

# Low expectations at Indo-Pak talks

## Pranab starts Islamabad visit Saturday

AFP, New Delhi

India's foreign minister is to make a rare visit to Pakistan this weekend, with the trip expected to firm up peace efforts between the nuclear-armed rivals rather than yield any breakthrough.

Pranab Mukherjee's two-day visit starting Saturday to Islamabad is primarily to invite Pakistani leaders to New Delhi for a South Asian summit in April, although the two sides will inevitably discuss the ongoing peace process.

"The ministers will assess the progress made so far and pave the way for the start of the next round of talks," an Indian foreign ministry official told AFP.

Mukherjee is to meet his counterpart Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri on Sunday, and will also call on President Pervez Musharraf and

Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz.

Peace talks launched in February 2004, on eight contentious issues including the divided Himalayan region of Kashmir, have resulted in increased "people-to-people" contact, and accords to cut risks of an accidental launch of atomic weapons and prior notification of missile tests.

India put the process on hold in the face of public outrage over last July's deadly attacks on Mumbai's commuter network, which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan's spy agency and a Pakistan-based militant group.

Foreign secretary-level talks in New Delhi in mid-November, during which the two sides agreed to set up a new anti-terror panel, has put the talks back on track.

But progress on divided Kashmir -- the cause of two out of three wars since 1947 -- has been painfully

slow, even though government sources told AFP that "back-channel discussions" on the subject have been going "rather well."

Indian security analyst Uday Bhaskar said there was now "a greater content and a greater resilience" in the peace process, but stressed any solution will "take time."

A Pakistani defence analyst, retired general Talat Masood, said this weekend's talks were a fresh sign that the neighbours had "decided to cooperate and move forward substantively on resolving the Kashmir dispute."

"There is not likely to be any breakthrough on the contentious issues, but it will at least allow both the sides to exchange views and to see how to move forward the peace process," he said.

Another Pakistani analyst, Hasan Askari, said the trip will at least "help speed up the confidence

building process."

Media reports say India could suggest measures to boost tourism and trade across the heavily-militarised boundary with Pakistan in Kashmir -- although this is still far short of moves such as troop cuts.

According to an Indian government source, a section within Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's ruling Congress Party "wants a breakthrough with Pakistan that can be highlighted as a foreign policy coup... but there are others that warn him to proceed with caution."

"The Mukherjee-Kasuri meeting could bring some of the thoughts discussed through the back-channels to the diplomatic domain," he said.

"India is willing to consider new proposals. The prime minister has said that short of redrawing the borders, India was willing to discuss all proposals," he said.



PHOTO: STAR

Karnaphuli Ship Builders Ltd. starts repairing the Banglar Sourav, an oil tanker, yesterday. The ship was damaged in an explosion at the outer anchorage of Chittagong Port about seven months ago.

## Afghanistan appeals to UN over Pak mining plan

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan has written to the new United Nations chief to express "deep concern" about Pakistan's plan to mine and fence their disputed border, the foreign ministry said yesterday.

Foreign Minister Rangeen Dadfar Spanta's letter to UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon comes amid growing tension about the plan, which Pakistan says is intended to stop the cross-border movement of Taliban insurgents.

"In the letter the foreign minister expressed the deep concerns of the Afghan government regarding the decision of the Islamic government of Pakistan to fence and mine along the Durand Line," Sultan

Ahmad Baheen said.

The Durand Line refers to the border drawn up in 1893 by British India, which once included Pakistan, to divide the powerful Pashtun tribes. Afghanistan disputes the frontier, saying it cuts off part of its territory.

Spanta also asked that Pakistan and the international community "take serious steps to eliminate the financing, recruiting, equipping and training centres of terrorists," Baheen said.

The letter adds that war-ravaged Afghanistan has "suffered the highest number of casualties in the world from land mines," he told reporters.

Fencing and mining the border would also separate families straddling the border and was "not

practical," he said, repeating concerns raised by President Hamid Karzai.

Afghanistan wanted the letter be distributed among members of the UN Security Council, Baheen said.

Karzai called Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz to the capital last week to discuss the plan and other differences among the Islamic neighbours, telling reporters afterwards that the gap between them was growing.

The United Nations in Afghanistan and Canadian government have also expressed concern about the plan, leading Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri to say Tuesday the country would look at other options.

## 2006 warmest year in US, sixth in world

AFP, Washington

2006 was the warmest year on record in the United States and the sixth warmest in all the world, the National Climate Data Center (NCDC) said Tuesday.

The average temperature last year in the United States, excluding Alaska and Hawaii states, was 12.8 degrees Celsius or 1.2 degrees C above the 20th century yearly average.

It was also 0.04 degrees C higher than 1998, the previous hottest year in US history, the Data Center said.

The Center did not link December's unusually high temperatures in the United States to global warming, which most scientists blame on industry-generated greenhouse gas emissions that have been increasing over the past 30 years.



PHOTO: STAR

A boy scans the list of victims of mass arrest who have been granted bail to find out his father's name yesterday. The lists were put up on the wall of Dhaka Central Jail.

