

World pressure brought India to table: Gilani

Political, military top brass review offer

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, ANI, Islamabad

Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani said yesterday world pressure forced India to the negotiating table as the international community now realises the importance of resolving the lingering Kashmir dispute.

He was addressing a meeting of the Pakistan-administered Kashmir cabinet on the Kashmir Solidarity Day, Online news agency reported.

Gilani said Pakistan had always sought resolution of the Kashmir dispute peacefully through talks and desired that the Kashmiris are made part of the dialogue process.

Gilani's remarks came a day after it was made known in New Delhi that India sent a formal proposal to Pakistan for talks between their foreign secretaries and pledged to pursue the discussions with 'an open and positive mind'.

New Delhi made it clear that the talks will focus primarily on counter-terrorism,

but indicated 'that other issues that will contribute to creating an atmosphere of peace and stability between the two countries will also be raised,' a well-placed source said in New Delhi Thursday.

"Dates are being discussed for the meeting between the foreign secretaries," the source said, adding that it could happen later this month.

The latest Indian talks offer has been taken up by Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani and Army Chief General Ashfaq Parvez Kayani.

Sources privy to the meeting said Zardari and Kayani first held a one-on-one meeting, and joined by Gilani later.

Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi also joined them at a dinner hosted by the President.

Presidential spokesperson Farhatullah Babar refused to divulge much details, and only said: "We have issued a press release and it is enough."

Babar said that the recently concluded London conference on Afghanistan, the

rehabilitation and reconstruction work in South Waziristan and the current volatile situation in Karachi were also discussed.

After the receipt of the Indian proposal, Pakistan has sought a clarification about the agenda and a reply is awaited, he said. As soon as India responds to this step, further progress would take place, he was quoted as saying by APP.

Basit also said Pakistan sought a sustained and meaningful engagement with India, adding the two countries have a number of issues between them and terrorism was one of them.

At the same time, he said that terrorism alone could not be the topic of dialogue between the two countries. 'If the Indians think so, it would not be an appropriate approach to restart the engagement.'

Basit's remarks came a day after it was made known in New Delhi that India had sent a formal proposal to Pakistan for talks between their foreign secretaries and had pledged to pursue the discussions with 'an open and positive mind'.



Pakistani activists from Shabab-i-Milli torch an Indian flag during an anti-India protest in Multan yesterday to mark Kashmir Solidarity Day. Thousands of people rallied across Pakistan on Friday to denounce Indian rule in Kashmir, the disputed Muslim-majority Himalayan state divided between the nuclear-armed rivals.



Muslim Shia pilgrims gather outside the Imam Abbas shrine in the Iraqi holy city of Karbala, 110km south of Baghdad, to mark the Shia mourning day of Arbaeen on Thursday. Arbaeen marks 40 days after the Ashura anniversary commemorating the slaying of one of Shia Islam's most revered figures, Imam Hussein (RA), who was slaughtered by the armies of the Sunni caliph Yazid in 680 AD.

Brown worst offender in MPs' expenses scam

4 UK lawmakers charged

ANI, AP, London

Britain's chief prosecutor says four lawmakers will face criminal charges in the country's expense claims scandal.

Keir Starmer, the director of public prosecution, said Friday that three members of the House of Commons and one member of the House of Lords had been charged with offences including false accounting.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown has been exposed as the worst cabinet offender in the MPs' expenses scandal, with 21,189.53 pounds claimed from taxpayers cash as cleaning costs.

Brown has been ordered to repay 12,888.03 pounds, which accounts for more than half the 24,643.17 pounds total demanded from 12 Cabinet ministers.

In all, 392 serving and ex-MPs have been told to payback 1.12 million pounds in dodgy claims.

Apart from Brown, the "Dodgy Dozen" ministers, out of 23 in Labour's Cabinet, are: Business Secretary Peter Mandelson, Chancellor Alistair Darling, Foreign Secretary David Miliband, Justice Secretary Jack Straw.

Communities and Local Government Minister John Denham, Children, Schools and Families Secretary Ed Balls and his wife, Work and Pensions Secretary Yvette Cooper.

Protestants accept deal to save N Ireland govt

AP, Hillsborough

The prime ministers of Britain and Ireland unveiled a breakthrough agreement yesterday that saves Northern Ireland's Catholic-Protestant unity government.

