

Crackdown on political parties continues in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani police have detained more than 2,000 politicians and their supporters in a major sweep of opposition leaders ahead of a Pakistan Day rally later this week, party officials said yesterday.

They said raids on party members' homes in the central province of Punjab continued overnight Tuesday as the military regime tried to prevent the demonstration to demand the restoration of democracy.

"More than 2,000 people have been arrested all over Punjab," said Qasim Zia, provincial chief of the 18-party Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD).

Zia, head of the Punjab chapter of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto, said police had arrested former MPs, ex-ministers and almost all PPP zonal chiefs.

He said at least 250 people, including the former mayor of the Punjab capital Lahore, were arrested in the eastern city where the ARD has scheduled its "peaceful protest" on Friday.

"Top ARD leaders are coming to Lahore and we are going to hold the meeting," Zia said.

Discovery lands at Kennedy Space Centre

AFP, Washington

The US space shuttle Discovery landed at Florida's Kennedy Space Centre early yesterday, ending a 12-day mission to the International Space Station (ISS), the US space agency NASA said.

The shuttle touched down at Cape Canaveral at 2:31 am (1331 BST) on the second attempt after its original 12:56 am (1156 BST) landing was scrapped due to bad weather.

The Discovery brought back to Earth American William Shepherd, 51, and Russians Yuri Gidzenko, 38, and Sergei Krikalev, 42, the first residents of the space station, who spent 141 days in space -- 136 of them aboard the ISS -- to prepare the station to serve as a space laboratory.

Their replacements were delivered by Discovery during its mission to the space station.

The new team, consisting of Russian cosmonaut Yuri Usachev and astronauts James Voss and Susan Helms, will remain aboard the ISS until late July.

During the shuttle's nine-day docking with the station, an Italian-built multipurpose logistics module, known as Leonardo, was used for the first time to ferry five tonnes of equipment on board the station.

Bush won't try to 'force peace' on Israel, Palestinians

Sharon reiterates his stand

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush stuck by his largely hands-off approach to Middle East policy Tuesday, telling Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon he "will not try to force peace" on Israel and the Palestinians.

"We'll do everything we can to help calm nerves, to encourage there to be dialogue," said the US leader, who since taking office January 20 has broken with predecessor Bill Clinton's intensely personal approach to the region.

"I told him our nation will not try to force peace, that we'll facilitate peace and that we will work with those responsible for peace," he said in a brief joint appearance after the two leaders met for the first time since taking office.

Sharon insisted that Bush endorsed his adamant position that peace talks with Palestinian President Yasser Arafat were impossible until the latter acts to end six months of violence.

The US leader publicly kept mum on the subject. "The first thing and the most important one is to bring security to the citizens of Israel," Sharon said. "Once we reach security, and it will be calm in the Middle East, I believe that we'll start our negotiations to reach a peace agreement."

Sharon later told some reporters that he had urged the president not to

invite Arafat because such a meeting "would be proof that terrorism pays." Bush did not respond, according to Israeli officials.

A senior US administration official denied that Sharon had sought to dissuade Bush from welcoming Arafat and insisted that while Washington called on the Arab leader help end the six-month uprising, doing so was not a condition for a visit by Arafat.

Bush, meanwhile, declined to say whether he would meet with Arafat, promising only that "one of the things that I will do is use whatever persuasive powers I have to create an environment in which peace can flourish."

The US leader has invited Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Jordan's King Abdullah.

The US official also said Bush urged Israel to "restore normal economic life" and ease pressures on Palestinians, thousands of whom cannot work since Israel closed its borders with the West Bank and Gaza when the violence flared up last September.

Meanwhile, US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher assailed Israel's plan to build an additional 3,000 homes in a controversial Jewish settlement in East Jerusalem known to the Arabs as Jebel Abu Ghneim.



PHOTO: AFP

Relatives of victims of the Ehime Maru vessel are joined by Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori (C) as they throw flowers on Tuesday on the site of the February 9 collision between the Japanese fishing vessel and the US Navy submarine USS Greeneville off the coast of Hawaii. The US Navy has received the first portion of a feasibility study for salvage of the Japanese vessel Ehime Maru which sank, killing nine crew and students.

Local council polls begin in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

The second phase of village elections began in Pakistan yesterday under the glare of international scrutiny, following a Commonwealth warning of "stronger measures" against the military government.

More than 10 million Pakistanis will elect 1,459 local councils in the second round of voting under General Pervez Musharraf's plan to devolve power, which he says will create genuine democracy.

Musharraf, who toppled prime minister Nawaz Sharif in a bloodless coup in October 1999, has described his devolution plan as "revolutionary" but his critics are unconvinced.

