

Pak president warns radicals

US dismisses Musharraf's domestic difficulties

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf warned his nation on Friday of the government's determination to ensure stability as the opposition launched a day of protests against the US-led military campaign in Afghanistan.

Radical groups have called for protests after Friday prayers and a nationwide strike against the air raids in the neighbouring state and the Pakistan government's support for the US action.

The authorities have ordered reinforced security and Musharraf, who is on a visit to the United Nations in New York, issued a special message, saying everything would be done to "keep Pakistan peaceful, stable and secure."

They army general, who led a coup in October 1998 to seize power, said: "Ours has been a very tolerant government. We believe in full freedom of expression and we lay value on democracy."

In the message to mark the anniversary of the birth of national poet Allama Iqbal, he went on: "When these are used to play with the destiny of Pakistan, we cannot act as silent spectators nor would the people like us to be bystanders."

"We shall employ all that is required to keep Pakistan peaceful, stable and secure."

Musharraf highlighted the need for "respect for inter-faith sensitivities". Two weeks ago 16 Christians were gunned down in a church in Punjab province in a massacre linked to opposition to the US campaign.

The authorities have generally kept radical religious groups under control, putting some leaders under house arrest and taking action such as banning the use of mosque loudspeakers to make political speeches.

Musharraf said: "We can seize this opportunity to our great advantage or we can just drift along unnoticed. Pakistan, however, was not created to drift unnoticed. We shall chart our own course to destiny."

Reuters adds: The US envoy to Pakistan said yesterday Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf could easily ride out any local opposition to the US bombing of Afghanistan when the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan starts next week.

Ambassador Wendy Chamberlin told reporters that Musharraf was "stronger than in the past" and had the support of a loyal and professional military.

"He is in a very strong position and ... I am confident that when Ramadan starts, if our objectives have not been achieved by then, he won't have a problem," she said.

Pakistani airspace is the main route for US aircraft bombing Afghanistan to get rid of the Taliban and the al Qaeda organization, but most Pakistanis oppose the bombing.

Musharraf said yesterday he would try to persuade US President George W Bush to suspend the bombing during Ramadan to avert political fallout in the Islamic world.



British Prime Minister Tony Blair (R) and Pakistan's President General Pervez Musharraf address the media on Thursday at a press conference inside 10 Downing Street in central London. Following Musharraf's renewed calls for a swift conclusion of the US-led assault on Afghanistan, Blair announced the bombing campaign against the Taliban would continue during Ramadan.

Laden cell planned to hijack SIA jet, crash it into Delhi

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal imposed strict security around Kathmandu international airport Friday after receiving information that a cell linked to Osama bin Laden was planning to hijack a Singaporean airliner and crash it into New Delhi, officials said.

Police in the southern Indian city of Madras told Nepalese authorities they had received a threat that a bin Laden cell was planning to hijack a Singapore Airlines (SIA) flight out of Kathmandu and crash it into the Indian capital, said Jaya Diwan, general secretary of Nepal's foreign airline operators' association.

He said the likely target in New Delhi would be the residence either of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee or US Ambassador Robert Blackwill, or the US embassy.

"We are taking precautionary measures so that this kind of ugly thing does not happen," Diwan

told AFP.

He said Nepal had received all its information about the plot from India, leading some officials to be cautious about the threat.

He said there was "no need to be panicky" as no airlines in Nepal had received the threat.

"It could be a hoax, although it is wise to be alert," said Bishnu Subedi, executive secretary of the foreign carriers' association.

According to the information from Madras, passed on by the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal, men from bin Laden's al-Qaeda network were already in Kathmandu preparing for the suicide hijacking, Subedi said.

All passengers entering Kathmandu's Tribhuvan International Airport were being thoroughly checked, officials said. Senior political, police and army officials who are generally exempt from airport security checks were also being searched.



Pakistani policemen run as they flee demonstrators in Pakistani city of Peshawar on Friday. The nationwide protests called by Islamic parties are opposing US-led airstrikes in Afghanistan.

