



Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf hoists the national flag during the 55th Independence Day celebrations in Islamabad on Wednesday. Musharraf made a solemn pledge on Pak Independence Day, promising a free and transparent parliamentary polls in October, the first since his 1999 coup.

Musharraf flays militants as enemies of Pakistan

Pak president promises free, fair polls

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's military ruler Pervez Musharraf on Wednesday vilified Islamic extremists for their "shameful and despicable" attacks on Christians and Westerners, in a speech to mark the Islamic republic's 55th anniversary.

"The recent attacks on our Christian brothers and sisters are the most shameful and despicable examples of terrorism," he said at an early morning flag-hoisting ceremony.

"All this was in the name of Islam. These misled criminals and terrorists and their tutors even have the audacity to think their actions are the route to paradise."

As Muslim-majority Pakistan celebrated its 1947 founding, the specter of the rash of killings that have plagued the country since Musharraf signed up to the US-led war on terrorism hung over celebrations.

A Pakistani nurse who died at the weekend became the fourth victim of Friday's grenade attack on a chapel at the Taxila Christian Hospital west of Islamabad, and the 59th person to die in eight strikes on Christian and foreign targets in less than one year.

Islamic militants furious at Pakistan's frontline role in the US-led campaigns to wipe out Taliban and al-Qaida fugitives are blamed for the cycle of killings.

Wednesday's condemnations were Musharraf's most scathing so far, and he called on all Pakistanis to help "root out those who are maligning our religion and tarnishing the image of Pakistan."

"We were never so cowardly to hide and then try to kill children and

women, he said.

"Is this the true spirit of Islam? Is this the religion that we all are so proud of? Where is the tolerance and the magnanimity and chivalry and the large-heartedness that characterised the true Muslims?"

He said the Islamic extremist attackers were playing into the hands of the enemies of Pakistan.

"Other than the innocent victims that have been killed who is the loser? Nobody but Pakistan, our country and the poor of Pakistan whose sustenance depends on jobs through investment which shied away."

Meanwhile, President Pervez Musharraf Wednesday pledged on Pakistan's 55th independence day that parliamentary polls in October, the first since his 1999 military coup, would be free and fair.

"On this solemn occasion, let me give the whole nation a personal guarantee, I will take all possible measures to ensure a free, fair and a transparent election," Musharraf said at an early-morning flag hoisting ceremony here.

"In October, we will, Inshallah (God willing), usher in an era of true democracy

"This fine transition is critical to the future of democracy in Pakistan."

A raft of restrictions imposed by Musharraf on candidates for election and a host of proposed constitutional changes have led critics to brand the polls "a charade."

Opposition leaders have frequently accused the military regime of pre-poll rigging by banning political rallies and allegedly moving officials to posts where they can intimidate voters into favouring the government.

Indian Independence Day Troops, militants brace for showdown

AFP, Srinagar

Security forces and separatist Muslim militants are gearing up for their annual showdown in festive Indian Kashmir, as India and Pakistan celebrate their independence days.

Around a dozen militant groups in Kashmir celebrate Pakistan's Independence Day on August 14 every year by hoisting Pakistani flags and holding small parades at places where they will not be trapped by security forces.

In contrast, India's Independence Day, which falls on August 15, is observed as a "black day" by the separatists and boycotted by militants who warn people against taking part in official celebrations.

The militants traditionally step up their operations in the run up to August 15 and have even attacked official venues with rockets on the day itself.

Kashmir's main separatist alliance the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) has appealed to the Muslim population of Kashmir to remain indoors on August 15 and observe a general strike.

Watertight security is being ensured by hundreds of troops through cordon and search operations across Kashmir.

Troops are maintaining a round-the-clock vigil around Bakshi Stadium, the main venue of Indian Independence Day celebrations in the Kashmiri summer capital Srinagar.

Many of the localities around the football stadium, which has been attacked in the past, have been searched in the past few days.

