

Benazir urges military

Hold early polls, go back to barracks

ISLAMABAD, Oct 17: Pakistan's military rulers should move swiftly to hold elections and return the troops to their barracks, former prime minister Benazir Bhutto said in an interview published today, reports AFP.

"No one in the country, least of all the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), will accept the situation if the intervention turns out to be the beginning of another dictatorship and era of tyranny," Benazir told The News.

The Pakistani military overthrew the elected govern-

ment of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif last week, with army chief General Pervez Musharraf suspending the constitution and proclaiming himself chief executive.

Benazir, twice elected premier and twice dismissed, acknowledged that the people of Pakistan had largely accepted the military action, but argued that this was because they were "fed up" with Sharif.

The PPP leader accused Sharif, now detained along with many other members of his administration, of having destroyed one state institution

after another.

"Power went to his head and he took on the army," said Benazir, who described her own first sacking in 1990 as a quasi-military coup.

Sharif had miscalculated "gravely," she said, adding that the army had the power to "defend itself... and that was the undoing of Nawaz."

The most important factor that brought Pakistan to the present situation was Sharif's "penchant for unbridled and absolute power at the expense of vital state institutions and stability of the country."



Indian Minister for External Affairs Jaswant Singh (L) greets Pakistani schoolgirls during a goodwill function in New Delhi yesterday. Pakistani schoolchildren on an exchange programme in India, the first since the Kashmir conflict, were received by Singh as a goodwill gesture between the rival nations. — AFP photo

It's 'too early' to consider talks with Pakistan: Delhi

NEW DELHI, Oct. 17: Indian External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh said today it was "too early" to consider resuming bilateral talks with Pakistan following the military coup there, reports AFP.

"It is too early to refer to that," Singh told reporters after meeting a group of 30 school children from Pakistan who ended a week-long stay in India. Pressed further, Singh said: "It is premature to comment one way or the other... Until the situation (in Pakistan) becomes clear, it will be improper for me to answer hypothetically."

Singh reiterated that India was concerned with last week's

military coup that ousted Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

"It is a matter of concern to us," he said. "Whatever is happening in Pakistan is not clear. It will not be proper to say what will happen in the coming days."

India has taken a cautious stand on the Pakistani coup. New Delhi has expressed concern over the development but has not condemned the military takeover.

Singh, however, described as "totally unfounded" Western fears that the military coup had increased the danger of a possi-

ble nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since their independence from Britain in 1947. Two of the conflicts were over Kashmir, a Himalayan region claimed by both.

India was also locked in a bloody border war in Kashmir in May-July this year with Pakistan-backed Muslim guerrillas.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee undertook a historic bus journey to Pakistan in February. But relations between the two countries deteriorated sharply following the Kashmir conflict.

Habibie apologises to nation as political fate hangs in balance

JAKARTA, Oct 17: Indonesian President B.J. Habibie's political future hung in the balance today after the National Assembly heard a last-ditch attempt by the embattled leader to win a second term, reports AFP.

After a televised speech by Habibie that included an apology to the nation for his shortcomings, the 700-member People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) formed a commission to determine whether to accept or reject a report of his past performance.

There was no immediate indication of how long the committee would be out, but only three days remain before the assembly elects the country's fourth president on Wednesday.

All outgoing presidents are required by law to account for their performance to the MPR. Habibie, 63, delivered his "accountability" speech Thursday and appeared again on Sunday to respond to widespread criti-

cism in the MPR.

A rejection of his report would not automatically knock him out of contention but would drastically undermine his determined bid to win a new term after 17 months at the helm of the world's fourth most populous nation.

His own Golkar party has said it could propose a new candidate if he fails the assembly test.

Then vice president Habibie rose to power in May 1998 when political and economic turmoil forced his mentor Suharto to resign after a 32-year rule.

On Sunday afternoon, the MPR adjourned its plenary session after Habibie's speech and set up the commission to recommend what the body should do, amid calls for an outright vote, which would be a first for a body which served as little more than a Suharto rubber stamp.

