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For the first time in two years, India and Pakistan agree to establish diplomatic ties and begin peace talks.

The political standoff between the neighboring South Asian countries of India and Pakistan may be closer to a resolution after Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee announced last week that he planned to restore diplomatic links with Pakistan.

"We are committed to the improvement of relations with Pakistan and we are willing to grasp every opportunity for doing so," Vajpayee told Indian lawmakers.

India severed all ties between the two countries in December 2001, following a terror attack in its parliament that killed 14 people. India blamed Islamic militants in Pakistan for the attack. Pakistan denied any involvement.

In response to Indian overtures last week, Zafarullah Khan Jamali, the prime minister of Pakistan, called for a meeting among the factions of Pakistan's parliament to discuss the next steps in its relations with India. Both sides have agreed to the first diplomatic talks in two years and will name ambassadors to take up residence in each other's capitals.

Pakistan offers nuclear disarmament

On Monday, Pakistani Foreign Ministry spokesman Aziz Ahmed Khan said his country will destroy its nuclear arsenal if India does the same.

"As far as Pakistan is concerned, if India is ready to denuclearize, we would be happy to denuclearize," Khan said. "But it will have to be mutual."

A decision by both countries to disarm their nuclear weapons would do much to allay the fears of the international community, which has worried that tensions in the area could lead to nuclear confrontation.

Both countries declared themselves nuclear powers in 1998 after testing atomic bombs. Neither country has allowed international weapons inspectors to examine its arsenal and the number of weapons each country has is not known.

The Kashmir problem

The major source of disagreement between the two countries is over the predominantly Muslim border territory of Kashmir, where Islamic militants have been fighting Indian rule for more than 14 years. The area has been a hotbed of troubles since the two

countries were established in 1947 from the partitioning of British India. India is mainly Hindu while Pakistan is mostly Muslim.

Two of the three wars between the two countries have been fought over Kashmir. India has accused Pakistan of supporting what it calls "cross-border terrorism," in which Islamic militants have crossed into India from Pakistani territory. Pakistan has denied providing anything more than diplomatic and moral support to the cause.

Some Islamic separatists have called for complete independence for Kashmir while others want unification with Pakistan. More than 38,000 people have died since the revolt broke out in late 1989. Separatists claim the number is double that, according to the French news service AFP.

Continued violence

Although diplomatic gestures have been made, violence continues in Kashmir. Bomb blasts and gun battles killed seven people and injured 33 others on Monday, Reuters reports.

Suspected Muslim militants set off a home-made bomb in a bus-stand in the remote Doda district of Indian Kashmir killing a man and wounding 32 other people, police said. A pro-Indian politician was wounded in another part of the territory when guerrillas lobbed a grenade at his car.

Indian police also said security forces killed six rebels, including two senior members of Kashmir's front line militant group Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, in gun battles in the region on Monday.