

On border, Pak polls raise hopes for peace with India

AFP, Wagah

Every evening as dusk falls on the India-Pakistan border post near Lahore, crowds gather on either side of the frontier and scream slogans at each other in a choreographed show of bravado.

"Long Live Pakistan!" some shout from the stands as patriotic music blasts through a stadium. Similar cries ring out from India, while men on both sides frantically wave flags, trying to outdo each other in nationalistic fervour.

Immaculately dressed soldiers then lower both national flags, marking the closure of the border between two countries who have been at odds since independence from Britain and partition in 1947.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars, two over the disputed territory of Kashmir.

The countries came to the brink of war again in the aftermath of a deadly attack on India's parliament in December 2001, which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based militants.

India snapped diplomatic, transport and trade links but in

January 2004 the two countries agreed to a peace process which has trudged along since.

Many people who rely on the border crossing here hope that the new Pakistani government voted in on Monday will speed up thawing relations between the historic rivals.

India on Wednesday welcomed the elections in Pakistan and said it hoped to see fresh talks with its nuclear-armed South Asian rival.

"If there is a real democracy then there will be a good relationship between India and Pakistan," said Muhammad Munshi, a 57-year-old Pakistani porter with a long salt-and-pepper beard and blue robes who survives on tips.

"We will earn more money, the labourers will be more prosperous -- if there is no activity then we will be earning nothing," he told AFP.

The border town of Wagah has seen many benefits as a result of the peace process between the two nations.

Labourers load brightly coloured trucks with tomatoes coming from India, while dried fruit from Afghanistan heads in the other direction. Trucks have only

recently been allowed to cross onto Pakistani soil.

So-called "friendship buses" also shuttle between New Delhi and Lahore three times a week, carrying about 45 people, said Shuja Heider Kazmi, superintendent at the brand new customs building at Wagah.

The South Asian neighbours launched the link in 1999. It was suspended following the raid on India's parliament in 2001, but restored in 2003 when relations improved.

That India-Pakistan relations barely featured in Pakistan's fierce election campaign shows how much the situation has improved.

"By the passage of time, it has helped us realise we can have dialogue in a friendly way, not with guns," said Kazmi.

Monday's election saw the party of slain former prime minister Benazir Bhutto win the most seats in the National Assembly, followed by two-time former premier Nawaz Sharif's outfit.

Both beat the party loyal to President Pervez Musharraf, the former general who seized power in a 1999 coup.

"The army... they know if there is friendship, their importance will be lesser," Kazmi told AFP referring to the Indian and Pakistani armed forces.

"If there is a political government, we expect there will be better relations."

International relations professor Ishtiaq Ahmed, from Islamabad's Quaid-e-Azam University, said that although Musharraf has advanced ties, a democratic government would be more dedicated to success.

"The context is already there -- any civilian government would look to build upon it," he told AFP. "The civilians are much more flexible in negotiating, in making compromises."

When in power, both Bhutto and Sharif made efforts to reach out to India and foster stronger ties, but Ahmed said the army scuppered the moves.

A first step for the new government, he said, would be trying to ease visa restrictions, so people could travel with greater ease for business, tourism, or to visit relatives, many of whom have been divided by the troubles.



Children take part in a handwriting competition on the National Museum premises in the city yesterday. The museum authorities organised the competition to mark the Amar Ekushey.



CPB President Manjurul Ahsan Khan speaks at a workshop on 'Empowerment of women, Jatiya Sangsad and the local government system' at the party office in the city yesterday. On his left is CPB General Secretary Mujahidul Islam Selim and on his right are Shah Alam and Leena Chakrabarty.

Indian state bars controversial Bollywood film

AFP, Bhopal

An Indian state yesterday ordered cinema halls not to screen a controversial film featuring Bollywood's most glamorous star Aishwarya Rai after violent demonstrations.

Many people from India's Rajput community have staged angry protests over the depiction of a romance between Mughal King Akbar and a Hindu princess, saying the film has distorted history and shown their ancestors in poor light.

"The screening of the film has been suspended and not banned," Shivraj Singh Chouhan, chief minister of central Madhya Pradesh state told reporters in Bhopal.

"Jodhaa Akbar" -- said to be one of the most expensive Bollywood movies ever made -- depicts a romance between the 16th century Mughal ruler Akbar and Rajput princess Jodha Bai.

