

Nirupama to visit Pakistan for further talks: Krishna

External Affairs Minister SM Krishna yesterday said that Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao would soon visit Pakistan for further talks.

On the sidelines of a function here, Krishna said, "We have already taken the initiative. Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh is in good faith. Provided the backdrop of having talks at the level of foreign secretary."

"The foreign secretary of Pakistan came here, and then, perhaps it is time for the foreign secretary of India to go to Pakistan," he added.

Despite talks between the two neighbours during Pakistani Foreign Secretary Salman Bashir's visit to India, nothing fruitful came out and the two sides ended the interaction with a pledge to 'keep in touch', signalling that relations between the nuclear-armed rivals remain frosty.

Thai PM rejects ultimatum as demo reaches barracks where govt holed up

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's prime minister yesterday rejected an ultimatum by tens of thousands of red-shirted protesters to call snap elections as they descended on a military barracks where the government was holed up.

The demonstrators, loyal to ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra, said Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva would face mounting protests unless he gives in, prompting the military to boost troop numbers and ready evacuation plans.

Dressed in pro-Thaksin red, the peaceful protesters massed in front of the 11th infantry army barracks on Bangkok's northern outskirts to press their demand for Abhisit to dissolve parliament by 0500 GMT.

But in a nationally televised address from the barracks, where ministers and military top brass were gathered, he said "the coalition parties agree the demand cannot be met."

"Elections must be held under common rules and genuine calm. We have to listen to other people's voices, not just the protesters," the prime minister said.

The Red Shirts, many from poor and rural northern areas, are loyal to populist former

prime minister Thaksin, who was ousted in a coup in 2006 and is living abroad, mostly in Dubai, to avoid a jail term for corruption.

Last month Thailand's top court confiscated 1.4 billion dollars of the telecoms tycoon's wealth. He addressed the crowd from an undisclosed European location by video link late Sunday, urging his supporters to press on.

Abhisit left the army base by helicopter immediately after his televised announcement, saying he wanted to inspect the city traffic, snarled up by the moving rally.

At least 86,000 protesters had been gathered since Saturday at a downtown rally site, where soldiers and riot police have been deployed under a strict security law that allows authorities to ban gatherings and impose curfews.

In total, authorities said, a 50,000-strong security force was on hand across Bangkok and surrounding provinces.

Protest leader Veera Musikapong said they would slowly return to the main rally ground close to government offices in the city's historic quarter after Abhisit refused their demands, and leaders would meet to plan their next move.

Veera exchanged friendly words with a military official across the barracks' wall, as both sides sought to avoid confrontation.



Red-shirted supporters of deposed Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra wave flags and shout slogans during an anti-government protest outside a military barracks in Bangkok yesterday. Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva on Monday rejected an ultimatum by tens of thousands of protesters to dissolve parliament as they marched on the barracks sheltering the government.



Bhujana Samaj Party (BSP) leader and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati (C) waves to a crowd at a party anniversary rally in Lucknow yesterday. Thousands of supporters of the party and its leader, India's first Dalit women chief minister, celebrated the 25th anniversary of the party.

US official ran private spy network in Pakistan, Afghanistan

ANI, Washington

A US Defence Department official had set up a private network to help track and kill suspected militants in Afghanistan and Pakistan under the cover of a benign government information-gathering programme, military sources have revealed.

Michael D Furlong hired contractors from private security companies that employed former CIA and Special Forces operatives.

The News quoted military sources as saying that the contractors gathered intelligence on the whereabouts of suspected militants and the location of insurgent camps, and the information was then sent to military units and intelligence officials for possible lethal action in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

While it has been widely reported that the CIA and the military are attacking operatives of al-Qaeda and others through unmanned, remote-controlled drone strikes, some US officials grew concerned over Furlong's off-the-books spy operation.

The officials say they are not sure who condoned and supervised his work. It is illegal for the military to hire contractors to act as covert spies.

Sources say Furlong's secret network might have been improperly financed by diverting money from a program designed to merely gather information about the region.

Bombs kill 9 as Afghan cops foil suicide attack

AFP, Kabul

Roadside bomb blasts killed nine people in Afghanistan yesterday as the government said local security forces shot dead five would-be suicide bombers, thwarting a major coordinated attack.

Six people were killed in southern Kandahar province when their vehicle struck an improvised bomb, a device that Taliban-linked militants widely use in their attacks on military forces, authorities said.

Security forces found Pakistani identities cards and other documents on the victims' bodies linking them to insurgent groups, the Kandahar provincial government said in a statement.

