when the first point opened, Pakistani police fired teargas to disperse angry Kashmiris prevented from crossing the border by the lengthy bureaucratic process.

"We are ready for the crossing for the people but the opposite side wants to carry out some modalities," Haider said.

"The main aim of opening this crossing is to let the people of both sides of Kashmir have contacts."

Indian relief commissioner Bashir Ahmed Runi said Kashmiris would be allowed to cross "whenever we get orders". "As far as the administration is concerned, we are ready."

Pakistan says India has insisted on paperwork, including lists of travellers and security checks, which takes about 10 days to process, delaying hoped-for family reunions until next week at the earliest.

Pakistani and Indian forces used to exchange regular artillery fire along the Line of Control until they agreed to a ceasefire in late 2003.

'Kashmir militant confesses to Delhi bombing'

AFP, Jammu

A Kashmiri militant has confessed in detention to planting one of three bombs that exploded in New Delhi and killed 62 people last month before a Hindu festival, the Indian army said yesterday.

"The army has picked up Ghulam Mohiuddin Lone of Banihal area in Doda district of Kashmir, who has confessed that he was involved in the Paharganj bomb blast in New Delhi," said Colonel D.K. Badola, spokesman for the Indian army in Jammu.

Paharganj was one of two markets that were hit by blasts on October 29, days ahead of Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights. Another blast occurred on a bus.

Badola said Lone had been handed over to police in Jammu, winter capital of Indian-administered Kashmir.

A military intelligence source told AFP that Lone had said he was paid 23,000 rupees (500 dollars) by a commander of the pan-Islamic militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba.

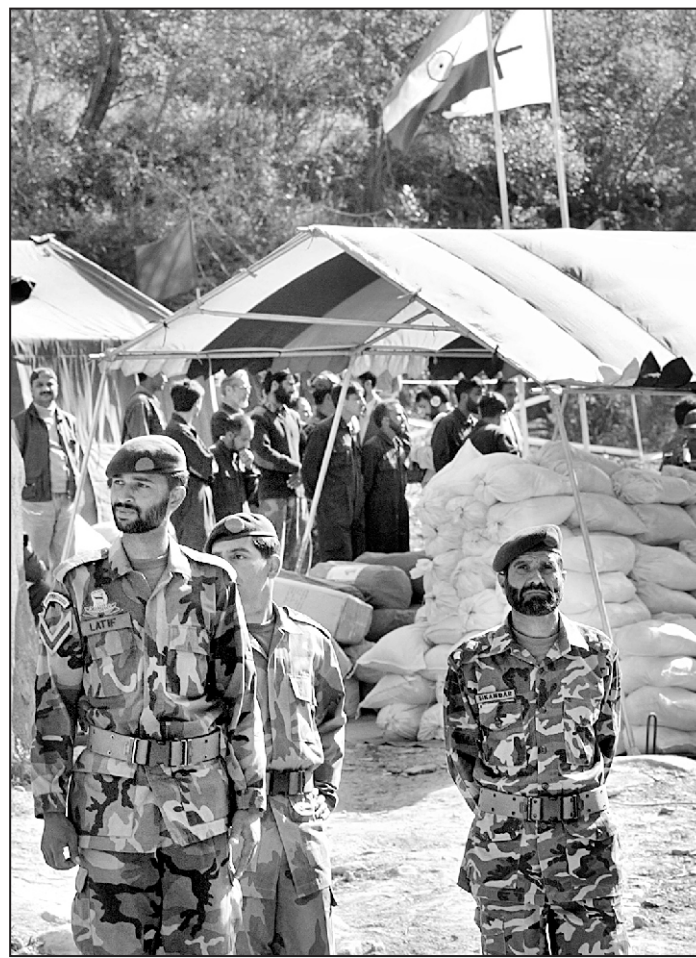


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani soldiers stand near an Indian checkpoint after the opening of the second crossing point for aid supplies on the Line of Control which links the Indian Kaman Post with Chakothi in Pakistan yesterday. The two countries have agreed that a lengthy verification process is needed for those willing to cross the LoC, leading to frustration among survivors of the October 8 earthquake.

