

International

Sharif, Vajpayee to discuss Kashmir, N-treaty PMs of India, Pakistan under int'l pressure to settle differences

BRIEFLY



US First Lady Hillary Clinton (R) holds hands with South African First Lady Graca Machel during an event with African-American religious leaders in the East Room of the White House Tuesday. — AP/UNB photo

28 die in coal mine blast in China: A gas explosion at a coal mine in central China killed 28 miners and seriously injured one, a Chinese newspaper reported Wednesday. AP says from Beijing.

The explosion on Friday in Baofeng county in Henan Province was caused by an equipment failure, the Workers' Daily reported. The 29 miners working in the small, legally operated mine had no way to escape, it said.

2 women held in UN assembly plot: Two women have been charged with lying to federal agents about a scheme by a reputed member of an Iranian opposition group and another man to sneak into the United Nations General Assembly, AP reports from New York.

Investigators suspect the men may have wanted to stage "some sort of demonstration" during Monday's opening session, said Denise Gibson, spokesman for the Secrete Service in New York City.

Over 200 shops gutted in Pakistan: More than 200 shops were gutted yesterday when a huge fire swept through a Karachi market, police and fire officials said, AFP reports from Karachi.

The blaze erupted before dawn and engulfed a three-story complex in New Boulton market, a popular spot for buying toys and plastic goods, the officials said.

Myanmar troops abduct 27 Thais: Twenty-seven Thais, including police officers and soldiers, were abducted by Myanmar troops but released after negotiations with Thai officials, a Thai military officer said Wednesday, AP reports from Bangkok.

The abduction early Tuesday morning was the result of a business conflict between local people and the Myanmar troops, said the army officer who monitors the Thai-Myanmar border in Kanchanaburi province, 110 kilometers west of Bangkok.

Pak food aid for N Korea: Pakistan has promised to give famine-stricken North Korea 30,000 tons of free grain, the communist state's official media reported Wednesday, AP reports from Seoul.

The first shipment of 14,000 tons arrived in North Korea on Tuesday, the North's official Korean Central News Agency said.

3 die in forest fires in Russia: Three people have died and more than 700 are left homeless from an epidemic of forest fires raging across Russia's far eastern Sakhalin island, the Itar-Tass news agency reported, AFP says from Moscow.

Afghan opposition vows to continue fighting Taliban

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 23: The Afghan opposition vowed Tuesday to continue fighting the Taliban even if the ruling fundamentalist militia captures their last strongholds, report AFP.

"Even if they gain more terrain on the ground, it will only change the nature of the conflict, the resistance will continue," said Abdullah, Deputy Foreign Minister of the ousted government of President Burhanuddin Rabbani.

His government continues to be recognized by the United Nations which is denying the UN seat to the Taliban.

More Taliban victories would also "have much broader consequences in the region," Abdullah told AFP on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

"The whole region has been antagonized and will be much more antagonized if the Taliban advance so it will be a much bigger, more complicated problem," he said.

Abdullah said his movement "reserves the right" to seek weaponry from Iran or other countries if fighting worsens.

The Taliban have captured in the past month two key

strongholds of the Northern Alliance a grouping of opposition militias which now holds less than 10 of the country.

The Taliban victories at Mazar-i-Sharif and Bamyan heightened tensions with Iran which massed 200,000 troops on the border after nine Iranians were killed in northern Afghanistan.

Abdullah said he was encouraged by Monday's meeting at the UN of six of Afghan's neighbours including Iran and Pakistan, the top backer of the Taliban, along with United States and Russia.

The eight countries called on Taliban to reach a ceasefire and negotiate the formation of a new "broad-based" government and authorized special UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi to visit the region.

But Abdullah cast doubt on the ability of Pakistan commitment to push the Taliban to take the steps called for by the six plus two meeting.

The promises made by Pakistani politicians in the past about stopping the situation in Afghanistan have not worked, he said accusing the Pakistan military of seeking a Taliban victory on the ground.

KSA expels Afghan diplomat

RIYADH, Sept 23: Saudi Arabia expelled the Afghan charge d'affaires Tuesday and recalled its representative from Kabul, the official news agency reported, says AP.