Commonwealth ministers in London Tuesday warned Pakistan, which was suspended from the councils of the global body after the coup, to speed up plans for the restoration of democracy or face "stronger measures."

In a communiqué, they expressed "concern over the harassment of political parties, including the restrictions imposed on democratic activity, processes and institutions and the detention of persons without due process of law."

Commonwealth chief Don McKinnon warned that Pakistan had to make "more definite progress" on a timetable for democracy through free and fair elections by October, when heads of government meet in Brisbane.

Pakistan immediately hit back at the "unsubstantiated" allegations, accusing the Commonwealth of ignoring the military's efforts to rebuild clean civilian government following years of corruption.

The Commonwealth "fails to acknowledge the important steps that the government has already taken towards the introduction of genuine democracy in the country," the foreign office said.

Musharraf has banned public rallies, suspended parliament and the constitution, and locked up scores of former politicians under draconian anti-corruption laws which allow for three months detention without charge.

The Commonwealth's discussions on Pakistan came as the regime rounded up hundreds of political party members to stop a rally scheduled for Friday, Pakistan's national day, to call for the restoration of democracy.

Foreign diplomats and non-governmental organisations are expected to visit polling stations to monitor the elections.

Election Commission officials have said 30,639 seats would be contested yesterday in the country's four provinces.

Each union council consists of 21 seats of which 12 are general seats, six are for farmers and labourers and at least one seat is reserved for non-Muslims or minorities.

A record number of 13,300 women are contesting, with one third of seats reserved for them under Musharraf's devolution plan. Many are expected to be elected unopposed.

Another 2,105 non-Muslim candidates are in the field for 1,459 seats allocated to minority communities.

The first phase of village elections in December saw a turnout of around 45 percent and was hailed as a major success by the military.



'Big B' most powerful film star

AFP, Bombay

Indian screen legend Amitabh Bachchan has been listed as the country's most powerful film star by the Internet website Forbes.com.

Bachchan, 58, led in almost every category, ahead of current movie heartthrob Hrithik Roshan as well as top actors Aamir Khan, Aishwarya Rai and Madhuri Dixit.

The number one power ranking slot was given to Bachchan, or the Big B as he is known here, despite the fact that his film career has been in the doldrums of late with a series of flops.

Forbes rated the stars on salary, number of press clips and by gauging popularity from Internet searches.

It also painted a dramatic picture of the Bombay film world, which was rocked recently by the arrest of several top producers and directors over links with organised crime.

"Feuds between actors are carried out in public and often reach epic proportions; death threats, assaults, extortion attempts and murky financing are all part of the game," Forbes said.

Albanian rebels reject ultimatum

AFP, Pristina, Yugoslavia

Albanian rebels fighting Macedonian security forces yesterday rejected Skopje's ultimatum to surrender or withdraw from positions around the embattled town of Tetovo or face renewed army attacks.

"We will not leave our positions, we are going to advance and open new fronts," an official of the self-proclaimed National Liberation Army based near the northwestern Macedonian town told AFP by phone.

"I think the Macedonians should take us seriously and not throw ultimatums at us," said the guerrilla spokesman.

"We are an organised army and

we hold positions not only around Tetovo but in all the Albanian areas of Macedonia," he warned.

Macedonia has a large Albanian minority concentrated in the north-west along the borders with UN-run Kosovo.

In Tetovo, hours after launching an offensive, the Macedonian army started a 24-hour ceasefire at midnight Tuesday (0500 BST) after the government gave Albanian rebels in the hills above the embattled town to surrender or withdraw by the end of Wednesday.

The army had launched an offensive at 4:00 pm (2100 BST) Tuesday against the Albanian rebels in the hills above the embattled town of Tetovo near the border with Kosovo.

Plumes of smoke rose from around rebel positions and columns of earth were thrown up as the army opened an artillery barrage against the insurgents, marking a new intensity in Macedonia's struggle to quell the rebellion before it sucks the entire region into a new Balkans war.

But later, an announcement by the ministries of the interior and defence said that the Macedonian forces would refrain from opening fire for 24 hours to give the "terrorists" time to reply to the ultimatum.

The army would "only reply in case of an attack by the other side," the announcement said.

When the ultimatum expired, "the security forces will pursue their attacks against the terrorist positions with all means at their disposal

until they are wiped out, in the Tetovo region and along the northern border" of the country, it said.

"The aim of these operations will be to chase the terrorists from our country and install peace on the whole of Macedonian territory."

Army cannon opened rapid fire at 4:00 pm on Tuesday and within half an hour a heavy pall of thick grey smoke hung across the entire hillside to the north and northwest of the town.

Several isolated houses on the edge of the northwestern town had been hit by shells, including one from which rebels had been firing on police positions.

