

Obama hails ties with India

AFP, Washington

US President Barack Obama on Friday hailed Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as a "great friend," saluting his role in the warming of ties between the world's two largest democracies.

Singh, who has led India since 2004, paid what will likely be his last official visit to the White House as he is seen as unlikely to run for a third term in next year's election.

The two leaders agreed to shore up cooperation on areas of occasional concern including Afghanistan, market access and immigration.

In a joint statement, the United States and India committed to cooperation on a "smooth security and political transition" in Afghanistan, where US combat forces are due to withdraw next year.

Obama and Singh in their statement also "strongly condemned" a raid by militants Thursday on a police station in Indian Kashmir that killed 12.

Obama has seen improving ties with New Delhi as a centerpiece of his strategy of shifting US economic and diplomatic resources to Asia, and views India's vibrant democracy as a kindred national spirit to the United States in a region where political freedoms can be fleeting.

Obama hosted Singh for the first state dinner of his presidency in 2009 and paid his own state visit to India a year later. Vice President Joe Biden was in India in June.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh shakes hands with US President Barack Obama in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington, DC, on Friday.

PHOTO: AFP

Rahul adds to Manmohan's worries

OUR CORRESPONDENT, New Delhi

'Rahul drops bomb on PM, govt'. 'Rahul tears ordinance and the PM'. 'Rahul trashes ordinance, shames govt'.

These headlines from three leading dailies of India aptly encapsulate the huge embarrassment of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and the apparent disarray in India's ruling Congress ahead of parliamentary elections early next year after party Vice President Rahul Gandhi launched a sharp attack on an ordinance passed by the federal cabinet last Monday to protect convicted lawmakers from losing their legislature seats.

What has caused the "political earthquake", as one daily described it, was not Rahul's note of dissent—as murmurs of criticism had been coming from a number of senior but less important Congress leaders before Rahul's outburst—of the ordinance but his virtual diatribe by terming the ordinance as "complete nonsense" and that it should be "torn up and thrown out".

What is more interesting is that Rahul's stinging criticism of the ordinance came even as the document had the clearance from the Congress party's

core group that includes party chief Sonia Gandhi and the Prime Minister.

The ordinance aims at undoing a Supreme Court order mandating disqualification of convicted lawmakers facing at least a two-year prison term.

While Congress sources sought to drive home the point that Rahul's remarks should be viewed in the context of his views about the prevailing political culture, most political observers and some of the prime minister's close associates, including his former media advisor Sanjaya Baru, believe Manmohan Singh was left hugely embarrassed at a time when he is on a visit to the US and hours before his meeting with President Barack Obama. In fact, Baru told TV channels last night that the Prime Minister should step down.

However, the prime minister seems determined to ride out his plight. In a statement issued in New York, Manmohan Singh said that the issues raised would be considered on "my return to India after due deliberations in the cabinet".

Rahul's attack on the ordinance raises a few questions: (1) Was the Congress No 2 leader not in the loop when moves were afoot to draft the ordinance? (2)

Did he and other party leaders not anticipate the negative reaction the ordinance would evoke from the public? (3) Was it just a trial balloon which could burst if things become hot? (4) Was it a belated damage control act by Rahul?

Another key question being asked is even if Rahul's rejection of the ordinance has enhanced his image, has it undermined that of the prime minister?

Rahul himself has written to the prime minister explaining his views on the ordinance. "I realize that what I said about the ordinance was not in harmony with the cabinet's decision and Congress core group's view. I also know it would be exploited by our political opponents", Rahul said in the communication, adding "I have the highest respect for you and I look up to you for your wisdom. I have nothing but the greatest admiration for the manner in which you are providing leadership in extremely difficult circumstances."

Rahul's denunciation of the ordinance appears to have given rise to a perception that the PM's authority has been eroded and contrasted sharply with the speed with which the cabinet cleared the ordinance.

MANMOHAN-SHARIF MEET AT UN Indian PM tones down expectations

AFP, United Nations

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday warned that Pakistan must stop being "the epicenter of terrorism" if it wants better ties ahead of his first meeting with Nawaz Sharif.

Singh will sit down for breakfast today on the sidelines of the United Nations summit with Sharif, Pakistan's newly elected premier, who appealed Friday for a "new beginning" with the historic rival.

