

GOODWILL GESTURE
Pakistan frees 55 Indians

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan yesterday released 55 Indian fishermen, 15 of them teenagers, as a "goodwill gesture" to mark independence day in India.

The release is part of an understanding between the nuclear-armed rivals to free citizens who mistakenly stray into each other's waters.

The Indians were presented with flowers and gifts, then bused to the eastern city of Lahore, from where they would cross the Wagah border.

Ayaz Soomro, law minister for Sindh, said the releases were "a goodwill gesture".

"We hope our neighbours reciprocate in the same spirit and release Pakistani prisoners from their jails," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Inspector General Aditya Mishra of Indian Border Security Force, right, presents plants to Pakistani Ranger Sector Commander Brigadier Zahid Rana during a flag hoisting ceremony to celebrate India's Independence Day at the India-Pakistan Wagah border post yesterday.

India announces mission to Mars

AFP, New Delhi

India plans to launch a space probe that will orbit Mars, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh confirmed yesterday after press reports that the mission was scheduled to begin late next year.

The project would mark another step in the country's ambitious space programme, which placed a probe on the moon three years ago and envisages its first manned mission in 2016.

"Our spaceship will go near Mars and collect important scientific information," Singh said in his annual Independence Day address, heralding the plan as "a huge step for us in the area of science and technology".

The Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) is expected to launch the unmanned orbiter as early as November next year, the Press Trust of India news agency reported earlier this month.

Being estimated at one ISRO official, the cost of the mission has been estimated to four to five billion rupees (\$70-90 million).

India has a well-established space programme which is a source of strong national pride, but it has also attracted criticism as the government struggles to tackle dire poverty and child malnutrition.

In September 2009, India's Chandrayaan-1 lunar probe discovered water on the moon, boosting the country's credibility among more experienced space-faring nations.

The United States, Russia, Europe, Japan and China have all sent missions to Mars.

India PM blames lack of political consensus for slow growth

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday blamed the absence of political consensus for the slowdown in the country's economic growth and promised to ramp up the economy through new investments and management of government finances.

Addressing the nation from the ramparts of the Red Fort on the occasion of Independence Day, he said, "as far as creating an environment within the country for rapid economic growth is concerned, I believe that we are not being able to achieve this because of a lack of political consensus on many issues".

"Time has now come to view the issues which affect our development processes as matters of national security", he said adding "if we do not increase the pace of the country's economic growth, take steps to encourage new investment in the

economy, improve the management of government finances and work for the livelihood security of the common man and energy security of the country, then it most certainly affects our national security".

Singh vowed that the government would "work hard for India's rapid economic growth and for shielding the country from the effects of the global economic slowdown by creating new employment opportunities for young men and women living in villages and cities and securing the livelihood of our poor brothers and sister, our workers and our farmers".

"We will leave no stone unturned to encourage investment in our country so that our entrepreneurs can make a



Manmohan Singh

substantial contribution to our economy", the prime minister said.

His remarks come at a time when the Indian economy, after registering rapid rise in the last decade, has shown signs of a slowdown in the last one year and projections for the current fiscal year (2012-13) is being scaled down amidst rising inflation.

There is a lack of consensus among the parties, including those in ruling Congress-led UPA, about bold economic reforms like allowing foreign direct investment in multi brand retail and pension fund and banking and insurance sectors.

Singh said the inflation has to be controlled. "This would pose some difficulty because of a bad monsoon this year. However, we have taken

many measures to deal with the situation".

He said India has "a big stock of food grains because of the hard work of our farmer brothers and sisters, and availability of food grains is not a problem for us".

The prime minister said the economic growth in the current year will be a little better than the 6.5 percent of last year.

Singh promised to reduce corruption in public life and sought the cooperation of political parties to pass Lokpal and Lokayukta (anti-graft ombudsman) Bills in parliament.

The prime minister said India's defence forces are ready to meet any challenge and their modernisation will continue.

Security in the Indian capital was enhanced several times over for the Independence Day celebrations as thousands of armed security personnel kept a hawk-eyed vigil to pre-empt any possible terror strike.

