

Musharraf warns of enemy plot to destabilise country

Pak FM in US to discuss nuclear security

ISLAMABAD, June 16: Military ruler General Pervez Musharraf today warned that enemies of Pakistan were trying to destabilise the country by fanning sectarianism that has claimed hundreds of lives in the past few years, reports AFP.

"Pakistan is passing through a critical stage of its history and is a victim of sectarianism and hatred," Musharraf told a gathering of Islamic scholars here to mark the birthday of Prophet Muhammad (SM).

"We should understand the designs of the enemy and put aside our personal differences to forge national unity," he said.

Some 300 people have died in sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shites in the past three years, mostly in the populous Punjab province over differences on religious rites.

The violence between the majority Sunni and minority Shiite communities has claimed about a dozen lives since general Musharraf took over in a military coup in October.

The killing of top Sunni scholar Maulana Yusuf Ludhianvi in Karachi last month provoked countrywide condemnation.

Officials accuse agents from rival neighbour India of involvement in the unrest.

Musharraf said anti-Pakistan elements were exploiting the situation to destabilise the country.

Musharraf, a moderate Muslim who calls for tolerance, urged people to follow the teachings of Prophet Muhammad and respect the rights of others.

"We should seek guidance from the life and teachings of

the last of all prophets," he said.

Another AFP report says: Pakistan's Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar arrived Wednesday in Washington for the most in-depth discussions on nuclear security with the United States since the military seized power in Islamabad last year.

Sattar is due to meet Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott and other senior members of administration during his two-day visit.

The White House has described South Asia as the "most dangerous place in the world" after India and then its bitter regional rival Pakistan raised the stakes in their long conflict by conducting rival nuclear weapons tests in 1998.

Pakistan said in a Foreign Ministry statement issued ahead of the talks that it was committed to a policy of "re-

sponsibility and restraint" now that it was a declared nuclear power.

Issues on the table include the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which Pakistan and India have so far refused to sign, as well as a proposed Fissile Material Cutoff Treaty and a multilateral moratorium on the production of fissile material.

Pakistan and the United States have held eight rounds of a security dialogue, but this week's consultations will be the first since October's coup in Pakistan led by General Pervez Musharraf, who overthrew the government of then premier Nawaz Sharif.

President Bill Clinton raised nuclear security and other issues in a lightning visit to Pakistan during his South Asia tour earlier this year.



Pakistani Chief Executive General Pervez Musharraf (R) talks with visiting Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid (C) during the welcome ceremony at the presidential palace in Islamabad Friday. Wahid, who flew in from Iran, held talks with General Musharraf and President Rafiq Tarar (L) yesterday.

Indonesian president in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, June 16: Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid received a red-carpet welcome in Pakistan today at the start of a two-day visit which will include talks with military ruler General Pervez Musharraf, reports AFP.

Wahid, who flew in from Iran, was welcomed at the airport by Musharraf and reviewed a guard of honour at the presidential palace where he met President Muhammad Rafiq Tarar.

He is due to hold talks with both men later Friday, officials said.

The Pakistani foreign office has said Wahid's visit would be a "reaffirmation" of friendly bilateral relations.

"The president of Indonesia's visit is a reaffirmation of the long-standing friendship and fraternal relations between Pakistan and Indonesia," it said in a statement Thursday.

High-level visits by the leadership of both countries have made a positive contribution to the strengthening of bilateral relations.

Reunification fever sweeps S Korea

SEOUL, June 16: President Kim Dae-Jung held a meeting of South Korean ministers today to order action after his historic summit in Pyongyang, as reunification hopes mounted in the country, reports AFP.

Kim ordered a special cabinet meeting after his talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il which produced a landmark accord to move toward reconciliation and bring together families divided by the half-century split between the Koreans.

On his triumphant return to Seoul on Thursday, the president declared that reunification between the Cold War enemies was now possible.

Kim said, "We Koreans are at the start of a new era. When I was in Pyongyang I realised that Pyongyang is our land. The people of Pyongyang are our people."

The two sides have different

formulas for unification. The North wants an immediate federation, while the South has proposed a more gradual confederation. They agreed to independently seek common ground in their two approaches towards a single Korea.

Many foreign governments and politicians in the South have demanded more detail on the accords made.

But fired by the summit, a new spirit of friendship for the North -- which has been a sworn enemy since the division of the peninsula in 1945 and the 1950-53 Korean War -- has now swept the country.

The military authorities and provincial governments in South Korea are drastically changing ceremonies and events to mark the 50th anniversary of the start of the Korean War on June 25.