The Afghan envoy was ordered to leave "due to Saudi Arabia's national interests," the Saudi Press Agency said.

Saudi Arabia is one of three countries that has recognized the Taliban militia as the legitimate government in war-ravaged Afghanistan. The others are Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates.

The Taliban were condemned internationally after they admitted Sept 10 that their forces had killed eight Iranian diplomats and an Iranian journalist after capturing the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif last month.

Since then the Iranian military has been put on alert and more than 200,000 soldiers have been deployed on Iran's border with Afghanistan.

The Taliban say they have sent as many as 10,000 fresh troops to the border area.

Western diplomats in Riyadh say the Saudi chief of intelligence, Prince Turki al-Faisal, visited Afghanistan last week with the aim of trying to reduce tension between the Taliban and Iran.

Iran is accused of backing the opposition to the Taliban.



Two sailboats and a motor boat washed up on shore by the force of Hurricane Georges in Fajardo, on the east coast of Puerto Rico, Tuesday. Georges' 120 mph winds knocked out power and forced residents into shelters in the densely populated Dominican Republic Tuesday, after plowing through Puerto Rico and leaving at least eight dead in the northeast Caribbean. — AP/UNB photo

NEW YORK, Sept 23: The prime ministers of India and Pakistan are facing international pressure to settle their differences over Kashmir, a dispute that turned ominous since both countries carried out nuclear tests last May, reports AP.

A lunch meeting scheduled for Wednesday between Pakistan's Nawaz Sharif and India's Atal Bihari Vajpayee will be the second since their nuclear tests drew international condemnation and pressure for both sides to sign the nuclear test ban treaty.

Both leaders, meeting on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly, are under domestic pressure that will prevent them from any firm pledges on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

Vajpayee and Sharif met for the first time following the nuclear tests during a regional summit. Those talks ended with India and Pakistan each accusing the other of intransigence, and their armies unleashing the heaviest firing across Kashmir in recent memory.

But since then, their foreign secretaries have met and re-

portedly made progress that could result in Vajpayee and Sharif agreeing in New York to set a date for resuming peace talks.

Sharif held a one-on-one meeting at the United Nations on Monday with President Bill Clinton.

The president's national security adviser, Sandy Berger, later told reporters that Sharif indicated he would make a "positive statement" on the subject of nuclear testing during his address to the UN General Assembly on Wednesday.

Berger was not more specific except to say the statement would be about the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, which Clinton wants both India and Pakistan to sign as a way of reducing tensions.

But Pakistan's Foreign Secretary Shamsah Ahmad said Monday that his country will refuse to discuss signing the treaty until international sanctions and pressures are lifted.

Clinton is due shortly to decide whether to scrap his plan for stops in India and Pakistan this fall during an Asia trip

that was scheduled before the two countries shocked the world by detonating nuclear test devices in defiance of American objections.

An AFP report from Washington says: Indian special envoy Jaswant Singh met US deputy secretary of state Strobe Talbott on Tuesday in a fresh attempt to defuse a crisis stemming from Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests, US officials said.

The officials refused to give details of the talks, which came as the prime ministers of both South Asian rivals prepared to address the UN General Assembly later this week.

Indian and Pakistani officials have suggested that their leaders could make significant statements on the nuclear issue in their speeches, but have given no details.

First India and then Pakistan tested nuclear devices in May, a development that stunned the world and fanned fears of a nuclear arms race in South Asia. Washington promptly imposed economic sanctions on Delhi and Islamabad.

Since then, Talbott has tried to persuade the two countries to sign the 1996 Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, already signed by most other nations. He has held several meetings with Singh and Pakistani foreign secretary Shamsah Ahmad.

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif told US President Bill Clinton at the United Nations on Monday his country would sign the treaty if Washington waived sanctions.

But US officials said Clinton made no specific commitments and the talks produced no breakthrough in efforts to defuse the South Asia nuclear crisis.

