

Pakistan must 'clarify its position' on Taliban: UN

AFP, Kabul

The Pakistani government must clarify its position on Taliban rebels in Afghanistan after a provincial governor likened them to a liberation movement, the United Nations said yesterday.

The Afghan foreign ministry made a similar demand Sunday, condemning the weekend comments by the governor of the North West Frontier Province, which borders Afghanistan, as "provocative and untrue".

UN representative Tom Koenigs said he was "very astonished" by governor Ali Muhammad Jan Arazai's statement.

The governor said the Taliban rebellion was "developing into some kind of nationalist movement, a resistance movement, some sort of liberation war against the coalition forces."

"I totally disagree," Koenigs said at a media briefing.

"I think the Pakistani government has to clarify whether this is its official position or whether it is the position of a governor who should be corrected by the central government," he said.

Train blasts won't sabotage peace

Says Musharraf

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said bomb blasts on a train in India that killed at least 67 people, most of them Pakistanis, would not be allowed to sabotage a peace process with India.

Musharraf said the leaders of India and Pakistan had to "move forward undeterred" in their efforts to resolve disputes and establish lasting peace.

Pakistan's foreign minister said earlier he was going ahead with a trip to India as planned on Tuesday despite the blasts on the Pakistani-bound train.

"We will not allow elements which want to sabotage the ongoing peace process to succeed in their nefarious designs," Musharraf said in a statement.

Nuclear-armed India and Pakistan have fought three wars since 1947 and nearly went to war a fourth time in 2002.

Relations have improved since

they launched a peace process at the beginning of 2004, although they have yet to make any significant progress in their central dispute over the divided Himalayan region of Kashmir.

India has blamed previous bomb attacks on Islamist militants linked to Pakistan, casting a pall over peace efforts.

Officials in India also said the attack on the train at around midnight on Sunday appeared to be an attempt to undermine the peace process.

Musharraf said the "heinous crime" would have the opposite effect.

"Such wanton acts of terrorism will only serve to further strengthen our resolve to attain the mutually desired objective of sustainable peace between the two countries," he said.

Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshed Mehmood Kasuri said his trip to India on Tuesday was still on.

"I will be leaving tomorrow for Delhi to further the peace process," Kasuri told reporters in the Pakistani capital.

"In fact, if at all, we should hasten the peace process."

The train service links New Delhi with the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore, although passengers have to get down at the border and cross on foot before boarding another train for their destination.

Pakistani Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said there were 757 passengers on board the train, 553 of them Pakistanis.

He said Pakistan, for its part, would continue the train service as scheduled on Monday, although security would be stepped up on the Pakistani leg of the journey.

The Indian High Commission in Islamabad said arrangements had been made to process visas immediately for relatives of people on the train wishing to go to India. A temporary visa office was also being set up in Lahore.

Survivors recount Indian train inferno

AFP, Panipat

Survivors told yesterday how a ball of fire incinerated dozens of passengers and reduced two carriages of the India-Pakistan "Friendship Express" to charred wrecks.

Kamaruddin, 60, from Multan in Pakistan, said chaos spread quickly through the train after a deadly cocktail of kerosene and explosives went off.

"I was sitting towards the end of one of the two coaches when I heard a deafening sound within few feet away from me," said Kamaruddin, who uses only one name.

"The whole place was full of smoke and I could hear a lot of people screaming for help but I could not move."

He was taken unconscious from the scene at Deewana and awoke at a nearby hospital in Panipat.

A crowd of other injured survivors and frantic relatives struggled at the hospital to make sense of the attack.

"There was a huge fire and I saw smoke coming out," said Usman Ali, who hails from Lahore, just over the border in Pakistan.

"When I came out of the coach, I saw that the doors of one (carriage) were closed and people could not escape," he told AFP.

Aman who identified himself only

as Anwar said four of his Pakistani relatives from a family of six, including two children, were among the 66 dead.

He held out hope that two boys had survived but was unable to enter Panipat's Phim Sensachar Civil Hospital to check.

"The doctors are not allowing me to go in. The doctors say the post-mortem has to be completed first."

The family had visited Anwar in India and was on the way home via the train, which runs twice-weekly from New Delhi to Lahore.

