

'US very much involved in defusing Indo-Pak tension'

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush said Friday that the United States was "very much involved" in defusing tensions between Pakistan and India sparked by what he denounced as a terrorist attack on parliament in New Delhi.

"A flare-up in that region could really create severe problems for all of us that are engaged in the fight against terror," he said of the nuclear rivals during a roundtable with a small group of reporters.

Speculation has been mounting that the United States will be forced to plunge deeper into peacemaking in South Asia, especially if rising tensions between the two nuclear-armed rivals become even more inflamed, especially over Kashmir.

But asked whether he would appoint a special envoy to the region, Bush replied: "No, we don't need one" and said US Secretary of State Colin Powell had been in contact by telephone with officials in the region.

In the past two days, Powell has spoken once each with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and twice with Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Abdul Sattar, according to US officials.

"We're mindful of the potential there in the area and we're on the phone," said Bush, who renewed his offer of anti-terror aid to India and his condemnation of the attack on New Delhi's parliament.

"One of the things that we can do is help provide information to the Indians to get to the root of that terrorist attack," last week in which 14 people, including six gunmen, were killed, said Bush.

"We're interested in routing terror where it may exist that's why I strongly condemn the terrorist attack that took place on the Indian parliament," the president said in the Oval Office.

"President Musharraf strongly -- he feels the same way I do, that's why he condemned the attack," said Bush, who declared a US-led global war on terrorism after September 11 suicide attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

The United States said earlier that Bush had every confidence in Musharraf's capacity to combat terrorism, as Islamabad mulled a US request to take aim at militant groups targeted by the president.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said Bush would support Musharraf as he moved to combat terror groups, as tensions escalated between India and Pakistan over an attack on the parliament blamed by New Delhi on Islamic extremists.

"President Bush has every confidence in President Musharraf's capacity to act against the terrorists," he said.

"The president calls on him to take action against the Lashkar-i-Taiba, the Jaish-i-Muhammad and other terrorist organizations, their leaders and their finances."

Both groups, which are based in Pakistan and active against Indian troops in the disputed region of Kashmir, were named by India as chief suspects in the parliament attack last week in which 14 people, including six gunmen were killed.

India accused Pakistani intelligence of backing the attack, and threatened retaliation.

Bush Thursday froze the assets of the Lashkar-i-Taiba, in the latest stage of his global war on terrorism.

In Islamabad, a government spokesman said Pakistan would freeze the assets and accounts of another group -- Pakistani-based Umma Tameer-e-Nau, which Bush also has moved against.

Bin Laden has fled to Kashmir?

AFP, Rome

Osama bin Laden, wanted by the West for the September 11 attacks, has fled to Kashmir with the help of Pakistan's secret services, an Italian television station reported Friday.

An unidentified informer who appeared on RaiTre public television, his back to the camera, said bin Laden had left his secret base in the Tora Bora mountain area in eastern Afghanistan, December 12.

The informer, carrying documents said to belong to the Pakistani secret services, also said 2,000 men belonging to bin Laden's al-Qaida network had succeeded in fleeing Afghanistan to various places including Kashmir and the break-away Russian republic of Chechnya.

US President George W. Bush said earlier Friday that he does not know the location of the Saudi-born bin Laden, while a US-allied Afghan commander said he was still in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan.

De la Rúa barred from leaving Argentina

AFP, Buenos Aires

Two Argentine judges have barred ex-president Fernando de la Rúa from leaving the country pending an investigation into the suppression of violent anti-government protests, court officials said Friday.

Judges Maria Servini de Cubria and Norberto Oyabide issued the order after hearing a report from prosecutors about police suppression of protests in which seven people died in the capital.

The judges' order also implicated former interior minister Ramon Mestre, former security chief Enrique Mathov and federal police Chief Ruben Santos.

De la Rúa resigned Thursday as support for his government crumbled amid violent protests against austerity measures aimed at staving off financial collapse.

At least 27 people died throughout the nation in two days of looting and clashes with police. Police said some 500 were arrested, some under emergency orders allowing arrests without a court order.



Masked Palestinian militants of Islamic Jihad movement carry the body of their comrade Mahmoud Mkaiaid, 18, during his funeral in the Jabaliya refugee camp, north of Gaza City on Friday. Mkaiaid was killed by Palestinian policemen during armed clashes, which erupted between them and the Islamic supporters of Jihad and Hamas on Thursday in the camp.