Both sides' negotiators gathered at Hillsborough Castle near Belfast to meet Gordon Brown of Britain and Brian Cowen of Ireland, who last week launched a personal mission to prevent the collapse of power-sharing, the central achievement of Northern Ireland's 1998 peace accord.

Brown said the agreement was possible because of "a new spirit of mutual cooperation and respect."

Cowen, joining him at a press conference with local Catholic and Protestant leaders, called the painstakingly negotiated deal "an essential step for peace, stability and security in Northern Ireland."

The breakthrough came at midnight follow-

ing 10 days of round-the-clock talks, when the key Protestant party, the Democratic Unionists, announced their lawmakers' unanimous backing for the still-confidential deal on how Northern Ireland will take control of its justice system from Britain. The major Irish Catholic party, Sinn Fein, had declared its support earlier.

Democratic Unionist leader Peter Robinson, who leads the often-troubled government coalition formed in 2007, defended the marathon nature of the negotiations.

"Over recent weeks there may have been great frustration out in the community," Robinson said. "But there would have been even greater frustration if we did a deal that collapsed. So it is far better that we spend the extra time and we get it right."

Robinson said his party's lawmakers "have unanimously supported the way forward. ... This is a sound deal and one that I can recommend."

10 Americans charged with Haiti child abductions

AFP, Port-au-Prince

Ten US missionaries faced a long wait behind bars after being charged with child abduction and conspiracy for trying to smuggle 33 children out of quake-hit Haiti.

In a case that has overshadowed the massive international relief effort, the Americans were formally charged Thursday with "kidnapping minors and criminal association," according to their lawyer Edwin Coq.

The five men and five women -- who had arrived at the court in confident mood with their luggage packed -- bowed their heads in prayer in the back of a jeep as they were returned to police detention.

Detained a week ago, they now face a long pre-trial detention, as Haitian law gives the prosecution three months to draw up its case.

If convicted, they could face nine years in prison for child kidnapping and further jail time for conspiracy.

They have denied ill intent, saying they were only trying to help children abandoned after the devastating January 12 quake that killed an estimated 212,000 people and left at least a million homeless.

Justice Minister Paul Denis told AFP he saw "no reason" why the group from the Idaho-based Baptist charity New Life Children's Refuge should be sent to the United States for trial.

"It is Haitian law that has been violated," he said. "It is up to Haitian authorities to hear and judge the case."

As they were escorted into the jeep, some tried to cover their faces with a black jacket. Haitian journalists whipped it off and one threw a stone before being stopped by police.

The case has sparked outrage in impoverished Haiti where child-trafficking was already rife before the 7.0-magnitude quake struck.

The US missionaries were held as they attempted to cross into the Dominican Republic with a busload of 33 children aged from two months to 12 years.

It has emerged many of the children have living parents or relatives, some of whom may have personally handed them over for a better life.

The quake left much of the capital Port-au-Prince and surrounding area in rubble in what Prime Minister Jean-Max Bellerive has described as "a disaster on a planetary scale."

Constructions banned around Agra monuments

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Agra

With small monuments in the city of the Taj almost dwarfed by encroachments, all new constructions have been banned around them within a radius of 300 metres.

