

Benazir hints at deal with anti-US parties

AFP, London

Pakistan's former prime minister Benazir Bhutto was considering forming a coalition with an anti-US party after their unexpected success in last week's elections, a British daily said Tuesday.

Benazir told The Guardian that she would be prepared to do a deal with the Islamic right, and not as expected with the main pro-military party, if the MMA moderated its policy of closing down all US bases in Pakistan.

"We can do business with anybody who reflects the spirit of the constitution," Bhutto said, according to the paper.

The Muttahidda Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), or United Action Front, is an alliance of six Islamic parties opposed to the US campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaida which shocked Pakistan in Thursday's elections by winning an unprecedented 49 of the national

parliament's 272 general seats.

Her party could form a coalition with the MMA if it was prepared to put its opposition to US troops in Pakistan on the "backburner," Bhutto was quoted as saying.

Thursday's general elections in Pakistan, the first since President Pervez Musharraf seized power in a coup three years ago, threw up a hung national assembly and faced widespread accusation of vote-rigging.

Benazir's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) emerged with 63 seats, making it the second biggest party after the pro-government Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q), which won 77.

Benazir could theoretically form a government with the MMA which hold the balance of power in the new assembly, although observers believe the PML-Q will probably try to form a government with independents and the Islamic right.

Efforts on to resolve Kashmir impasse

AFP, Srinagar

A top politician Tuesday attempted to break the impasse between two parties staking a claim for the leadership in Indian Kashmir, but chances of a breakthrough looked grim.

Saifudin Soz of India's main opposition Congress party made a last ditch effort to end the deadlock between the Congress and the regional Peoples Democratic Party (PDP), both trying to form a coalition government in the state assembly despite haggles over who will take the job of chief minister.

The Congress secured 20 seats, while the PDP won 16 seats in the 87-member assembly following a four-phase election that swept the long-ruling National Conference

(NC) from power, according to results announced Thursday.

Despite efforts by Soz, a former NC leader who recently joined Congress, analysts said it seemed less likely a coalition could be formed and perhaps the NC, which gained 28 seats and remains the single largest party, could try to form a government instead.

According to the constitution, the new government must be in place by October 17.

The Congress leader in Indian-administered Kashmir, Ghulam Nabi Azad, and his PDP counterpart, Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, both want the top job.

Congress national leader Sonia Gandhi failed to negotiate a solution after holding talks with both men in New Delhi on Sunday.

Homecoming after 24 years in tears

AFP, Tokyo

Five Japanese nationals kidnapped by North Korea in the 1970s arrived in Tokyo Tuesday for an emotionally-charged visit to the land of their birth, their first in 24 years.

A chartered Boeing 767-300ER carrying the five landed at Haneda airport at 2:20 pm (0520 GMT) some two hours after it left Pyongyang.

Minutes later the five, looking old beyond their years, stepped into the brilliant autumn sunshine smiling at relatives waiting on the tarmac waving Japanese flags and carrying banners that read "Welcome back."

The first to emerge were Yasushi Chimura and Fokie Hamamoto, both aged 47, who were engaged to marry when they disappeared.

They were followed by Kaoru Hasuike, 45, and Yukiko Okudo, who were dating when they were seized in 1978 and married in 1980.

Last off the plane was Hitomi Soga, 43, married to US national who reportedly defected to North Korea while serving in the US military in South Korea.

She was not officially recognised as a kidnap victim until Pyongyang confirmed last month she was alive in the secretive state. Soga and her mother disappeared in August 1978. The fate of her mother is unknown.

Hamamoto and Okudo were smartly dressed in beige skirts and matching jackets, while Soga wore a floral print blouse under a dark blazer. Both men wore dark suits with white shirts and ties.

All five sported North Korean flag lapel pins.

At the foot of the aircraft steps the returnees broke down in tears as they hugged parents and siblings they had not seen for decades.

After about five minutes the five, clutching huge bouquets of red roses, were escorted to a terminal building to continue their family reunion away from the eyes of the massed Japanese media.

A limousine bus with a police escort later left the airport to take the families to a Tokyo hotel, where they were to stay until Thursday when they are expected to visit their respective hometowns.

"I am extremely happy to see him. I want to hug him and tell him 'We have been waiting for you,'" Chimura's uncle Seizuo Kawahara said in a television interview from his home in northern Japan.

The homecoming came after North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il acknowledged the abduction of Japanese nationals for the first time at a landmark summit with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi last month.

The admission prompted Koizumi to agree to resume talks on normalising diplomatic ties later this month.

The five -- along with at least eight others Pyongyang says have since died -- were abducted to train and give their identities to spies who were to infiltrate South Korea posing as Japanese.



An unidentified Indonesian woman puts a candle to mourn the victims of Bali carnage at the front gate of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta on Monday. Australian Prime Minister John Howard called Monday for a national day of mourning to be observed for Australians killed and wounded in the bombing in Bali which killed over 183 people.

Australia lowers flags, tightens security in all major cities

REUTERS, Sydney

Flags flew at half-mast, security was tightened in major cities and demands for justice rang out as Australia began to digest its own September 11 after the deadly bomb blasts in Bali.

Flags at federal government buildings were lowered to mourn the dozens of Australians who died when car bombs ripped through popular beach bars packed with young revellers on the Indonesian resort island over the weekend, killing more than 180 people.

Commentator Piers Akerman, writing in The Daily Telegraph, said October 12 was Australia's September 11.

"Counting the toll," read the headline on The Australian newspaper's front page over photographs of some of the dead and missing caught up in the attack on what Australians had always considered a safe and friendly playground for children.

In New South Wales, Australia's most populous state, and in Victoria in the south, police increased security around power stations, gas and water plants, schools and places of worship.

A Reuters television cameraman filming Australia's sole nuclear reactor, the Lucas Heights research facility in Sydney, was detained briefly by police and his car searched for bombs.

"Two days ago it would have been fine, but now it's impossible (to film)," a security officer told him.

At Red Cross blood banks, donors queued up to help the scores of badly burned or gashed survivors evacuated to Australia.

But the main reaction three days after the bombings Indonesian officials say could have been carried out by Osama bin Laden's al Qaida network was a demand for justice following Australia's bloodiest day since World War Two.

"It is the first time since the Japanese attacks on Darwin and Sydney 60 years ago that large numbers of Australian citizens have been made the deliberate target of what amounts to an act of war," South Australia state premier Mike Rann said.

"I believe we should, as with any other murder, investigate and vigorously pursue those responsible and bring them to trial."

Sydney tabloid The Daily Telegraph, its front page dedicated

to photos of those whose "only crime was to go on holiday", urged Australian anger to be "harnessed in the hunt" for the killers.

The government has sent Australian Federal Police officers to help Indonesia comb through the ashes of the Sari Club in Bali's Kuta beach and to help identify the charred corpses rotting in the tropical heat at the overwhelmed Bali morgue.

Australian and US officials say they suspect Indonesia's Jemaah Islamiyah, a group tied to al Qaida, the suspected perpetrators of the September 11 attacks on the United States.

Yet Australian newspapers and commentators unanimously voiced doubts about Jakarta's ability or willingness to take out an Islamic group it says it does not have enough evidence against.

"It is time for (Indonesian) President Megawati Sukarnoputri to turn words into actions and crack down on terrorist groups whatever their ideology or religious persuasion," The Australian said in an editorial.

The Sydney Morning Herald demanded the authorities "call the butchers of Bali to account".

Saddam set on firm course to defy US

AFP, Baghdad

If the United States is to shoot down Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi president is showing determination to go out in a blaze of defiant glory.

The organs of state organised a massive show of strength in support of the embattled leader on Tuesday when he won another seven years in office as the sole candidate in a presidential referendum.

Washington has other plans and is stepping up war preparations to try to oust the strongman who has ruled since 1979, probably before the end of the year.

But Saddam has warned he will fight all the way and his record certainly indicates that he will.

"If fighting is imposed on us we will fight," said the 65-year-old who guided Iraq through the 1980-1988

war with Iran and the 1991 Gulf War.

