

Benazir calls on India, Pakistan to de-escalate nuclear tension

AFP, New Delhi
Former Pakistani premier Benazir Bhutto Monday urged arch rivals India and Pakistan to de-escalate tensions between them, saying their nuclear arms race had left South Asia on the verge of "doom and disaster".
India and Pakistan conducted tit-for-tat nuclear weapons tests in 1998 and during the past few months have engaged in a heated war of words over the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir.
"Our part of the world has been teetering on the verge of doom and disaster too often," said Benazir.
"We (India and Pakistan) have been at each other's throats. We have fought four wars, troops on both sides continue to fire at each other and we have nuclear bombs too."
"A push on the button can end life before we realise what was done in desperation. We owe it our children to build a world free of the threat of nuclear annihilation," she said.
Benazir, 48, who is on a private visit to India, was addressing a business conference organised by India's industry lobby group, the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII).
In her speech, she welcomed the steps taken by Indian Prime Minister

Atal Behari Vajpayee to "rekindle hope" of a lasting peace in the subcontinent by showing a strong commitment to a dialogue process with Pakistan.
"Hope for peace was rekindled under the leadership of Prime Minister Vajpayee," said Benazir.
"The Indian government announced a unilateral ceasefire in Kashmir and met with the militant groups. These were important steps taken. They required vision and strength," she added.
The government announced a unilateral ceasefire in Kashmir in November last year, but it was called off earlier this year.
On Saturday, Vajpayee said he was prepared to meet Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on the sidelines of a South Asian summit in the Nepalese capital of Kathmandu between January 4 and 6.
It would be the first meeting since a bilateral summit in July, which broke down over the issue of Kashmir, which is divided between India and Pakistan and claimed by both.
India and Pakistan, who are part of the US-led coalition against terrorism, have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir since 1947. The countries came dangerously close to a fourth war in 1999 when Indian and Pakistani troops fought for six weeks at Kargil in Kashmir.



Former Pakistan prime minister Benazir Bhutto (L) shakes hands with Congress (R) Party president Sonia Gandhi while Congress leader Natwar Singh (C) looks on in New Delhi on Sunday. Benazir, who is living in exile in London and Dubai, urged Islamabad to "respond in a substantive way" to the strong initiatives taken by India in Kashmir, and suggested a broad-based relationship and the creation of "safe and open borders" between the two neighbours.

Russia to set up diplomatic mission in Kabul: FM

AFP, Moscow
Russia will soon begin working on setting up a permanent diplomatic mission in the Afghan capital Kabul, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov said late Sunday.
"Starting Monday, a special group tasked with settling the mission in would begin their work, and we hope that this work will be completed soon," Ivanov told the state-owned RTR channel.
Russia had already found a building that would house the mission, Ivanov said, adding that the former Russian embassy was too damaged to be used any time soon.
Another group would start working on setting up a humanitarian aid center, Ivanov added.

Code of conduct for Indian legislators

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi
Concerned over the decline in discipline and decorum in the Indian parliament and the state assemblies, a high-level conference of presiding officers and elected representatives on Sunday adopted an unprecedented code of conduct, seeking to punish erring members.
The daylong conference, attended by top political leaders of the country including Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Leader of the Opposition Sonia Gandhi, came up with a 60-point "do's and don'ts" for members of both houses of parliament and state assemblies.
Speaker after speaker, including Vice-president Krishan Kant, Vajpayee and Sonia, expressed concern that growing indiscipline among legislators and frequent

British troops not involved in Kandahar operation

UK optimistic about talks
AFP, London
No British troops are involved in the US military operation around the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar in southern Afghanistan, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said Monday.
"There are no British troops involved at the moment," Straw told BBC radio, declining to confirm details about the US mission.
The Pakistan-based Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) said Monday that US troops, tanks and artillery landed south of Kandahar in what appeared to be the start of a major final offensive against the Taliban centre.
AIP said troops were landing near the airport some 20 kilometres (12 miles) outside Kandahar.
Washington has yet to formally confirm the reports, but Pentagon sources quoted by ABC News said Sunday between 1,200 and 1,600 US troops would be on the ground around Kandahar within a day.
Meanwhile, British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw was optimistic Monday that talks in Bonn this week between Afghanistan's ethnic groups would lead to the creation of a broad-based interim authority for the country.
Straw said the former ruling Taliban, having been expelled from the capital Kabul nearly two weeks ago, "are almost literally making their last stand."
"It looks as though they have very little support from the local population even in their heartland," he told BBC radio.

