

## Musharraf extends olive branch to India

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan's president offered Saturday to join India in a "serious and sustained dialogue" to resolve tensions that threaten to trigger war between the two nuclear-armed neighbours.

"I would like to reiterate our readiness to engage in a serious and sustained dialogue with India to commence together a journey of peace and progress," President Gen. Pervez Musharraf said in a message to Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The message, distributed by the government news agency, was sent on India's Republic Day, when the country marks its 52nd anniversary as a republic.

It followed India's announcement Friday that it had successfully tested a new version of its nuclear-capable intermediate range missile from an island off its eastern coast.

The test came with hundreds of thousands of Indian and Pakistani forces mobilized along the border in their biggest standoff in decades. It drew immediate criticism from the United States, Pakistan, Britain and Germany, which said India should have avoided it at such a tense time.

Musharraf said Pakistan "desires to establish tension-free and good-neighbourly relations with India."

Pakistan has made similar overtures to India since the July summit in Agra, India, which broke down over Kashmir, the divided mostly Muslim province where Islamic militants, some based in Pakistan, have been carrying out attacks and fighting Indian forces for 12 years.

The latest message appeared aimed in part at convincing the United States and other major nations that Pakistan remains committed to improving relations with India and that India is responsible for the lack of progress.

Pakistan is eager to exploit the international goodwill it received when Musharraf abandoned the Taliban in neighbouring Afghanistan and joined the US-led coalition against terrorism following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Tensions between Hindu-majority India and Muslim Pakistan escalated after a Dec. 13 assault on the Indian parliament complex in New Delhi, in which 14 people were killed including five attackers.

India blamed two Pakistan-based groups fighting for self-determination of the Indian-ruled portion of Kashmir -- Jais-e-Mohammed and Laskar-e-Tayyaba -- and the Pakistani intelligence service. The two groups denied the allegation and Pakistan insisted India has failed to prove its claims.

Musharraf, however, banned the two organisations and three other Islamic extremist groups and declared that Pakistan would not allow its soil to be used as a base for terrorism.

India welcomed Musharraf's comments but said it would not pull back forces from the border until "cross-border terrorism" is halted.

On Friday, Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani said India would need several months to judge whether there has been a letup in cross-border attacks and repeated India's demand that Pakistan extradite 20 men wanted on suspicions of terrorist acts in India.

"At the moment, the government decision is that the present situation will continue," Advani said, referring to the troop buildup.

AFP adds: Pakistan will not be provoked into responding to India's test of a short-range version of its nuclear-capable Agni missile, Pakistani foreign minister Abdul Sattar said.

The test Friday from the Chandipur test range off the eastern coastal Indian state of Orissa drew a strong response from Pakistan which described it as a threat to regional security, especially at a time of heightened tensions between Islamabad and New Delhi.

Sattar told CNN late Friday the missile test "is bound to be considered unwise, if not reckless, at a time that is very tense."

"Pakistan would not respond with its own missile test, he said."

"Our government has decided that we will not be provoked into responding to India's test, because... by doing that, we will fall into the Indian way of dealing with the situation."

"That is, adding provocation, adding to the threat on the borders, adding tension to tension," Sattar added.

Pakistan had postponed testing its own nuclear-capable missile and would wait for "a degree of normalcy" to return to the relationship with India before considering whether a test was necessary.

## India marks Republic Day without showing its military might

AFP, New Delhi

India on Saturday celebrated its annual Republic Day without the traditional show of military might, as the country's troops, tanks and guns remained on the borders of rival Pakistan.

In the biggest event, Indian President K.R. Narayanan saluted marching contingents of children and paramilitary soldiers in New Delhi's central vista as Republic Day's chief guest, Mauritian President Cassam Uteem, sat behind bullet-proof glass.

More than 60,000 soldiers and police guarded the city's streets and the Janpath parade route in an unprecedented security exercise to thwart possible attacks by Islamic guerrillas who have vowed to fight the Indian state.

However the only display of military hardware was a life-size model of India's nuclear-capable ballistic missile Agni, which was test-fired the day before, sparking fears of a further heightening of military tensions in South Asia.

Helicopter gunships streaked across New Delhi skies for the event, which every year showcases India's military might but was scaled down for the first time because of the tensions with Pakistan.



PHOTO: AFP

An Agni II intermediate range missile is paraded through the streets during India's annual Republic Day Parade in New Delhi on Saturday. This year's annual Republic Day was a bit different in absence of the traditional show of military might as the country's troops, tanks and guns remained on the borders of arch-rival Pakistan.

## US tests sea-based missile defence

REUTERS, Washington

The US military on Friday knocked out a target missile using a sea-launched interceptor that could be part of President George W Bush's planned ballistic missile defense.

Eager to curb expectations, the Pentagon said a hit had not been its chief goal. But the interceptor missile, launched from an Aegis cruiser, and the Aries target missile collided in space over the US Pacific Missile Range Facility at Kauai, Hawaii.

"It was not a primary objective to result in a hit, however, it did that as well," a Pentagon spokesman said.

