

ANALYSTS SAY

Pak-Afghan spat shows cracks in war on terror

AFP, Islamabad

If Osama bin Laden follows the news, the chances are he is enjoying the spectacle of "war on terror" allies Afghanistan and Pakistan at each other's throats.

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf has inflamed a year-long war of words with neighbouring Afghanistan by branding its President Hamid Karzai "oblivious" to events in his own country.

On Sunday, just after US President George W. Bush visited both nations, Musharraf said intelligence about the presence of Taliban leaders in Pakistan provided by Karzai during a recent visit was "nonsense".

Kabul retaliated by stepping up calls for Islamabad to clamp down

on Taliban and al-Qaeda insurgents who allegedly launch attacks in Afghanistan from hideouts across the border in Pakistan.

Analysts say the row demonstrates that not all is well in the hunt for Bin Laden – said to be hiding on the rugged frontier – and warn that it could destabilise a critically important region of the world.

"What it shows is that Pakistan, Afghanistan and the US have been unsuccessful in trying to pacify the situation in the region," defence analyst and retired Pakistani army general Talat Masood told AFP.

"This altercation can seriously hurt the campaign against terror."

Afghanistan and Pakistan have rowed over the demarcation of their borders since the latter was formed in 1947 and ties have remained

volatile despite many historical and ethnic links.

Islamabad helped Afghanistan drive out the Red Army, then it backed the Taliban, and finally allied with Washington after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

But being on the front line in Washington's battle against al-Qaeda the past four and a half years has exacerbated underlying tensions and the latest dispute has been brewing for much of the last year.

It bubbled over after Bush said in Kabul that he would bring up the issue of cross-border rebel incursions with Pakistan. Then after meeting Musharraf the US leader said: "There is a lot of work to be done in defeating al-Qaeda."

Musharraf's outburst came a day

later.

"It is obvious that both Kabul and Islamabad are reacting to the growing US pressure on each to do more to stem the Taliban-led attacks on the American and Nato forces in Afghanistan," said Riffat Hussain, director of the Regional Institute of Strategic Studies in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo.

Last year was the bloodiest since 2001 in Afghanistan, with attacks and clashes killing 1,600 people, many of them militants.

Pakistan says it is doing enough. It has 70,000 troops on the border and says it killed 140 pro-Taliban insurgents in a tribal area in fighting that started on Saturday – the same day Bush was in Islamabad.

