

Musharraf urges Russia to recognise Taliban

AFP, Moscow

Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf urged Russia in an interview published here yesterday to recognise Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia as means of restoring stability in war-torn country.

He also refused to rule out that Pakistan could in the future conduct nuclear tests in response to its arch-rival India's own accumulation of atomic weaponry.

Musharraf told the Izvestiya daily that he recognised that relations between Pakistan and Russia -- which traditionally allies itself to India in the region -- had failed to improve significantly in recent years.

"I have a great desire to improve relations with Russia, because honestly speaking, they are not at the best right now," Musharraf said. Russia says Pakistan is the prime sponsor of the radical Islamic Taliban militia. Moscow accuses the guerrillas of supporting rebels in separatist Chechnya and trying to destabilise the whole Central Asian region.

However Musharraf countered that peace would never be restored in Afghanistan unless Russian and other world powers recognised the Taliban.

Investigation against Bush's daughters

AFP, Austin, Texas

Police in Texas are investigating whether President George W. Bush's twin daughters illegally tried to buy alcoholic drinks at a popular Austin restaurant, officials said Wednesday.

Austin police went to Chuy's Mexican restaurant late Tuesday after receiving an emergency telephone call to report minors attempting to buy alcohol.

When they arrived, the officers found that Jenna and Barbara Bush, both 19, "were alleged to have been involved in this incident," Austin police said in a written statement.

The legal drinking age across the United States is 21.

Because no Austin police officer witnessed any offence, no charges were filed. Austin police and the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission are investigating the incident.

"The investigation is by the book," said David Ball, a spokesman for the Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission.

The investigation comes one month after Jenna Bush was cited for underage drinking in an Austin bar.

Jenna Bush attends the University of Texas at Austin while her sister, Barbara, attends Yale University in Connecticut.

Moscow wants dialogue with US, China, India on missile defence

AFP, Minsk

Russia called yesterday for a dialogue with the United States, China and India to "neutralise" the threat of missile attacks by so-called "rogue states."

"We must conduct a dialogue with the United States, China and India to find a common response to the new threats in the 21st century," Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said during a meeting here with his Belarusian counterpart Mikhail Khvostov.

"We should neutralise these threats, but not at the cost of security and international stability," he said.

Washington has insisted it must build an anti-missile shield because of the danger to US security posed by so-called "rogue states" such as North Korea, Libya and Iran.

Grenade attack kills eight in Colombia

REUTERS, Bogota

Eight peasants, including five young children, were killed on Wednesday when unidentified men hurled grenades into two homes in rural northern Colombia, police said.

The attack -- one of the deadliest this year involving children -- took place near the village of San Diego in the agricultural province of Cesar on the Caribbean coast.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack but leftist rebels and outlawed right-wing paramilitary groups have been battling for control of Cesar. The country has been embroiled in a 37-year-old civil war.

Col Mario Jose Guatibonsa, head of police in Cesar, said a group of about 35 men in camouflage fatigues hurled grenades into two homes, setting them ablaze. The blasts and fires killed one man, two women and five children aged between one and 12.

Parliament set to impeach Wahid

Special session of upper house of parliament on Aug 1

AFP, Jakarta

The chairman of Indonesia's highest legislative body said yesterday that a special session that may end with the impeachment of President Abdurrahman Wahid will convene on August 1.

"It has been decided that the special session will be convened two months from now, which falls on August 1, 2001," chairman of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), Amien Rais, told journalists at the parliament.

Rais was speaking after a meeting of the MPR leadership and with the heads and secretaries of the 11

factions at the assembly to discuss the timetable for the special session sought by the lower house of parliament.

The MPR's Working Committee, which will prepare the special session, will begin to work on June 1, Amien said.

The lower house, the People's Representative Council (DPR) late on Wednesday decided by vote to demand the MPR hold a special session for the 60-year-old president to account for his rule.

A rejection of his account will mean an impeachment for the country's first democratically-elected head of state.

