

International

Gen Musharraf says Kashmir solution key to peace in South Asia

ISLAMABAD, May 28: Marking the second anniversary of Pakistan's nuclear tests Sunday, Army Chief Gen Pervez Musharraf said South Asian neighbours, India and Pakistan, have to settle the protracted Kashmir dispute to remove "the threat of a nuclear holocaust," reports AP.

He told a public gathering in the federal capital that Pakistan was not interested in embarking on a nuclear arms race. However, he warned that Pakistan would not be left behind if neighbour India forged ahead with nuclear weapons development.

The military chief, who seized power from Pakistan's civilian rulers last October, said he has repeatedly offered talks with neighbour India to settle the Kashmir dispute, but he warned New Delhi not to take

the offer as a sign of weakness. "Our offer to talk on Kashmir is to remove the problem of Kashmir. We don't want the people of South Asia to live under the threat of a nuclear holocaust," Musharraf said. "But India shouldn't take our offer as a sign of weakness."

Both India and Pakistan lay claim to a united Kashmir, which was divided between the two uneasy neighbours after British rule of the subcontinent ended in 1947.

The two countries have gone to war twice over Kashmir and last summer they waged a bitter border battle that many people feared would escalate into all-out war.

Musharraf said Pakistan conducted its nuclear tests in May 1998 in response to tests conducted by India to weeks earlier.

Pakistan possessed the nuclear know-how to declare itself a nuclear power 10 years early, but refrained from doing so "in respect of international norms," said Musharraf.

But then India tested and they followed it with hostile threats we were forced to conduct our tests to restore the strategic balance in the area," said Musharraf.

He saluted Pakistan's nuclear scientists for their achievements.

Dr A Q Khan, considered the father of Pakistan's nuclear programme, said it's time for Pakistan to use its scientific know-how to improve its society, a society where barely 30 per cent of its 140 million people can read or write.

"We have to improve our social development now," said Khan.



Philippine chief negotiator Robert Avenajado (R) talks to Abu Sayyaf rebel leader, Galib Andang alias Commander Robot (C) while a group of hostages, Marie Michel Moarbes from Lebanon (extreme L), Marc Wallert (behind Robot) and his father Werner Wallert (second from R) from Germany in a meeting in Bandang village, the jungle camp of the Muslim extremist rebels Saturday. 21 mostly foreign hostages were captured on April 23 from a resort on the Malaysian island of Sipadan. — AFP photo

Peru set to elect Fujimori amid boycott call

LIMA, May 28: Peruvians faced the possibility today of reelecting President Alberto Fujimori or heeding the opposition's call to boycott a runoff election which has been internationally condemned as undemocratic, reports Reuters.

Opposition candidate Alejandro Toledo, a shoeshine boy turned World Bank economist, is asking his supporters to face a \$33 fine — a third of the monthly minimum wage — and boycott the vote or spoil their ballot, alleging the election has already been rigged against him.

Some 14.5 million eligible voters were legally bound to head to the polls across Peru — the latest nation in an Andean region where many fear democracy may be on the retreat.

Voting booths were set to open at 8 am (19:00 BST) and close at 4 pm (3:00 BST).

"There aren't elections; this is only Fujimori's election," said Lucio, 29, a Toledo supporter who plans to void the vote by writing "no to fraud" on his ballot.

Toledo, the 54-year-old son of an Andean peasant, has called his supporters to march in protest to Lima's main downtown square after polls close. Comparing himself to Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi, he has vowed a non-violent campaign to push for another, clean vote.

Guards spent Saturday afternoon greasing the Presidential Palace's iron gates to ensure protesters did not scale them.

Mass demonstrations before the end of voting are illegal.

Toledo, whose promises of

jobs have struck a chord in this mineral-rich but impoverished country of 25 million people, alleges unfair conditions like a biased media, unreliable vote counting computers and state food handouts stole his victory in the April 9 first round and would ensure he lost if he participated in the second.

But Fujimori, who is praised for beating bloody leftist guerrillas and stabilising the economy, needs only one third of the electorate to cast valid votes for the result to be constitutionally legitimate. Pollsters say the 61-year-old son of Japanese immigrants, who has largely kept his lead in the polls, will easily get what he needs.

Yet, even before the fraud allegations that led to Toledo's boycott, his bid for a third consecutive term was called a blatant violation of the constitution.

Protesters calling him a dictator have sporadically clashed with police throughout the country since Wednesday's decision by the National Election Board, the country's top electoral authority to reject widespread requests to postpone the vote.