## Pak commission to push for Afghan border peace

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday announced a new commission to organise a gathering of tribal elders from both sides of the border to try and curb the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan.

"Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz has approved the appointment of a commission for organising and holding jirgas (tribal assemblies)," an official statement said.

A decision to hold a meeting of tribal leaders and elders in

bordering areas was taken in September when Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf and Afghan President Hamid Karzai held a joint meeting with US President George W Bush at the White House. The Afghan leader proposed convening a jirga amid tensions between the neighbours, who blamed each other for not doing enough to rein in the militants.

Ethnic Pashtuns living on both sides of the border have for centuries used jirgas to resolve internal disputes.

"The commission shall formulate its recommendations regarding the modalities for holding of jirgas," the statement said adding that it will liaise with a similar commission already set up by the Afghan Government.

The commission will be headed by Interior Minister Aftab Ahmed Sherpao and will include the governor of the northwest frontier province, Ali Muhammad Jan Aurakzai, governor of Baluchistan, Owais Ahmed Ghani, Minister for Culture Ghazi Gulab Jamal and Minister for States and Frontier Regions, Sardar Yar Muhammad Rind.

Pakistan, a key ally in the US-led "war on terror" has deployed 80,000 troops along the frontier to stop militants launching attacks in Afghanistan.

HIJACK THREAT

## India airports on high alert

AFP, New Delhi

All airports in India have been put on high alert after authorities received hijack threats from militants fighting Indian rule in the disputed Kashmir region, news reports said yesterday.

Additional forces were deployed and security checks increased after intelligence authorities warned that militants may hijack an aircraft, the Press Trust of India reported quoting unnamed sources.

The report did not mention any particular rebel outfit or the exact nature of threat.

Airports in India previously stepped up security after nearly 190 people were killed in serial train bombings in the western financial hub of Mumbai in July.

A 17-year-old insurgency against Indian rule in the Himalayan region of Kashmir has claimed 44,000 lives.

## Philippines blast kills 6 ahead of summit

AFP, General Santos

Six people were killed and 10 others wounded yesterday when a bomb exploded in front of the public market in this southern Philippines city, police said.

The improvised bomb went off in front of a lottery ticket store in this city, which has been hit by Muslim extremist attacks in the past.

Police would not immediately say who might be behind the explosion which came as Asian leaders were preparing for two major summits in the central city of Cebu, some 475 kilometers (294 miles) north.

The bodies of the victims were cut into pieces by the blast which was heard throughout the predominantly-Christian city with a Muslim minority.

Military officials had previously warned terror groups might stage attacks in other parts of the country to embarrass the government, which postponed the summits last month citing an approaching typhoon.

The bombing also comes just after peace negotiators from the government and the Muslim

extremist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) held a two-day meeting in General Santos from Tuesday to Wednesday.

General Santos City Mayor Pedro Acheron said it was "a remote possibility," that the bombing was related to the ASEAN summit since it happened so far from Cebu.

He said the likely suspects were Muslim groups that might want to disrupt the peace talks between the government and the MILF although he would not identify them.

In February 2005 a bomb believed planted by the Abu Sayyaf Muslim extremist group killed three people and wounded 13 others here.

The Abu Sayyaf, which has carried out the worst kidnapping and bombing attacks in the Philippines, has been linked to the Al-Qaeda terror network.

The MILF signed a ceasefire with Manila in 2003 to open the door to peace talks and has denied any connection to the Abu Sayyaf.

Representatives of 16 countries will attend the ASEAN and East Asia summits at Cebu.

## Nepal Maoists predict victory in June polls

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoists predicted yesterday they would form a majority government after elections slated to be held in June.

"It is likely that after the election of the constituent assembly our party will be able to form its own government. A government of absolute majority is going to be formed," CP Gajurel, the Maoist head of international relations, told journalists.

Elections to the constituent assembly, which will rewrite Nepal's constitution permanently and decide the fate of the 238-year-old monarchy, are due to be held by June 2007.

The former rebels have already been granted 73 seats in a 330-seat interim parliament in a deal expected to be approved formally on January 15.

Under the terms of the deal, they will place their weapons and armies under United Nations supervision, paving their way to be recognised as a political party to contest polls.

Despite being poised to enter mainstream politics after ten years of war, the Maoists will remain true

to their Communist revolutionary roots, the senior Maoist leader said.

"Since we are Maoists, we have not abandoned Marxism, Leninism, Maoism. We are upholding it," said Gajurel, who was released from prison in India late last year.

The party will continue to have "fraternal" relations with like-minded groups in other countries, including India, where authorities are battling Maoist insurgents in 15 of 29 states, he said.

"I would like to make clear that the relations between those parties in India are not working relations, only theoretical relations because we have the same ideology. It will not affect relations between the two states," Gajurel said.

The rebels have observed a ceasefire for eight months, and Gajurel denied reports that they continued to extort money.

"For the vilification of our party this misinformation campaign has been conducted by certain elements. If there are one or two exceptional cases we are controlling them," said the leader.