But Rajputs say Jodha was in fact Akbar's daughter-in-law. In addition, they say their women were fiercely opposed to marrying the Mughals.

Several mobs have attacked cinema halls and forced disruption of the film's screening in many cities across north and central India.

Cinema halls in western Rajasthan state, where the protests started, have refused to show the film after threats of violence.

Police to question Sarkozy's ex-wife over SMS

AFP, Paris

French police plan to question President Nicolas Sarkozy's ex-wife Cecilia over allegations that she sent her a text message offering to call off his marriage if she took him back, a judicial source said yesterday.

Sarkozy is suing the weekly Nouvel Observateur for reporting that he had sent the message to Cecilia eight days before his marriage to ex-model Carla Bruni.

"If you come back, I'll call it all off," the president is reported to have told his ex-wife Cecilia Ciganer-Albeniz.

The Paris prosecutor has asked police to summon the former first lady to testify, but no date has been set for the hearing, said the judicial source.

G8 urged to meet Kyoto Protocol goals

AFP, Brasilia

President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, on closing the GLOBE forum on climate change yesterday, called on the Group of Eight (G8) developed nations to meet greenhouse-gas reduction targets set out in the Kyoto Protocol.

"It's important that the G8 countries assume their responsibility by complying with the Kyoto Protocol, and support our efforts by opening their markets to our sustainable products," Lula told 100 lawmakers from Brazil, India, China, South Africa and Mexico.

The two-day GLOBE forum

(Global Legislators Organization for a Balanced Environment) aims to agree on a post-2012 climate change settlement and submit it to the leaders of powerful G8 countries meeting on Japan's Hokkaido island from July 7 to 9.

The international Kyoto Protocol, an agreement made under United Nations auspices according to which around 175 countries have agreed to reduce their carbon emissions, expires in 2012.

The Kyoto Protocol's dismal track record so far, Lula said, can only be improved "if the global sharing of benefits and responsibilities begins in earnest now, and

greater effort is placed on post-2012 climate-change initiatives."

Lula called on industrialized nations to "bear the costs of slowing deforestation and protecting the wilderness by means of voluntary contributions to the Amazon Fund."

Brazil, he said, "wants to count on the international community's cooperation" in its efforts to preserve the Amazon region, and called for an international fund to protect the region's biodiversity.

Lula also asked the G8 to back another Brazilian Amazon preservation project seeking to invest about one billion dollars a year between now and 2012.

China to launch second lunar probe in 2009

AFP, Beijing

China hopes to launch its second moon-orbiting satellite in 2009, state media reported yesterday, as the country steps up its space programme.

The news came after scientists regained contact with the country's first lunar satellite Chang'e-1 following a four-hour blackout, Xinhua news agency said.

Ye Peijian, the chief commander of Chang'e-1, did not elaborate on his announcement of the follow-up mission.

Change'e-1 is currently making a three-dimensional survey of the moon, and collecting data on the make-up of its surface, the report added.

The control centre lost contact with the satellite for four hours on Thursday, as it moved into a shadow area caused by Earth blocking out the sun, the report added.

Brazilian river ferry death toll rises to 14

AFP, Brasilia

The confirmed number of people drowned when a ferry sank on Brazil's Amazon River rose to 14 yesterday with the recovery of three more bodies, a rescue commander told the state Agencia Brasil news agency.

Fire services commander Antonio Dias said operations were continuing to locate up to five other passengers still missing following the sinking that occurred before dawn Thursday when the ferry collided with a barge.

Those killed comprised eight children, four women and two men, he said.

India sets wages for housemaids abroad

AFP, New Delhi

India has begun rolling out mandatory minimum wage requirements for housemaids working in the Gulf and parts of Africa and Southeast Asia, a minister said yesterday.

"They are the most exploited lot," Minister of Overseas Indian Affairs Vayalar Ravi told AFP, citing frequent complaints of harassment, overwork and low wages from female domestic workers.

"They are not covered by the labour laws of those countries."

Indian embassies in 18 countries have been told to prescribe minimum monthly wages for maids in the range of 300 to 350 dollars in consultation with local governments, the minister said.

"Otherwise we will not give them clearance to go," said Ravi, adding that he expected Indian embassies in the countries concerned to issue wage guidelines by the beginning of March.

After that, Indian missions must verify work contracts to make sure they are following the new wage requirements in order for the worker to get emigration clearance.

The Indian missions in Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates have already put the rules in place.

