



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Border Security Force (BSF) personnel escort Pakistani Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir (C) as he leaves India at the India-Pakistan Wagah Border Post yesterday. India and Pakistan's first official talks since the 2008 Mumbai attacks moved relations out of the diplomatic deep freeze, but left both sides at loggerheads on how to take the dialogue forward.

Greater trust needed for composite dialogue

Says Indian FM

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

Describing the foreign secretary-level talks as "an encouraging step," External Affairs Minister SM Krishna yesterday told parliament that the future of bilateral dialogue with Pakistan will depend on Islamabad's response to India's "core concerns on terrorism" which remains undiluted. "On Pakistan's view that the composite dialogue between the two countries should be restored, we responded that the resumption of such a process would have to await the restoration of greater trust and confidence," Krishna told the Lok Sabha.

He was making a statement in parliament on talks between the foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan here Thursday.

The talks "represent an encouraging step towards restoring dialogue and better communication between the two governments," Krishna said.

"The two foreign secretaries have agreed to remain in touch and continue this endeavour," he added.

Stressing that India has not diluted its position on terrorism, Krishna said: "India's engagement with Pakistan will be predicated, as it has been since the Mumbai terrorist attack, on the response of Pakistan to our core concerns on terrorism."

"However, we do not dilute our position, or our resolve to defeat terrorism, as our prime minister has said, by talking to any country. Communication and engagement represent the best way forward," he added.

In their first formal talks since the Mumbai terror attack here, the two countries Thursday discussed a host of issues, including terrorism and Kashmir, but the stalemate persisted. Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao gave her Pakistani counterpart Salman Bashir three fresh dossiers linking elements in that country to various terror attacks in India.

She also made it clear that the time was 'not yet ripe' for resuming composite dialogue till a climate of trust was created over India's "core concern" over terror.

Don't blame us for water woes, India tells Pakistan

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

Rejecting "negative propaganda" over the Indus waters row, India has made it clear that Pakistan's water woes arise from its internal domestic problems and called for adherence to the 1960 Indus Water Treaty, informed sources say. Pakistan raised the issue of the alleged denial of Indus waters to it during the foreign secretary-level talks with India Thursday. But the Indian side stressed that the interests of the two countries were best served by sticking to the letter and spirit of the water treaty.

India also rejected Pakistan's accusation that New Delhi was violating the treaty, government sources said Friday.

They have given us no evidence to buttress the charge, an official source said.

India's stand is that Pakistan's problems arise due to inter-provincial rivalry in that country.

Sindh and Baluchistan have accused Pakistan's western province of Punjab of denying them Indus water. There are also technical problems relating to lack of effective watershed management. Over the years, per capita availability of water in Pakistan has gone down drastically due to a host of factors.

After talks with his Indian counterpart Nirupama Rao Thursday, Pakistani Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir handed over a brief paper on the water row to India.

Speaking to reporters later, he struck a conciliatory note saying it was "important to abide by the provisions of the treaty."

Rao made it clear that the Indus treaty had been "a very successful and useful mechanism" to resolve water-related disputes.

NEWS ANALYSIS

India, Pakistan break the ice, but chill remains

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan's first official talks since the 2008 Mumbai attacks moved relations out of the diplomatic deep freeze, but left both sides at loggerheads on how to take the dialogue forward.

Expectations had been low even before Indian Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao sat down with her Pakistani counterpart Salman Bashir on Thursday, and their subsequent briefings made it clear that there had been little attempt to address any substantive issues.

The Indian side, aware that its offer of talks had been criticised in some quarters as a sign of weakness, stressed that the bulk of the meeting had consisted of pressing Islamabad to combat militancy.

Pakistan complained about India's "narrow focus" on terrorism and highlighted its attempt to bring the conversation around to other issues, including the long-running dispute over the divided region of Kashmir.

"New round, old story," was the front-page verdict of the Hindustan Times on the discussions that ended with vague promises to "remain in touch," despite Pakistan's desire for a return to a comprehensive peace dialogue.

Pakistani newspapers were even more dismissive and largely critical of India's refusal

to resume a full dialogue.

"Meaningless talks end in meaningless way," said the English-language The Nation.

Washington, which was widely seen as playing a key role in bringing the two sides back together, put a positive spin on the outcome, describing it as an "important step" towards normalisation.

