

US presses Pakistan on militant threat

Boucher holds talks with Pak FM

AFP, Islamabad

A senior US diplomat held talks Wednesday with Pakistani officials on the growing influence of al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and US threats to use force against militants on Pakistani territory.

Richard Boucher, US assistant secretary of state for South Asia, met with Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri soon after arriving, and was to meet President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, an official said.

Kasuri used the meeting to express Islamabad's concern about recent US statements on possible American airstrikes on Pakistani territory to target al-Qaeda militants, the foreign ministry said.

Kasuri told Boucher any unilateral US strikes on Pakistan would be "counter-productive to the close

cooperation between the two countries".

Musharraf and Aziz used public appearances Tuesday marking the 60th anniversary of Pakistan's founding to reiterate Islamabad's anger at the suggestions of possible airstrikes.

US intelligence reports have warned that Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network has found safe haven in the tribal regions on the Pakistan side of the border with Afghanistan.

The report prompted some US politicians to say that Washington should take unilateral military action.

Kasuri told Boucher that "Pakistan was making valuable contribution and immense sacrifices in fighting extremism and terrorism," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

Asked by Kasuri to clarify reports of the threatened unilateral action, Boucher had referred to statements by US President George W Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, in which they said they respect Pakistan's sovereignty, it said.

"Foreign Minister Kasuri underlined that a long-term relationship between Pakistan and the United States was in the interest of both countries and for durable peace and security in the region," the statement said.

Kasuri said the relationship "should be based on mutual trust and confidence."

Boucher's visit comes less than a week after Musharraf conceded that al-Qaeda and the Taliban had established bases in Pakistan to plan international attacks.

The president has been under

mounting US pressure to do more against extremists in the remote mountainous regions bordering Afghanistan, which has also been a source of tension between Islamabad and Kabul.

The ministry statement said Boucher appreciated Pakistan's role in helping battle the threat posed by al-Qaeda and the Taliban - which is waging an escalated insurgency in Afghanistan from its border bases.

The foreign minister also expressed concerns over recent US law linking American security assistance to Pakistan with progress in efforts against terrorism.

Boucher, who last met Musharraf here in July, is also due to meet with interior ministry officials and political leaders during his three-day visit.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri (R) greets Assistant US Secretary of State for South Asia Richard Boucher at the Foreign Ministry in Islamabad yesterday. Boucher arrived in Islamabad for top level security and counter-terrorism talks with the Pakistani leaders.

Picture on Indo-US N-deal becoming clear: Japan

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

With India and the US finalising the civil nuclear deal, Japan has said the "picture" is becoming "clear" to it but it preferred a wait-and-watch approach till New Delhi negotiates the safeguards agreement with IAEA.

Lauding India's track record on non-proliferation, Japan said it has been a "good boy" despite remaining outside the NPT regime but New Delhi should shoulder the responsibility to strengthen the NPT regime.

"Basically, this matter is still under careful scrutiny and we are being briefed by the US and India to tell us precisely what happened," Japanese Ambassador Yasukuni Enoki said in an interview here about the 123 agreement concluded last month.

Japan has got "good clarification

from the Indian side and also we are approaching the US. So, I think the picture is becoming clear," he said ahead of the visit of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe here.

National Security Adviser MK Narayanan was in Tokyo over a week ago during which he apprised Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso about the nuclear deal.

Enoki said the attention is shifting to India-IAEA safeguards negotiations and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG).

"We are watching the negotiations between India and the IAEA about the safeguards agreement," he said.

On NSG, he said the meeting of the 45-nation grouping is expected to be convened in the autumn and "then we will express our position."

