

Pakistan leader's 'Stone Age' revelation shows weakness: Analysts

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf's disclosure of a US threat to bomb Pakistan if it did not back the war on terror may have been meant as a sop to domestic opponents, but made him look weak instead, analysts say.

Experts said they were baffled why military ruler Musharraf had brought up the five-year-old alleged warning shortly before a crucial meeting Friday with US President George W Bush.

"It is a bad reflection on the Pakistani leadership that it buckled to pressures despite the fact that we are a powerful nation with a strong army and nuclear power," former army chief General Mirza Aslam Beg told AFP.

"America threatened Iran with dire consequences -- but have they succumbed to the pressure?"

asked Beg, who now runs his own think-tank.

Musharraf, who supported the US-led ousting of Afghanistan's Taliban regime after the September 11, 2001 attacks, said former deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage made the threat to Pakistan's then head of intelligence.

"The intelligence director told me that (Armitage) said, 'Be prepared to be bombed. Be prepared to go back to the Stone Age,'" Musharraf said in the CBS interview.

"I think it was a very rude remark," Musharraf says in the interview due to be broadcast Sunday.

Armitage has denied making the comment, saying only he had warned Pakistan that it was either with the United States or against it as it went after the perpetrators of the 2001 suicide plane attacks that

killed nearly 3,000 people in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania.

Analysts suggested Musharraf may have been explaining the pressure he was under to his domestic audience in this Islamic republic of 150 million people, where anti-American sentiment is widespread.

Muslim hardliners and opposition parties in Pakistan regularly accuse Musharraf of being a US lackey. Islamic extremists have tried to kill him three times primarily because of his ties to Washington.

But if the statement was meant for Pakistanis it was "poor management of public relations", defence analyst Talat Masood said.

The public would ask how the United States could be so "rude and aggressive" when it was meant to be an ally, he added.

Musharraf's anti-terror alliance with Washington is already strained.

Bush told CNN on Wednesday he would "absolutely" send US troops into Pakistan if he knew Osama bin Laden was there. Musharraf quickly rejected the idea.

Islamabad has also brushed off months of carping by US and other officials that it is failing to stop Taliban militants based on its soil from launching attacks in neighbouring Afghanistan.

"Musharraf's statement (on the bombing threat) reflects the fragile nature of our relations with Washington," Masood said.

He said it may be a fact that Musharraf had acted in his country's interests by bowing to US pressure after the attacks "but what Musharraf will achieve by saying so, I am baffled."

Columnist and political analyst Mohammad Afzal Niazi also described Musharraf's statement as "confusing" but suggested that it could be to gain publicity for his autobiography, which is due to be published soon.

"It is just before the launch of his book," Niazi said.

Musharraf's revelation would also increase anti-US feelings here, he said. "It obviously does not make America very popular. For many it would mean the US is a bully."

Beg said Musharraf's so-called revelation on US television was especially puzzling as the alleged threat had been already reported in Pakistani papers soon after the 2001 attacks.

"This news is five years old," he said. "He probably wants to remind his bosses in Washington how obediently he followed their diktat."



PHOTO: AFP
US President George W Bush (R) shakes hands with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (L) after their joint press conference in the East Room of the White House Friday in Washington, DC. Bush said Friday he was "taken aback" by a news report that the United States had threatened to bomb Pakistan in late 2001, but stopped short of flatly denying the charge.

Bhutan to use students as polls officials

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Thimphu

Bhutan may use students as polling officials during its first general election in 2008 when the Himalayan kingdom shifts from monarchy to parliamentary democracy.

Bhutan Chief Election Commissioner Dasho Kunzang Wangdi said he was impressed by the student trainees of the Paro College of Education during a three-day mock election earlier this month.

"It was evident that the students had put in a lot of thought and effort in the campaign. It envisages the trainees of Paro College of Education as electoral officers during the time of election," said an Election Commission statement.

King Jigme Singye Wangchuck last December made a landmark decision to abdicate the throne in favour of his eldest son, Crown Prince Jigme Khesar Namgyal Wangchuck, 25, before Bhutan adopts a constitution and elects a prime minister in 2008.

Bhutan's Election Commission said some 400,000 voters out of the country's nearly 600,000 people would be eligible to exercise their franchise in the 2008 elections to choose the first democratically elected government.

First female space tourist savouring 'every single second' in orbit

AFP, Washington

The world's first female space tourist, American national Anousheh Ansari, said she is savouring every bit of her time at the International Space Station, despite the trip's hefty price tag.

