

India, China agree to set up hotline

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India and China have agreed to establish a hotline at the highest political level -- between the prime ministers of the two countries -- in next one month to promote better understanding.

The idea of the hotline was floated with the purpose of not allowing differences between the two countries cast a shadow on their bilateral ties, something agreed on at a meeting between Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Chinese President Hu Jintao on the sidelines of Brazil-India-Russia-China summit in the Russian city of Yekaterinburg a few days ago, sources said.

There have been some rough edges in Sino-India ties with China opposing an Asian Development Bank grant to a watershed project in the north eastern state of Arunachal Pradesh. India rejects China's claim to Arunachal Pradesh asserting the state is very much of India's territory.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani activists of various Islamic religious parties chant slogans during a demonstration against the US and the Taliban in Karachi yesterday. The demonstrators condemned the United States for drone attacks on Pakistani territory and criticised Taliban militants for attacks on mosques and seminaries.

Pak army on horns of dilemma over how to tackle Taliban

ANI, Washington

As Pakistan looks to open new fronts against the Taliban and other extremists, and particularly against the Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) chief Baitullah Mehsud in South Waziristan, some vital questions, which have emerged from the Swat offensive, have remained unanswered.

With the Pakistan Army preparing to launch a fresh offensive in South Waziristan, it still remains unclear, as to how long the troops would be asked to stay in the valley to maintain peace and order there.

The longer they stay in the region, the extra burden they would put on themselves in terms of civilian administration, analysts believe.

According to Moeed Yusuf, a security analyst at Boston University, the Pakistan Army could get bogged down if it is saddled with holding territories regained in Swat and Buner.

"The question that remains to be seen is how much they (army) are going to hold and how

much are they going to be asked to do in terms of civilian administration," The Christian Science Monitor quoted Yusuf, as saying.

Yusuf raised apprehensions saying that the army's capability could suffer if asked to do more in civilian administration.

"The more they are asked to do in civilian administration, it puts pressure on the military, from doing much more," he said.

This could adversely affect the government's goals that it had set-up for South Waziristan, the report said.

Moreover, a military offensive in the tribal region and the Taliban's home would be much more different and difficult than the one in Swat.

With tougher terrains and more deep rooted insurgents, it is uncertain whether the military would be able to succeed in its aims in the region, the report added.

It is also been speculated that the Pakistan Army, instead of crushing Mehsud's network in the region, would instead redirect the Taliban towards Afghanistan.

US, Kyrgyzstan reach deal on Afghan transit

AFP, Bishkek

Kyrgyzstan has reached an agreement with the United States that will open up its territory for the transit of non-lethal cargo to support Nato forces in Afghanistan, the foreign minister said Friday.

"We have reached an agreement about the transit of non-military cargo to Afghanistan via Kyrgyz territory," Foreign Minister Kadyrbek Sarbayev said during an interview with local news website 24.kg.

The announcement by Sarbayev did not address the issue of the pending closure of the key US airbase at Manas, which Bishkek ordered closed earlier this year under what was largely seen as pressure from Moscow.

Intense speculation has surrounded the fate of the base, which is located outside the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek and which Kyrgyzstan has ordered US forces to quit by August 18.

A source in the Kyrgyz government, speaking on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the negotiations, confirmed that a basic deal had been reached between the two sides, but said some issues remained under discussion.

"A new agreement between the governments of Kyrgyzstan and the US is being prepared regarding this question. The yearly fee for the transit of cargo to Afghanistan has not yet been concretely fixed," he said.

Manas is used to ferry tens of thousands of troops in and out of Afghanistan each year.

The loss of the base would deal a major blow to coalition military efforts at a time when US President Barack Obama has pledged to boost the campaign there against the Taliban.

Troops kill 23 Taliban in S Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Afghan and international troops have killed 23 Taliban militants in various operations in southern Afghanistan, one of which also left a policeman dead, authorities said yesterday.

Sixteen of the militants were killed in the southern province of Uruzgan on Thursday in a clash in which the policeman died, provincial authorities said.

"In a joint operation, a clash erupted with the opposition in which 16 Taliban were killed," said Mohammad Nabi Uruzgani, provincial police intelligence chief.

The bodies of the dead men were left behind after the fighting, he told AFP.

"A policeman was also killed in the clash," he said.

Also on Thursday, Afghan military forces killed seven Taliban militants in the volatile southern province of Kandahar, a stronghold of

the Taliban militia waging an insurgency that has seen record attacks this year.

