

Kabul tense as ex-Afghan king heads home

AFP, Kabul

The Afghan capital was buzzing with tense anticipation Wednesday as locals prepared for the symbolic return of their former king after 29 years in exile in Italy.

Mohammed Zahir Shah's homecoming Thursday will be a major sign of Afghanistan's rehabilitation after more than 20 years of war that tore the country's social fabric apart.

But with security still a major concern more than five months after the collapse of the Taliban regime, there were no signs of any public celebrations to greet the respected 87-year-old former king.

Instead Afghan security forces were on high alert following the discovery of an alleged plot to assassinate top officials in the interim administration this month.

"For sure we have increased security measures in the city. We have increased the number of police and security people by 40 percent," defence ministry official Mir Jan told AFP.

"We are satisfied with security. We have done what we could, but we cannot rule out an incident."

Italy has announced it will send around nine policemen with Zahir Shah to ensure his safety in Afghanistan for three months until local police are trained to take over.

Zahir Shah has not set foot in Afghanistan since he was ousted in a 1973 coup led by his cousin Mohammed Daoud, but many of his former subjects remember his reign affectionately as a time of relative peace and hope he will be able to unify a country now divided between rival warlords.

He is due to inaugurate a Loya Jirga, a traditional Afghan grand assembly, which will select a transitional government in June to run the country for the next two years.

Although Zahir Shah has said he is not returning with an intention to reclaim the throne, his family members have said he would agree to lead the war-torn nation if the Loya Jirga chose him to do so.

His return will be seen as a major boost to the credibility of the UN-backed cabinet of royalist interim leader Hamid Karzai, who is yet to win the full support of ethnic and tribal leaders in the countryside.

Powell trip puts ME in tatters, no deal or truce in sight

Situation is far worse than before: Erakat

AFP, Jerusalem

US Secretary of State Colin Powell was to wrap up his futile Middle East peace mission on Wednesday with no sign of a ceasefire and facing Palestinian charges the situation has only grown worse.

Powell began a final round of talks with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in his besieged and battered West Bank compound in Ramallah, but hopes were dim of a major step forward in ending almost 19 months of killing.

"As Secretary Powell himself said, he thought that would be a difficult thing to achieve on this trip," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said.

US officials have been working with both sides to hammer out statements that could be presented as a kind of accord, but Powell acknowledged Tuesday the final result would probably not even include the word "ceasefire."

The result was expected to be a watered-down agreement that could allow Powell to claim some progress in his week-long visit to the region, but that would have little real effect on the ground.

"Honestly, the situation is worse today that it was seven days ago," top Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told reporters in Ramallah before Powell's meeting with Arafat.

Powell has pushed Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to pull back his troops from the West Bank and end a vast military offensive launched March 29, in what Israel said was a bid to crush the "infrastructure of terrorism."

He has also pressed Arafat to rein in militants and end the suicide bombings and other attacks which have killed scores of Israeli civilians.

But the Palestinians have insisted the Israelis must withdraw before there

can be any real ceasefire, while Sharon's troops remain in place across much of the West Bank and are keeping Arafat under siege.

Erakat said Sharon had ignored US President George W. Bush's calls for an immediate pullout and end to the army assault, which has left a trail of devastation across the West Bank, where Arafat's Palestinian Authority government has dreamed of creating an independent state.

"I don't know if we have a Palestinian Authority any more," Erakat said. "Everything of our civil infrastructure and security infrastructure has been destroyed."

Mahmud Abbas, Arafat's deputy in the Palestine Liberation Organisation, told AFP: "We expected a response on an Israeli pullout, but Sharon closed all the doors. Which means that the visit of Mr. Powell did not yield any result."

Meanwhile, the situation in the Palestinian territories is worse now than when US Secretary of State Colin Powell started his peace mission a week ago, chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat said Wednesday.

"Honestly, the situation is worse today that it was seven days ago," said Erakat, talking before Powell arrived for a second and final round of talks with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in his Ramallah base, besieged by the Israeli army.

He said Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had ignored US President George W. Bush's calls for an immediate withdrawal, and said he was not sure the Palestinian Authority even existed as an administrative body after the occupation of city after city in the West Bank.



A picture released by the Palestinian Press Office shows US Secretary of State Colin Powell (L) talking with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat at Arafat's besieged headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah on Wednesday. Powell met with Arafat for a second round of talks on the Middle East crisis.



