

MUSHARRAF SAYS
Attacks won't sidetrack
Kashmir peace talks

REUTERS, Canberra

Pakistan and India's quest to resolve a long-running row over Kashmir will not be pushed off course by militant violence in the Himalayan region, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said yesterday.

Musharraf, speaking a day after a deadly car bombing in Kashmir, said nobody could stop the violence, which he vowed would not distract India and Pakistan from the peace process they have both described as irreversible.

"I think we should not be overly bothered about (the car bombing) and we should not allow it to affect the peace process," Musharraf told Reuters in an interview during the first visit by a Pakistani president to Australia.

"I would go even to the extent of saying even if we reach peace and agreement, even after that there will be some extremists who may carry out such kind of extremist attacks. We should bear with that."

Kashmir has been at the centre of two of the three wars India and Pakistan have fought since winning independence from Britain in 1947,

but relations between South Asia's nuclear rivals are improving since they launched peace talks early last year.

A car bomb exploded on Monday in Pulwama town, south of Indian Kashmir's summer capital of Srinagar, killing at least 14 people and wounding more than 100 in the latest incident of separatist violence in the territory.

Militants have frequently timed attacks in Kashmir to distract attention from diplomatic efforts to address the dispute elsewhere, and Monday's blast occurred while moderate separatist leaders were in the midst of a two-week visit to Pakistan.

Hardline separatist groups, who want Pakistan to control Kashmir, have been angered by Musharraf's attempts to reach a compromise with India and by the Pakistan government's apparent support for moderate leaders who want an independent Kashmir.

"We have to find a middle point," Musharraf said, stressing the need for the parties to show a willingness to compromise.

"So we hope that when we start real, serious negotiations, people

and groups will be more flexible to a future conclusion."

He said he had a vision for self-governance for Kashmir but that independence for the region would be unacceptable to both Pakistan and India.

More than 45,000 people have died in Kashmir since the revolt began against Indian rule in 1989. New Delhi has long accused Pakistan of stoking the rebellion in the mainly Muslim majority region, a charge denied by Islamabad.

"There is nobody who can exercise control on everyone and everything that is happening in Kashmir. I certainly don't hold a whistle which I can blow and every bullet stops being fired," Musharraf told Canberra's National Press Club.

Musharraf reiterated that he believed the best chance for peace lay in the relationship he had developed with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and underlined the need for a deal to be reached before either leader left office.

"I have told Prime Minister Manmohan Singh that the best timetable is that it must take place within our tenures," Musharraf told the press club.

South African
president
sacks
his deputy

BBC ONLINE

South African President Thabo Mbeki has dismissed his deputy, Jacob Zuma.

This comes after the trial of Zuma's financial adviser, Schabir Shaik, appeared to implicate the deputy president in corruption.

Mbeki said that in the light of the need to defend South Africa's young democracy, "it would be best to release Jacob Zuma of his responsibilities".

Zuma was once seen as the heir apparent to the presidency, and remains a popular figure.

Addressing a special sitting of parliament, Mbeki emphasised that Zuma must be presumed innocent, and that Shaik's conviction could yet be overturned on appeal.

But he concluded: "As president of the republic, I have come to the conclusion that the circumstances dictate that in the interest of the honourable deputy president, the government, our young democratic system and our country, it would be best to release the honourable Jacob Zuma from his responsibilities as deputy president of the republic and member of the cabinet."

Tony Leon, leader of the opposition Democratic Alliance, immediately praised Mbeki for valuing "principle over politics".

US rejects pullout
timetable

Court releases Saddam video

AFP, Baghdad

The Iraqi court set up to try Saddam Hussein has released a tape showing the ousted leader being interrogated as the White House again rejected the idea of laying out a timetable for withdrawing US troops from Iraq.

The video was released Monday amid heightened tensions between the country's once-oppressed Shia majority and the disempowered Sunni Arab minority, and on the same day that a Sunni group accused the government of ethnic cleansing.

"I have given the approval to release the tape," Judge Raed al-Juhli, a member of the Iraqi Special Tribunal, said without elaborating.

CNN television showed brief footage of Juhli questioning a bearded Saddam with longish black hair who was wearing a tieless white shirt and a black vest, reportedly over the 1982 killing of 143 residents of Dujail, a Shia village northeast of Baghdad.

Meanwhile, The White House on Monday rejected calls for setting a precise timetable for a US withdrawal from Iraq, even as a new poll showed almost six in 10 Americans want at

least a partial pullout of US forces.

"We will leave when we complete the mission," spokesman Scott McClellan said a day after a representative in US President George W. Bush's Republican party said he would push legislation fixing a firm

schedule for such a withdrawal.

"We are not going to stay a day longer than what is necessary. But what we're working to achieve in Iraq is vital to peace and security for generations to come," said McClellan.