"Military forces killed seven of the opposition in Zahri district and they left their bodies on the ground," Afghan national army corps commander General Shir Mohammad Zazai said.

The Taliban are the main militant group operating in Afghanistan. With support from al-Qaeda, they are fighting the US-backed government of President Hamid Karzai.

Afghan and foreign forces fighting extremist insurgents have stepped up operations this year to secure August 20 presidential and provincial council elections, a landmark in the war-scarred country's transition to democracy.

Earlier police found Friday the body of an Afghan medical student beheaded by unknown attackers in a university mosque in Afghanistan's southern city of Kandahar, witnesses said.

West Bengal villagers caught between security forces and Maoists

ANI, Pirakata

Fear stalks the villagers trapped in the exchange of fire between the security forces and the Maoist rebels who declared Lalgarh region of West Bengal 'liberated zone'.

The gun battle between the paramilitary troops and the Maoists caused unease amongst the residents of Pirakata village, 18 kilometres from Lalgarh, and from where the security personnel launched their operation against the rebels.

For the villagers who are quite unaccustomed to such circumstances, the situation is very frightening.

"In our village the paramilitary forces are engaged in a clash with the Maoists and the exchange of fire has been taking place. Such incidents never took place in our village," said Asoke Bharti, a villager.

"How are we going to cope with it? If the situation remains like this, then how will we venture out of our homes? Our lives are at stake. They (the Maoists) have been forcing people at night to join them. If we refuse, they beat us, what are we going to do?" Bharti added.

On Friday, the West Bengal Police supported by central paramilitary forces initiated the operation to flush out Maoists from Lalgarh.



PHOTO: AFP
Indian paramilitary soldiers detain villagers as they proceed into the villages of Lalgarh, in Midnapore district, some 200km west of Kolkata on Thursday. India deployed troops to West Bengal on Wednesday to tackle an upsurge in Maoist violence after days of clashes between tribal villagers and police.



PHOTO: AFP
Myanmar members of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) offer prayers at the Shwedagon Pagoda on the occasion of the 64th birthday of democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, in Yangon yesterday. Myanmar democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi marked a grim 64th birthday in prison as activists took to the Internet and staged worldwide protests to call for her release and an end to her trial.

Global campaign marks Suu Kyi's 64th birthday

AP, Yangon

Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi spent her 64th birthday locked in prison Friday as global condemnation over her trial and demands for her freedom erupted across Twitter, Facebook and other Web sites and at rallies worldwide.

The Nobel Peace Prize laureate planned to mark the day by sharing food with her prison guards.

"Daw Aung San Suu Kyi will celebrate her birthday by treating the people around her to rice and chocolate cake," said lawyer Nyan Win, who left several gifts at the prison including a chocolate cake, an apple cake, three bouquets of orchids and 50 lunch boxes of Indian-style biryani rice. "Daw" is a term of respect in

Myanmar.

"She really appreciates the efforts and said she was sorry she wasn't able to thank everyone individually," he said, noting that lawyers have informed her of the worldwide campaign but did not personally see her Friday.

Hollywood stars like Brad Pitt and Julia Roberts, celebrities Madonna and David Beckham, Nobel laureates and world leaders joined voices to call for the military government to release Suu Kyi. She has now spent 14 birthdays in detention.

Many posted online messages on social networking sites and videos on YouTube in what human rights groups called an unprecedented and enormously powerful tool to harness support for Suu Kyi and highlight her struggle.

BJP's soul-searching meet today

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

There will be key absentees even as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) holds its first high-level assessment of its election defeat and looks for ways to revive cadre morale at the two-day national executive meeting that begins here Saturday.

"The meeting is definitely important for it is being held in the aftermath of the elections. There will be state-wise reporting to examine where we went wrong and also a review of the poll results," party vice-president and spokesperson Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi told IANS.

Ever since the results, the BJP, which is the second largest party in the Lok Sabha, has been gripped with internal strife. Signs of it were evident well before the polls but the loss has only aggravated it.

The party's key strategist for the elections, Arun Jaitley, who quit as national general secretary recently and has been in the firing line, will not attend the crucial conference as he is holidaying abroad. Former external affairs

minister Yashwant Sinha, who resigned all his posts, will also be absent.

Jaitley has already resigned as general secretary in keeping with the one-man one-post principle, which insiders say is actually an attempt to thwart him being targeted during the national executive.

Many expect the meet to be a stormy affair with several leaders sure to demand that responsibility be fixed for the poll debacle.

"We need to reinvent ourselves as well especially if the party is to regain public confidence. And for that we have to chart out a clear roadmap," a senior party functionary told IANS on conditions of anonymity.