Chandrika gets Saarc summit send off and dubious honour

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's outgoing president bids farewell to regional politics at a South Asian summit this week but retains the honour of being the longest serving head of a regional body that scored high marks for failure.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga, 60, will attend the 13th summit of the seven-member South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (Saarc) in Dhaka as her final foreign outing before the November 17 election here.

Asian diplomats believe Kumaratunga will use the occasion to stage her swan song but for those who have worked closely with her, the scion of the Bandaranaike dynasty is not going to fade away that obediently.

"There is no such thing as a swan song for her," said Jayanath Rajapakse who accompanied Kumaratunga as her international relations advisor to her first Saarc summit in New Delhi in 1995.

"This summit will be an emotional one for her. She will no doubt project it as such."

Sources close to Kumaratunga had speculated that she may take up an international role in a UN agency or may return to parliamentary politics after her second and final term as president ends this month.

She has no Saarc laurels to rest on

except the dubious title of having served the longest period as the regional grouping's head because India-Pakistan squabbling prevented the staging of a summit.

Rajapakse said he could not identify anything the regional body had achieved during her term as its chairwoman from 1998 to 2002, the longest time served by a Saarc chief, or since the regional grouping's inception in 1985.

The grouping of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka has had difficulty even in arranging summits and what should have been annual meetings never took place because of bilateral bickering.

Kumaratunga herself has been highly critical of the regional body and she wanted more dynamism injected into a body where the charter precludes discussions of contentious bilateral issues.

During the ninth summit in the Maldives in 1997, she suggested having "off the record" bilateral discussions but the initiative failed to attract widespread support.

Instead, India and Pakistan went on to stage tit-for-tat nuclear tests that cast the threat of weapons of mass destruction over the world's poorest region.

Murder of defence lawyer threatens Saddam trial

AFP, Baghdad

The murder of a second defence lawyer in the Saddam Hussein trial threatens to unravel the proceedings of the US-supported court and raises questions about the legitimacy of the process, experts say.

Lawyers for Saddam and his seven co-defendants in the trial for crimes against humanity that opened October 19 have suspended contacts with the court, issuing a 10-point list of demands.

The Saddam defence lawyers have said they want UN protection for meetings of the defence committee and the hiring of 15 bodyguards per lawyer to ensure their protection.

If the court cannot even protect the defence lawyers, "one has to question the legitimacy of the proceedings", said Raymond Brown, a US international law expert who in 2004 served as a defence co-counsel at the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

"It raises the fundamental legitimacy of the process," Brown told AFP. And if the defence lawyers refuse to participate, "that may precipitate a

crisis".

Issam Ghazzawi, a spokesman for Saddam's Jordan-based defence team, said the lawyers planned to meet in Amman on Wednesday or Thursday to "evaluate" the situation.

Foreign defence counsels, who include big names like former Algerian president Ahmed Ben Bella and former US attorney general Ramsey Clark, will also be joining the meeting, he said.

However, presiding judge Rizkar Mohammed Amin has the authority to order the defence team to court and force them to accept government or US security, said Michael Scharf, a US professor of international law at Case Western Reserve University in Ohio.

"Judge Amin has to sit down and read them the riot act," said Scharf, who was on an international team that helped train the Iraqi High Tribunal judges in 2004 and 2005.

Amin can also press obstruction of justice charges, which carries penalties that range from a fine, to being disbarred, to jail time, Scharf said.



First signal from Europe's mission to Venus

AFP, Moscow

The first space mission in over 10 years to Earth's closest neighbour Venus emitted its first signal after a successful launch from the Russian cosmodrome in Baikonur, Kazakhstan.

The baby cried. Venus Express has begun its operational mission, said Jean-Pierre Cau, an official from EADS Astrium, the company that built the spacecraft's propulsion system, after receiving the signal.

Venus Express separated successfully from the Soyuz Fregat carrier rocket more than 90 minutes after its 0333 GMT launch at the start of a 163-day journey to Venus.