Pak nuke arsenal is not safe: US

PTI, Washington

US defence secretary Leon Panetta fears that there is a danger of Pakistan's nuclear weapons falling into the hands of terrorists if terrorism is not controlled in the country.

"The great danger we've always feared is that if terrorism is not controlled in their country, than those nuclear weapons could fall into the wrong hands," Panetta told reporters at a Pentagon news conference here on Tuesday.

Panetta was responding to questions on a recent congressional report which said Pakistan is increasing its nuclear capabilities, which are mainly targeted towards India.

"When I talk to the Pakistanis, I've always stressed the fact that we should have common cause with regards to confronting terrorism; that terrorists not only represent a threat to our country, terrorism represents a real threat to their country as well," he said.

"A lot of Pakistanis have died as a result of terrorism. A lot of members of their military have died as a result of terrorism. And it's important for them to recognize that threat and to act against that threat. And in particular, it's important because they are a nuclear power," Panetta said.

In a recent report, the Congressional Research Service had said that Pakistan is increasing its production of nuclear weapons and improving the delivery mechanism of nuclear weapons, which is mainly targeted towards India.

Small blasts hit Manipur, no injuries

AFP, Guwahati

Four roadside bombs exploded in the northeastern Indian state of Manipur yesterday as the country celebrated independence day, police said, adding that no one was injured.

"There have been four roadside blasts of moderate to low intensity, three in and around (the state capital) Imphal and one in Thoubal district," A Singh, a police official in the Imphal control room, told AFP.

"The blasts took place over two hours this morning, there were no casualties."

Separatist violence has for years dogged remote Manipur, where dozens of militant and tribal groups wage an insurgency against rule from New Delhi.

NEWS IN brief

Myanmar names new VP

AFP, Naypyidaw

Myanmar's parliament yesterday appointed the navy chief to replace a regime hardliner as one of the country's vice presidents, in a move seen as strengthening government reformers.

Admiral Nyan Tun, 58, who has a reputation as a political moderate, was selected by the military personnel who make up one quarter of the legislature and have the right to choose one of the two vice presidents.

His predecessor Tin Aung Myint Oo -- a renowned hardliner with close links to ex-junta chief Than Shwe -- resigned in July ostensibly due to ill health, fanning rumours of a power struggle between regime moderates and conservatives.



Nyan Tun

Steve Jobs' home robbed

CNN ONLINE

More than \$60,000 worth of computers, jewelry and personal items have been stolen from the Palo Alto, California, home of the late Apple co-founder Steve Jobs.

Kariem McFarlin, 35, of Alameda was arrested and charged with residential burglary and selling stolen property, according to Scott Tsui, supervising deputy district attorney for Santa Clara County. McFarlin remains in the Santa Clara County jail on \$500,000 bail pending a court hearing on Monday, Tsui said.

The break-in occurred July 17, although details of the burglary and McFarlin's August 2 arrest are now just becoming public. The house was being renovated last

Israel picks new defence minister

AGENCIES

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu yesterday chose a former security chief as his new civil defence minister amid heightened public debate over a possible strike on Iran.

Avraham Dichter, who has served as internal security minister and head of the Shin Bet, Israel's domestic intelligence agency, has said in the past he would prefer Israel not to go it alone in any attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

Meanwhile, Iran yesterday said it is dismissing Israeli threats of an imminent attack against it, explaining that even some Israeli officials realised



Avraham Dichter

Pak PM launches caretaker talks

THE NATION ONLINE

Prime Minister Raja Pervaiz Ashraf on Tuesday extended dialogue offer to all political parties and said democracy took firm footing in the country during the last four years of the incumbent government, as it achieved significant targets in economic and social sectors.

"The government led by the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) is following the reconciliatory policy envisioned by late Benazir Bhutto," Raja asserted, adding that the government sought consultation on all issues, including the formation of caretaker government and it had invited all political stakeholders for the purpose.

He hoped that all political parties and their leaders would support the government in pursuit of their national obligation.

