

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, bers 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: AFP

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.

India begins war games near Pakistan border

AFP, New Delhi

India began its largest military manoeuvres in 13 years yesterday and said the one of the main objectives of the exercise along Pakistan's border would be to train troops in tactical measures in a nuclear conflict.

"The exercises have started. In the initial stages, reconnaissance will take place during which the enemy will be identified," Colonel Shruti Kant, a spokesman for the Indian army said.

"The final assault will take place on May 10," he added.

More than 60,000 troops, heavy armour such as Russian built T-72 tanks and around 100 transport and combat aircraft are involved in the mammoth five-day war games in the Bikaner sector of the northern desert state of Rajasthan.

The Indian Air Force, which held its own exercises involving more than 100 combat jets last year, will launch ground attacks during the exercise, codenamed "Complete Victory."

The manoeuvres will end with the firing of high-calibre live ammunition rockets and other battlefield missiles in India's nuclear weapons test zone of Pokhran in Rajasthan, sources said.

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 armour 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.

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

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Ruud Lubbers met Afghan refugees in squalid camps in northwestern Pakistan Saturday and called for peace to stem Afghanistan's humanitarian crisis.

The UNHCR chief visited the overflowing Shamshatoo and Jalozi camps near Peshawar, capital of North West Frontier Province (NWFP), where more than 170,000 Afghans have sought shelter since September.

Another 500,000 people fleeing drought and war between the ruling Taliban militia and opposition forces have been living in displacement camps inside Afghanistan.

Lubbers praised the efforts of UN agencies and various non governmental organisations to help the uprooted Afghans.

"I saw disabled men working and I saw women making efforts. This is

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.

Powell urges govt, LTTE to hold peace talks

Curfew eased in Colombo after mob violence

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Colin Powell on Friday urged Sri Lanka and Tamil Tigers rebels to stop fighting and open a peace dialogue, as he hosted talks with Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar.

Powell also expressed support for Norway's effort to salvage its peace bid on the island but voiced "strong understanding" for the "terrorist challenge" posed to the government by the separatist rebels, said State Department spokesman Richard Boucher. "The United States has long believed that the Sri Lankan conflict cannot be settled by military means," Boucher said.

"For this reason, the secretary expressed his hope that the two sides will make a commitment to cease hostilities and start peace talks as soon as possible."

Kadirgamar is a key figure in Sri Lanka's attempts to enter into a

dialogue with the guerrillas.

He left home on Tuesday as Norway's special envoy, Erik Solheim, was in Colombo trying to revive his country's bid to bring the two sides together.

The Tamil Tigers have accused Colombo of shattering Oslo's peace efforts by launching a major offensive at the end of the rebels' four-month-long unilateral truce on April 24.

The State Department designated the Tamil Tigers as a terrorist organisation in 1999 and said this week in its annual terrorism report that the group remained violent in 2000, engaging in several terrorist acts against government and civilian targets. Meanwhile, a curfew imposed on the Sri Lankan capital and its suburbs after stone-throwing Muslim mobs went on the rampage damaging property and clashing with police was lifted Saturday, officials said.

The 12-hour night curfew was

removed, but police and security forces stepped up their patrols throughout the city, a police spokesman said adding that at least eight people had been arrested overnight in connection with the incident.

The men were being held for their alleged involvement in attacks against police, officials said.

Sri Lanka's main opposition appealed for calm with opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe urging the public to maintain law and order without allowing the clashes to degenerate into inter-communal violence.

The leftist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, demanded that the government take tough action against those inciting communal violence. The JVP warned that communist elements may be trying to cash in on the unrest.

The situation in the capital was calm on Saturday as public transport resumed normal services and shops opened for business.

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.



PHOTO: AFP

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.

Arroyo meets with rioters

AFP, Manila

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 jail 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

AFP, Miami

Florida's legislature voted overwhelmingly Friday to overhaul the state's election laws, doing away with the punch-card balloting that led to inaccuracies in vote-counting and which threw the 2000 presidential election into uncertainty and chaos for several weeks.

Florida will jettison its paper ballots in favour of electronic ballot-counting, with optical scanners reading voter-marked paper ballots throughout most counties, and more advanced touch-screen computer voting in a few counties which sufficient funds to pay for the expensive technology.

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 2002.

"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.

Technicians head home after spy plane inspection

AFP, Beijing

A US team that inspected a damaged US spy plane in southern China left Saturday after reporting that the stranded EP-3 could be repaired and flown out of Hainan island.

5 commandos killed in Lankan land mine blast

AFP, Colombo

At least five police commandos were killed and two others seriously wounded yesterday when they were caught up in a land mine attack carried out by Tail Tiger rebels, officials said.

The attack came in the eastern district of Ampara as police commandos were clearing a main road of mines before allowing civilians to use the highway, officials said.

Indian SC asks govt to enforce law on female foeticide

AFP, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court has directed the federal and provincial governments to enforce laws that ban sex determination and selection procedures, to correct the high female-male imbalance.

A report published in the Times of India Saturday said the apex court had also asked state governments to furnish quarterly reports on the implementation and working of laws banning female foeticide in the country.

The authorities have also been instructed to launch a media campaign against female infanticide and pre-natal sex determination, the report said.

The court order passed on Friday was in response to a public interest petition filed by two local non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

In their petition, the NGOs said a "diabolic link" existed between sex selection technologies, female foeticide and India's falling sex ratio.

A population count conducted in