The sea-based test took place at 9.18 pm EST (0218 GMT Saturday) after a postponement because a US Navy medical evacuation ship was passing by, the Pentagon said.

## China calls for peace in S Asia

AFP, Beijing

China, a longstanding ally of Pakistan, today appealed for peace and stability in South Asia but stopped short of condemning India's surprise test of a nuclear-capable missile.

"We hope all the countries will take more measures favourable to the protection of peace and stability in South Asia," a foreign ministry spokesman told AFP without elaborating.

The test of the short-range Agni I missile prompted an angry response from Pakistan at a time when tensions between the two nuclear neighbours have escalated to a full-blown military stand-off.

## Myanmar, India to mend ties

AP, Yangon

With ties between the countries on the mend, India and Myanmar will reopen consulates in two major cities, a state-run newspaper said Saturday.

Closed since 1979, consulates will soon resume operations in the Indian city of Calcutta and Myanmar's second largest city, Mandalay, the New Light of Myanmar said.

Relations between the two countries soured after 1988 when the Myanmar military brutally suppressed a pro-democracy movement in the country. But ties have improved significantly since 2000.

Gen Maung Aye, the no 2 power-holder in the ruling military junta, visited India in November 2000, and India's External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh came to Myanmar, also known as Burma, last February.

## 8 killed in India as truck overturns

AFP, New Delhi

Eight people, including two women, were killed and four injured Saturday when the truck they were travelling in flipped over in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, the United News of India news agency reported.

The truck, which was laden with coal, had been travelling from the eastern state of Orissa when the accident occurred in Kerala's West Godavary district.

The injured were rushed to nearby hospitals. The driver of the truck escaped unhurt.

## US-led forces seeking use of facilities at Karachi airport

### UN leads push to stabilise Afghanistan

AFP, Karachi

US-led coalition forces are negotiating a deal with Pakistani aviation companies to use ground-handling facilities at Karachi's airport, industry sources said Saturday.

"A delegation of the forces called on the high-ups of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) late Friday to negotiate a deal for technical ground support for their logistics operations," said a senior PIA official, requesting anonymity.

PIA, the national flag carrier, has extensive ground-handling facilities at Karachi International airport. The coalition was also talking

with another ground handling company, Shaheen Airport Service (SAS), run by retired Pakistan Air Force employees, sources said.

SAS executive Mohammad Ali Shah would not directly confirm any approach but said it was prepared to "provide the facilities on a commercial basis to whomsoever it may be".

Earlier, newspapers reported that aviation authorities had assigned a portion of the airport to the US-led military forces for the transit of goods and personnel to Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, diplomatic efforts to secure Afghanistan's future gath-

ered pace Saturday after the United States promised to finish its job of eliminating the last remnants of al-Qaeda and the Taliban from the country.

As UN chief Kofi Annan began a two-day visit to Iran designed to shore up Tehran's backing for the rebuilding of its neighbour, interim Afghan leader Hamid Karzai was preparing for a crucial trip to Washington next week.

Karzai is due to meet US President George W. Bush at the White House on Monday for talks on the next stage in Afghanistan's planned transition to stable government.

## 50 facts about Queen

AP, London

Buckingham Palace released a wealth of facts about the life and reign of Queen Elizabeth II Friday to mark her Golden Jubilee.

In honour of the 50th anniversary of her ascension to the throne, officials published a list of 50 facts about the queen on the Internet, followed by a similar list dedicated to her husband Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh.

Amid an assortment of details, such as the queen learning to drive in 1945, are some amusing nuggets of information.

The list, collated from palace archives, reveals some of the more unusual gifts she has received while on foreign tours, including two tortoises, a bull elephant called Jumbo and a canary.

## India honours 2 US congressmen

AFP, New Delhi

India will award two US congressmen, Frank Pallone and Gary Ackerman, its third highest civilian honour for helping strengthen ties between the world's two largest democracies, the Press Trust of India said Saturday.

The Padma Bhushan awards for Ackerman and Pallone were announced on India's annual Republic Day.

The two Democrats are members of the pro-India caucus in Congress and strongly advocated the lifting of US sanctions imposed on India after its surprise nuclear tests in 1998.

## 4 Maoists shot dead in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese security forces gunned down four Maoist rebels, two of them women, defence ministry sources said Saturday.

Three of the Maoists were killed by the army in a battle Friday in the western district of Gorkha, while the other died in an exchange of fire with security personnel in Myagdi district.

Defence ministry officials said more Maoists may have died in the encounters.

Fifty Maoists surrendered and 20 more were arrested after the clashes, the sources said.

## Briton leaves Yemen after serving 3-yr jail

AFP, Aden

A Briton jailed in Yemen for terrorism left the country for home on Saturday after serving a three-year jail term, the police commissioner in the southern port city of Aden told AFP.

"Mohammad Mustapha Kamel, the natural son of Abu Hamza al-Masri, was released today after serving out his sentence" in the presence of representatives from the British consulate, Lieutenant General Mohammad Saleh Turaiq said.

