

US pushes for Indo-Pak peace progress

REUTERS, New Delhi

The United States leaned on India and Pakistan yesterday to work together against terrorism and urged the South Asian rivals to seek progress as they resume peace talks next week.

The comments by US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Richard Boucher, came days before senior officials of India and Pakistan hold talks in New Delhi to push a peace process that had stalled after the July 11 Mumbai train blasts.

Indian Foreign Secretary Shiv Shankar Menon is due to meet his Pakistani counterpart, Riaz Mohammad Khan, on November 14 and 15 to discuss among other things, a joint system the two coun-

tries have agreed to set up to tackle terrorism.

"I hope these can be positive discussions," Boucher told a news conference after talks with Indian officials.

"What needs to be done is ... to try to achieve some progress on the issues and I am confident that both sides are getting together to try to achieve progress on issues, to try to work together against terrorism," he said.

Peace talks between the nuclear-armed neighbours were launched in 2004 after intense global pressure, led by the United States, forced them to pull back from the brink of a war following an attack on Indian parliament blamed on Pakistan-based Islamist militants.

But Washington has not been publicly involved in mediating between the two countries, with India averse to international intervention in what it sees as a regional dispute.

The India-Pakistan negotiations made slow progress until New Delhi suspended talks this year after blaming a Pakistan-based Islamist militant group for the July 11 Mumbai train bombings in which at least 186 people were killed.

The two sides agreed to restart the process after Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf held talks on the sidelines of a Non-Aligned Movement summit in Havana in September.

The two leaders also agreed to set up a joint counter-terrorism system to

share information and follow-up on attacks in either country.

Boucher said Washington hoped that the India-Pakistan joint mechanism to tackle terrorism would prove useful.

Many Indian analysts have dismissed the mechanism saying they did not expect Islamabad to act against its own spy agency, which New Delhi blames for subversive acts across the country.

"We hope that the mechanism ... produces outcomes that are important not just for political relations for the governments but produces outcomes that can help stop the terrorism that hurts people," Boucher said.

US voters rejected Bush war-mongering

Says Iranian leader

AFP, Tehran

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said yesterday that the Republican defeat in US mid-term congressional elections was a rejection of President George W. Bush's "war-mongering" policies.

"The fact that the president's party lost is not just an American domestic incident, it is a defeat for the incumbent president's war-mongering and aggressive policies," Khamenei said on state television.

Democrats seized control of both houses of Congress this week, with many voters saying they cast ballots for the party's candidates in protest over how the Bush administration has managed the war in Iraq.

Meanwhile, top Iranian cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Emami Kashani advised the Democrats, who will take control of the new Congress convening in January, to allow Iran to pursue its nuclear ambitions.



Nepalese men play drums during a rally to celebrate the recent peace deal in Kathmandu yesterday. Maoist rebels on November 8 announced their decade-long armed struggle was over and they are planning to join an interim government.

PHOTO: AFP



The wife (R) and son of Sri Lankan Tamil legislator Nadarajah Raviraj, who was gunned down earlier in the day, wait at his residential area in the capital Colombo yesterday. The slaying of Raviraj, a member of the pro-rebel Tamil National Alliance (TNA), came as violence escalated in Sri Lanka straining a threadbare truce between troops and Tamil Tiger rebels.

PHOTO: AFP

150,000 civilians killed in Iraq bloodletting since invasion

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq yesterday said nearly 150,000 people have died since the US-led invasion, as outgoing Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld accepted his military faced difficulties in fighting extremists in the country.

The war-ravaged country's Shias and Sunnis, meanwhile, headed to their respective mosques for weekly prayers amid a fresh bout of violence over the past three days that has left dozens dead.

Iraq's health ministry estimated on Friday that some 150,000 people have been killed since the March 2003 invasion, more than three times the previously agreed upon figure.

The latest death toll was first mentioned by Health Minister Ali al-Shamari in Vienna on Thursday and was subsequently confirmed by a public affairs official in the ministry.

