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U.S. envoys head for Pakistan to urge restraint

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With U.S. diplomats rushing to Pakistan to urge restraint, American satellites have uncovered activities in western Pakistan that could signal preparations for a nuclear test, congressional and intelligence officials said Thursday.

Spy satellites detected an influx of equipment, technicians and security activities at a site in Pakistan Chagai Hills, near Pakistan's border with Iran, the officials said.

Pakistan could engage in tests of its own, perhaps as early as next week, said the officials who spoke on condition of anonymity after CIA Director George Tenet testified behind closed doors to the House Intelligence Committee.

Other officials said the United States was prepared to offer anxious Pakistani leaders some incentives as part of a long-shot effort to discourage them from trying to develop a nuclear capability comparable to India's. India conducted nuclear test explosions on Monday and Wednesday.

A high-level U.S. delegation due to arrive in Islamabad on Friday will have concrete proposals for the Pakistanis, said State Department spokesman James P. Rubin.

"I can say they are not going empty-handed," Rubin said, declining to provide details.

But he called the mission, led by Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, "excruciatingly difficult," given the political pressures in Pakistan to develop its own unambiguous nuclear capability.

James Steinberg, the deputy national security adviser, appeared to rule out the possibility that the United States would try to allay Pakistan's security concerns by releasing 71 F-16 fighter bombers that Pakistan purchased years ago from the United States but never received.

The Bush administration suspended the sale in 1990 because of suspicions that Pakistan was developing an atom bomb. The two countries have been unable to agree on a solution, and the planes remain in U.S. custody.

Steinberg briefed reporters accompanying President Clinton on a trip to Germany. He said the administration believes Pakistani security will be harmed if it proceeds with a nuclear test.

"If an arms race were entered into and further steps were taken, there's obviously a danger of further steps on both sides contributing to greater instability in the region," Steinberg said.

He said Talbott will end his Islamabad discussions Saturday and fly Sunday to London to report to Clinton. Talbott is being accompanied by Gen. Anthony Zinni, commander in chief of the Central Command, which is responsible for monitoring the South Asia region.

They will meet with Pakistani Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub, who told The Associated Press on Thursday, "They will talk and we will listen."

After a three-hour meeting Thursday, Pakistan's Cabinet declared that the entire region's security was threatened by India's testing of five nuclear devices Monday and Wednesday in the desert bordering Pakistan.

The testing left the Clinton administration shocked and angered. Rubin stepped up the rhetorical heat on India, accusing Indian officials of "duplicitous" behavior in not tipping off U.S. officials about their plans during some 20 bilateral encounters that preceded this week's testing.

Tenet told lawmakers that one reason the intelligence agency was caught off guard was because India took great steps to hide its activities.

"I think you have a situation where India was very clever in using denial and deception," said Rep. Norman Dicks, D-Wash., senior Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee.

"The blue sky era of complacency about the nuclear threat is over," said Porter Goss, R-Fla., the committee chairman. "We have all been jolted back into reality by the events of the week."

Meanwhile, a House Commerce subcommittee heard testimony from Paul Leventhal, the Nuclear Control Institute president, who said Pakistan took an "extremely significant" step recently by starting up its first plutonium-producing reactor.

Leventhal said the reactor gives Pakistan the capacity to produce enough plutonium for one to two bombs a year, and that may have figured in India's decision to resume nuclear testing.

The State Department, apprised of Levanthal's testimony, offered no immediate comment.

Howard Schaffer, a former diplomat and South Asia expert, predicted it will take more than persuasion by Talbott to dissuade the Pakistanis from conducting nuclear testing.

"Pakistan will be watching closely to learn what the major powers are prepared to do to bolster Pakistan through arms to counter the Indian threat," he said.