Addressing the UN General Assembly, Singh said he shared Sharif's hopes for better relations but warned that Pakistan must no longer be "the epicenter of terrorism in our region" in the wake of another deadly attack in Indian-administered Kashmir.

"For progress to be made, it is imperative that the territory of Pakistan and the areas under its control are not utilized for aiding or abetting terrorism," Singh said.

"It is equally important that the terrorist machinery that draws its sustenance from Pakistan be shut down," he said.

Singh said he supported resolving questions over Kashmir -- which is divided between the South Asian powers and is claimed by both -- but stood firm that the Himalayan territory is "an integral part of India."

"There can never, ever, be a compromise with the unity and territorial integrity of India," he said.

A raid by militants on an Indian army base in Kashmir killed 10 people on Thursday. Omar Abdullah, chief minister of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir, said the attack "aimed at derailing" dialogue between India and Pakistan.

Sharif, addressing the UN General Assembly on Friday, said he was looking for a "substantive and purposeful dialogue" with Singh to offer a chance for "a new beginning" with India.

"Our two countries have wasted massive resources in an arms race," Sharif said. "We could have used those resources for the economic well-being of our people."

Pakistan followed India in developing nuclear weapons.

The presence of atomic arms has raised fears over the repercussions of conflict between India and Pakistan -- caused either by a major attack inside India or an escalation of conflict over Kashmir.

While Sharif has returned to office, Singh -- who turned 81 on Thursday -- is seen to be on his way out. He has led the world's largest democracy since 2004 and is not expected to lead his Congress Party in next year's elections.

In a valedictory visit to the White House on Friday to see President Barack Obama, the Indian leader voiced weariness about his decade of dealing with Pakistan.

"The expectations have to be toned down given the terrorism which is still active in our subcontinent," Singh told Obama of his meeting with Sharif.

NEWSIN brief

Iraq violence kills 11

AFP, Baghdad

Violence that included attacks on security forces and their families killed 11 people in Iraq yesterday, officials said.

The latest violence brings the death toll to more than 740 people in September and more than 4,550 this year, according to AFP figures based on security and medical sources.

UP riot victims to get govt jobs

PTI, Lucknow

An order has been issued by the Uttar Pradesh government to provide government jobs to those killed during riots in Muzaffarnagar and adjoining areas, a official spokesman said.

"Implementing the announcement made by chief minister Akhilesh Yadav on September 15 that kin of those killed in riots will be given government job according to their qualification an order has been issued," he said.

US denied Bashir visa: Sudan

AFP, United Nations

Sudan's foreign minister yesterday accused the United States of denying a visa to President Omar al-Bashir, wanted on war crimes charges, barring him from taking part in a UN summit. Meanwhile, two Arab tribes which have been battling off-and-on for months in Sudan's Darfur region have resumed fighting, leaving dozens dead, one of their leaders said on Friday.

Trinamool suspends MP Kunal Ghosh

PTI, Kolkata

Dissident Trinamool Congress Rajya Sabha MP Kunal Ghosh, whose name has cropped up in Saradha chit fund scam and who was served a show cause notice for speaking against party chief Mamata Banerjee, was suspended yesterday from the party.

The party, however, spared MPs Satabdi Roy and Tapas Pal who were also served show cause notices on September 20 after they apologised in writing to the party chief.



Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (2nd L), Britain's Foreign Minister William Hague (3rd R) and US Secretary of State John Kerry (2nd R) vote to approve a resolution that will require Syria to give up its chemical weapons during a meeting at UN headquarters in New York, on Friday.

Strong new quake hits shattered Pak region

Death toll hits 515; insurgents hamper aid efforts

AFP, Awaran

A powerful 6.8-magnitude earthquake hit southwest Pakistan yesterday, killing at least 22 people in a region already devastated by a tremor which left more than 515 people dead this week, local officials said.

Babar Yaqoob, the Chief Secretary of Baluchistan, gave the updated death toll as he toured the destroyed region of Awaran, where the 7.7 magnitude quake struck on Tuesday.

"The death toll is increasing. Rescue workers have so far recovered 22 dead bodies," Hari Fal, the top government official in Khuzdar town told AFP, adding that more than 50 people have been wounded.

Officials fear the toll in Saturday's quake in Awaran, the poorest district in the southwest province of Baluchistan, could still rise further.

The new quake struck the remote district at a depth of 14 kilometres at 12:34pm

according to the US Geological Survey (USGS).