"There needs to be direction if we are to be a relevant political party."

The BJP came down crashing to 116 seats in the Lok Sabha elections from 138 in 2004, while it was actually hoping to improve on its performance.

Both Sinha and Jaswant Singh have already spoken of the need to fix blame for the election results as well as pressing for re-constitution of the party.

Army offensive threatens Pakistan itself

Says Imran Khan

AFP, Washington

Pakistani opposition figure and cricket legend Imran Khan said Thursday an army offensive was threatening the country itself and urged the United States to wind down its involvement in Afghanistan.

On a visit to Washington, Khan said the Pakistani military faced a crisis of morale, estimating that 25 percent of the troops involved in the push in the troubled northwest belonged to the same Pashtun ethnicity as local people.

"Pakistan is at risk," Khan said at the Middle East Institute, a Washington think-tank. "How long will the government soldiers keep fighting their own people?"

Khan, who met US congressional leaders including Senator John Kerry, said that the

United States must begin to end its military campaign in neighbouring Afghanistan first launched after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

"The US must think of an exit strategy in Afghanistan. As long as there is chaos in Afghanistan, or there is fighting going on, there will be no peace in Pakistan's tribal area," Khan said.

Pakistani troops have waged a more than seven-week battle in northwestern areas after Taliban guerrillas advanced perilously close to the capital Islamabad.

Khan regretted that a campaign against thousands of guerrillas in the scenic Swat valley had displaced more than 2.5 million people.

"If ever the Taliban were discredited and the public was behind the military operation, it was during the Swat operation. But the anger against the army is much greater," Khan said.

UN steps up security for its staff across Pakistan

ANI, Islamabad

Worried by the recent terror strikes in Pakistan in which some of its officials were also killed, the United Nations (UN) has beefed up the security of its staff and offices across the country.

The UN has increased the security level to grade three, The News reports.

According to sources, the UN has asked the family members of foreign staff stationed in Pakistan to leave the country, and has directed the officials to refrain from venturing out without security.

Krishna talks regional situation with Bhutan
PTI, Thimpu

On his maiden foreign visit after taking over as External Affairs Minister, S M Krishna today held wide-ranging talks with Bhutanese King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck and other leaders, discussing bilateral ties and regional matters, including the security situation in Nepal.

Briefing reporters on issues that figured during the meetings, Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon said that besides talking about the ways of strengthening bilateral ties, the two sides also reviewed the situation in the region.

