



PHOTO: AFP
British Prime Minister Tony Blair and his wife Cherie Blair, centre, receive Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, right, and first lady Sahba Musharraf, left, at Chequers, near Princes Risborough on Wednesday. Chequers is the country residence of the British Prime Minister.

Palestinian unity cabinet efforts in jeopardy

AFP, Gaza City

Efforts to form a Palestinian unity government, seen as key to solving an unprecedented crisis, are in jeopardy over entrenched differences with Hamas, a Fatah party spokesman said yesterday.

"Talk of a national unity government is not serious now," Maher Miqdad told AFP, more than two weeks after Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and Prime Minister Ismail Haniya agreed on a policy outline for the incoming government.

Talks have been flung into limbo over Hamas's refusal to soften its stance by unequivocally agreeing that the future government recognise Israel and past agreements signed between the Palestinians and the Jewish state.

"I cannot say that there has been progress in any sense," Abbas admitted to reporters on a visit to the Qatari capital.

Back in Gaza, Miqdad charged that Hamas had "reneged" on the agreement reached between Abbas and Haniya on September 11 over a platform for a unity cabinet to replace the Hamas-led administration battling international boycott.

He said talks between Fatah MP Rawhi Fattuh, who was sent by Abbas as a special envoy to the Gaza Strip to meet Hamas leaders, did "not reach common points".

"Hamas is now asking that a number of points, such as the Arab initiative, be changed, which has brought matters back square one," he said.

Under a proposal adopted by the Arab League in 2002, the Arab world would normalize relations with Israel in exchange for a withdrawal from Arab land occupied since 1967 and a negotiated solution to the Palestinian refugee issue.

The international community

insists that any future Palestinian government recognize Israel, renounce violence and abide by past peace agreements before lifting a six-month boycott slapped on the Hamas-led cabinet.

Khalil al-Hiyeh, the head of Hamas's negotiating team, conceded that there was a persistent "crisis" in efforts to stitch together a new government.

"There is a continuing internal crisis over forming the national unity government," he told AFP.

Hamas "informed Fattuh of its commitment to forming a national unity government and to the outlines agreed by Abu Mazen (Abbas) and Prime Minister Ismail Haniya, with the exception of differences over the Arab peace initiative," said Hiyeh, also head of the Hamas parliamentary block.

But he called for more negotiations to solve the impasse and said there was still hope the talks would succeed.

Amnesty slams abuse of Pak terror suspects

AFP, London

Rights group Amnesty International condemned yesterday the abuse of terrorist suspects caught in Pakistan, saying hundreds had "disappeared," while others were tortured or sold on to US authorities.

In a report the London-based group said bounty hunters routinely help arrest suspects, who are then sold on abroad including to the United States' infamous prison camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

"The road to Guantanamo very literally starts in Pakistan," said Amnesty's Claudio Cordone, commenting on the report.

"Hundreds of people have been picked up in mass arrests, many have been sold to the USA as 'terrorists' simply on the word of their captor, and hundreds have been transferred to Guantanamo Bay, Bagram Airbase (a US base in Afghanistan) or secret detention centres run by the USA," he added.

Pakistan has supported the US-

led global war on terrorism since it was launched by US President George W. Bush shortly after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington.

As part of this Islamabad has deployed some 80,000 troops along the border with Afghanistan to hunt down Taliban militants and al-Qaeda fugitives, thought to have sneaked into the rugged region after the Taliban fell in late 2001.

But Amnesty alleges that, in cooperating in the 'war on terror', the Pakistani government has systematically committed human rights abuses against hundreds of Pakistanis and foreign nationals.

"Hundreds of terror suspects have disappeared after being taken into custody, many by Pakistan's intelligence services," said the report.

"A large number of war on terror detainees have been literally sold into US hands by bounty hunters who have received cash payments in return, typically 5,000 US dollars," it added.

Potential row over Pak terror charges defused

Says Blair

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair claimed Thursday to have defused a potential row with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf over claims that his country's intelligence services are backing Islamist extremism.

A spokesman for Blair said Musharraf had accepted that a think-tank report which contained the allegation did not represent the view of Britain's government, following talks between the two.

"President Musharraf accepted straight away that this document was not a reflection of British government policy so there was no need to discuss it any further," the spokesman told AFP.

The issue had threatened to make the pair's two-hour evening meeting at Chequers, the prime ministerial retreat outside London, a stormy one.

The contentious report was written for the Defence Academy, a British defence ministry think-tank, and claims that Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) is indirectly supporting extremism in Afghanistan, Iraq and Britain by backing the MNA, a coalition of Pakistani religious parties.

Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 military coup, strongly denied the claim in a BBC interview Wednesday.

"Absolutely, 200 percent, I reject it," he said. "I take exception seriously and I would like to talk about it (with) Prime Minister Tony Blair when I meet him."