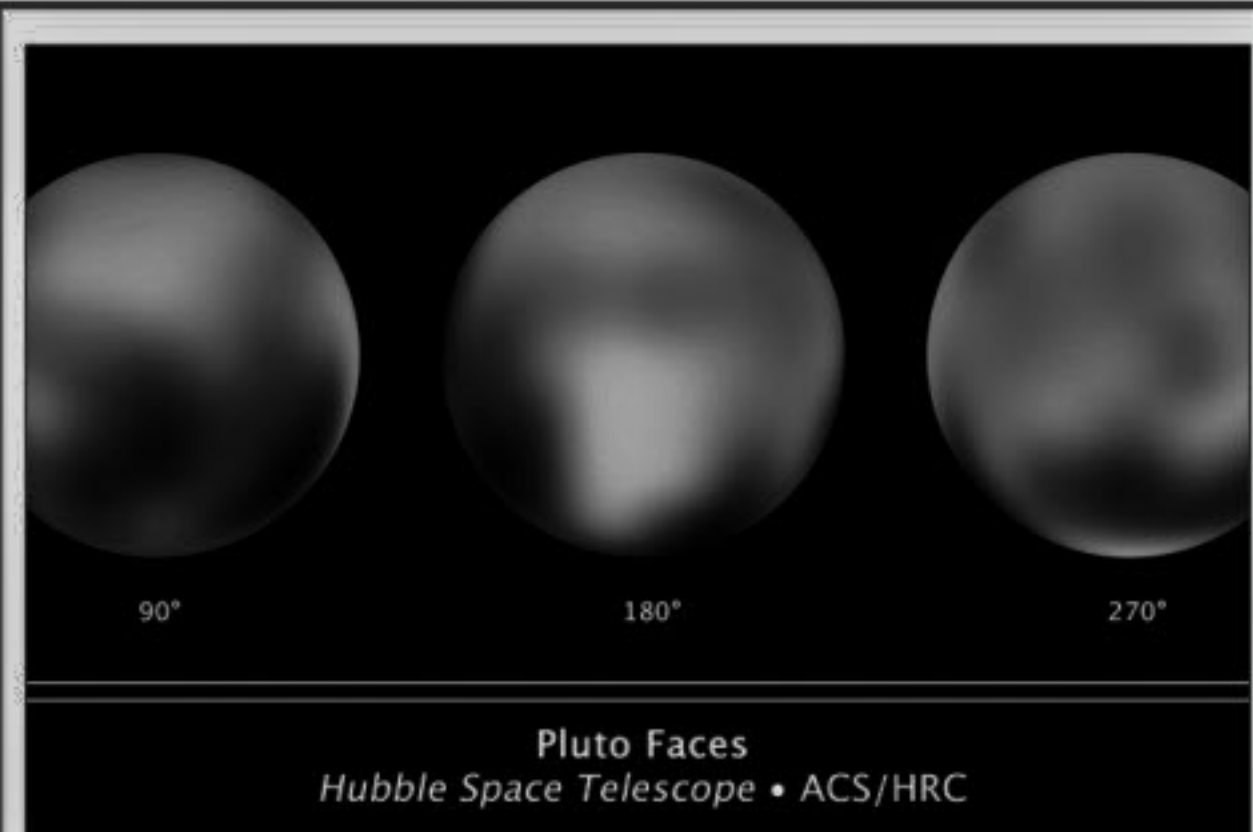
The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) order follows a gazette notification of Jan 23 and fears that rapid urbanization is threatening to wipe out valuable chunks of history, officials here said.

Under the modified rules, the power of the local ASI office to issue no objection certificates (NOCs) has been withdrawn.

"We do not know what is to be done with encroachments and structures already in existence. But in future no constructions would be permitted within the regulated zones," Superintending archaeologist AR Siddiqui told IANS.

In recent years, many of the lesser known monuments in Agra have either disappeared or have been dwarfed by illegal structures.

"Most smaller protected monuments in Agra -- there are scores of them -- have been virtually overwhelmed by new structures which threaten their existence. These include Delhi Gate, Etmauddaula, Sikandra, Ram Bagh and dozens of others," Braj Mandal Heritage Conservation Society president Surendra Sharma told IANS.



This image obtained from Nasa on Thursday shows the newest images of Pluto taken by the Hubble Space Telescope. Pluto, the dwarf planet on the outer edge of our solar system, has a dramatically redder hue than it did just a few years ago, Nasa scientists said Thursday, after examining the photos.

Pluto changing colour

AP, Washington

Spurned Pluto is changing its looks, donning more rouge in its complexion and altering its iceball surface here and there.

Colour astronomers surprised. Newly released Hubble Space Telescope photos show the distant one-time planet demoted to "dwarf planet" status in 2006 is changing colour and its ice sheets are shifting.

The photos, released by Nasa Thursday, paint a Pluto that is significantly redder than it had been for the past several decades. To the layman, it has a yellow-orange hue, but astronomers say it has about 20 percent more red than it used to have.

The pictures show icy frozen nitrogen on Pluto's surface growing and shrinking, brightening in the north and darkening in the south. Astronomers say Pluto's surface is changing more than the surfaces of other bodies in the solar system. That's unexpected because a season lasts 120 years in some regions of Pluto.