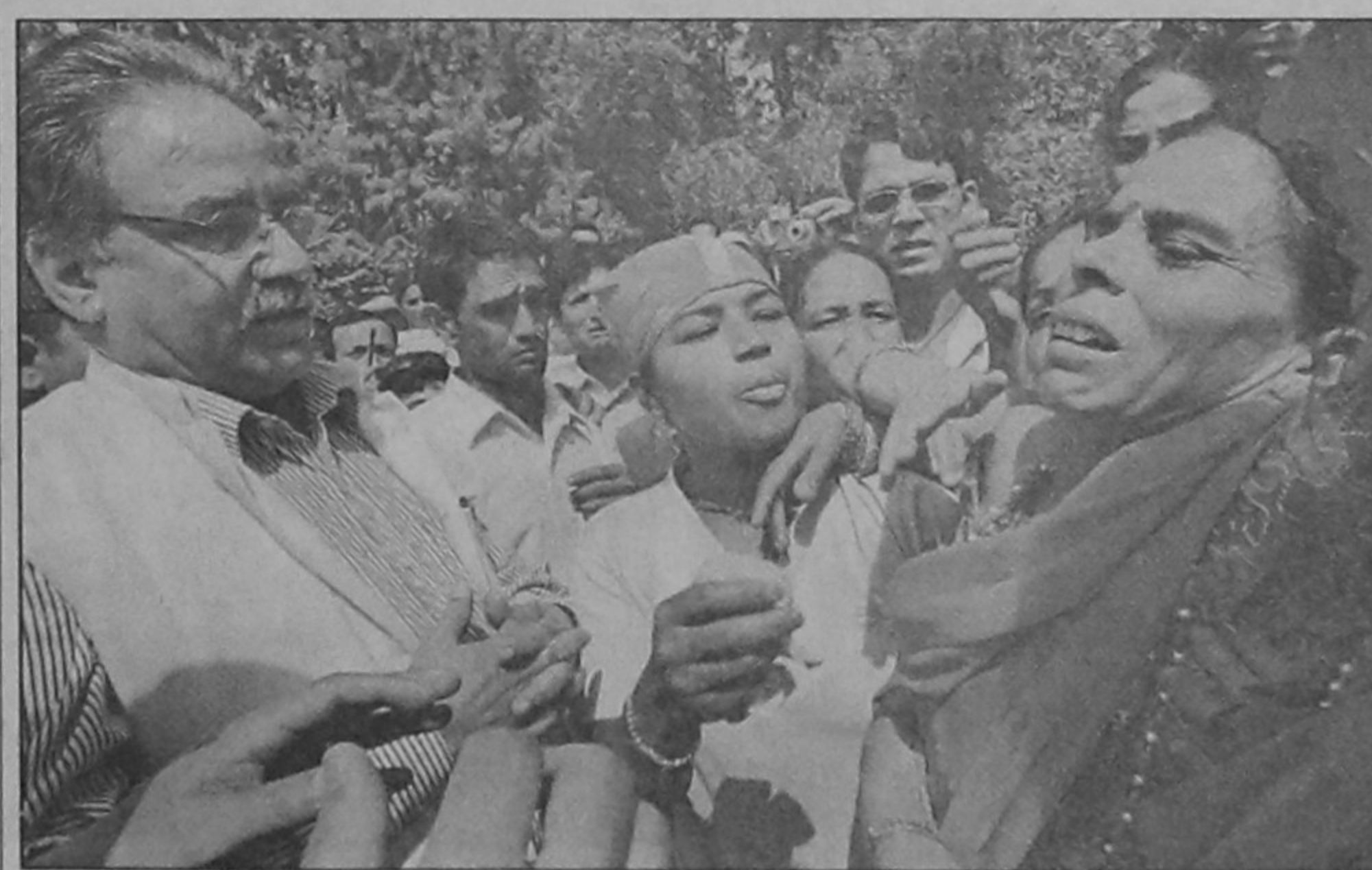


PHOTO: AFP
Former prime minister and Maoist leader Pushpa Kamal Dahal, also known as 'Prachanda', consoles Shanta Phuyal (R) at the funeral of her husband, Maoist cadre Rajendra Phuyal, in Kathmandu yesterday.

CPI-M politburo meets to discuss polls debacle

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

The Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) politburo met here Friday to discuss the Maoist violence in Lalgarh in West Bengal, problems in the party's Kerala unit and the debacle in the Lok Sabha elections.

The party's top leaders, including the chief ministers of CPI-M-ruled states, are participating in the meeting.

"It's an election review meeting," MK Pandey said. In the 15th Lok Sabha elections, the CPI-M put up one of its worst performances, winning just 16 seats compared to 43

in 2004 and 33 in 1999.

Asked if the Lalgarh issue would also figure in the discussions, Pandey said: "We have to discuss that part also."

The major concern of the CPI-M leadership is to find ways to deal with the Maoist violence in Lalgarh, which the party alleges, has the support of the Trinamool Congress.

Lalgarh in West Midnapore district of West Bengal has been on the boil since last November when a landmine exploded on the route of the convoy of Chief Minister Bhatnagarjee and then central ministers Ram Vilas Paswan and Jitin Prasad.



Rahul Gandhi turns 39

ANI, New Delhi

Congress General Secretary Rahul Gandhi, who was instrumental in the Congress' emergence as the single largest party in recently concluded Lok Sabha polls, turned 39 on Friday.

The Congress party has decided to celebrate Rahul Gandhi's birthday as 'Samrasta Divas' and hold the 'sabbhoj'.

Andhra Pradesh Congress Committee will also organise essay writing and elocution competitions in English on the occasion.

Born on June 19, 1970, he is a Member of Parliament from Amethi constituency in Uttar Pradesh.

He has been widely credited with Congress' big win in 2009 general elections. His tactics are game-changing: insisting on grassroots activism, building deep connections to rural India and trying to democratise the hierarchical Congress Party itself.

He turned down a cabinet post in the Manmohan Singh Government and is concentrating on strengthening the party at the grassroots.

NDA, UPA gear up for Jharkhand Rajya Sabha polls today

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Ranchi

The ruling United Progressive Alliance (UPA) and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) are both geared up for the election to two Rajya Sabha seats from Jharkhand Saturday, making all attempts to keep their flock together and seeking support of smaller parties to ensure their candidates win.



PHOTO: AFP
Maldivian President Mohammed Nasheed (R) shakes hands with Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama in Colombo yesterday. The Maldivian leader is on a two-day visit to the Sri Lanka.