



PHOTO: AFP
Indian villagers make their way through floodwaters covering a main highway at Karimnagar, some 150km north-east of Hyderabad Wednesday. At least 31 people died from heavy monsoon rains this week that swelled rivers in eastern India and displaced thousands, officials said.

Violent protests in Delhi over shop closures

REUTERS, New Delhi

Violent protests broke out in parts of New Delhi on Wednesday against government moves to seal up shops illegally operating in residential areas, with local media reporting that a young boy had been killed.

Television stations showed footage of thousands of protesters, some of whom threw stones at police, who in turn fired tear gas to disperse the crowds. Media reported that two protesters and a senior policeman were injured.

Police declined to confirm any deaths or injuries in the protests, which were centred on the northeast district of Seelampur.

The Municipal Corporation of Delhi has upset traders with its drive to seal up and demolish illegal shops in the capital's residential areas, which began over a year ago.

The strike started on Tuesday, and the illegal operators gained support from the Confederation of All India Traders and shop owners from authorised markets.

Musharraf signals difficulty in shedding uniform

AFP, United Nations

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf indicated Wednesday that he might not hang up his military uniform any time soon, saying army authority was needed to bring about reforms in his nation.

Citing his administration's recent proposal of a parliament bill to amend much-criticized Islamic rape laws, he said it might not have been possible if he was not the military chief.

Musharraf took power in a bloodless coup in 1999 and pledged four years later that he would hang up his uniform and become a civilian leader.

But he reneged on his promise, deeming it vital for political stability and the fight against terrorism. Musharraf is a key ally in the US war on terror.

Speaking at a press conference

at the sidelines of the United General Assembly on Wednesday, Musharraf said his elected predecessors, including the country's first woman leader Benazir Bhutto, dared not take steps to amend controversial Islamic laws concerning rape and adultery imposed since 1979.

"It's only me who is touching it and let me tell you, for the consumption of the audience, may be if I am not in uniform may be it would have been difficult to touch it for me also," he said.

"So I am touching it because I have the confidence that I would get it through," he said.

But Musharraf has come under fire from rights groups for delaying presentation this month of the bill seeking changes to the Hudood Ordinances. They see it as a climbdown by the government under pressure from an alliance of

hardline Islamic parties.

The reforms would permit rape victims to file charges under the criminal law instead of religious law, which requires producing four male witnesses to prove rape.

Musharraf bristled at the news conference Wednesday when a reporter asked whether he had backtracked on the bill.

"You are imagining that we are going one step forward and four steps backward, actually nothing of that sort is happening," he told the reporter. "That is your opinion, not the world's opinion, not our opinion," he said.

Musharraf then dwelled on his "balancing" task of trying to develop consensus between religious extremists and liberal forces in his Islamic nation.

"On one side are the religious extremists who are saying if you touch the bill we are all out in the

streets, on the other side is the liberal extremists who say repeal the ordinances otherwise we are out on the streets," he said.

Human Rights Watch, a US based group, charged in a statement Wednesday that "promises about reform of the Hudood Ordinances have been made and broken many times already" and "this is the last chance for the government to show its sincerity."

It urged US President George W. Bush to press Musharraf at their meeting Friday to restore civilian rule, hold free and fair elections, and end legal discrimination against women.

"If Bush is serious about fostering democracy in the Muslim world, how can he support Musharraf's refusal to end military rule in Pakistan?," said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch.

Lanka urges Tigers to join peace process

REUTERS, United Nations

Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapaksa called on the separatist Tamil Tigers on Wednesday to give up violence and embrace democracy and the peace process, including international negotiations brokered by Norway.

Rajapaksa said his government was committed to constitutional reforms and negotiations and had engaged in combat only as a "calibrated defensive reaction to very serious cease-fire violations by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam)" at recent flash points.

"The LTTE must also demonstrate a visible effort to transform itself from an entity practicing terrorism to one practicing democracy," he said in prepared remarks to the Asia Society in New York.

The president addressed the Asia Society and the UN General

Assembly three days after Sri Lankan government troops and Tamil Tiger rebels exchanged gunfire and skirmished at sea to end a four-day lull in fighting around the South Asian island state's besieged Jaffna peninsula.

He noted that while Colombo had not reimposed a ban on the LTTE since violence flared up in July, the group remained blacklisted by many Western states as a terrorist organisation.

"Only the LTTE can un-ban themselves by good behaviour, democratic transformation and good-faith negotiations," he said.

Earlier on Wednesday, he told the UN General Assembly the LTTE was a "ruthless terrorist outfit" that "devotes its full force to violence, suicide bombings, massacre of civilians, indiscriminate armed assaults, and conscription of young children for war."

UN raps Nepali troops over anti-king crackdown

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's army and police used excessive force to crack down on April's protests against King Gyanendra, causing deaths and injuries to demonstrators and civilians, the United Nations said yesterday.

"Children and young people, as well as medical workers trying to treat the injured, were among those targeted," David Johnson, Officer-in-Charge of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Nepal, said in a report.

"OHCHR-Nepal staff themselves witnessed police using baton-charges into crowds, including peaceful assemblies, often aimed at the head and causing serious injury," he said.



Bangladesh Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan talks with Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf on the sideline of the NAM Summit in Havana, Cuba recently.