

US ENVOY'S MISSION VAJPAYEE SAYS DELHI PLANS 'APPROPRIATE ACTION' TO PUNISH ISLAMABAD'S ALLEGED SPONSORSHIP OF KASHMIRI TERRORIST GROUPS

India retains option of strike on Pakistan

By Edward Luce in New Delhi

A spokesman for India's ruling Bharatiya Janata party said yesterday that New Delhi could not rule out the option of going to war with Pakistan following the worst terrorist attack on India for seven months.

Christina Rocca, the US assistant secretary of state, arrived in Islamabad yesterday for talks with General Pervez Musharraf, Pakis-

tan's military ruler, on the second leg of a tour aimed at averting conflict between the two countries.

But in coinciding with Tuesday's suicide terrorist attack in the disputed province of Jammu, in which an alleged Pakistan-based group killed 33 people, Ms Rocca's mission appeared to face an uphill struggle. An estimated 1m Indian and Pakistani troops face each other across the border.

"We are very worried about the continued mobilisation of two major armies facing each other in close proximity and the threat that could be posed by a spark and lead to an unintended conflict," said Ms Rocca before leaving Delhi.

Under growing pressure from the ruling Hindu nationalist BJP, Atal Behari Vajpayee, India's prime minister, yesterday informed President George W. Bush

that New Delhi planned "appropriate action" in response to the attack.

George Fernandes, defence minister, said India was considering the best way of "punishing" Pakistan for its alleged sponsorship of Kashmiri terrorist groups. Analysts said the possibility of an Indian launching "limited strike" on Pakistan had risen sharply since Tuesday.

"The pressure on Mr Vajpayee to order a 'surgi-

cal' strike on the terrorist camps in Pakistan is intense," said Sundeep Waslekar at the International Centre for Peace Initiatives in Bombay. "The view is that India is bleeding and it cannot sit back and accept any more of this."

In Pakistan, senior officials said that Islamabad was planning to send more troops to the frontier region with Afghanistan in a move that they said could help

stem the flow of militants from Afghanistan into Jammu & Kashmir. But western diplomats, including, it is thought, Ms Rocca in her meeting with Gen Musharraf yesterday, are pressing Pakistan to take much more visible measures against the Kashmiri groups.

"It is time for Gen Musharraf to dispel the doubts," said a US official.

Additional reporting by Farhan Bokhari



Musharraf: under US pressure to act against militants