This year extra security measures are being taken as Muslim rebels have vowed to thwart upcoming state polls, which are to be held in four phases beginning on September 16.

"We want to keep militants at bay and that is why the search and frisking operations have been increased," a Muslim police officer said.

The increased operations led to the recovery of a huge dump of chemicals and explosives on Monday, which police claimed was to be used by militants to disrupt both Independence Day and the polls.

Floods wreak havoc in Europe

AFP, Prague

Residents of flood-ravaged Prague were anxiously waiting for the swollen river Vltava to reach its peak on Wednesday, as the toll from ferocious European weather conditions from Russia to Germany rose to at least 88 dead.

Rescue workers fought a daunting battle Tuesday to stop floodwaters from further submerging the medieval central district of the Czech capital, where tens of thousands fled their homes in some of the worst flooding for a century.

Around 200,000 people have been evacuated across the Czech Republic since waters first began to rise last week in what has become the country's worst flooding in more than a century, Czech Interior Minister Stanislav Gross said.

In Germany, Dresden in the east was the hardest hit from the muddy waters, while bridges were swept away in Austria with half the country underwater and the river Danube cascading over its banks in Vienna.

In Germany the death toll rose to

11 as the floods caused by torrential rains continued to ravage the country's eastern and southern regions, authorities there said early Wednesday.

Five people were found dead in Saxony Tuesday, one of them in Dresden, bringing to eight the number killed since Saturday in the eastern state that has been the worst hit by the extreme weather, the regional interior ministry said.

At least 17,000 people were evacuated in the eastern German state of Saxony where the body of a 70-year-old man was recovered as mounting rivers left dozens stranded in their homes.

Helicopters and boats evacuated people from hospitals and schools in areas sealed off by the rising waters.

A state of emergency was declared in seven districts of Bavaria.

The ferocious weather comes at the height of the European tourist season, with resorts and hoteliers since July already taking a severe hit from record rainfalls and freak

storms across much of the European continent.

Medieval buildings and bridges in Prague were damaged and more than 1,000 years of art and history became potential flood victims.

Two men, aged 52 and 76, drowned, bringing to nine the number of those killed in the Czech Republic.

City authorities provided emergency accommodation to 50,000 residents who were ordered to evacuate their homes. Many had earlier refused to leave, despite dire warnings that electricity, gas and drinking water supplies would be cut off.

Motorised rafts and rowboats turned into frequent methods of transportation in the medieval section of the city centre, Mala Strana, which was at risk as the river Vltava rose ever higher.

The river was expected to crest on Wednesday, though authorities earlier had said it was expected to reach its highest level -- more than seven meters (25 feet) above normal -- by 1800 GMT Tuesday.



A helicopter of the German Federal Army rescues flood victims on Tuesday in the eastern German town of Grimma while a crane is being used to transfer a rhino from the flooded pavilion in Prague's zoo after the Czech capital was hit by the worst flooding since 1954.



PHOTO: AFP

Israel puts top Fatah leader to trial

AFP, Tel Aviv

Israel launched the most high-profile trial of the Palestinian Intifada Wednesday, formally charging Marwan Barghout, the West Bank leader of Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, with murder and terrorism.

Barghout, 43, appeared handcuffed and flanked by police in a Tel Aviv court, making a brief, impassioned statement to reporters before heading in to hear charges that he headed the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, an armed Fatah offshoot behind scores of deadly attacks.

"Everybody in the world knows that Marwan Barghout is fighting for peace. I am a peace man," he said in English.

Israel, which captured him in a Ramallah invasion in April, has linked him to the deaths of dozens of Israelis and the wounding of hundreds more. If found guilty, he faces life behind bars.

"I was trying to do everything for peace between the two people," Barghout insisted. "I do believe that the best solution for the two people is two states ... there's no other

solution."

