

## US attacks within Pak borders unacceptable

Says Pakistani PM

REUTERS, Washington

Pakistan is an ally of the United States in its war on terrorism but cannot abide US strikes on militants within its borders, Pakistani Prime Minister Shaoukat Aziz said on Sunday.

"We do not allow any country to violate our sovereignty. We are committed to fighting terrorism but it has to be fought together," Aziz said on CNN's "Late Edition" programme.

The US military has used pilotless drone aircraft in places that are seen as hotbeds for anti-American activity like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen to try to take out Islamic militants targeted in the US war on terrorism.

But Aziz said Pakistan does not allow the drone attacks and that foreign strikes were unacceptable to a nation that has

voiced its commitment for US President George W. Bush's worldwide campaign.

"We are totally capable of taking care of activities within our borders and we do not encourage or allow any country to violate this understanding," Aziz said.

Shaoukat also said that there was a "fair element of truth" to US media reports about a US predator strike in Pakistan in January, which was purportedly aimed at al-Qaeda second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri but had missed its target.

"It's very difficult to say who was there because... the individual in question got away," Shaoukat said. "Clearly the indications from various intelligence sources was that there are high value targets there."

Such attacks can be fiercely unpopular in Pakistan and the

January strike prompted a formal complaint. It also triggered debate about Pakistan's complicity in -- or at least acceptance of -- US strikes there.

Aziz, a former banker and finance minister tapped by President Pervez Musharraf in 2004, also rejected recent allusions from Afghan President Hamid Karzai that al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is hiding in Pakistan.

"We have no clue where he is," Aziz said. "If he were ever in our territory and we found out, we would go after him."

Aziz also said the Afghan government is wrong to assert that Taliban insurgents are now being directed from within Pakistan.

"We understand that the command and control network of the Taliban is very much deep inside Afghanistan," he said.

## Pakistan puts airports on terror alert

India also renews alert

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has tightened security at all of its airports to prevent possible terrorist attacks following a wave of unrest in the Islamic republic, officials said yesterday.

Authorities have declared "high vigilance" status at the country's more than 30 operating airports, including the capital Islamabad, Pakistan's largest city Karachi and the cultural hub of Lahore, security officials said.

"These are preventive measures taken in view of the overall situation in the country, to avert any untoward incident," Airport Security Force deputy director Ejaz Qureshi told AFP.

"Vigilance and surveillance has been enhanced at all airports and the ratio of checks has been increased," he added.

Officials said the alert was issued shortly after a suicide bomber killed 42 soldiers at a military camp at Dargai in northwest Pakistan last Wednesday.

The blast was apparently in revenge for an October 30 airstrike on a suspected al-Qaeda training camp that left 80 people dead and

triggered protests by Islamists who said the victims were innocent.

The government warned that five "terrorists" believed to be accomplices of the Dargai bomber were preparing to strike somewhere in the country, according to a report in the respected English-language daily Dawn.

Earlier India renewed a high security alert at its airports Sunday following a warning that the al-Qaeda terror network could try and hijack US-bound passenger flights, officials said.

"We sounded an alert after the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) forwarded an e-mail that spoke of the possibility of an al-Qaeda attempt to hijack US-bound flights from India," a home ministry official said.

The official, who did not want to be named, said the e-mail written by an "unknown entity" appeared to have originated from India and was received by the FBI Saturday at its headquarters in the US.

"While the 'target' was US-bound flights, the nature of threat mentioned in the e-mail was 'hijacking'," he added.



Pakistani airport security guards stay alert at the Karachi international airport in Karachi yesterday. Pakistan has tightened security at all of its airports to prevent possible terrorist attacks following a wave of unrest in the country.

## Thailand to lift martial law within days

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's military junta will lift martial law within days, the defence minister said yesterday as the country seeks to boost its international standing ahead of a meeting of Asia-Pacific nations.

"We will know in one or two days," Boonrawd Somtas told reporters.

The junta leader, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, will hold talks with military-appointed Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont before making any decision, he added.

But Boonrawd said that if the junta makes a decision this week on whether to lift martial law, it might not take effect until later in November and might not apply to the entire country.

The defence minister said last week that martial law would likely be lifted before Surayud leaves for the summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum in Hanoi on Saturday.

## Lebanon's crisis deepens as another minister quits

REUTERS, Beirut

Lebanon's political crisis deepened yesterday as the last pro-Syrian minister quit the cabinet shortly before it was to meet to discuss the framework of a special court to try killers of a former prime minister.

Environment Minister Yacoub Sarraf, a loyal supporter of pro-Syrian President Emile Lahoud, resigned after five Shia Muslim ministers from Hezbollah and its ally, the Amal movement, quit over the failure of talks on their demands for effective veto power in the government.

