

Army takeover throws Pakistan into disarray

ISLAMABAD, Oct 13: A military coup has thrown Pakistan into political disarray just one year after it exploded a nuclear device and months after a conflict with India nearly erupted into a full-fledged war, reports AP.

Prime Minister Nawas Sharif and most of his government ministers were under apparent house arrest, with soldiers surrounding their homes refusing to let anyone in or out. Army Chief Gen Pervez Musharraf spoke briefly on national television urging calm and saying the military had no choice but to take over.

Western diplomats say it was Musharraf who orchestrated the takeover of Indian territory in Kashmir this summer, provoking a bitter border dispute that many feared would escalate into an all-out war.

Sharif and Musharraf apparently disagreed over the withdrawal of Islamic militants from Kargil in Indian-held Kashmir — a withdrawal negotiated by Sharif at the behest of the United States.

But what policies Musharraf will pursue toward India were not laid out in his speech to the nation, nor were there any in-

dications of the army's plans for Pakistan. There was no word on whether he planned to hold elections, establish an interim government or impose full army rule. Pakistan has been ruled by the army for 25 of its 52-year history.

The last round of military rule ended in Pakistan in 1988 with the death of Army Chief Gen Zia-ul-Haq in a mysterious plane crash. Since then Pakistan has struggled with democracy.

It's unclear if the army chief will feel bound by the constitutional requirement that elections be held within three months of a government's removal from power.

It also was not clear what reaction, if any, there would be from Sharif's supporters.

Although he won elections in 1997 with a solid two-thirds majority, Sharif had become increasingly unpopular for policies critics describe as heavy-handed.

Sharif spent much of his time in power consolidating his power. He methodically removed rivals from positions of power. He forced the resignation of President Farooq

Leghari after he publicly criticised Sharif's government. He forced the resignation of the Supreme Court's Chief Justice when he pressed ahead with charges of contempt against Sharif.

He forced the resignation of Musharraf's predecessor, Gen Jehangir Keramat, after he called for a National Security Council that would give the army a more direct role in government policy-making.

He also dismissed the Sindh provincial government when it differed with his government and imposed direct federal government rule, alienating the southern province.

Sharif came down with a heavy hand to quell protests by opposition politicians.

Musharraf said in his speech that Sharif was driving the country to ruin.

However, analysts say chances of a quick return to democracy are slim. Most analysts here expect Musharraf to establish an interim government of technocrats and former politicians to run the country for at least two years before even contemplating general elections.

Pak politics Chronology of events since end of army rule in '88

UNDATED, Oct 13: Since the last round of military rule ended in 1988, Pakistan's attempt at democracy has been a succession of elections, dismissals and appointments until it ended as it began — with army rule, reports AP.

Nov 19, 1988: Benazir Bhutto is elected prime minister in the first free and fair party-based election since 1977. Three months before polls, military dictator Gen. Zia-ul-Haq dies in a mysterious plane crash.

Aug 6, 1990: President Ghulam Ishaq Khan dismisses Ms Bhutto's government on charges of runaway corruption and incompetence. Fresh elections are called and an interim government headed by Ghulam Mustafa Jatoi is appointed.

Oct 24, 1990: Nawaz Sharif's nine-party Democratic Alliance sweep the polls securing a two-thirds majority in the federal Parliament and handing Ms Bhutto a humiliating defeat.

April 18, 1993: Sharif's government is dismissed by Ishaq Khan also on charges of corruption, ending a five-month feud between the President and Sharif. An interim government headed by Balakh Sher Mazari is appointed.

May 26, 1993: The Supreme Court restores Sharif's government, charging Ishaq Khan has overstepped his constitutional authority when he dismissed the government.

July 18, 1993: Both Sharif and President Ishaq Khan resign under pressure from the army. An interim government, headed by former World Bank vice-president Moeen Qureshi, calls fresh elections.

Oct 7, 1993: Ms Bhutto returns to power in general elections. Her Pakistan People's Party is forced to form a coalition government.