Ansari, 40, told reporters she has no regrets at a press conference broadcast from the International Space Station, responding to a reporter's question about the more than 20 million dollars she reportedly paid for the eight-day space tour.

"I am having a wonderful time here. It's been more than what I expected, and I am enjoying every single second of it. The entire experience has been wonderful up here," she said.

"But the favourite moment, as I suspected, was the moment I was able to see the Earth for the first time and see it as so beautiful and peaceful in the dark background, and it was a moment I will never forget."

Ansari, who lived in Iran until the age of 16, is only the fourth space tourist in history, but the first woman to take the extraordinary voyage.

She said she had experienced some spacesickness during the trip, however: "I did suffer a lot of the usual symptoms of being in orbit, like back pain, headache and motion sickness," she said.

Lebanese army posted on Israel border for first time in decades

AFP, Naqura

Lebanese soldiers backed by UN peacekeepers deployed yesterday for the first time in decades at posts on the volatile border with Israel, as the Hezbollah chief boasted his Shia guerrillas were stronger than ever.

After more Israeli troops withdrew from the region following the Jewish state's devastating July-August war with Hezbollah, around 400 Lebanese soldiers supported by tanks were deployed at five points on the border's western sector, an army spokesman said.

Two of the posts at Ras Naqura on the Mediterranean and Labuneh, three kilometres (two miles) inland, set up with the support of a Ghanaian armoured unit of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (Unifil), stand 100 metres (yards) from Israeli troops.

The spokesman said the Israeli

army in the western sector was left holding on to only a single post in Marwahin, some 30km east of Naqura.

Unifil commander Major General Alain Pelligrini said Friday that Israeli forces withdrew from more positions on the "Blue Line" demarcating the border and should have pulled out completely by the end of this month.

Israel announced last Wednesday it was delaying the completion of its promised withdrawal until after the Jewish New Year holidays which end on Sunday evening.

Also on Saturday, a Lebanese naval boat berthed in Naqura harbour to patrol the waters between the southern port town of Tyre and Naqura, where Unifil has its headquarters, the state news agency ANI reported.

Lebanese soldiers had not been deployed for four decades along the border with Israel, having been

absent since 1968 when Palestinian guerrillas held sway and southern Lebanon was considered "Fatahland", taking its name from the mainstream Palestine Liberation Organisation faction.

Hezbollah took control in 2000 after the end of more than two decades of occupation by the Israeli army.

UN Security Council Resolution 1701 which came into force on August 14 established a ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah following their 34-day war in which more than 1,200 people were killed in Lebanon alone.

In Beirut, meanwhile, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah's defiant speech Friday before hundreds of thousands of supporters at a "victory" rally drew mixed reviews in Beirut newspapers, after he rejected UN demands to disarm his fighters.

West blocks Arab push to condemn Israel's nuclear activities

AFP, Vienna

Abiding the consensus," said the ambassador from Finland, which holds the rotating European Union presidency.

South Africa's Abdul Minty, who presided the meeting, said that delegates had tried to thrash out a compromise but to no avail while US ambassador Gregory Schulte said "this is a sad manner to end this conference".

It was the first time such a resolution has been debated at the IAEA in some 15 years, when it was shot down in similar circumstances.

Syria condemned the motion's adjournment and accused Western nations of "double standards" in the differing ways it treated Israel and Iran, which is currently under the threat of UN sanctions over its controversial nuclear programme.

Muslim families flee homes in Lanka

AP, Colombo

Hundreds of Muslim families have fled their homes in eastern Sri Lanka, fearing a Tamil rebel assault to reclaim territory taken by government forces in recent fighting, a local government leader said yesterday.

Dr Thoufeek, chairman of the government in the eastern coastal town of Mutur, said 700 to 800 families around 10 percent of the population left on Friday and Saturday after the Tamil Tiger separatists warned of an impending offensive.

Mutur's residents, who are mostly Muslims, only returned to their homes two weeks ago from refugee camps. They had been driven from the town by weeks of heavy fighting and artillery assaults in August that killed

dozens of civilians.

Foreign mediators are struggling to keep alive a 2002 cease-fire amid clashes that have killed at least 1,000 combatants and more than 100 civilians since July.

On Friday, hundreds of people boarded boats in Mutur, about 140 miles east of the capital, Colombo, and sailed for the nearby Muslim-majority island of Kinniyai, Thoufeek said in a telephone interview.

Government forces refused to let them pass by road, he said.

