

Ban on political rallies to continue: Musharraf

AP, Hanoi

Pakistan's military ruler, Gen Pervez Musharraf, said yesterday his government has released hundreds of arrested pro-democracy protesters but a ban on political rallies will remain until elections are held next year.

Musharraf said he did not know exactly how many members of the main anti-government alliance had been arrested in last week's crackdown.

"By now I am sure that all the people must have been released," he said.

Musharraf, who finished a three-day visit to Vietnam on Saturday, said his government would not allow "any violation of the rule set by this government that is, no political activity."

The government imposed a ban on rallies soon after it seized power in a bloodless coup in October 1999 by toppling the elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Last week it arrested hundreds of supporters of the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy to prevent a planned rally on May 1

demanding early elections.

Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League and the Pakistan Peoples' Party of another ousted prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, are the key mem-



Pervez Musharraf, members of the 15-party alliance.

"There will be no lifting of the ban on political activity until we have elections next year," Musharraf

said. Musharraf has promised to return Pakistan to democracy by October 2002 in line with a Supreme Court verdict ordering him to introduce reforms, clean up Pakistan's deeply corrupt political system and revive the country's ailing economy by then.

The ban, which covers outdoor rallies and demonstrations, "is on a few political elements who want to misuse their platform to cause disruptions and unrest," Musharraf said.

Musharraf said his visit to Vietnam, the first by a Pakistani leader since the two countries established diplomatic ties in 1972, had been successful.

"The future looks very bright between Vietnam and Pakistan," he said.

Musharraf's trip is viewed as part of efforts by his government to improve its ties with Southeast Asia.

Before arriving in Vietnam, Musharraf visited Myanmar, which like Pakistan faces diplomatic isolation as both are governed by unelected military regimes.



Photo dated January 26, 1999 shows an Agni intermediate range ballistic missile being towed past the presidential dais in New Delhi during India's annual Republic Day following its declaration as a nuclear power. India began its largest military manoeuvres in 13 years yesterday with exercise along the Pakistan border with the aim of training troops in tactical measures in event of nuclear conflict. More than 60,000 troops are involved in the mammoth five-day war games in the Bikaner sector of the northern desert state of Rajasthan.

Bush orders review of all Sino-US govt contacts

AFP, Washington

In a move that could further strain Sino-US ties, President George W. Bush has ordered federal agencies to review contacts with China "on a case-by-case basis," the White House said Friday.

The purpose is "to make a determination on a case-by-case basis about which of those contacts are the most positive and productive for the United States and which may not be," Bush spokesman Ari Fleischer told reporters.

The departments of state and defence are conducting their own reviews, while Bush's national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, is overseeing reviews by other agencies, said Fleischer.

A US State Department official, who asked not to be named, said the review affected official meetings and embassy events -- in Washington or Beijing -- that might involve contacts between US and Chinese officials.

But the official emphasised Washington was not reviewing relations with China. "We're not talking about recalling an ambassador," the official said. "On the contrary, the president has just announced his nominee for ambassador to China."

Fleischer's comments came a day after Bush lashed China's human rights record and indicated that the United States would "review all opportunities to interface with the Chinese."

"If it enhances our relationship, it might make sense. If it's a useless exercise, and it doesn't make the relationship any better, then we won't do that," Bush said told reporters.

Relations have suffered heavy strains recently, with a tense 11-day standoff over a US spy plane that collided with a Chinese fighter April 1, Bush approving a major arms package for Taiwan and saying he would defend the island against an attack by Beijing, and his sharp words about China's human rights record.

"What the Chinese must understand is that we'll be firm in our philosophy, consistent in our beliefs, and we want to work to have a relationship that is a positive relationship for both countries," Bush said Thursday.

UNHCR chief calls for peace to help return of Afghans

AFP, Peshawar

a good thing. I saw children in their school and they are your future," he told the refugees.

Lubbers regretted that fighting was continuing in Afghanistan despite a drought in the country and called for peace to enable refugees to return to their homeland.

"As soon as peace is returned, you will go back with your families," said Lubbers who arrived from Afghanistan on Thursday for talks with Pakistani officials.

"The elders, head of the families, women and children will remember the way you lived here."

"You will remember these strange people of so many countries, who came here to help you," he said.

UNHCR spokesman Yusuf Hassan has said that the makeshift Jalozi camp, where some 80,000 Afghans live, could become a "death camp" with conditions poised to deteriorate with the onset of the hot season.