As Washington has increased the pressure, Iraq has adopted a conciliatory stance, agreeing to let UN weapons inspectors back for the first time in four years, promising to give them free rein and working hard for a diplomatic solution to the crisis.

But none of it has so far swayed the hawks in the United States government who are now considering installing a military government in Baghdad after an invasion.

Saddam's fighting talk followed a vow by Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz that Iraq would hit back against any strike within the hour, jangling the nerves of neighbours such as Kuwait.

The ruling Baath Party, of which Saddam is secretary general, transformed the referendum into a declaration of undying love for the

president and a message to US President George W. Bush.

Saddam is not a quitter, diplomats note, he's a survivor.

Western analysts have mulled the possibility that the president could step down in favour of one of his sons, Uday, the elder, or Qusayy.

But there are few takers for such ideas in Baghdad where the father's grip on power appears at least on the surface as strong as ever.

Saddam has emerged from repeated ordeals by fire, the last time from four nights of hi-tech missile terror and destruction unleashed by the superpower and Britain in December 1998.

US missile strikes in 1996 and twice in 1993 saw Saddam emerge each time to declare another victory.

UNSC still deadlocked on Iraq

REUTERS, United Nations

As British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw visited Washington on Tuesday, key UN Security Council members were deadlocked for the third week on a resolution authorising force against Iraq.

Despite attempts at a compromise by the United States and France, which is leading the opposition to a U.S.-drafted measure, "We're still stuck," a key council diplomat said.

France, which according to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan probably has a majority of the 15 council members on its side, wants the resolution to allow UN inspectors to test Iraq's willingness to cooperate with stiff demands. If Baghdad does not comply, a second resolution would authorise force.

The United States wants authorisation to use force in the first round. Alternatively, Washington

might approve two resolutions if the first one gave it legal cover to use military force. "Then they can do what they like with the second," one U.S. official said.

Britain, which helped the United States draw up its resolution, would back two council votes on the use of force, providing requirements for Iraqi disarmament were tougher than those France has proposed, diplomats said.

Straw was to confer in Washington with Secretary of State Colin Powell on the resolution after near daily telephone calls among foreign ministers of the five council members with veto power -- the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China. Both Russia and China have backed France.

Washington has not formally introduced its draft yet, preferring to get approval from the five permanent members before tackling the other rotating 10 nations on the

council.

A Security Council resolution needs a minimum of nine votes in favour and no veto for adoption.

Annan said last week that most UN members prefer two resolutions. But one key diplomat believed nations may not be given such a simple choice, saying, "If the US backs out of the whole thing, then people might think again."

All UN members will have an opportunity to speak on Wednesday, the first public debate on Iraq.

No deadline has been set for a vote in the Security Council but the strong show of support for the administration in the U.S. Congress last week appeared to have done little to speed up the negotiations.

The United States hopes to introduce its resolution by late this week or early next week, but there was no sign of a breakthrough.

Woman killed in new shooting in Washington

AFP, Washington

A woman was shot and killed late Monday in a suburb of the US capital in an attack similar to those of a serial sniper who has killed eight people so far in the Washington area, police officials said.

The woman was shot at 9:19 pm (0119 GMT Tuesday) in the parking lot of a Home Depot hardware store, at a shopping centre about 15 kilometres (nine miles) west of Washington in an area called Seven Corners, Virginia, Fairfax County police chief Tom Manger told reporters.

The victim was reportedly loading purchases into her car, with her husband standing by.

Sudanese govt, rebels sign temporary truce

REUTERS, Machakos

Sudanese rebels said on Tuesday they had signed a temporary cease-fire with the government to cover the duration of their latest round of peace talks, the first such truce in 19 years of civil war.

"This is the first time where we have signed a cessation of hostilities," Samson Kwaje, spokesman for the Sudan People's Liberation Army, told reporters. "Both parties have signed so as to allow the talks to continue."

The talks, taking place in the Kenyan town of Machakos, are due to last about five weeks. Kwaje said the cease-fire will take effect from

midday in Sudan on Thursday.

A copy of the cease-fire deal obtained by Reuters said the temporary truce covered all areas in Sudan.

