

# Rice pledges support for Pak, Afghan democracy

## Visit marred by deadly bomb blast, 5 killed

REUTERS, AFP, Kabul/ Islamabad

A bomb blast in southern Afghanistan killed at least five people yesterday as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made a one-day trip, pledging long-term US commitment to support Afghanistan's transition to democracy and move for election in Pakistan.

Rice spoke proudly of the progress Afghanistan had made since US forces helped the Afghan opposition oust the Taliban militia in late 2001, after its leaders refused to surrender Osama bin Laden following the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States.

Earlier Rice told Pakistan's military ruler President Pervez Musharraf Wednesday night that the United States supports Pakistan's move toward free elections.

"We have a long-term commit-

ment to this country," Rice told a joint news conference with President Hamid Karzai, before flying back to Islamabad for further talks with Pakistani leaders.

"The Secretary expressed our firm support for steady movement along a path to free and fair elections in 2007," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said after Rice met for three hours with Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999.

Rice had earlier met Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz after arriving from the Indian capital New Delhi on her first trip to the continent since taking up her post in January.

Pakistan has been a staunch ally of US President George W. Bush since the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington which killed about 3,000 people and for which al-Qaeda claimed responsibility.

"She expressed our appreciation for Pakistan's superb support in the war on terror," Boucher said.

Rice, who was to fly to the Afghan capital Kabul early Thursday, also discussed with Musharraf "how both our nations can support Afghanistan as it moves to parliamentary elections in the months to come," Boucher said.

After a brief stop in Kabul, Rice is to return later the same day to Pakistan for talks with other senior Pakistani figures, including her counterpart Khurshid Kasuri.

A Taliban-inspired insurgency in the country has faded over the past few months.

Thursday's blast killed five people in the former Taliban stronghold of Kandahar, 460 km southwest of the capital. It was the worst bomb attack since August.

More than 30 people were

wounded. A senior security officer blamed Taliban loyalists for the attack, but a Taliban spokesman denied responsibility.

Rice, on her first visit to Kabul, said the United States would stick by the Afghan government as it sought to bring peace and stability after decades of violence going back to the Soviet invasion in 1979.

"We learned the hard way what it meant not to have a long-term commitment," she said, referring to how Washington abandoned Afghanistan once Soviet troops withdrew in 1989 leaving al-Qaeda to establish bases there.

The US administration sees Afghanistan as a foreign policy success. After throwing out the Taliban, it set the country on the path to its first democratic presidential election in 2004, which Karzai easily won.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (L) looks on as Afghan President Hamid Karzai speaks during a press conference at the Presidential Palace in Kabul yesterday. Afghanistan's electoral commission has proposed holding the country's long-delayed parliamentary polls in September, President Hamid Karzai and US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said.

# Chinese FM to visit Nepal for talks on arms sale

AFP, Kathmandu

Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing is to visit Nepal at the end of March during which the possible sale of arms to the Himalayan country by Beijing will be discussed, a foreign ministry official here said yesterday.

Li will arrive on March 31 for a 24-hour visit on his way to Bangladesh during which he will hold talks with King Gyanendra and separately with two members of the Council of Ministers the monarch appointed after he assumed absolute power last month.

"Li's visit is significant ... as it will further strengthen Nepal-China socio-economic and political relations," the official said.

Diplomatic sources said the visit had taken on increased significance in the light of Britain and India's suspension of military aid to Nepal in response to the king's power grab.

China supplied arms to Nepal in the late 1980s and a possible

resumption of sales was likely to be discussed, the sources said.

With the United States also warning it could halt the supply of weapons to Nepal unless the king restores fundamental freedoms, Nepal was looking at alternative sources, they added.

A Nepalese foreign ministry source confirmed other sources of supply were being investigated.

"When Nepal needs arms and other military equipment, we are free to receive them from any countries at a competent price or under grants," he said.

Pakistan has also already offered to supply arms to help Nepal's military face down a rebellion by Maoists bent on establishing a communist republic in the world's only Hindu kingdom.

