

India prepares for N-test: Musharraf

Delhi rejects Pak allegations as baseless

AFP, Washington

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf Tuesday warned he had seen "indications" of a possible new nuclear test by India and pleaded for outside mediation over the Kashmir dispute, a day ahead of talks with President George W. Bush.

As the Pakistani leader launched his three-day visit to the US capital, hopes rose for the release of US journalist Daniel Pearl, 38, as police in Pakistan seized the top suspect in his kidnapping by suspected Islamic militants three weeks ago.

Musharraf caused a stir at an event hosted by two Washington think-tanks by referring to the nuclear arms race in South Asia and condemning India's launch last month of a nuclear-capable missile.

"The missile test carried out by India and some information, some news even, of maybe a possibility of a nuclear test is most untimely and may I also say provocative," Musharraf said.

Questioned later on the allegation, Musharraf said "there were certainly indications."

"I did share these with the US leadership. I can't give conclusive evidence of it, but I thought if at all there was a possibility, it should be checked," he said at an event hosted by the Woodrow Wilson Institute and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Musharraf did not elaborate further, nor did he provide proposed dates or locations of the alleged test or if it was merely planned or had taken place.

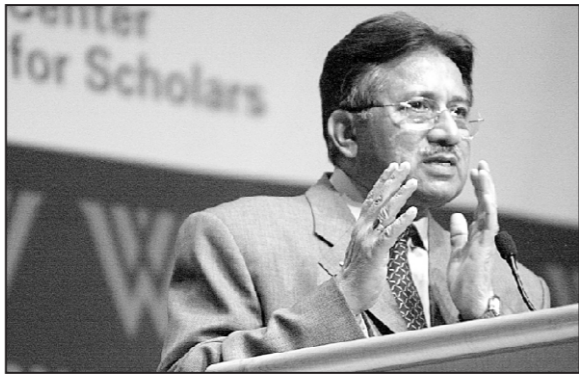


PHOTO: AFP

President of Pakistan General Pervez Musharraf speaks on Monday at a talk hosted by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, DC.

There was no immediate US comment on the claim which comes with South Asian tensions still on the boil after an attack on India's parliament on December 13.

India shocked the world in May 1998 when it conducted a

series of nuclear weapons tests. Despite intense foreign pressure, Pakistan followed suit, raising the terrifying prospect of a war between the neighbours and arch-rivals.

Musharraf also argued that Pakistan desired peace with India -- but warned in what appeared to be a call for US involvement, that true peace could only thrive with a resolution to the rivals' bloody duel over Kashmir.

"Bilateralism has failed, and therefore, I believe there is a requirement for mediation, or facilitation in resolving the disputes between India and Pakistan."

"Kashmir is a dispute that needs to be addressed through dialogue."

Musharraf did not specifically name the United States as his preferred mediator in the dispute, but Pakistan has long sought to get Washington involved.

India is adamantly opposed to international mediation and US officials say they will only become involved at the request of both parties.

Meanwhile, India on Wednesday dismissed as totally baseless suggestions by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf that it had either carried out or was considering a fresh nuclear test.

"These accusations are totally without basis," foreign ministry spokeswoman Nirupama Rao told the Star television network.

"This is obviously a season for kite flying in Pakistan. We have seen a number of such false allegations made in recent days and we reject them in their entirety," Rao said.

Knighthood for Giuliani

AFP, London

Former New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani was Wednesday to be awarded an honorary knighthood by Britain's Queen Elizabeth for his leadership in the wake of the September 11 terror attacks.

His investiture at Buckingham Palace was due to take place around 11:00 am (1100 GMT.)

Ahead of the ceremony, Giuliani, who arrived in London late Tuesday, told the BBC that he drew his strength to lead New Yorkers from the life of Britain's World War II leader Winston Churchill, who he said was "my great hero".

"During the weeks after the terror attacks the people of Britain, and the people of London in particular, were a source of strength for me."

"The first thing that came to mind was how the people of London and the people of Britain dealt with the Battle of Britain and how they were able to withstand being bombed and... were able to go on with their lives," Giuliani said, referring to the defence of Britain against German bombing in 1940.

Iraq next target, Powell hints

US cargo plane crashes in Afghanistan

AFP, Kandahar

A US Air Force cargo plane crashed in Afghanistan Wednesday, injuring eight members of its crew in a sharp reminder of the risks involved in the ongoing campaign to eliminate the al-Qaida terror network.

The crash came as Secretary of State Colin Powell dropped the strongest hint yet that Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq, rather than Iran or North Korea, could be Washington's next target in the "war on terror."