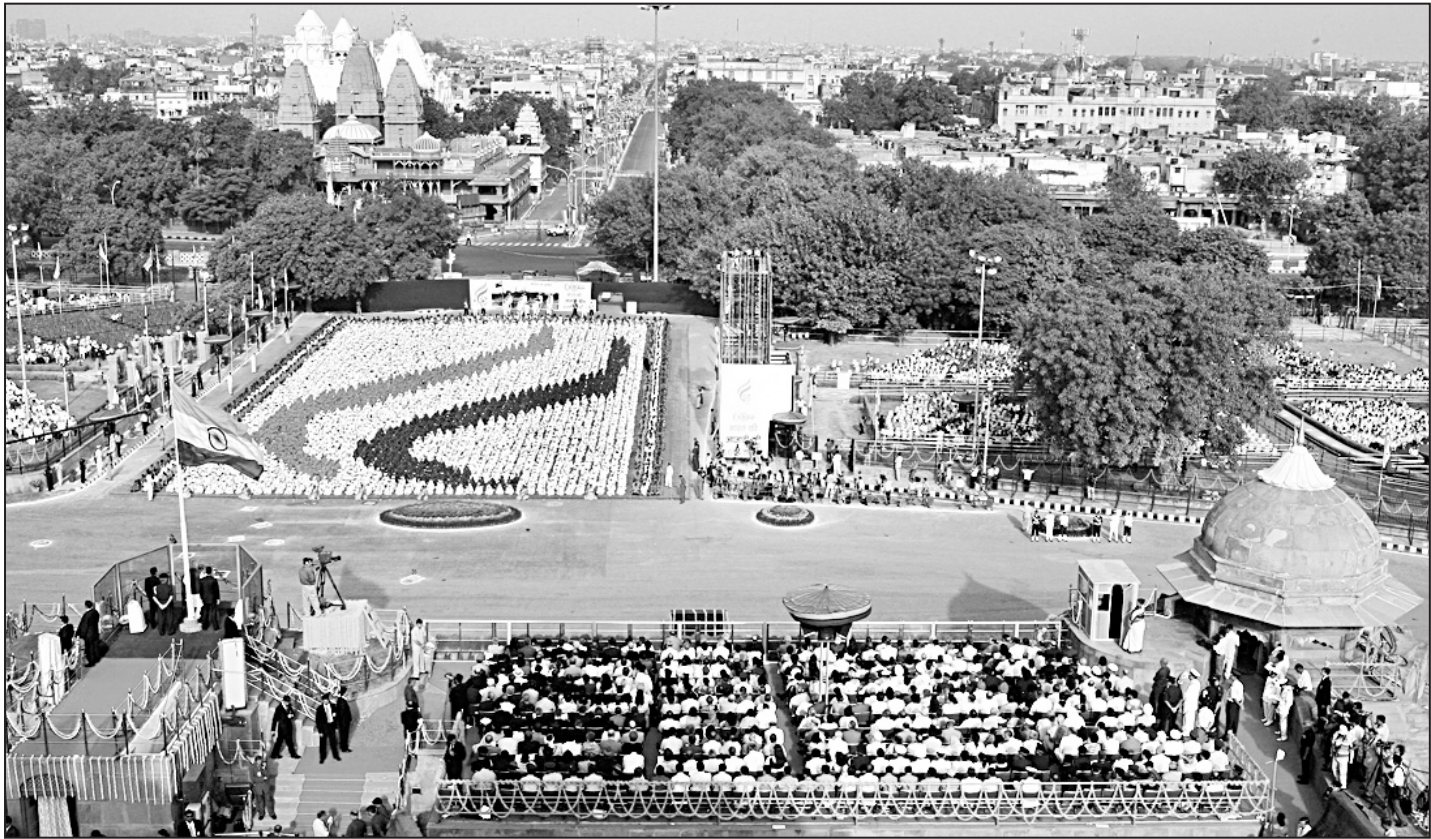


PHOTO: AFP

This Indian Ministry of Defence handout picture taken yesterday shows a general view of the Red Fort in New Delhi as Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh delivers a speech on the occasion of India's 60th anniversary of independence. Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh promised a six-billion-dollar package to bolster India's ailing agriculture sector as he launched celebrations for the nation's independence.