Nov 5, 1996: President Farooq Leghari dismisses Ms Bhutto's government on charges including rampant corruption, economic mismanagement and sponsoring police hit-squads. Leghari appoints an interim government headed by Miraj Khalid and sets fresh elections for Feb 3.

Jan 29, 1997: Supreme Court upholds Ms Bhutto's dismissal from power and orders elections to go ahead.

Feb 3, 1997: Nawaz Sharif is elected prime minister for Pakistan with a two-thirds majority.

Oct 12, 1999: Nawaz Sharif's government is dismissed by Army Chief, Gen Pervez Musharraf in a military coup.

World fears regional instability

BEIJING, Oct 13: China led a chorus of concern at the military coup in its neighbour and ally Pakistan Wednesday, as countries across the world warned it could heighten tensions in the volatile region, reports AP.

As Pakistan's arch rival India put its troops on alert along the border, many nations were warily eyeing the unfolding events after Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was ousted Tuesday by army chief General Pervez Musharraf.

The subcontinent edged to the brink of war earlier this year as India and Pakistan — the world's two newest nuclear nations — clashed over the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir.

India's army chief General V.P. Malik called for the country to be extra vigilant following the coup.

"The political instability in the neighbourhood is not conducive to the regional security environment and so we have to watch the situation closely in Pakistan," he said.

India and Pakistan conducted tit-for-tat nuclear tests in May 1998, sparking global concern at the prospect of a

South Asian arms race.

China was among those that called then for restraint from both sides.

"Pakistan is a friendly neighbour of China. We are very concerned with the changing situation in Pakistan and are presently furthering our understanding of the situation," said a statement issued Wednesday by Beijing's foreign ministry.

Despite their close ties, Sharif failed to win Beijing's backing over the Kashmir crisis, which erupted when Islamic guerrillas occupied mountain heights for 10 weeks in the summer.

Many nations also criticised the coup as a defeat for democracy, as it removed a prime minister who had been overwhelmingly elected for a five-year term in February 1997.

Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy said the Commonwealth would consider expelling Pakistan and raised the possibility of economic sanctions.

"I have received a communication from the secretary general of the Commonwealth," Axworthy said. "He said we'll have to consider Pakistan's position in the Commonwealth as

a result of this."

"I don't think we should be lending (money) to people that have military takeovers or military dictatorships."

"We have a lot of development aid programs that are active. Certainly Pakistan is very susceptible and sensitive to international financial institutions."

British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook warned the Pakistani army to respect the constitution.

"Events are still unfolding but the military there must be under no illusion — we will strongly condemn any unconstitutional actions," Cook said.

Australia also called for the early restoration of democracy, warning the constitution and the rule of law had to be respected.

"Australia is deeply concerned at the unconstitutional overthrow of the democratically elected government in Pakistan," Foreign Minister Alexander Downer told parliament.

However, Washington took a more cautious approach urging the restoration of democracy, but hinting it could work with the new leadership.

"We regret that once again a chain of political events has led to a setback for democracy and the constitution in Pakistan," State Department spokesman James Rubin said.

"We hope that in his upcoming policy statements, General (Pervez) Musharraf will set forth clear plans for the restoration of civilian government in Pakistan."

