

Kartarpur pact tomorrow, India asks Pak to scrap \$20 fee

SHUBHAJIT ROY
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 21

DESPITE THE escalation of hostilities on the Line of Control (LoC), New Delhi Monday said it has conveyed to Islamabad that it is ready to sign a pact on the proposed Kartarpur corridor on October 23 although Pakistan has not waived the \$20 fee for each pilgrim from India. India has once again urged Pakistan not to levy this fee.

This move comes a day after the first significant escalation on the LoC since the abrogation of Article 370 in Jammu and Kashmir, with the Army targeting several terrorist launchpads in Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir. India said the action was in retaliation to "unprovoked" firing by Pakistan that left two Indian soldiers and a civilian dead in the border district of Kupwara.

The Ministry of External Affairs said Monday that in view of the long-pending demand of pilgrims to have visa-free access and to operationalise the corridor before the 550th birth anniversary of Guru Nanak on November 12, the government "would be ready to sign the Agreement on Kartarpur Sahib corridor on October 23".

"It is a matter of disappointment that while an understanding has been reached on most of the elements for facilitating the visit of pilgrims from India, Pakistan continues to insist on levying a service fee of US\$20 per pilgrim per visit. Government has consistently

urged Pakistan that in deference to the wishes of pilgrims, it should not levy such a fee," the MEA said in a statement.

"While agreeing to sign the agreement, the Government of Pakistan has been once again urged to reconsider its insistence to levy service fee on pilgrims. India would be ready to amend the agreement accordingly at any time," the statement said.

The MEA said the government has taken the initiative to put in place state-of-the-art infrastructure and open the corridor so that pilgrims from India and those holding Overseas Citizen of India (OCI) cards can undertake the visit to Kartarpur Sahib.

Last week, MEA spokesperson Raveesh Kumar had said that the corridor is an important "people-to-people" initiative by India to commemorate the birth anniversary.

Delhi's readiness to sign the pact came a day after Army Chief General Bipin Rawat said the Indian side had "caused severe damage to terrorists' infrastructure across... Six-10 Pakistani soldiers have been killed, three camps have been destroyed".

He said that the action followed information that terrorists had arrived at camps in forward areas and that, in the last one month, with Diwali approaching, repeated infiltration attempts had been made. On Sunday, Pakistan had summoned Indian Acting High Commissioner Gaurav Ahluwalia in Islamabad and lodged an official protest.



Soldiers with the bodies of two Armymen killed in Tangdhar, at Delhi airport. *Tashi Tobgyal*

At hamlet near LoC, 16-year calm shattered in one night

ADIL AKHZER
GUNDSHAAT (LOC)
TANGDHAR, OCTOBER 21

SAIKA SIDIQ watched helplessly as the house of Parvez Ahmed went up in flames on Saturday night. Her marriage was scheduled later this month and items for the wedding had been kept in Ahmed's house. Saika's father Mohammad Sidiq stepped out to douse the flames, but before he could reach Ahmed's house, a mortar shell landed near him and killed him.

Gundshaat, a hamlet less than 2 km from the Line of Control (LoC), had been calm since India and Pakistan agreed to a ceasefire in 2003, but Saturday night changed that — a villager was killed, three injured and more than a dozen houses damaged by mortar shells fired from across the LoC.

One of the houses belonged to Ahmad, a cousin of Sidiq.

Sidiq's daughter Saika was to get married on October 29 and he had stocked wedding gifts and other items in his cousin's house.

"There is a tradition in our village that we buy things like, refrigerator, washing machine etc, for the bride," said Saika's mother Nasreena Bano. "When the house caught fire, he (Sidiq) rushed out to extinguish it but a shell landed right then and he was killed."

"My husband became a victim of conflict between the two countries. Everything is finished now. I don't know how I will be able to marry off my four daughters now. He (Sidiq) was the only earning member."

The villagers recall Saturday night with horror. Bilal Ahmad said, "For the whole night, I just thought that a shell will land on our house and we would be finished."

On Sunday, Defence spokesperson in Srinagar Col Rajesh Kalia said Pakistan violated the ceasefire in Tangdhar,

killing two soldiers and a civilian. In New Delhi, the Army said it targeted terror launchpads across the border in Tangdhar, killing six to 10 Pakistani soldiers.