Hamas, Fatah resume talks on coalition govt

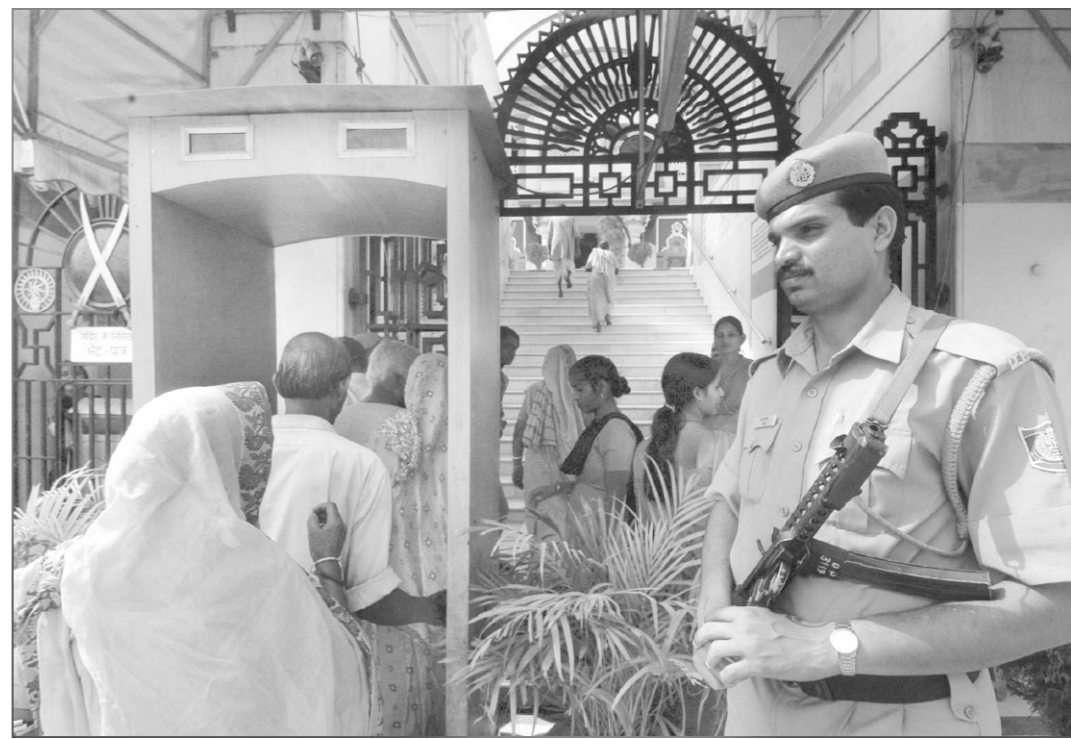
AFP, Gaza City

Islamist Hamas and defeated Fatah are to resume talks yesterday on forming a Palestinian government, likely to face diminished chances of success following hefty slinging matches in parliament.

The chief parliamentarians for Hamas, Mahmud al-Zahar, and for Fatah, Azzam al-Ahmed, were to meet in Gaza City in the early evening, Hamas spokesman Salah al-Bardawil told AFP, in the second such meeting in two weeks.

Ahmed, who is based in the West Bank town of Ramallah, confirmed to AFP that he would travel to the Gaza Strip Wednesday to meet Zahar to "discuss the forming of government".

Bardawil said Hamas representatives would also meet Palestinian Authority president Mahmud Abbas on Thursday. The moderate leader is due to travel from the West Bank to the Gaza Strip late Wednesday.



A police official (R) stands guard outside the Birla Temple in New Delhi yesterday. Security was tightened all over India after a series of blasts killed at least 23 people and injured 62 in three separate bomb attacks in the holy Hindu city of Varanasi in northern India on Tuesday.

100 firms face boycott in drive to oust Thai PM

AFP, Bangkok

Thai protesters threatened yesterday to boycott nearly 100 companies and products linked to Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, ratcheting up the pressure for him to resign.

The boycott list includes several top international brands, such as Toyota, Heineken, Nescafe and Seven-Eleven convenience stores.

"We will see to it that Thai people don't drink Nescafe coffee or buy goods at Seven-Eleven convenience stores," said Parnthep Puurpongpan, a spokesman for the anti-Thaksin coalition that has led weekly protests in Bangkok.

The list includes dozens of companies with links to Thaksin's business empire and to his party.

The boycott would begin Thursday if the Singapore investment firm Temasek completes its purchase of Shin Corp, the telecom giant founded by Thaksin, Parnthep said.



Pakistani women shout slogans during a protest rally in Lahore yesterday to mark the International Women's Day. Around 3,000 people attended a rally led by Pakistani woman Mukhtar Mai, whose gang rape on the orders of a tribal council triggered an international outcry.

Violence in spotlight on women's day

AFP, REUTERS, Hong Kong/ Kathmandu

Campaigners have marked International Women's Day by vowing to fight sexual violence and discrimination in Asia as the United States remains locked in debate about abortion rights.

While marches and debates were planned in countries still struggling for gender equality, the event looked set to pass largely unnoticed in nations where women have already made strides in politics, business and the home.

In Nepal, women are beaten to death, shot at, blown up by landmines and abducted in a decade-old conflict between government troops and Maoists that has killed thousands, a United Nations envoy said.

"Today, the UN calls on combatants in Nepal to avoid, at all costs, targeting civilian women directly or accidentally," Matthew Kahane, the body's resident official said in a statement on Tuesday.

In Afghanistan, still slowly clawing its way to normality after years of civil war capped by five years of

Taliban rule, activists were to launch a project to assess the extent of sexual violence against women.

President Hamid Karzai was also to order the release of a number of female prisoners. Women in Afghanistan can still be jailed for actions such as adultery and running away from forced marriages.

In neighbouring Pakistan, a woman whose gang rape on the orders of a tribal council triggered an international outcry was to lead a women's rights rally.

"The day will be momentous as it will bring together, for the first time, men and women in an area globally marked for gender discrimination and cruelty towards women," Mukhtar Mai told AFP.

Mai's rape – a punishment for her brother's alleged love affair – and her quest to bring her rapists to justice has garnered extensive international attention, much to the embarrassment of Pakistani authorities.

India refuses to let Kashmiri rebel leader visit Pakistan

AFP, Srinagar

A hardline Kashmiri separatist leader said yesterday he has been refused permission by India to travel to Pakistan for a three-day international conference on the revolt-hit region.

The refusal to grant Syed Ali Geelani a passport comes as India and Pakistan are engaged in a slow-moving peace process to settle their dispute over Kashmir that each holds in part but claims in full.

