

## Pakistan warns of looming West-Muslim 'iron curtain'

AFP, United Nations

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf warned an "iron curtain" was falling between the Islamic world and the West as Muslims feel they are getting no justice in international disputes.

"There is no time to lose," said Musharraf, a key ally in the US war on terrorism who has been under intense political pressure at home over his support for the administration of President George W. Bush.

"Justice must be offered in the form of resolution of all outstanding international disputes which affect the Muslims," Musharraf said in speech on Wednesday to the UN General Assembly that also touched on Pakistan's dispute with India over Kashmir.

"Action has to be taken before an iron curtain finally descends between the West and the Islamic world," he said.

"The major powers of the West have yet to show movement by seriously trying to resolve internationally recognised disputes affecting the Muslim world," he said. The Pakistani leader put special

emphasis on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, mentioning both Israel's "daily atrocities" as well as "misguided" suicide attacks by Palestinians.

"The tragedy of Palestine is an open wound inflicted on the psyche of every Muslim. It generates anger and resentment across the Islamic world," he told world leaders at the United Nations annual debate.

"The world today sees turmoil and upheaval everywhere -- especially in the Third World and more specifically in the Muslim world. Too many fronts have been opened, too many battle lines drawn," Musharraf said.

The Pakistani leader called to "wind down" the conflict in Iraq, which he said "can only be achieved through handing over governance authority to the people of Iraq and allowing them full control over their natural resources."

He also urged industrialised nations to support "an Islamic renaissance" through financial and technical assistance and larger trade opportunities.

## 'India sincere in seeking better ties with Pakistan'

### Musharraf holds out hope for peace

AFP, Hong Kong

India's prime minister said in an interview published yesterday ahead of his first meeting with Pakistan's president that he was "very sincere" in wanting better ties with Islamabad.

Singh, due to hold talks with Musharraf today on the fringes of the annual UN General Assembly in New York, said in the interview which appeared in the Asian edition of The Wall Street Journal that the long-awaited meeting would be "an essay in mutual comprehension."

The prime minister, whose Congress-led government took office in May, said he was interested in hearing from Musharraf "what opportunities he has in mind" for improving relations.

"I'm very sincere in... the desire to normalise relations with Pakistan," said Singh, adding the fruits of better ties would be "immense" in trade, energy and water resources and development cooperation.

His comments appeared after

Musharraf told the annual UN General Assembly Wednesday it was the "moment for peace".

Earlier just ahead of his first summit with India's new prime minister, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf Wednesday held out hope of resolving the long-burning dispute over Kashmir.

Musharraf promised to demonstrate sincerity, flexibility and boldness in the dialogue with India.

Analysts say the first meeting between Singh and Musharraf could give an impetus to the nations' slow-moving eight-month peace process but that a solution on Kashmir remained distant.

India accuses Pakistan of stoking a deadly insurrection against New Delhi's rule in Indian Kashmir that has raged since 1989. Pakistan denies the charge, saying it only supports a freedom struggle.

"The aspiration for peace enjoys popular support in Pakistan and, I also believe, in India," Musharraf told world leaders on day two of the annual United Nations debate in

New York. "Neither country can achieve its ambition for social and economic progress in the absence of peace," he said.

"Now that the negotiations are entering the difficult stage of grappling with solutions to previously irreconcilable disputes, Pakistan hopes that India shows the same sincerity, flexibility and boldness that Pakistan will demonstrate," Musharraf said.

"I would like to convey to him that this is the moment for peace. We must not allow it to slip away," he said.

Musharraf's focus on the Kashmir dispute is, in itself, a potential obstacle to any real progress being made at the meeting with Singh.

India is adamant that peace talks should follow an incremental path, covering all issues of bilateral contention rather than concentrating solely on Kashmir.



Left-wing Israelis and international peace activists shout as an Israeli border policeman shoots rubber bullets at Palestinians demonstrating against the construction of the Israeli separation barrier in the southern West Bank village of Beit Awwa yesterday. Five Palestinians were wounded by rubber bullets during the protest.