Witnesses said the roadblocks were removed Saturday after meetings between the government and local authorities. Some 8,000 Muslim families live in the area.

Many had reluctantly returned home in time for the Islamic holy

month of Ramadan, which begins Sunday in Sri Lanka, but will now leave "because of another disaster," Thoufeek said.

The Tamil rebels began fighting in 1983 for a separate homeland in the north and east for Sri Lanka's largest ethnic minority.

The conflict was nominally halted by a Norway-brokered cease-fire in 2002 although the recent wave of violence has threatened to drag the country back into full-scale civil war.

Norwegian Ambassador Hans Brattskar on Friday met the Tamil Tigers' political leader, Suppiah Thamilselvan, in the northern rebel stronghold. The two discussed a recent rash of abductions, the rebels said on their official Web site. No additional details were available.

Japan launches satellite to explore sun

AFP, Tokyo

Japan put into orbit a satellite to measure the Sun's magnetic field, giving scientists better knowledge of violent solar activity that affects the Earth.

The Solar-B satellite has three telescopes that will get the closest look yet at the Sun's magnetic fields. It will orbit the Earth for three years and spend three-quarters of the time in direct sunlight.

The satellite was launched yesterday from the Uchinoura Space Center in southern Japan in cooperation with the US and European space programmes, which will assess the data to complement their own research.

The rocket which loaded the Solar-B "succeeded" in putting the satellite into orbit, the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) said on its website.

The Solar-B was given the Japanese name Hinode (sunrise), it said.

"The satellite will start its observation of the Sun's activity about two months later," said Satoki Kurokawa, spokesman for JAXA told AFP.

The data will also be analysed by the European Space Agency at Norway's Svalbard Islands in the

Arctic Ocean, the only station on Earth that will be able to link with the Solar-B at all times.

The Solar-B has three telescopes -- one optical, one X-ray and one ultraviolet -- that were designed with the United States and Britain.

"It will take three weeks for the satellite to adjust its orbit to a circular path from an ellipse path which it is currently following, and then researchers will open the lids of (the) three telescopes," Kurokawa said.

The Japanese researchers would lead observation of the satellite in the first six months, before it is taken over by other research institutes around the world, he said.

"Solar-B represents a very important step for solar physics," said European Space Agency scientist Bernhard Fleck.

"Solar-B will be able to study the solar magnetic field at scales smaller than ever before, and connect its behaviour to the energetic and powerful processes at work on the Sun," he said in a statement.

The Sun's magnetic field lines generate huge amounts of energy through solar flares when they interact. Coronal eruptions can

affect the solar wind, bringing magnetic disturbances on Earth.

The satellite follows the Solar-A, also known by its Japanese name Yohkoh, which Japan launched in 1991 in collaboration with the United States and Britain.

"The success of the launch is truly a gratifying news. This is the result of our efforts to improve reliability of rockets made in Japan," said Kenji Kosaka, Japan's minister of education, culture, sports, science and technology.

Japan has been gradually expanding its space program after an embarrassing failure in 2003 when it had to destroy a spy satellite 10 minutes after liftoff.

On September 11, it put into orbit its third spy satellite to monitor communist neighbour North Korea.

The rocket which launched the Satellite-B, the solid-fuel rocket called M-5, is the last of its kind after Japan decided to discontinue them for cost reasons. One launch costs about 7 billion yen (60 million dollars).

Japan's science ministry plans to develop and launch by 2010 a new and cheaper solid-fuel rocket that will cost 2.5 billion yen per launch, but the plans needs parliamentary approval.



PHOTO: AFP
The M-5 solid-fuel rocket carrying the Solar-B satellite lift off from the Uchinoura Space Centre, Kagoshima prefecture yesterday. Japan put into orbit a satellite to measure the Sun's magnetic field, giving scientists better knowledge of violent solar activity that affects the Earth.

Stem cells made from 'dead' human embryo

AP, New York

Scientists say they have created a stem cell line from a human embryo that had stopped developing naturally, and so was considered dead. Using such embryos might ease ethical concerns about creating such cells, they suggested.

One expert said the technique makes harvesting stem cells no more ethically troublesome than organ donation. But others said it still carries scientific and ethical problems.

Scientists want to use human embryonic stem cells to study diseases and create transplant tissue for treating illnesses such as diabetes and Parkinson's disease. Such cells are taken from human embryos that are a few days old, and the harvesting process destroys the embryo. That raises ethical objections.

The new work, published online Thursday by the journal Stem Cells, comes from Miodrag Stojkovic of the Prince Felipe Research Center in Valencia, Spain, with colleagues there and

in England.