Housemaids to Bahrain, where some 130,000 Indians work, must earn a minimum of 265 dollars a month while those to the UAE, home to at least one million Indians, will earn 300 dollars a month.

Food, accommodation and air fare must also be provided by the employer.

The wage guidelines for female domestic helps are part of a larger policy first announced last year to protect Indian women workers abroad.

Female workers emigrating to these countries must also be older than 30 -- a rule aimed at stopping trafficking for sex.

"Sex trafficking also we want to check," said Ravi. "We will not relax this requirement at all."

Millions of Indians work overseas, particularly in the six oil-rich Gulf Arab nations of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The minister said wages were not being set for other categories of workers.

As many as six million Indian expatriates send home 20 billion dollars a year from Gulf states. Workers' associations and human rights groups regularly voice complaints of mistreatment.

BJFCI executives

Faruk Ahmed and Anisur Rahman have been elected president and secretary general of Bangladesh Journalists' Forum for Consumers & Investors (BJFCI) yesterday, says a press release.

The election of the 25-member National Executive Committee of BJFCI was held at the National Press Club.

Other elected office bearers are: Enamul Hoq, Kaykobad Milton, Nurul Azam Pabon and Aiub Bhuiyan-vice-presidents, Mursalin Noman- joint secretary, Muhammad Jahangir Alam- treasurer, Md Shariful Islam- organising secretary, Mita Chowdhury- publication and publicity secretary, Nayeem Nowroz- information and research secretary, Khondoker F Rahman and Zilani Milton- international affairs secretary, Dulal Hossain- human rights and law affairs secretary, Syed Ali Asfaq- investment affairs secretary, Asfaqur Rahman- Office Secretary.

Members are: Ali Sanowar, Abul Khair, Belayet Hossain, Shamim Ara, Mohammad Shahnewaz, Ezzah Ahmed, Shamim Siddique and Rezaul Karim.

Thailand heart patients caught in drug dilemma

AFP, Bangkok

Some 34,000 Thai heart disease sufferers may lose access to cheap drugs because the government has halted imports of the medicine pending a review of its generics programme, an activist said yesterday.

Thailand's previous military government issued so-called compulsory licences, which temporarily suspend patent protections for pricey

medicines, allowing production of cheaper copycat versions.

The newly elected government of Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej has launched a review of the programme, alarming health activists that the administration would scrap it.

Before the review was announced, the Government Pharmaceutical Organisation (GPO) had already signed a contract to import one million tablets of a generic version of

the popular heart drug Plavix from Indian firm Cadila Health Care.

But Saree Ongsomwang, manager of the Consumer Federation, said that the GPO has not actually imported the pills because it was afraid of legal troubles if the government decided to scrap the generics programme.

"They're afraid that if the government cancels the compulsory license, it could be sued" by French group Sanofi-Aventis, which holds the patent, Saree told AFP.

GPO officials could not be reached for comment.

Saree said that 34,000 patients who had been set to receive the drug were now caught in a lurch, unable to afford to buy the drug at full price.

"Plavix is expensive. Hospitals charge between 80 to 120 baht (2.47 to 3.70 dollars) for one tablet," she said.

The removal of patent protections has angered Western drug giants, who say it is an infringement of their intellectual property rights. Activists have hailed copycat drugs, saying it helps developing nations seeking cheaper medicines for the poor.

Thailand's army-backed government issued compulsory licenses for Plavix along with the AIDS drugs Efavirenz and Kaletra in January 2007.

The decision to allow a generic version of Plavix sparked particular controversy because the blood-thinning treatment is believed to be the world's second best-selling medication.

In addition to Plavix and the AIDS medications, Thailand has also issued compulsory licenses for three cancer drugs -- Docetaxel, Letrozole and Tarceva.

The military government also struck a last-minute deal last month with drug giant Novartis, which agreed to give its leukaemia medicine Glivec to Thai patients for free.

Reception to Canadian prof

Department of Economics of International University of Business Agriculture and Technology (IUBAT) will accord a reception to Dr John Richards, member of the Overseas Advisory Council of IUBAT from Simon Fraser University, Canada on 1.00pm at IUBAT conference hall today, says a press release.

Prof Dr M Alimullah Miyan, vice-chancellor and founder of IUBAT will preside over the reception.

Interested academics, researchers, policy makers, managers and professionals are requested to attend the programme.



Bangladesh Scouts takes out a colourful procession in the city yesterday to mark the Scout Day.

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