The DPR said its decision was taken because the president has failed "to heed" a second censure motion against him filed on April 30, which blamed him for failing to stem the country's economic and social problems.

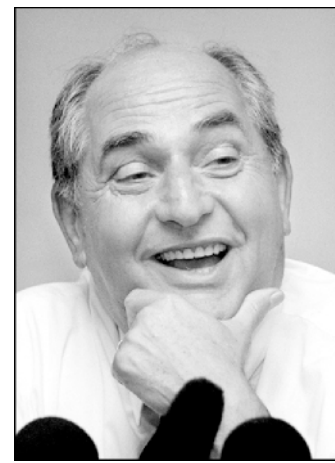
Rais said that no one at the meeting had mentioned anything about the MPR session being held ahead of the two-month period required by an MPR regulation.

Rais told the RCTI television earlier Thursday that if conditions warranted it and if there was a "national consensus" the special session could be held in less than two months.

DPR Chairman Akbar Tanjung has said that the special session could be convened as early as in two weeks if Wahid made good on his threat of declaring a state of emergency.

Rais also said that the annual session of the MPR, usually held in August would be postponed "until one or two months after the special session," but he added that the matter has yet to be discussed in detail.

Rais earlier Thursday also chaired a meeting of the body's leadership to discuss the special meeting, but he gave no detail of the talks.



Top PLO official dies in Kuwait

AFP, Kuwait City

Faisal al-Husseini, the top PLO official for Jerusalem and a standard-bearer of decades of Palestinian resistance to Israel, died in Kuwait yesterday of a massive heart attack at the age of 60.

"Husseini has passed away," a Palestinian official told AFP.

He had arrived in Kuwait only on Tuesday as the first senior Palestinian official to visit the emirate in 11 years. He received a frosty welcome from Kuwaitis who have not forgiven the Palestinians for their perceived support for Iraq during the Gulf War.

In the Palestinian territories, his death was announced solemnly on the official Voice of Palestine radio and Palestinian television as three days of mourning were declared.

Husseini, born in Baghdad in 1940, was the descendant of a long line of legendary Palestinian leaders. His father died in the 1948 war which saw the birth of Israel.

A pragmatic politician, he came to Jerusalem in 1964, and rose to become one of the most prominent members of the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the mainstream Fatah movement of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

In monumental struggles with Israeli authorities battling to reduce the Palestinian presence in Jerusalem he was repeatedly arrested and jailed, particularly during the first intifada or Palestinian uprising, from 1987 to 1993, but refused to yield.

Woman regains memory after 25 years

AFP, New Delhi

A 60-year old Indian woman who suffered amnesia for 25 years has been reunited with her family after her memory finally returned, the Indian Express reported yesterday.

Though hailing from the central Indian city of Nagpur, Vimla was found 25 years ago wandering far away from home in Amritsar, in the northern Indian state of Punjab, the report said.

She was then put into a home for the destitute in Amritsar.

"Vimla would sit facing the wall and refused to eat her medicines," Inderjit Kaur, one of the caretakers of the home, was quoted by the Express as saying.

"Though physically healthy, her mind refused to remember her past. We thought she would live out the remaining years of her life here," the caretaker said.

But one morning in February this year things changed.

Vimla got up complaining of an acute pain in her head. She then looked round the room as if she did not know where she was and started to cry uncontrollably, saying she wanted to go home, the report said.

It took two months of counselling for Vimla to completely regain her memory and earlier this month she was reunited with her husband, Madhukar Dinkar Sathe in Nagpur, the report said.

"I was heart broken (when my wife went missing) and started contacting astrologers," Sathe said.

"The local pandit (Hindu priest) advised me to lead an austere life... I spent most of my life in prayers," Sathe said.

"The years passed but I had a belief that one day my wife would join me. With the grace of God she is with me today."

Tragic

AP, Kuala Lumpur

A party to celebrate a wedding became a tragic wake after the newlyweds were killed in a car crash on their way to the feast, a newspaper reported yesterday.

Mohd Sharifuddin, 24, and Zainatul Hasnita Abdul Kadir, 27, were married Sunday in a ceremony in the bride's home state of Pahang, in central Malaysia, and were on their way to a wedding feast thrown by the groom's family in Terengganu, on the northeast coast, the New Straits Times reported.

But even as Mohd's relatives made final preparations for the party to welcome Zainatul to their family the couple's car crashed into a truck, the paper reported. The newlyweds were killed, along with the bride's parents, who were also in the car. The bride's aunt, who was in another car, witnessed the crash.

Sharif's trial was not fair: Amnesty

AFP, London

Last year's trial of ousted Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif did not meet standards of fairness, Amnesty International said Wednesday in an annual report which blasted the military government's lip service to human rights.

The London-based human rights group said the anti-terrorism court proceedings against Sharif, who was toppled in a coup in October 1999 and convicted of hijacking in April last year, "did not fully meet standards of fair trial."

Sharif was released from lengthy prison terms in December when he was banned from politics for 21 years and expelled into exile in Saudi Arabia by the military government under General Pervez Musharraf.

He has always maintained his innocence but has little sympathy

among ordinary Pakistanis who see him and his cronies in the former ruling party as hopelessly corrupt.

Earlier this year the corruption conviction of another former Pakistani prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, was set aside when the Supreme Court ruled that the Sharif government had rigged her trial.

Musharraf has taken no action against the High Court judge who allegedly produced the guilty verdict to appease his former political patrons.

Amnesty said Musharraf was paying lip service to human rights. "Despite the government's stated commitment to human rights protection, human rights violations including torture and deaths in custody increased during 2000," the Amnesty report said.

"Minorities were not given adequate protection ... Violence against women and children contin-

ued at a high level. Political activities remained restricted."

Musharraf made a major speech about his commitment to human rights shortly after the coup.

But Amnesty said he had failed to improve the plight of women in the Islamic state, had pandered to violent religious extremists and had thrown hundreds of political activists into detention.

"Some members of the previous government continued to be detained without charge or trial," it said, adding that "torture in police custody and jails, often of people held in unlawful detention, continued to be widespread."

It said at least 25 people had been killed by police in custody last year, while several juvenile detainees had been sexually abused.

"Children were subjected to abuses in custody and in the community, for instance as child labour-

6 injured in blast as local council polls begin in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

A bomb blast injured six people as Pakistanis cast their votes yesterday in the third round of local council elections under the military government's promised transition to democracy.

Thousands of police and soldiers were deployed for extra security as voting got underway in 18 districts around the country.

Police said six people were lightly injured when a bomb exploded in a van at a taxi stand in the usually crowded Pir Wadahi area of Rawalpindi, near the capital Islamabad.

"The bomb was apparently planted under the van and the explosion injured six people and damaged seven vehicles also," said police officer Nazir Ahmed, adding that the motive for the attack was unclear.

Rawalpindi is due to cast its vote in the local body elections in the next few weeks, but elsewhere around the country more than 16 million Pakistanis are voting for 1,471 village councils.

No serious violence marred the first two rounds of voting, held over the past six months.

The elections are the first step in military ruler General Pervez Musharraf's plan to decentralise power and create a "genuine democracy" free of corruption and feudal authority.

Musharraf, who believes the elections can bring "revolutionary" change to Pakistan, has vowed to transfer power to a civilian government through general elections before October 12 next year.

The local body elections will be followed by district and provincial polls leading up to the promised general elections.

Election Commission official



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan army trooper with his dog examines the wreckage of a van at the site of bomb blast in Rawalpindi city, some 25 kilometers from Islamabad, yesterday. At least six people were injured and some seven vehicles were damaged when a bomb exploded under a van.

Mohammad Afzal said 71,000 candidates were in the running, including 10,283 women and 2,500 from ethnic or religious minorities.

"In the first two phases in December and March the percent of the vote cast was high and we are expecting the trend to continue," he said.

A third of all seats on the local councils have been reserved for women, and there are smaller provisions for minority groups.

Political parties have been banned from fielding candidates,

but their proxies have managed to win seats in the first two phases of the elections.

Minority groups have also boycotted voting in some areas due to rules which prohibit them from voting for mainstream Islamic candidates.

International observers from the Commonwealth, Britain and Norway were in Hyderabad, Multan and Hangu districts to monitor the vote, Afzal said.

Musharraf, who seized power in a coup in October 1999, has come under intense international pres-

sure to announce a clearer roadmap for Pakistan's return to democracy.

But so far he has refused to spell out when and how the general elections will be held, or what will become of the 1973 constitution which he suspended along with the parliaments.

The general has made it clear that he does not want to see his reform efforts ruined by politicians who see steps aside, and rumours are rife that he is planning to make himself president.

Germany approves compensation for Nazi-era slaves

AFP, Berlin

Fifty-six years after the end of World War II, the German parliament on Wednesday approved 10 billion marks (4.5 billion dollars) in compensation to some one million elderly survivors of the Nazi slave labour system.

The lower house, the Bundestag, confirmed that German companies were sufficiently protected from lawsuits on behalf of former slave and forced labourers. It then voted for the long-awaited payments to begin.

Only a handful of deputies from the opposition Christian Union parties voted against the all-party motion.

Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder said sentiment for the occasion could be summed up by the word "finally".

"The aim of all these efforts from the beginning was to give survivors of the Nazi regime symbolic material reparation, because real reparation is hardly possible," he told the Bundestag.

The fund was established following nearly three years of tough negotiations between the German government and industry, the United States and other countries, and advocates for the victims.

The resulting agreement stipulated that payments could not begin until German companies were shielded from lawsuits on behalf of victims, a difficult proviso that left many survivors wondering just weeks ago whether they would ever see compensation.

Wednesday's vote in parliament followed court rulings in the United States effectively removing the threat of such suits.

The German government and industry have each pledged to provide five billion marks for the 700,000 to 1.5 million elderly survivors who may now be eligible to receive payments.

More than 6,300 companies contributed to the fund, including many which were founded after 1945 and thus did not directly benefit from the forced labour system.

Germany's chief negotiator on the issue, Otto Lambsdorff, expressed satisfaction that the arduous process had finally led to the release of compensation money for the victims. He said he also hoped it had led to greater awareness in Germany of the country's past.

"In this hour, ladies and gentlemen, we remember the forced and slave labourers, people whose human dignity the Germans injured more than two generations ago, whose capacity for work and years of youth were stolen."

"I must also apologise to those for whom our work took too long. The delays were and are painful because we will no longer reach many of the victims who have died."

Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime forced up to 10 million people in the countries it had occupied to labour for the Third Reich under degrading conditions. Hundreds of thousands were literally worked to death.

One survivor, Kurt Goldstein, an 87-year-old who was forced to work in a Polish mine that was the personal property of Nazi-era war economy minister Hermann Goering, told AFP Wednesday that while the payments were welcome, he still expected an apology from those who had enslaved him.

"It is alright," he said when asked for his reaction to the vote.

"Now everything must be done to ensure that the slave labourers are paid as soon as possible. But the scrooges of German industry should apologise for what they have done. No plea for forgiveness has crossed their lips as yet."

The forced labourers, mainly from five eastern European countries -- Belarus, the Czech Republic, Poland, Russia and Ukraine -- number up to one million and are to receive an average of 5,000 marks each.

The number of former slave labourers, those forced to work under especially cruel and life-threatening conditions, is estimated at about 200,000. They are to receive about 15,000 marks each.

US military on high alert in Bahrain

REUTERS, Washington

US military forces in Bahrain have been put on their second-highest state of alert following threats of a possible attack by anti-American guerrillas, a senior defence official said on Wednesday.

The official, who asked not to be identified, told Reuters that American forces in the Gulf emirate, headquarters of the US 5th Fleet, were put on alert over the weekend after intelligence information was received about specific threats.

"They had some threats in the area, and Bahrain has been put on Threatcon (Threat Condition) Charlie," the official said. The level of alert is the highest for US forces except for Threatcon Delta and requires base guards, troops and their families to be especially aware of possible attack.