They studied embryos donated by an in vitro fertilization clinic with consent of the patients. Part of the work focused on 132 "arrested" embryos, those that had stopped dividing for 24 or 48 hours after reaching various stages of development.

Thirteen of these embryos had developed more than others, reaching 16 to 24 cells before cell division stopped. Scientists were able to create a stem cell line from just one of these embryos.

These stem cells performed normally on a series of tests, Stojkovic said in a telephone interview.

He said he did not know whether the result indicated a solution to ethical concerns about embryonic stem cells. The point of the research was to show that such embryos provide an additional source of the cells beyond healthy embryos, rather than to set up any kind of a competition, he said. Both sources should be used, he said.

Dr Donald W Landry, director of

the division of experimental therapeutics at the Columbia University Medical Centre in New York, who proposed the idea of getting stem cells from arrested embryos in 2004, called the work an important addition to the field.

"Regardless of how you feel about personhood for embryos, if the embryo is dead, then the issue of personhood is resolved," Landry said.

"This then reduces the ethics of human embryonic stem cell generation to the ethics of, say, organ donation. So now you're really saying, 'Can we take live cells from dead embryos the way we take live organs from dead patients?'"

Landry is part of a consortium that is pursuing the approach.

But others said the approach fails to solve the ethical problems.

There is no way to prove that an arrested embryo would have stopped growing if it had been put into a woman's womb rather than a lab dish, said Robin Lovell-Badge of the Medical Research Council's National

Institute for Medical Research in London. So that leaves open the possibility that it was the lab conditions that halted their growth, he said.

Rev. Tad Pacholczyk, director of education for the National Catholic Bioethics Center in Philadelphia, said he believed an embryo may not be dead if individual cells are still alive and able to create stem cell lines.

Landry says an embryo is dead if its cells irreversibly stop working together to function as a single organism. But even under that definition, Pacholczyk said, scientists know too little about early embryos to discern when one is truly dead.

Dr George Daley of the Harvard Stem Cell Institute said the new paper's approach also raises a scientific concern: Stem cells from arrested embryos might carry the risk of some undetected defect.

"If there was something wrong with the embryo that made it arrest, isn't there something wrong with these cells?" that could cause problems with their use, he asked. "We don't know."

President Bush should resign Says Chavez

AP, Caracas

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez launched yet another verbal assault against President Bush upon returning from a highly charged US visit Friday, calling on the American leader to resign.

Chavez also suggested that New York city police were behind a electrical disruption during his speech Thursday in Harlem, but police denied the allegation.

"He should renounce the presidency if he has any dignity. The president of the United States has failed completely," Chavez said at the inauguration of a natural gas project in northwestern Venezuela.

It was Chavez's first appearance since returning from the United States, where he called Bush "the devil" at the United Nations' General Assembly and later criticised him in a speech to supporters at a church in Harlem.

The comments coming near US legislative elections have drawn condemnation even from some of Bush's critics.

Bush's political foes and fans alike condemned the remarks. US newspapers criticized the Venezuelan leader, and one governor said his state is no longer interested in buying discounted heating oil from Venezuela-owned Citgo this winter.

Antarctic ozone hole nears record

REUTERS, Geneva

The hole over Antarctica's ozone layer is bigger than last year and is nearing the record 29-million-square-km hole seen in 2000, the World Meteorological Organisation said on Friday.

Geir Braathen, the United Nations weather agency's top ozone expert, said ozone depletion had a late onset in this year's southern hemisphere winter, when low temperatures normally trigger chemical reactions that break down the atmospheric layer that filters dangerous solar radiation.

"The ozone depletion started quite late, but when it started it came quite rapidly," Braathen told journalists in Geneva.

"It (the hole) has now risen to a level that has passed last year's, and is very close to, if not equal to, the ozone hole size of 2003, and also approaching the size of 2000," he said.

The Antarctic ozone hole was at its second-largest in 2003.

While use of ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) has waned, Braathen said large amounts of chlorine and bromine remain in the atmosphere and would keep causing large reduc-

tions in the Antarctic ozone layer for many years to come.

"We will for the next couple of decades expect to see recurring ozone holes of the size that we see now," he said.

The WMO and the UN Environment Program (UNEP) said in August that the protective layer would likely return to pre-1980 levels by 2049 over much of Europe, North America, Asia, Australasia, Latin America and Africa.

In Antarctica, the agencies said ozone layer recovery would likely be delayed until 2065.

