

'Musharraf may seek extension of his term for 5 more years'

Referendum in sight to legitimise presidency

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's military ruler Pervez Musharraf is considering holding a referendum on extending his unelected presidency for another five years, a senior politician said Thursday.

"He is seriously thinking of holding a referendum to ensure continuity," Ijaz ul-Haq, senior vice president of a faction of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) opposed to party leader and deposed premier Nawaz Sharif, told AFP.

General Musharraf raised the idea of a referendum in talks with a 33-member delegation of the PML-QA faction at his official residence here on Wednesday, Ijaz said.

During the talks Musharraf also discussed parliamentary elections, which he has pledged to hold in October, and possible presidential elections.

"He asked our views on a referendum, which he believes is an option" in the absence of a parliament, Ijaz said.

Musharraf, the country's military chief, dissolved parliament and

declared himself president in June 2001, 21 months after seizing power and suspending the legislature in a bloodless coup against the elected Sharif government.

Musharraf's push for a referendum to affirm his presidency for five more years "seems serious," Ijaz said.

The president will make a final decision on the referendum after similar talks with other political party leaders in coming days, Ijaz added.

Speculation was rife in local media Thursday that Musharraf would call a referendum for late April or early May, but Ijaz said the president specified no date in his talks with the PML-QA delegation.

A cabinet meeting on Wednesday did not discuss Musharraf's referendum plans, and "no decision has been taken in this regard," Information Minister Nisar Memon told reporters afterwards.

Ijaz declined to comment on the PML-QA's stance on a referendum, leaving the decision up to a meeting of the faction's central committee.

"We told him the pros and cons of holding a referendum," adding that being "a one-sided affair," the turnout would be very low.

4 killed in New Delhi market fire

AFP, New Delhi

At least four people were burnt to death on Thursday when a fire broke out in a busy market in the Indian capital, officials said.

The fire broke out at about 8:20 am (0310 GMT) in Sarojini Nagar market, gutting several shops. At least 16 fire engines were sent in to battle the blaze, which was brought under control after two hours.

Four charred bodies have so far been taken out from the rubble. Search teams were looking for more casualties and injured.

The cause of the fire was not immediately known.



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) greets his Nepali counterpart Sher Bahadur Deuba (L) as his wife Arzu (C) looks on during an official welcoming ceremony at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi on Thursday. Deuba is on a four-day visit expected to focus on an increasingly violent Maoist rebellion in the Himalayan kingdom.

Israel, PA closer to truce deal

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli and Palestinian security chiefs geared Thursday for a new round of US-brokered ceasefire talks with signs they were nearing an agreement to halt 18 months of violence.

Officials said the negotiations were due to resume later Thursday or Friday after a highly anticipated meeting chaired by US envoy Anthony Zinni late Wednesday failed to produce a ceasefire declaration.

But with hopes growing for a truce in the bloodshed that has claimed more than 1,560 lives, Israeli tanks ruptured a tense calm on the ground with a raid early Thursday into a West Bank village.

A senior Palestinian official

hinted the parties were close to a ceasefire deal, a condition set by US Vice President Dick Cheney for a meeting with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in Egypt, where preparations were already underway.

"We did not reach an agreement in the meeting (Wednesday) but there were serious talks on all security issues," said the high-ranking Palestinian security official, who asked not to be named.

He said channels of communication were open and the talks were "supposed to resume on Friday." Israel said the discussions could restart late Thursday.

The talks aim to set a timetable for an end to hostilities and open the way to discussions on a lasting ceasefire, as outlined in a plan

drawn up last June by CIA director George Tenet.

Cheney said during a meeting in Jerusalem Tuesday with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon he would meet Arafat for the first time if the Palestinian made a "100 percent effort" to rein in militant groups.

The meeting of the security chiefs took place despite a suicide bombing by the radical Palestinian group Islamic Jihad on a bus in northern Israel which killed seven Israelis, including four soldiers.

International pressure has mounted on both sides to seize the opportunity of Cheney's visit and an Arab summit in Beirut next week to halt the violence which peaked this month in a bloody cascade of Palestinian suicide attacks and blistering Israeli ripostes.

Lankan ruling party sweeps local polls

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's ruling party Thursday won an unprecedented landslide at local elections, calling it an endorsement of a truce with Tamil Tiger rebels and the Norwegian-sponsored peace process.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) routed President Chandrika Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA) which was reduced to a dismal second place with just four councils in Wednesday's polls.

The ruling UNP said the result was a huge show of support for its attempts to end two decades of

separatist bloodshed in the country, although it had not turned the vote into a referendum on the peace process during the campaign.

"The people have spoken with one voice," Constitutional Affairs Minister G. L. Peiris said. "The resounding result of this magnitude shows that the election was more than about culverts and bridges in local areas."

Peiris said the main opposition had tried to make the local election a vote over the peace process initiated by Wickremesinghe and the result was a huge defeat for the "anti-peace" campaigners.