The US and Britain have supplied Nepal with helicopters and military equipment and have also trained the country's army and police force, a defence ministry source said.



PHOTO: AFP

NGO activists shout anti-US slogans during a demonstration in Lahore yesterday against US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visit to Pakistan. Rice told Pakistan's military ruler President Pervez Musharraf Wednesday in a meeting that the United States would support Pakistan's move toward free elections, a State Department spokesman said.

# Trans-Kashmir bus to be fortnightly service

AFP, Srinagar

The first bus service in decades connecting the Indian and Pakistani zones of Kashmir will run only once a fortnight, an official said yesterday, dashing hopes of thousands that they would soon be able to visit relatives across the divide.

Additionally, no private vehicles will be allowed to ply the route "for the time being," said Nayeem Akhter, secretary to Indian Kashmir Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed.

"It has been decided by the two

sides that initially the bus will run once a fortnight," Akhter told AFP.

India and Pakistan last month agreed as part of their ongoing peace process to restart a bus service between the Indian Kashmir summer capital Srinagar and Muzaffarabad, the capital of the Pakistani zone of the divided Himalayan state.

The service was halted in 1947 when the two nuclear-armed rivals first went to war over Kashmir.

Akhter said the buses would not cross the Line of Control (LoC) -- the de facto border dividing Kashmir.

# Lanka struggles under deluge of tsunami aid

AFP, Colombo

Tonnes of drinking water and used clothes are clogging Sri Lanka's main sea port and slowing the distribution of other tsunami relief aid, a government official said yesterday.

The social service ministry said hundreds of thousands of litres of drinking water had been sent by foreign donors to help survivors of the December 26 tsunamis, but the supplies had been stuck at the port.

"In some cases, the expiry date has passed and we are not able to distribute this water," spokesman W.M.S. Wijekoon said. "Having to clear this cargo that is not needed is also adding to the delays."

# INDIA-PAK BUS RUN Security not compromised: Manmohan

PTI, New Delhi

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday asserted in Rajya Sabha that the special entry permit system for the Srinagar-Muzaffarabad bus, to be flagged off on April 7, will in no way compromise India's position on Jammu and Kashmir.

"This in no way poses any danger to our security," Prime Minister said as vociferous opposition members voiced apprehensions over replacing the system of passport and visa.

This, they said, will have no check on antecedents of people from Pakistan.

# Musharraf's mother visits ancestral home in Delhi

AFP, New Delhi

Hundreds of people crowded onto rooftops and thronged the narrow lanes of Old Delhi yesterday as Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's mother paid her first visit to her ancestral home in more than 20 years.

Octogenarian Zarin Musharraf was showered with gifts and flowers as she arrived in a wheelchair at the haveli, or traditional ornately decorated home, in India's former capital now part of greater New Delhi.

Flanked by her grandson Bilal, Musharraf cut a birthday cake for the nine-year-old daughter of the family presently living in the house.

"Everything seems to have changed here. There is a bit more of the sky visible from here. It really brings back so many memories," she said of the home where she had lived before the 1947 partition which divided India and Pakistan at their independence from Britain.

Among those who gathered in the hot sun to welcome her was her former housemaid Anara, who like many Indians uses only one name.

"Madam was very happy to see me. All I wanted was to meet her, nothing else," Anara said.

Bilal Musharraf told AFP that his

grandmother was jubilant as she had for a long time wanted to visit the home again, having last paid a clandestine visit there in the early 1980s.

Deputy speaker of the Delhi Legislative Assembly Shoaib Iqbal draped a white shawl around Bilal, who is the son of the Pakistani president.

"We chose to present a white cloth as it symbolises peace. We want all the bitterness to flow and only happy memories to remain," he said.

Zarin Musharraf, who arrived in India Wednesday, told reporters she was happy India and Pakistan were making efforts to establish peaceful relations.

"Good winds are blowing. I hope all the issues between the two countries will be resolved amicably," she said.

The present occupants of the home, a family of Jains, said they had been thrilled when they were informed Wednesday evening they were to receive important visitors.