"We have statistics and we send

them every day to the cabinet. We also have monthly and bi-annual figures," he said.

"Some 75 to 80 people die every day on average ... but in some cases the figures exceed that number, so the total will be nearing 150,000."

The dead came from military clashes, those killed in cold blood and bodies brought to morgues, he added.

The number of dead in Iraq has been a controversial topic of repeated speculation. Most estimates, such as those by the Iraq Body Count project, put the figure at between 50,000 and 60,000.

In October, British medical journal the Lancet published a report estimating that 650,000 people had died since the invasion, based on extrapolations from people interviewed.

'UN faces tough task in backing Nepali peace'

AFP, Kathmandu

The United Nations will be facing a tough task and major test as it seeks to back up a landmark peace deal between Nepal's government and battle-hardened Maoist rebels, analysts said yesterday.

The world body has been called to monitor the rebel People's Liberation Army and their weapons, as well as the Nepal Army, who have been battling for the past 10 years in a conflict that has killed some 12,500 people.

"The United Nations monitoring team has a very sensitive job to do, to make sure that there are no misunderstandings between the rebels and the government," said Indrajit Rai, a conflict expert who teaches at Nepal's army college.

Under the peace deal struck Wednesday, the insurgents and government have agreed that the rebel army will be confined to camps

and their weapons locked up under UN supervision, although the rebels will retain a key to the locked weapons.

The move will assure the rebels a place in Nepal's government and parliament.

"The rebels will always remain watchful as they are outnumbered by the Nepal Army by a huge margin and any wrongdoing on the Nepal Army's part will give the rebels a reason to breach the agreement," said Rai.

The guerrillas say they have a fighting force of 35,000, but other estimates put rebel combatant numbers nearer 12,000. The Nepal Army has 90,000 soldiers.

The UN has begun assembling a team that will eventually monitor the seven areas where the Maoist weapons and their People's Liberation Army will be confined.

"If there are reports or allegations that weapons are elsewhere it

will be our responsibility to investigate them," Ian Martin, the UN chief's personal representative in the Nepal peace process, told reporters Thursday.

"Our commitment is to maintain confidence in the process by ensuring any breach of the agreement will be made known to the international community," he said.

But the UN will have no enforcement role, and this could be a problem in the future, the English language weekly the Nepal Times wrote Friday.

"There are questions about how effective UN monitoring of the cantonment and arms lock down will be, given that the organisation has no enforcement mandate," it said.

The tasks facing the UN, rebels and government are massive, said Kapil Shrestha, a political science professor from Kathmandu's Tribhuvan University.

US urges end to Lanka bloodshed

UN slams army shelling on refugees

AFP, New Delhi

A senior US official voiced growing concern yesterday about the bloody escalation in the Sri Lankan conflict and urged the island's government and Tamil Tiger rebels to respect a threadbare ceasefire.

"We have growing concern," Richard Boucher, the US assistant secretary for south and central Asian affairs, told reporters in New Delhi.

"There is news this morning of the killing of one of the Tamil politicians," he added.

"It is very important for both sides to respect the ceasefire. The only way to achieve what they want is through negotiations.

Some 65 Tamil civilians died in the island's east under government artillery fire on Wednesday.

International condemnation of the heavy civilian casualties in the separatist conflict has been mount-

ing, as a truce agreed in 2002 has unravelled.

The United Nations and the United States joined Amnesty International in severely criticising Wednesday's shelling by the Sri Lankan army that killed the Tamil civilians.

UN relief coordinator Jan Egeland on Thursday slammed an indiscriminate artillery bombardment by the Sri Lankan army that left at least 65 Tamils dead.

Oceans turning acidic

AP, Nairobi

The world's oceans are becoming more acidic, which poses a threat to sea life and Earth's fragile food chain, a climate expert said Thursday.

Oceans have already absorbed a third of the world's emissions of carbon dioxide, one of the heat-trapping gases blamed for global warming, leading to acidification that prevents vital sea life from forming properly.