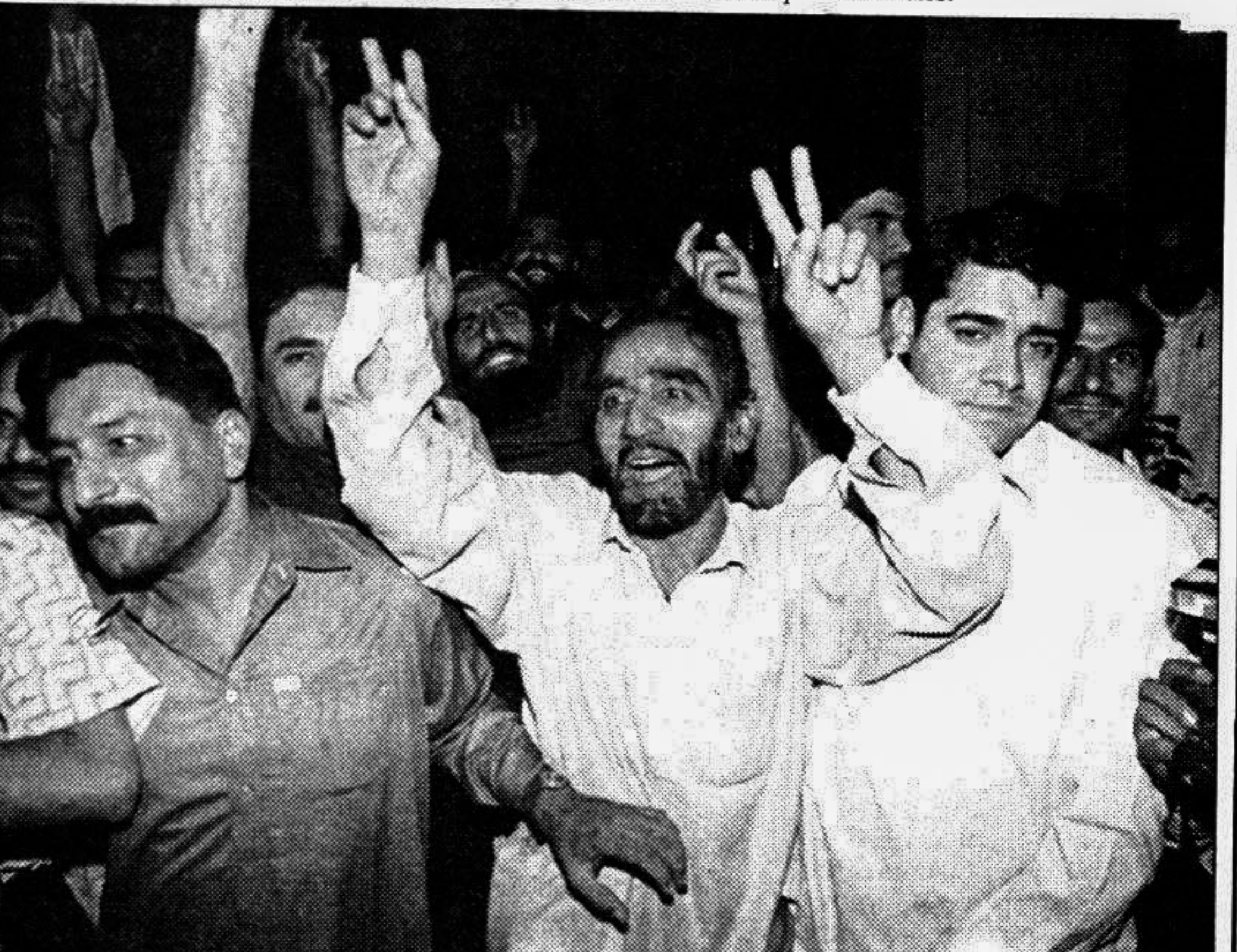
Musharraf told the nation early Wednesday in his first address, that he would set out his future policies later.

Japan, the largest donor to Pakistan, before aid was frozen last year, called on the army to release Sharif from house arrest.

Foreign Minister Yohei Kono said in a statement he hoped the crisis would be settled as soon as possible in accordance with democratic and constitutional procedures.

"Japan will keep a close watch on the situation with great concern," he said.

Japan joined Britain in warning nationals against travelling to Pakistan, while the Philippines said it was checking the safety of its 600 nationals in the country.



People shout pro-army slogans during the celebration of the dismissal of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif government on Tuesday. Sharif's government was "dismissed" after it sacked army chief General Pervez Musharraf. Troops have taken over security at the airports of all major cities and of key installations. — AFP photo

Profile of coup leader

ISLAMABAD, Oct 13: The leader of the coup in Pakistan is a former army commando known as a moderate on domestic affairs and a hawk when it comes to relations with neighboring India, reports AP.

A decorated soldier, Musharraf won his commando status on national television early Wednesday morning when he announced Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's dismissal from power and the army's takeover.