US determined to push ME peace forward

WASHINGTON, June 16: The United States has decided to keep pushing forward the Middle East peace process despite existing tension between Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, US officials said, reports AFP.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright will return to the Middle East before the end of the month to see whether a summit between Arafat, Barak and US President Bill Clinton is needed to speed up the peace process.

The State Department and Barak's office announced Albright's latest trip to the region, as Israeli and Palestinian negotiators continued their talks here late into Thursday night.

"The purpose of her visit will be to determine whether a summit would be useful at this point or whether we need to continue negotiations," spokesman Richard Boucher

said, adding that Albright's trip would follow US Middle East peace envoy Dennis Ross' visit next week to the region.

The exact dates of Albright's trip have not yet been determined, he added, saying he expected it to occur in about 10 days.

"It will be an assessment to determine if we're close enough for a summit," Boucher told reporters.

The United States has been pushing for Arafat and Barak to reach enough agreement on the issues that still divide them to make a Camp David-style summit hosted by Clinton a worthwhile exercise.

Arafat met Thursday at the White House for three hours with Clinton. They discussed efforts to break the deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, but made no "decisions on what the next step in the process should be," said White House spokesman P J Crowley.

Asked about the prospects for a comprehensive deal by September, Clinton told reporters ahead of the talks: "I can only tell you that I want to finish the job, and I'd like to see it finished on time."

A September 13 deadline for a "final status" agreement was agreed on by the two sides at talks in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt last September.

Clinton dismissed a suggestion that the Palestinian-Israeli track of the peace process was in danger of collapse. "No, I think it's an important moment, and we just have to keep working on it," Clinton said.

However, after his meeting with Clinton, Arafat had harsh words for the Israeli prime minister.

"Barak until now doesn't have the will to reach a just and comprehensive settlement to achieve peace in the region," Arafat told reporters.



Picture shows North Korean leader Kim Jong-il waving to South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung Thursday at Soan airport in Pyongyang before Kim Dae-Jung's departure to Seoul. Kim Dae-Jung and Kim Jong-il signed a landmark accord on easing five decades of tensions, with both sides ordering a halt to propaganda attacks against each other.

Israelis support dropping Shas party from govt

JERUSALEM, June 16: A majority of Israelis believe Prime Minister Ehud Barak should fire the ministers belonging to the ultra-orthodox Shas party, which has created a crisis threatening to topple his government, according to a poll published today, reports AFP.

Fifty-nine percent of respondents to a Gallup poll carried out by the Hebrew-language Maariv newspaper said Barak should dump Shas, the second largest member of his ruling coalition with 17 parliamentary seats, after it voted with the opposition last week in favour of a motion calling for early elections.

The Shas had been demanding the government should pay to revamp its ailing education system and give it more control over its schools, as a price for its loyalty.

But another coalition member, the left-wing secular Meretz party, announced Thursday that it would walk out if Barak bowed to Shas "blackmail" and agreed to transfer control of the party's schools from the education ministry, run by Meretz leader and Shas's bete noire Yossi Sarid.

"We will quit the government the moment that is done. The prime minister must halt the negotiations with Shas," said Trade and Industry Minister Ran Cohen of Meretz. The party has 10 MPs.

The results of the poll as published in Maariv did not give the percentage of people who supported keeping Shas or those who abstained, nor did it say how many were polled. Similar polls have had 500 respondents, with a 4.5 percent margin of error.

Lankan peace bid hits rocky road as deadline looms

COLOMBO, June 16: Three months after President Chandrika Kumaratunga and her main opposition began talks to find a way to end the country's decades of ethnic bloodshed, the euphoria has given way to anxiety, reports AFP.

The most contentious issues are now up for discussion, a source close to the talks said. "The road ahead is rocky and strewn with landmines. The big question is how to bring the Tigers into the process."

The government early in the talks had sought to hammer out a bipartisan approach with the United National Party (UNP) they could take to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas.

The LTTE are fighting for an independent homeland called Eelam in the island's north and east.

Their bloody offensives have left more than 60,000 people dead over the past two decades and recent battles have created more than 16,000 refugees in the northern Jaffna peninsula, where the Tamil minority is concentrated.

But now, according to Tamil political sources, the government appears to have shifted gears, and wants to go straight to parliament with a draft peace plan they will present to the Tigers as a fait accompli.

"At the last meeting with the opposition on Wednesday, the president made it clear that she was reluctant to send the proposals to the LTTE and instead wanted to go to parliament straight away," another source close to the talks said.

"This seems like a U-turn on

the part of the government as earlier there was broad consensus that the proposals should be given to the Tigers and then move to parliament," the source said.

Any agreement between the two main parties must be presented to parliament and approved before the assembly is dissolved on August 24. Fresh elections must be held by mid-November.