US was unprepared for war, says Vajpayee

AFP, Washington

Visiting Indian Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, told The Washington Post daily that the United States was unprepared for war in Afghanistan and that ground forces are now necessary for victory.

"The campaign cannot be described as fully satisfactory," Vajpayee said in an interview published Friday.

"It appears (Afghanistan's ruling) Taliban are well entrenched, so ground forces will have to be engaged," he added.

Speaking on the eve of his first meeting here Friday with US President George W. Bush,

Vajpayee said the US-led campaign against the Taliban, terrorist suspect Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaeda network has been heavily dependent on airstrikes and appeared to be "slackening" at times.

"Sometimes there appears there is a stalemate. The next day there is a huge bombardment," he said.

The prime minister said the US military campaign in Afghanistan has suffered from a lack of adequate intelligence and that the opposition Northern Alliance had not received enough weapons or sufficient latitude from Washington to press ground offensives against the Taliban.

US bombing in northeastern

Afghanistan has helped opposition Northern Alliance to move tantalisingly close to the key city of Mazar-i-Sharif, but opposition spokesmen Thursday reported that Taliban forces were being reinforced by fresh troops from Kabul.

Washington has urged the opposition forces to engage the Taliban more forcefully, but a Northern Alliance commander said that despite the heavy bombing raids, the Taliban positions would be difficult to defeat, adding: "The outcome of the battle is determined on the ground."

Vajpayee predicted that the campaign would move slowly, adding: "It appears America was not prepared for this kind of war. Now things are being put in order."

Canada brands LTTE terrorist organisation

AFP, Colombo

Canada has listed the Tamil Tigers as a foreign terrorist organisation and may freeze the separatist group's assets, the Canadian mission in Sri Lanka said Friday.

The Liberation of Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which is fighting a drawn-out secessionist campaign, will be among 83 groups blacklisted by Canada in accordance with the UN Convention on the Suppression of Terrorism, the Canadian high commission said in a statement.

The United States formally banned the Tamil Tigers in October 1997, followed by Sri Lanka in January 1998 and Britain in February 2001.

Lankan state TV boss quits ahead of polls

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's state-run television chief resigned after allegations that the network was running a smear campaign against ruling party opponents ahead of polls next month, officials said Friday.

The chairman of the Rupavahini television network, Sanath Gunatilleke, quit Thursday, an official of the station said. His departure followed the resignation of the network's number two earlier this week.

The resignation of Gunatilleke, a former media advisor to President Chandrika Kumaratunga and one of her closest confidants, came as the Supreme Court investigated charges that the network was defaming rivals of the ruling People's Alliance.

US targeting all Muslim nations: Imam Bukhari

AFP, New Delhi

India's top Muslim cleric on Friday blasted the United States and its allies for what he said was a campaign to eliminate Muslim powers one by one throughout the world.

"Anti-Islam forces are targeting Muslims in various parts of the world," Syed Ahmed Bukhari told a Friday prayer meeting here at India's largest mosque, Jama Masjid.

Bukhari cited US Secretary of State Colin Powell's remark Wednesday that Iraq "should not think that we will not be concerned about these activities (accumulating weapons of mass destruction) and will not turn our attention to them."

The imam of Jama Masjid said the US-led forces bombarding

Afghanistan were not targeting the Taliban regime or Afghan people, but Islam as a religion.

Bukhari said the Afghan campaign was part of "the war between believers and non-believers (that) has continued for more than 1,400 years."

He urged all countries including India not to lose sight of the "terrorism by Israel which has been putting Palestinian Muslims under its cruelty and tyranny for the last 50 years."

He singled out Kuwait for supporting the US-led forces and urged the emirate to change its stance and condemn the US actions in Afghanistan.

Bukhari also said a tough new anti-terrorism ordinance proposed in India would in all probability be misused against Muslims.

Taliban rush reinforcements to protect Mazar-i-Sharif

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's Taliban militia rushed reinforcements to the key northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif where a bloody battle was shaping up against attacking opposition forces, a Taliban spokesman said Friday.