"When we heard that she was coming here, we called our whole family for the occasion. It was wonderful as it coincided with the birthday of one of our children and the naming ceremony of another," said head of the household, Devinder Kumar Jain.



PHOTO: AFP

Zarin Musharraf, mother of Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf arrives in a wheel-chair at Naharwali Haveli where Musharraf spent his childhood in New Delhi yesterday. Musharraf's frail mother Zarin was accompanied by her grandson Bilal as a small group of bystanders pressed forward to greet her with flowers and gifts.

# Climate of fear exists in Nepal, jurists say

AFP, New Delhi

Human rights are grossly violated, the rule of law has been abandoned and the media is under attack in Nepal after King Gyanendra seized power last month, the International Commission of Jurists said Wednesday.

A team from the conglomerate of judges and lawyers visited Nepal from March 13-16 and met journalists, political leaders and officials in the new regime.

"What we found in Nepal was a climate of fear," secretary-general

Nicholas Howen told a news conference in New Delhi.

"More than 500 political leaders, student leaders, human rights defenders, journalists and lawyers have reportedly been detained since February 1, others forced into exile."

Gyanendra sacked the government on February 1 and imposed a state of emergency, assuming absolute powers to tackle a Maoist insurgency.

"Newspapers are censored or closed down; peaceful protestors are immediately arrested. The

independence of the judiciary is under intense pressure," Howen said, presenting a report entitled "Nepal: Rule of Law Abandoned".

The report urges the king to revoke the state of emergency and release all political detainees, warning that the suspension of fundamental rights "is not lawful under Nepali and international law and will not help to win the war against the Maoists."

The jurists listed torture and killings carried out by both security forces and Maoist rebels in their nine-year conflict.

# Nepali editor grilled for report

AFP, Kathmandu

The editor of Kantipur, Nepal's biggest daily, said he was grilled by police yesterday for a report in which the number of protestors arrested by police during countrywide anti-monarchy demonstrations was published.

Editor Narayan Wagle said he had been summoned to appear before police last morning.

"I was told the news report in my paper which said around 750 protestors across the country had been nabbed for holding anti-king protests on Monday, had gone against the spirit and norms of the royal proclamation of February 1," Wagle told reporters, referring to King Gyanendra's assuming of absolute power in Nepal last month.

# Oxford Union to unveil Lankan FM's portrait today

The Oxford Union of the University of Oxford will unveil the portrait of Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, the honorary fellow of Balliol College 2004, today, says a press release issued by Lankan High Commission in Dhaka.

Sir Jeremy Lever, president of the Oxford Union, 1957 will formally unveil the portrait of Kadirgamar during a reception in presence of Lord Patten of Barnes, Chancellor of the University of Oxford this evening at the Macmillan Room of Oxford Union in Frewin Court.

Kadirgamar was the treasurer of Balliol College in 1958 and president of Oxford Union in 1959.

# Two Sikhs acquitted in Air India bombing

AFP, Vancouver

A Canadian judge on Wednesday acquitted two Sikh men of massacring 329 people in a 1985 Air India jet bombing, the worst single airborne terror strike prior to September 11, 2001.

In a stunning verdict, which left loved ones of victims gasping in shock, the judge threw out eight counts of murder and conspiracy against Ajaib Singh Bagri, 55, and Ripudaman Singh Malik, 58.

The dramatic judgements followed a near two-year trial on prosecution claims that the two men planted the bomb, and another device which exploded on the ground in Tokyo, to punish India for its crackdown on Sikhs in the early

1980s.

"Despite the horrific nature of the alleged crimes, there can be no lowering of the standard of proof from that required in any criminal trial," said Justice Ian Bruce Josephson in the British Columbia Supreme Court.

The evidence had fallen "markedly short" of the standard required to convict the men, said Josephson, who heard the case in a specially constructed blast-resistant courtroom without a jury.

His verdict was so withering, and questioning of the testimony of key witnesses, whose identities are protected by a publication ban, so acute, that observers questioned whether a prosecution appeal was feasible.