US officials said on Friday planned trip to South Asia this year by Clinton is expected to be postponed because India and Pakistan have not made sufficient progress toward agreeing to curb their nuclear programmes.

The White House has declined to announce a final decision on the trip until the Pakistani and Indian prime ministers make their UN addresses. But officials were doubtful there could be enough achieved in time to make the trip possible.

WASHINGTON, Sept 23: South African President Nelson Mandela pledged to stand by President Bill Clinton even if everybody else deserts him, because no other American president has identified himself more with the aspirations of black people, reports AP.

From a luncheon at the South African Embassy to a raucous White House reception with black ministers, Mandela's farewell visit to the United States before retiring from politics next year played more like a pep rally for Clinton and his wife than a valedictory for the South African hero.

It is not our business to interfere in this matter, but we do wish to say that President Clinton is a friend of South Africa and Africa and, I believe, the friend of the great mass of black people and minorities and the disabled of the United States," Mandela said Tuesday.

The frail 80-year-old Mandela led a standing ovation in the East Room after the Rev. Bernice King, daughter of Martin Luther King Jr whipped the assembly into a chant aimed at Clinton's detractors: "Leave him alone! Leave him alone!"

Mandela's wife, Graca Machel, reached for Hillary Rodham Clinton's hand and held it. The visiting newlywed couple was spending the night at the White House in what Mrs Clinton called "a slumber party."

The president called Mandela's friendship one of the greatest of the "many blessings for Hillary and me, far outweighing all the trials," Clinton joked because "he feels like he's about 25 years old again and he's so happily married, he can't be troubled with all these boring affairs like politics."

On policy, Mandela told the black religious leaders that South Africa was counting on them. "It is small wonder that the struggle to end apartheid drew such strength from here that we now look to you to work with us as we seek to banish poverty, hunger, illiteracy and ignorance from our land," he said.

At the embassy luncheon, Mandela said Clinton "has my full support in everything that he does," drawing applause from guests that included presidential friend Vernon Jordan. "In the jurisprudence of many... civilized countries, a person is regarded as innocent until he's convicted."

Mandela also decried the "grave injustice" of Western countries judging South Africa by their standards.

Opposition urges president not to dismiss Bihar govt

NEW DELHI, Sept 23: India's fractious opposition came together Wednesday and urged the president to reject Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's recommendation that a socialist government in an eastern state be fired, reports AP.

Top opposition leaders met President KR Narayanan in New Delhi separately and said Prime Minister Vajpayee's recommendation to fire the Bihar state government controlled by his political rivals smacked of vendetta. Vajpayee's government says federal authorities should take over running Bihar because law and order has collapsed there.

The president, who must make the final decision, was consulting politicians and legal experts on the sensitive issue. He has in the past turned down a similar request against another state government.

In Bihar, a general strike called by the governing party, Rashtriya Loktantrik Morcha, shut down shops and busi-

nesses, but no violence was reported. Nearly 1,400 paramilitary forces guarded key towns in the state.

The state assembly adopted a resolution urging the president to reject the federal government's recommendation. On Tuesday evening, nearly 300 governing party ministers, lawmakers and supporters staged a three-hour sit-in protest outside the residence of the state governor, Sunder Singh Bhandari.

Vajpayee's Cabinet on Tuesday endorsed Bhandari's recommendation that the state government be fired on grounds of "constitutional breakdown, financial mismanagement and failure of law and order." Bihar is considered India's most lawless state.