The opposition, meanwhile, reported renewed US bombing around Mazar-i-Sharif while US officials in Washington said they were weighing all options, including throwing more American ground troops into the battle.

The opposition Northern Alliance claimed a series of breakthroughs this week in their drive towards the provincial capital, the first big prize in the month-old US-led military offensive in Afghanistan.

But they faced stiff opposition from the Taliban, who have been entrenched in the city for three years.

One Northern Alliance commander said his men had dug in about 20 kilometers (13 miles) south of Mazar-i-Sharif, while another claimed to have moved

to within seven kilometers (four miles) northwest of the city.

The Taliban have dismissed the opposition's claims as exaggerated, but admit some territory has been lost in recent battles.

Abdul Henan Hemat, chief of the Taliban's Bakhter information agency, said the Islamic militia had bolstered its positions in Mazar-i-Sharif, a potential "land bridge" for supplies and US troops from nearby Uzbekistan.

"The new reinforcements have arrived in Mazar and the Taliban will soon launch their counter-attack," Hemat told AFP. He did not say how many troops the militia had in place.

Some 4,000 Islamic volunteers, mainly Pakistanis, were dispatched from Kabul on Thursday to fight alongside the Taliban in Mazar-i-Sharif, according to a spokesman for the militant group, Harakat Jehadi Islami.

Lopez glitters at MTV Music Awards

AFP, Frankfurt

US rock group Limp Bizkit and singers Jennifer Lopez and Robbie Williams won top prizes in the MTV Europe Music Awards here late Thursday.

Hispano-American singer Lopez and Williams of Britain won best female and male singer awards while Limp Bizkit ran away with three prizes. British group Gorillaz and singer Craig David took two each.

Several past winners including Madonna, Mariah Carey, Janet Jackson, REM and U2, left empty handed this time.

MTV said seven million viewers took part by internet or telephone in choosing the winners.



Ex-Spice Girl Emma Bunton arrives for the MTV Europe Music Awards at the Festhalle in Frankfurt on Thursday. The awards will be broadcast to millions of music fans worldwide.

Australians go to polls today

AFP, Sydney

Australians go to the polls on Saturday after a campaign in which Prime Minister John Howard spent the crucial last days struggling to salvage his credibility on the key issue of asylum seekers.

With major polls showing a dramatic Labor resurgence in the final week, Howard began a last-minute media blitz Friday fending off claims of misleading the public over an incident last month involving a boatload of asylum seekers.

Howard has made asylum seekers the major issue of the campaign and his handling of it the basis of claims about his superior leadership and the grounds on which his government should be re-elected.

Police get more teeth to fight insurgency

AFP, Guwahati

India's government decided Friday to equip police in the insurgency-hit northeast with sophisticated weapons and communication gadgets to deal with a rise in rebel attacks, officials said.

"The central government (will) arm the security forces in the region with all modern weapons to counter the militants," top Indian home ministry official P.D. Shenoy said in Assam's state capital Guwahati.

Shenoy was chairing a conference of police chiefs and chief secretaries of India's seven northeastern states to discuss new anti-insurgency strategies.

Advani slams Musharraf's remarks

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani on Friday slammed Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf for reportedly saying India was committing "state terrorism" in Kashmir.

However he distanced himself from calls by some Indian leaders for military strikes against militant camps across the disputed Kashmir border.

No accord at UN climate talks

AFP, Marrakesh

Negotiators failed to reach agreement early Friday on a key problem blocking completion of the UN's Kyoto Protocol on global warming, diplomats said.

The 30 environment ministers representing the 167 countries taking part in the climate negotiations here broke up at 0100 GMT and were to resume meeting at 0900 GMT Friday.

The agreement sought by the ministers centered on criteria allowing access to Kyoto's so-called flexibility mechanisms.

3 Japanese warships set sail to back US war

AP, Sasebo

Hundreds of Japanese sailors on a small flotilla of warships embarked for the Indian Ocean on Friday, making good on Japan's pledge to back US-led forces in the war against terrorism.

