

Straw praises push for moderate Islam

AFP, Peshawar

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw yesterday hailed Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's campaign for moderate Islam, as he urged Muslims and Westerners to break down misperceptions of each other.

"I warmly welcome President Musharraf's call for a 'jihad against extremism' ... and his concept of 'enlightened moderation' because of its recognition of the need... to promote tolerance and combat extremism," Straw said in a lecture in Peshawar, capital of the Islam-ruled North West Frontier Province (NWFP).

Islam stands for "peace, love, brotherhood and harmony," he told the audience of 100 teachers and professors at the state-run University of Peshawar.

Straw was speaking on the third and final day of an official visit to the Islamic republic, where he held talks with Musharraf, a key Western ally in the war against terrorism, on nuclear proliferation, peace moves with India, Afghan reconstruction and Pakistan's four-year suspension from the Commonwealth.

He arrived the day after more than 40 Muslims from Pakistan's

Shia minority were killed after an attack on a religious procession to mark their holiest day.

It was one of the worst attacks in Pakistan's two-decade history of violence between rival Shia and Sunni communities, and coincided with anti-Shia attacks in Iraq that left more than 170 people dead.

"In all these outrages, most of the victims are Muslims," Straw said.

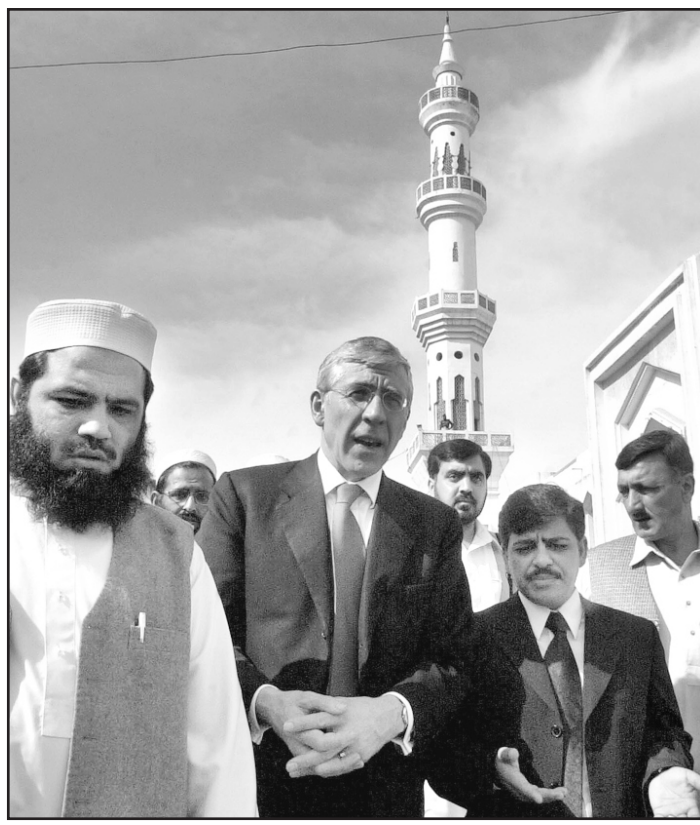
"There could be no clearer proof that this terrorism has nothing to do with the alleged division between Islam and the West. Terrorists attack defenceless victims regardless of faith or nation."

He said both the Islamic and Western worlds needed to lift their understanding of each other.

Muslims needed to see the West as less "subversive and godless," while Westerners needed to alter perceptions of Islam as "intolerant and violent."

"Both these are distorted and mistaken views. The crucial questions are, firstly, what best can we do to correct them? and secondly, how best can we do so?" Straw said.

The West tended to "forget that secularism when taken to extremes can be just as oppressive as a society permeated by religion," Straw said.



An unidentified Pakistani official (2R) guide British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw (C) during his visit at the Jamia Imdadul Aloom Islamic seminary in Peshawar yesterday. Straw, who is on a three day visit to Pakistan, said that London was satisfied with Islamabad's co-operation in investigating nuclear proliferation by its chief nuclear scientist.

Split in Tigers widens

Renegade commander seeks separate truce with Lankan govt

REUTERS, Colombo

A split in Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels -- which could threaten moves to restart peace talks -- has widened with a renegade commander demanding a separate truce with the government, local media reported yesterday.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have waged a separatist war for 20 years until signing a cease-fire two years ago. That cease-fire has held, despite a feud between the country's president and prime minister over the peace process.

A split in the rebel leadership would further complicate peace efforts stalled by the row between President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe that has led to a snap election on April 2.

"Rebel Karuna wants separate deal with government," said the headline in The Island newspa-

per.

But in a letter to LTTE chief Velupillai Prabhakaran in an LTTE-run newspaper published in the eastern town of Batticaloa, Karuna said: "Let us function independently under your direct leadership. We are not leaving you, we are not opposed to you."

