

Nuclear war unlikely over Kashmir, leader says.By **Chaitanya Kalbag**

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NEW DELHI, Feb 6 (Reuter) - The leader of India's Kashmir region said on Thursday he did not think a nuclear war would erupt on the subcontinent over the disputed territory.

"I think India has never thought of using a nuclear option, and Pakistan would never make that mistake," Farooq Abdullah, chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir state, told Reuters.

U.S. intelligence officials told the Senate Intelligence Committee on Wednesday that India and Pakistan could stumble into an unwanted war that could escalate into a nuclear exchange.

Lt Gen Patrick Hughes, director of the Defence Intelligence Agency, called the India-Pakistan rivalry America's most important security concern in the subcontinent.

He said neither side wanted war but both had short-range ballistic missiles, could quickly assemble nuclear weapons and maintained large forces across a tense line of control.

"With frequent low-level clashes, the potential for miscalculation and rapid escalation is constant," Hughes said.

The two South Asian neighbours have fought three wars since independence from Britain in 1947, two of them over Kashmir.

India, which controls two-thirds of Kashmir, detonated a nuclear device in 1974 but says it has not built a nuclear bomb.

India said on Wednesday that it favoured resuming high-level talks with Pakistan but would wait for Prime Minister-elect Nawaz Sharif to take the first step in bridging gaping differences between the long-time foes.

Abdullah, in a telephone interview from the state's winter capital of Jammu, said he hoped Pakistan's new government would take a "realistic view" of Kashmir and that Sharif would soon hold talks with Indian Prime Minister H.D. Deve Gowda.

"I am hopeful there will be an amicable settlement," he said. "We want a permanent solution thrashed out so that our misery will end."

The charismatic Abdullah, whose father Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah governed Jammu and Kashmir for two decades, rode to power last October on a pledge to seek greater autonomy for India's only Moslem-majority state after the first local elections since a bloody separatist revolt erupted in 1990.

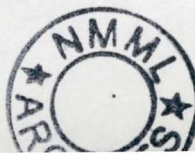
Abdullah noted that Kashmir had not been used as an issue by either Nawaz Sharif or his arch-rival, Benazir Bhutto, in Monday's Pakistan elections.

"For the first time Kashmir was not an issue in a Pakistan election," Abdullah said. "That is something great. It shows that Pakistanis are also sick of it (the Kashmir issue)."

Abdullah, who narrowly escaped a bomb planted by a Kashmiri separatist group last month, said the law and order situation had improved since he took office. "We no longer conduct search-and-cordon operations. We now get specific information about where they (the guerrillas) are," he said.

More than 20,000 people have been killed since 1990 when simmering discontent against Indian rule erupted into armed revolt. India accuses Pakistan of training and arming Kashmir's Moslem militants, a charge denied by Islamabad.

Abdullah said prime minister Deve Gowda was scheduled to visit Jammu and Kashmir state on February 12. "We will discuss major economic issues," he said, adding that Kashmir was the only Indian state to announce a social security plan that would give unemployed youth monthly stipends for up to a year.



"That will give our educated youth time to find either a government job or a private job," he said. "Or three or four of them could get together and start a shop or a business."

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TOKYO, Sept 21 (Reuters) - India's new telecommunications policy will open the domestic market to foreign firms, end a century-old state monopoly and aim to provide 60 telephones for every 1,000 people by 2000, a minister said on Wednesday.

India now has 9.44 telephones per 1,000, one of the lowest densities in the world. The average Indian has to wait between one and two years for a connection.

"India is a vast country. Three million people are on waiting lists for telephones," Communications Minister Sush Ram told Reuters in an interview.

"That is why we have to invite foreign investors. I am sure, this being a profitable business, many investors will come in."

He said the telecommunications policy unveiled last weekend aimed to give people a telephone on demand by 1997.

Nearly 20 local and foreign companies like Motorola, U.S. West, AT&T, and Pacific Telescot are keen to invest in India's lagged phone system as demand starts with the privatisation of the monopoly, and have applied for licences.

The telecom law says only domestic firms will be allowed to provide local telephone services but foreign firms can own 49 per cent of joint ventures. Private firms will be licensed for 15 years. An independent regulator will set prices and work out revenue-sharing plans.

Ram said India does not open the lucrative long-distance market to foreign firms but added the policy will do so in five years. "We can do it (review the situation) earlier too," he said.

India is the only country that has opened this sector to private investors in such a low density of less than one telephone per 1,000 people. Affluent countries like Japan have opened their telephone markets to private investors only a few years ago.

Ram was in Tokyo en route to a meeting in the western city of Kyoto of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), a gathering of nations involved in coordinating world communications.

Ram said more than 60 percent of telephone traffic was within one of India's 15 telecommunications "circles" and only about 25 percent of traffic was between two circles.

Some circles consisted entirely of one of the country's 25 states - Madhya Pradesh for instance was nearly twice the size of Britain.

Until a few years ago a telephone was considered a luxury for the common man. Now it has become a necessity. Seventy percent of our 400 million people live in rural areas. It is imperative for economic change in rural areas too," Ram said.

Until now he reconciled his nationalist politics with letting foreign firms into a strategic field like telecommunications, Ram, a 67-year-old Sanskrit scholar, said.

"Telecoms have become a very important factor in the economic and social growth of our country. We cannot wait now. This is a highly profitable business and finance is our biggest constraint. Private industry within the country will not be enough to support expansion."

"It is not advisable to wait for a long time simply because we want to monopolise profits."

He said India to reach the telecommunications standards of some developing countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, New Delhi needed \$50 billion to upgrade its infrastructure.