Zarkasih Nur of the United

Development Party told journalists that all parties wanted the decision on Habibie to be taken by vote.

"Voting is the best way to settle the issue in a rapid manner," Nur said.

Four of the 11 political factions in the MPR have already rejected the Habibie report, while the other seven including Habibie's Golkar party and the army have remained non-committal in public.

Habibie, fighting for political survival, apologized to the nation Sunday for his shortcomings and made a last-ditch attempt to convince parliament to give him a new mandate.

"With all humility, I appeal for forgiveness for all shortcomings and for my inability to reach perfection," said Habibie. "I'm not an extraordinary human being descended from the heaven to turn hopes into realities."

Pak military widens anti-corruption net

ISLAMABAD, Oct 17: Pakistan's military rulers tightened their anti-corruption squeeze with a wave of arrests and army raids, as people waited expectantly today for the new regime's blueprint on future governance, reports AFP.

Five days after the coup that toppled the elected government of prime minister Nawaz Sharif, military check points were in place at all main airports and maritime ports, armed with lists of officials wanted in connection with corruption and fraud investigations.

Hundreds of members of the Sharif administration, including ministers, MPs and political advisers have been barred from leaving the country after their bank accounts were frozen on Friday.

who served in previous administrations under former premier Benazir Bhutto.

Scores of senior political figures have been arrested or placed under "protective custody," as special army task forces pick their way through bank statements and tax records in search of millions of dollars in illicit funds.

The new military regime, which has yet to provide specific details on how and for what period of time it plans to rule, launched the hunt for unpaid taxes and defaulted loans -- estimated at some 3.5 billion dollars -- almost immediately after Tuesday's coup.

Anger at the corrupt activities of successive civilian governments has been a major factor in the favourable public response to the military takeover, which ended 14 years of democratic rule.

Pak coup poses dilemma for SAARC summit

COLOMBO, Oct 17: The military coup in Pakistan has posed a serious dilemma for the South Asian regional grouping preparing for its 11th summit, reports AFP.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) charter precludes discussion on bilateral or internal issues, but this is the first time since the formation of the grouping in 1985 that a member government has been ousted by a military coup.

"SAARC is all about good governance," said Sri Lanka's opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe.

He said next month's summit in the Nepali capital of Kathmandu must review the position of Pakistan in the context that the Commonwealth was reconsidering Islamabad's membership following the coup in which the civilian government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was ousted by the military.

Sri Lanka is the current chairman of SAARC, but Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga has yet to react to the developments in Pakistan while a foreign ministry

spokesman declined to comment.

General Pervez Musharraf seized power in Islamabad on Tuesday after returning from Colombo where he had been attending the Sri Lankan army's golden jubilee celebrations along with Kumaratunga.

The only previous occasion SAARC came close to a military takeover in a member state was in November 1988 when disgruntled elements in the tiny atoll nation of the Maldives used Sri Lankan Tamil mercenaries to stage an armed attack on the capital island Male.

However, the coup did fail and SAARC called for the security of small states through "scrupulous adherence to the UN charter."

How the latest political upheaval in Pakistan will affect SAARC is unclear, but Asian diplomats here said that an immediate consequence might be the postponement of the summit tentatively due to take place on November 26.

Summits of SAARC cannot be held unless all member states are represented either by head of state or head of government.



A tricycle loaded with passengers ploughs through a flooded road in the Philippine capital of Manila yesterday after a tropical depression spawned heavy rains overnight. The government weather bureau said the tropical depression had passed the capital but will continue to bring torrential rains and strong winds to several nearby provinces. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

14 tourists kidnapped in Colombia: Police were searching yesterday for 14 tourists kidnapped in a daring raid by presumed leftist guerrillas on a boat off Colombia's Pacific coast, while another 14 people died in scattered clashes between rebels and government forces, officials said, AFP reports from Bogota.

The kidnapping and the violence came despite an announcement by government and rebel negotiators that they would resume formal peace talks October 24. Five kidnappers disguised themselves among the "Asturia V's" 33 passengers.

