

KASHMIR ISSUE

Obama rules out outside solution

PTI, Washington

Ruling out any solution from "outside" to the issue of Jammu and Kashmir, US President Barack Obama yesterday underlined that disputes between India and Pakistan can only be resolved by the two countries themselves.

Welcoming the Indo-Pak dialogue process, he said, "It is not the place of any nation, including the United States, to try to impose solutions from the outside."

"That said, nations must meet their responsibilities and all of us have a profound interest in a Pakistan that is stable, prosperous and democratic."

The US leader was responding to a question on the current state of Indo-Pak relations and the best way forward for the two countries to resolve their bilateral matters, including Jammu and Kashmir.

Obama told PTI that the US welcomed any dialogue and lessening of Indo-Pak tensions which would be good for South Asia and for the world.

"President (Asif Ali) Zardari's visit to India was encouraging. Increased trade and people-to-people contacts between Indians

and Pakistanis can lead to greater prosperity and understanding on both sides.

"Efforts in New Delhi and Islamabad to improve relations give hope for further progress, including a possible visit to Pakistan by Prime Minister (Manmohan) Singh," he said.

The US leader answered questions on the future of Afghanistan and India's role in it, as well as the US strategy in the Asia-Pacific region which is seen by some commentators as aimed at making India a counterweight to the growing military and economic muscle of China.

"India will be critical to Afghanistan's future," he said pointing out that it had also been critical to Afghanistan's progress to date.

The US President said India's generous contributions have helped India to train Afghan police, promote development and improve the lives of the Afghan people.

India was the first nation to forge a Strategic Partnership Agreement with Afghanistan, and India's civil service can be a model as Afghans strengthen their own governance and institutions, he said.

As a result of this spring's Nato Summit in



US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton meets with Egypt's head of the military council Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi at the Ministry of Defense in Cairo yesterday. Tantawi -- Egypt's interim ruler after Hosni Mubarak was ousted by a popular uprising -- yesterday said the military will not let "one group" dominate the country, referring to Muslim Brotherhood, just hours after Hillary urged him to support a transition to civilian rule. PHOTO: AFP

UK PM urges unity in coalition

AFP, London

British Prime Minister David Cameron yesterday urged the two parties in his coalition to unite "in the national interest", after a major rebellion by his lawmakers exposed a rift between the partners.

Writing in the Sunday Times, Conservative leader Cameron admitted that there were "profound areas of disagreement" between his party and its junior coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats.

His appeal for the two parties to work together despite their differences comes after 91 Conservative lawmakers voted on Tuesday against government plans to reform parliament's upper chamber.

The Liberal Democrats have championed proposals for a mainly elected House of Lords, and the Conservative revolt -- the biggest since the coalition came to power in May 2010 -- has raised

Syria in civil war: Red Cross

Heavy fighting erupts near Damascus; regime denies massacre charges

AGENCIES

The Red Cross (ICRC) yesterday said the fighting in Syria has become so widespread that the conflict is now in effect a civil war.

The change in status means combatants will not be officially subject to the Geneva Conventions, leaving them more exposed to war crimes prosecutions.

The Red Cross had previously regarded only the areas around Idlib, Homs and Hama as war zones.

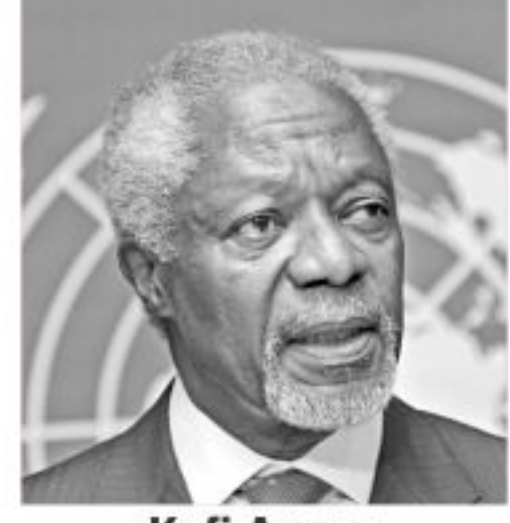
Meanwhile, Syrian officials are disputing claims that they used heavy weapons in fighting on Thursday.

Speaking at a news conference in Damascus, foreign ministry spokesman Jihad Makdissi said Syrian government forces did not use helicopters and tanks in Thursday's assault on Treimsa.

Activists initially described fighting in the village of Tremseh near Hama as a massacre of dozens of civilians, but later accounts suggested most of the dead were armed rebels.

The UN accused Syrian forces of using heavy artillery, tanks and helicopters, but Damascus denied those allegations and said just two civilians had been killed.