India wants better ties with its neighbours

Says Manmohan in his Independence Day address

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday said New Delhi wanted "best of relations" with its immediate neighbours whose prosperity is linked to India's security.

Addressing the nation from the ramparts of historic Red Fort on the 60th anniversary of India's independence, he said India wanted to live in a neighbourhood of peace and prosperity.

"I assure all our neighbours that we in India want peace and the best of relations with all of them," Singh said, adding "I sincerely believe that in the prosperity and well-being of our neighbours lies the key to our own security and progress."

New Delhi "desired good relations with all the countries, be it big or small, and "the East and the West, the North and the South. Today, we enjoy good relations with

all major powers and all developing countries".

Singh said India has emerged "as a bridge between many extremes of the world. Our composite culture is a living proof of the possibility of a confluence of civilisations. India will always be a nation bridging the many global divides".

The prime minister said those who preached hatred and communalism had no place in Indian society and his government was determined to crush extremism and terrorism.

"Those who profess hatred and extremism, those who spread the virus of communalism and those who believe in violence and terrorism have no place in our society," he said.

"We must all fight these anti-democratic, anti-social and anti-national forces, each in our own way, in our daily lives. Let there be no doubt in anyone's mind that the government is firm in its resolve to

fight all forms of extremism and terrorism."

"Our strength is in our unity, despite our diversity; it is that unity which gave us our independence. It is that unity that gives us our strength as a nation. We must have faith in our strength and confidence in our capabilities. Each of us has our individual identities. However every citizen must recognise that we are Indians first and last."

Manmohan Singh said the government had decided to invest in setting up good quality schools. "We will support 6,000 new high quality schools - one in every block of the country. Each school will set standards of excellence for other schools in the area."

"We will also ensure that adequate numbers of colleges are set up across the country, especially in districts where enrolment levels are low. We will help states set up colleges in 370 such districts."

6 Italian 'mafia' men killed in Germany

AFP, Berlin

Six Italian men with alleged mafia links were shot dead in an execution-style killing near a train station in the western German city of Duisburg, police said yesterday.

Reports citing top Italian police officials said the men were members of the 'Ndrangheta - the Calabrian mafia from southern Italy.

A police patrol discovered the men in two vehicles, a Volkswagen Golf car and an Opel van, in the early hours of Wednesday.

All six had been shot in the head. Five were dead when they were found and a sixth was critically wounded and died as he was being taken to hospital.

A woman passerby had heard the sound of gunshots and alerted a police patrol car, which went to the scene.

Duisburg police spokesman Heinrich Rotering said: "The six men found with bullet wounds to the head were Italians aged from 16 to 39."

Witnesses said they saw two people running from the scene of the shooting.

US to slap terror tag on Iran's revolutionary guard

AFP, Washington

The Bush administration has decided to give a "terrorist" designation to Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard, which would allow the US government to target the group's business and financial operations, the Washington Post reported yesterday.

The daily reported that the Bush administration suspects the Revolutionary Guard, Iran's 125,000-strong elite military branch, of providing support to extremists in Iraq, Afghanistan, and throughout the Middle East.

The Post said that the decision follows congressional pressure on the administration to toughen its stance against Tehran, and reflects administration frustration with the ineffectiveness of UN resolutions against Iran's nuclear programme.

The executive order, to be issued by US President George W. Bush in the coming days, will allow the United States to block the assets of terrorists and to disrupt operations by foreign businesses that "provide support, services or assistance to, or otherwise associate with, terrorists."

Abbas' decree excludes Hamas from election

Japan resumes direct aid to Palestinians

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas yesterday issued a decree that effectively excludes the rival Hamas movement ruling the Gaza Strip from future elections.

The decree makes changes to electoral law, including requiring candidates in presidential and legislative elections "to respect the political programme of the PLO," according to the text of the signed decree seen by AFP.

It also requires candidates to respect all previous agreements signed by the Palestinian Authority.

Hamas does not respect the political programme of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), which recognises Israel, as the Islamists' charter calls for the destruction of the Jewish state.

