

## Musharraf takes polls path

Pak military regime unveils local election plans

ISLAMABAD, Mar 23: Pakistan's military ruler on Thursday announced nationwide local elections — considered a first step toward a return to democracy, reports AP.

General Pervez Musharraf's promise came two days before US President Bill Clinton is scheduled to visit Pakistan, where he is expected to press the military ruler for a timeframe for general elections.

Musharraf has rebuffed international pressure to return Pakistan to democracy quickly, saying the task ahead is onerous. But Thursday, he said the first round of local elections will be held between December and May 2001. A second round of local elections — at the district level — will be held in July 2001, effectively putting municipal governments back in power.

"We want to empower the impoverished, the people at the

grass root level," Musharraf told a news conference in the federal capital.

"Democracy starts here at the district and local governments," he said. "From here we will move up step by step to provincial and federal (elections) in due course of time."

The army chief toppled Pakistan's elected government in a bloodless coup last October, accusing officials of corruption and power mongering that crippled institutions and alienated smaller provinces.

Musharraf's scheme for staggered local elections also involves a complete restructuring to give a greater voice to the village level, where councils are referred to as union councils.

His scheme also allocates seats for women, for minorities in Pakistan and for the first time, for the poorest whom he referred to as "workers and peasants."

In Pakistan's rough and tumble politics, the wealthiest generally dominate politics and dictate who the poorest should vote for.

Union councils, to be elected between December and May 2001, will have 26 seats — 10 reserved for women, four for peasants and workers and one for minority religious groups.

At the district level, the 66-seat councils will include 50 general seats, which can be contested by men and women, as well as 10 seats reserved for women, three for workers and peasants and three for minorities.

But before holding the local elections, the army-led government says it wants to revise a 20-year-old electoral list and make new identity cards that can't easily be forged.

"We have to create a new electoral role. They are all bogus.

They have been manipulated and distorted," Musharraf told reporters. "No one has any faith in them."

Musharraf previously referred to ousted Premier Nawaz Sharif's government as a "sham democracy" and vowed that the next time an elected government takes power in Pakistan it will be through a "real democracy."

The army's anti-corruption bureau, established by Musharraf, says it has recovered dhs 1 billion in unpaid bank loans and money stolen by corrupt politicians and bureaucrats.

The anti-corruption bureau was given sweeping powers to arrest, detain and charge those suspected of corruption.

Sharif is in jail in southern Karachi on charges of hijacking, attempted murder, kidnapping and terrorism. If convicted, he could be sentenced to death.



Sikhs take out a procession in Jammu in Indian held Kashmir on Thursday to protest the massacre of 36 Sikhs in southern Kashmir on March 20 by suspected separatist militants. (Story on Back Page)

—AFP Photo

## India undermines SAFTA spirit

Unilateral increase in duty on Bangladeshi garment product

By Staff Correspondent

India has unilaterally increased the duty on import of garment from Bangladesh against the spirit of Saarc Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAFTA), exporters said.

According to sources, during the third round of negotiation under SAFTA in the middle of last year, Delhi agreed to provide some duty concessions on import of goods from Bangladesh and other Saarc countries.

Following the negotiation, Delhi informed Dhaka through a notification in last August that Indian importers would get 10 to 90 per cent duty concession on 77 items while buying those from Bangladesh. And

garments, particularly men's shirt was given 50 per cent concession.

Availing the concession, some garment manufacturers immediately started exporting apparels particularly men's shirt to India. Some renowned international buyers who had chain shops in India also placed orders for garments item from Bangladesh.

But the Indian government suddenly changed the duty structure on garment import from Bangladesh. Earlier, Delhi would charge only 20 per cent duty on invoice value of garments imported from Bangladesh.

However, he observed that a country cannot unilaterally increase duty after agreeing in the negotiation.

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ued at 1.26 million dollars from Madura Garments of Bangalore.

It shipped the first consignment of garment comprising 30,000 shirts in January. But the buyer informed them that due to sudden change in the duty structure they are cancelling the future shipment.

Such a huge increase is actually difficult for us to work with and we are making strong presentations to the government to reduce the duty. We also request you to make a presentation to your government to provide a favourable duty terms for import from Bangladesh," said R. Krishnakumar, purchase manager of Madura Gar-

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