India begins war games near Pakistan border

AFP, New Delhi

New Delhi has said it had given advance notice to Islamabad of its corps-level -- about 60,000 men -- exercises to avoid military tensions with its neighbour.

However, Pakistan on Wednesday said India's claims that it had given advance information of the exercise was "not correct."

India had earlier told Pakistan that it would conduct two separate division-size -- roughly 20,000 men -- exercises in mid-May in Bikaner and Hoshiarpur areas and would remain 90 to 150 km from Pakistan's border, Islamabad said.

This exercise was to take place in mid-May, whereas the exercise announced on Monday would happen in early May, the Pakistani government said.

Under a 1991 agreement between the two countries, each side is required to give advance notice to the other of all exercises at corps level within a distance of 75 km from the border.

Despite the protests, witnesses reported that columns of armoured vehicles had rolled into the hot deserts of Rajasthan for the May 5-10 event.

The exercises are a result of a decision taken during a military commanders' conference held in New Delhi in April.

Indian SC asks govt to enforce law on female foeticide

AFP, New Delhi

March had reported that India had 933 women for 1,000 men, up from 927 women per 1,000 men a decade ago.

However, the census figures also showed that there has been a dramatic drop in the child sex ratio in the capital New Delhi, along with the northern states of Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh.

Punjab, another northern state with a high per capita income, had the lowest child sex ratio -- of 793 females per 1,000 males, the Times of India reported.

The public interest petition noted that sex determination was possible even before conception -- by a method called "Pre-natal Genetic Diagnosis."

This method, which allows the sperm cell to be processed in a laboratory ensuring conception of a male child, was popular in the states of Punjab and Haryana, the petition said.

Technicians head home after spy plane inspection

AFP, Beijing



Legendary Shehnai (traditional Indian flute) maestro, Bismillah Khan (L) gestures towards Indian President K.R. Narayanan (R), as he requests to play at least once in the Presidential Palace's Durbar Hall, after he received the Bharat Ratna, India's highest civilian award on Friday. At age 85, Khan, one of India's legendary musicians, continues to give concerts.

5 commandos killed in Lankan land mine blast

AFP, Colombo

Arroyo meets with rioters

Philippine President Gloria Arroyo paid a surprise visit yesterday to alleged rioters jailed for being part of an attempt to topple her.

They were among 50,000 supporters of jailed ex-president Joseph Estrada who attacked the presidential palace on May 1 as part of an alleged failed plan to grab power.

About 100 pro-Estrada supporters have been arrested.

Arroyo, who declared emergency-like powers to quell the rebellion, called Saturday for the transfer of some of the jailed rioters from the national police headquarters to welfare homes.

Arroyo's visit came as the military began easing security in the Philippine capital even though alleged key plotters behind the power-grab remained at large.

The president was expected to remove on Monday the so-called state of rebellion she had declared to quell the riots, in which four people died and about 100 others were injured.

During her visit, Arroyo asked some 40 of the jailed rioters why they joined the siege on her palace, radio station DZBB reported.

Many of the detainees insisted they not been part of the crowd that hurled rocks and fought with riot police outside Malacanang Palace.

Doctors accompanying the president gave the jailed men medical check-ups.

Arroyo had said earlier that some of the rioters had "no inkling about politics," depicting them as "abandoned pawns" of opposition leaders.

Lawmakers okay electoral reforms in Florida

The state will give counties 12 million dollars this year and another 12 million dollars in 2002 to purchase new equipment.

The legislation also directs the secretary of state to set rules for hand-counts. The absence of such standards prompted the US Supreme Court to block last year's hand-count in Florida and hand the election to George W. Bush.

Officials said they hoped to have the new system up and running by May 10.

"We now have a model for the rest of the country. That was our hope," said Governor Jeb Bush, who said he will sign the bill into law.

2 more killed in Assam pre-polls violence

AFP, Guwahati

Two political activists have been killed and three critically injured in a fresh spate of pre-poll violence in India's northeastern state of Assam, officials said Saturday.

Unidentified gunmen attacked an election office of the opposition Congress party late Friday in Sonitpur, 220 km north of the provincial capital Guwahati, a police spokesman said.

"The gunmen shot dead two Congress workers and wounded three others before escaping," he said.

It was the latest in a series of militant attacks ahead of state elections in Assam scheduled for May 10.

Federal troops are on alert across Assam as militants of the banned United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), which has called for an election boycott, step up their offensive.

About 50 people have been killed and more than 175 injured in the violence during the past month.