## Nepal invites Maoists to resume pace talks

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba on Wednesday invited Maoist rebels to resume negotiations that broke down over a year ago but said he would offer a key concession if the guerrillas agreed to talk.

Deuba said his government's peace committee "has formally invited the Maoists to come to the negotiating table for peace talks."

He offered no details on when and where the talks would take place. He said the negotiations would be closed, amid criticism the last peace bid collapsed in August 2003 in part because of the intense media attention around meetings.

The Maoists have been fighting since 1996 to overthrow the monarchy in an insurgency that has claimed 10,000 lives.

The rebels, who enjoy free rein in much of the countryside, have demanded the government stop labelling them a terrorist group, which keeps their leaders away from cities for fear of arrest.

But Deuba said: "The terrorist tag labelled against the rebels will be withdrawn only when they come to the negotiating table."

A three-member delegation headed by Padma Ratna Tuladhara, a human rights activist with contacts

with the Maoists, left Wednesday for the southwestern town of Nepalgunj to deliver the invitation to the Maoists, who control areas near the Indian border city.

"We are trying... to arrange for peace talks at an earliest date to end the present political and security problem in Nepal," Tuladhara told AFP before his departure.

A top Maoist leader, Krishna Bahadur Mahara, recently told a local newspaper that the rebels were ready to talk to the government if it stopped referring to the guerrillas as terrorists and released Maoists from prison.

The rebels have been building pressure on the government with a two-day strike set for next week during one of the Himalayan kingdom's most important festivals.

The Maoists in August used threats to stop traffic in and out of the capital Kathmandu for one week and to shut down 47 businesses.

The industries reopened a month later when the government released two prominent rebels from jail.

Meanwhile, Maoist rebels fighting to overthrow Nepal's monarchy bombed a rural health post administering vaccine for measles, one of the most severe diseases in the Himalayan kingdom, officials said Thursday.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri wipes her eyes during her last address to parliament as President, in Jakarta yesterday. Former security minister Yudhoyono swept to victory with a clear majority in Indonesia's first ever presidential polls, pledging to revive the economy and tackle militants blamed for a series of deadly attacks.

## 5m felons will fail to vote in US polls

REUTERS, Washington

Millions of US citizens, including a disproportionate number of black voters, will be blocked from voting in the Nov. 2 presidential election because of legal barriers, faulty procedures or dirty tricks, according to civil rights and legal experts.

The largest category of those legally disenfranchised consists of almost 5 million former felons who have served prison sentences and been released.

In total, 13 percent of all black men are barred from voting due to a felony conviction, according to the Commission on Civil Rights. Polls consistently find that black Americans overwhelmingly vote for Democrats.

"This has a huge effect on elections but also on black communities which see their political clout diluted. No one has yet explained to me how letting ex-felons who have served their sentences into polling booths hurts anyone," said Jessie Allen of the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University.

Conservatives disagree. "Society is not required to turn a blind eye to the fact that someone has a criminal record. Someone who was

not willing to follow the law and was sent to prison should not be in a position to make the law for others by electing lawmakers," said Roger Clegg of the Center for Equal Opportunity think tank.

Millions of other votes in the 2000 presidential election were lost due to clerical and administrative errors while civil rights organisations have catalogued numerous tactics aimed at suppressing black voter turnout.

"There are individuals and officials who are actively trying to stop people from voting who they think will vote against their party and that nearly always means stopping black people from voting Democratic," said Mary Frances Berry, head of the US Commission on Human Rights.

Vicky Beasley, a field officer for People for the American Way, listed some of the ways voters have been "discouraged" from voting.

"In elections in Baltimore in 2002 and in Georgia last year, black voters were sent fliers saying anyone who hadn't paid utility bills or had outstanding parking tickets or were behind on their rent would be arrested at polling stations. It happens in every election cycle," she said.

## 3 Israelis among 6 killed in Gaza clash

AFP, Gaza City

Three Israeli soldiers and three Palestinians were killed during intense gunbattles yesterday after a group of militants managed to break into a Jewish settlement in the Gaza Strip.

The soldiers, who included an officer, were shot dead after the members of three radical Palestinian movements managed to break into the settlement of Morag in the south of the territory under heavy fog cover.