Any plan will also face pressure to succeed since the LTTE rejected Kumaratunga's previous peace initiative in 1995.

Diplomats said Colombo has been encouraged by the United States, the European Union and India to move towards negotiations with the help of Norway, which was invited to act as a third-party facilitator in the conflict.



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat (L) speaks to reporters Thursday as he leaves the White House in Washington, DC after meetings with US President Bill Clinton. Arafat was in Washington, DC for discussions on Middle East peace process.

Attempt on Serb opposition leader

PODGORICA, Yugoslavia, June 16: Serbian opposition leader Vuk Draskovic was shot and wounded in Montenegro by unknown assailants. In what was described by his party today as the second attempt on his life in less than a year, reports AFP.

The 53-year-old was "slightly injured, grazed by two bullets" to the head in the attack late Thursday on his house in the Montenegrin coastal town of Budva, his advisor Ognjen Prbicevic told AFP.

"The house was riddled with bullets," as it was hit by automatic weapons fire at 11:30 p.m. (3:30 BST), Prbicevic said.

Draskovic, a long-time opponent of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, was rushed to a hospital in the nearby town of Kotor, but was later released and his injuries are not life threatening, medical sources there said.

Governor of Aceh sacked

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia, June 16: The governor of Indonesia's rebellious Aceh province has been dismissed by President Abdurrahman Wahid following a vote of no-confidence, an official said here today, reports AFP.

Syamsuddin Mahmud will be replaced on June 21 by senior home affairs ministry official in Jakarta Ramli Ridwan who will act as caretaker governor, the governor's spokesman Tenku Pribadi said.

The presidential decree on Mahmud's replacement was issued on June 7 by President Abdurrahman Wahid, he said.

Mahmud, a Belgian-trained economist and professor at the Syiah Kuala University in Banda Aceh, is expected to be posted in Jakarta as deputy chairman of the National Development Planning Board (Bappenas).

Progress on truce talks in Solomon Islands

SYDNEY, June 16: An uneasy standoff held between warring factions in the Solomon Islands today and a top police official said progress was being made on a permanent ceasefire.

There has been good progress, efforts are being made from both sides on a permanent ceasefire," Assistant Police Commissioner Wilfred Akao told AFP.

Each side is studying each others' submissions to determine when a final ceasefire will come.

BRIEFLY

Bus accident kills 12 in India: A bus skidded off a mountain road and fell into a gorge in India's northern Kashmir state Friday, killing 12 people and injuring 33, police said, AP reports from Jammu.

At least five of the injured were in critical condition, police said, quoting doctors treating the victims in a hospital in Jammu. Kashmir's winter capital. The accident occurred early Friday near Nandini, a village 25 kilometers (15 miles) north of Jammu. The cause of the accident was not known, but Kashmir has narrow, winding roads and more than 100 people have been killed in three accidents in the state in the last one month.

5 killed in air crash in England: An air ambulance flying a patient to a neurological unit in northwest England port crashed into the River Mersey on Wednesday, killing five people, officials said, AP reports from Liverpool.

The single-engine Piper Aztec, carrying the sick man of a stretcher, his wife, two nurses and the pilot, crashed as it prepared to land, flipped over and sank into the river, Liverpool airport manager Road Hill said.

UNSC wrestles with resolution to oust foreign forces from DRC

UNITED NATIONS, June 16: Members of the UN Security Council wrestled Thursday night with the wording of a draft resolution that would order foreign forces out of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), but reflect their countries' legitimate security concerns, reports AFP.

Diplomats said council members discussed the draft during a reception hosted by the French ambassador to the United Nations, Jean-David Levitte, for senior officials from the six countries involved in the war in DRC.

Levitte holds the presidency of the council this month, and he chaired several meetings earlier Thursday which included the political committee set up by the six under a ceasefire agreement signed on July 10 last year.

The council was due to re-

convene at 9:30 a.m. (19:30 BST) Friday for a second and final day of talks, starting with closed-door consultations and ending with the adoption of a resolution aimed at reviving the shaky peace accord.

A text, drafted by France, was distributed to council members on Wednesday night and amended during Thursday's meetings. Diplomats said Levitte hoped a final draft could be sent to the capitals of the 15 council members for approval before Friday morning.

Disagreements remained over the language of two paragraphs demanding the withdrawal of Rwandan and Ugandan troops and of all other foreign forces in DRC.

Both Rwanda and Uganda sent troops to DRC to back rebels opposed to the three-year-old regime of President Laurent Kabila.

Benazir's aide released after questioning

KARACHI, June 16: A close aide to former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto was released from police custody early today after questioning over alleged corruption, his family said, reports AFP.