PHOTO: AFP

Bollywood actress Nandita Das (R) smiles while holding a placard with former Miss India Nafisa Ali (L) during a rally organised by the Lok Morcha, an umbrella group of political parties seeking the dismissal of Gujarat state Chief Minister Narendra Modi, in New Delhi on Wednesday. Both houses of the Indian parliament were adjourned amid uproar for the third consecutive day, with opposition MPs demanding the removal of the chief minister of Gujarat state, where sectarian riots have claimed more than 850 lives.

Indian houses adjourned again

AFP, New Delhi

Both houses of the Indian parliament were adjourned amid uproar for the third consecutive day Wednesday, with opposition MPs demanding the removal of the chief minister of Gujarat state, where sectarian riots have claimed more than 850 lives.

The lower house was adjourned within minutes of assembling in the forenoon as slogan-shouting MPs made normal business impossible.

Business was suspended in the upper house for the same reason by speaker and India's vice president Krishan Kant after a brief ceremony to swear in newly-elected members.

Parliament has been paralysed since it returned from a three-week recess on Monday to debate and pass the national budget.

Taiwan test fires home-made missiles

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan's military institute launched Wednesday a three-day drill to test fire its new missiles at a southern base, it was reported Wednesday.

The drill at Chiupeng missile base was testing new missiles developed by the Chungshan Institute of Science and Technology which was under defence ministry supervision, the United Daily News.

It was not immediately clear what kind of missiles were being tested, the paper said.

Taiwan has deployed various surface-to-air, air-to-air and ship-to-ship missiles developed by the institute, which is now developing other advanced weaponry, including the cruise missile "Hsiungfeng II E."

Gunmen in army uniform kill 5 in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Unidentified gunmen, some of them wearing army uniform, broke into two houses overnight in northern Kashmir and shot dead five people, police and army officials said Wednesday.

An army spokesman said the gunmen were Muslim militants disguised as soldiers, but local newspapers blamed the attack on members of the army's counter-insurgency wing working in tandem with a pro-India militant group, Ikhwan.

Pak opposition parties to fight Musharraf's referendum

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani opposition parties said Wednesday they are planning a mass protest against plans by military ruler Pervez Musharraf to hold a referendum to extend his presidency.

Opposition parties, provoked by the president's refusal to say whether he would step down if he loses the referendum, said they would accept a challenge from Musharraf and stage a rally in the Punjab provincial capital Lahore three days ahead of the April 30 vote.

"The rally is aimed at exposing the farcical and unconstitutional referendum," said Pakistan People's Party (PPP) spokesman Farhatullah Babar.

"We accept the challenge and we are very confident that people will turn up in very large numbers."

Musharraf, who banned outdoor political gatherings after coming to power in a coup in October 1999, said Tuesday he would allow opposition rallies only at Lahore's Minar-e-Pakistan park.

But he indicated that the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy -- a coalition of all the main opposition parties -- would never be able to fill the massive park.

"We will allow them to hold public meetings in Minar-i-Pakistan and see how many people they gather," the general said in response to criticism that he was addressing public rallies across the country while muzzling the opposition.

"Since they cannot bring enough people they always shy away," Musharraf on Tuesday claimed his political opposition was trying to destabilise the country ahead of elections in October, and refused to say whether he would step down if

he lost the referendum.

Speaking during a nationally televised press conference, he accused exiled former prime ministers -- Nawaz Sharif, who was ousted in the coup, and Benazir Bhutto -- of plotting to destabilise the country.

"I know exactly what is going on abroad. I know what all the people sitting abroad are doing, and I know with whom they are doing it," he said.

He hinted that both leaders could be arrested on unspecified charges if they returned to Pakistan before federal elections scheduled in October.

Pakistan Muslim League leader Sharif was freed from prison, where he was serving life for hijacking and tax evasion, and sent into exile in Saudi Arabia in December 2000. He has never been pardoned for his crimes.

Gusmao declared victor

AFP, Dili

Former guerrilla chief Xanana Gusmao was Wednesday declared the winner by a landslide of East Timor's historic first presidential election, with almost 83 percent of the vote.

Gusmao, who becomes head of state next month of the world's newest nation, promised to be a president for all the people of the tiny impoverished territory, which still bears the scars of brutal militia violence and destruction.

