

India energised by nuclear pacts

AFP, New Delhi

India's atomic energy pact with France represents a major step for the fast developing country, marking the moment it finally rid itself of its status as a nuclear outlier.

A separate deal with the United States was passed by the US Senate on Wednesday, cementing India's new position in what Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has called "the global nuclear order."

The accord with France, signed in Paris on Tuesday, ended a ban on countries selling civilian nuclear technology and equipment to New Delhi, imposed in 1974 when India used its civilian programme to produce and test an atomic bomb.

Security analyst C Uday Bhaskar said the pacts would remove the tag of "nuclear transgressor" and give India "a unique and exceptional status that is recognised by the world."

"India is not a signatory to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it is not recognised as a nuclear weapon state, but New Delhi can buy reactors, fuel and technology from the international market," said Bhaskar, former head of the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses.

"This places India in a class

apart from Pakistan, Israel and North Korea, countries that have nuclear weapons but cannot engage in nuclear commerce," he said.

The fact that New Delhi, which also carried out nuclear tests in 1998, had managed to re-enter global nuclear commerce on its own terms represents a "significant victory for Indian diplomacy," he added.

Arundhati Ghosh, India's former envoy to the Geneva-based Conference on Disarmament, said the two deals would help to secure the emerging South Asian giant a seat at "the global high table."

The pacts should also allow India to boost its economic growth rate, she said.

New Delhi, which has recently been expanding economically at the rate of over eight percent, has been on the lookout for cheaper and cleaner sources of fuel to accelerate to double-digit growth.

"The deals open the way for India to increase economic growth and sustain it by providing cheap means of electricity for industry and agriculture," she said.

India is being courted by high profile groups like the Group of Eight industrialised nations and is increasingly consulted on major international issues, she noted.



Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee (L) shakes hands with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice prior to a meeting at Hyderabad House in New Delhi yesterday. Rice has arrived in India to showcase a historic civilian nuclear deal, but last-minute hitches delayed the signing of the pact during her trip.

Lankan jets pound LTTE HQs: 42 rebels killed

Troops on the verge of capturing rebel power base

AFP, AP, Colombo

Sri Lankan troops killed 42 Tamil Tigers and injured 53 in a ground and sea offensive aimed at dismantling the rebels' mini-state in the north of the island, the defence ministry said Friday.

Sri Lankan warplanes Friday bombed the headquarters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) "police" unit inside the northern district of Kilinochchi, the ministry said.

The pro-rebel Tamilnet website said the air force dropped three "bunker-busting bombs" targeting the main police building and nearby complex belonging to the rebel aid agency, the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation.

Lanka's army chief said Saturday his troops are on the verge of capturing the key northern headquarters of the Tamil Tigers in Kilinochchi.

Army forces had advanced to within two kilometres (1.25 miles) of the rebel stronghold.

Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka said in a speech at a Buddhist ceremony in the north central town of Anuradhapura.

Wresting control of Kilinochchi would be a major military and psychological blow to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Two soldiers were killed in Thursday's clashes, and another 20 injured, said military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara.

The military says the rebels have lost 7,158 fighters since January, when Colombo pulled out of a Norwegian-brokered ceasefire. The defence ministry has acknowledged the loss of 697 soldiers over the same period.

The air raid came after ground forces rained artillery shells and rockets on Kilinochchi town from Thursday night, injuring two civilians, the LTTE said in a statement.

Sri Lankan air force jets also bombed the offices of the Tamil Tiger political chief Friday as the

military pressed forward with its resurgent offensive against the separatist guerrillas, the military said.

The attack on Balasingham Nadesan's office in the war-torn north came a day after the air force bombed the offices of the rebel peace secretariat, the headquarters for its negotiating team in long-defunct peace talks.

The locations of the two offices were well-known, but the military had refrained from targeting them. The decision to bomb them sent a strong message that the government which has vowed to crush the Tamil Tigers by the end of the year no longer considered any rebel targets off limits.

The military said troops were on the outskirts of Kilinochchi and trying to take control of the town that has been in rebel hands for a decade.

The government has announced plans to raise defence spending by seven percent to 1.6 billion dollars in 2009, from 1.5

billion dollars this year, to maintain the offensive against the LTTE.

The ethnic conflict has claimed tens of thousands lives on both sides since 1972.

Troops have pushed deep into rebel-held territory in the north amid heavy fighting in recent weeks.

With nearly all communications to the north severed, rebel spokesmen could not be contacted for comment.

Both sides have been accused of exaggerating enemy casualties while underreporting their own.

Independent verification of the fighting is not possible because journalists are barred from the war zone.

The rebels have been fighting for an independent state in the north and east since 1983, following decades of marginalisation of ethnic Tamils by governments dominated by the Sinhalese majority. More than 70,000 people have been killed in the conflict.

Indian temple stampede claims 224 lives

AFP, Jodhpur

The death toll from a deadly stampede at a Hindu temple in the northern Indian state of Rajasthan has risen to 224, police said late Wednesday.

The toll was higher than an estimate given earlier in the day, and Inspector-General Rajiv Dasot said police had received more reports from bereaved families.

"People and relatives are now reporting back with the deaths of relatives and we now know 224 is the number of those killed," Dasot said in Jodhpur, where the stampede took place early Tuesday.

The disaster occurred when more than 25,000 worshippers rushed to reach the hill-top shrine to Hindu warrior goddess Chamunda in Jodhpur's 15th-century Chamunda Devi temple.

At least 35 more people were hospitalised after the disaster, which came at the start of Navaratri, a nine-day Hindu festival which is one of the most important in the Hindu calendar and when crowds are particularly large.

The temple reopened to devotees on Wednesday, but not more than 200 Hindus were seen at the

complex. "Jodhpur is in mourning and people are attending funerals of their loved ones," said Reeta Inani, a regular visitor to the temple which is built inside the Mehrangarh Fort, a major tourism spot in Jodhpur.

The stampede came at the start of Navaratri, a nine-day Hindu festival which is one of the most important in the Hindu calendar and when crowds are particularly large.

Officials said the stampede appeared to have started when a wall along the narrow path leading up to the temple collapsed, killing

several people and sparking widespread panic.

People were trampled and suffocated to death.

"The stampede began when people lost their footing and set off a chain reaction," Thanvi said.

Officials said many of the injured were seriously hurt. After the stampede, devotees carried limp bodies to police vehicles, while others desperately tried to resuscitate victims.

Temple stampedes are common during religious festivities in India, where crowd control is often rudimentary or non-existent.

Invitation to Bid (ITB) Promotion of Development and Confidence Building in the Chittagong Hill Tracts Procurement of Motor Cycles for UNDP-CHTDF

গণপ্রজাতন্ত্রী বাংলাদেশ সরকার নিয়োগ বিজ্ঞপ্তি

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Invitation for Tender Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh