

Pakistan breathes sigh of relief as unrest subsides

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani authorities breathed a sigh of relief Saturday after protests against their support for possible US military strikes on Afghanistan passed off largely peacefully, but violence in Karachi cast doubts on the port's use by US forces.

Less than 100,000 protesters took to the streets of Pakistan's main cities on Friday and there were no incidents of mass unrest to match the fiery rhetoric of the radical Islamists opposed to President Pervez Musharraf's stance in the present crisis.

Serious disturbances were limited to Karachi, where at least four people died as demonstrators clashed with police and tried to force businesses to shut down in line with their call for a general strike.

"The majority of Pakistanis did not respond to the strike called by

the so-called religious leaders," a government spokesman told AFP.

"The people of Pakistan have reposed their confidence in President Musharraf's policies," he added.

Musharraf announced last week that he would support possible military action against Afghanistan over the September 11 terror attacks on the United States.

The spokesman insisted the violence in Karachi had been instigated by a "small section" of demonstrators intent on fomenting unrest.

President Musharraf held talks Saturday with provincial governors, police chiefs and some military officials on the internal security situation but no new measures were announced immediately.

"The government is determined not to allow a minority to disturb public peace, and those responsible for violence in Karachi will be

strongly taken to task," the spokesman said.

The Karachi incidents and the clearly high level of organisation behind the demonstrations in the city, triggered speculation the protests were aimed less at Musharraf and more at preventing the port being used by US naval forces.

There have been reports that the US requests for help from Pakistan in preparing for possible strikes against Afghanistan included docking facilities in Karachi for US naval vessels.

The threat of US military action loomed larger after the ruling Taliban regime in Afghanistan on Friday rejected an ultimatum from US President George W. Bush to hand over the main suspect in the September 11 attacks -- Osama bin Laden -- or face the consequences.

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Indian opposition leader Sonia Gandhi (R) looks at a "chaddar", a piece of muslin cloth, in New Delhi on Saturday before sending it to the Ajmer Sharif Dargah, or shrine, to be blessed so that her wish for peace be fulfilled. The Ajmer Sharif is dedicated to the 13th century Sufi saint Khwaja Moinuddin Chisti. Sufism is an ancient mystical form of Islam emphasising direct personal spiritual contact with the Almighty.

Chirac, Vajpayee stress UN role to fight terror

AFP, Paris

French President Jacques Chirac spoke by telephone Saturday with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee about developments in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States, officials said.

They stressed the importance of the United Nations role in the fight against terrorism, which should be seen as a "global struggle," an official in the French president's office said.

Chirac briefed the Indian prime minister on the outcome of a special European Union summit Friday in Brussels as well as on his talks earlier in the week with US President George W. Bush and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

The EU members "strongly reiterated their solidarity with the United States" and cautioned against "confusing fanatical terror-

ist groups with mainstream Muslims and the Arab world," the official quoted Chirac as saying.

Vajpayee said India was also determined to fight against terrorism and that, like the European Union, India wants the United Nations to be active in that fight, according to the French official.

In New Delhi, an official from Vajpayee's office said only that the two discussed current events in light of the attacks that were feared to have killed some 6,300 people.

India has held a series of diplomatic contacts since the attacks, with Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh speaking Wednesday to British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and his Iranian counterpart, Kamal Kharazi.

Prime Minister Vajpayee spoke last week with US President George W. Bush and pledged New Delhi's "fullest cooperation" in the war on terrorism.

Indo-Pak FMs talk by phone to ease tension

AFP, Islamabad

The foreign ministers of Pakistan and India spoke by telephone Saturday in a bid to ease tensions that rose in the wake of the terrorist attacks on the US, Pakistani foreign ministry spokesman Riaz Mohammad Khan said.

In the first direct high-level contact between the South Asian rivals since a leadership summit in July ended in deadlock, Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar held a detailed discussion with his Indian counterpart Jaswant Singh, Khan said.