Kashmir pointman to try to resume talks with Pakistan

AFP, New Delhi

India's chief negotiator on Kashmir has been asked to try and reopen dialogue with Pakistan as part of a new initiative to resolve the dispute over the Himalayan region, a newspaper reported on Thursday.

The Times of India said the government's pointman on Kashmir, K.C. Pant, has been asked to informally examine ways to resume talks when he visits Islamabad for a three-day South Asian ministerial meeting on poverty beginning April 7.

Pant's visit would come shortly after a trip to Kashmir by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who will be accompanied by Home Minister L.K. Advani and Defence Minister George Fernandes.

The Times, quoting official sources, said Vajpayee may unveil a "major socio-economic package" for the

war-torn state when he visits later this month.

The reported initiative comes three months after New Delhi-Islamabad relations plunged to a new low, following a deadly attack on India's parliament which was blamed on two Pakistan-based militant groups active in Kashmir.

India has refused to hold talks with Pakistan until Islamabad stopped promoting "cross-border terrorism" in Kashmir, and imposed a number of diplomatic and economic sanctions on Pakistan.

The two sides have massed troops on their border, as New Delhi insists it will wait for proof that a crackdown on extremists announced by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf is implemented on the ground.

New Delhi accuses Islamabad of fomenting the Islamic insurgency in Indian-ruled Kashmir, where more than 35,000 people have died since 1989.

Crackdown on militants intensified in Pakistan

AFP, Lahore

Pakistan's government is intensifying its crackdown on religious extremists and making arrangements to speed up disposal of cases in special anti-terrorism courts, the Punjab province home secretary said on Thursday.

The decision was taken at a cabinet meeting on Tuesday chaired by President Pervez Musharraf and attended by provincial governors and high government officials, Syed Ejaz Shah, who attended the meeting, told AFP.

Musharraf "has issued directions to concerned officials to intensify the ongoing crackdown against actual militant elements who were playing

with the lives of innocent people," the secretary of populous Punjab province said.

The high-level meeting was convened by Musharraf to discuss the law and order situation following a grenade attack during Sunday service at a Protestant church in Islamabad's diplomatic enclave that left five people dead, including two Americans, and scores injured.

Musharraf said the crackdown would be carried out regardless of threats or political pressure.

"He made it clear that any kind of social, financial, political pressure or any threat from criminal people would not be a reason for not arresting such elements," Shah said.

'Baywatch' babe now in the grip of Hepatitis C

AFP, Los Angeles

Former "Baywatch" television star Pamela Anderson claimed Wednesday she had caught hepatitis C by sharing a tattoo needle with ex-husband, bad-boy rocker Tommy Lee.

"I contracted hepatitis C while sharing a tattoo needle with my ex-husband Tommy Lee," Anderson said in a statement released by her publicist in Los Angeles.

"Tommy has the disease and never disclosed it to me during our marriage," said Anderson, who is locked in a bitter custody dispute with the former Motley Crue drummer over the couple's two children.

Koizumi makes a move to ease Korean animosity

AFP, Seoul

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi arrived in South Korea on Thursday in a new bid to ease decades of hostility between the two countries ahead of their joint hosting of this year's football World Cup.

Koizumi said he was determined to make his three-day stay and meeting with President Kim Dae-Jung "future-oriented." And in stark contrast to a stormy half-day visit last October, there were no major anti-Japanese protests.

Koizumi and Kim will hold a summit Friday to discuss the World Cup, moves toward a joint free trade agreement and a research council to look into disputes about how the two countries see their stormy past, officials said.

Japan occupied the Korean peninsula from 1910 to 1945 and elder Koreans have never forgiven or forgotten the brutal treatment meted out.

Koizumi made an apology for Japan's colonial rule during his October visit. This time his first appointment was to lay a wreath at a martyrs' monument at the national cemetery in Seoul.



Police stand before the charred, destroyed vehicle believed used in a powerful car bomb blast near the United States Embassy late Wednesday in Lima. The blast killed at least nine people and injured several others three days before the planned March 23 visit of US President George W. Bush to Peru.

Bomb blasts kill 9 near US embassy in Lima

AFP, Lima

Two powerful car bombs exploded late Wednesday near the US embassy in Lima killing nine people, three days ahead of a visit here by US President George W. Bush.

Vice President Raul Diez Canseco, who was at the scene of the blasts early Thursday, upgraded the death toll from six to nine and said more than 30 people had been injured.

Peruvian President Alejandro Toledo cut short a visit to Monterrey, Mexico, where he was to attend a UN-sponsored conference against poverty, and was flying back to Peru Thursday, the vice president said.

Interior Minister Fernando Rospiogliosi said one of the fatalities was a police officer who was inspecting one of the suspicious vehicles. Police said a private security guard at the US embassy was also killed. His nationality was not given.