Hamas ready to hold talks with Israel

AFP, Gaza City

Hamas said yesterday it was prepared to consider holding talks with Israel but vowed not to disarm, two months before the radical Islamist group contests its first Palestinian legislative elections.

"Negotiations are not our intention, negotiation is a method," said Mahmud Zahar, leader of the powerful movement in its Gaza Strip stronghold, in a rare interview with Israeli radio.

"If the method is able to liberate our land, to liberate our people from Israeli jails, to reconstruct what was destroyed by the long-standing Israeli occupation, at that time we can discuss," added Zahar, speaking in English.

His interview comes just over two months before Hamas is to contest its first parliamentary polls, only the second ever ballot of its kind in the Palestinian territories.

Hamas, the most powerful Islamist faction in the territories, is expected to make significant gains, undercutting the decade-long power monopoly exercised by the more moderate Fatah party of Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas.

Israel says it will not facilitate the crunch vote as long as Hamas -- whose charter calls for the destruction of the Jewish state -- insists on running.

But looking ahead to the post-election period, when Hamas members will probably take up seats in parliament and even join a coalition Palestinian cabinet, Zahar did not rule out talks.

"It depends on the other side, because the Israelis are not intending to make negotiation... Let us wait and see after the elections," the Hamas official said.

Zahar called on Israel to withdraw from the occupied West Bank and east Jerusalem and "to give the Palestinians a chance to live as human beings".

He flatly ruled out any question of Hamas disarming, as demanded by Israel, and called the Jewish state a foreign body in the Middle East.

Israel, which has denounced Hamas's decision to join the political mainstream while still bearing arms, dismissed Zahar's declarations as tactics designed only to undercut intense Israeli pressure on the movement.

"There is nothing to negotiate as long as Hamas sticks to its ultimate objectives and continues to carry out attacks and fire rockets," senior defence ministry official Amos Gilad told public radio.



Ex-Indian president Narayanan no more

AFP, New Delhi

Former Indian president K. R. Narayanan died in an army hospital yesterday, after being admitted almost two weeks ago with acute pneumonia, the Press Trust of India news agency said.

Narayanan, president for five years from July 1997, had been on life support since his admission to the hospital in New Delhi on October 29.

The 85-year-old former president was the first in India's history from the Dalit group, the name adopted by those at the bottom of India's caste system.

UN extends mandate of US-led force in Iraq

AFP, United Nations

The UN Security Council, acting at the request of Iraq's government, on Tuesday unanimously adopted a one-year extension of the mandate of the US-led force in Iraq.

The council voted 15-0 "to extend the mandate of the multinational force, as set forth in Resolution 1546 until December 2006."

"The unanimous adoption of this resolution is a vivid demonstration of broad international support for a federal, democratic, pluralistic and unified Iraq," US ambassador to the UN John Bolton said after the vote.

"We thought the manner in which the resolution was adopted, in a constructive cooperative, rapid fashion was a good sign," he added.

In a concession to French and Russian objections, Washington had agreed that the council would review the mandate on June 15 of next year, diplomats said.

Britain's UN envoy Emyr Jones Parry said the vote "underlines the support of the international community again for the sort of outcome we want in Iraq."

The resolution, sponsored by the United States, Britain, Japan, Romania and Denmark, said the mandate of the

force "shall be reviewed at the request of the government of Iraq, or no later than June 15, 2006, and declares that it will terminate this mandate earlier if requested by the government of Iraq."

It also decided to extend until December 31, 2006 arrangements for depositing into the Development Fund for Iraq proceeds from export sales of petroleum, petroleum products and natural gas.

It said provisions for depositing those proceeds shall be reviewed at the request of the Iraqi government, or pledging to treat them humanely.

Adding fuel to the torture debate is last week's revelation by the Washington Post that since September 11, 2001 top al-Qaeda captives have been held in secret, CIA-run prisons in at least eight countries.

The Central Intelligence Agency, which is not part of the Defence Department, operates in secrecy, and the rules under which it works are not publicly known.

Vice President Dick Cheney has pressed Congress to exempt the CIA from legislation sponsored by Senator John McCain that would ban "cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment of prisoners in the detention of the US government".

