

Indo-Pak officials discuss dates, agenda for talks

US welcomes move

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, ANI, New Delhi/Islamabad/Washington

India and Pakistan Friday discussed the dates for talks between their foreign secretaries and the scope of their dialogue that could include other issues besides terrorism.

Pakistan High Commissioner to India Shahid Malik met the Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao and discussed the probable dates and also the agenda for the proposed bilateral talks between the two countries.

He mentioned this after the meeting at New Delhi on Friday.

He also confirmed that terrorism would also be one of the main agendas of the talks.

"The discussions between Pakistan High Commissioner Shahid Malik and Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao lasted for 45 min-

utes," said external affairs ministry spokesperson Vishnu Prakash in New Delhi.

"The talks were positive and constructive, both sides discussed issues relevant to the forthcoming foreign secretary level talks," Prakash told reporters.

"The Pakistani side is expected to get back to us about a mutually convenient date. They will revert soon," he said.

The talks could be broad-based and include terrorism, said sources.

India's offer of foreign secretary-level talks has predictably raised hopes in Islamabad about a revival of the composite dialogue, with its top leadership discussing the Indian proposal. The US, too, welcomed the move, but a cautious New Delhi feels that it is premature to judge the outcome of the talks.

Rao had rang up her Pakistani counterpart Manmohan Singh ten days ago to invite him to come to New Delhi for talks,

said sources.

This will be the first meeting between the two foreign secretaries since they met in New York on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September last year.

Rao and Malik also discussed the scope of dialogue with India making it clear it will hold 'discussions with an open and positive mind.' The Pakistani side is pitching to include the issue of Kashmir in the forthcoming talks, but New Delhi wants to focus the discussions on terror at this stage.

India had frozen the composite dialogue in the wake of the attacks that it blamed on elements operating from Pakistan.

It's the first step to test the waters, the sources said. Any decision on resuming the composite dialogue will be taken by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh himself, the sources added.



Pakistani political party leaders and supporters of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) carry coffins during a funeral for their workers who were killed in the previous day's twin bomb blasts in Karachi yesterday.



A police officer patrols the west front of the US capital while much of the Washington metropolitan area remains under a National Weather Service blizzard warning since Saturday night with accumulations of 20 to 30 inches snow in Washington DC.

Powerful blizzard shuts down US capital

AFP, Washington

An "extremely dangerous" blizzard expected to dump record amounts of snow pounded the eastern United States Saturday, closing down the US capital and threatening to trap millions indoors for days.

The National Weather Service (NWS) put the Washington-Baltimore metropolitan area under a rare 24-hour blizzard warning starting at 10:00 pm Friday (0300 GMT Saturday).

The storm, dubbed "Snowpocalypse" and "Snowmageddon" by many locals, stretched from Indiana to Pennsylvania and into parts of New York and North Carolina, creating treacherous travel conditions, shutting Washington area airports and leading several states to declare emergencies.

The storm "will significantly impact most of the region through Saturday," the NWS said.

The inclement weather was deemed responsible for at least two fatalities -- a father and son who were hit by a tractor-trailer on a

road in Virginia when they stopped to help a stranded motorist, local media reported.

Forecasters said the Washington region would be hardest-hit, describing overnight Friday to Saturday travel conditions in the area as "hazardous and life-threatening."

They issued a blunt warning: help area emergency workers "by staying off the road."

The NWS forecast up to 30 inches (76 centimetres) of snow in the capital region, which would shatter Washington's 88-year-old record snowfall of 28 inches, in the "Great Knickerbocker Storm."

That blizzard, which slammed the region in January 1922, got its name from the collapse of the Knickerbocker Theatre in Washington, killing nearly 100 people.

The US capital rarely gets so much snow: according to NWS data, since 1870 the Washington area has had more than a foot (30.5 cm) of snow only 13 times -- including just six weeks ago, when a monster December storm dumped 16 inches (41 cm) on Washington.

Thousands pack funerals for Pak bomb victims

AP, Karachi

Beating their chests with hands, thousands of minority Shia Muslims attended a mass funeral Saturday for those killed in a pair of bombings in Pakistan's largest city.