Barghout's lawyer, Khadr Shkueirat told the court his client, who is a Palestinian lawmaker as well as being Fatah's secretary general in the West Bank, refused to recognise the tribunal's legitimacy in trying him.

He also demanded that he be presented with the evidence against his client.

Judge Zvi Gorfinkel ordered the court into recess until September 5 after the prosecution formally read the charges against Barghout, including various counts of murder and belonging to a terrorist organisation.

The judge ordered Barghout be held until the end of the trial.

Shkueirat also presented a list of what he called indictments against Israel, but Gorfinkel waved them down, saying it was not the time for such charges.

The gesture highlighted the risks of the trial for Israel, with some commentators saying Barghout could use it as a public platform to attack Israel's occupation and its heavy-handed military tactics.

Koreas to reopen border links, hold military talks

AFP, Seoul

North and South Korea agreed Wednesday to speed up measures to reconnect border links cut for more than 50 years and other reconciliation measures at the end of three days of high level talks.

The two sides also agreed that crucial military talks would be held but did not set a date.

Tension reducing measures have been made a priority by the South's government and neighbours such as Japan, which also announced Wednesday they will hold official talks with North Korea this month.

On top of moves to relink railways and a road across the Cold War border, the two Koreas also agreed to hold reunions of families divided since the 1950-53 Korean War and economic talks in September and a new round of ministerial level talks in October in Pyongyang, according to the communiques.

Taekwondo teams from the two sides will also make exchange visits and a North Korean economic delegation will visit the South in October, it added.

US sees activity at Iraqi arms site Baghdad renews call for arms inspection

REUTERS, Washington

US intelligence agencies spotted activity last week at an Iraqi plant identified as a biological weapons production facility, The Washington Times reported in Wednesday edition.

"A convey of about 60 trucks was photographed by a U.S. spy satellite at a known biological weapons facility last week," the paper quoted U.S. intelligence officials as saying, adding that the site was located about six miles northwest of Baghdad.

"They're moving stuff in or out," an official familiar with the report told the paper. The official also noted that intelligence information about Iraq's weapons program was limited.

A CIA spokesman did not immediately return a call seeking comment.

The Washington Times report on the truck convoy near Taji followed a Washington Post report earlier this month that U.S. intelligence was

looking for a suspected Iraqi biological weapons laboratory north of Baghdad.

The Post quoted U.S. government officials as saying the plant, with 85 employees, may be producing a weapon-sized version of the lethal Ebola virus.

President Bush has called Iraq "an enemy until proven otherwise" accusing Baghdad of developing weapons of mass destruction. Official U.S. policy has been to seek a "regime change" in Iraq, but senior officials, including Bush have sought to play down expectations of an imminent attack on the oil-exporting country.

Iraq's ambassador to the United Nations said on Tuesday that Iraq "is clear" of any weapons of mass destruction.

"There's nothing hidden in Iraq. There are no mass destruction weapons at all," Ambassador Mohammed Aloudi said in an interview on PBS's "News Hour with Jim Lehrer."

AFP adds: Iraq on Wednesday

renewed its call for the US Congress to accept its invitation to send a fact-finding team to Baghdad to check if Iraqi authorities are developing weapons of mass destruction.

"What does the US Congress have to lose if it accepts the invitation from the Iraqi parliament and forms a delegation accompanied by a team of experts to visit the sites where their administration claims that Iraq is hiding or producing weapons of mass destruction?" asked the ruling Baath party daily Ath-Thawra.

"Would it not be appropriate for Congress to take advantage of this opportunity offered by the Iraqi parliament to check these accusations on the ground, for the sake of US national security and to avoid America launching itself into an adventure that even its allies dub illegal and immoral."

Ath-Thawra stressed that those members of Congress who accept a visit to Iraq "will not be brainwashed."

72 Pak parties get nod to run in October polls

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan on Tuesday approved 72 political parties' bids to contest October polls, including the new wing of ex-premier Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and deposed premier Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League.