8 hostages freed from Chechnya: Chechen militants have freed eight hostages, some held in the breakaway republic for more than a year, said police in the Russian republic of Dagestan, quoted Saturday by the Interfax news agency, AFP reports from Moscow.

100 Pinochet supporters arrested: Almost 100 supporters of former dictator Augusto Pinochet were arrested Saturday when they tried to protest his arrest in front of the British and Spanish embassies here, police said, AFP reports from Santiago.

The supporters of Pinochet, who was arrested in London one year ago on a Spanish warrant charging he tortured political opponents, left a rally organised by the Augusto Pinochet Foundation and tried to march to the embassies around nightfall.

US makes secret offer to Russia on missile defence

WASHINGTON, Oct 17: In a confidential proposal, the United States is offering to help Russia complete a key radar site in Siberia if Moscow agrees to renegate a landmark missile defence treaty, reports said today, reports AFP.

Quoting US and Russian officials, the New York Times said the administration of President Bill Clinton was offering to help Russia complete the missile tracking facility in Mischelevka, near Irkutsk.

"We've raised with them a number of cooperative activities to show that we see this as a threat that affects both countries," a senior administration official told the Washington Post.

"We don't see this as anything against Russia, and we're willing to look at a whole range of cooperative measures that would address the same rogue, threat we're concerned about," the official told the Post.

Russian drives on in Chechnya

GROZNY, Russia, Oct 17: Russia pressed today with its relentless drive to crush Islamic rebels in Chechnya, but kept open the door to talks with the beleaguered republic's leadership over the fate of Grozny, reports AFP.

Russia's ORT television reported no major clashes overnight, federal troops using the lull to reinforce positions along the Terek River that separates the Russia-controlled northern third of Chechnya from the rest of the republic.

Russian forces surged towards the outskirts of Grozny on Saturday, ousting 200 Chechen soldiers defending high ground northwest of the Chechen capital after heavy air and artillery strikes.

Chechen and Russian reports put federal forces anywhere from 30 to less than 20 kilometres (19 to less than 12 miles) from Grozny, which Chechen officials vowed Saturday to defend.

Officials in Grozny reported overnight shelling and air

strikes against settlements ringing the Chechen capital, notably Tolstoi-Yurt and Vinogradnoye to the north, Pervomayskoye and Dolinsky to the west, Interfax said.

On Chechnya's eastern border with Dagestan, the villages of Nozhai-Yurt and Zandak were also pounded, Chechen government officials said.

Russia's NTV television broadcast pictures Saturday of Russian armour progressing along the far eastern edge of the Terek Ridge which stretches up to the villages that make up the northwestern suburbs of Grozny.

The ridge overlooks the villages of Dolinsky, Raduzhnoye and Pobedinskoye, which stand at the northwestern gates of Grozny, barely 20 kilometres (12 miles) west of the city centre. Chechen officials said Saturday the settlements were still controlled by their forces.

Russia's NTV television said federal troops were less than 20 kilometres (12 miles) from Grozny after surging forward.

Colombo plays down Indian minister's link with LTTE

COLOMBO, Oct 17: Sri Lanka had no fears of India's defence minister George Fernandes' links with the island's separatist Tiger rebels, Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar said in remarks published here today, reports AFP.

Sri Lankan newspapers have repeatedly urged the Indian government to either sack or contain Fernandes, who is believed to be sympathetic to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels fighting Sri Lankan troops.

Minister Kadirgamar in an interview with the Sunday Times newspaper here said that even though Fernandes may have been associated with the LTTE in the past, his record as defence minister gave no justification for that belief.

"The government of Sri Lanka entertains no apprehensions whatever that Fernandes is partial to the LTTE," Kadirgamar said. "Last week, foreign ministry

spokesman Ravinatha Ariyasingha declined to comment on India's new government retaining Fernandes as the country's defence minister amid fears here he was sympathetic towards Tiger rebels.

Ariyasingha said the government will not comment either on the formation of the new government in India or the military coup in Pakistan.

"It is not the policy of the Sri Lankan government to comment on internal matters of another country," Ariyasingha said.