"The gunmen infiltrated under the cover of the community's greenhouses and opened fire at the soldiers, killing an IDF (Israel Defense Forces) officer and another two IDF soldiers," an army statement said, adding that a fourth soldier had been wounded.

"IDF soldiers opened fire at the gunmen and killed them. Two AK-47 assault rifles, 9 magazines and four grenades were found on the bodies of the two gunmen."

However, as the commander of the region, General Shmuel Zaccai, attempted to hold a press conference in Morag later in the morning, it became clear that a third Palestinian was still at large.

Reporters were forced to take cover as the Palestinian became

embroiled in a further exchange of fire with the soldiers which was broadcast live on Israeli radio.

A correspondent from the Israeli daily Yedioth Aharonot was shot in the leg and had his wounds dressed by the commander.

The gunbattle lasted about half an hour before the third Palestinian was shot dead, a military spokesman said.

News of the militants' deaths was announced by loudspeaker in the nearby Rafah and Khan Yunis Palestinian refugee camps.

The announcements also claimed the attack in the name of three of the smaller militant groups -- the Popular Resistance Committees, Aburish and Islamic Jihad.

Palestinian sources later named the three dead men as 22-year-old Mohammed El Azazi from Rafah, Yussef Amir, 19, from Gaza City, and Imad Abu Samhadana, 21, who was also from Rafah.

In overnight violence, around 15 Palestinians were wounded in Khan Yunis in a series of Israeli operations, including a helicopter strike. Palestinian sources also reported that around 10 houses had been demolished by the army in the same area.

## N Korea threatens to turn Japan into 'nuclear sea of fire'

AFP, Seoul

North Korea threatened yesterday to turn Japan into a "nuclear sea of fire" if it comes under attack from the United States.

"If the United States ignites a nuclear war, the US military bases in Japan would serve as a detonating fuse to turn Japan into a nuclear sea of fire," the North's ruling party newspaper Rodong Sinmun said in a Korean-language article monitored by South Korea's Yonhap news agency.

It was one of the most searing North Korean threats directed against Japan, Yonhap said. The Stalinist North has accused Tokyo of supporting what it sees as a US campaign to isolate it.

In an English-language article published by Pyongyang's official

KCNA news agency, Rodong accused the United States of converting Japan into "strategic vantage points" for a pre-emptive attack on North Korea.

"It plans to use Japan as an advance base in hurling into the Korean peninsula a task force from its mainland and other areas in case of emergency," the paper said.

Japan and the US, along with the two Koreas, China and Russia have held three rounds of talks on curbing the North's nuclear weapons drive in return for diplomatic concessions and possible economic aid.

A fourth round was scheduled for this month but Pyongyang has refused to return to the negotiating table, citing Washington's hostile policy and South Korea's nuclear experiments.

## Top Tiger renegade killed in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Four people including a top renegade Tamil Tiger rebel were shot dead yesterday in growing factional fighting in Sri Lanka despite efforts to revive the peace process, officials and a pro-rebel website reported.

The main unit of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) ambushed and killed a rebel known as Reggie and two of his close aides in rebel-held eastern Sri Lanka, the Tamilnet website said.

Suspected Tiger gunmen also killed a rival political activist in the capital Colombo, police said.

Reggie was the deputy and brother of breakaway Tiger leader V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna.

## 'No progress' on ME roadmap

BBC ONLINE

No significant progress has been achieved towards peace in the Middle East, representatives from the US, the EU, Russia and the UN have said.

The diplomatic grouping - or Quartet - says it remains committed to the peace plan known as the roadmap.

But it urged Israel and the Palestinians to do more to fulfil their obligations under the plan.

The call was issued after a high-level meeting on the sidelines of the UN general assembly in New York.

Wednesday's talks were attended by US Secretary of State Colin Powell, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

"The situation on the ground for

both Palestinians and Israelis remains extremely difficult and no significant progress has been achieved," they said in a statement afterwards.

The roadmap was officially adopted in June 2003 as a phase-by-phase route to ending the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians within two years.

The Palestinians were urged to crack down on militants, and the Israelis to freeze settlement activity.