PHOTO: AFP

Onus for peace now on Israel

AP, Jerusalem

Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat says a decision by the Islamic militant group Hamas to suspend suicide bombings and mortar attacks in Israel leaves the next step in the quest for Mideast peace up to Israel.

Erekat said he told Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres in a telephone conversation Friday that he now expected Israel to stop its pre-emptive strikes on suspected Palestinian militants and lift its blockade of Palestinian towns and villages.

"The ball now is in the Israeli court to stop all acts of aggression, to stop the policy of assassinations, to lift the closure and to return to the negotiating table," he said.

The Hamas announcement, seen as boosting chances for a US-brokered truce to take hold, came at a time of renewed internal Palestinian fighting in which six people died in a gun battle in a Gaza refugee camp.

It followed two days of clashes

between Palestinian police -- who have been trying to enforce a cease-fire -- and supporters of Hamas and the smaller Islamic Jihad group. In all, seven Palestinians have been killed and 94 hurt in internal confrontations since Thursday, doctors said.

Hamas said in a leaflet faxed to news agencies that it ordered attacks in Israel suspended "until further notice" to preserve Palestinian unity. The announcement was seen as a victory for beleaguered Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who has been under intense US and European pressure to prevent attacks on Israel.

It was the first time Hamas had made such a promise in the 15 months of fighting.

However, the Hamas decision only referred to stopping suicide attacks within Israel's borders, not in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, leaving open the possibility of further violence against Jewish settlers and soldiers there. The ban on mortar fire extended to both Israel and the Palestinian territories,

according to the leaflet.

A senior Palestinian official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the Hamas announcement was a result of negotiations between leaders of the group and senior Palestinian Authority officials that ended early Friday.

The Palestinian cabinet, meeting Friday night in the West Bank town of Ramallah, issued a statement welcoming the Hamas move as an important contribution to national unity.

Israel's reaction was guarded. In the past 15 months of fighting, scores of Israelis have been killed in attacks by Islamic militants, including 36 this month.

"What's positive? That they stop terror activities in one place, but keep murdering women and children somewhere else?" said Raanan Gissin, an adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. "As long as the terror activities continue... we will implement our right of self-defence, and we will act against them with all our might."

US defends gaps in Bin Laden tape

AFP, Washington

Poor video and audio quality, not an effort to spare Saudi Arabia, accounts for gaps in the government-issued transcript accompanying a videotape showing Osama bin Laden gloating about the September 11 terror strikes, US officials insisted Friday.

The Pentagon has declined to release a more complete version of the transcript, despite claims in the US press, corroborated by independent translators who studied it carefully, that the gaps coincide with information that could embarrass Saudi Arabia, an important US ally in the Middle East.

Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said the government was satisfied with the tape from an intelligence standpoint, though he declined to elaborate.

As far as further revisiting its translation, the secretary said "we are not trying to go back and get another version for the public."

Mountain of obstacles on Afghans' road to peace

AFP, Islamabad

Afghanistan's new government is a small step on the path to reconstructing a bitterly divided nation, but its leader Hamid Karzai still faces a mountain of obstacles.

In a country devastated by more than two decades of war and rife with ethnic divisions, the battle to oust the Taliban regime may pale in comparison to the challenges facing new leader Hamid Karzai.

The sulphurous mix of ethnic groups and warlords jostling to maintain control of their fiefdoms has forced a delicate balancing act on Karzai, as he seeks to prevent a return to anarchy.

"He has certainly had a lot on his plate" before a Loya Jirga grand assembly of elders appoints a transitional government to organise elections, said Simbal Khan, an Afghan expert at Islamabad's Quaid-e-Azam University.

"It is going to be very difficult to establish any kind of peaceful situation inside Afghanistan."

"The six month administration is a very transitional phase. There is still a war going on and so the overall law and order situation is very fluid."

Karzai is a royalist of from the Pashtuns, the largest single ethnic group. But he is seen as the most acceptable figure to head the new government in a way that few Northern Alliance leaders would be even though the alliance took Kabul.

Nevertheless, with his cabinet made up of 11 Pashtuns, eight Tajiks, five Shiite Muslim Hazaras, three Uzbeks and three from other minorities, finding a consensus could be difficult.

"The composition of the government does not give Karzai a large area to manoeuvre and it limits his decision making," Khan said.

"International pressure will have to shift more on to the Northern

Alliance members of his cabinet to cooperate."

For the moment at least, the 44-year-old ally of former king Mohammad Zahir Shah has the backing of the international community.

"We all share the same goals, to restore peace, promote reconciliation, an national unity, ensure security and stability, justice and equality for all citizens and to work hand in hand to reconstruct Afghanistan," the UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi said at the swearing in ceremony.

Brahimi said one key step in that process was taken when the UN Security Council agreed unanimously the mandate for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) arriving in Kabul.

However, the presence of foreign troops on Afghan soil, if only for six months, in itself could prove destabilising.

Gunmen kill Pak minister's brother in Karachi

AFP, Karachi

Gunmen shot dead the brother of Pakistan's interior minister Moinuddin Haider in Karachi on Friday night, police and ministry officials said.

There was speculation that the killing of Ehtishamuddin Haider, 60, could be linked to the minister's tough comments against terrorism in recent weeks.

Karachi's Deputy Inspector of Police Tariq Jamil said "he has been targeted because of his brother." Ehtishamuddin, who had no political office, was leaving the Fatimid Foundation, a blood donation centre, in eastern Karachi late Friday when he was gunned down by two men on a motorbike, an interior ministry spokesman said.

The interior minister has made several outspoken statements in recent weeks against religious extremism and supporting the international coalition against terrorism, which has targeted extremist bases in neighbouring Afghanistan.

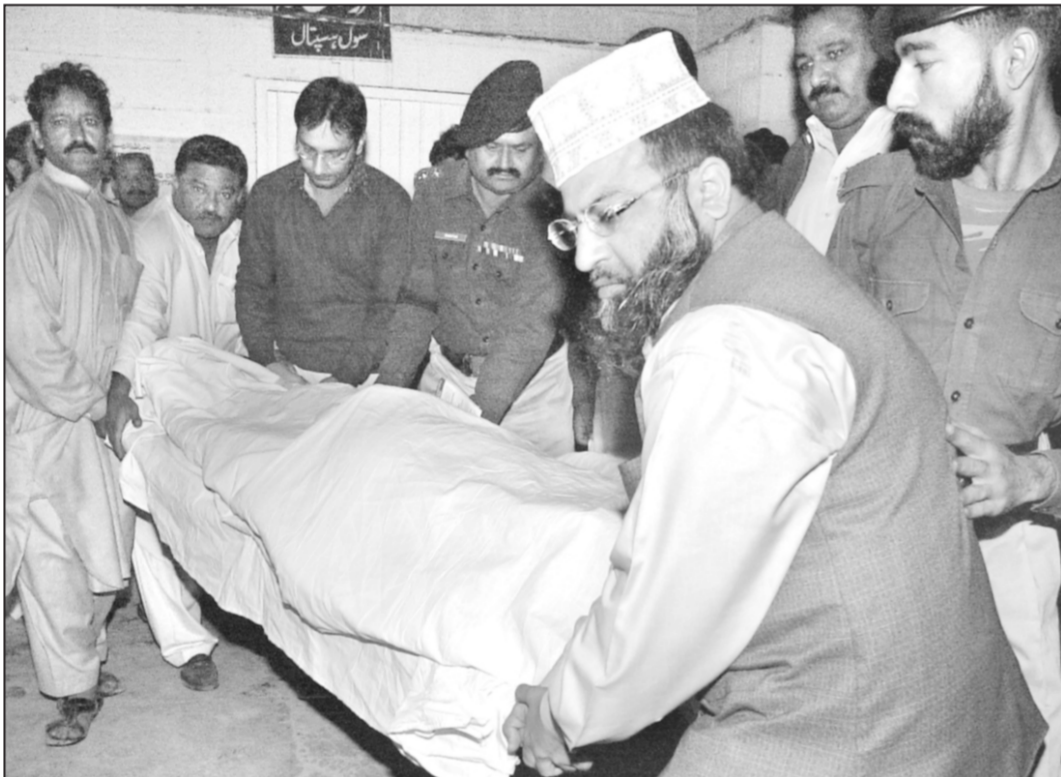


PHOTO: AFP

People carry the body of Ehtishamuddin Haider, 60, brother of Pakistani Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider, in a government hospital in the port city of Karachi, early Saturday. Ehtishamuddin, whose brother has been known for his tough comments against terrorism in recent weeks, was gunned down by two unknown men on a motorbike when the victim was leaving a blood donation centre.

