

Pak military will have to hand over power to civilian admn

Sharif still defiant

ISLAMABAD, Oct 31 : Pakistan's military regime will have to hand power to a civilian administration as soon as possible or take the blame for the "disintegration" of the country, ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif said in an interview published today, reports AFP.

Speaking to Japan's Mainichi Shimbun from his prison cell in the high security Attock Fort outside the capital, Sharif said "this government has failed completely and it will have to revert to civilian rule."

"It is not a choice or an option available to it. It is a demand that has to be met as early as possible to save the country from disintegration," he said in the interview published in English-language dailies here.

Sharif on Monday won a small victory against the military regime which toppled him in a bloodless coup last year. The Sindh High Court threw out his conviction for terrorism and rejected a state appeal demanding his execution.

But he is still languishing in prison with a life sentence for hijacking related to events on the night of the military takeover, when he tried to stop a plane carrying coup leader General Pervez Musharraf from landing.

He said the Musharraf regime had failed in every aspect of its ambitious reform agenda, including stamping out corruption and reviving the debt-ridden economy.

"No government in the 52-year history of our

country has lost its credibility as quickly as this government has," he said.

"There is disharmony and chaos .. and internationally we are a discredited country."

"There is flight of capital and manpower and the government's propagandists are misleading the people, but the situation is such that they themselves do not believe their own propaganda."

Musharraf, who rode to power on a wave of anti-Sharif sentiment, last week admitted for the first time that his popularity was waning and there was a "perception of discouragement and despondency."

He said that "if we were not performing, I would be the first person to be thinking of ways to bring some body who can run Pakistan better."

But he said the perception of Pakistan's failures had been blown out of proportion by intellectuals and the media and there was no need to rush in a civilian administration.

Pakistan's supreme court has validated the coup and given Musharraf three years to complete his reforms and hold general elections.

Sharif said the Pakistani military has no respect for democracy and had held every civilian government hostage.

The moment a civilian set-up is established a systematic campaign of sabotage is started to undermine the authority of that government," he said.

1st crew to live on ISS blasts off

BAIKONUR, Kazakhstan, Oct 31 : Two Russians and an American blasted off today for the International Space Station to become the first crew to inhabit a ground-breaking project to advance space exploration in the 21st century, reports AFP.

Just over four minutes later the Soyuz craft carrying US astronaut William Shepherd and Russian cosmonauts Sergei Krikalyov and Yury Gidzenko, left the Earth's atmosphere and reached orbit.

"Everything is going according to plan. The rocket is in orbit," said Alexei Lukyanov, an official at the Baikonur space centre here.

The Soyuz left a fiery plume as it soared through the fog above the Kazakhstan steppe into the skies at 13:53 BST.

The crew, due to reach the ISS on Thursday, will be the first to take up long-term residence on the 16-nation space project, which marks unprecedented international cooperation in man's exploration of space.

Their craft is scheduled to dock automatically with ISS at 0919 GMT Thursday, although the crew can switch to a manual procedure if necessary.

The three cosmonauts will remain on the multi-billion-dollar space station, until February 2001 when a replacement crew arrives.

Russian President Vladimir Putin, in Paris for a official visit, congratulated his country's space agency for the successful launch, Interfax news agency

reported.

Unprecedented security measures were taken in case of an accident to the Russia Soyuz TM-3 rocket.

Around 400 people including doctors and rescue teams were deployed from this central Asian cosmodrome to the Sea of Japan, the last place where the Soyuz could drop if its takeoff had failed -- a distance of some 7,000 kilometres (4,400 miles).

Two ships, 14 planes and 20 helicopters of the Russian armed forces were also mobilised.

Ahead of the launch, Shepherd told a final pre-launch press conference that the joint Russian-US mission marked a new era in space travel.

Shepherd, who speaks fluent Russian, will be mission commander while his fellow cosmonauts speak English, which is expected to dominate transmissions from the space station and controllers back on Earth.

Work in the station's lab will continue until at least 2013.

The ISS project is backed by 16 nations led by the United States and Russia. ISS currently consists of the Russian modules Zvezda and Zarya, and the US module Unity.

By becoming a manned station, ISS will take the place of the Soviet-era Mir orbiter, the world's only operational space station, which is due to be scrapped in February because of financing problems.

The Progress cargo ship is due to be dispatched to the station in mid-November to replenish the ISS's fuel stocks and provide food and water supplies for the three-man crew.

The launch in early December of another US space shuttle should bring two large solar panels which will generate electricity for the station.

The ISS is expected to be completed in 2005 or 2006, a vast structure 108 metres (yards) long and 74 metres wide, weighing more than 450 tonnes.

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