"We certainly hope that both countries will build on this dialogue in the weeks and months ahead," State Department spokesman Philip Crowley said.

US encouragement is largely based on concerns that an unstable relationship with India will force Pakistan to divert resources from the fight with the Taliban on its border with Afghanistan.

Analysts also saw some cause for optimism, despite the absence of any framework for taking the talks forward.

"I think that under the circumstances, this is as positive an outcome as was possible. Though there was no breakthrough, there was no breakdown," said Indian analyst CU Bhaskar from the National Maritime Foundation think-tank.

While the discussions were little more than "statements of positions," they did at least have the merit of being made face-to-face, Bhaskar said.

24 dead in stampede at Mali mosque

AFP, Bamako

A stampede at a famed mosque in Mali's northwestern desert city of Timbuktu crushed at least 24 people to death and left many more injured, officials and witnesses said yesterday.

"Sixteen bodies" were taken to a Timbuktu hospital and there were "55 injured," a hospital source told AFP after the crush at the Djinguereber mosque, one of Mali's most recognisable buildings.

A police official said "at least eight other bodies have not been transported to the morgue" at the hospital and would be buried as soon as possible, according to Muslim tradition.

Thousands of pilgrims come to Timbuktu for the prophet's birthday and an official said the accident appeared to have happened because of a bottleneck caused by renovation work on the 14th-century mosque, made largely from mud.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan security officers and firemen inspect the debris from a blast in the Shar-e-Naw area in the heart of the capital Kabul yesterday that killed 17 people. A suicide bomber set off the huge explosion near an upmarket shopping and hotel complex early in the morning, and police shot dead two other would-be attackers, officials said.



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India to push for 33pc women in parliament

AFP, New Delhi

India's government plans to legislate to reserve one third of seats in parliament for women, a spokesman said yesterday.

The cabinet adopted the Women's Reservation Bill at a Thursday meeting, which will now be put before the lower and upper houses of parliament for consent, an official from Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's office said.

The proposal to reserve 33 percent of seats in parliament would radically boost women's membership in the lower house where they occupy 59 slots out of 545. There are just 21 women in the 250-seat upper house.

The bill, which would also apply to state assemblies, has been in the works for more than a decade, but the official said it could go to parliament after the budget was presented on Friday.

"It's likely that it might be tabled this session," he said.

The bill has been held up by opposition from lawmakers who demanded a portion of the women's quota be set aside for minorities and so-called backward classes -- groups which have traditionally been socially and economically disadvantaged.

'80pc Pak lawmakers have more than one wife'

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan Minister of State for Ports and Shipping Nabil Gabol has claimed that 80 percent of National Assembly (NA) members have more than one wife.

Gabol stunned the house by saying that most of the lawmakers had more than one wife while he was responding to former information minister Sherry Rehman's remarks that a man should not be allowed to enter into his second wedlock without the permission of his first wife.

"It should be left for Ulema to issue a decree whether anyone can have more than one wife or not," Gabol said in reply.

Interestingly, none of the MNA's (members of the National Assembly), present in the house during the discussion, rejected or confirmed Gabol's remarks.

Maulana Abdul Malik, who represents the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in the National Assembly, however, supported Gabol's stance on polygamy.

Reciting a verse from Quran, Malik said, "Faithful are allowed to wed twice, thrice or four times provided they can maintain justice between wives."

Militants blow up 16 Pak schools in Feb

AFP, Peshawar

Taliban-linked militants have blown up a school in northwest Pakistan, bringing to 16 the number of such attacks this month, officials said yesterday.

"Militants blew up 16 boys' and girls' schools in the tribal regions of Mohmand, Bajaur, Khyber and Dara Adamkhel during the current month," provincial education minister, Sardar Hussain Babak told AFP.

He blamed the attacks on Taliban and other extremist groups, including Lashkar-e-Islam, which has some links to Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

The latest government boys' high school to be attacked was blown up overnight in Mohmand tribal region, officials said.

"All 21 rooms in the school building were destroyed after bombs planted in seven different places went off," local administration official Roshan Khan told AFP.

Another official Maqsood Khan confirmed the incident and said no one was hurt in the attack, which he blamed on the Taliban.



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