Addressing the flag-hoisting ceremony at Jinnah Convention Centre held in connection with the Independence Day, the prime minister extended an offer of dialogue to all political parties for reconciliation.

He said the opposition had an important role in any democratic system. "We are taking the opposition into confidence (for the next general elections), and for this we have taken a start from the consensus appointment of chief election commissioner," said Raja.

"We want impartial and transparent elections so the transfer of power takes place in a democratic way, which would be a big success for the continuity of democracy in the country," he added.

E Timor can cope without UN: Ban

AFP, Dili

East Timor is ready to take charge of its own security and UN peacekeepers should be able to leave on schedule by the end of the year, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said yesterday.

The current UN deployment -- the United Nations Integrated Mission in East Timor -- came in 2006, after a political crisis in which dozens were killed and hundreds of thousands displaced, with an mandate to restore security.

But the only major violence since then was a 2008 failed assassination attempt against former president Jose Ramos Horta.

"It is in this positive atmosphere that the United Nations is preparing for the withdrawal of UNMIT at the end of the year," Ban said in a speech before parliament.

GROWING TENSIONS IN NORTH-EAST ASIA
China, South Korea demand Japan face up to war past

AFP, Tokyo

China and South Korea yesterday pressed Japan to face up to its wartime past, as festering territorial disputes flared and Asia marked the anniversary of Tokyo's World War II surrender.

Both countries demanded Japan do more to atone for the brutal expansionism of the 20th century, while in Tokyo cabinet ministers paid tribute to fallen Japanese, including top war criminals, at a controversial shrine.

Beijing said the key issue was "whether Japan can really look in the mirror of history, heeding its lessons, holding hands with Asian people to face the future".

"The power is in the hands of Japan itself," it added. "We hope Japan can keep its promise to deal with and reflect on its invasion history and take concrete measures to safeguard China-Japan relations."

In Seoul, President Lee Myung-Bak, whose visit to disputed islands last week sent relations with Tokyo into virtual freefall, said Japan had to make amends for the sexual slavery it forced on women in its former colony.

"Chain links tangled in the history of Korea-Japan relations are hampering the common march toward a better tomorrow in the Northeast Asian region, as well as bilateral ties", Leesaid.

The demands came as Japanese police arrested five pro-China activists who had landed on an island claimed by both Beijing and Tokyo.

Japan marked the 67th anniversary of its surrender with an official ceremony in which Emperor Akihito and Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda led 6,000 people in prayer.

Their speeches used tried and tested formulae for regret, but avoided an explicit apology.

"During the war, (Japan) inflicted significant damage and pain on many countries, especially on people in Asian countries," Noda told the annual ceremony. "We deeply regret that."

But analysts say, nearly seven decades after Japan surrendered, leadership changes in Northeast Asia are fuelling territorial disputes that are themselves the legacy of a war the region never really settled.

Long-running spats that Tokyo has with

Seoul and Beijing have reared their heads anew as South Korea and China ready for a shift at the top, with politicians in both nations banging nationalistic drums.

A general election is due later this year in South Korea and Beijing is readying for a once-in-a-decade power transfer when President Hu Jintao and other leaders step down from their top Communist Party posts this autumn.

Japan's own fractious and fracturing political scene is bringing a similar sentiment to the surface at home, where a weakened government is seemingly unable to prevent things spinning out of control.



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of former South Korean "comfort women" who were forced to serve as sex slaves for Japanese troops during World War II hold placards reading "official apology," during a protest against Japan in Seoul yesterday.

Where the fall of the Berlin Wall proved closure of sorts for Europe's post-war division, Asia is still struggling to sort out the aftermath of the conflict, said Takashi Terada, professor of international politics and Asia-Pacific studies at Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan.

"Europe has more or less sorted out the legacy of Cold War, but it is still visible in Asia," he told AFP.

"A lot of territorial disputes have remained unresolved because the region merely deferred difficult decisions."

Jia Qingguo, professor at Peking University's School of International Studies, said leadership changes in China and South Korea were exacerbating age-old fissures.