Police officers at Tangdhar said they have asked villagers to avoid movement at night. "As a precautionary measure, we have told people to avoid movement at night for their safety," said a police officer.

Villagers are worried about the coming days. "There are no bunkers in the village. Everybody is scared, the children more so, as they have seen it for the first time," said the village numberdar Nazir Ahmad (50).

At Tangdhar town, it is the marriage season and people have started to panic. "My cousin is getting married today and we had a long list of guests," said Mukhtar Ahmad, a resident of Tangdhar. "At the last moment, we cut short the list because nobody knows what will happen next."

After Army strike, J&K Governor asks Pak to behave

BASHAARAT MASOOD
SRINAGAR, OCTOBER 21

JAMMU AND Kashmir Governor Satya Pal Malik on Monday said that if Pakistan did not "behave" and desist from supporting militants, India will cross the Line of Control (LoC).

"This has become their routine. Somewhere it is to be stopped," Malik said after the Army targeted terrorist launch pads across the border. "We will completely destroy the terrorist camps and if they don't desist, we will go inside."

Governor Malik was speaking to the reporters on the sidelines of the Police Commemoration Day held at Police Training School at Zewan on the outskirts of Srinagar city.

"War is a bad thing. Pakistan should behave. If they don't desist, what happened yesterday, it will happen more than that," the Governor said.

Malik's statement comes barely a month after he said that he is "against war to take back the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir" and that PoK can be wrested from Pakistan only through "development in Jammu and Kashmir".

Pak troops violate ceasefire in Poonch

Jammu: Pakistani troops on Monday resorted to mortar shelling and small arms fire along the LoC in Jammu and Kashmir's Poonch district.

Sources said that Pakistani troops initiated the ceasefire violation in Qasba and Kermi areas of Poonch around 3 pm. The Indian troops retaliated, they said. The violation comes a day after Indian troops, in retaliatory fire, inflicted heavy casualties among Pakistani troops and destroyed a number of militant camps at various locations across the LoC opposite Kashmir Valley's Tangdhar area. **ENS**

US Congress panel to discuss J&K today

SHUBHAJIT ROY
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 21

WITH NORMAL life affected for 78th day - main markets shut, public transport off the road, major political leaders under house arrest and internet still down - New Delhi is bracing for a critical assessment in Washington DC on Tuesday, where a US Congress panel will hold a hearing at the Capitol Hill.

Meanwhile, in Delhi, External Affairs minister S Jaishankar said on Monday that by the time he visited the US after abrogation of provisions under Article 370, the "English-speaking liberal media" posed a much more difficult challenge than others, as it had "preset views" and did not present a "fair picture".

US Congressman Brad Sherman, chairman of the House Subcommittee on Asia, will hold a hearing on "Human Rights in South Asia: Views from the State Department and the Region" at the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington at 10 am US Eastern Daylight Time (7.30

pm IST) on Tuesday. According to the latest schedule available, US State Department's Acting Assistant Secretary (Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs) Alice G Wells and Assistant Secretary in Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour at the State Department, Robert A Destro, will testify before the committee.

They will be cross-questioned by US Congressmen on the panel about American efforts and assessment of the situation in Jammu and Kashmir.

Indian ambassador to the US Harsh Vardhan Shringla had briefed Sherman and some others in the Congressional panel on the Kashmir situation before the hearing.

Sources told The Indian Express that while tough questions are expected from US Congressmen during the hearing, Delhi will watch the language used by US administration officials Wells and Destro in their testimonies.

In early September, US State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortugas had said, in response to questions, "We con-

EXPLAINED Some critique after smooth sailing

AFTER NEW Delhi revoked J&K's special status under Article 370, the US response has been quite muted - barring one statement by the State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus in early September, when she expressed concern over the "widespread detentions" and "urged" the authorities to "respect human rights". She had also asked Indian authorities to "resume political engagement with local leaders" and hold "elections at the earliest".

tinue to be very concerned by widespread detentions, including of local political and business leaders, and the restrictions on residents of the region. We are also concerned about reports that internet and mobile phone access continues to be blocked in certain regions. We urge authorities to respect human rights and restore access to services such as the internet and mobile networks. We look forward to the Indian government's resumption of political engagement with local leaders and the scheduling of promised elections at the earliest opportunity."

