

Pak President summons parliament session

Islamists push Musharraf to quit army by March

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has called Pakistan's first parliament since his 1999 coup to convene on Saturday, as Islamists pressed for concessions before declaring whether they will join the future government.

Musharraf's new date for the parliament's inauguration was announced late Wednesday, a week after he postponed the opening from November 8 to give parties more time to forge a coalition out of the hung parliament.

The setting of a new date has brought partial relief to the political limbo engulfing Pakistan since polls on October 10, but a governing coalition has yet to be declared.

Meanwhile, Pakistan's Islamists are pushing President Pervez Musharraf to quit the army in the near future and modify his proposed National Security Council before

agreeing to enter a coalition government, a spokesman said Thursday.

"We are heading in the direction of an agreement," Shahid Shamsi, spokesman for the Islamic party alliance Mutthida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), a day after General Musharraf called the delayed parliament to convene on Saturday.

Shamsi said the Islamic parties were hoping Musharraf would agree to resign as army chief in March and limit the jurisdiction of the military-dominated National Security Council to security issues.

Musharraf, who grabbed power in a bloodless military coup in 1999 and declared himself president last year, has been army chief since 1998 and in August unilaterally extended his posts both as army chief and president by five years.

"We are trying that he should give up his (army) uniform on March 23," Shamsi told AFP.

The establishment of a National

Security Council, to be tasked with overseeing the future government, is one of the most contentious of Musharraf's 29 constitutional amendments announced on August 21.

Critics say it will give the military a permanent place in politics, as the four top military chiefs -- the army, navy and airforce chiefs as well as the head of the joint chiefs of staff committee -- will sit on the council alongside six civilian politicians. Musharraf would chair it.

"We are negotiating that the purpose of the National Security Council should be national security only and I think there will be a resolution," Shamsi said.

The Islamists have been in intensive talks with the chief pro-Musharraf party, the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q), for a moderation of the contentious amendments as a condition for entering a coalition with them.

Bus bombed in Nepal: 2 killed

AFP, Kathmandu

At least two people were killed and 18 injured when a bus was bombed by suspected Maoist rebels in north-eastern Nepal Thursday, police said.

Seven of the injured are in a serious condition, a police spokesman said.

The bus was heading towards Kathmandu from the town of Chairkot when it struck a boobytrap at Halaley, about 80 km northeast of here, the spokesman said.

"Of the injured passengers, 14 were flown to Kathmandu for treatment," he said, adding that further details of the incident were being awaited.

The rebels have been fighting for a communist republic in Nepal since 1996, with the insurgency so far claiming more than 7,000 lives.

Indian military jet crashes: 2 pilots killed

AFP, Kolkata

An Indian military MiG-21 jet crashed on Thursday in the West Bengal, killing the two pilots who were on board, a senior police official said.

The official, Narayan Chandra Bose, said the Russian-made MiG-21 crashed while on a "routine training mission" in Phasidoo, about 600 km north of Kolkata.

In New Delhi, Indian Air Force spokesman Squadron Leader R.K. Dhingra confirmed the accident adding that "it took place about 7:35 am (0200 GMT) Thursday morning."

The aircraft was a trainer version of the MiG-21. We lost two pilots in the crash," he said.

The Indian Air Force, which is the world's fourth largest, has been plagued by crashes in the recent past.

Last week a Jaguar fighter jet crashed into a residential area of the northern Indian town of Ambala, killing about 12 people.

According to official figures, at least 211 MiG-21s, worth tens of millions of dollars, were lost in crashes between 1991 and 2000, killing around 100 pilots.

Following the crash of the British-made Jaguar aircraft, a high-level meeting chaired by Defence Minister George Fernandes decided to phase out the ageing fleet of Russian-made MiG-21 fighter jets.

Jiang steps down to make way for fresh blood

AFP, Beijing

China made sweeping changes to its leadership Thursday as President Jiang Zemin and almost all the country's other communist bosses began handing over power to a younger generation.