At least 31 people died and 170 others were wounded in Karachi on Friday when suspected Sunni militants targeted a bus carrying Shia worshippers and then attacked a major hospital treating victims of the first bomb, said government spokesman Jamil Soomro.

Karachi has a history of religious violence between Shia and Sunni Muslims, and the city has been tense in recent weeks due to clashes between rival political parties that have left dozens dead.

Paramilitary spokesman Maj. Aurang Zeb said security forces were on maximum alert at the funeral in the Malir area of the southern port city. Many businesses were observing a strike over the attacks.

Witnesses said about 7,000 mourners attended the funeral.

Although no group claimed responsibility, Pakistan is home to Sunni extremist groups with a history of attacking Shias.

In late December, 44 people died when a bomb ripped through a Shia procession in the city to mark the anniversary of the death of revered Shia figure Imam Hussein.

Lanka govt extends emergency rule

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka faced criticism yesterday for extending a state of emergency giving sweeping powers to security forces to detain suspects ahead of parliamentary elections due by April.

A private poll-monitoring body, the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections, said continuation of emergency rule could undermine the vote slated to be held after last month's presidential election, won by Mahinda Rajapakse.

"The use of emergency laws could seriously affect the campaign and there is no guarantee that the government will not use it against political opponents," the group's executive director, Rohana Hettiarachchi, said.

On Friday, Sri Lanka's parliament voted heavily in favour of extending the state of emergency for one month despite international calls to revert to normal laws. The extension must be approved by parliament every month.

"The emergency is needed because enemies of the state are trying to regroup and unite," Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickrematunge told parliament. Emergency rule allows suspects to

be kept in custody for prolonged periods without trial.

Official sources said the national assembly could be dissolved next week, two months before its six-year term ends in mid-April, and elections scheduled for early April.

The New York-based Human Rights Watch has been pressing for the emergency laws to be lifted and a halt to violence targeting opponents of the government.

"We fear that this (violence targeting the opposition) is just the beginning of a campaign to get rid of critical voices before the parliamentary elections," HRW director Brad Adams said in a statement last week.

"Sri Lanka's friends should tell the government that any crackdown on civil society will harm future relations." Dozens of opposition workers have been held under emergency laws.

Wickrematunge said although troops crushed separatist Tamil guerrillas last year, rebel remnants were trying to make a comeback, a claim rejected by the opposition, which says the government is using the emergency to suppress dissent.

Saarc ministers' meet postponed at Nepal's request

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Kathmandu

While the ground-breaking meeting of the home ministers of Saarc to be held in Pakistan has been postponed at Nepal's request, the Himalayan republic has, however, sent its home minister to China as per schedule.

Home Minister Bhim Rawal Saturday led an eight-member delegation on an official visit to China. The visit, to span both Beijing and Lhasa, will last for a week.

Rawal, accompanied by the chiefs of Nepal Police, Armed Police and state intelligence agency National Investigation Department, is expected to discuss security cooperation along the Sino-Nepal border areas with his Chinese counterpart.

China has reportedly expressed a desire to be allowed to deploy air marshals on flights by Chinese airlines from Kathmandu to Lhasa and other Chinese cities.

The meeting of the home ministers of eight South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation countries, scheduled in Islamabad Feb 26-27, was postponed after Nepal said it would be inconvenient for Rawal.

The Islamabad meet, coming just two months before the Saarc summit in Bhutan's capital Thimpu, was to have been an ice-breaking event.

Indian Home Minister P Chidambaram would have been the first top Indian official to visit Pakistan after the 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai, which are thought to have been plotted in Pakistan.

Taliban blow up girls' school in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar



Indian Congress party activists burn an effigy of Hindu right-wing hardliner and Shiv Sena party chief Bal Thackeray and Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) chief Raj Thackeray during a demonstration in Amritsar yesterday.

Taliban militants blew up a girls' school yesterday in northwest Pakistan, the latest in a wave of attacks by Islamist extremists targeting educational institutions, a minister said.