This was a clear evolution of the US administration's position, and this approach is very different from the US position on August 6, when it had said that they "take note" that the Indian government has described these actions as strictly an internal matter. The US had said that they were concerned about reports of detentions and urge respect for individual rights and discussion with those in affected communities.

Speaking at the US-India strategic partnership forum here, External Affairs Minister Jaishankar asserted that the

change in Article 370 of the Constitution was India's "internal business".

He said: "By the time I actually went to the US in September, which was about six weeks after the event, we had made considerable progress. I think it was a much more difficult challenge with the media, especially the English-speaking liberal media, because partly they were very ideological about it; they had strong preset views on this subject. In my view...in many ways they did not present a fair picture. Maybe they did not absorb a fair picture either."

It may be noted that US Congressman Chris Van Hollen was not allowed to visit J&K by the government, and this denial of permission by Delhi will be raised during the hearing. Van Hollen, who has travelled across India but has never been to J&K in the past, had told The Indian Express, "I had thought it would be useful to go there and see the situation by myself. My personal view is that if you have nothing to hide, there is nothing to fear by allowing visitors to the state. I can only conclude that the

Indian government doesn't want us to see what's happening out there."

Among others expected to be called as witnesses will be Nitasha Kaul, associate professor in Politics and International Relations at the Center for the Study of Democracy (University of Westminster), and Angana Chatterji, co-chair of political conflict, gender and people's rights initiative, research anthropologist, Center for Race and Gender, (University of California, Berkeley).

Also testifying will be Sindh-American human rights activist Fatima Gul and Amnesty International's Asia Pacific advocacy manager Francisco Bencosme.

On October 7, the official Twitter handle of the US House Foreign Affairs committee had tweeted, "India's communication blackout in Kashmir is having a devastating impact on the lives and welfare of everyday Kashmiris. It's time for India to lift these restrictions and afford Kashmiris the same rights and privileges as any other Indian citizen."

Indo-US trade: Goyal says contours of deal worked out

ENS ECONOMIC BUREAU
NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 21

INDIA AND the US have worked out the broad contours of an agreement to resolve trade-related issues between the two countries, and the "first set" of agreements will "hopefully" be announced "soon", Union Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said Monday.

"...We've almost resolved the broad contours of what we are going to announce. I don't see any great difficulty in closing the gap on the first announcement, but...both Ambassador (Robert) Lighthizer (United States Trade Representative) and I understand that we have huge potential we still need to tap," Goyal said during the USISPF India Leadership Summit here.

"We will hopefully come out with our first set of agreements soon, but we both believe that India and the US should look at larger engagement in the days ahead, possibly even leading to an announcement for a bilateral agreement that will go beyond the mere tinkering that we are doing at present," he said.

According to Goyal, the two countries would have been in a position to announce an agreement sooner, but the USTR's negotiations with Japan and subsequent discussions with China had "probably" delayed the finalisation of the US' trade package with India.

"We had a little pause because all of us were busy in different areas, but it's on track. Everything is going smoothly," he said.

India is looking to the US for technology, innovation, skills and quality education, while it offers an "attractive market to US businesses and skilled labour that can add value to American companies," he said.

On its participation in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Goyal said India would also protect "every interests of domestic industry, India and the people of India" before agreeing to any free trade agreement.



Piyush Goyal with former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger at the India Leadership Summit in New Delhi, Monday. *PTI*

Heavy rain lashes parts of Kerala, IMD issues red alert for five districts

SHAJU PHILIP
THIRUVANANTHAPURAM, OCTOBER 21

THE INDIAN Meteorological Department (IMD) on Monday issued an alert for heavy to extremely heavy rain across 13 of the state's 14 districts. Of these, a red alert has been sounded in Ernakulam, Palakkad, Idukki, Malappuram and Thrissur districts, which are likely to receive extremely heavy rainfall.

Three weeks into the north-east monsoon period, Kerala has already recorded 38 per cent excess rainfall.

Dr S Abhilash from the Department of Atmospheric Sciences at CUSAT-Kochi said the situation is complex with one well-marked low pressure area in the Arabian Sea and another low pressure area emerging in the Bay of Bengal, off the coast of Tamil Nadu. He added that there

"Government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi protects India's national interest first and does not fitter away free trade agreements like we saw in the 2009-10 period of the Congress regime, where agreements were done in a hurry, often asymmetrically against India's interests and very often with clauses that were detrimental to India," he said. "India's market access in a significant measure to these countries and I think India will ensure that on services, on investments, in every aspect, our national interest is protected first before any agreement is entered into with anyone," he added.