The accusations, if proved, would mean



Kofi Annan



Jihad Makdissi

Damascus had broken an agreement it made with envoy Kofi Annan.

Later yesterday, video footage emerged purporting to show heavy fighting in southern Damascus.

Activists claimed the fighting was the most intense seen in the capital since the start of anti-government protests in March last year.

They said tanks and mortars were used, and in some areas residents were fleeing.

There has been no independent confirmation of their claims.

On the diplomatic front, UN-Arab peace envoy Kofi Annan and UN chief Ban Ki-moon head for Russia and China today to press the two UN Security Council doubters to back tougher action against President Bashar al-Assad to halt the

slaughter in Syria.

The visits by the UN leaders come at a crucial new stage in the conflict. The Security Council has until Friday to renew the UN mission in Syria but is divided over Western calls to add sanctions.

On the ground, troops bombarded rebel areas in several parts of Syria as violence killed at least 55 people yesterday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, which oversees the Geneva Conventions, said fighting had now spread beyond the three hotspots of Idlib, Homs and Hama.

Spokesman Hicham Hassan said Syria was now regarded as a "non-international armed conflict", which is the technical term for civil war.

The BBC's Imogen Foulkes in Geneva says the statement is significant because it is the Red Cross' job to monitor the conduct of the fighting, and to tell warring parties what their obligations are.

Under the Geneva Conventions, indiscriminate attacks on civilians, attacks on medical personnel or the destruction of basic services like water or electricity are forbidden and can be prosecuted as war crimes.

From now on, all those fighting in Syria are officially subject to the laws of war, and could end up at a war crimes tribunal if they disobey them.

Afghan minister survives killing plot

REUTERS, Kunduz

An Afghan government minister survived a bomb attack on his motorcade in northern Afghanistan yesterday, the second assault on a high-profile politician in two days, but two of his bodyguards were wounded, provincial officials said.

Higher Education Minister Obaidullah Obaid was travelling from Baghlan to Kunduz province when one of the cars in his convoy hit a roadside bomb, Munshi Majid, the provincial governor of Baghlan who was in the same motorcade, told Reuters.

"The minister is safe," Munshi said. "Two policemen were wounded in the bomb attack," he said, adding that the bomb exploded on a highway outside Baghlan city.

AU summit opens to discuss conflicts

Sudans commit to talks

AFP, Addis Ababa

African Union leaders yesterday opened their biannual summit to discuss the continent's hotspots including DR Congo and Mali, although elections for the bloc's top job overshadowed the agenda.

Security issues are a top priority at the meeting, with leaders focusing on instability in Mali, renewed violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo and the ongoing crisis between Sudan and South Sudan.

Ping opened the two-day summit saying that the AU was ready to send troops to the restive eastern DR Congo as part of a peacekeeping force, where Rwanda is accused by UN experts and Kinshasa of supporting a mutiny by Congolese troops.

But Ping also warned other conflicts remained a major concern, describing the crisis in Mali, where authorities are struggling to tackle Islamist militants, as "one of the most serious threats to security and stability of the continent."

More hopeful areas include Somalia -- where Islamist fighters are on the back foot -- and the disputes between Sudan and South Sudan, following fierce border battles in April and March along disputed regions of their oil-rich frontier.

Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir and Salva Kiir of South Sudan shook hands warmly, following their first face-to-face talks on Saturday since the border fighting took them to the brink of all-out war.

N Korea ready to resume nuke talks

AFP, Phnom Penh

North Korea told Cambodia Saturday it was ready to rejoin six-party denuclearisation talks, Phnom Penh said, without outlining any conditions to a potential return to the negotiating table.

North Korean Foreign Minister Pak Ui-Chun met with his Cambodian counterpart in Phnom Penh and "clearly stated that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is ready to participate in the six-party talks", Cambodian foreign ministry spokesman Koy Kuong told reporters.

"Cambodia welcomes the positive step," he said, adding that Pak "did not talk about conditions during the meeting".



The Soyuz TMA-05M spacecraft blasts off from the Russian leased Kazakh Baikonur cosmodrome yesterday. The Russian rocket carrying an international crew of Akihiko Hoshide of Japan, Yuri Malenchenko of Russia and Sunita Williams of the US blasted off without a hitch for the International Space Station in the first manned mission in two months. PHOTO: AFP

US presidential race turns bitter

Obama goes negative with Romney attack ad

AFP, Washington

The US presidential race has grown increasingly hostile and bitter, with President Barack Obama releasing an attack ad that blamed Republican rival Mitt Romney for shipping American jobs abroad.

Obama, who with a stubborn unemployment rate of 8.2 percent, is fighting historic precedent to keep his job, poured scorn on his White House opponent's business record, intensifying his recent character assassination of Romney.