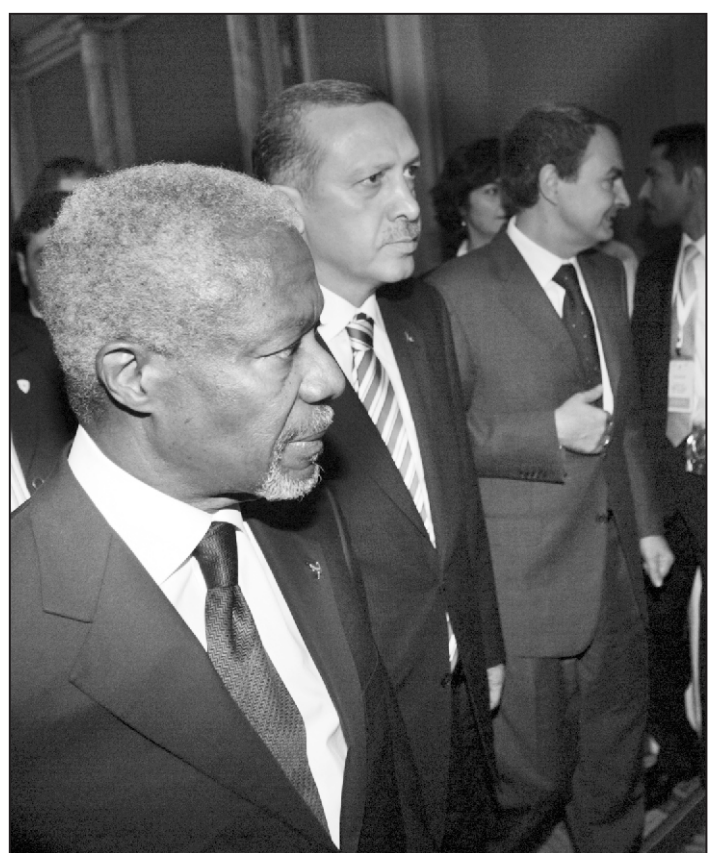
The anti-Syrian majority coalition has accused Hezbollah of implementing a Syrian-Iranian plan to overthrow the Western-backed government and foil efforts to set up the court to try the killers of former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hairi.

## Blast kills 25 coal miners in China

AFP, Beijing

Twenty-five workers were killed in a coalmine explosion in north China and nine are missing, the government said yesterday.

The blast, the latest to hit the nation's notoriously dangerous mining industry, occurred at the Nanshan Colliery in Lingshi county, Shanxi province Sunday night, the State Administration of Work Safety website said.



United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan (L), Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan (C) and Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero (R) attend a meeting of the Alliance of Civilizations, an initiative they launched last year to foster respect and dialogue between Islamic and Western societies.

## UN initiative calls for ME peace to heal Islam-West divide

AFP, Istanbul

Resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is key to improving relations between Islam and the West, a multinational group of scholars, politicians and religious leaders said in a report presented here yesterday to UN chief Kofi Annan.

"The Israeli-Palestinian issue has become a key symbol of the rift between Western and Muslim societies and remains one of the gravest threats to international stability," said the report, excerpts of which were obtained by AFP.

"The international community should seek a settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with a renewed sense of urgency," said the document finalised after a two-day meeting here.

The 20 experts -- among them former Iranian president Mohamed Khatami and South African Nobel Peace Prize laureate Desmond Tutu -- is part of the UN-backed Alliance of Civilisations initiative,

launched last year to foster respect and dialogue between Islamic and Western societies.

The group is co-sponsored by predominantly Catholic Spain and mainly Muslim but strictly secular Turkey.

The report called for an international meeting "as soon as possible" to reinvigorate the Middle East peace process and urged drafting a White Paper analyzing the Israeli-Palestinian landscape "dispassionately and objectively".

After receiving the report, Annan underlined the global ramifications of the Palestinian-Israeli issue.

"We may wish to think of the Arab-Israeli conflict as just one regional conflict amongst many. But it is not," the UN leader said at a joint news conference with Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

## Democrats call for Iraq pullout

Bush meets with Iraq panels

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush was set to meet yesterday with a bipartisan panel of foreign policy experts working on recommendations about US strategy in Iraq as leading lawmakers urge a phased withdrawal of US troops beginning in four or six months.

White House spokesman Tony Snow said the Iraq Study Group is not due to present the president with its final report this week.

"That is yet to come, on a schedule to be determined by the study group itself," he added.

The British newspaper The Observer reported Sunday that Prime Minister Tony Blair told Bush in a long telephone call about the need to involve Iraq's neighbours Syria and Iran in efforts to stabilise the country, which is gripped by spiralling sectarian violence.

On Saturday, Bush signalled that he was open to a new path in the violence-racked country, praising his choice for defence secretary as "an agent of change."

In his weekly radio address, Bush reaffirmed his determination to fight terrorism and said that Iraq remained "the central front in this war on terror."

But he made it clear, less than a week after the stunning Democratic

victory in Tuesday's congressional elections, that he was open to ideas presented by Democrats as well the Iraq Study Group.