Sattar informed Singh that Pakistan was ready to "fully cooperate" with the world community in combatting terrorism, and voiced disappointment at the "barage of propaganda" emanating from New Delhi.

Singh, in turn, told Sattar that India "has no intention to add to the current complexity being faced by the government and people of Pakistan," Indian foreign ministry spokeswoman Nirupama Rao said in New Delhi.

India and Pakistan have been

exchanging barbed statements ever since the United States began assembling an international coalition against terrorism following the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

In a televised address to the nation last week, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf had warned India to "lay off," accusing New Delhi of seeking to have Pakistan labelled a terrorist state and damage the country's strategic interests.

In a interview with the Times of India two days later, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee responded that Musharraf's concern was not with terrorism but with sponsoring the long-running armed Muslim insurgency in Indian-controlled Kashmir.

"How can he be concerned about terrorism? He has promoted it," Vajpayee said.

The sniping has arisen out of a mutual suspicion in Islamabad and New Delhi that the other side is attempting to trade support to possible US military strikes against Afghanistan for Washington's favour in their decades old rivalry.

STOCK



Hungry Afghan refugees, including children, wait for free food along a roadside outside a restaurant in the commercial centre of Sadr in the southern district of Karachi on Saturday. Restaurant owners said many businessmen provided them with money to distribute food free of charge to the refugees.

Pope arrives in Kazakhstan

AFP, Astana

Pope John Paul II arrived in mainly Muslim Kazakhstan Saturday for a four-day visit amid tight security after the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States.

The 81-year-old pontiff is on his first visit to the republic in the troubled central Asian region.

Kazakh authorities were hoping to reap political capital from the visit, presenting their country to the hundreds of the reporters covering the trip as a haven of religious tolerance in a troubled region.

US, UK jets pound Iraq

AP, Riyadh

In a second attack in as many days, US and British aircraft struck two anti-aircraft sites in southern Iraq on Friday in response to Baghdad's sustained hostilities against allied pilots, a US military spokesman said.

The attacks, involving precision-guided munitions, took place around 12:30 pm (09:30 GMT), targeting military vehicles and equipment in Al-Amrah and Talil, about 250 km and 272 km south of Baghdad.

But Reynolds stressed there would be no rush to judgement.

"It is more important to have clear and detailed information than information in general terms," he told reporters.

"We have asked the supervisory bodies in every member state to

EU after beneficiaries of US terrorist attacks

AFP, Liege

EU investigators were on Saturday scrutinising stock trading patterns prior to the September 11 US terrorist attacks to see whether anyone with prior knowledge may have reaped financial gain.

"There are insider trading investigations going on in some countries," said Belgian Finance Minister Didier Reynders, whose country holds the current EU presidency, during a break in a meeting of EU finance ministers.

Stocks virtually across the board, but particularly airline stocks, plunged to record lows following the kamikaze attacks by hijacked airliners on New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon in Washington.

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"We have asked the supervisory bodies in every member state to

look into this and we are hoping to have their reports by mid-October."

He said the EU had reason to believe "suspicious trading" had occurred in the period before the attacks "to take advantage of market fluctuations that would result."

France and Belgium were two of the countries mentioned in that regard he said, without elaboration.

And Germany's Bundesbank chief, Ernst Welteke, said on the sidelines of the meeting that a report of an investigation showed "bizarre" fiscal transactions prior to the attacks that could not be chalked up to coincidence.

Welteke said the transactions "could not have been planned and carried out without a certain knowledge," particularly citing heavy trading in oil and gold futures.

"We don't want to make any judgements or statements until we have a full picture of the investigations," said Reynders, adding reports were expected for a regular joint meeting of EU justice and finance ministers on October 16 in Luxembourg.

Reynders made a big show of using his Belgian bank card to withdraw 150 euros from a specially constructed ATM (automatic teller machine) set up onstage, looking pleased and a bit surprised when it worked on the first try.