ABC News, meanwhile, quoted intelligence sources as saying there was a "serious and credible terrorist threat" against Americans in Aden, the port city in Yemen where the destroyer USS Cole was damaged

by a suicide bomb on Oct 12, 2000.

Americans in the Yemeni capital have been told by Washington to "pack their bags" and were also informed that the United States would seek permission from the Yemen government to send in a plane to evacuate them, ABC reported. There are a few dozen US citizens remaining in Aden, ABC said.

Asked about the report, a State Department spokeswoman said she had no knowledge of any plans for an evacuation of US citizens in Yemen.

There are about 1,400 US troops in Bahrain, most of them Navy personnel.

The senior defence official declined to be specific about the Bahrain threats but stressed that the information was received before a criminal court jury in New York found four men guilty on Tuesday in connection with deadly 1998 bombing attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania.

Indo-Pak summit unlikely before mid-July

AFP, New Delhi

The proposed Indo-Pakistan peace summit in New Delhi is unlikely to take place before mid-July because of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's upcoming knee operation, cabinet spokesman Pramod Mahajan said yesterday.

Vajpayee will undergo an operation on his right knee in Bombay on June 7. His left knee-joint was replaced in similar surgery back in October.

"Last time it took 10 days in the hospital, after which it will take around three weeks for him to be able to walk normally," Mahajan told reporters after a cabinet meeting.

"So, I guess the meeting will not take place before the first or second week of July. Definitely not before the end of June," he said.

Vajpayee extended a surprise invitation last week to Pakistani military ruler General Pervez

Musharraf to come to New Delhi for talks.

Musharraf has indicated that he would be willing to come in late June or early July.

Meanwhile, with the shock of India's surprise invitation to Pakistan for talks over Kashmir waning, the focus is now on what the two sides will actually discuss at the negotiating table.

In his reply to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's invitation, Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf this week identified Kashmir as the "root cause of tension" that had kept both nations in "distrust and hostility" over these past decades.

"I therefore look forward to sincere and candid discussions with you to resolve the issue ... in accordance with the wishes of the Kashmiri people," Musharraf said in his reply.

British polls campaign enters final week

AFP, London

Britain's political parties returned to the familiar battle cries of taxation and public services yesterday as the general election campaign entered its final week.

Prime Minister Tony Blair's ruling Labour is still seen to be coasting to a big victory on June 7, according to two fresh opinion polls.

He launched the party's latest photo opportunity, a poster of a large memo pad with the words: "Urgent reminder: vote schools and hospitals this Thurs," to hammer home Labour's stated priorities.

The opposition Conservative Party, meanwhile, was returning to its familiar promise of tax cuts and warning that another Labour government would bring in fresh so-called "stealth taxes."

But for all the Tories have huffed and puffed and leader William Hague has criss-crossed the country, they have failed to make the slightest inroad into Labour's huge lead.

Two fresh polls yesterday con-

firmed Blair's seemingly assured victory.

One, from the Daily Telegraph, gave Labour a 16-point lead, unchanged from a week ago, with 47 percent compared to 31 percent.

The other, in The Times, put Labour on a slightly bigger lead of 18 points, 48 percent to 30 percent.

Both polls showed the Liberal Democrats, Britain's third largest party, on 16 percent.

Blair said Labour would use the last week of the campaign to "crusade" for investment in schools and hospitals.

Party workers will make thousands of telephone calls a day to electors, and leaflets and videos will be used to ram the message home in key target areas.

He said the big question for the closing stage of the campaign was who had the will and the means "to lift our schools and hospitals from where they are today to what they can and must become."



PHOTO: AFP

A file photo dated January 17, 2000 shows an Indian woman sitting under an Indian Air Force (IAF) Russian-made MiG-21 during a preview ahead of the yearly Republic Day parade. A brand new version of the aging aircraft will be ready by the end of the year with state-of-the-art air defence systems being upgraded by the state-run Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd with Russian technology.