It was Japan's first military contingent since World War II to be deployed in support of forces involved in combat. Ten years ago Japan agreed to send minesweepers to the Persian Gulf only after the Gulf War was over.

"This mission is a first, but we are trained to be able to respond to whatever contingencies may arise," said Rear Admiral Hirotsugu Honda. "We want to show what we are capable of."

The mission, which follows weeks of debate in Parliament, is controversial: Opponents at home and in Asian nations that suffered the brunt of Japanese militarism during World War II fear it could be a first step toward loosening constitutional constraints on Japan's armed forces.

The 5,200-ton destroyer Kurama, the 4,550-ton destroyer Kirsame and the 8,100-ton supply ship Hamana were sent on a reconnaissance mission in preparation for a planned dispatch of other naval units under a new law that allows Japan's Self-Defence Forces to participate in a backup role in the US-led war against terrorism.

The vessels carrying 700 sailors left from a Japanese base at Sasebo, 614 miles (982 kilometers) southwest of Tokyo shortly before 7 am (2200 GMT). They will sail through the Strait of Malacca, government and military officials said.

As early as December, Japan's navy is expected to begin transporting supplies and fuel for allied forces operating in Afghanistan.

"Even since the Gulf War there has been a growing public recognition that Japan has to take some risks and be part of things related to international peacekeeping," said Gerald Curtis, a visiting researcher at the National Institute for Policy Studies in Tokyo.



Destroyer Kurama (C/L) of Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force (MSDF) leaves the Sasebo naval base, western Japan on Friday. Three naval vessels left the Japanese port for the Indian Ocean on a fact-finding mission ahead of a larger task force to provide non-combat support for the US-led military campaign in Afghanistan.

US Senate okays bill to boost spying

REUTERS, Washington

As the United States seeks to improve its spying efforts, which are on the front line of the war against terrorism, the Senate on Thursday approved legislation to provide more funding to revitalise eavesdropping and clandestine capabilities.

The Senate unanimously approved the annual funding bill for the CIA, the National Security Agency (NSA), and other intelligence programmes. The amount is classified, but congressional sources said the bill would increase spending by 7.7 per cent in 2002 over current levels that intelligence experts estimate at about \$30

billion. The House passed its version last month and the two chambers must now negotiate a compromise measure.

The need to fix long-standing problems at US spy agencies reached greater urgency after the September 11 attacks.

Lawmakers said intelligence is on the forefront of the war against terrorism and must be revived from post-cold war atrophy if the United States is to win the battle.

"We all realise that good and timely intelligence is our first and sometimes only line of defense against terrorism," said Senate Intelligence Committee Chairman Bob Graham.

Bush lashes out at Arafat amid call for greater US role

AFP, Jerusalem

Calls for greater US involvement in the Middle East peace process grew from both Palestinian and European leaders, as Washington lashed out at Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat for not doing enough to reign in terror.

And fears of attacks were palpable in Israel Friday.

Two cabinet ministers have been warned that they were possible targets, while the country's chief of staff has said numerous security alerts are in place.

Palestinian minister for international cooperation Nabil Shaath asked the United States to "become thoroughly involved once

again in this peace process, there is no other alternative."

"We would like to see the (US) political vision enunciated clearly because that is the political light at the end of the tunnel," he said after meeting with Secretary of State Colin Powell in Washington.

In Berlin, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder also emphasised the role of the United States in helping solve the Middle East conflict, saying action was needed by it, the European Union, Russia and the UN "at the highest level".

And British Prime Minister Tony Blair reiterated in London his support for a viable Palestinian state, where Israelis and

Palestinians live side by side" and "have the opportunity to be equal partners."

He spoke during a press conference with visiting Jordanian King Abdullah II, who reminded Britain that without Palestinian statehood and Israeli withdrawal from occupied territories "there will never be a just and lasting resolution to the conflict in our region."

Some hint of where the Israeli government stands could come later in the day.

Raanan Gissin, spokesman for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, said Foreign Minister Shimon Peres was to brief the premier Friday morning on his plans for a new peace initiative.