No one was hurt in the attack, which took place in the village of Huwaid, eight kilometres north of the town of Bannu.

"The explosive material was planted at three different places in the girls' primary school, which completely destroyed five out of seven rooms of the building," provincial education minister Sardar Hussain Babak said.

He blamed the attack on Taliban, saying they were "opposed to girls' education."

Talks with Taliban must involve women: UN

AFP, Geneva

Any peace negotiations with the Taliban in Afghanistan must involve women, a United Nations committee on women's rights warned on Friday following talks in Geneva.

"Any agreement reached with the Taliban in Afghanistan should include a clear commitment to respect and protect women's rights", the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women said in a statement.

The 23-member UN experts body urged the Afghan government and its international allies "to ensure women representatives are included

in peace, development dialogues and negotiations with the Taliban."

Committee members also expressed their "deep concern at the exclusion of Afghan women from the high level decision-making" at the international London conference on Afghanistan late last month.

Women's rights advocates have voiced alarm as President Hamid Karzai aims plans to mediate with the Islamist insurgents who have waged war since being forced from power in 2001.

The 1996-2001 Taliban regime barred Afghan women from all public activities, including school. They could

only leave home accompanied by a male relative and were routinely beaten in public and even stoned to death for perceived breaches of Islamic law.

Although under the Afghan constitution women are equal to men, women's groups say they remain marginalised and underprivileged, subject to violence and discrimination in the name of Afghan tradition.

As they fight to see their constitutional rights enforced in daily life, some are voicing concerns that Karzai may be forced to compromise on women's rights in return for cooperation from Taliban leaders.

Clinton apologises for slow Haiti aid effort

AFP, Port-au-Prince

Former US president Bill Clinton pledged Friday to try to get aid flowing here as he was met by angry Haitians protesting the slow arrival of help since last month's quake.

Clinton said he was sorry that the aid efforts had been so slow, adding he also wanted to understand why more than three weeks after the January 12 quake supplies were still not getting through to desperate Haitians.

"I'm sorry it's taken this long," Clinton said, adding he and other relief workers were working hard to ease the suffering.

"I'm trying to get to what the bottlenecks are, part of it is just shipping the volume of food in here that is necessary," Clinton told reporters as he visited a clinic in the ruined capital of Port-au-Prince.

But the former president rejected suggestions he had in effect become governor of this small Caribbean nation.

"What I don't want to be is the governor of Haiti. I want to build the capacity of the country to chart its own course. They can trust me not to be a neocolonialist, I'm too old."

Clinton also visited the government's de facto headquarters in a police building in the city, where about 200 people demonstrated outside to protest the lack of shelter.

Congress leaders talk price rise issue

ANI, New Delhi

The Congress Working Committee (CWC) on Friday discussed the spiralling price rise at a meeting, after the Congress President Sonia Gandhi declared it a matter of 'high concern'.

Gandhi presided over the meeting, which was attended by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Finance Minister Pranab Mukherjee, Defence Minister AK Antony, Health Minister Ghulam Nabi Azad and party general secretaries.

This was the first meeting in the New Year, which was aimed at dealing with the issue of food inflation.

The meeting was deemed significant as it is being held a day before a Chief Ministers conference convened by Dr

Singh. The meeting was also being held just three weeks before the presentation of the General Budget.

Congress party has faced flak from various opposition parties over the rising prices of essential commodities.

The wholesale price index rose 7.3 percent in December from a year earlier, its highest since November 2008, and accelerated from a 4.8 percent gain in November.

The rise was driven by near 20 percent jump in food prices, which rose on weak monsoon rains and flooding in parts of the country, but inflation in manufacturing products picked up to 5.2 percent from four percent in November, a sign that inflationary pressures were spreading to other sectors of the economy.

Sylhet grassroots see Tarique adoration

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opportunity to address the meeting. But earlier it was declared that the grassroots leaders would exchange views with the intellectuals.

A documentary over Tarique's role in the union representative conferences held in 2005 was screened at the programme.

But surprisingly, neither the organisers nor the invited guests placed before audiences the recommendations made in those conferences.