The decree also says that all parliament candidates will be chosen according to party lists. Previously, half of those standing for the legisla-

ture were chosen in single constituencies.

The requirement makes it easier for candidates from Abbas's Fatah party to run in the Gaza Strip, which has been under control of the Islamists for two months after Hamas fighters overran forces loyal to the moderate president.

Following the bloody takeover, Abbas fired the Hamas-led unity cabinet, appointed one headed by the Western-backed economist, Salam Fayyad, and has refused talks with the Islamists. He has also vowed to call early general elections.

Hamas swept to victory in the last election in January 2006 in a surprise rout of the long-dominant Fatah party.

In the wake of the Gaza takeover, Abbas has issued decrees that he says have the power of law, although this is disputed by Hamas.

The Islamists have refused to recognise the Fayyad government and insist that the coalition cabinet

headed by the sacked Hamas premier Ismail Haniya is the Palestinians' sole legitimate government.

Meanwhile, Japan resumed direct financial aid to the Palestinians yesterday when Foreign Minister Taro Aso signed a multi-million dollar aid package for the Western-backed government.

Aso signed the deal with Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad in the West Bank town of Ramallah as he continued a regional tour which Tokyo has said aims to promote the peace process through economic means.

"The deal provides direct aid from the Japanese government to the Palestinian Authority in the amount of 11.3 million dollars for the general budget, support for an agriculture project and other economic sectors," a senior Palestinian official told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP

Japan's Foreign Minister Taro Aso shakes hands with Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas at his office in the West Bank city of Ramallah yesterday. Japan resumed direct financial aid to the Palestinians when Foreign Minister Taro Aso signed a multi-million dollar aid package for the Western-backed government.

Riot police called in to halt Nepali student violence

AFP, Kathmandu

Riot police deployed to university campuses in the Nepali capital yesterday after Maoist students clashed with rivals leading to dozens of arrests, officials said.

"Hundreds of riot police have been mobilised on campuses to prevent further clashes," Sarbendra Khanal, Kathmandu's police chief, told AFP.

Police arrested 24 Maoist students on Wednesday and 46 the previous day.

Only Maoists had been arrested "because they were the ones who were instigating the violence, and they were the only ones using weapons like knives and iron rods," said Khanal.

The clashes began Monday when supporters a Maoist-affiliated student union battled backers of a student union connected to the Nepali Congress, Nepal's biggest

political party.

Police said it was unclear what triggered the fighting, which injured four people.

Nepal's Maoists ended their bloody civil war late last year by signing a peace pact with the government, but are still accused of using violence.

"They have a tendency to beat up students who don't support their views and want other student bodies to follow their leadership," Pradeep Poudel, the head of the Nepali Congress-linked Nepal Students Union, told AFP.

On Wednesday, Maoist students staged a demonstration demanding the release of their jailed comrades.

"Otherwise we'll call for a nationwide education strike," warned Leknath Neupane, the head of the All Nepal National Independent Students Union - Revolutionary.

Netanyahu wins Likud race, eyes top job

AP, Jerusalem

Benjamin Netanyahu, fresh off a commanding election win as leader of Israel's hardline Likud Party, vowed yesterday to shift his efforts toward reclaiming his old job as prime minister.

Netanyahu faced a relatively strong challenge from Moshe Feiglin, a radical West Bank settler, whose performance in Tuesday's primary could help shore up the extreme right wing of the party and hurt Netanyahu's efforts to rehabilitate Likud after it was battered in national elections last year.

Recent polls have crowned Netanyahu, Likud's leader since late 2005, as the front-runner for Israel's top job.

Netanyahu captured 73 percent of the vote to Feiglin's 23 percent, according to final results party officials released early Wednesday. A third candidate, Danny Danon, trailed with 3.5 percent.

Netanyahu's victory was a foregone conclusion after he announced the elections on short notice.

5,700 'disappeared' in Lanka: Amnesty

Skirmishes kill 9 Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Hundreds of people disappeared in Sri Lanka in the past year and more than 5,700 such cases from the past three decades were under UN review, rights group Amnesty International said Tuesday.