On Sunday, Democratic lawmakers said they hoped to begin a phased withdrawal of US troops within four to six months as Washington pressures Iraqis to reach a political solution to the violence there.

US Senator Carl Levin, presumed to become the chairman of the Senate Armed Forces Committee in January, said that Americans supported the short time frame for withdrawal.

"The people spoke dramatically, overwhelmingly, resoundingly to change the course in Iraq," Levin told ABC news, saying that the US military commitment there is "not open-ended."

"As a matter of fact, we need to begin a phased redeployment of forces from Iraq in four to six months," Levin said.

Senator Joe Biden, set to return to his role as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, said the United States should call on the Iraqi government to resolve sectarian divisions through political compromise.

## South Ossetia overwhelmingly votes for independence

AFP, Moscow

Georgia's separatist territory of South Ossetia voted overwhelmingly for independence, according to partial results published yesterday from a referendum that critics warn could inflame regional tensions.

Results from 80 percent of polling stations showed that 99 percent of voters had cast their ballots in favour of independence, Russian news agencies said, citing election officials.

Local residents could still be seen walking the streets of Tskhinvali draped in the South Ossetian flag Monday, while others hooped car horns, following a noisy pro-independence demonstration after polls closed on Sunday.

The leadership of the tiny region in the foothills of the Caucasus mountains has said the referendum is a first step towards international acceptance and eventual union with Russia.

But the outcome was not expected to be recognised by the international community and could aggravate a diplomatic crisis between Georgia and Russia.

Moscow has backed the rebel authorities in South Ossetia while not explicitly endorsing full-blown independence.



South Ossetian people celebrate at the main square in the town of Tskhinvali, capital of Georgia's breakaway region of South Ossetia Sunday. Voters in Georgia's Moscow-backed rebel region of South Ossetia went to the polls in a referendum on independence that has irked Tbilisi amid a diplomatic crisis between Russia and Georgia.

## Calls mount for Israeli army chief to resign over Lebanon war

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's army chief faced mounting calls to resign yesterday after an internal military inquiry blamed army leaders for lax discipline that allowed two soldiers to be seized in a July cross-border raid that sparked the Lebanon war.

Chief of staff Dan Halutz "lacks professionalism and charisma," reserve General Yanush Ben-Gal told public radio.

"He is responsible for a failure of the Israeli army (in Lebanon) that amounts to a knock-out. He has to resign," he said.

The sentiment was echoed throughout the Israeli press Monday, a day after the internal inquiry found that the July 12 cross-border raid in which two soldiers were seized by Hezbollah could have been prevented.

An Israeli commander in charge of the Lebanese border region, Brigadier General Gal Hirsch, resigned Sunday before the inquiry findings were presented to the army leadership in a six-hour session, which according to reports degenerated into shouting matches as Halutz rejected the findings.

Hirsch became the second military head to roll over the Lebanon war, following the September 13 resignation of Major General Udi Adam, who led Israel's northern command during the 34-day offensive.

The inquiry, led by reserve Major General Doron Almog, found that reserve battalions sent to the Israeli-Lebanese border failed to follow procedures, disregarded intelligence and were not adequately prepared for their mission.

AFP, New Delhi

India, the largest arms purchaser among emerging nations, said yesterday it will not prune its military spending, because of the growing threat from terrorism and regional tensions.

India annually spends 14 billion dollars, or 2.34 percent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP), on its military. Since 2004 it has either spent or committed billions of dollars in modernisation projects planned until 2010.

"It is a harsh reality that defence expenditure involves huge outlays on acquisitions," Foreign Ministry Pranab Mukherjee told visiting defence officials from 40 countries including Britain, China, Germany and the US.

"There is no denying the fact that

the challenge of modern warfare with the likely nuclear, biological and chemical dimensions cannot be met with outdated technologies," he said.

"These assume greater significance because of unfathomable dangers arising from proliferation of nuclear technologies over the years and the capability acquired by international terrorist organisations."

"And therefore there is no escape from modernisation of the defence forces," said Mukherjee, who until last month held the defence portfolio.

His remarks came on the eve of the resumption of peace talks with India's nuclear-capable rival Pakistan. Talks had been on hold following the July train bombings in Mumbai, which killed 186 people

and injured 800.

India, which has fought three wars with Pakistan since 1947 and received a bloody nose in a bitter border skirmish with China in 1962, blamed the attack on militant groups backed by Islamabad's main spy agency.

India has in the past two years spent 7.0 billion dollars on acquisitions including 1.43 billion dollars on 26 British trainer jets, 1.2 billion dollars on six French submarines and 1.5 billion dollars on a Russian aircraft carrier.

Its immediate shopping list includes 126 fighter jets worth 6.5 billion dollars, artillery for 1.5 billion dollars as well as plans to construct an air defence ship worth 2.2 billion dollars, according to available estimates.