Although USGS said it was an aftershock of the Tuesday 7.7-magnitude quake, an official at the National Seismic Centre of Pakistan classified it as a new earthquake.

Relief efforts have at times been thwarted by insurgent attacks on rescue convoys, with local officials admitting that teams have been unable to reach thousands of survivors in the worst-hit areas.

Since the Tuesday quake, insurgents have launched several attacks on rescue teams and issued threats.

On Thursday, a helicopter carrying the head of the NDMA came under rocket fire by insurgents while flying in Awaran district. No-one was hurt and no damage was done.

On Friday, insurgents also opened fire on another helicopter and, in two separate incidents, fired on rescue convoys, officials said, adding that no one was hurt in the attacks.

Greece arrests neo-Nazi party leader

AFP, Athens

Greek police yesterday swooped on the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party, arresting its leadership and hunting for dozens of members across the country in a crackdown sparked by the murder of a leftist musician.

The arrests came a day after Golden Dawn threatened to pull its lawmakers out of parliament, a move that could spark a political crisis in the recession-hit country.

In dawn raids, Greek anti-terror police arrested party leader Nikos Michaloliakos along with party spokesman and MP Ilias Kassidiaris, two other lawmakers and a dozen party members.

The charges against them ranged from belonging to a "criminal organisation" to murder and assault, according to a source in the justice ministry. The police sweep came after the country's supreme court, which has been charged with investigating the group, issued arrest warrants for some 30 members.

Golden Dawn has faced a crackdown after a self-confessed neo-Nazi fatally stabbed popular hip-hop musician Pavlos Fyssas, 34, on September 18, a killing that sparked nationwide protests. The party currently has 18 lawmakers in parliament and prior to the murder was the third most popular political grouping in the country.



Mumbai building collapse toll hits 43

AGENCIES

The death toll from the collapse of a five-storey apartment block in Mumbai rose to 45 as rescuers frantically searched for around two dozen others trapped beneath the rubble, officials said yesterday.

The owner of a decoration firm who illegally carried out "faulty" renovation at his rented office-cum-warehouse on the ground floor of the ill-fated building has been arrested in connection with the incident.

"The death toll in the collapse has risen to 45 and 32 people are injured," civic body sources told and added that more people were still believed to be trapped under the debris.

Fifteen of the dead were women, the senior rescue official said, while a number of those rescued were being treated in hospital.

Local officials said 22 families had been housed in the block owned by the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai in the city's eastern suburbs.

Distraught relatives stood tearfully watching the rescue efforts, hoping family members would be pulled alive from the mass of concrete.

The residential block collapsed at dawn Friday -- marking the latest building disaster to hit the city and surrounding area.

Local authorities said they would bear the cost of treating the injured and that compensation would be paid to families of the dead.



New Miss World, Megan Young (C) from the Philippines holds hands with first runner up Marine Lorphelin of France (L) and second runner up Carranzar Naa Okailey (R) of Ghana after winning the crown over 126 beauty contestants in the Miss World 2013 finals in Nusa Dua, in Indonesia's resort island of Bali yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

'Thank you. Khodahafez'

Rohani Tweet reveals what Obama told him over phone

AFP, Washington

The surprise first phone contact Friday between presidents Barack Obama and Hassan Rouhani was not only a dramatic moment in US-Iranian ties, but also in the field of digital diplomacy.

Moments before the US leader announced from the White House podium that he had had a chat with his opposite number, the Iranian president had sent a tweet that may well live on in history.

"In a phone conversation b/w #Iranian & #US Presidents just now: @HassanRohani: 'Have a Nice Day!' @BarackObama: 'Thank you. Khodahafez,'" it read.

Khodahafez is a Farsi phrase used on parting, like "farewell" or "goodbye," but literally trans-



lated as "God be your protector."

Rohani's account appeared on Twitter after his election this year and his English-language messages have become a symbol of Tehran's diplomatic outreach.

There has been some controversy about the account in Iran. It has not been officially confirmed as

his and social networking sites are banned to ordinary citizens.

But throughout his visit this week to the UN General Assembly in New York, Rohani's office has used the stream to keep followers up to date with his speeches and media appearances.

Later, for reasons that were not immediately clear, many of the tweets were deleted -- although not before they had been recorded as screenshots or retweeted by thousands of Web users.