With six of the nation's top seven leaders standing down from their posts in the ruling Communist Party, the stage is now set for 59-year-old Vice President Hu Jintao to take control of the world's most populous nation.

Jiang, 76, immediately hailed the changeover at the party's just-ended 16th Congress in Beijing.

"The Central Committee for the new term has been elected at the Congress, thus ensuring the smooth succession of the new collective at the central leadership of the party to the previous one," he said at a lavish Soviet-style closing session.

The long-rumoured clear-out at the summit of China's secretive and authoritarian political system also sees Premier Zhu Rongji and parliamentary head Li Peng, both 74, step down from their party posts.

Although heavily stage-managed, it is the first leadership change since the Communist Party took power in 1949 not to involve a death or an internal party coup.

However many questions remain, chiefly over Jiang's widely assumed ambition to wield power from behind the scenes.

In a potential sign of things to come, a string of Jiang's allies were elected into the party's new Central Committee, the 350-strong elite body to which all China's top leaders must belong.

Jiang and the other 70-something leaders were not on the ballot for the Central Committee as the more than 2,000 delegates rubber stamped the changes inside the opulent grandeur of the Great Hall of the People.

Jiang remains president until next March, when he is expected to hand over the post to Hu at a parliamentary meeting.



Chinese President Jiang Zemin (R) together with Premier Zhu Rongji (C) and Vice President Hu Jintao (L) clap hands at the end of the closing session of the 16th Communist Party Congress at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing Thursday. China marked the first major step in a generational change of leaders when a new elite Communist Party committee was provisionally elected without President Jiang and other elderly bosses. Jiang, 76, was among six of China's current seven top leaders who failed to return in an initial vote for the party's new Central Committee, to which all leaders must belong.

Zhu, China's economic guiding hand in recent years and Li, notorious for ordering troops to fire on the 1989 Tiananmen Square students protests, will shed their state posts at the same time.

The remaining Standing Committee members bowing out are Li Ruihuan, 68 -- considered a rare liberal voice -- Wei Jianxing, 71, and Li Langqing, 70, Xinhua said.

The main business remaining is the appointment of the new party Politburo Standing Committee, China's new top ruling body, due to happen Friday morning.

Experts predict that a series of Jiang allies could be manoeuvred onto the committee, which currently has seven members, potentially leaving Hu outflanked by his predecessor in terms of real clout for some years to come.

"Directly or indirectly, Jiang will

probably continue to wield a lot of power," said Joseph Fewsmith, a China watcher at Boston University.

Among key Jiang allies elected to the Central Committee and in the frame for top jobs are Zeng Qinghong, the president's political right hand man and Jia Qinglin, head of the Communist Party in Beijing.

The president also gained influence by having the party constitution incorporate his pet "Three Represents" theory, paving the way for capitalist entrepreneurs to become party members.

This is shorthand for the idea that the Communist Party should not only stand for the working class but also "advanced production forces", meaning entrepreneurs.

Although many businesspeople are already members, the move has huge symbolic meaning.

"The fact that we can enter the party is really extraordinary. Earlier I was not qualified to do so," said Huang Fajing, head of a cigarette lighter manufacturer in the south-eastern city of Wenzhou.

However the amendment did not appear to mention Jiang by name, which some observers said he had wanted to elevate himself alongside predecessors Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping.

The party's top rulers will be officially elected Friday morning by the new Central Committee, although experts say all changes have been worked out in advance.

In a particularly archaic twist, the new line-up is likely to be unveiled for the first time when the Politburo Standing Committee is paraded on stage in order of seniority at the Great Hall of the People on Friday.

3 die during firefighters' strike in UK

AFP, London

Three elderly people died in the first hours of a two-day strike by British firefighters, as thousands of soldiers with antiquated fire tenders faced a rash of false alarms.

In London, serious delays were reported during the Thursday morning rush-hour on the Underground subway network as many train drivers failed to arrive for work, apparently out of concern for safety.

The Waterloo and City line was closed altogether, as were 22 particularly deep subway stations.