"He was put on the flight to Sanaa this morning to catch a connecting flight to London departing Sanaa at 0800 GMT," Turaiq said.

The commissioner said Kamel had been treated fairly during his uneventful time in prison, weighing "68 kilograms (150 pounds)" when he was incarcerated and 85 kilograms (187 pounds) when released.

## India marks anniversary of Gujarat killer quake

AFP, Bhuj

Residents of this western Indian city mourned in silence for the 20,000 people who died in a killer earthquake which struck a year ago on Saturday.

Many students and shopkeepers stayed at home out of respect to the victims of the country's deadliest quake in a half-century.

The Kutch district, the hardest hit by the disaster, observed two minutes of silence at 8:46 am (0316 GMT) to mourn those killed by the earthquake, which registered 7.9 on the Richter scale and left another 160,000 people injured.

Some people offered spontaneous prayers for the dead on the streets, but most residents of this still traumatised district chose to mourn at home, where many still feel the crippling economic effects of the quake that damaged five billion dollars worth of property.

The disaster also cast a pall over ceremonies for India's Republic Day on Saturday, with the chief minister of this western state of Gujarat using a ceremony for the national holiday to defend the government's record on helping the victims.

"The pace of work is not slow and will not be slowed. Even the industrial belts are coming back to normalcy," Chief Minister Narendra Modi told a crowd of several hundred.

## Australia says 'no' to migrant policy change

AP, Woomera

As the government boasted Saturday about Australia's proud record of tolerance, more asylum seekers joined protests about harsh conditions they are forced to live in while their visa applications are processed.

One refugee was hospitalized after falling or jumping into a roll of razor wire at the Woomera detention center in the Australian Outback where a hunger strike by nearly 200 mainly Afghan asylum seekers yielded its 11th day.

The injured man's condition and nationality were not immediately known. He was rushed by ambulance to Woomera's small hospital in the early afternoon. Strapped onto a stretcher, a bloodstained bandage could be seen under a white cloth covering the man's face.

A camp guard also was injured when he was hit by a rock apparently thrown by a protester.

Dozens more refugees waved placards declaring "Freedom or death" in a brief rooftop protest at Woomera while in Western

Australia state four more asylum seekers were treated after drinking antiseptic in another protest.

At least 188 mainly Afghan refugees at the Woomera detention center remained on hunger strike to protest the length of time asylum applications take and the fact that they are incarcerated throughout the process.

About 2,000 Afghans have sought asylum in Australia.

Some refugees have been locked up for nearly three years at Woomera, a former missile testing base surrounded by razor wire-topped fences on a dusty, featureless plain 1,800 kilometers (1,120 miles) west of Sydney.

The government of Prime Minister John Howard has been criticized by refugee and human rights groups around the world for its stance but refuses to change the policy -- saying it is intended as a deterrent.

And as the protests continued Saturday, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock boasted of Australia's history of tolerance in a speech to mark the national day.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Colin Powell (R) walks from the lobby of the State Department with Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Interim Administration of Afghanistan Abdullah Abdullah (L) after a luncheon at the State Department on Friday in Washington, DC.

## IAEA team begins routine inspection in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

A team from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on Saturday began a routine inspection of Iraqi nuclear facilities under the international Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), signed by Iraq in 1972, an Iraqi source said.

The seven-member team, headed by Polish national Andrzej Pietruzewski, started at a site close to Baghdad, the source said, without giving details.

The IAEA made a similar visit in January 2001 to inspect Iraq's nuclear installations under the NPT. It found that the country's uranium stocks were being kept under seal and had not been touched.

## Iranian police, teachers clash in Tehran

AFP, Tehran

Clashes erupted Saturday morning between Iranian riot police and teachers near the presidential offices in Tehran, and about a dozen were arrested, an AFP correspondent said.

Hundreds of teachers were holding a demonstration to protest for higher salaries when they were confronted by the police, who ordered them to break up the banned rally and attacked a group of about 20 of them.

A group of about a dozen was arrested and forced into police cars near the University of Tehran after they marched from the presidential offices where the clashes took place.

## 'Estrada no longer a threat'

AFP, Manila

Deposed president Joseph Estrada is no longer a political threat, Philippine President Gloria Arroyo said Saturday as she assured the public her administration was stable.

Speaking in her weekly radio show, Arroyo said her detained predecessor was "not even a figurehead" for the opposition.

"Their agenda is not Erap (Estrada's nickname), she said, referring to the opposition.

"He is not the rallying point of their debates. The debates are on other matters."

She said Estrada's name was not even being mentioned in Senate debates even though his wife, Luisa Ejercito, was a senator.

## Afghan FM sees no Iranian interference

AFP, Washington

Afghan Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah said Friday he had seen no evidence that Iran was destabilising Afghanistan, as he set the stage for the landmark visit to Washington of his country's interim leader Hamid Karzai.

Abdullah met Secretary of State Colin Powell to prepare for Karzai's talks at the White House on Monday with President George W. Bush due to focus on the reconstruction of Afghanistan after decades of war and the US campaign against terrorism.