Musharraf, who joined the military in 1964, twice served in Pakistan's Special Services Group or commando unit. He faced off against Indian soldiers as a commando stationed on the disputed border that divides Kashmir between Pakistan and its uneasy neighbour India.

According to most western analysts, Musharraf orchestrated this summer's occupation of Indian territory in Kashmir, which led to a bitter border dispute that world leaders feared could escalate into an all-out war between the newest nuclear powers.

There have been reports in recent weeks that Sharif's decision to withdraw militants from Kashmir this summer to head off a war with India angered Musharraf and was the cause of a yawning rift between the two that eventually led to the government's downfall.

Musharraf received a medal of distinction for his service during Pakistan's 1965 war against India, which was waged for 17 days over the disputed Kashmir region — the flash-point of two wars between the neighbours. They fought a third war in 1971 over Bangladesh or what was then East Pakistan.

At home Musharraf is seen as moderate, who has supported economic reforms. Among his criticisms of Sharif was that his government had driven the country toward economic ruin.

He also has not been aligned with the country's right-wing religious groups, with the exception of encouraging their battle against Indian troops in Kashmir.

A former instructor at Pakistan's top military schools, Musharraf has been described by fellow soldiers as a "professional soldier."

Judge's decision on Anwar sex trial Oct 18

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 13: The judge in Anwar Ibrahim's sex trial said he would announce on October 18 whether to acquit the former Malaysian finance minister or order the trial to continue with defence witnesses, reports Reuters.

"I will give my decision on Monday. I need enough time to go through the lengthy evidence given," High Court judge Arifin Jaka told the court today.

DPRK demands cancellation of US-ROK military exercise

SEOUL, Oct 13: North Korea on Wednesday demanded the cancellation of planned joint war games between the United States and South Korea, branding them a dangerous provocation and a threat to the area's tense peace, reports AP.

"We vehemently denounce the 'Foal Eagle' joint military exercise planned by warhawks at home and abroad as a grave military provocation and an undisguised threat of aggression on (North Korea)," the Rodong Simnun newspaper said.

"The situation of the Korean peninsula is extremely tense as can be seen in the provocative armed conflict at the (Yellow Sea) orchestrated by the South Korean authorities some time ago."

"Who can say that the projected exercise will not be a prelude to a total war of aggression on the north under the situation?" the paper asked in a signed editorial carried by the Korean Central News Agency.

The Cold War rivals had a brief but bitter gunbattle over their disputed maritime border in the Yellow Sea in June in which at least one North Korean military vessel was sunk.

India will talk with any 'establishment' in Pakistan: Vajpayee

NEW DELHI, Oct 13: Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said Wednesday that India would talk with any "establishment" in Pakistan following the military coup there, reports AP.

"We are willing to talk to any establishment in Pakistan," Vajpayee told reporters, when asked if Tuesday's military takeover would rule out a future dialogue with Islamabad.

"We have already registered our great concern. Vigilance on the border has been intensified," Vajpayee said as he emerged from a special cabinet meeting.

In an earlier written statement, issued after he was sworn in at the head of a new coalition government, Vajpayee had called on Islamabad to create the "right environment" to pursue friendly bilateral ties.

"We are monitoring the situation and keeping ourselves fully informed," Vajpayee said. "India's policy towards Pakistan is consistent and principled. We wish the people of Pakistan well."

"We remain committed to developing friendly and coop-

erative ties with Pakistan based on mutual trust and confidence, for which the government of Pakistan needs to create the right environment."

Prior to the Kashmir conflict which erupted in May, Vajpayee had enjoyed a personal rapport with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

An emergency session of India's Cabinet Committee on Defence — attended by the three chiefs of the armed forces — was to be held later Wednesday.

"We are on the watch, there is nothing to worry about," Air Chief Marshal A.Y. Tipnis told reporters as he arrived at the prime minister's office.

India on Tuesday voiced "grave concern" at the coup which saw army chief General Pervez Musharraf seize power and place Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif under virtual house arrest.