The rebels and government had been due to sign the deal on Monday, but the signing was delayed amid last minute haggling over the terms of the deal.

Sudanese government officials and mediators were not immediately available for comment.

Negotiations between the government and SPLA collapsed last month after the rebels seized the strategic garrison town of Torit. Fighting in southern Sudan has escalated since then.

Israel detains Mufti of Jerusalem

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli police detained the Mufti of Jerusalem, the Palestinians' highest religious authority, on Tuesday to question him about statements he made in defence of suicide bombers.

"At the instruction of the state attorney-general, police have detained Ikrima Sabri, the Mufti of Jerusalem, and he is being questioned now," Israeli police said in a statement.

Musharraf tells EU to mind own business

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf has lashed out at European Union observers' flaying of his controversial changes to Pakistan's constitution, the country's official news agency reported Tuesday.

"Mr. Cushman should have confined his remarks to the holding of the national elections," Musharraf was quoted as saying by the state Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) at the end of a three-day trip to Istanbul.

"He had no business to interfere

in the international affairs of Pakistan."

The EU observers team chief, John Cushman, released a scathing report on Saturday of last week's general elections, calling them "deeply flawed" and attacking constitutional changes announced by Musharraf in August.

The report said the changes "could lead to the concentration of power in the hands of a single individual who can dismiss elected governments" and "institutionalise the role of the military" in government.



Muslim women hold burning placards with portraits of US President George W. Bush during protests near the US embassy in Manila on Tuesday. The protesters are demonstrating against the possible US attack on Iraq.

Security tight across India amid fear of rebel attacks

AFP, New Delhi

Security personnel across India were on high alert Tuesday on the occasion of a prominent Hindu festival, amidst fears of attacks by various militant groups, police said.

In the capital, New Delhi, a police spokesman said heavily-armed commandos had been deployed at prominent temples to provide security during Dussehra, one of the three most popular festivals of the Hindu calendar.

Devotees were made to walk through metal detectors and were frisked by police before entering the shrines.

Dussehra symbolises the victory of good over evil.

In northern India, celebrations include recitations and music that recall the life of the Hindu warrior god, Ram.

Amateur troupes also dramatise the epic battle between Ram and the demon king, Ravan.

According to the epic "Ramayana," Ravan kidnapped Ram's wife, Sita, while the couple

were in exile.

Ram marshalled an army and fought Ravan, to be re-united with his wife.

On Dussehra, cracker-stuffed effigies of the demon Ravan, and his brother and son are set on fire by actors playing Ram, to the cheers of thousands of spectators.

Delhi police chief, R.S. Gupta told reporters Monday that though there was no report of any specific attack, precautions had been taken "keeping in view the prevailing situation in the country and assessing the general threat perception."

Security was tightened near the historic Red Fort, where Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Indian opposition leader Sonia Gandhi were to attend Dussehra festivities later Tuesday.

Quick reaction teams of security personnel had been deployed and arrangements made to control crowds, Gupta said.

Security around temples in India were already beefed up a fortnight ago following an attack by two suspected Islamic militants on a temple

in the western state of Gujarat on September 24, in which 28 Hindu devotees and three security personnel were killed.

The two attackers were later killed by police commandos.

Police had set strict security guidelines for "garbas" -- traditional dances organised by cultural groups in Gujarat during the nine-day Navratri Festival coinciding with the Dussehra festival in northern India.

Permission had been granted to only five groups to organise the dances this year compared with hundreds of groups last year, a senior police official said, adding that all of them had been asked to end festivities by 10.00 pm.

In eastern India, police were keeping vigil following reports that the Islamic militant group, Lashkar-e-Taiba, had threatened to target Hindu festivities in the region.

On Sunday militants launched two separate attacks on Hindus celebrating Durga Puja, which honours the Hindu goddess Durga in the northeastern state of Assam, killing five and injuring at least 21.



The coffin of late Prince Claus, husband of Dutch Queen Beatrix, is carried out of the Palace Noordeinde in The Hague on Tuesday. Prince Claus was laid to rest on Tuesday in the royal family vault in Delft.