Secretary of State Colin Powell made it clear that US leaders were looking at ways to topple Saddam Hussein and pointedly did not rule out the possibility of a military confrontation with the Iraqi regime.

While defending President George W. Bush's description of Iran, Iraq and North Korea as "an axis of evil" Powell said Iraq was a

source of greater concern than the other two states.

"With respect to Iran and with respect to North Korea, there is no plan to start a war with these nations," Powell told the Senate Budget Committee on Tuesday. "We want to see a dialogue."

Powell's fine-tuning of Bush's stance follows criticism from some European leaders of the direction in which Washington's anti-terror campaign is developing.

The European Union has distanced itself from Washington's attacks on Iran in particular, arguing that they play into the hands of anti-western hardliners in Tehran.

The US accuses the three "rogue" states of a mixture of crimes including supporting terrorism, weapons proliferation and attempting to acquire weapons of mass destruction.

EU, OIC calls for tolerance

AFP, Istanbul

Foreign Ministers from the European Union and the Organisation of the Islamic Conference Wednesday urged greater dialogue between Christian and Muslim states and stressed the need to fight terrorism, at the end of a forum aimed at closing the cultural divide after the terror attacks.

"The tragic events of September 11 have shown the need to strengthen tolerance and understanding among different cultures to avoid a reappearance of deeply-rooted prejudices that can surface," said a joint press statement issued

after the meeting.

The statement said the participants had identified a "need for further cooperation".

"The forum proposes that existing bilateral and multilateral frameworks continue to be used for general debate on the issues raised during the meeting," it added.

The foreign ministers also condemned terrorism, which they said could not be justified for any reason, according to the statement.

"They recognise the joint responsibility to fight against any kind of terrorism," it added.

India kicks off state polls

AFP, Lucknow

India kicked off Wednesday a round of key state elections, whose results could have a serious impact on the stability of the multi-party coalition government led by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

First to the polls was the frontier state of Punjab, which will be followed by Manipur, Uttaranchal and the politically crucial state of Uttar Pradesh.

With voting staggered over several days in some states, the voting process will only be completed on February 21, with results

expected up to a week later.

The most keenly awaited contest is in Uttar Pradesh -- India's Hindu heartland, the most populous state in the country and far and away the most important in political terms.

The state is currently run by Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party, but opinion polls have suggested that the BJP might not only lose control of the state legislature but also be overtaken by the rival Samajwadi Party as the largest single party.

In Uttar Pradesh, as in the other three states, the BJP campaign has focused on the issue of terrorism,

promoting Vajpayee and his party as the only grouping capable of protecting India from the activities of Islamic extremist groups.

The most prominent election poster at the BJP headquarters in the state capital, Lucknow, shows Vajpayee raising a clenched fist with the slogan: "This time, the fight against terrorism will be to the finish."

The BJP is clearly hoping to garner votes by fanning nationalist sentiment at a time when several hundred thousand Indian troops are locked in a tense border face-off with Pakistan.

US lists details of Iranian interference in Afghanistan

AFP, London

US President George W. Bush's special envoy for Afghanistan said in a BBC interview that Washington has given Tehran details of alleged Iranian interference in Afghanistan and help to al-Qaida fugitives.

According to an account of the interview on the BBC website, Zalmay Khalilzad said Washington had passed the information directly to Iranian diplomats during multilateral talks on Afghanistan.

He said hardline elements around Iran's spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and in the elite Revolutionary Guards were helping to arm and finance groups in Afghanistan in a bid to establish pockets of influence and discourage co-operation with the interim government.

Khalilzad said Washington was concerned that Iran had two policies on Afghanistan, driven by the moderate supporters of reformist

President Mohammad Khatami and the hardliners respectively.

The first was constructive, as demonstrated by Khatami's statements and the work done by Iranian diplomats, but the other more negative.

Khalilzad alleged that members of the Al Qods division of the Revolutionary Guards had been despatched to Afghanistan along with a group of Afghan Shiites trained in Lebanon known as Mohamed's Soldiers.

He said he also believed that some elements of the Revolutionary Guards had had a relatively long-standing relationship with the al-Qaida terror movement and had helped members of the group escape from Afghanistan to Iran following the defeat of the Taliban regime.

Some al-Qaida members, he alleged, had even been allowed to travel on to other destinations.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian children walk in a flooded area in Jakarta on Wednesday. Hundreds of residents in remote parts of Jakarta have to take refuge again after flooding hit the city after all-night long rain.