Pakistanis provoke particular suspicion in Afghanistan, where many accuse the neighbouring country of harbouring links with the Taliban and say militants infiltrate the border, fanning the eight-year Afghan Taliban insurgency.

Similar bomb blasts killed three civilians in

the province of Ghazni, also in the south, the interior ministry said, blaming the attack on the Taliban.

Also on Monday, Afghan security forces shot dead five men wearing suicide vests and carrying guns who tried to storm government buildings and a bazaar in the east of the country, the interior ministry said in separate statement.

Militants in Afghanistan's long insurgency have increasingly mounted coordinated suicide bombings in their effort to destabilise the Western-backed government.

Afghan forces in turn are being trained by the West to effectively take on the militants, with a view to a withdrawal by US-led foreign forces.

The interior ministry said Monday's thwarted attack in Barmal, on the Pakistani border in Paktika province, appeared to be a coordinated attempt to hit several targets at once, along the lines of a massive assault that killed 35 people in the Taliban heartland of Kandahar on Saturday.

Suu Kyi party set date for registry decision

AFP, Bangkok

The Myanmar opposition party of Aung San Suu Kyi will decide in two weeks whether to re-register under new election laws that force their detained leader out of the party, a spokesman said Monday.

Under the laws enacted by the ruling junta last week, sparking global anger, Suu Kyi faces exclusion from her National League for Democracy (NLD) because registered parties will be dissolved if any member is a serving prisoner.

NLD spokesman Khin Maung Swe told AFP that opinions among senior party members were "not black or white" after meeting on Monday to discuss the legislation, which gives them 60 days from last Monday to register ahead of elections this year.

"The central executive committee members are going to decide on March 29 whether to register or not," Khin Maung Swe said.

Suu Kyi, who has been locked up in the military-ruled nation for 14 of the past 20 years, would be included in the committee vote and "will accept their decision", he added.

"The authorities know that we have to meet with Aung San Suu Kyi after they released the laws, so there is a hope to be able to meet her to reach a clear decision."

The new laws also officially annul the result of Myanmar's last elections in 1990, which the NLD won by a landslide but was never allowed by the junta to take power.

Elections promised by the regime this year will be the first since then and if the NLD does register, it will have to accept a controversial constitution approved in a 2008 referendum, which it has previously refused to recognise.

But Khin Maung Swe said the party would decide later whether to participate in the elections, which are expected in October or November although a date has not yet been set.

Suu Kyi called on Myanmar citizens on Thursday to respond to the "unjust" registration law, which was slammed by the international community, including the United States, which said it made a "mockery" of democracy.

Rajya Sabha revokes suspension of four SP MPs

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

The Rajya Sabha yesterday revoked the suspension of four Samajwadi Party (SP) members, amongst the seven MPs against whom action was taken for their unruly behaviour before the debate on the women's reservation bill last week.

Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pawan Kumar Bansal moved a motion recommending termination of action taken against Veerpal Singh Yadav, Nand Kishore Yadav, Amir Alam Khan and Kamal Akhtar after question hour in the Rajya Sabha.

The four SP MPs were suspended last week Tuesday along with Subhash Prasad Yadav of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), Ejaz Ali of the Janata Dal-United (JD-U) and Sabir Ali of the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) following protests against the bill reserving 33 percent seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislatures for women.

'No democracy' in Sri Lanka Says former chief justice

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's former chief justice slammed the arrest of ex-army chief and opposition leader Sarath Fonseka yesterday on the eve of his court martial, saying there was "no democracy" in the country.

Retired chief justice Sarath Silva criticised the treatment of Fonseka, who challenged President Mahinda Rajapakse at January elections, as hundreds of supporters of the ex-army boss demonstrated in Colombo.

"There is no democracy since there is no room for dissent," Silva told reporters. "There is no freedom of expression. The arrest and detention of General Sarath Fonseka is against the constitution."

He said that the government was not using civilian law as that "would give Fonseka recourse to the court system to seek redress."

Silva, who retired as the head of the Supreme Court last June, supported Fonseka's bid for the presidency after accusing Rajapakse of failing to uphold the constitution.

Fonseka and the president were allies in the crushing of Tamil Tiger rebels last May, which ended their 37-year separatist struggle that left up to 100,000 people dead according to a UN estimate.

Ahead of Fonseka's court martial, his Democratic National Alliance (DNA) party has said he will not cooperate with the closed-door proceedings at naval headquarters in the capital.

The demonstrations in Colombo were the latest in a string of protests against Fonseka's arrest and court martial. The military has accused Fonseka of engaging in politics while in uniform and violating military procurement laws.

His party says the court martial is aimed at stopping the 59-year-old from campaigning in parliamentary elections set for April 8.