A doctor said that verification could take time because of the severity of the inferno that burnt two coaches of the train.

"It's very difficult to say who the victims were," said Dr. Ved Gupta, head of post-mortem operations at the hospital in Panipat.

"Most of the bodies were charred beyond recognition," he said. "It is difficult to say who is who, whether they are Indians or Pakistanis."

Outside the hospital more than a dozen wooden coffins lined the boundary wall of the mortuary as trucks brought slabs of ice for other bodies that were placed in bags.

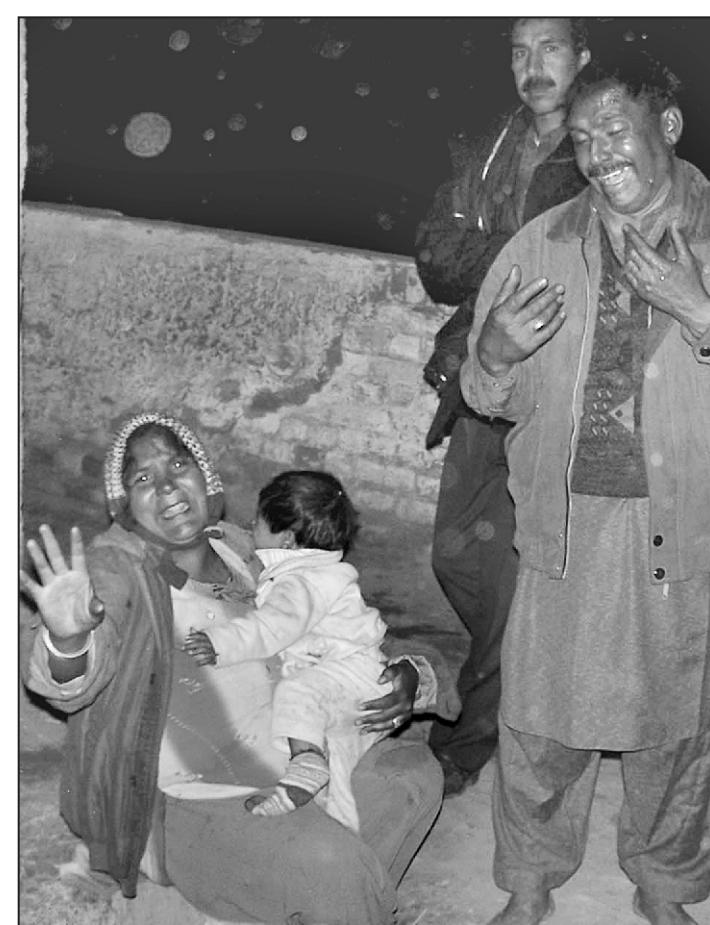


PHOTO: AFP
Survivors of a train blast sit beside the tracks near the Indian train the "Samjhauta (Friendship) Express" 100kms north of New Delhi yesterday after explosions aboard train killed at least 67 people.



PHOTO: AFP
US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (C), Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (R) shake hands during a summit in Jerusalem yesterday. Rice was holding three-way peace talks with Israeli and Palestinian leaders but her mission has been complicated by battles over a Palestinian unity cabinet.

Little progress in ME talks

Rice hosts Abbas-Olmert peace talks in Jerusalem

AFP, Jerusalem

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice held a rare joint meeting with Israeli and Palestinian leaders yesterday but achieved little concrete progress in reviving the peace process other than a pledge for further talks.

Rice said all sides agreed had affirmed their commitment to a two-state solution during the first three-way summit of its kind in nearly four years, but warned that peace would not come through terror, in a clear reference to dominant Palestinian party Hamas.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas had agreed to meet again soon, Rice said, adding that she also planned to return to the region to pursue peace efforts.

"All three of us affirmed our commitment to a two-state solution, agreed that a Palestinian state cannot be born of violence and terror, and reiterated our acceptance of previous agreements and obligations, including the roadmap," she said after the meeting.

Within minutes of her statement, military sources said an Israeli truck driver had been stabbed and killed in a Palestinian village in the occupied West Bank, west of Abbas's political powerbase of Ramallah.

"The president and prime minister agreed that they would meet together again soon," Rice said after more than two and a half hours of talks in a luxury Jerusalem hotel.