"I was willing to attend the meeting but I have been refused a passport by India," said Geelani, who heads the hardline faction of Indian Kashmir's separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference.

There was no immediate comment available from the passport office in Srinagar, summer capital of Indian Kashmir where a revolt against New Delhi's rule has raged since 1989 and has claimed over 44,000 lives.

Varanasi blasts rock Indian parliament

Both Houses adjourned

PTI, New Delhi/ Varanasi

Both Houses of Parliament were adjourned on Wednesday following protests by the opposition members over the Varanasi blasts.

The Opposition, led by the BJP, Government responsible for the blasts that killed at least 28 people and left over 50 injured.

The Parliament was first adjourned till noon and then for the whole day.

Agitated members trooped into the well soon after the two Houses assembled and raised slogans like Har Har Mahadev, Jai Bajrang Bali and 'UPA Government down, down', disrupting the proceedings.

Amid the din, Home Minister Shivraj Patil said the temple was "targeted understandably to cause communal tension in the country" and assured the Lok Sabha that the Government remained firmly committed to combating terrorism.

Lok Sabha Speaker Somnath

Chatterjee condemned the blasts as "senseless acts of violence" and affirmed the country's strong resolve to maintain peace and tranquillity and unitedly fight terrorism and violence.

In the Rajya Sabha, Deputy Chairman K Rahman Khan said that such outrageous acts of terror were intended to "test our patience and secular credentials" and appealed to all sections of society to maintain peace and calm.

Meanwhile, residents in Varanasi are trying to return to normal after blasts ripped through the city Tuesday night.

However, one can sense the uneasy calmness that the people are trying to maintain.

Schools, colleges, markets and business establishments were shut.

Groups of people were seen engaged in discussions near tea stalls and other public places near the site of the explosions.

Violence keeps UN's Iraq expansion on hold: Annan

4 killed in bombings, 23 bodies found

REUTERS, AFP, United Nations/ Baghdad

UN hopes of stepping up its activities in Iraq are still on hold due to the violence across the country and the risk of UN staff becoming targets, Secretary General Kofi Annan said on Tuesday.

Efforts to reinforce the world body's presence in satellite offices in Basra in the south and Erbil in the north appear to have failed because no country will provide the aircraft needed to ferry staff

safely in and out of those cities, Annan said.

Despite December parliamentary elections which took place in relative calm, "the organisation's presence and its ability to operate effectively in Iraq remain severely constrained by the security environment," Annan said in his latest quarterly report to the Security Council on UN operations in Iraq.

The return to Iraqi self-rule and stepped-up efforts by Iraqi and US-led forces to maintain security "have been

accompanied by the development of an increasingly complex armed opposition capable of carrying out a consistently high level of violent activity across the country," he said.

In latest violence yesterday at least 23 bodies many of them hanged were found dumped in parts of Baghdad, while a string of explosions killed at least four people in the Iraqi capital, police said.

UN SAYS Post-quake disaster in Pakistan averted

AFP, Islamabad

The threat of a second wave of winter deaths after the devastating South Asian earthquake five months ago has been averted, the United Nations said Wednesday.

Aid agencies were now preparing to help survivors return to their homes as the emergency phase neared its end and recovery and reconstruction efforts began, said Jamie McGoldrick, the UN deputy humanitarian coordinator.

"There has been no second wave of deaths, no massive population movement down the mountains, no severe malnutrition and no outbreak of epidemics," he told reporters at a press conference marking five months since the disaster.

The massive 7.6-magnitude October 8 earthquake killed more than 73,000 people and left nearly three million homeless in Pakistani Kashmir and North West Frontier Province. Around 1,300 also died in Indian Kashmir.



Indian court jails Gujarat riot witness for contempt

REUTERS, New Delhi

A key witness to an attack on a Muslim-owned bakery during religious riots in India in 2002 was sentenced to a year in jail yesterday for repeatedly changing her evidence.

The testimony of Zahira Sheikh, whose family owned the bakery in the western state of Gujarat in which 14 people died after it was set ablaze by a mob, was seen as a test case of attempts to obtain justice for hundreds of Muslim victims of the rioting.

But Sheikh recanted on her statements in various courts, prompting the Supreme Court to investigate her actions.

"We find Zahira guilty of contempt of court," a two-bench decision by justices Arijit Pasayat and H.K.Sema said.

Human rights groups say about 2,500 people – mostly Muslims – were killed in the Gujarat riots, some of the worst in India since independence in 1947, but official estimates put the figure at more than 1,000.