"Reports emanating from Pakistan are a matter of grave concern and we are closely monitoring the situation," a spokesman from Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's office said.

EU postpones agreement with Pakistan

BRUSSELS, Oct 13: The European Union on Wednesday postponed indefinitely the renewal of a 13-year-old partnership accord with Islamabad following a military coup in Pakistan, an EU spokesman said, reports AP.

The European Union and Pakistan have been linked in a partnership accord signed in 1986, and to have been renewed on October 20.

The spokesman said a meeting between Pakistan and the EU troika had also been cancelled.

European Commission for External Relations Chris Patten said he "deplored" the military coup and hoped "that democracy" would be restored as quickly as possible.

"The regime must do everything possible to use tensions with neighbouring countries," Patten said through his spokesman.

Pakistan's new army rulers face an uphill struggle to turn around a feeble economy that was a key factor in undermining support for ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

Analysts said the coup once again plunged the country into a difficult economic crisis, as the International Monetary Fund warned that flows of aid could stop.

C'wealth chief warns Pakistan

LONDON, Oct 13: The Commonwealth on Wednesday warned that it may suspend Pakistan if the military continues to control the country, after troops ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif late Tuesday, reports AP.

"If it is confirmed that the military will remain in power, I would expect this regime to be suspended from the Council of the Commonwealth," cautioned Emeke Anyaoku, the secretary-general of the body of former British territories.

Sharif was Wednesday being held by troops in the capital. "The Commonwealth has become an organisation whose members are committed to democracy," he said in a BBC-radio interview in London.

"What has happened flies in the face of that and therefore isolates the Pakistani regime," he went on.

"I would expect that this regime would be urged by the Commonwealth to hurry up with a speedy restoration of democracy," Anyaoku said.

He added that he understood that Pakistan may be faced with the dilemma of a "democracy which was not delivering" and "that created problems".

But he expressed the hope that there would be a "democratic" solution.

7 UN observers taken hostage in Abkhazia

SUKHUMI, Georgia, Oct 13: Seven UN military observers were taken hostage Wednesday in the breakaway Georgian province of Abkhazia, UN and Abkhaz officials said, reports AP.

The head of the Abkhaz presidential security service Astamir Tarba said the UN officials were being held in the village of Adzhara, 75 kilometres from the regional capital Sukhumi.

The observers were being held in the Kadorskaya gorge held by the Svan minority hostile to the Abkhaz authorities. Russian news agencies citing Abkhaz sources said the UN observers flew to the area by helicopter and were seized by unidentified assailants on landing.

Officials at the UN headquarters in Sukhumi confirmed that the military observers had been seized.

It was not immediately clear what had prompted the abductions.

On July 9, a similar hostage-taking incident took place in the same village. A Georgian minister was among the 30 or so people then abducted. All were released unharmed after a few hours.

The Black Sea province of Abkhazia broke away from Georgia in 1992, triggering a bitter succession struggle with Tbilisi in which an estimated 10,000 people died.

Israel, Palestinians reach deal on prisoner release

JERUSALEM, Oct 13: Around 150 Palestinian and Arab prisoners are expected to be freed from Israeli jails within the next 48 hours after an agreement in principle on their overdue release, officials said Wednesday.

"All our differences were overcome," Palestinian Minister for Prisoners Hisham Abdelrazzak told AFP. "They should be released tomorrow or the day after."

Negotiators hammered out an agreement in principle on Tuesday and are due to meet again on Wednesday to settle the final list of prisoners who had been scheduled to go free 11 days ago.

"The negotiators reached an accord in principle during a meeting Tuesday evening, without any modification to the criteria for selecting the prisoners to be released," Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's spokeswoman Mirav Parsi-Zadok said.

"Palestinians who killed or seriously wounded Israelis will not be freed," she said, adding that justice ministry director general Nili Arad is to check the

new list of inmates before the names are submitted to the Palestinians, and a further meeting held.

The 150 prisoners were set to go free on October 1 under the terms of last month's interim peace accord signed by Israel and the Palestinians in the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh.