Karuna is the military name for V. Muralitharan, a top Tiger leader who has differed with Prabhakaran in the past, but was also one of the negotiators in peace talks that stalled last April.

A split will be embarrassing for the rebels, who pride themselves on a strong code of loyalty and have in the past assassinated their own commanders for straying from the party line.

The rebels from the minority Tamil community have harshly criticized the political feud in the government, saying it shows the Sinhalese who dominate Sri Lanka are not serious about

negotiating peace.

"The differences between Prabhakaran and Karuna arose following LTTE cadres' alleged involvement in the recent killings of non-LTTE politicians in the Batticaloa district," said the Daily Mirror, referring to the killings of a candidate and political activist Monday.

The rebels will hold a news conference at their headquarters in northern Sri Lanka Saturday.

A Tamil source in the northern Jaffna peninsula said Karuna was also upset "because as the movement grows more junior people are giving him orders."

Karuna's letter to Prabhakaran said: "I want to function directly under you, avoiding the divisional heads of Tamil Eelam."

The Tigers initially denied there was a rift but on Thursday political wing leader S.P. Thamilselvan said there was a

dispute, but said it would be resolved "very soon."

Renegotiating the cease-fire agreement may be difficult. It was signed between Prabhakaran and the Norwegian government -- which is brokering the peace effort -- and Wickremesinghe and the Norwegians.

Any changes require "the mutual agreement of both parties."

Military officials said the crisis has not caused extra tension on the frontlines.

"We have not heard anything officially. We have been asked to observe the cease-fire as normal in the east," said military spokesman Sumedha Perera.

Trained in India, Karuna is one of the rebels' toughest fighters and won a battle to control the island's main north-south artery, dubbed the "Highway of Death" after 3,500 soldiers from both sides died fighting over it.

Laden 'evaded Pakistani raid'

BBC ONLINE, Tora Bora

A local official in eastern Afghanistan says he has received credible reports that Osama Bin Laden escaped the recent Pakistani operation to catch him.

Speaking to the BBC, the official said the information came in a fax sent to a former Taleban member three days ago.

It comes amid reports of stepped-up American military operations aimed at capturing al-Qaeda's leader.

Bin Laden is believed to be hiding in the mountainous border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

His former Tora Bora hideout in eastern Afghanistan has come under particular scrutiny.

The official, who did not want to be named, says he met a former member of the Taleban who had received a fax referring to "the Sheikh", the term often used for Bin Laden by his supporters.

The fax reportedly said the Sheikh was alive and well and that he had escaped an attempt by Pakistani forces to catch him on their side of the border last week in the tribal areas of South Waziristan.

It is a surprising claim - especially that the news came by fax, given that American intelligence and military units are likely to be keeping a close eye on all electronic communications.

Palestinian territories sealed off

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel braced itself yesterday for possible revenge strikes by Hamas, sealing off the Palestinian territories after thousands of supporters of the hardline Islamist group held angry funerals for three of their comrades killed in an air strike.

With the approach of the Jewish festival of Purim on Sunday, the Israeli army late on Thursday completely shut down crossings with the West Bank and Gaza Strip until Monday.

"In keeping with a decision at the political level and in light of security considerations, the West Bank and Gaza Strip have been sealed off from tonight for the duration of the Purim festival," the army said a statement.

Earlier Thursday a 14-year-old Palestinian schoolboy was killed and five others shot and wounded by the Israeli army during an incursion into Rafah in the southern Gaza Strip, medical sources said.

Meanwhile, Israel's Supreme Court ordered a 10-day delay in the army's evacuation of wildcat Jewish settlements in the West Bank following an appeal by settlers, court sources said.

In Gaza City, around 3,000 people chanting "Revenge, revenge" and "Our answer will be in Tel Aviv" turned out for the funerals of Ibrahim al-Deiri, 38, and Tarad al-

Jamal, 24 whose car was blown up Wednesday by two rockets near Netzarim settlement south of Gaza City.

Another 2,000 people attended a funeral in the Nusseirat refugee camp in central Gaza for Ammar Hassan, 25, who was also killed in the air strike.

The Israeli army said the three had been behind numerous deadly operations and were planning an "imminent" attack.

With Purim looming, Israel has deployed thousands of extra border guards and police officers in anticipation of a revenge Hamas strike, including in schools, commercial centers and shopping malls, police said in Tel Aviv.

"We know the terrorist organisations' ability to penetrate when it is possible... our forces are doing their best, utmost efforts to secure a safe, quiet holiday," Public Security Minister Tzahi Hanegbi said in Jerusalem.

