

International

Sharif agrees to hold talks with opposition

ISLAMABAD, Sept 26: Amidst anti-government agitation, beleaguered Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has finally agreed to hold talks with the opposition on various national issues and will set up a three-member committee in this regard, reports PTI.

Sharif, during a meeting with the Parliamentary Secretary on Information, Anwarul Haq Ramay said he believes in talks and very soon he will set up a three-member committee for discussing national issues with the opposition, the Urdu Daily Jung said.

The prime minister agreed to hold talks on issues ranging from signing of CTBT, establishment of an independent Election Commission and the passage of the controversial Shariah Bill from the

Parliament, it said.

He said the agenda for the talks with the opposition parties will include signing of CTBT, setting up of an independent Election Commission, preparing new voter list, Shariah Bill, Article 62 and 63 besides constitutional amendment with regard to tenure of the National Assembly.

The report said as per Sharif's plan, all political and religious parties will be called for consultations on the above mentioned agenda.

The prime minister said in the first round of talks parties with representation in the Parliament will be called for consultations followed by party with no representation and finally the religious and regional parties will be called.

AFP adds: The Pakistani opposition Sunday issued an

Ultimatum for release of Pak leaders, workers

ultimatum to the government to release detained leaders and supporters within two days or face renewed protests.

But authorities in southern Sindh province said those arrested in a crackdown on an opposition rally Saturday would face trial.

Police prevented attempts by the opposition Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) to stage the anti-government rally here by arresting frontline leaders and supporters.

Those detained were mostly from the 19-party GDA's key components, the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of former premier Benazir Bhutto, and the ethnic based Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM).

MQM leader Farooq Sattar

claimed more than 6,000 had been arrested in the past two days, while police sources put the figure at less than 1,000.

"It is the worst kind of state terrorism against political leaders and workers," Sattar said, accusing officials of trying to muzzle any dissent.

Calling the police action a "black chapter in the history of democracy" in Pakistan, he said the detainees must be released within 48 hours or a new wave of opposition protests would be launched.

Syed Ghaus Ali Shah, who is chief of the provincial administration in the absence of an elected government, told reporters the government would show no leniency to the detainees.

In a similar crackdown on September 11, authorities released hundreds of opposition supporters and leaders as a 'gesture of goodwill'.

Two gunned down in Pakistan

Another AFP reports adds: unidentified motorbike riders shot dead a Christian social worker and Sunni Muslim official in separate attacks in the central Pakistani province of Punjab, police said Sunday.

They said three men on a motorbike opened fire on 62-year-old retired government official, Rana Ashraf, early Sunday when he left for dawn prayers in a mosque in Zikriya Town, Multan.



Polling officers wait with sealed ballot boxes overnight to deposit their respective ballot boxes at the main collection centre in Patna Sunday in Bihar state after voting came to an end late Saturday. Various parts of Bihar went to polls Saturday at the fourth phase of the general elections in India to elect a new central government. — AFP photo

Opposition concedes Taliban advance

KABUL, Sept 26: Afghanistan's opposition forces Sunday conceded the Taliban had made some advances after the hardline Islamic militia launched the second wave of its summer offensive, reports AFP.

General Sayed Hussain Anwari of the opposition's United Front said several posts were captured around Imam Sahib in northern Kunduz province where heavy fighting had entered its second day.

"We think they will continue their attacks in order to make up for their defeat in the Shamali areas. We believe they will be defeated in this region too," Anwari told AFP.

The Taliban launched its summer offensive on July 28 at front lines north of Kabul. Initially the militia made spectacular gains across the Shamali Plains in an advance on opposition strongholds in the nearby Panjshir Valley.

However, a counter-attack by forces loyal to opposition

commander Ahmad Shah Massoud cut Taliban gains in half and Kabul's notorious front lines were re-drawn about 30 km north of the capital.

Analysts say the second wave -- launched from three

points on Saturday -- in the far north is aimed at cutting supply routes heading south into the Panjshir ahead of winter.

While fighting continued around Imam Sahib, Anwari said battle zones at Dasht-i-Archi and Bangi had eased where "it is quiet because the Taliban attack was repulsed in these two directions."

"Only fighting is going on around Imam Sahib where the Taliban have captured a few posts," he said.

The Taliban has so far declined to comment on the fresh fighting, although militia authorities rarely comment once an offensive is underway.

Independent sources confirmed the much anticipated second wave had begun involving about 6,000 Taliban troops but they were unable to confirm the opposition's claims.

"We expect the fighting to continue for two or three days before the commanders re-assess the situation," one western observer told AFP.

