

India, Pakistan Urged To Quell Antagonism

By Daniel Pearl

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan -- Western officials are pressing India and Pakistan to hold direct talks in coming days to defuse tensions and roll back a military buildup by both sides.

But a fresh terrorist attack in Indian-held Kashmir suggested that militants are trying to push India and Pakistan toward a confrontation. India's foreign minister, Jaswant Singh, and Pakistan's foreign minister, Abdul Sattar, met Wednesday for a photo opportunity in Kathmandu, Nepal, where a regional summit is scheduled to begin formally on Friday, and the two officials exchanged handshakes and smiles, witnesses told the Associated Press. Minutes later, though, two grenades exploded near the Srinagar assembly building in Indian-controlled Kashmir, the site of an Oct. 1 suicide-bomb attack by suspected Islamic militants.

At least 18 people were wounded in the attack, but nobody claimed responsibility. "I have no knowledge of any blast today [Wednesday], but if there is one, we have no connection with it," said Hassan Burki, a spokesman for Jaish-e-Muhammad, a group India has blamed for the Oct. 1 attack and for a Dec. 13 attack on India's parliament building in New Delhi. There was no immediate reaction from Indian officials.

India has amassed troops along its border with Pakistan and put in place tough economic sanctions since the Dec. 13 attack to buttress its demand that Pakistan take serious action against anti-India militant groups that operate from Pakistani soil. In recent days, Pakistan has rounded up scores of militants, an effort that has won plaudits from American officials. Still, Mr. Burki said at least one of Jaish-e-Muhammad's recruitment offices is still operating.

A statement attributed to the group in Kashmiri newspapers earlier this week warned of "new deadly attacks" against the Indian military in Kashmir to weaken India's resolve to crush Kashmir militants. Mr. Burki said he couldn't confirm the authenticity of the statement.

Western diplomats have been lobbying officials of India and Pakistan to hold talks on the sidelines of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation meeting in Nepal. So far, India hasn't agreed. Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee are both scheduled to attend the summit -- Mr. Musharraf after making a quick stop in China to consult with Pakistan's longtime regional ally. The summit's formal agenda includes a regional trade treaty, adoption of antiterrorism legislation, and measures against trafficking in women and children.

SAARC, created in 1985, has always been hampered by tensions between India and Pakistan, and has served largely as a vehicle for officials of the two countries to meet without the expectation of a bilateral summit. Close on the heels of the three-day summit, British Prime Minister Tony Blair is scheduled to visit New Delhi and Islamabad for talks with the two countries' leaders. Also, the U.S. is considering sending an envoy, but still hadn't decided as of Wednesday.

Pakistan has long sought international intervention to help resolve the issue of Kashmir, the divided Himalayan region that both India and Pakistan claim. Western leaders have been reluctant to get too deeply involved, partly because the dispute is so contentious and partly because India has been adamant that Kashmir should remain a bilateral issue. But top Washington officials have made a flurry of telephone calls in recent days to Indian and Pakistani officials, drawing them closer to informal mediation on Kashmir.

"It's now a front-burner issue," said Wendy Chamberlin, U.S. ambassador to Pakistan, although she added, "The immediate aim is to defuse the tensions along the border."

One reason for urgency is the fear that Pakistan may be forced to divert troops toward the Indian border from the Afghanistan border, where Pakistan's army has been helping prevent Osama bin Laden and other accused terrorists from fleeing.

"I can say there have been some adjustments, but no significant diminution of support" for the interdiction efforts, Ms. Chamberlin said. She said Pakistani forces are continuing to arrest members of the al Qaeda terrorist network every day. She wouldn't confirm or deny that U.S. troops have been allowed to enter Pakistan from Afghanistan border regions in pursuit of fleeing al Qaeda fighters.

But in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, where some 5,000 Pakistani troops are patrolling border areas, Javed Iqbal, the home and tribal-affairs secretary, denied any change in the troop deployment. He said local news reports that Pakistan might replace regular troops with reserves were "pure speculation."

Rasul Bailay in New Delhi contributed to this article.