The paper was leaked to the BBC, which said it was written by a senior military official linked to Britain's foreign intelligence service, MI6, who went to Pakistan on a fact-finding mission in June and interviewed army officers and academics.

"The army's dual role in combating terrorism and at the same time promoting the MNA, and so indirectly supporting the Taliban through the ISI, is coming under closer and closer international scrutiny," the report said.

"Indirectly, Pakistan, through the ISI, has been supporting terrorism and extremism whether in London on 7/7 or in Afghanistan or Iraq."

Four British Muslim suicide bombers killed 52 people in a series of attacks on London's public transport system on July 7 last year.

At least two of the bombers had visited Pakistan, where it is suspected they had contact with extremist groups.

The report also proposes using high-level links between the British and Pakistani armies to persuade Musharraf to step down and accept free elections and persuade the army to dismantle the ISI.

Abe's Liberal Democratic Party

Abe maps out Japan's foreign policy

AP, Tokyo

Japan's new nationalist prime minister pledged Friday to make his country a decisive force on the international stage and push for a reduction of tensions with China and South Korea.

In his first speech before parliament since winning the premiership in a landslide vote Tuesday, Shinzo Abe also vowed to move ahead with revising the pacifist constitution and exploring a collective defence system with the United States.

Abe has struck a chord with the public by campaigning on a populist, nationalist agenda: He wants a more confident Japan that can distance itself from post-World War II guilt by amending the constitution and giving the military a bigger international profile.

"I believe it's entirely possible to create a country brimming with attractiveness and vigour, while maintaining the noble virtues of the Japanese people," he said. "I aim for a country that is trusted, revered and loved by the world and asserts its leadership."

has long campaigned to replace the pacifist constitution drafted by US forces after World War II to revise phrasing that renounces the country's right to offensive action and bans maintaining a military for warfare.

He also vowed to push for better relations with China and South Korea. Tokyo announced on Thursday that Abe and South Korea's president have agreed to meet soon, and his aides are trying to arrange a similar meeting with China's leader.

"China and South Korea are important neighbours," Abe said. "Strengthening relationships of trust with the two countries is vital to Asia and to international society, and I believe it is important to communicate candidly and in a forward-looking way."

But he reiterated his hardline stance against North Korea, refusing to establish diplomatic ties with it until its past abductions of Japanese citizens are resolved.



PHOTO: AFP
Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (R) and Foreign Minister Taro Aso (L) bow to members of the House of Representatives after Abe's first policy speech at the Diet in Tokyo yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP
The world's first female space tourist Anousheh Ansari is helped out of the Russian "Soyuz TMA-8" space capsule after safe landing near Arkalyk, some 300km from Kazakh capital Astana yesterday.

First woman space tourist returns to Earth

AFP, Arkalyk

The world's first female space tourist was greeted with fresh fruit and a bouquet of roses when she and the two crew members of the 13th International Space Station mission landed yesterday in the steppes of Kazakhstan.

The capsule carrying Iranian-born American Anousheh Ansari, Pavel Vinogradov of Russia and US astronaut Jeffrey Williams touched down softly at 0114 GMT north of Arkalyk, shortly after sunrise.

Bush concealing level of Iraq violence

Says Woodward

REUTERS, Washington

The Bush administration is concealing the level of violence against US troops in Iraq and the situation there is growing worse despite White House and Pentagon claims of progress, journalist Bob Woodward said in advance of a new book.

Insurgent attacks against US-led forces in Iraq occurred, on average, every 15 minutes, Woodward said in a CBS "60 Minutes" interview taped for broadcast on Sunday.

"It's getting to the point now where there are eight, 900 attacks a week. That's more than a hundred a day. That is four an hour attacking our forces," Woodward said in excerpts of the interview released on Thursday before the release of his book on the administration, called "State of Denial."

Lankan war imperils civilians, tsunami aid

Says UN envoy

REUTERS, Colombo

A deadly new chapter in Sri Lanka's two-decade civil war is putting the lives of thousands of civilians at risk and derailing efforts to rebuild areas devastated by the 2004 tsunami, a senior UN envoy said.

Nordic truce monitors on Thursday accused both the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of grossly violating the terms of a now tattered 2002 ceasefire, saying both sides were hampering investigations of rights abuses.

"I am deeply disturbed by the report of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission that over 200 civilians have been killed, and thousands

displaced, over the past two months in Sri Lanka," said Eric Schwartz, deputy United Nations special envoy for tsunami recovery, in a statement issued overnight.

Many foreign aid groups have had to abandon post-tsunami projects in the northeast amid the worst outbreak of fighting since the truce, which has killed hundreds of civilians, troops and rebels.

"Significant investments in reconstruction, so generously supported by donors around the world, are now imperilled," said Schwartz, deputy to the special UN envoy, former US President Bill Clinton. "More importantly, many thousands of civilians are at

grave risk, cut off from regular supplies of food and other assistance."