Asked about Sri Lanka's concerns over Fernandes retaining the key defence portfolio, Ariyasingha said: "Whoever is in power, we will deal with them."

On Monday, the state-run Observer urged India's new government of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to restrain elements sympathetic to Tiger guerrillas who are fighting for independence in Sri Lanka.

Iraq executes spy chief

LONDON, Oct 17: Iraq's President Saddam Hussein has executed the head of his intelligence service, the Sunday Telegraph newspaper reported today, says AFP.

The Iraqi leader accused Rafiq Dahham Majoul al-Takriti of leaking information about a secret arms deal with Russia worth several million dollars.

The deal concerned, in particular, a supply of parts for the Iraqi air force, the newspaper said.

The Telegraph cited western diplomatic sources and sources close to the Iraqi opposition as saying the intelligence chief's execution might be linked to rivalry with Saddam Hussein's eldest son, Uday.

The Iraqi press reported Wednesday that the intelligence chief, a senior official of the ruling Baath party and an advisor to the Iraqi dictator, had died from a heart attack.

But the Sunday Telegraph said he was executed on Monday shortly after he was dismissed from his post.

Death toll hits 242 Lankan fighting continues

COLOMBO, Oct 17: Fighting raged in northern Sri Lanka today, with Tiger rebels and troops losing at least 242 combatants, while British experts confirmed the guerrillas had acquired guided missiles, officials here said, reports AFP.

Government forces killed another 59 members of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in several clashes Saturday in the north of the island.

The defence ministry said that figure took total rebel casualties killed in fighting since Thursday to 202.

Official sources said the army had also sustained heavy losses, with at least 40 soldiers

killed and more than 360 wounded in the operation code-named "Watershed." Most of the army's casualties were due to rebel artillery and mortar bomb attacks.

As the ferocious battles raged in the north, a press report here said ballistic experts in Britain had confirmed the LTTE was in possession of hi-tech anti-tank guided missiles.

UN envoy meets Suu Kyi

YANGON, Oct 17: A United Nations special envoy met Myanmar's pro-democracy leader Sunday for the second time during his latest bid to break the political impasse between her and the military government, reports AP.

Aung San Suu Kyi, winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, received UN Assistant Secretary General Alvaro de Soto at her lakeside home, diplomats said on condition of anonymity.

Suu Kyi has appealed for years without success for the ruling generals to hold a meaningful dialogue with her to bring civilian rule to the country, which has been under the military's heel since 1962.

In 1990, her National League for Democracy overwhelmingly won elections, but the result was never honoured by the military and the country remains without a parliament. Hundreds of Suu Kyi's followers have been jailed and her activities are tightly curbed.



Cambodian Queen Monineath Sihanouk (R) shows Jordan's Queen Noor around the Royal Palace after her arrival in Phnom Penh yesterday. The Jordanian queen arrived in the capital for a three-day visit as flag bearer for the international campaign against landmines, and will meet Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen during her visit. — AFP photo

Off the Record

Most wired city
WASHINGTON: The nation's capital -- where information is life -- is the most wired area in the United States, with just under 60 per cent of adults here hooked up to the Internet, the Washington Post reported Sunday, says AFP.

A study by Scarborough Research of New York found that 59.9 per cent of adults in the Washington area -- awash with politicians, lawyers, lobbyists and consultants -- are online.

In the study to be released Monday, Scarborough Research surveyed 170,000 adults in 64 major US markets from February 1998 to February 1999, the Post said.

Researchers found it significant that five areas were at or above the 50-per cent mark, meaning Internet use has entered the mainstream of society there.

HK residents flood into China for Chung Yung festival

HONG KONG, Oct 17: Tens of thousands of Hong Kong residents flooded to China today to celebrate the Chung Yung festival, reports AFP.

By early afternoon, 102,000 people had passed through the Louwu customs post between the territory and the mainland, an immigration department spokesman said.

The department had to keep all 68 of its departure counters open most of the morning, he added.

On Saturday, the first day of the long weekend, the Louwu customs post recorded 312,000 people passing through.