Safdar Abbasi, a member of the parliament which was suspended in October, was detained in his hometown of Larkana, southern Sindh province, by a team from the army-led National Accountability Bureau (NAB) on Thursday.

His family and colleagues from the Pakistan People's Party earlier told AFP they feared he had been arrested and the eight-month-old military government's tough crackdown on corruption.

But his brother, Munawar Abbasi, said he was allowed to go free after police consulted NAB officials in the capital Islamabad.

"He was kept in custody for several hours before he was freed as the warrant on which he was arrested had been suspended," Abbasi said.

Military ruler General Pervez Musharraf, who ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif in a coup in October, set up the NAB to deal with cases of corruption involving politicians, bureaucrats and businessmen.

Bhutto, who was sacked as prime minister in 1996 and convicted of corruption in April last year, lives in exile in London.

Cosmonauts return from Mir repair mission

ARKALYK, Kazakhstan, June 16: Two Russian cosmonauts made a bumpy return to Earth today after a two-month mission repairing the ageing Mir space station, reports AFP.

Cosmonauts Sergei Zolotov and Alexander Kalery landed aboard their Soyuz TM-30 capsule near the town of Arkalyk in the central Asian nation of Kazakhstan.

Dropping to Earth under a giant parachute, the re-entry module bounced several times before settling down at 0044 GMT.

Kalery told AFP it was "the most difficult" landing of his three space missions so far.

The capsule "bounced up and down a few times on the ground like a rubber ball," he said.

Fresh reshuffle in Indonesian military

JAKARTA, June 16: Indonesia's once all-powerful military on Friday announced the replacement of 122 commanders and staff officers in a reshuffle aimed at revamping the institution to meet the changing times, reports AFP.

The reshuffle, the second major one this year, covered 20 posts at military headquarters, 60 in the army, 16 in the air force and 26 in the navy.

The documents of transfer were signed Wednesday by armed forces commander Admiral Widodo Adisucipto, making the new appointments effective immediately, a military statement said.

In the most important change, the key post of com-

mander of the army's special forces (Kopassus) went from Major General Syahrir to Brigadier General Amirul Isnaini, previously an assistant to army chief General Tyasno Sudarto.

The move also saw changes or transfers in five regional military commands -- including the commanders of the restive provinces of Maluku and Aceh.

Maluku commander Brigadier General Max Tamaela, who has been criticized by both Muslim and Christian communities in the riot-torn province, was replaced by Colonel I Made Yasa, a Hindu from Bali province.



Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer (R) flanked by New Zealand Foreign Minister Phil Goff, speaks to the media before departing from Nausori Airport, outside the Fijian capital, Suva Friday. The four-member Commonwealth delegation, which held talks with the interim military government in an attempt to resolve the coup crisis, said they were assured by the military administration that civilian rule would return "shortly" when the political hostages are released.

'Civilian rule soon in Fiji'

SUVA, June 16: Martial law authorities today committed Fiji to a return to a multi-racial democracy within two years and ruled out the involvement of George Speight and other coup plotters holding 31 hostages, reports AFP.

Martial law commander Commodore Vorege Bainimarama told a Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) an interim civilian government would take over "shortly" when the hostages were released, with full democracy in two years.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer described the pledge as "a rough road map to a return to democracy" but CMAG wanted this sooner than two years.

"They told us as soon as the hostages are released they will move to an interim civilian government," Downer told reporters after meeting Bainimarama.

New Zealand Foreign Minister Phil Goff, without elaborating whether the release of hostages was imminent said: "Our understanding is that they will be establishing an interim civilian government shortly."

Fiji's elected government, led by the country's first ethnic Indian premier Mahendra Chaudhry, has been held hostage in parliament since May 19, when failed businessman Speight staged a coup in the name of indigenous Fijians.

"We are pleased Commander Bainimarama assured us that neither Mr Speight nor any of his henchmen will form any part of the interim civilian government," Downer added before boarding a plane to leave Fiji.

CMAG has suspended Fiji from councils of the organisation and sent the delegation to Suva to decide whether to recommend full suspension for non-compliance of a requirement that members have "just and honest government" with fundamental human rights, including equal rights and opportunities for all citizens.

Under Speight's proposals, and under existing martial law, the 41 percent of the country who are ethnic Indians, do not have such rights.

Goff said the only acceptable Fiji Government was the Chaudhry government.

"Our first and best solution is that that government should be returned to office at the end of the hostage situation," he said.

The straightforward assurances given by Bainimarama are in stark contrast to what his negotiators have been saying to Speight and gunmen who believe they are winning the coup.

They appeared to believe they were taking a crucial role in any new government.