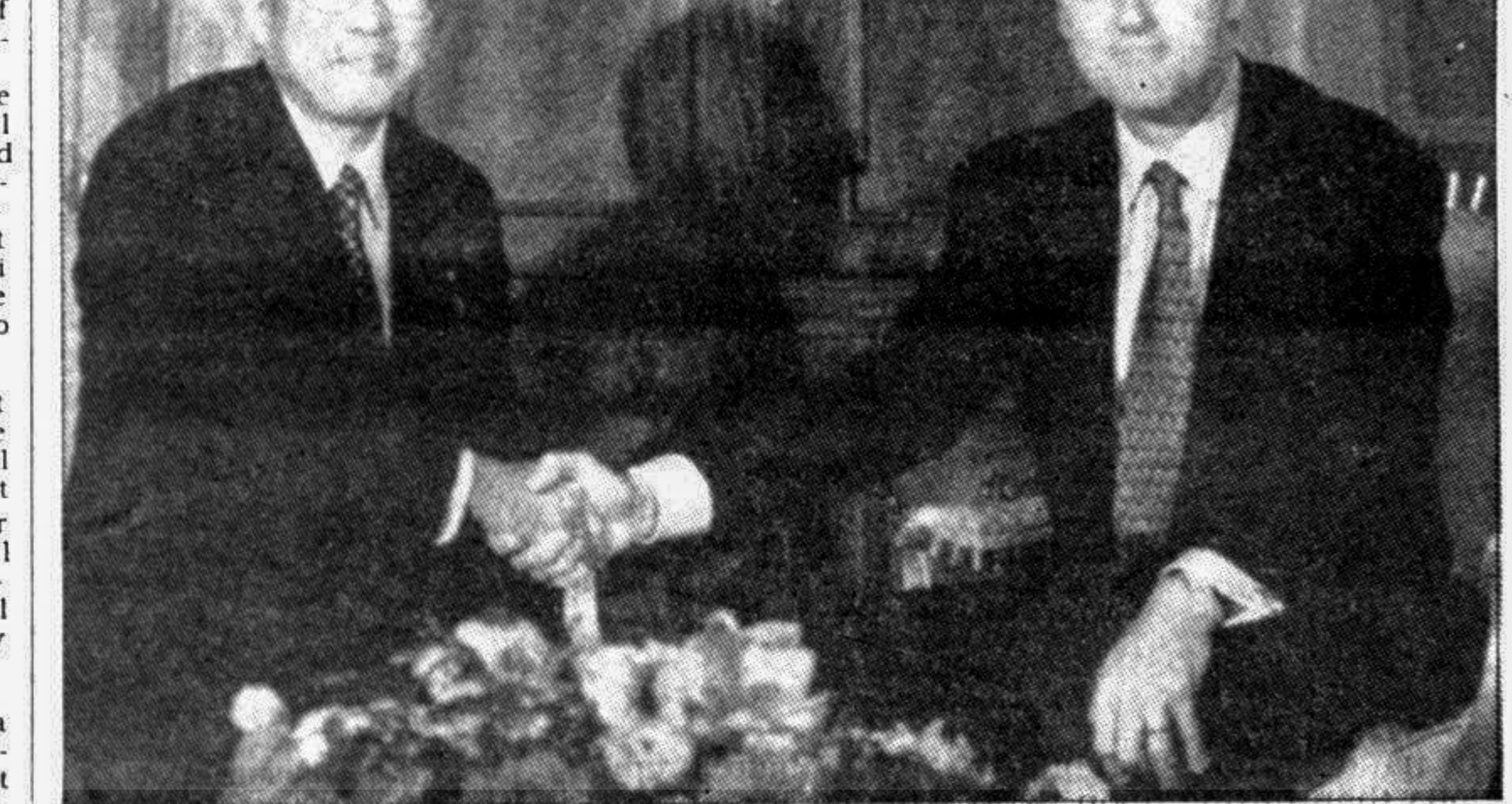
Bhandari is a senior leader of Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party but he is expected to act impartially. State governors are appointed by the federal government to oversee local administrations, while chief

ministers who are members of state assemblies are the top local politicians.

In New Delhi, former Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral met the president and later said the dismissal of the state government would seriously damage democracy. He pointed out Bihar Chief Minister Rabri Devi had won a confidence vote in the state legislature only two days ago.

Federal officials say that while Devi has the votes in the legislature, she has lost control of law and order in Bihar. Most of the lawmakers in the Bihar legislature have criminal records and are frequently accused of switching political loyalty in return for hefty bribes.

Mulayam Singh Yadav, a leader of the Rashtriya Loktantrik Morcha, who also met with the president Wednesday, Yadav called for Bhandari's dismissal.