Israeli tanks swarm into Gaza, kill 4 Palestinian policemen

AFP, Gaza City

In a massive show of force, Israeli tanks and troops streamed into three Palestinian towns in the Gaza Strip in search of militants, killing four policemen.

Meanwhile on the diplomatic front British Foreign Secretary headed for the region amid reports that he was sceptical about European proposals for ending the 16-month conflict.

The army took over the entire town of Beit Hanoun in the north of the Gaza Strip, describing it as a "stronghold of the Hamas organization from where a large number of attacks have been planned."

It also sent tanks into the central town of Deir Al-Balah and Beit Lahia in the north for several hours, triggering intense gun battles in the streets.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had issued stern warnings to the radical Islamic movement not to deploy its new generation of home-made Qassam 2 missiles, but Hamas militants fired two at Israel Sunday for the first time, hitting only farmland but triggering alarm in the Jewish state.

Monday night's three-pronged operation aimed to flush out militants as the Israeli army imposed a curfew, set up roadblocks on all roads into Beit Hanoun and conducted systematic searches.

The main north-south road through the Gaza Strip had also been cut at Beit Hanoun, the sources said.

One Palestinian policeman was killed as the troops stormed into the town at dawn. Security officials said the man was unarmed and was running down a street when he was shot.

Philippines, US sign pact to crush Abu Sayyaf

AFP, Zamboanga

The United States and the Philippines approved Wednesday the final document allowing them to hold joint military operations against Muslim Abu Sayyaf gunmen linked to the al-Qaida terror network.

Filipino troops meanwhile intensified their crackdown against the rebel group in the country's south, killing seven more guerrillas.

Officials said the signing of the "terms of reference" would finally pave the way for the deployment of US special forces in joint patrols against the Abu Sayyaf in their Basilan island stronghold.

Allied to the al-Qaida network of alleged international terrorist Osama bin Laden, Abu Sayyaf guerrillas are holding captive a US Christian missionary couple on the island.

A document containing the terms of reference for the joint operations

was signed after a teleconference Tuesday night between Philippine Vice President and Foreign Secretary Teofisto Guingona and James Kelly, the US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs.

President Gloria Arroyo said the document will be forwarded "as a matter of courtesy" to the Philippine Congress, where some representatives have questioned the legality of the operations.

The six-month operations were launched on January 15 and involve up to 660 US troops, making it the largest American troop deployment outside US soil since the Afghan campaign began in October.

It has, however, faced opposition from activists and some legislators who claim allowing the presence of US forces and facilities is against the Philippine constitution.

Omar confesses to kidnapping of US reporter

AFP, Islamabad

British-born Islamic militant Sheikh Omar has confessed to kidnapping US journalist Daniel Pearl during intense interrogation, police sources said Wednesday.

"The interrogation is continuing. He is talking but he is a hard nut to crack. We hope he will come out with the truth," a senior police interrogator told AFP by telephone from Karachi.

Progress in Suu Kyi-junta talks

AFP, Yangon

The historic dialogue between Myanmar's military junta and democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi is progressing steadily and success is "imminent", a government spokesman said Wednesday.

The spokesman rejected criticism from the United States and pro-democracy ethnic political parties in Myanmar that the pace of the talks, which began in October 2000, is too slow.

EC mulls offering respite for illegal migrants

AFP, Brussels

The European Commission is proposing offering renewable six-month visas to illegal immigrants who cooperate with the authorities attempting to stamp out the trade in human smuggling.

According to Brussels, studies illegal immigration is an increasing international phenomenon, with human smuggling networks multiplying.

INS may allow 70,000 refugees to US

AP, Washington

Immigration officials told senators they would try to allow 70,000 political refugees into the United States this year despite the virtual halt caused by the terrorist attacks.

President George W. Bush said last year he wanted that number set as the maximum number of political refugees in 2002, but the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the State Department rarely meet the ceiling set by the president.

Both agencies indicated earlier this year they would reduce the ceiling to 50,000 because of new security challenges, senators and refugee advocates said.

However, INS Commissioner

James Ziglar and Assistant Secretary of State Arthur "Gene" Dewey reaffirmed on Tuesday their commitment to reaching the original number.

"We're committed to making more than a good-faith effort to reach that ceiling," Ziglar said.

Ziglar said he would increase the pool of eligible applicants and the number of officers available to conduct refugee interviews. He said he would also ensure work space for officers and expand their work-weeks.

"It will be difficult. It may take a miracle," said Dewey. He said that 2,000 refugees were admitted in January and another 3,000 are scheduled to arrive this month.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian opposition leader Sonia Gandhi (L) shakes hand with Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev (R) during a meeting at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi on Wednesday.