Activists of Democratic National Alliance holds placards in Colombo yesterday calling the military detention of the former Army chief and the defeated presidential candidate General Sarath Fonseka illegal. Fonseka is to face two court martial hearings on March 16 and 17.

Indian govt backs off, avoids introducing Nuke Liability Bill

ANI, New Delhi

The expected face-off between the UPA government and the opposition over the former's proposed Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Bill has fizzled out with the UPA saying it will not table the Bill that provides for compensation in case of a nuclear accident for discussion today.

The BJP and the Left have already indicated opposition to the Bill that is key to operationalise the landmark Indo-US nuclear deal. Senior BJP leader N.K. Advani said the government must give reasons for not tabling the Bill for a discussion, when it already figures in the day's listed business.

The Bill pegs the maximum amount of liability in case of each nuclear accident at Rs 300 crore to be paid by the operator of the nuclear plant.

However, the draft bill also has provisions that would enable the government to either increase or decrease the amount of liability of any operator.

Scientists reveal how snakes 'see' at night

AFP, Paris

Scientists revealed Sunday for the first time how some snakes can detect the faint body heat exuded by a mouse a metre (three feet) away with enough precision and speed to hunt in the dark.

It has been known for decades that rattlesnakes, boas and pythons have so-called pit organs between the eye and the nostril that can sense even tiny amounts of infrared radiation -- heat -- in their surroundings. Among pit vipers, the western diamondback rattlesnake, native to northern Mexico and southwestern United States, is in a class of its own, its heat-seeking ability up to 10 times keener than any of its cousins.

Even with tiny patches covering its eyes, the snake has shown the ability to track and kill prey blindfolded.

But exactly how these reptiles detect and convert infrared signals into nerve impulses has remained a mystery, and the subject of sharp debate.

28 killed as bus falls into river in Rajasthan

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Jaipur

In one of Rajasthan's worst road accidents, 28 people were killed yesterday and 36 were injured when a bus fell into a river from a bridge in Sawai Madhopur district, police said.

The accident took place about 50 km from Sawai Madhopur when the bus, which was carrying about 64 students and staff of Mother India Teacher Training College, Jhalawar, was returning from Mathura and Vrindavan in Uttar Pradesh.

"The incident occurred at around 3.30 am when a bus of the teacher's training school fell over the bridge in the Morel river. Rescue operations are going on and we had recovered 26 bodies," Superintendent of Police Vikas Kumar told IANS on the phone.



Debris lies around a severed bus near Sawai Madhopur, 180km west of Jaipur yesterday. Twenty-eight teacher's training students died as the bus collided with another vehicle atop a bridge and then fell 60 feet onto a riverbed early in the morning.

Indian toddler killed in Australia cremated

PTI, Kotkapura

Hundreds of people from all walks of life yesterday joined the funeral procession of the three-year-old Gurshan Singh Channa, who was killed in Australia, as his mortal remains were consigned to flames.

The body, which was brought by the toddler's parents from Melbourne yesterday, was taken by the mourners from the parental house to Rambhag cremation ground after passing through the main streets of the town.

Apart from friends and relatives of the Channa family, locals, representatives of all major political parties, NGOs and senior officers of district administration were present to share the grief of his inconsolable parents -- father Harjit Singh Channa and mother Harpreet Kaur. After the prayers by a Sikh cleric, the pyre was lit by Harjit.

India, Pakistan must end confrontation

Says Musharraf

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

India and Pakistan must end their confrontation and "go for peace," former Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf has said.

"We must stop this confrontation between India and Pakistan... We must go for peace for the sake of the world, because the world considers us to be a nuclear flashpoint," Seattle times quoted him as saying at a press conference in the city Sunday.

Denying that Pakistan had supported terrorist activity in India, he accused it of 'hyper reactions' after the 26/11 Mumbai carnage that India blames on Pakistani terrorists.

Musharraf also accused India of supporting terrorism in Pakistan, including in Baluchistan province, where rebels have begun a secessionist movement.

Musharraf has been on an extended lecture tour of the US in Europe since stepping down in August 2008 after being threatened with impeachment for declaring an emergency Nov 3, 2007.

His visit to Seattle prompted more than 70 protesters to gather early Sunday evening outside the Westin Hotel in Bellevue where he spoke after the press conference.

One sign read "Dictator Not Welcome," while others read, "Stand for Peace" and "Mister Commando is on the Run."

"My biggest concern is that he was a dictator and now he is getting this welcome in America," Seattle Times quoted Agha Khan, a Microsoft software engineer at the protest, as saying.