Some 52,000 firefighters downed hoses at 6 pm (1800 GMT) on Wednesday for 48 hours to press their demands for a whopping 40 percent pay hike, in their first national walkout in 25 years.

Stand-in military crews faced a rash of hoaxes on their first night out. In London, as many as one in four emergency calls overnight turned out to be bogus, Sky News television reported.

Imam of Paris mosque detained

AFP, Paris

The imam of a mosque in the western Paris suburb of teaux has been detained in an investigation into an alleged terrorist plot, judicial officials said Thursday.

Two other men were also taken into custody Wednesday morning in the enquiry led by France's top anti-terrorist judge Jean-Louis Bruguiere.

Le Parisien newspaper Thursday named the imam as Thami Rajji, a 52-year-old Moroccan. He had been under surveillance since a police tip-off in June alleging he was involved in preparing attacks on French targets, the paper said.

Investigators conducted a search of his mosque as well as of his home, Le Parisien reported.

Indian EC asks Modi to ban Gujarat yatra

THE STATESMAN/ANN

The BJP appears to be on another collision course with the CEC, accusing JM Lyngdoh of behaving like a Congress leader after the Election Commission today directed Gujarat to ban the proposed VHP yatra in the state.

The VHP had earlier described Mr Lyngdoh as "anti-Hindu," besides declaring that it would defy the ban, court arrest and seek legal remedies. The VHP senior vice-president, Mr Giriraj Kishore, said it was infringement of "fundamental rights."

The EC's decision was "wrong" and the CEC "has overstretched his powers," Jaideep Patel, joint general secretary of the VHP said, adding "the lift parties held during Ramzan are purely political, and yet they take place".

The EC directed the Gujarat

government to take all necessary measures to "prevent" any yatra or procession that may affect the 12 December Assembly elections in the state. The commission also instructed the government to take preventive and punitive action against individuals, parties and organisations indulging in communally incendiary and provocative speeches, posters and pamphlets.

The brief order came after a full meeting of the commission, presided over by Mr Lyngdoh, in which the Gujarat government's report today on the VHP proposed yatra was considered. The commission said it had noted with "utmost concern" the Gujarat chief secretary's report saying there was every likelihood of communal tensions and passions being exacerbated by the VHP proposed yatra across Gujarat from November 15.



Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam chats with young girls at the memorial for India's first prime minister Jawahar Lal Nehru in New Delhi on Thursday. The celebrations were to commemorate Nehru's 112th birth anniversary. The day is celebrated as Children's Day in memory of Nehru who had a special affection towards children.

Ex-Indian army officer forms suicide squad

AFP, Mumbai

A former Indian army officer said Thursday he had set up a suicide squad of more than 40 youths who have volunteered to die in a fight against arch-rival Pakistan.

Colonel Jayant Chitale, who retired from the army in 1988, told AFP the militants are on a "cleansing mission."

"A section of the squad will fight the internal enemy of the nation such as corrupt politicians, bureaucrats and criminals, while the other will take on Pakistan, our country's external enemy," Chitale said, referring to his "Hindustan Atma Ghatki Pathak" or Indian suicide squad.

A total of 45 youths were given elementary commando training by the military foundation of southern Maharashtra state in a course which ended on Wednesday, he said.

The training took place at Badlapur, 65 kilometres (40 miles)

from Bombay, the country's financial hub.

"Our plan is to keep ready around 500 young boys and girls to launch an attack on Pakistan the way they (Pakistan) have been doing for the last two decades on us," said Chitale, a veteran of the 1971 war between India and Pakistan.

"But when we hit back it will be two to three times more aggressive. However, all our operations will be (made known) to the government and will be done after its permission (is granted). There will not be anything clandestine."

Maharashtra chief minister Vilasrao Deshmukh meanwhile said he had asked police to look into the functioning of Chitale's group.

India accuses Pakistan of sponsoring Islamic militants who have been engaged in guerrilla activities in disputed Kashmir for the past 13 years in a rebellion against Indian rule that has left some 37,500 people dead.