Since 2006, hundreds of people have reportedly been abducted by the security forces or armed groups in areas in the north and east of Sri Lanka, as well as in Colombo, the London-based rights group said.

In a report marking the International Day of the Disappeared, which falls on August 30, Amnesty said many people taken in for questioning had subsequently disappeared.

It said the Vice-Chancellor of Eastern University, Sivasubramanian Ravendranath, was reportedly abducted while at a conference in Colombo in December and his whereabouts were unknown.

"He was in an area of the capital

tightly controlled by the army. It is likely that his captors were military agents," Amnesty said. "He has not been heard from since."

"There are currently 5,749 outstanding cases of enforced disappearance in Sri Lanka being reviewed by the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances," the rights group added.

There was no immediate comment from the government about the latest Amnesty report, but Colombo routinely denies that security forces and police are involved in abductions.

At least nine Tamil Tiger rebels and a government soldier were killed in sporadic clashes in northern Sri Lanka, the defence ministry said yesterday.

Six of the rebels were killed along a de facto border separating the rest of the country from rebel-held Wanni region on Tuesday, the ministry said adding that the soldier was killed during those clashes.

Taliban bomb kills 3 Germans in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

A bomb blast in the Afghan capital killed two German police officers and a foreign ministry staffer yesterday, officials in Kabul and Berlin said.

A Western official in Kabul told AFP they were travelling in two vehicles when the bomb went off.

In Berlin, security officials said two were members of the German federal police and the other was an employee of the German foreign ministry.

Taliban spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi claimed responsibility for the attack in a telephone call to AFP.

"It was a remote-controlled bomb which exploded in front of a military convoy," he said.

An AFP photographer at the scene of the explosion in the capital's southeast reported a destroyed, overturned four-wheel-drive vehicle of the type usually used by military forces and diplomats in Kabul.

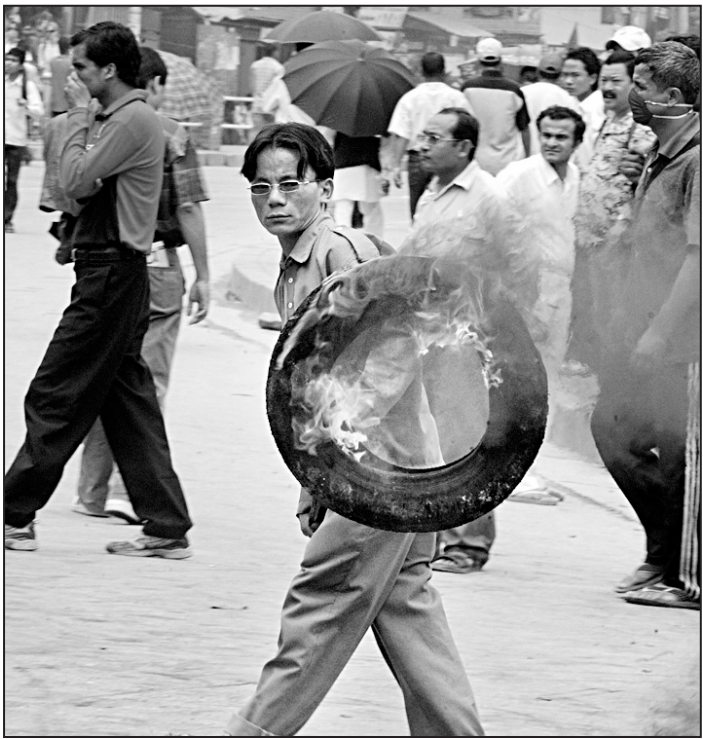


PHOTO: AFP

A Nepalese Maoist student activist carries a burning tyre during a demonstration in Kathmandu yesterday. Hundreds of riot police were deployed on university campuses as dozens were detained in Nepal's capital after clashes between Maoist students and their opponents, officials said.