The election's credibility was seriously bruised last week after international monitors dubbed the process "far from free and fair" and observers like the Organisation of American States and the US-based Carter Centre withdrew their monitoring of the vote.

There will now be no independent source to verify the government's count.

BRIEFLY



Record breaking Mount Everest climber Babu Chheri (L) with his wife in an open van wave to friends on his return to Kathmandu yesterday, after climbing 8848-metre (29,028 ft) Mount Everest, the world's tallest, in 16 hours 56 minutes on May 21. Babu Chheri now holds three world records with the last two Climbing Everest, twice in the same season in 1995 and staying atop Everest for 21 hours in 1999. — AFP photo

Blast in church in Indonesia: At least 10 people were wounded when a home-made bomb exploded in a church in the Indonesian city of Medan during today mass, witnesses said, Reuters reports from Medan.

The blast is the latest violence to hit the troubled country which in the past week has seen sectarian killings resume in its spice islands and bloody clashes between students and police in the capital Jakarta.

Israeli DPM quits: Israeli deputy premier Yitzhak Mordechai, charged on three counts of sexual assault, has handed in his resignation, the prime minister's office said yesterday, AFP reports from Jerusalem.

Mordechai submitted his resignation to Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, it added. The Iraqi-born Mordechai, 55, temporarily stood down from his post as transport minister after the investigation was launched in early March following an initial complaint by a 23-year-old employee in his office.

Israeli president to quit: Israeli President Ezer Weizman, beleaguered by sharp public criticism alleging financial improprieties, will step down from office within six weeks, political sources said on Saturday, Reuters reports from Jerusalem.

The 76-year-old former air force chief and peacemaker informed Prime Minister Ehud Barak of his decision to end his term by July 10 in a telephone conversation on Friday, Israel Radio said.

Gore unveils his views on US military

WASHINGTON, May 28: US Vice President and Democratic presidential candidate Al Gore unveiled his views on the US military Saturday, calling for it to be ready for humanitarian missions, but remaining vague on the controversial topic of missile defences, reports AFP.

"We must be fully ready for the 21st century peacekeeping and humanitarian missions that are certain to arise coming decades," Gore said in a document posted Saturday on his campaign Web site.

Seeking to position Gore as a defender of the US Armed Forces as rival Republican, the document said that "America's military must be consistent with a future-oriented vision of what it will take to win on the information-age battlefield."

Reinforcing his pro-defence message, Gore travelled to the West Point Military Academy in New York State Saturday and delivered a rousing commencement address.

"Our Armed Forces will always be the power behind America's promise," he told hundreds of cheering cadets. "You will be the ones to open the new avenues to peace, and close the gates against war."

The vice president described "rogue states" trying to obtain weapons of mass destruction and missile technology as the source of a "new emerging threat to our country."

In the four-point programme, Gore commits himself to retaining a high-quality professional all-volunteer force, using the US technological edge to equip it, updating the US military strategy to confront with future challenges and streamlining the Defence Department.

"America must maintain its nuclear strength, with adequate

offensive forces to ensure deterrence," the document said.

The document contains what is seen as a hint that a future Gore administration might consider deploying satellite protection defences as the US economy grows increasingly dependent on the Internet and satellite-based communications.

"We also must ensure we can defend ourselves and be confident that our space assets are secure so that we can conduct operations in urban environments, defend our cyberspace, and protect the nation and its forces against such asymmetric threats as chemical and biological weapons," the programme says.

But the document contains no specific mention of the nationwide missile defence system being considered by the Clinton administration to defend the United States from what it describes as missile attacks by "rogue" states.

Women taxi drivers take to Dubai streets

DUBAI, May 28: Seven Arab women will blaze a trail in the emirate of Dubai from Thursday when they become the first women taxi drivers across the Muslim Arab Gulf, reports AFP.

They will only take female and children passengers, but the press in the liberal trading and tourist hub have greeted the move as a breakthrough.

In neighbouring Saudi Arabia, which enforces a strict interpretation of Islam, women are not allowed to drive at all.

"There was quite a lot of opposition from my brothers and senior family members," Abia Hussein told today's Gulf News.

Putin signs CTBT

MOSCOW, May 28: President Vladimir Putin has signed the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, the Kremlin press service said Sunday, reports AP.

The treaty was ratified by the parliament's upper chamber, the Federation Council, on May 17. The State Duma, the lower chamber of parliament, approved the treaty on April 21. Putin signed the document on Saturday, the press service said.