But Israel refused to free them after the Palestinians rejected the names of about 30 prisoners it had earmarked for release, charging that they did not meet the terms laid down in the Sharm agreement.

The first list included several members of Hamas and Islamic Jihad, militant Palestinian groups which are violently opposed to the peace process, and 28 nationals from neighbouring Arab countries.

It was not immediately clear if they were also included on the new list.

Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erakat said Tuesday he was optimistic that the prisoners could go free on Thursday as the only thing wanting is "the green light from the Israeli gov-

ernment of Ehud Barak."

Israel public radio reported that negotiators found a compromise following the surprise intervention of the Shin Beth domestic intelligence agency, and that the release could take place either Thursday or Friday.

Under the Sharm agreement, Israel committed itself to release prisoners who committed crimes before the signing of the Oslo peace accords in September 1995 and who were arrested before May 1994, when Palestinian autonomy effectively started.

But the Palestinians complained that of the 150, around 30 were arrested after that date and were anyway due to have served out their sentences by March next year.

Shin Beth, which took part in the negotiations for the first time Tuesday, recommended that prisoners sentenced to long jail terms should be freed, according to Israeli radio.

The Palestinians for their part agreed that the list could include inmates who had only a few months left to serve, the radio reported.

IAEA experts in Japan to inspect N-plant

TOKYO, Oct 13: A fact-finding team from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) arrived here Wednesday on a five-day mission to look into the world's worst nuclear accident since the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, reports AP.

Three IAEA experts were scheduled to meet Japanese officials and visit the accident site, a uranium processing plant in Tokaimura, northeast of Tokyo.

The purpose of the visit was "for the IAEA to understand what has happened in the Tokaimura accident," said Hiroshi Kataoka, an official at the Science and Technology Agency.

The officials were not expected to talk to the press during their trip, he said.

After meeting with central and local government officials, IAEA experts will travel on Friday to Tokaimura, some 120 kilometres (75 miles) northeast of Tokyo, to inspect the plant run by JCO Co. Ltd.

JCO has admitted workers broke regulations and sparked a critical nuclear reaction at the plant on September 30.

The radioactive leak from the plant exposed at least 49 people to radiation and forced more than 320,000 people to shelter at home for more than a day.

BRIEFLY

Kofi Annan in Kosovo: UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan arrived in the Kosovo capital Pristina Wednesday from Sarajevo for a two-day visit to monitor UN efforts to restore peace and security to the war-torn Yugoslav province, AFP reports from Pristina.

Annan was met on arrival by Bernard Kouchner, his special representative in charge of rebuilding Kosovo. The trip has been overshadowed by security concerns after a UN employee was shot and killed in Pristina late Monday after he spoke in Serb to a group of ethnic Albanians in the provincial capital.

Two killed in landslide: Two miners were killed and a third was missing when a landslide struck a gold rush site in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao, rescuers said Wednesday. AFP reports from Davao, Philippines.

Three other people were injured in Tuesday's slip which also buried 30 houses at the mining site near the town of Pantukan, said Carmelito Lupo of the civil defence office. Heavy rain loosened the earth on a hill which collapsed on several mine shafts, said rescue worker Merto Bandigan.

Israeli air raid on Lebanon: Israeli warplanes struck in southern Lebanon early Wednesday following a series of attacks by the pro-Syrian Shiite Muslim group Amal, Lebanese police said, AFP reports from Lebanon.

They fired four missiles on the edge of the village of Frun, north of the central sector of the Israeli-occupied zone of southern Lebanon, the police said, without reporting any casualties.

4 die as boat sinks in Hanoi: Four people drowned and four others were reported missing after a bamboo boat sank off Do Son Casino resort in northern Vietnam, district police said Wednesday. AFP reports from Hanoi.

A bamboo boat carrying 16 local tourists sank Sunday evening after it hit a submerged construction structure about 300 metres (990 feet) from the coast. Eight people were saved by a local rescue team and fishermen. The captain of the unlicensed tourist boat was arrested for questioning, police added.