

Pakistan considers US request to extradite Sheikh Omar

Links between intelligence services, Pearl killers denied

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan was considering yesterday US requests to extradite Sheikh Omar, the British-born confessed mastermind of slain US reporter Daniel Pearl's abduction, as police kept up a search for his body.

"Pakistan has received a request for the extradition of Sheikh Omar from the United States. It is reviewing it and the response will follow," a Pakistani government spokesman told AFP Tuesday.

Washington stepped up the pressure for extradition Tuesday on Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, who met with US Ambassador Wendy Chamberlin and spoke by telephone with Secretary of State Colin Powell.

"The United States will continue to make its case to Pakistan. Pakistan has received the case well," said White House spokesman Ari Fleischer.

However Fleischer cautioned against expecting an "instant resolution" to the situation.

No Pakistani official would say how Musharraf responded to the US request, but one noted that Islamabad had agreed to extradition in the past.

"Although there is no formal extradition treaty between the United States and Pakistan, there are two precedents when Pakistan extradited terrorists wanted by the United States," the official said.

Pakistan extradited to the US suspects in the 1993 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and outside the Central Intelligence Agency headquarters near Washington.

Omar admitted in court on February 14 he had masterminded the abduction of the Wall Street Journal correspondent who disappeared on January 23. He also said the reporter was dead, which was confirmed a week later when a grisly video surfaced of Pearl's slaying.

Omar, who was born in 1973 in London, was Monday ordered remanded in police custody for another two weeks as police seek evidence.

"We have 14 more days to find the clue from the killers and to recover the remains of Pearl," a senior police investigator told AFP.

He also said investigators would examine the video of Pearl's slaying "very minutely."

AP adds: With the United States pressing for the extradition of the men suspected of abducting and killing Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, Pakistan on Wednesday angrily denied any ties between the Islamic militants and the country's intelligence services.

Meanwhile, Pearl's widow, Mariane, appealed to Pakistan's government and its people to find those responsible and said the world must unite fight terrorism.

Pakistani Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider vowed to bring Pearl's killers to justice, and said allegations about a link between confessed kidnapper Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency were "malicious and wrong propaganda."

"We reject these reports completely. There is no question of any linkage," Haider told The Associated Press on the sidelines of a conference on people smuggling in Bali, Indonesia.



PHOTO: AFP

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II is greeted by Australian Primer Minister John Howard (2nd L) and his wife Janette (L) at the Festival Center banquet room in Adelaide yesterday. The Queen arrived in Australia yesterday for the start of a royal visit coinciding with a Commonwealth summit.

37 nations confer on ways to end people smuggling

AP, Bali

Participants at an international conference on illegal immigration warned yesterday that people smuggling is increasingly linked to other criminal activities such as drug trafficking, gunrunning and terrorism.

"Many smuggling activities are being organized by criminal networks also involved in the trafficking of narcotics, document fraud, money laundering, arms smuggling and other transnational crimes," said a draft statement being discussed by delegations from dozens of nations from Asia, the Middle East and the Pacific region.

Participants expressed concern about "possible links between terrorist elements and people smuggling operations."

The draft statement drawn up by co-hosts Australia and Indonesia is expected to be endorsed by all 37 participating nations on Thursday, the final day of the conference.

Thirty-five cabinet ministers were among the delegates who on Wednesday discussed proposals to tighten border controls and criminalize people smuggling as part of wide-ranging efforts to combat illegal immigration.

Organizers said it was the largest international gathering devoted to the problem of illegal immigration.

"People smuggling leads to even bigger crimes against humanity and undermines human dignity," Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri told participants.

Thousands of refugees are currently stranded in Megawati's country, which is also burdened by

hundreds of thousands of internally displaced Indonesians who have fled ethnic and separatist violence.

Relations between Indonesia and Australia deteriorated sharply last year after a Norwegian ship rescued more than 430 asylum seekers from a sinking Indonesian boat heading toward Australia. Canberra refused to accept the passengers and demanded they be returned to Indonesia.

According to official statistics, about 2,700 illegal immigrants -- mostly from Afghanistan and the Middle East -- pass through Indonesia on their way to Australia each year.

In her speech, Megawati warned against "impatient governments taking unilateral steps to protect their national interests."

Putin, Blair talk Russia-NATO relations, Afghan situation

AFP, Moscow

Russian President Vladimir Putin and British Prime Minister Tony Blair discussed Russia-NATO relations and the situation in Afghanistan in a telephone call late Tuesday, the Kremlin said in a statement.

During the 30-minute discussion initiated by Blair, the two leaders agreed on the need to "establish a concrete and pragmatic dialogue" to set up a "new format for Russia-NATO relations," the statement said.

The Financial Times reported Monday that NATO members had agreed on the broad outline of a new relationship with Russia that would give Moscow an equal voice on many important issues.

Malaysia detains 2500 illegal immigrants

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Thousands of people were arrested and hundreds of homes destroyed in a major crackdown on illegal immigrants in Malaysia's Sabah state on Borneo island, police said yesterday.

On the first day of a drive targeting 30,000 migrants, police and army troops arrested more than 2,500 people and demolished 227 squatter homes, a police spokesman said.

Those arrested, mostly Filipinos and Indonesians, were being held in detention camps and would be deported as soon as possible, the spokesman told AFP.

"We will send them back, but it's not the end. Operations will be ongoing indefinitely.

"When we stop depends on how fast we can flush them out," he said.

He said the crackdown also was aimed at weeding out armed militant groups, especially from the Philippines, which were trying to set up bases in the state's squatter colonies.

"Our main task is concentrating on illegals, but in between if we find criminal or militant elements, we will also act swiftly," he said.