"We don't know who carried out the attack ... we found no pamphlets or literature claiming or showing the source of the attack," the minister said.

Police said the bombs exploded at 11:30 pm (0430 GMT Thursday) outside a Banco de Credito de Lima branch office at the El Polo shopping center in the eastern Lima neighborhood of La Molina.



Canadian singer Celine Dion attends a premiere in Paris on Wednesday for her latest album, "A New Day Has Come". The recording is the diva's first after a two-year maternity sabbatical.

Australia keeps Zimbabwe sanction option open

AFP, Canberra

Australia warned Zimbabwe Thursday it was keeping open the option of sanctions after the Mugabe government pressed ahead with treason charges against opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

Zimbabwe has been suspended from the Commonwealth for a year after the organisation ruled elections earlier this month which returned President Robert Mugabe to power were neither free nor fair.

"We keep alive the option of imposing sanctions if we think it is appropriate," Foreign Minister Alexander Downer told parliament.

"But I remind the House that Morgan Tsvangirai, the leader of the opposition in Zimbabwe, the man

who has been so terribly wronged by the false election that took place in that country, said last night when asked about sanctions: 'I think they should wait.'"

Downer also lashed out at the treason charges laid against the Movement for Democratic Change leader, who appeared in court Wednesday to face allegations he plotted to kill Mugabe.

The allegations were based on a video screened on the Australian TV station SBS before the poll.

"Our government deplores the laying of formal charges for treason against Tsvangirai," Downer said.

"The harassment of the opposition in Zimbabwe must stop and ... the Australian government is deeply skeptical of the basis of this charge."

US engineer jailed for 5-yr in China

AFP, Beijing

A Beijing court on Thursday sentenced Chinese-American engineer Fong Fuming to five years in prison for illegally obtaining state secrets and bribery, the US embassy said.

The verdict comes more than two years after Fong, who is reportedly in poor health, was first arrested and five months after his trial, delays previously condemned by the United States as unacceptable.

The Beijing No. 1 People's Intermediate People's Court issued its verdict in the case Thursday morning, an embassy spokesman told AFP.

"The court convicted Fong of illegally obtaining state secrets and of bribery on behalf of a company and sentenced him to five years' imprisonment, followed by deportation," the spokesman said.

"Fong was acquitted of individual bribery and of obtaining a large number of state secrets on behalf of a foreign entity," he said.

The period of imprisonment will include time already served by Fong, who was arrested at the end of February 2000, said the spokesman, who asked not to be named.

Annan asks UNSC to examine 19 questions posed by Iraq

AP, United Nations

Secretary-General Kofi Annan has asked the UN Security Council to examine 19 questions posed by Iraq ranging from the legality of US efforts to overthrow Saddam Hussein to the neutrality of US and British weapons inspectors, according to documents obtained Wednesday.

The questions were given to Annan by Iraqi Foreign Minister Najib Sabri during talks earlier this month focusing on the return of weapons inspectors. The secretary-general put them in categories and sent them to the Security Council on Tuesday with a letter asking for "any response" the council might want to provide by April 10.

A second round of UN-Iraq talks is expected to be held around April 18, UN spokesman Farhan Haq said Wednesday.

Annan said the initial meeting with Sabri had been "a good start." But it produced no sign Iraq would allow weapons inspectors to return the first step toward lifting 11-year-old UN sanctions and a key demand of the United States and other council members.

Inspectors left Baghdad before the United States and Britain carried out airstrikes in December 1998 to punish Iraq for not cooperating with the inspection programme. Saddam Hussein's government has barred them from returning.

US President George W. Bush has warned Saddam that he faces unspecified consequences if he fails to heed American demands to allow inspectors into Iraq to verify whether it has dismantled its weapons of mass destruction.

Sabri's questions did not rule out allowing the return of weapons inspectors but indicated that Iraq wants

inspections to be conducted for a limited time period and lead to certification that the country is free of weapons of mass destruction the key condition for sanctions to be lifted. Western officials, however, reject any conditions set by Iraq and demand unfettered access to suspected weapons sites.

The questions include the time needed to complete weapons inspections and certify that Iraq's banned weapons programs have been eliminated, the nature of the inspections, and the composition of inspection teams.

Chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix has told the Security Council that if Iraq gave a green light for inspectors to return, and actively cooperated with them, he could recommend suspending sanctions in one year, diplomats and UN officials said.

Iraq has accused some US and British inspectors in the former UN inspection agency of spying for the West. Sabri asked whether the United Nations can guarantee that the new inspectors "are not spies and will not conduct spying tasks," and how US and British inspectors could be neutral.

Blix has said he will fire anyone found to be working for a government. He also said Iraq should not have a veto over the composition of inspection teams.

The Iraqi questions also focused on requests for compensation for losses sustained by Iraq since sanctions were imposed after its 1990 invasion of Kuwait, whether Iraq can acquire conventional weapons for self-defence, and a host of political questions aimed at the United States.