"It's a little bit of a surprise to see these changes happening so big and so fast," said astronomer Marc Buie of the Southwest Research Institute in Boulder, Colorado. "This is unprecedented."

3 children die in Philippines machete attack

AFP, Manila

Three siblings aged between nine and 14 were killed in the Philippines by a machete-wielding suspect who also attempted to rape one of them, police said yesterday.

A 22-year-old male suspect was detained in connection with Thursday's attack near the town of Alaminos, southeast of Manila, said provincial police commander Senior Superintendent Manolito Labador.

US threatens to bypass EU on terror fight

AFP, Brussels

The United States has warned that it may stop working with EU institutions on terrorist data exchange if the European parliament next week blocks a bilateral deal on the issue.

"If the European parliament overturns the agreement," which allows Washington to access bank data from European citizens, "I am unsure whether Washington agencies would again decide to address this issue at EU level," US ambassador to the EU William Kennard warned in a letter seen by AFP.

The letter was sent to EU parliament president Jerzy Buzek and the heads of the main political groups in the chamber.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has also called Buzek and EU foreign affair chief Catherine Ashton to voice Washington's concern over the issue.

The parliament could reject the interim EU-US deal at a plenary session next week, after the body's civil rights committee on Thursday pronounced against it.



South Africa's first black president Nelson Mandela (1st row L) flanked by his former wife Winnie Madikizela-Mandela celebrates the 20th anniversary of his release from prison with a private dinner party at his home with family, friends and comrades of the liberation struggle on Thursday in Johannesburg.



Local residents walk through a flooded street in the Arenal neighbourhood of Mexico City on Thursday. Heavy rains swelled the canal of "Bordo Xochiaca" causing the wall to collapse and flood the city area.

Jackson doctor negotiating surrender: Lawyer

AFP, Los Angeles

Michael Jackson's doctor was set to surrender to authorities yesterday to face criminal charges filed against him arising from the pop star's death, his lawyer said.

"Dr Conrad Murray has agreed to surrender himself tomorrow," lawyer Ed Chernoff said in a statement here Thursday. "The particulars of Dr Murray's surrender have not yet been arranged."

The TMZ.com entertainment website -- which broke the news of Jackson's death in June last year -- reported that Murray would be arraigned and charged with involuntary manslaughter on Friday.

The website, citing law enforcement sources, said Murray would turn himself into the Los Angeles Police Department before being taken to appear in court at 1:30 pm (2130 GMT) local time.

Chernoff said he had been negotiating the procedure for Murray's detention in an effort to avoid a high-profile arrest of the doctor.

"An arrest of Dr Murray would be a waste of money, time and resources. We've always made it clear: You tell us where; we'll be there," Chernoff said. "I'm sure something can be arranged."

Reports of Murray's looming manslaughter case follow a painstaking seven-month investigation by police.

UN chief can't judge if Gaza probes are 'credible'

AP, United Nations

A report from UN secretary-general Ban Ki-moon indicates he was uncertain whether UN demands were met for "credible" investigations into allegations that Israel or the Palestinians deliberately targeted civilians during last year's Gaza conflict.

The highly anticipated report released Thursday night to the 192-nation General Assembly cautioned that such investigations must be conducted "wherever there are credible allegations of human rights abuses."

Israel says it has launched investigations into 150 separate incidents, including 36 criminal probes so far, and gathered evidence from almost 100 Palestinians who had complaints or were witnesses.

The Palestinians only created a commission to carry out an investigation in late January, despite a General Assembly resolution in November urging both sides to conduct investigations by Friday.

In a short preface to his 72-page report, nearly all of which is responses by Israel and the Palestinians, Ban concluded he could not ultimately determine yet whether Israel and the Palestinians had met the General Assembly's demands to carry out credible, independent investigations into their own actions.

He said he hoped the assembly's resolution will, in fact, result in probes "that are independent, credible and in conformity with international standards."

But, he added that "no determination can be made on the implementation of the resolution by the parties concerned."

An expert UN panel found in September that both Israel and Palestinian militants committed war crimes during last winter's fighting, in which 13 Israelis and almost 1,400 Palestinians were killed, including many civilians.

The panel's 575-page investigative report, requested by the Geneva-based UN Human Rights Council, was overseen by a respected South African jurist, Richard Goldstone.