"It is critical that all parties to the conflict ease current restrictions on access to affected populations, cease hostilities and return to negotiations," he added.

The government and the Tigers insist they honour the truce and accuse each other of trying to force a full-blown return to a war that has killed more than 65,000 people since 1983.

And while both sides have pledged to eventually resume peace talks that have been suspended for five months, analysts and diplomats fear violence could well deepen first.

Brother-in-law, nephew of Saddam trial judge killed

AFP, Baghdad

The brother-in-law and the nephew of the chief judge in the Saddam Hussein genocide trial have been murdered by gunmen in Baghdad, officials said yesterday.

Government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh told AFP that he had personally spoken to Judge Mohammed al-Oreibi al-Khalifa and had confirmed that Kadhim Abdul Hussein and his son Karrar had been gunned down late Thursday in a flashpoint district.

"The brother-in-law and his son were assassinated in Ghazaliyah while they went to collect some of their belongings. They have been assassinated by some unknown group," Dabbagh said, confirming reports from security officials.

Judge Khalifa is presiding over the trial of Iraq's ousted leader Saddam Hussein on charges of genocide during the 1988 Anfal campaign against the country's Kurdish minority.

'US far behind Iraq rebuilding goals'

AFP, Washington

The United States has slumped well short of its goals in rebuilding Iraq, with production in the critical oil sector still languishing below pre-war levels, a government audit warned Thursday.

Targets have also been missed in expanding water and electricity production and a third of Pentagon projects are still to be completed, the Government Accountability Office said in a new report.

And as violence rages on, the security situation may push reconstruction goals further out of reach, the audit said.

Defence Department officials were partly to blame for delays, after making "assumptions about funding and time frames that later proved to be unfounded," the report said.

And amid continuing accusations of cronyism in the US rebuilding effort in Iraq, the report said that at times the department "did not take advantage of full and open competition during the initial stages of reconstruction."

Oil production, which Bush administration officials once said would help meet vast costs of rebuilding Iraq was in August still below levels reached under Saddam Hussein.

Russian officials pull out of Georgia in spying row

REUTERS, Tbilisi

Russia began pulling out some of its diplomats and their families from Georgia on Friday as the small ex-Soviet state pressed spying charges against a group of Russian army officers.

A Russian Ilyushin cargo plane landed in Tbilisi to pick up some of the several hundred people working for Russia in the southern Caucasus country and bring them home.

"More than 100 people will leave today," Russian ambassador Vyacheslav Kovalenko, himself recalled by Moscow, told journalists in the Georgian capital. He said a second plane was scheduled to arrive from Moscow.

Four Russian army officers, whose arrest by Georgia on charges of spying for the GRU military intelligence arm sparked the current crisis, were driven to a Tbilisi court in a convoy on Friday.

Relations with Russia, Georgia's old Soviet master, have worsened dramatically since pro-Western President Mikhail Saakashvili came to power in the 2003 "Rose Revolution."

Saakashvili's pursuit of Nato

membership particularly irks Russia. He himself has publicly attacked Moscow, saying it supports separatists who control two regions of his country in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The court has a straight choice between continuing to hold them or freeing them, as demanded by Russia.

Police still surrounded Russian army headquarters, focal point of the crisis following the arrest of the Russian army officers. The headquarters controls two Russian bases, relics from Soviet times, which are to be withdrawn in 2008.

A fifth Russian officer sought by Georgia in connection with the alleged spy ring remained inside the military headquarters.

"Russia will not hand over Lieutenant-Colonel Konstantin Pichugin to Georgia," Kovalenko, the ambassador, said.

The crisis in Georgia overshadowed a meeting between Nato defence ministers and their Russian counterpart Sergei Ivanov in the Slovenian coastal resort of Portoroz on Friday.

After months of hesitation, Nato agreed on September 18 to launch

talks on closer ties with Georgia leading possibly to membership, an outcome which angered Moscow.

"We don't want a row over this, but clearly he (Ivanov) will want to raise the issue," said one Nato source ahead of the meeting, scheduled to discuss fledgling efforts at defence cooperation between Nato and Russia.

Russian ministers and media have reacted angrily to what they have described as deliberate provocation from Saakashvili.

Apart from recalling its ambassador, Moscow has advised Russian nationals against travel to Georgia, a small mountainous republic of 5 million people.

President Vladimir Putin, away in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, has so far not commented publicly on the crisis.

Georgia has suffered serious economic hardship, aggravated by civil war, since independence from Moscow, with power cuts, shortages and unemployment. An estimated one million Georgians work in Russia and send money home, keeping the country very much in the sway of its huge neighbour.



PHOTO: AFP
Indian tourists walk past closed shops in Srinagar yesterday as Indian Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) soldiers stand guard during a strike called by the leader of the hardline faction of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC), Syed Ali Geelani, against the scheduled execution of a Muslim man convicted over a December 2001 attack on the national parliament.