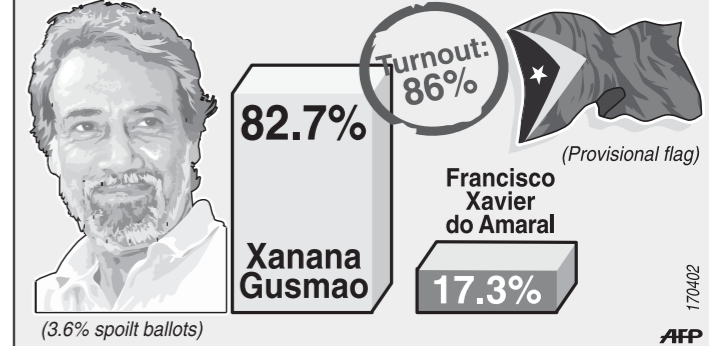
"By the decision of the majority of the people, I am the elected president and I become a president for the whole nation, not only of those who voted for me," he

said after election officials announced his victory over sole challenger Francisco Xavier do Amaral.

"It is with enormous gratitude and humility that I receive the trust that the people have put in me," said the hero of the independence struggle against Indonesia. He said he knew that "the expectations are high, the anxieties and needs are enormous." The charismatic 55-year-old will be sworn in by United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan just before the territory achieves independence at midnight on May 19/20.

He promised his presidency "will also be a voice for the concerns of the people" and a way to make the government respond to those concerns.

Gusmao landslide in East Timor



Venezuelans try to heal rift over coup

AP, Caracas

Venezuelans have begun to accept President Hugo Chavez's appeal to reflect on a flip-flop coup over the weekend that nearly ripped the nation apart. But so far, there seems to be as much bitterness as forgiveness.

"Polarisation has to give way to reconciliation and understanding," Cesar Gaviria, secretary general of the Organization of American States, said after meeting Chavez on Tuesday.

Chavez was toppled Friday -- only to retake power on Sunday -- amid mass protests in which scores died. Gaviria was leading a fact-finding mission meant to help other governments in the top diplomatic body in the Western Hemisphere understand what happened. OAS officials are to meet Thursday to

discuss the crisis.

While Caracas has seemingly returned to normal, the passions expressed during mass marches over the weekend by Chavez's supporters and foes remained fierce.

The opposition Democratic Action party announced Tuesday it did not recognize Chavez as president. The people arose on April 11 to remove that gentleman with a 19th century mentality who misgoverns the fatherland," party president Rafael Marin said.

Even as dozens of civilians and soldiers face possible charges stemming from the coup, Christian Democratic party leader Sergio Omar Calderon appeared to justify it on Tuesday, arguing that Chavez himself had imposed "permanent unconstitutionality" on the country.

5 hundred huts gutted in Mumbai

AFP, Mumbai

Around 500 dwellings were gutted and two people injured in a major fire that broke out Wednesday morning in a slum area of suburban Mumbai.

The fire in the Muslim-dominated area of Bandra was brought under control within three hours by 120 fire fighters with the help of 12 fire engines and seven large-sized water tankers, fire officer AS Jhandwal told AFP.

"The blaze was really big and engulfed almost five hundred huts. Initially we feared several may be dead," Jhandwal said.

"Fortunately, there are no casualties, except two injured persons who have been rushed to the nearby hospital."

He said the cause of the fire had not been confirmed, although initial investigations pointed to an electrical short-circuit.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents watch fire fighters on the site of the remains of their houses in a slum area of suburban Mumbai on Wednesday after around 500 huts were gutted and two people injured in a major fire. The fire that broke out early in the morning destroyed over 200 houses to ashes as the residents had absolutely no chance to save their belongings.

Churchill's backup WWII bunker reveals its secret

AFP, London

Buried under a sleepy, suburban street in north London lies one of Britain's best-kept World War II secrets: a bunker built as an emergency refuge for prime minister Winston Churchill.

Codenamed "Paddock", the bomb-proof complex was a backup headquarters for the premier and his cabinet if German bombers forced them to abandon Whitehall, the seat of government in the centre of the capital.

Unknown or forgotten by all but a handful of historians for over half a century, the bunker was opened this week for the first time to a curious public.

Located in the suburb of Neasden, a 40-minute drive from central London, Paddock was so secret that even King George VI, the British king during the 1939-45 war, was not told its exact location.

It is buried 40 feet (12 metres) below ground and covered with steel-reinforced concrete three-and-a-half feet thick, designed to protect government ministers and 200 staff against a direct bomb hit.

A tiny entrance next to a row of unassuming homes leads down into a labyrinthine complex of 59 rooms on three levels.

Cold droplets drip off the ceilings, splashing into dark puddles on the floor. A blanket of white fungus creeps across the walls, from which dangle ancient electrical cables.

In one dank chamber stands a huge generator, next to it a cast-iron 1930s-style control panel with an array of dials and switches.