Correspondent got Laden's tape in Islamabad

AFP, Islamabad

A correspondent for the Arab TV network Al-Jazeera told AFP Thursday that an unidentified man in the Pakistani capital Islamabad gave him an audiotape claiming to be Osama bin Laden hailing recent attacks in the Middle East and Bali.

Ahmed Muhaffaq Zaidan, who has interviewed bin Laden twice in 2000 and 2001 and has just written a book on him, said he was "100 percent sure" the voice belonged to the al-Qaida chief.

"I received a call (Tuesday) night from somebody who said he wanted to meet me and had something for me," Zaidan told AFP.

"I went to the place where he said he would be waiting for me and I met him there," he said, refusing to identify the meeting place other than as a "congested area" in Islamabad.

Myanmar junta leader meets UN envoy

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's leader Senior General Than Shwe met Thursday with UN envoy Razali Ismail in talks critical to his efforts to revitalise a stalled political reconciliation process, officials said.

The hastily scheduled meeting, which forced Razali to postpone a planned visit to northeastern Shan state, lasted half an hour, official sources told AFP.

Razali is on a five-day mission to the military-run nation aimed at reviving a two-year-old dialogue between the junta and the opposition, after warning he could quit if the regime continued to resist democratic reforms.

The Malaysian diplomat said in a recent interview that he wanted to ask Than Shwe why the junta had reneged on a promise to begin

political talks with the opposition led by Aung San Suu Kyi who was released from house arrest in May.

He told the Malaysiakini Internet news service that he wanted to convey international concern over "why since the lifting on the restrictions on Suu Kyi in May, a dialogue did not take place."

"A promise was made to me that there would be a dialogue," he said.

Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) said that the meeting between Razali and Than Shwe was crucial to the envoy's efforts to reignite the reform process in Myanmar.

"Mr. Razali asked us what our proposals are for when he meets this man Mr. Than Shwe. We told him we should start the dialogue right now," NLD spokesman U Lwin told AFP earlier Thursday.

US citizens warned of terror threat at India's Camel Fair

AFP, Washington

The United States Wednesday joined Britain in warning its citizens not to visit the annual Pushkar Camel fair in the northwestern Indian state of Rajasthan because of possible terrorist activity.

"Information has been received which suggests that there is a risk of terrorist activity at the Pushkar Camel Fair/Mela, which starts on November 15," the US embassy in New Delhi said in a statement.

"While we have no indication of a

specific threat to American citizens, we advise that they should avoid this event.

"US citizens are reminded that they should exercise vigilance when in the vicinity of government installations, visiting tourist sites or attending public events around India."

The statement, made available to AFP in Washington by the State Department, was almost identical to one issued earlier by the British Foreign Office.



A file photo shows a camel trader waiting for buyers as the sun sets at the annual camel and cattle fair in Pushkar, in the desert state of Rajasthan. The US joined Britain on Wednesday in warning its citizens not to visit the annual Pushkar camel fair because of possible terrorist activity.

Man behind Philippine bombings captured

AFP, Manila

Authorities in the Philippines have arrested a suspected Muslim rebel who has admitted to masterminding deadly bomb blasts in the south of the country, the military said Thursday.

The arrest helped foil planned attacks on government installations, foreign embassies and shopping malls in the Philippine capital, President Gloria Arroyo said after being presented with the suspect.

The suspect, Adbulmukim Edris, had said that he had been trained by two Yemeni nationals, possibly linked to the al-Qaida terror network, a military statement said.

Edris, the alleged head of the explosive team and urban operations group of the Abu Sayyaf Muslim kidnapping gang, was presented by the military to Arroyo just before she departed Manila on a provincial sortie.

"Their group was planning a series of bomb attacks against government installations, foreign embassies and opping malls in Metro Manila," Arroyo said.

She described him as "the number one bomber of the Abu Sayyaf group," adding that "we must make sure the rest of his kind are put behind bars."

A beaming Arroyo held up captured plans for a truck bomb that Edris had allegedly been working on.