US REPORT ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM India did not act fast enough in Gujarat

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New York

While the Indian constitution provides for freedom of religion, the government occasionally has not acted fast enough to prevent religious violence, says a State Department report on International Religious Freedom for 2005 that particularly cites the Gujarat riots.

Released on Wednesday by the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labour, the report notes that "... the Government generally respects this right in practice. However, the government sometimes in the recent past did not act swiftly enough to counter societal attacks against religious minorities and attempts by some leaders of state and local governments to limit religious freedom."

Washington reiterated its displeasure

with the pace of bringing about justice in the Gujarat riots of 2002 that killed nearly 2,000 people in Gujarat, most of them Muslims.

"Despite the Government's efforts to foster communal harmony, some extremists continued to view ineffective investigation and prosecution of attacks on religious minorities as a signal that they could commit such violence with impunity, although numerous cases are currently in the courts," says the report, which contains chapters on numerous countries throughout the world.

The report details the steps taken by the Manmohan Singh coalition government to address the failures of the government of Gujarat to halt expeditiously Hindu-Muslim riots there in 2002.

Terrorist training camp found in Indonesia

AP, Jakarta

Anti-terror police discovered a recently abandoned jungle training camp where militants taught bomb-making skills to scores of extremists, security officials said Wednesday, weeks after suicide attackers launched fresh strikes on the tourist island of Bali.

Instructors at the camp in Maluku province the scene of bloody fighting between Muslim and Christians from 1999 to 2002 were graduates of terrorist academies in Afghanistan and the Philippines, said police Lt. Col. Leonidas Braksan.

The isolated camp deep in the jungle had been running for several years and was attended by militants

from all over Indonesia, he said, showing how terrorists have been able to maintain training networks despite a nationwide crackdown.

Police raided the camp on Seram Island earlier this month after receiving a tip from recently arrested militants, Braksan said. Officers found several huts there, as well as white flags used as markers for military exercises. Villagers living nearby heard gunfire and occasional explosions from the direction of the camp, he said.

"They were teaching the tactics of war, including using weapons and making bombs," Braksan said, citing testimony from captured graduates of the camp. "The place was very isolated and difficult to get to."



PHOTO: AFP

Firemen fight a blaze at a furniture warehouse late Tuesday in Arras, northern France. For the first time in nearly two weeks France saw a clear fall in the number of overnight attacks yesterday, raising cautious hopes that the worst wave of urban unrest since May 1968 might be receding.

MUSLIMS SAY Anger, not religion, drives French rioting

AFP, Trappes

For the young Muslims who live in the gritty Merisiers apartment blocks in this town to the west of Paris, the riots that have affected their neighbourhood and dozens of urban areas across the country over the last 12 days have nothing to do with religion.

"Why did they ask the imam of the Paris mosque to calm down the youths?" asked Saidou, 22, the self-appointed spokesman for a group of boys in the neighbourhood.

A third of Trappes' 28,000 residents are Muslims, according to local officials.

"The violence is a phenomenon of society. Islam has nothing to do with

it," he added.

A 17-year-old who left school three years ago said bluntly: "We want to make war. To let loose on the cops. They're looking for a fight. As long as (Interior Minister Nicolas) Sarkozy is around, we'll keep burning cars. We'll burn society," he added.

In Trappes, 27 buses worth 3.5 million euros (4.1 million dollars) were torched and destroyed in their depot.

"Do they have to wait for us to riot for there to be dialogue? I'm in construction, but because I have no choice. There is work, but they give us the dirty work."

"What's our future? We are condemned to stay in the high rises," he added.

cities across France and some 330 people were arrested.

The previous night, it was 1,400 torched cars and 395 arrests. The youths behind the violence are mostly drawn from the large Muslim communities.

"Whenever there is a problem in a country, it's the Muslims (who are blamed)," said Karim.

"It's not the Muslims, it's people who are in dire straits. I've got a qualification in construction. I'm in construction, but because I have no choice. There is work, but they give us the dirty work."

"What's our future? We are condemned to stay in the high rises," he added.