"They reiterated their desire for American participation and leadership in facilitating efforts to overcome obstacles, rally regional and international support and move forward toward peace," she added.

"In that vein I expect to return to the region soon," said Rice, on her 10th visit to Jerusalem as secretary of state and her fourth in five months.

Monday's meeting is the first of its kind since 2003 when Rice's predecessor, Colin Powell, met Olmert's predecessor, Ariel Sharon, and Abbas, then Palestinian prime minister.

But hopes of a breakthrough have been clouded by a Palestinian power-sharing deal between the moderate Abbas and Hamas -- blacklisted as terrorists in the West -- to form a unity government in order to end a crippling boycott.

Rice said they had discussed long-standing international conditions on the government during the talks, which come with the Palestinians in the midst of forming a unity cabinet that they hope will end a crippling Western boycott.

Thailand warns of more 'terrorist' attacks

Nine killed in overnight strikes

AFP, Bangkok

Islamic separatists could stage more "terrorist" attacks, Thailand warned yesterday, after nine people were killed in overnight strikes as many Thais began celebrating the Lunar New Year.

Thailand's army chief of staff said the insurgents, who have battled the government for three years in Muslim-majority provinces of southern Thailand, could try to stage new attacks during upcoming Buddhist holidays.

"The violence may increase, and it will be the same kind of terrorist tactics," General Montri Sangkasap told reporters after an emergency security meeting in Bangkok.

Thailand's junta chief, General

Sonthi Boonyaratglin, and Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont had summoned military and security chiefs over the attacks that killed nine and wounded 44.

The insurgents staged some 49 bombings, shootings and arson attacks late Sunday and early Monday, targeting mainly homes and businesses owned by Buddhists or ethnic Chinese.

Three people were killed in shootings and six others in bombings in the 12 hours of violence, the officials told AFP. A total of 44 people were injured, they added.

"They want to frighten Buddhists and ethnic Chinese living there so that they will leave the region," army spokesman Colonel Acar Tiproch said.

Iran launches war games with missile tests

AFP, Tehran

Iran's ideological army, the elite Revolutionary Guards, launched three days of war games yesterday with a succession of missile tests aimed at improving defensive capabilities.

The "Power Manoeuvre" war games by the elite force in 16 of Iran's 30 provinces come at a time of mounting tension with the United States over Iran's nuclear programme and allegations it is arming militias in Iraq.

"With the firing of short-, medium- and long-range missiles by the Revolutionary Guards, 'Power Manoeuvre' has started," the state news agency IRNA reported.

It is the latest show of force by Iran's elite military in the face of Washington's increasingly tough rhetoric although US officials have been at pains to deny speculation of a planned military strike.

IRNA said a total of 750 missiles and canon munitions would be fired during the exercises, being staged less than two weeks after similar manoeuvres by the Guards' air force and naval units.

Exercise spokesman General Nilforoushan told state television the war games were aimed at "upgrading the capabilities and readiness of defence of the military forces as well as the deployment of munitions and forces in the early hours of a war".

Nepali king defends 2005 power grab

Statement sparks protests

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Isolated King Gyanendra defended his short-lived grab for absolute power two years ago in a rare public statement that sparked protests from political parties that accused him of illegally meddling in politics.

The king, in an annual "Democracy Day" message to the nation, said he was forced to take power in 2005 to keep law and order amid a Maoist insurgency.

"It is clear that the prevailing situation compelled us to take the February 1, 2005, step in accordance with the people's aspiration to reactivate the elected bodies by maintaining law and order," the 59-year-old monarch said.

The king ruled with absolute power for only 15 months before violent street protests forced him to end his rule, reinstate parliament and hand power to a multi-party alliance that made peace with the Maoists to end a decade-old civil war.

Thousands of Maoist protesters shouting "End the politics of reactionary statement", rallied on Monday against the king as they marched in Kathmandu. Political parties said the monarch had violated the interim constitution by talking about politics.

The protests highlighted the unpopularity of a king who traditionally many Nepalis had considered an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, one of Hinduism's supreme trinity of gods.

King's Gyanendra's motorcade was stoned on Friday as the monarch drove to a Hindu pilgrimage site in the capital.

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