US President Bill Clinton (R) meets with Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York Tuesday. — AP/UNB photo

Anwar Ibrahim's wife asked to appear before police

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 23: Police called the wife of sacked deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim to appear at a police station for questioning Wednesday, one of her aides said, reports AP.

Azizah Ismail was handed the order by plainclothes police officers from the criminal investigation department, the aide said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Meanwhile, Anwar was expected to be brought to a court to face charges ranging from disturbing public order to sexual misconduct, including sodomy, sources at his house said. Sodomy is illegal in Malaysia.

Anwar's wife, who has spent most of her time inside the house with the couple's six children, was being investigated for allegedly making seditious statements. She had alleged that police may be injecting her husband, arrested Sunday, with the HIV virus.

On Tuesday, a senior government official said Anwar will face a dozen sex-related charges in court by the weekend.

Deputy Home Minister Tajol Rosli Mohd Ghazali called on Malaysians, confused by the political events of the past three weeks, to have faith in the judicial system.

Allow the legal proceedings to commence," he told reporters late Tuesday.

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said he personally interviewed people who said they engaged in illegal sex acts with his ousted deputy, Mahathir, who fired Anwar as his deputy and finance minister on Sept 2, said the allegations were so vile he decided to question people himself.

Anwar, 51, has adamantly denied all the charges against him. He says trouble started when he began questioning Mahathir's policies and challenged his 17-year rule.

Since his ouster, tens of thousands of supporters have demonstrated at rallies throughout the country. Many supporters are from the conservative Islamic party he founded during his student days and they do not believe the government's sexual misconduct allegations.

Ghazali said Anwar would have been charged in criminal court Monday, but thousands of his supporters surrounded the courthouse, forcing police to postpone the hearing.

When Anwar supporters outside the courthouse lunged at the motorcade of Queen Elizabeth II on Monday, riot police moved in to disperse the crowd with tear gas and water cannons.

They had used the same methods to drive marchers away from the prime minister's residence Sunday night. It was the first violent clash between police and demonstrators in this Southeast Asian country in a decade.

"He will be charged based on the same reasons why the prime minister sacked him," Tajol Rosli said. "The charges are all related to sex scandals and not for other reasons."

Late Tuesday, the government disclosed that Anwar, arrested under a colonial security law that allows imprisonment without trial, was being held at Kuala Lumpur's police headquarters.

Khatami says Salman Rushdie affair 'completely finished'

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 23: Iranian President Mohammad Khatami said on Tuesday the Salman Rushdie affair should be regarded as "completely finished," reports Reuters.

But he announced no substantive change in Iran's position on the death sentence issued against the British author of the "Satanic Verses" by the late revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Khatami told western reporters we should consider the Salman Rushdie's issue as completely finished.

He said that while Khomeini and other religious leaders had expressed their views in 1989 on what they regarded as Rushdie's blasphemy against Islam, the Iranian government had announced that it would take no action on the issue.

Iran now wanted to move on from the cultural clash of the Rushdie affair, which postponed relations between the Islamic Republic and Europe to promote a dialogue between civilisations, the president said.

Zardari indicted of corruption

LAHORE, Pakistan, Sept 23: An accountability court here Tuesday indicted Asif Ali Zardari, the husband of former Pakistani Premier Benazir Bhutto, of corruption, court sources said, reports AFP.

He was charged by a two-judge accountability bench of the Lahore High Court with possessing assets "disproportionate" to his known sources of income inside and outside Pakistan.

The assets listed in the charge sheet include agricultural and other lands and stakes in sugar mills in Pakistan and real estate in Britain, Belgium, France and the United States.

Zardari has been in jail since the dismissal of his wife as premier in November, 1996 by then President Farooq Ahmed Leghari for alleged misuse of power.

He was a minister in Benazir administration and is now a member of the Senate.

The official Associated Press of Pakistan news agency (APP) said Zardari's assets at home were valued at 22 billion rupees (478 million dollars) and those abroad were worth one and a half billion dollars.

Zardari, who was present in court, refused to receive the charge sheet but described the charges as malicious and baseless and part of a campaign of political victimisation by the government, APP reported.