First human embryo cloned

AFP, Washington
US biotechnology researchers claim they have cloned for the first time an early-stage human embryo, paving the way for future harvesting of stem cells to treat disease — but raising the fear of cloned humans.
A Massachusetts-based company called Advanced Cell Technology (ACT) said in a study available Monday in the Journal of Regenerative Medicine that it had effectively cloned early-stage embryos by performing somatic nuclear cell transfers.
If confirmed, the claim marks a major development in genetic research.
"We had one embryo that went to the six-cell stage," ACT president Michael West said on NBC television Sunday, saying that the breakthrough could allow doctors one day to grow and harvest specific organs for transplant in their patients.
"Our dream is that someday we could take a patient's cell, skin cell, and give them back anything that they needed to cure disease," West said.
He said however that he opposed cloning entire humans, and said the developments were likely to be scrutinised both by scientists and politicians trying to set standards of medical and moral criteria.
But cloning embryos at an early stage could easily lead to cloning entire human, warned bioethicist George Annas from the Boston University School of Public Health.
"There's no way to get around that," he said. "This is a step in that direction."
Arthur Caplan, a bioethicist at the University of Pennsylvania, described the news as "a major step down that road." But he added: "whether that road leads anywhere nobody knows."
Both Caplan and Annas, both of whom support stem cell research and therapeutic cloning, said scientists are still a long way from being able to turn stem cells into organs.
Reaction from the Vatican was muted, with Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone, the Holy See's secretary of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, saying further information was needed.
Bertone said however that if a stem cell was extracted and added to an egg to genetically reprogram it, creating an embryo, "then that is true human cloning, and that must be condemned."
However there is one wild card: the US Congress. The House of Representatives already has voted to "criminalise even the medical uses of cloning," West observed on CNN.
White House spokeswoman Jennifer Millerwise added Sunday that US President George W. Bush has "made it clear 100 percent" that he opposes all types of human cloning.
Millerwise said that Bush, who in August authorised limited federal funding for research on a select group of stem cell lines, fully supports the House bill banning human cloning, and suggested the US Senate do the same.
Some senators voiced their concern Sunday.
"I don't think we're going to let the cloning of human embryos go on," said Republican Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama on NBC. "People are concerned about the ethical problems here."



Muslim women vote at a polling centre, in the strife-torn island of Basilan on Monday during elections for officials of a Muslim autonomous region in the southern Philippines. The election was largely peaceful despite an attempt last week by the outgoing Muslim autonomous region Governor Nur Misuari to prevent the holding of the elections by staging a pocket rebellion in the southern island of Jolo. Misuari is in jail in Malaysia after being arrested for illegal entry while fleeing army offensive in Jolo.

Lanka set for curfews to contain pre-polls violence

AFP, Colombo
Police in Sri Lanka Monday said they planned to impose curfews and seek military reinforcements for patrols following widespread violence in the run up to next week's parliamentary elections.
The Police Election Secretariat said a major security plan had already been finalised to prevent post-election violence and army units would be used to reinforce police in rural areas.
"We are most likely to have curfews in areas where we believe there could be trouble after voting on December 5," Police Deputy Inspector General Gamini Nawaratne said.
He said the authorities were in talks Monday with the military to seek their assistance in maintaining law and order as the police were stretched to the limit.
The Police Election Secretariat headed by Nawaratne has received 1,312 election-related complaints since nominations closed last month.
Nawaratne said 296 people had been arrested and freed on bail, while another 29 were still being held in custody, for their alleged involvement in serious crimes relating to the campaign.
Police have recorded seven murders directly related to the campaign while private monitors have reported more than 20 deaths.
Nawaratne denied opposition claims that members of President Chandrika Kumaratunga's elite security unit had taken shotguns from the Ports Authority here to unleash violence in the provinces.
However, he said that all body guards of politicians had been issued instructions to ensure that elections laws were not violated.
Two politician bodyguards have been remanded in custody for their alleged role in violence, Nawaratne said.
Private election monitors, including those of the European Union, have expressed fears campaigning this year will be even more violent than the parliamentary elections last year.