Tarique, now in London, initiated such ground-level conference when the party was in power.

Talking to The Daily Star, Syed Rezaul Karim, joint secretary of Golapganj upazila BNP, said the programme did not fulfil their main target but still they considered the meeting an opportunity to boost the party spirit.

BNP Standing Committee Member Brig Gen (ret'd) ASM Hannan Shah attended the discussion as chief guest with Prof Kamal Ahmed Chowdhury of Shahjalal University of Science and Technology (SUST) in the chair.

Hundreds of party leaders, workers and supporters attended the programme at Saifur Rahman Auditorium in the town.

Hannan Shah said BNP had started its meetings with grassroots from Sylhet with the spirit of union representative conference. The party would arrange the same programme at least in nine more venues across the country, he added.

Prof Mahubul Iqbal and Prof Rashed Hasnat of Sylhet Agriculture University, Dr Sajedul Karim of SUST, Dr Niaz Ahmed Chowdhury of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University, Dr Shamimur Rahman of Bogra Medical College, Prof Mahubul Ahmed, former principal MC College, Lt Col (ret'd) Ali Ahmed, among others, took part in the discussion.

Former lawmaker and BNP Organising Secretary M Ilyas Ali, also coordinator of the programme, gave welcome speech.

The Daily Ittefaq reporter Mushfiqul Fazal Ansari, who was the deputy press secretary to former prime minister Khaleda Zia, conducted the meeting.

Huge number of central leaders including former lawmakers, chairperson's adviser, vice presidents, joint secretary generals, organising secretar-

ies, leaders of front and associate bodies including Juba Dal and Chhatra Dal attended the meeting.

Prof Kamal Ahmed Chowdhury said each and every case filed against Tarique would turn into ornaments for him, as all of them are false and baseless.

Prof Moeen Uddin rocked the backbone of the nation by hitting Tarique's spinal cord.

Dr Niaz Ahmed Chowdhury in his speech urged the BNP leadership to find out the mistakes the party made earlier and asked to take actions accordingly.

Dr Shamimur Rahman said Tarique wanted to establish a participatory democracy in the country. He said conspiracy was going on to defame Tarique by arranging some people as state witnesses, which have to be resisted by BNP men.

Jamal appointed new Pak Taliban chief

ANI, New York

Even as the US and Pakistani governments are uncertain over death of the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) Hakeemullah Mehsud, reports indicate that the banned extremist organisation has appointed its new commander.

According to The New York Times, Maulvi Noor Jamal, a native of the restive Orakzai region, has assumed charge as an acting leader of the TTP.

It is worth mentioning here that Orakzai is one of the most strategically situated parts of the ungoverned tribal areas because of its proximity to more settled and peaceful parts of the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and its capital, Peshawar.

Jamal was recently seen officiating the flogging of a teenage boy and two men in a video, aired by a private television channel.

Reeling from

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"The on-duty doctor Friday night said that my wife and son needed to do a CT Scan. It needs Tk 4,000 at Dhaka Medical College Hospital. But I don't have money to do that."

He was hovering around the DMCH administration area hoping to arrange for the CT Scans without payment as he heard it could be done for free at the DMCH.

"I couldn't even see the grave of my daughter at the Shia Majar Graveyard as I was busy here," a weeping Monjur told this correspondent.

Sumi's mother Hasina regained consciousness yesterday and asked for her daughter, as she didn't know that her daughter was dead. She tried to remember the day's incident.

"Sumi was walking with me holding my hand but suddenly she ran to cross the road and I also ran after him and then a bus appeared. I can't remember anymore," she said.

Sumi's uncle Mafiz Mia told The Daily Star, "Sumi was supposed to be admitted into the school this month but her rickshaw puller father could not manage the money for admission and school dress."

Meanwhile, bus driver Shamsur Rahman responsible for Hamim's death was sent to jail yesterday after one-day remand.

Follow students, locals, relatives and teachers of Hamim, a student of Wills Little Flower School, will form a human chain today in front of the school at Kakrail demanding punishment to the driver and seeking government's steps for safe road.