"The oceans are rapidly changing," said professor Stefan Rahmstorf on the sidelines of a UN conference on climate change that has drawn delegates from more than 100 countries to Kenya.

"Ocean acidification is a major threat to marine organisms."

Fish stocks and the world's coral reefs could also be hit while acidification risks "fundamentally altering" the food chain, he said.

In a study titled "The Future Oceans Warming Up, Rising High, Turning Sour," Rahmstorf and eight other scientists warned that the world is witnessing, on a global scale, problems similar to the acid rain phenomenon of the 1970s and 1980s.

Rahmstorf, the head of Germany's Potsdam Institute for Research into Climatic Effects, says more research is urgently needed to assess the impact of ocean acidification.

Palestinians inch towards unity government

AFP, Gaza City

Talks between Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and Hamas on creating a unity government have shown signs of progress after months of deadlock, with indications of an agreement on a new premier.

"The climate of discussions is very positive," Abbas's spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina said Friday, a day after the president returned to his West Bank powerbase after renewed talks with the Hamas prime minister in Gaza City.

"Contacts and discussions are continuing and I think we are in the final stage of negotiations to reach

an agreement on the formation of a unity government," added Abu Rudeina.

Abbas met prime minister Ismail Haniya four times during his stay in Gaza City, following a one-and-a-half-month interruption in face-to-face talks with the Islamist premier largely regarded the moderate president's nemesis.

Abbas had attributed the deadlock to Hamas's refusal to sanction a moderate political platform that would recognise Israel and peace agreements, but both sides agree that talks are on the right track and could even finish quickly.

11 Indian Maoists killed in clashes with police

AFP, Hyderabad

Eleven Indian Maoist militants were killed yesterday in two gunbattles with police in the south of the country, police said.

Police were combing forests in the coastal state of Andhra Pradesh for rebels when guerrillas opened fire, police superintendent Y Nagi Reddy said.

The exchange of fire, in which nine rebels were killed, lasted about half an hour in Kadapa district.

"Five men and four women rebels were killed on the spot," Reddy said, adding several weapons were recovered.



PHOTO: AFP

Conservation workers examine 37 dead pilot whales after a mass stranding at Ruakaka, north of Auckland yesterday. The pod of 77 whales became stranded on the beach near Marsden Point before rescuers were able to refloat 40 of the mammals and encourage them to return to seas, which are turning acidic.

Colossal storm on Saturn

REUTERS, Washington

A colossal, swirling storm with a well-developed eye is churning at Saturn's south pole, the first time a truly hurricane-like storm has been detected on a planet other than Earth, Nasa images showed on Thursday.

The storm on the giant, ringed planet is about 5,000 miles wide, measuring roughly two thirds the diameter of Earth, with winds howling

clockwise at 350 mph (550 kph).

Jupiter's Great Red Spot, which swirls counterclockwise, is far bigger, but is less like a hurricane because it lacks the typical eye and eye wall.

The images -- essentially a 14-frame movie -- were captured over a period of three hours on October 11 by the US space agency's Cassini spacecraft as it passed about 210,000 miles from the planet as part of its exploration of Saturn and its moons.

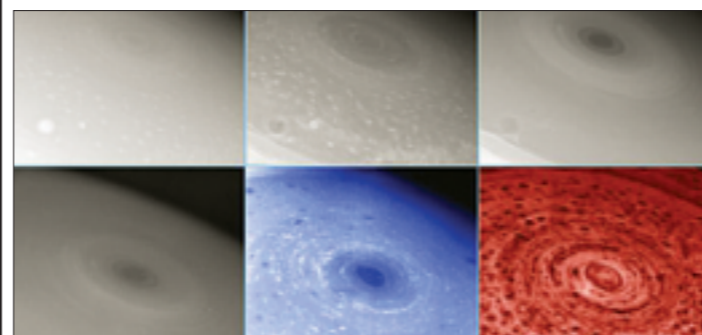


PHOTO: AFP

Images obtained from Nasa show a hurricane-like storm in Saturn's south pole.