'Afghan confce must respect interests of neighbours'

Pakistan seeks rapprochement with N Alliance

AFP, Tehran
Iran will accept any UN decision taken on Afghanistan, but says the upcoming inter-Afghan conference in Bonn must respect the "interests of the Afghans as well its neighbouring countries."
"Iran accepts any decision taken on Afghanistan within a United Nations framework," an unnamed foreign ministry official was quoted as saying by Monday's government-run Iran paper.
But "what is important for Iranian diplomacy is that the interests of the Afghans as well as neighbouring countries be assured during the inter-Afghan conference" scheduled to begin near Bonn Tuesday, the official said.
Another diplomat, whose identity was not revealed, said Iran, at this juncture, "prefers to observe a silence of satisfaction."
Foreign ministry spokesman Hamid-Reza Asefi, asked about the conference, said Monday that Tehran "hopes for its success, for stability in Afghanistan."
Meanwhile, an editorial in the reformist English-language Iran News said it was "unrealistic" to expect the government of Afghan president Burhanuddin Rabbani, ousted by the hardline Taliban militia in 1996, to approve its "own disintegration."
"It seems unrealistic that representatives of a legal government would vote for its own disintegration, especially when they are controlling major cities in the country, including Kabul."
A total of 21 delegates are expected to take part in the Bonn talks, but the United Nations has not yet released a definitive list of the participants.
Early Sunday, Rabbani said the largest delegation would be composed of 11 representatives from the Northern Alliance which backs his government, including one woman.
The UN-organized conference, entitled "Discussion on Afghanistan," will take place in the Petersburg, an official residence of the German government in the hills surrounding Bonn.
Meanwhile, Pakistan has quietly stepped up efforts to mend fences with the Northern Alliance, the new dominant political force in Afghanistan, an official source said Monday.
"We are in touch with the Northern Alliance and they have also contacted us," the source said.
A Pakistani delegation is being sent to Dubai to meet Afghanistan's acting president Burhanuddin Rabbani, who is in the Gulf Emirate, he said.

Bofors scandal Italian fights extradition to India

AFP, Kuala Lumpur
An Italian businessman appeared in court Monday to fight India's attempt to extradite him from Malaysia over a 1986 bribery case involving Sweden's Bofors arms manufacturer.
Ottavio Quattrocchi appeared calm and took notes as his lawyers traded arguments with those for the Indian government over an affidavit alleging the extradition attempt was politically motivated.
Quattrocchi, who was arrested and bailed in Malaysia last December, says he fell foul of an Indian political vendetta. He has said his only crime was to have been a close friend of India's former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and his widow Sonia.
Gandhi was assassinated in 1991, and Sonia Gandhi now heads the opposition Congress party.
The affidavit before the court was by journalist Prem Shankar Jha, formerly information adviser to then Indian Prime Minister V.P. Singh in 1990.

Laden, Omar together in Kandahar: N Alliance

AFP, Kabul
Suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden and Taliban chief Mullah Mohammad Omar are together and "contained" around the militia's southern citadel of Kandahar, the Northern Alliance said Monday.
But the alliance's foreign minister Abdullah Abdullah said the hunt for the world's most wanted man and his Afghan protector "is not yet over" and the coming days would be "very important."
Abdullah made his comments as US troops, tanks and artillery were reported landing Monday south of Kandahar in an apparent offensive against the last major pocket of militia resistance.
Bin Laden, wanted for the September 11 terror attacks on the United States, and Omar were "together in that area" and the Saudi militant's "forces are contained," Abdullah told a news conference.
He said Kandahar airport was still in Taliban hands, but did not specify which of the city's two facilities he was referring to.
Abdullah said the Northern Alliance, which took control of Kabul on November 13, had sent to Kandahar some locally born commanders and other influential people to help spark an anti-Taliban rebellion in the area.
"The story of the Taliban is over. It is a matter of time for it to come to an end," Abdullah said. Asked when Kandahar would fall, he said "soon," but suggested it might not be "very soon."
Abdullah said that the search for bin Laden was not over. "I would not say this is the final act."
He said the next step would be to keep an eye on the "extensive resistance against the Taliban by local forces," adding that they were being aided by the US-led coalition against terrorism.