Although Russia has now approved the treaty, it will ban nuclear tests only when the United States and other nations with nuclear capability also approve it. Russia has not conducted a nuclear explosion since 1990.

The US Senate rejected the treaty in 1999 after opponents said it would weaken American security. Other holdouts include China, Egypt, Pakistan, India and North Korea.

34 missing after Indian oil tanker catches fire off S Japan

TOKYO, May 28: All 34 crew members of an empty Indian oil tanker were missing after the ship caught fire Saturday off southern Japan, the Japanese Coast Guard said today, reports AP.

The 26,450-ton Pratibha Yamuna went up in flames Saturday night in the East China Sea about 550 km west of the southern Japanese island of Amami Oshima.

A coast guard cutter that reached the still-smoldering tanker early Sunday morning found an empty lifeboat but no survivors, said Mitsuhito Yoshinaga, a spokesman for the JCG's regional headquarters in southern Kagoshima Prefecture (state).

The tanker was apparently empty at the time of the accident, and rescuers saw no traces of oil leakage, Yoshinaga added.

Japanese men get breaks while women burdens

TOKYO, May 28: Japanese men get the breaks and women get the burdens, according to a government survey published today, reports Reuters.

In the nationwide survey conducted by the Prime Minister's office, 76.7 per cent of respondents said that men received better treatment than women in society.

Even though the survey was conducted as a part of the government's plan to back gender equality, about 45 per cent of respondents said that Japan's laws and societal conventions discriminated against women.

Fiji president gives more ground to rebels

SUVA, May 28: Armed rebels holding Fiji's prime minister and about 30 others hostage in parliament today rejected the president's latest offer to solve the crisis: A new government and immunity from prosecution, reports AP.

President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara said Saturday he has fired the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, who has been held captive by an armed gang for 10 days inside the Parliament compound.

But rebel leader George Speight insisted that Mara resign and that the 1997 constitution, which indigenous Fijians

blame for giving too much power to the ethnic Indian minority, be scrapped before the hostages are freed.

Mara's offer was "the act of a desperate man," Speight said. "His agenda is clear — he was trying to do everything in his power to retain power in this country."

Rebel guards holding automatic weapons opened the gates of parliament to let in some 1,500 supporters for a 90-minute Methodist church service in which Speight took pride of place. Afterward, Speight stood for 10 minutes shaking hands with supporters.

Before receiving a delegation from the influential indigenous body the Great Council of Chiefs, Speight said he expected a new offer within two days that could lead to the freeing of the hostages. Any deal would have to be ratified by the full council, he said. That could take days. The meeting ended with no resolution announced.

Mara's announcement on Saturday came several hours after two soldiers and a journalist were injured in a gunfight outside Parliament between rebels and Fijian soldiers. The president said the timing was unrelated.

Lankan troops' shelling stops evacuation of civilians: LTTE

LONDON, May 28: Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels said today army shelling stopped the evacuation of civilians from the war zone in Jaffna during a ceasefire, but the military dismissed the report as lies, reports Reuters.

The "Liberation Tigers" of Tamil Eelam said they implemented a 12-hour ceasefire in Thennaratchchi, a few miles east of Jaffna town, on Saturday and had asked the government to do likewise, but today they said the offer had been shunned.

"The evacuation of an estimated 15,000 civilians from the embattled Chavakachcheri sector failed Saturday, as heavy shelling by the Sri Lankan army prevented them moving to designated points where the UNHCR officials were waiting," the LTTE said in a statement released in London.

The government dismissed the LTTE statement as propaganda aimed at unnerving the people on Jaffna and lowering morale in its forces.

Independent corroboration of events in Jaffna remains difficult, with communications down and no journalists allowed in.

Representatives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were unavailable for comment.

Army spokesman Palitha Fernando told Reuters from Colombo that "these are the lies of the LTTE" and there had been little action in the area on Saturday.

"Everything was quiet, there was a lull in the fighting," Fernando said, adding "We don't shell where the people are."



A section of the estimated 100,000 people who made the Walk for Reconciliation, approach Darling Harbour after coming off the Sydney Harbour Bridge yesterday. The People's Walk officially led by indigenous and non-indigenous elders, forms part of Corroboree 2000 and is a demonstration of the Australian peoples commitment to Aboriginal reconciliation. — AFP photo

South Asia in turmoil two years after nuclear explosion

ISLAMABAD, May 28: Depending on the person you ask in Pakistan, the Asian subcontinent is either safer today because of fit-for-fit nuclear explosions with neighbour India two years ago or it's the likeliest spot for the world's first nuclear war, reports AP.