Gunmen kill 5 women in Kashmir

AP, Srinagar

Unidentified gunmen shot and killed five women and critically wounded four others in two separate incidents on Friday night in Kashmir, police said Saturday.

In the first assault, the gunmen barged into Sikh homes in the village of Poshkora in Hindu-dominated Anantnag district and started firing indiscriminately.

Three young Sikh women were killed and a Sikh couple was critically wounded, police said. Poshkora is 75 km south of Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu-Kashmir state.

Colombia govt opens peace talks with ELN

AFP, Bogota

The Colombian government announced Friday it would formally open peace talks with the leftist National Liberation Army at the same time recognising the group's political status.

In a statement, the government said it was suspending arrest orders issued in August for leaders of the group, known as the ELN, as a result of their decision to observe a truce through January 6.

Musharraf endorses Chinese crackdown on militants

AP, Xi'an

Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf headed west to visit one of China's biggest mosques on Saturday after telling Chinese leaders that he supports their crackdown on Muslim separatists.

Musharraf, midway through his first visit to China since the September 11 attacks, flew to Xi'an, an ancient city popular with tourists because of the famed terra-cotta warriors unearthed nearby.

In a respite after two days of meetings with Chinese leaders, Musharraf was to visit the Great Mosque in the Muslim quarter of Xi'an, 900 KM southwest of Beijing.

He also had been scheduled to see the terra-cotta figures, one of the world's most stunning archaeological treasures, although a Xi'an official said that part of the visit might be cancelled. Security for Musharraf was tight.

Before leaving Beijing, Musharraf met Saturday morning

with Chinese oil executives and a vice minister for trade and economics. Musharraf, accompanied by his oil, finance and commerce ministers, said closer economic relations between China and Pakistan "would really cement the bonds" between the two Asian neighbours.

Musharraf assured Chinese leaders Friday that China's longtime ties with Pakistan remain sound, despite his government's growing relations with Washington in the war on terror.

UK, Russia agree to share intelligence on terror

AFP, Royal Air Force Base Halton

Russian President Vladimir Putin and British Prime Minister Tony Blair hailed a landmark agreement Friday to share anti-terror intelligence as a sign of improving links between Russia and the West.

Blair and Putin announced the formation of a new bilateral group to share secrets about the activities of international terror groups after talks at a military base outside London.

"It's perhaps a measure of how relations between our two countries have strengthened that we can say that cooperation on intelligence matters since September 11 has been unprecedentedly close," Blair said at a joint press conference.

"To build on the links that have developed we have agreed to the formation of a new bilateral working group on terrorism that will allow our two countries to cooperate in defeating this attack on the civilised world."

Blair added that the group, to be in place "as soon as possible," was part of a transformation in Russia's ties with the West since Putin took office two years ago that had also led to the establishment of a Russia-NATO council.

The idea behind the new working

group is "to formalise and deepen existing intelligence cooperation and indeed other kind of cooperation in the fight against terrorism," a British government source told AFP.

Putin described the setting up of an international anti-terror coalition in the wake of the September attacks on New York and Washington as "a turning point for the destiny of our world."

"We have not only understood the common threat, we have also understood that we must fight it together," the Russian president added.

Downing Street sources said senior officials from the Foreign Office, Ministry of Defence and MI6, Britain's foreign intelligence service, will join their Russian counterparts to help coordinate the hunt for prime terror suspect Osama bin Laden and members of his al-Qaida network.

Putin praised Blair for originally coming up with the idea of a NATO "council of 20" allowing the 19 existing alliance members to discuss security issues with Russia.

"The formula proposed by Prime Minister Blair satisfies Russia, and this is one of the few realistic possibilities for changing the quality of the relationship between Russia and NATO," Putin said.



Cherie Blair (L), Russian President Vladimir Putin (second L), Lyudmila Putina (second R) and British Prime Minister Tony Blair (R) chat while walking at the premier's residence Chequers west of London on Friday. Putin is on a two-day official visit.

PHOTO: AFP