The United Front also claims Taliban strikes were backed by the militia's ageing fleet of MiG fighter jets with aerial bombardments killing at least 15 civilians.



Sun Chih-feng, a 25-year-old vocational school student, is pulled out alive from tons of debris Sunday, 130 hours after a 12-storey apartment building in Taipei collapsed in a powerful earthquake which struck September 21. His brother Sun Chih-kuang, 20, was rescued minutes earlier. Both are reported in good conditions by doctors who call the survival "miracle". — AFP photo

Two brothers rescued from Taipei rubble

TAIPEI, Sept 26: Two brothers emerged alive from the rubble of their apartment block Sunday 130 hours after it was razed by the Taiwan earthquake and as another powerful aftershock brought further death and destruction, reports AFP.

The men's father Sun Cheng said the pair were found when Taipei deputy mayor Ou Chin-ting stepped inside a tunnel dug by rescuers and came across a man who announced: "I'm Sun Chih-kuang. I'm one of those trapped here."

The 20-year-old had apparently dug his own way out after seeing light from approaching rescuers. He was able to walk out and thank his rescuers before being lifted down off the rubble in a crane's bucket and, grinning, embrace his family on the ground.

Soon afterwards, Sun's brother Sun Chih-feng, 25, was also lifted out of the rubble.

He was blindfolded after five days in the dark following Tuesday's 7.6-Richter-scale pre-dawn quake that killed more than 2,000 people. His condition was weaker than his brother's.

Taipei mayor Ma Ying-jeou said the pair "survived by eating rotten apples from a refrigerator buried with them, and drinking water we sprayed on the site and their own urine".

The pair were protected from tonnes of concrete and twisted metal by the refrigerator and a desk, and were able to talk to each other.

Japanese rescue specialists had declared there were no signs of life in the rubble on Wednesday.

Later at the capital's Suagshan hospital Doctor Su-chong-jian said: "The brothers both suffered smoke inhalation but otherwise they're OK except for a few bruises." They were also dehydrated.

Ma added Sun Chih-kuang had told him: "Buddha told me in a dream that I would be rescued in the morning."

The pair's parents, also devout Buddhists, thanked God for their sons' lives. Father Sun Cheng said: "It's a miracle."

Mother Liou Luan-ran said: "I did not believe heaven would take the lives of my two sons. When I heard someone had been rescued, I knew it was them." As the rescue began early

Sunday, another massive aftershock struck central Taiwan. It came hours after President Lee Teng-hui declared a six-month state of emergency to help more than 100,000 homeless refugees.

Three more die in latest quake

The death toll from Taiwan's devastating earthquake rose Sunday as the island was hit by another massive aftershock, officials said.

Officials listed 2,024 people as dead, up by around 20 overnight. Three more people were confirmed to have died in Sunday's early morning aftershock, which measured 6.8 on the Richter scale.

Local media reports spoke of several more deaths and around 20 more injured.

The official toll on Sunday at noon (10:00 am BST) also included a further 8,565 people listed as injured, 207 as missing or trapped in rubble, and 1,065 stranded in remote areas.

The earthquake which struck central Taiwan registered 7.6 on the Richter scale.