Judges Ihsanul Haq Chaudhury and Faqir Muhammad Khokar framed the charges on the basis of a case filed by the government's anti-corruption accountability bureau.

The bureau has also filed several other corruption cases against Benazir and Zardari involving charges the couple received kickbacks on government contracts and deposited the money in bank accounts abroad.

Zardari has also been charged with involvement in a murder conspiracy that allegedly led to the death of Benazir's estranged brother Mir Murtaza in a police shootout in Karachi in 1996 while she was still in power.

Who represents Afghanistan at UN — Taliban or Rabbani?

NEW YORK, Sept 23: With a broad gesture of his right hand, Noorullah Zadran makes a sweeping motion over a wall-sized map of Afghanistan, reports AP.

"It is like chess," he says of the stalemate in the civil war in his native land. "Sometimes you come to a point where you can go no further. All you can do then is to take the chess board and use it as a weapon."

The black-bearded Zadran, dressed in a Western-style three-piece suit, perspires slightly in the stifling heat of his cramped office, above a clinic in the Flushing section of New York's Queens borough.

From this unofficial mission, Zadran represents Afghanistan's Taliban religious army before the United Nations. There are none of the trappings of diplomatic ostentation, just a simple inscription above the door: "There is no God but Allah."

Zadran acknowledges his job has been an uphill battle.

The United Nations continues to seat the representative of Burhanuddin Rabbani two years after Taliban troops drove his government out of Kabul and as his militia and allies battle desperately to hang

on to a shrinking corner of the country's north.

On the world stage, Afghanistan is virtually a pariah state. The strict Islamic code imposed by Taliban leaders — banning women from schools and work, for example — has made Kabul's new masters so unpopular that only three countries have established diplomatic relations.

The US attack on the bases of Osama bin Laden in Afghanistan and the Taliban government's subsequent refusal to hand over the alleged terrorist has made the issue of diplomatic recognition even more difficult.

"If they can provide us with credible evidence, we are willing to sit down and discuss the matter of bin Laden," Zadran says. "But until we have diplomatic relations with the United States, we can't really discuss the issue of extradition."

By contrast to the unofficial Taliban mission, Rabbani's delegation to the United Nations is housed in an upper story of a midtown Manhattan high-rise.

A greying career diplomat, Ambassador AG Ravan Farhad has his own maps to show who controls what in Afghanistan.

"In the north, the Taliban occupy several towns and a few roads, but they do not have the countryside," he says. "They are unpopular among the people and resistance to them has already begun."

The opposition alliance's tenuous hold on the battlefield aside, Farhad insists Rabbani and his Cabinet, and not the Taliban, remain the legitimate rulers of Afghanistan. The mission carries on as it has since 1992, when Rabbani came to power after a Marxist regime was overthrown in Kabul.

"There is no doubt that for the time being we are in a defensive position," he concedes. "This is less costly for us. For the time being, there is no other solution."

As Taliban forces have spread their control over much of Afghanistan, their leaders are pressing for the right to be seated at the United Nations. So far, that call has left the UN credentials committee unimpressed.

"There are a lot of concerns about the Taliban, especially regarding the treatment of women," says Carlston Boucher, the ambassador from Barbados and chairman of the committee that determines

which delegations will be accredited.

"The situation on the ground is very terrible," Boucher says. "We'd like to see things normalize before we make any further decision on whom to recognise."

Taliban leaders have also made it difficult for the United Nations and other aid agencies to operate in Afghanistan, complicating relations with the international body. On more than one occasion, aid workers have been forced to leave the country altogether.

For Zadran, however, the United Nations is simply stalling on the issue of accrediting the current Kabul government.

"Every time we go there, they give us lectures: 'Why women are like this? Why men are like that? What about education?'" Zadran complains.

He makes no apologies for the Taliban's adherence to a strict form of Islamic law. "Islam is the only unifying factor in Afghanistan," he says.

"But for the would-be rulers of the entire country, Zadran's counterpart, Farhad, offers a caveat based on experience: "Afghanistan is a very difficult country to rule. You cannot easily or for long impose your will."