After the meeting at the UN, the Quartet in particular called on Israel to dismantle settlement outposts built since March 2001.

"The lack of action in this regard is a cause for concern," the statement said.

The US administration still believes the roadmap is the region's best hope for peace.

But the process is clearly in crisis, says the BBC's Jill McGivering in New York.



PHOTO: AFP

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan (L) listens to Kiran Prendergast under Secretary General for Department of Political Affairs (2nd L), as Bernard Bot Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands (R) and US Secretary of State Colin Powell look on prior to a quartet meeting Wednesday at the United Nations headquarters in New York City during the annual debate of the 59th United Nations General Assembly.

## CBS fined for 'nipplegate'

AFP, Washington

The US government's media watchdog on Wednesday slapped CBS television with a 550,000-dollar fine for broadcasting pop star Janet Jackson's breast to millions of people during the Super Bowl American football championship.

More than 540,000 complaints poured in to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) after Jackson's breast was revealed when singer Justin Timberlake pulled a piece of her bodice during the Super Bowl half-time show on February 1, the regulator said.

The 550,000-dollar fine is the stiffest penalty the agency can levy against CBS, which has 30 days to contest the FCC's findings.

The revealing of Jackson's breast, dubbed "nipplegate," for a few seconds on national television at an event watched by some 90 million viewers sparked an uproar across the country, while networks began imposing delays during live events to avoid another scandal.



PHOTO: AFP

Haitians walk in a flooded plain past others riding a truck near the northeastern Haitian city of Gonaives. More than 1,013 people were killed and another 1,200 remained missing when tropical storm Jeanne caused major flooding in the northern region of Haiti.

## Malaysia accuses West of fuelling terrorism

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Western countries have fuelled international terrorism through the invasion of Iraq but Muslim nations should help rebuild the country, Malaysian Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said yesterday.

Abdullah, who is chairman of the 57-nation Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), warned that if Muslims did not participate, a country which was once "a symbol of Islam's greatness... will be rebuilt in the mould and under the influence of others."

Reconstruction should take place under the supervision of the United Nations, which should also be strengthened and given a key role in fighting the war on terror, Abdullah said.

In a nationally broadcast two-hour speech to the convention of his ruling United Malays National Organisation, Abdullah urged Muslims to reject the use of terrorism and criticised the West for encouraging it.

## War on terror a double edged sword for US

AFP, Washington

The war on terrorism is turning out to be a double edged sword for the United States as it faces a more determined and nimble group of militants lurking in an environment more hostile towards Washington, officials and analysts told a conference here Wednesday.

William Pope, a senior US State Department counterterrorism official, said while many in the al-Qaeda top brass had been caught, a new cadre of lesser-known but equally powerful leaders had emerged and was becoming harder to track down.

Similarly, while the United States had effectively driven out terrorists from the international financial system through cooperation with other governments, it was now finding it difficult to pin down their financial networks because they evaded banks and used informal

financial channels. Pope told the "strategic Asia and the war of terrorism" conference in Washington that al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups were forming or trying to coalesce into a global jihadist network by establishing links with like-minded groups.

Among them is a network controlled by Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi, who has claimed responsibility for a series of beheadings of hostages, including US citizens, in Iraq. Pope said there were also growing indications that a number of largely Sunni Islamic extremist movements were trying to depict al-Qaeda standards and attempt to pursue a global jihad (holy war) against the United States and its allies.

"The problem is that the other younger, lesser known (leaders) are very serious about it -- they want to blow people up just as much as the more senior ones did," said Pope,

the principal deputy coordinator in the State Department's counterterrorism office.

"But it is harder to know who they are and where they are."

He predicted that if the al-Qaeda leadership successors linked up in a more diffused way with other localised groups, many of which predated al-Qaeda, the authorities would face a "harder situation."

"It is similar to the analogy of the money. We have basically driven terrorists out of the international banking system and into other ways of moving money -- including cash carried in suitcases."

Since the end of 2001, more than 170 countries had issued orders freezing or seizing about 142 million dollars in terrorist-related financial assets while 1,500 terrorist-related accounts and transactions have been blocked, Pope said.