The *Indian Express* reported on October 16 that India had been finalising a list of American food and beverage products like bourbon whiskey, frozen chicken cuts, walnuts and apples that it could reduce import duties on as part of its bid to resolve trade issues with Washington.

Trade tensions between the two countries had been on the rise over the last two years following the US' decision to hike tariffs on steel and aluminum products and certain decisions by India that the Trump administration claimed was preventing "equitable and reasonable access" to its markets.

India's decision to slash maximum retail prices of cardiac stents and knee implants over 65 per cent, tariffs on information and communication technology products and demands that dairy product exporters certify that their produce was derived from animals not fed food containing internal organs were among the sticking points.

Following the Trump administration's decision to withdraw India's benefits under its Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) programme in June, tariffs on products like almonds, apples and walnuts imported from the US were hiked by the Modi government.

The two sides were expected to announce a trade package during Prime Minister Modi's visit to the US last month. Goyal had travelled to meet USTR Lighthizer during this visit as well.

HC frowns on changes to honeytrap SIT

EXPRESS NEWS SERVICE
BHOPAL, OCTOBER 21

EXPRESSING DISPLEASURE over the frequent reconstitution of the Special Investigation Team (SIT) probing a honeytrap case involving the blackmail of a Indore Municipal Corporation (IMC) engineer, the Madhya Pradesh High Court has asked the entire electronic evidence to be submitted to the Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL), Hyderabad, and get an expert report on it.

In the case, which came to light a month ago, six people, including five women, were arrested for allegedly blackmailing an IMC engineer by threatening to circulate video clips that show him in a compromising position.

Pragya calls Gandhi ‘son of the nation’

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA
BHOPAL, OCTOBER 21

BJP MP Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur has kicked up another row by addressing Mahatma Gandhi as "son of the nation" instead of the "father of the nation".

Talking to reporters on the sidelines of a programme of Railways on Sunday, the Bhopal MP called Mahatma Gandhi *rashtraputra* (son of the nation) like many other icons of ancient and medieval India.

The state Congress slammed Thakur for her remarks and said her description shows disrespect for the leader.

As the statement created an uproar, Thakur, apologised and withdrew her comments.

‘MAY PREVENT MORE ISSUES LIKE AYODHYA’

Muslims should hand over all disputed sites to Hindus: UP Shia Waqf Board chief

MAULSHREE SETH
LUCKNOW, OCTOBER 21

MUSLIMS SHOULD give up their claim on all disputed sites and also hand over the places to Hindus to "correct the mistakes of ancestors," Uttar Pradesh Shia Waqf Board chairman Waseem Rizvi said Monday.

Rizvi said the need for such an appeal arose after reports of Sunnis seeking permission to offer namaz on disputed structures. He added that if all such issues were not resolved, some other similar dispute may crop up even after the Ayodhya issue is resolved. He made the appeal in a video circulated on social



media.

In his appeal, Rizvi claimed that there were 11 such major disputed sites across the country, including those in Mathura, Varanasi and Jaunpur.

Rizvi also claimed that while all the churches that were destroyed to build mosques had been reconstructed and re-

stored, "now was the time to give back land of temples, which was taken by Mughals".

He further said, "Mosques that have been constructed in place of temples, should be handed over to Hindus. We should correct the mistakes of ancestors and establish peace in the country."

Speaking to *The Indian Express* Monday, Rizvi said, "The need for the appeal arose as Sunnis have sought permission to offer namaz at disputed sites where mosques now stand...But that is not the solution. Finding solutions to Ramjanmabhoomi and Babri Masjid dispute is not the solution because another similar issue may crop up as

there 11 such major sites, where mosques were allegedly constructed after destroying temples. As offering namaz is not allowed at disputed sites, I made an appeal to all followers of Islam to hand over the sites to Hindus to correct the mistakes of ancestors."

Rizvi is facing four criminal cases, including one each in Lucknow and Prayagraj and two in Rampur, on charges of illegal transfer and misuse of waqf land since 2016. Recently, the state government sent a recommendation to the Centre for a CBI probe into allegations of irregularities and misuse of waqf land against the Sunni and Shia Waqf Boards and their chairmen.