In Rafah, Mohammed Othman, who was in his school playground when troops moved into the area, was fatally wounded in the stomach, medics said.

The Israeli army said the incursion was aimed at demolishing tunnels used to smuggle weapons under the nearby border with Egypt.

The youngster's death brought the overall toll since the start of the

Palestinian intifada, or uprising, in September 2000 to 3,798, including 2,844 Palestinians and 886 Israelis.

One day earlier, a 22-year-old Israeli and his father were arrested in Israel in connection with a series of anti-Arab attacks across the Jewish state, including one targeting an Arab-Israeli lawmaker, police said.

Elihan Golan and his father Meir, 45, are accused of orchestrating nine bombings over the last three years, including one targeting Arab-Israeli MP Issam Makhul in October, Israeli police spokesman Gil Kleiman told AFP.

Following the high court decision over Jewish settlements, Israel now has 10 days to submit its arguments as to why the outposts should be dismantled, the sources said.

On the domestic Israeli front, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon tried to shake off the fallout from revelations connected to a prisoner swap with Hezbollah.

Commentators said Thursday that Sharon was being dangerously weakened by revelations over his links to the family of a captive freed as part of a controversial deal with the Lebanese Shia militia.

A poll in the Maariv daily showed that 42 percent felt he should quit if he had links to the family but failed to divulge them, although 43 percent said he had no reason to resign.

3 convicted of conspiring to wage war on US

AFP, Washington

Three men belonging to what the US government calls a "Virginia Jihad" were convicted here Thursday of conspiracy to wage war on America and provide material support to the Taliban, charges that carry a possible life prison term, US Attorney General John Ashcroft said.

He said in a statement that the convictions were handed down against Masoud Khan, Hammad Abdur-Raheem and Seifulla Chapman in US District Court in Alexandria, Virginia, adjacent to Washington by Judge Leonie Brinkema.

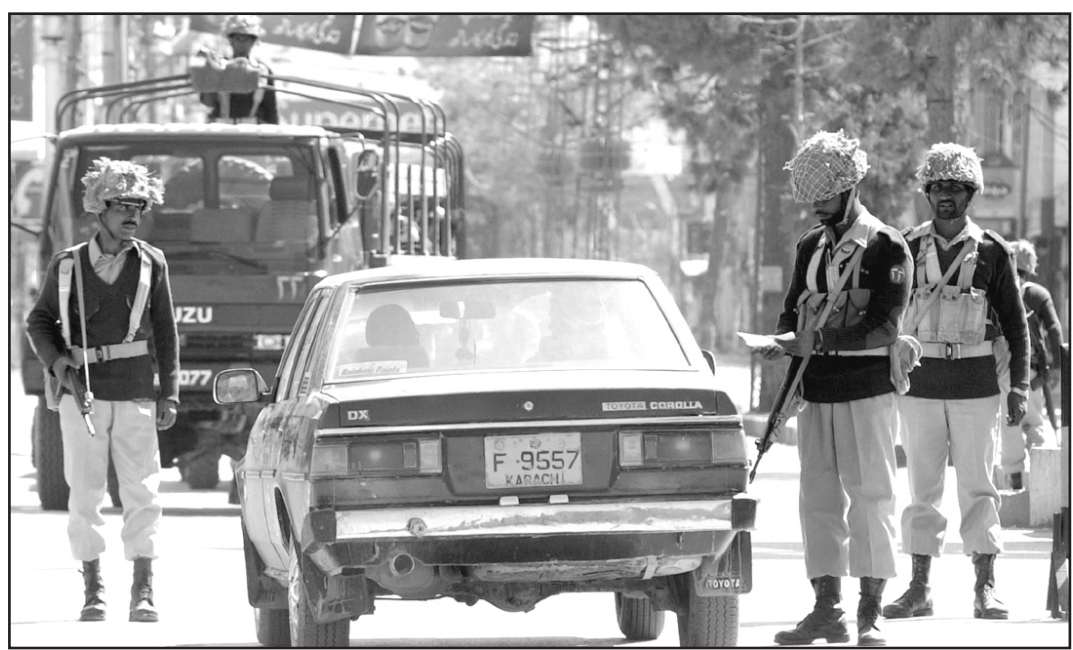
Khan and Abdur-Raheem were to be sentenced on June 4 and Chapman on June 11.

"The defendants convicted today were associates of a violent Islamic extremist group known as Lashkar-e-Taiba, which operates in Pakistan and Kashmir and which has ties to the al-Qaeda terrorist network," said Ashcroft.

A total of 11 defendants have been charged in indictments related to the Virginia case, including the three convicted Thursday.



Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (L) welcomes Afghanistan's former King Mohammed Zahir Shah for a meeting at the Presidential Palace in New Delhi yesterday. Shah was flown to New Delhi on Thursday for medical treatment after complaining of intestinal problems.