State chief minister Chong Kah Kiat said the move was long overdue, and called on political and community leaders to support the crackdown to resolve the longstanding problem of illegal immigrants.

"We are prepared to become unpopular among certain groups over the issue," Chong was quoted as saying by The Star Daily.

The massive clampdown followed the government's announcement last month that it planned to deport 30,000 illegals from the state "as soon as possible".

The action in Sabah is in line with a generally tougher line throughout Malaysia, which is home to 750,00 legal foreign workers and hundreds and thousands of illegals.

The government announced this month it would tighten coastal security in the narrow Straits of Malacca and along the northern Penang coast line as it aims for zero illegal entry this year.

The illegal migrants are said to have contributed to a growth in crime and other social problems, but the tough new line is also seen as a bid to protect jobs for locals in a time of economic hardship.

Six killed in Vienna train collision

AP, Vienna

A two-train collision south of Vienna left six people dead and 14 injured, police said yesterday.

Three of the dead were Hungarian citizens, two were Yugoslav and one was believed to be a Turkish national, said police, a day after the accident. Officials on Tuesday had said seven people were killed.

The accident occurred on a single stretch of track about 400 metres (yards) outside the train station in the village of Wampersdorf, some 35 kilometres (22 miles) south of Vienna and near the city of Baden.



Shahed Akhtar, Bangladesh envoy to Spain, presented his credentials to Don Juan Carlos I, King of Spain, in Madrid recently.

Musharraf blames Pak extremists for Shi'ite mosque attack

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf blamed opponents of his war on terrorism for an attack on a Shi'ite Muslim mosque in Rawalpindi on Tuesday that killed 10 people and wounded 15.

Musharraf was swift to condemn the attack in the mainly Sunni Muslim country and blamed extremist groups for the second killing of Shi'ites in less than a week.

Doctors at Rawalpindi's Holy Family Hospital, just outside the Pakistan capital of Islamabad, said they were overwhelmed by the number of dead and wounded from the Shah-i-Najf mosque.

"We have 10 dead and at least 15 wounded," a police spokesman said. At least eight of the wounded were in critical condition, according

to one doctor.

Police said three gunmen had opened fire on worshippers during evening prayers. One witness said there were up to 40 worshippers in the mosque at the time.

"It was a sudden firing and many of us immediately lay on the floor," one of the wounded, Anjum Abbas, told Reuters.

Shabbir Zaki, caretaker of the mosque, said two gunmen wearing shirts and baggy trousers entered the mosque hall and started hurling abuse at worshippers as they prayed.

"Suddenly they opened fire," Zaki said. "As soon as the shooting started, the worshippers, who were up to 40, lay on the ground to save themselves.

China for ban on human cloning

XINHUA, United Nations

Chinese delegate Chen Xu on Tuesday said the Chinese government supports the formulation of an early convention banning human cloning.

In a speech at a general debate held by the United Nations Ad-hoc Committee on an International Convention Against the Reproductive Cloning of Human Beings, Chen said that there was an imperative need to work out legal rules, and he expressed his appreciation for the efforts made by France and Germany in that regard.

Chen said the Chinese government firmly opposes human cloning

and also rejects any experiment in human cloning, as it would threaten human dignity.

Meanwhile, he said, a distinction should be made between therapeutic and reproductive cloning. Embryonic stem-cell research for the purpose of treating and preventing disease should be encouraged, but bio-ethics and universal norms should guide that process so that it develops in an orderly fashion and is strictly supervised, Chen added.

Chen also said that the Chinese government and the scientific community are following the progress of cloning technology and staying informed of the ethical concerns.

Annan to attend Arab summit in Beirut

XINHUA, Beirut

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan will attend the upcoming Arab summit in Beirut, the official NNA news agency yesterday quoted the UN chief's personal representative for southern Lebanon Steffan de Mistura as saying.

Mistura met with Lebanese Foreign Minister Mahmoud Hammoud yesterday, saying that Annan has accepted Lebanese President Emile Lahoud's invitation and will lead a UN delegation to attend the summit.

He noted that Annan pays great attention to the conference and keeps close watch over the development in the region.

"Due to its importance and the current critical situation in the Middle East, the secretary general hopes the historic conference could help Arab countries and other states in the region see a peace," Mistura claimed.

Amarinder Singh takes oath as Punjab CM

PTI, Chandigarh

Punjab Congress chief Amarinder Singh, who led the party in ending the five-year rule of Akali Dal-BJP government, was yesterday sworn in as chief minister of the state.

Governor Lt Gen (Retd) J F R Jacob administered the oath of office and secrecy to 60-year-old Amarinder Singh at a simple ceremony at the Raj Bhavan here.

Amarinder, who is the 21st chief minister of the state since independence, took the oath.

Jiang in Vietnam

AFP, Hanoi

Chinese President Jiang Zemin arrived in Vietnam yesterday for a three-day visit focussed on boosting the communist neighbours' mushrooming trade ties without inflaming the historic rivalry between the former foes.

Hundreds of schoolchildren waved red-and-yellow Chinese and Vietnamese flags as Jiang's plane landed at Hanoi airport while girls in colourful costumes feted the visitors.

Jiang, who is on his first foreign trip of the year, was accompanied by his wife, Vice Premier Qian Qichen and a number of senior officials, China's official Xinhua news agency said.

He was welcomed at the airport by the head of the organizing committee of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Tran Dinh Hoan, and Trade Minister Vu Khoan, a rising star who is widely expected to become Vietnam's new foreign affairs supremo later this year.

An official welcoming ceremony was due to be held for the Chinese party chief and president at 3.10 PM (0810 GMT), hosted by Vietnamese communist supremo Nong Duc Manh and President Tran Duc Luong.