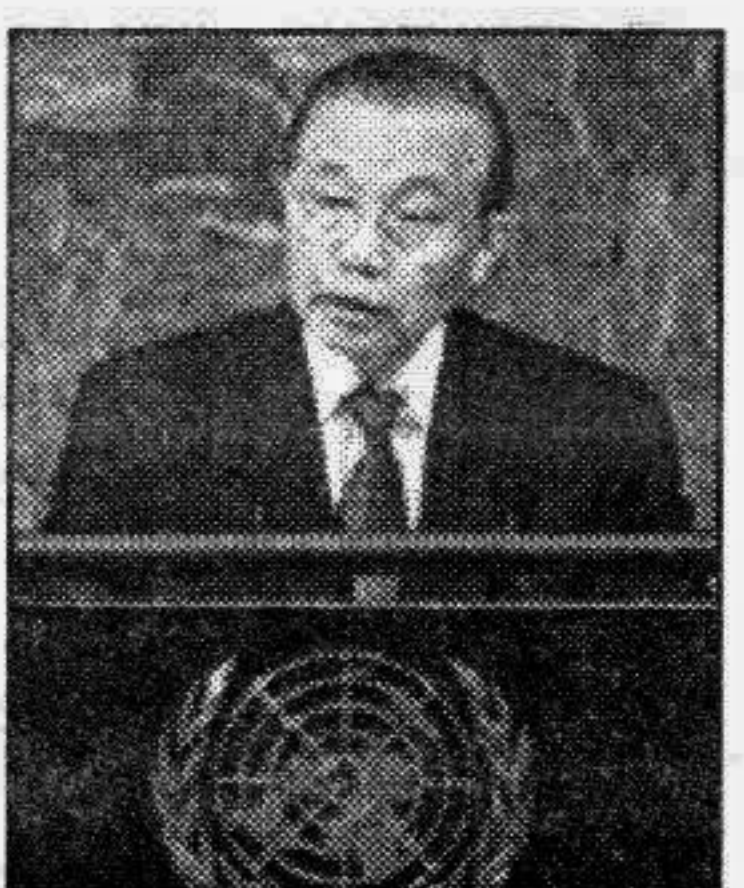
Yemeni president re-elected

SANA, Sept 26: Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh was re-elected president as expected Saturday, garnering the vast majority of the votes in an election that was boycotted by opposition groups, reports AP.

Saleh won 96.3 per cent of the vote, said Abdullah Barakat, the country's Chief electoral officer. Saleh's only rival, Najeeb Qahtan al-Shaabi, got 3.7 per cent. Barakat said at a news conference.

Authorities said Thursday's elections -- Yemen's first direct presidential polls -- were a success. But critics said they were an expensive farce put on to give an illusion of democracy.

Saleh first came to power as leader of North Yemen in 1978. Much of the nation credits him with unifying North and South Yemen in 1990.



Vietnamese Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Manh Cam addresses the fifty-fourth session of the United Nations General Assembly Saturday at UN Headquarters. — AFP photo

Rains kill 17 West Bengal seeks help of army, air force

CALCUTTA, Sept 26: The West Bengal government yesterday decided to seek help of the Army and Air Force in Burdwan and Birbhum districts, the two most affected, amidst fear that the state may see another spell of deluge as the low pressure, which had headed towards Bihar on Friday, suddenly turned east during the day and is now moving towards Darjeeling and Cooch Behar, reports PTI.

At least 17 people were killed so far and 10 lakh more were affected in the rain although the State Finance Minister, Asim Dasgupta, confirmed only eight. Fifteen districts were declared as "flood-affected" by the government. The minister said that the low pressure has turned towards North Bengal districts after wreaking havoc in the south.

Egyptians urged to back Mubarak for another term

CAIRO, Sept 26: Some 24 million registered voters were called to vote "yes" for a fourth six-year term for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak when polls opened early Sunday, reports AFP.

The 40,907 polling stations in the country, which opened at 8 a.m. (11:00 am BST), will stay open until 5 p.m. (1400 GMT) and possibly longer if voting lines are long, the interior ministry said.

It said 23,937,196 people were registered to vote out of a population of 64 million people.

After 18 years in office, the 71-year-old president received the backing in June of parliament, 90 per cent dominated by his own National Democratic Party, as sole candidate for a fourth term in office.

The only possible variable to watch in Sunday's poll will be the turnout, analysts here say.

Thousands rally against Milosevic

BELGRADE, Sept 26: In the biggest turnout during daily rallies in recent days, at least 55,000 people marched Saturday through downtown Belgrade and several other Serbian cities to press their demand for the resignation of President Slobodan Milosevic, reports AP.

At the start of the protest in downtown Belgrade, Cedomir Jovanovic, a former student leader and now an official of the opposition Democratic Party, said "We displayed a tremendous democratic potential. Tonight we will pay tribute to a victim of the oppressive regime, and we will criticise all those misreporting about us."

Later on, four girls laid bou-

quets of red flowers and people lit candles at the place where Slavko Curuvija, the owner of Dnevni Telegraph, a prominent opposition newspaper, was shot and killed by two gunmen on April 11. The marchers filed past in silence.

Curuvija's newspaper had been banned and fined for criticising Milosevic and other government officials after a strict media law was adopted in October 1998. He also had been at odds with ultranationalist leader Vojislav Seselj.

As they marched, their number swelled to more 40,000 people, the highest number in recent Belgrade protest rallies.

Infrastructure projects in West Bank settlements, the radio said.

The figures provoked an angry reaction from Israeli peace activists. "Housing Minister Yitzhak Levy is continuing the policies of the former right-wing government of Benjamin Netanyahu," the Peace Now group charged.

But a ministry spokesman vigorously defended the policies of the hardline Levy, whose National Religious Party is a strong supporter of the 160,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"(Settlement) construction within Eretz Israel (Biblical Greater Israel) will continue in accordance with the government's programme everywhere where there is a demand for housing," the spokesman said.

Barak's government has pledged not to build new Jewish settlements in the occupied territories but has said it will continue to meet housing needs in existing settlements.

A further seven tenders have been invited since July for in-

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