Pakistani army soldiers check the documents of a motorist (L) in Quetta yesterday. Troops patrolled the tense southwestern Pakistani city for the fourth day as authorities partially relaxed a 24-hour curfew imposed after an attack that killed 47 people, mostly Shia Muslims.

Sharon faces public backlash over scam

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Battered by multiple scandals, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon suffered a fresh blow yesterday when an opinion poll in Israel's biggest newspaper showed that for the first time a majority of Israelis want him to quit. The former general has vowed to weather the storms kicked up by allegations of corruption and misconduct that he denies. But much will depend on whether prosecutors now weighing criminal charges against Sharon decide to indict him in the coming weeks.

The poll in the Yedioth Ahronoth daily found that 53 percent of those surveyed believe Sharon should resign, while 43 percent want him to stay on. It was a stunning reversal for the 76-year-old leader, elected by landslides in 2001 and 2003.

A Sharon confidant blamed his troubles on "extreme right-wing"

opponents of his unilateral plan to evacuate Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip and several in the West Bank should a US-backed peace "roadmap" fail.

Sharon's political enemies, he said, were out to taint and topple their former ally, who has warned the Palestinians that his go-it-alone moves would leave them with less land than they seek for a state.

Already under investigation in two separate corruption scandals, Sharon came under another cloud this week when the Maariv newspaper alleged misconduct in a numerically lop-sided prisoner swap with Hizbollah guerrillas.

Confused by the murky details of the earlier scandals -- one involving a Greek real estate deal and the other a loan from a foreign friend -- Israelis saw little mystery in the latest affair.

All 6 BJP MPs in Delhi to be renominated

PTI, New Delhi

All the six sitting BJP MPs in Delhi will be renominated but the same could not be said of the MPs in the rest of the country, party general secretary Mukhtar Abbas Naqvisaid yesterday.

"We have decided to renominate all the sitting MPs from Delhi though this may not be so at the all India level where some are likely to be dropped," he said after a meeting of the party's Delhi Pradesh election committee.

Delhi has seven Lok Sabha seats.

In the case of Sadar Lok Sabha constituency from where Rajasthan Governor Madan Lal Khurana had won in 1999 elections, the party has to look for a new candidate, Naqvisaid.

Looting goes on in Haiti

AFP, Port-au-Prince

Partisans of exiled Haitian president Jean Bertrand Aristide looted a container port on the northern fringe of Port-au-Prince late Thursday as US and French patrols sought to enforce an overnight curfew in its fifth consecutive night.

The nation's political rivals meanwhile were assessing their meeting earlier in the day, the first in the month-old crisis to start the process of naming a new government.

An official of the huge Haiti Terminal, which handles 35 percent of the country's container imports, called the looting a "disaster."

"We have to act quickly to save what's left of the containers before the catastrophe is total," the official, Georges Romain, said.

The port's warehouses, holding an estimated 1,500 to 2,000 containers, were the main target as of late

Thursday.

"The area must be quickly secured by a military force of Americans, French or Haitian National Police," Romain told AFP.

During the day Thursday, residents of the capital converged on banks which were open for the first time in two weeks.

Sporadic gunfire still echoed in parts of Port-au-Prince, but the city was relatively calm after days of chaos marked by killing, arson and looting sprees that left a shoulder-high pile of decomposing bodies stacked in the main morgue.

An exact death toll from the violence that erupted was impossible to determine on Thursday.

The Pentagon said it expected Haitian police to handle looting and disorder in Port-au-Prince and the 1,000 US Marines in the capital to play a supporting role.

"We are going to support the

Haitian police, who are handling that very well right now," said Brigadier General David Rodriguez, of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The advance wave of a UN-backed stabilization security force hastily established itself as violence erupted amid anarchy in the capital after resigned Jean Bertrand Aristide resigned and fled last week-end.

Aristide accused France of colluding with the United States to oust him in a coup d'etat and complained from the Central African Republic where he is in exile that he had been the victim of a "political kidnapping" and was forced out at gunpoint.

Washington dismissed the charges and rejected calls for an inquiry into the conditions of Aristide's departure.

US TV airs Diana tapes

BBC ONLINE

Tapes on which Diana, Princess of Wales, tells of her attempts to commit suicide amid her marriage breakdown have been aired on US television.

The princess spoke bitterly of Prince Charles's affair with Camilla Parker Bowles and of her battle with bulimia.

She blamed the affair for worsening her growing depression which led to her attempting to kill herself.

Andrew Morton used the tapes, the first of a series being aired on NBC, for his book Diana: Her True Story.

Diana revealed on the recordings how her life had been filled with heartbreak and unhappiness from her childhood.