A sexworker displays red ribbons, which she and her colleagues will wear during an AIDS awareness campaign in Kolkata on Monday. Twenty thousand sex workers from local brothels will wear the ribbons during the week-long awareness campaign to mark International AIDS Day on December 1.

US may hit terror facilities in Somalia, Philippines

AFP, Washington
Suspected terrorist facilities in Somalia and the Philippines could be the next targets in the US-led anti-terrorism campaign, now focused on Afghanistan, Newsweek magazine reported.
According to the report in the weekly's Monday issue, the US Navy has been running reconnaissance flights over Somalia, where it is believed the Al-Qaida terror network of Osama bin Laden may have at least one training camp.
The United States already has special forces troops in the Philippines that are attempting to help President Gloria Arroyo's government fight an Al-Qaida-backed insurgency there, the report said.
The magazine also quoted senior US officials as saying there is a debate inside the administration of President George W. Bush about how to deal with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, but no final decision has been reached.
The main obstacle is that there is no hard evidence of ties between the aggressively secular Saddam and bin Laden, the magazine quotes the officials as saying.
Earlier Sunday, the Sunday Times of London reported that the United States and Britain are planning to extend the war on terrorism to Somalia, Sudan and Yemen as soon as the campaign in Afghanistan is over.
US and British intelligence

KSA, Arafat call for int'l observers

Suicide attack hurts 2 Israeli guards
AFP, Riyadh
Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Authority have called for international observers to be deployed urgently in the occupied territory to protect Palestinians, Palestinian ambassador Mustafa Dib said Monday.
The call came from a meeting between Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz late Sunday.
"They two leaders agreed on the urgent need to deploy international observers in the Palestinian territory to protect the Palestinian people against Israeli aggressions," Dib told AFP.
"Views were identical on working out a mechanism to implement President George W. Bush's call for a Palestinian state, and Secretary of State Colin Powell's plan for a ceasefire," Dib added.
Meanwhile, a Palestinian suicide bomber carried out an attack early Monday on the Erez border crossing at the northern edge of the Gaza Strip, slightly wounding two Israeli guards, an Israeli military source said.
He set off explosives carried round his waist just before arriving at the checkpoint for workers leaving the Gaza Strip to work in Israel, killing himself and wounding the border guards who were taken to an Israeli hospital, the source said.

Asian films top Bangkok film festival

AFP, Bangkok
Asian films scooped a clutch of awards at the fourth international Bangkok Film Festival which ended this weekend, organisers said Monday.
Chinese director Zhang Yang took the prize for Best Feature for "Quitting", the real life tale of 90s film star Jia Hongsheng's fall from grace.
Jia plays himself and Zhang brings in the former actor's parents to recreate the role they played in their son's recovery from drug addiction.
Taiwanese-French film "What Time Is It There?" was a close second, earning Taiwan's Tsai Ming Liang the Best Director award.

Father, sons killed in blast in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar
A father and his two sons were killed in a bomb explosion at their home in Indian-administered Kashmir, police said Monday.
An explosive device went off inside the house of Abdur Rehman at Lawaypora village, near Bandipora township, 60 kilometres (37 miles) north of Kashmir's summer capital, Srinagar, late Sunday, police said.
Rehman and his two sons, Ishaq Khan, 13 and Sadiq Khan, 11, died on the spot, police said.
Rehman's eight-year-old daughter was seriously injured.
Police said someone in the house may have been making a landmine, which went off by accident.