The pounding lasted around 90 minutes before dying away to spattered bursts of machinegun fire.

LTTE sinks navy gunboat in suicide attack

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels destroyed an Israeli-built gunboat, killing at least 11 sailors in the most serious violation yet of their unilateral truce, defence officials here said.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) launched the suicide attack against the Sri Lankan navy patrol that set out from the port of Trincomalee, defence ministry spokesman Sanath Karunaratne said.

He said a cluster of LTTE boats had taken part in the assault against two navy gunboats around eight nautical miles off the coast of Mullativu, where the Tigers have a stronghold.

"The attack was initiated by the LTTE," Karunaratne said. "This is

clearly the most serious violation of the LTTE's own ceasefire called on December 24. One gunboat was sunk and the other was damaged."

There was no immediate reaction from the rebels or details of their casualties.

During similar attacks in the past each of the boats deployed by the guerillas had a crew of at least two of their elite Black Sea Tiger bombers.

Defence sources said at least 11 sailors were killed while another seven escaped with injuries. Several others were presumed missing after the sea battle on Wednesday morning.

Navy sources said a search and rescue operation was underway while more navy reinforcements had also been sent to the area to engage rebel targets.

Canada resumes full cooperation with India

AFP, Ottawa

Canada announced on Tuesday that it was resuming full cooperation with India despite Ottawa's lingering concern about nuclear proliferation in South Asia.

In a statement issued on behalf of Foreign Minister John Manley, who is in London for a meeting of Commonwealth ministers, the Department of Foreign Affairs said Canada still had "deep concern about the dangerous trend toward nuclear proliferation in South Asia."

Tuesday's announcement does not mention Pakistan.

Canada cut back ties with India and Pakistan after the two countries carried out nuclear weapon tests.

Tuesday's statement said Canada would "pursue the broadest possible political and economic relationship with India." It added that Ottawa would now encourage bilateral ministerial visits and resume international aid programmes, both of which had been suspended.

Tuesday's announcement does not mention Pakistan.



PHOTO: AFP

This file picture shows the Brazilian offshore P-36 oil rig listing on March 19, some 270 km northeast of Rio de Janeiro and 150 km from Brazil's coast. Petrobras, the Brazilian state oil company, announced that the oil rig, the world's largest, has sunk after a series of unexplained explosions on March 15.

World's largest oil rig sinks into Atlantic

AFP, Rio De Janeiro

Crippled by a series of mysterious explosions, the world's largest offshore oil rig sank into the Atlantic Ocean on Tuesday, the state-owned oil company Petrobras announced.

The accident has sparked fears of a massive oil spill, despite assurances from Petrobras that the slick would not wash up on the beach.

The 210-metre-high rig, which had been in operation less than a year, took more than 1.5 million litres of oil with it as it headed 1,368 metres down to the ocean floor.

On Thursday, three unexplained explosions in one of the piles that supported the P-36 rig on the sea-

bed caused two confirmed deaths, with eight more people missing.

Dutch environmental experts, US consultants and workers from Petrobras battled to refloat the rig, pumping nitrogen into its flooded floaters and expelling 4,100 tonnes of water.

They managed to reduce the massive platform's list from 30 degrees to 24 degrees, but after heavy weather overnight, the huge steel structure suddenly started keeling over at 10:25 (1925 BST). Within less than 10 minutes the rig -- as big as a 40-story building -- had disappeared under the waters, heading to the ocean floor.

Indonesian MPs revive petition against Wahid

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian legislators have intensified their battle against defiant President Abdurrahman Wahid reviving a four-month-old petition accusing him of violating his oath of office by breaking laws, an MP said yesterday.

"The petition outlines a number of cases where we believe the president has violated laws," Reform faction legislator Alvin Lie, one of the 151 signatories to the petition, told AFP.

Lie said the petition, which was originally submitted on November 30, was still being processed by the 500-member lower house of parliament (DPR).

"Proponents yesterday (Tuesday) explained the petition to a plenary session of the DPR," he said.

The signatories include 45 legislators from Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), the holder of the largest

block of seats in the DPR. The petition alleges Wahid violated the constitution by allowing the flying of a separatist flag in restive Irian Jaya province.

It says he broke a 1999 law by interfering in the central bank by demanding the resignation of its governor, and another 1999 law by refusing to explain to parliament the dismissal of two economic ministers in April 2000.

The petition also accuses Wahid of violating parliamentary decrees by replacing the national police chief in December without consulting the DPR, proposing the lifting of a ban on communism, and delaying legal proceedings against three tycoons charged with corruption.

It also says he has failed to uphold a law on sharing power with Megawati.

The MPs want to persuade the DPR that it has solid grounds to issue a united statement that Wahid has violated the laws and the constitution, and step up pressure on him.