Pakistan's military ruler, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, says nuclear deterrence has ensured Pakistan's security and created a strategic balance in a region that has seen three wars in the past 53 years.

As recently as last summer, a bitter border dispute raged in disputed Kashmir — a region divided between both Pakistan and India and claimed in its entirety by both countries.

The border dispute threatened to escalate into an all-out confrontation between the two countries.

This week, Musharraf said he didn't believe that either Pakistan, or its longtime enemy India, would be foolish enough to take their nations to the brink of a nuclear war.

"Pakistan and India are responsible enough to understand the implications of nuclear power and responsible enough to avoid such a confrontation that would lead to their use,"

more proud.

"We feel safe because now everybody knows about our power, our neighbour knows," he said.

Kamal doesn't hold out much hope that Pakistan or India will settle the nagging Kashmir dispute through dialogue. But he says he's ready to endure war to see the dispute resolved.

"If the only solution to the problem is war, then it is war. We will have to have it. The destruction cannot be avoided," he said.

Others worry that unless the two countries begin talking quickly, they will begin a nuclear arms race.

"The reality of a nuclear South Asia is there, and that is not going to go away," said Dr Riffat Hussain, a political scientist at Islamabad's Qaid-e-Azam University.

Both Pakistan and India have said that nuclear weapons are a part of their arsenals. Both countries possess ballistic missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads, however neither country is believed to have developed a nuclear warhead.

Hussain says the two countries have to start talking before they cross that threshold.

"We have this small window of opportunity now, and if we

don't take advantage of it we are heading toward deployment and a nuclear arms race," he said.

But relations between India and Pakistan are strained.

India refuses to talk to Pakistan unless it withdraws militant secessionists from Indian Kashmir. India also is reluctant to talk to Pakistan's military ruler, whom they blame for last year's bitter border dispute.

Pakistan, meanwhile, denies all involvement in arming or training militants fighting in Indian-ruled Kashmir, but calls them "freedom fighters," allows their political offices to be headquartered in Pakistan and their followers to recruit fighters for Indian Kashmir.

Aziz Sadiq, a spokesman for the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, a fierce opponent of nuclear development, said Pakistan is worse off today than two years ago.

The economy is in ruins, international pressure has persisted, and relations with India are at an all-time low, he said.

"What have we gained?" he asked. "Nothing. Two years ago everyone knew we had the nuclear capability. We could have not tested, gained economically and internationally from it."

File photo dated January 6 of Israeli President Ezer Weizman hosting an official lunch at Jerusalem. Weizman, tainted by accusations of corruption and tax fraud, will step down on July 10, three years before the end of his second term, and elections for his successor will be held on August 10, it was announced yesterday. — AFP photo

HK activists commemorate Tiananmen crackdown

HONG KONG, May 28: Vowing to keep fighting until China becomes a democracy, activists demonstrated today to commemorate the military crackdown that ended the Tiananmen Square democracy demonstrations, reports AP.

About 50 people gathered in a park under the blazing sun, holding signs that said: "Demand accountability for massacre," and "Don't forget June 4," before a March planned later today.

"While we're seeing momentous economic developments in China why aren't we also seeing the end of one-party rule?" asked labour unionist and independent lawmaker Leung Yiu-chung.

Hundreds, if not thousands of people were killed when tanks and troops descended on demonstrators at Tiananmen Square in the early hours of the morning on June 4, 1989.

Younger people, who might not have any memories of the atrocities 11 years ago, need to learn about the importance of democracy in China and Hong Kong, the activists told a forum.

Time erodes our memories. China has no hope unless the new generation understands the

importance of democracy," said Andrew To, a veteran activist and a district councillor of the popular Democratic Party.

John No. 43, who has attended the annual rally every year, said he is optimistic.

"Taiwan has become a democracy. China and Hong Kong inevitably would have to follow this global trend to open up the government for opposition," said Ng, wearing a T-shirt that says, "Democracy 2000. Keep the fire alive."

Political conservatism remains strong in China despite rapid economic development.

Beijing leaders have been cracking down on the Falun Gong spiritual sect. The Hong Kong protesters said today the crackdown is a reminder of the totalitarian government's resolve to quash any opposition.

"The government knows it has to end one-party rule one day but is not confident enough to do so," said Ignatius Lo, a 22-year-old college student.

Today's protests were organised by the Hong Kong Alliance in Support of Patriotic Democratic Movements in China, which Beijing has labeled subversive.