The Election Commission issued a list of the 72 parties whose "constitutions, documents and information... are in substantial compliance with the provisions" of new electoral laws.

Under the new laws all parties were required to submit copies of their constitutions, financial records and the results of intra-party polls to the Commission in order to qualify to run in the October 10 elections.

The Commission rejected another 57 parties, saying their documents were "not in conformity with the provisions."

The Pakistan People's Party Parliamentarians was formed at the last minute on August 5 to overcome legal hurdles to the PPP's bid to run for election with Bhutto as their

leader.

The twice-elected, twice-dismissed premier is banned under new laws which disqualify candidates with criminal convictions. She has been convicted of absconding twice this year, for failing to return from self-imposed exile in London and Dubai for two separate graft trials.

The PPP's new wing has been approved to run for election. The PPP itself is not competing.

In its own last-minute move, the Pakistan Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif replaced him as leader with his younger brother Shahbaz Sharif.

There had been speculation that the party might be denied registration on the grounds that their new leader, the younger Sharif, has money laundering and loan defaulting charges pending against him.

An estimated 70 million Pakistani voters will elect a national parliament and four provincial parliaments on October 10, for the first time since a military takeover almost three years ago.



A boy holds a cobra as he sits in a metal box filled with snakes during the Naag Panchami festival in Bhopal on Tuesday. During this annual festival, Hindu devotees offer milk, bananas and coconuts to snakes in hope it will protect them from snakebites during the year.

S Asian floods claim 900 lives

AP, Kathmandu

Landslides swept through a mountainous village in Nepal killing two people as monsoon floods swelled the death toll to nearly 900 in India, Nepal and Bangladesh, officials said on Wednesday.

The landslide at Phulpinkot, 80 km north east of Nepal's capital, Katmandu, killed a 60-year-old man and a 55-year-old woman, the Interior Ministry said.

"Rescue workers have been sent to help the survivors and we continue to send relief material to these areas to help people who have lost their homes," said Lekhnath Pokhrel of the government's Natural Calamity Management Centre.

In the district of Makwanpur, 160 km southwest of Katmandu, where landslides killed at least 50 people last month, diarrhoea and typhoid have spread at alarming rates, The Kathmandu Post newspaper reported Wednesday.

Lack of clean drinking water and carcasses of dead cattle contaminating rivers and

streams could have caused the diseases, the newspaper quoted the Kakada village council chairman Govind Praja as saying.

Health officials were distributing water purification tablets Wednesday to slow the spread of the diseases. Heavy rains have caused severe floods in Nepal, Bangladesh and eastern India, leaving at least 876 people dead in the past two months.

The highest number of casualties have been reported in Nepal, where as many as 424 people have been killed and 250,000 more injured in the flooding, officials said.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has asked international donors for \$1.7 million in immediate aid for the victims in Nepal, as emergency relief supplies have been exhausted.

In neighbouring Bangladesh, rivers that had receded last week began rising again Wednesday following fresh downpours in the country's northern region, said the Flood Forecasting and Warning Centre in Dhaka.

Bangladesh is "bracing for another round of floods next

week as the rain-fed rivers are rising again," the centre said in its regular bulletin on Wednesday. Water levels of the rivers Ganges, Brahmaputra and Jamuna will rise further, it warned.

Monsoon floods have killed at least 157 people and displaced more than 6 million others in Bangladesh, a delta nation of 130 million people. In Bihar, Army was helping to evacuate thousands of villagers whose mud and thatch huts had been washed away by swirling flood waters, officials said Wednesday.

Rising rivers had submerged railroad tracks near Samastipur, near Patna, halting rail traffic for a large swathe of northeastern Bihar, said Shambu Saran Singh, a relief and rehabilitation ministry official. He said the death toll in the State had climbed to 265 people in flooding that began across the region in June. Thirty people have died in neighbouring Assam. Floods have displaced or trapped more than 15 million people in the two states, home to some 100 million people.