The 32-second ad, made public Saturday, alleged that Romney, when head of venture capital outfit Bain Capital, had links to companies that chose to lay off US-based workers and move those jobs to plants in Mexico and China instead.

The commercial, titled "Firms," aired just days after the Obama campaign seized on government records that suggested Romney remained in charge at Bain for three years beyond February 1999, when he officially stepped down.

The date is considered crucial as after that year Bain is said to have invested in companies that moved jobs abroad. Romney has denied having any managerial influence at the Boston-based investment firm beyond 1999.

With an off-tone Romney rendition of the patriotic anthem "America the Beautiful" ringing in the background, the ad, which aired in nine states as well as on YouTube, also accused the Republican contender of outsourcing jobs to India when he was governor of Massachusetts between 2003 and 2007.

Romney said on Friday that the Obama camp's claims about his involvement in moving jobs abroad were "false, misleading" and "wrong-headed," but the Democrats insist the charges are valid.

In a third salvo, the official approved campaign ad hit out at the Republican candidate for having "millions in a Swiss bank account," and of shoring up money in tax havens such as Bermuda and the Cayman Islands.

"Mitt Romney's not the solution. He's the problem," concluded the ad.

The issue of jobs is considered crucial as no US leader since World War II has won a second term while unemployment was above six percent, other than Ronald Reagan, who was reelected despite a 7.2 percent jobless rate in 1984.

In an already heated campaign, Obama has sought to paint himself as a down-to-earth American -- in contrast to his portrayal of Romney as an "out of touch" corporate raider who cares more about profits than everyday people.



DEATH CONTROVERSY Arafat's widow to pursue legal action

AFP, Zurich

The widow of Yasser Arafat is to launch legal action in France over claims that the veteran Palestinian leader died of radioactive polonium poisoning, her lawyer said in remarks published yesterday.

"Mrs Arafat has decided to lodge a legal complaint within the month," the Geneva-based lawyer Marc Bonnart told Le Matin Dimanche newspaper.

He said the legal proceedings would be taken in France where Arafat died at a military hospital in 2004.

The Institute for Radiation Physics in Switzerland, which analysed biological samples taken from Arafat's personal effects, found "an abnormal quantity" of the lethal radioactive substance polonium, the Al-Jazeera news channel reported in a documentary this month.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and Arafat's widow have reportedly already given their consent for samples to be taken from his remains, which are buried in a mausoleum in the West Bank town of Ramallah.

Arafat's nephew Nasser al-Qidwa on Thursday accused Israel of poisoning the veteran leader and called for those responsible to be held accountable.

INDIAN PRESIDENTIAL POLLS

Pranab appeals to Mamata to vote for him

PTI, Srinagar

UPA presidential candidate Pranab Mukherjee yesterday said he has been making appeals to Trinamool Congress Chief Mamata Banerjee every day asking her to vote for him.

"I appeal to her almost every day...that is for her to decide," Mukherjee told reporters when asked if he would appeal to the Trinamool Congress chief, an UPA ally at the Centre, to vote for him.

Mamata is yet to take a decision on her party's position on the presidential poll to be held on July 19.



Pranab Mukherjee



Mamata Banerjee

opposition PDP and three independent MLAs.

The former union finance minister said his meetings were part of thanksgiving to those political parties, which have extended support to his presidential race. Mukherjee later drove to the residence of former state Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed where he met the top leadership of the Peoples Democratic Party.

On Jammu and Kashmir, Mukherjee said he "would like to definitely see that this beautiful state gets its most rightful place, it is developed to the full potential." "Of course, within the parameters of Constitutional functioning and Constitutional responsibility, this is my desire to see that the full developmental potential of the state is being

MUMBAI CARNAGE, 2008

Pak envoy to India denies involvement

PTI, New Delhi

Pakistan's new envoy to India Salman Bashir yesterday said it was "unbelievable" and "incredible" to allege his country's state institutions' involvement in the Mumbai attacks, days after New Delhi demanded further action following LeT terrorist Abu Jundal's revelations.

Stating that Pakistan was looking at a new way of conducting its ties with India, Bashir said he expects India to do its part since it takes "two to tango". "As I said if our own army headquarters are attacked, if ISI offices are attacked, then I think it is really unbelievable, incredible to allege that Pakistani state institutions have been involved in this (Mumbai attacks)," Bashir told at a CNN-IBN's Devil's Advocate programme.

Trying to clear any question marks over Islamabad's commitment to renewed peace process with India especially in the backdrop of the arrest of Jundal, who has alleged involvement of certain ISI officers in the Mumbai attacks, Bashir said Pakistan's leadership, state institutions and people have realised that it is in national interest to have best of relations. On the issue of terror, Bashir reiterated his country's offer