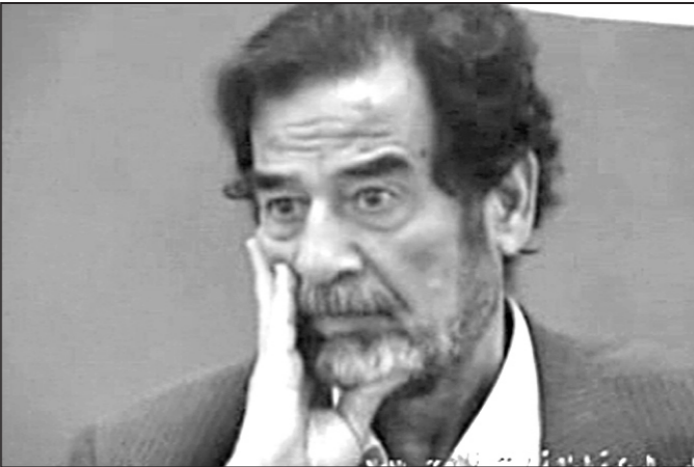


PHOTO: AFP

In this image taken from a video provided by the Iraqi Special Tribunal Monday, shows former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein during questioning by magistrates at an unknown location and date.

5 farmers die
as police
opens
fire on rally in
Rajasthan

REUTERS, Jaipur

The families of five farmers gunned down by police during a water protest cremated their dead yesterday amid tight security and fears of more violence.

Almost 1,000 police reinforcements have been sent to the area, just south of Jaipur, capital of Rajasthan. Witnesses say the atmosphere is tense, with many people slaying inside and almost half the local shops closed.

The five men were shot dead during a protest over water supplies on Monday, the second time since October police have killed farmers demonstrating over water. Five also died in the first incident.

Police say they fired in self-defence on Monday when hundreds of farmers pelted the 100 or so officers on the scene with stones. The farmers deny starting the trouble.

Rajasthan's 56 million people live mostly off farming, supplied by wells, and parts of the state are among India's driest and most drought-prone areas.

India's scorching summers bring severe water shortages across the country, due as much to crumbling infrastructure and poor resources as to the high temperatures. Water shortages have triggered small-scale rioting in the capital, where many people rely on water tankers for supplies.

Home-bound after 40 yrs

AP, Tokyo

A US soldier who deserted his Army unit 40 years ago and fled to North Korea left his home in northern Japan on Monday for his first visit to the United States since he turned himself in late last year.

Charles Jenkins, his Japanese wife and their two daughters were scheduled to fly to Washington on Tuesday after spending a night in Tokyo. He has said he has no plans to move to the United States, but has repeatedly said he wants to see his 91-year-old mother, who lives in a nursing home in Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina.

He was expected to stay in the United States for about a week. The US Embassy in Tokyo issued him a passport last month.

Jenkins, 65, served 25 days in a US military jail in Japan last year after a court-martial. He came to Japan in July to be with his wife, Hitomi Soga, who was kidnapped by North Korean agents in 1978 but allowed to return home in 2002.

The couple, who met in North Korea, live with their daughters in Soga's hometown of Mano, on the tiny island of Sado, off the north-western coast of Japan's main island of Honshu.



PHOTO: AFP

Charles Jenkins (R), the US soldier who deserted to North Korea in 1965, leads his family members before departing at Narita Airport, Chiba Prefecture yesterday. Jenkins, 65, left Japan with his Japanese wife who he met in Pyongyang and their two North Korean-born daughters, on a commercial flight. At left is his wife Hitomi Soga, and their two North Korean-born daughters, Mika (rear L), Brinda (rear R).

Earthquake kills 8
in northern Chile

AP, Santiago

A powerful earthquake rattled cities in Bolivia and Peru and heavily damaged mountain villages in northern Chile, killing at least eight people, officials said.

The quake had a preliminary magnitude of 7.9, making it the world's third strongest tremor since the quake that set off an Asian tsunami in December.

It struck Monday evening and was centred in an unpopulated Andean area, about 940 miles north of Santiago, Chile's capital.

Interior Minister Jorge Correa said a boulder fell on a car near Chile's northern port city of Iquique, killing all five passengers — three adults and two children. The other victims were three elderly men killed in two different Andean villages. One of the victims was a disabled

80-year-old man killed when a wall collapsed at his home.

Correa said several people were injured but did not provide a number or other details. In addition, several homes and roads were damaged. He said there could be more victims in some isolated communities, but added no details were immediately available because of poor communications.

The quake was also felt in several cities in neighbouring Peru and Bolivia, but no victims or major damage were reported in either country.

In the Bolivian capital of La Paz, many people took to the streets in panic.

Power supply and communications were interrupted in Iquique and Arica, another port city near Chile's border with Peru.

Jackson faces tough
fight to revive career

AFP, Los Angeles

Pop icon Michael Jackson faces a tough battle reviving his stalled career and crumbling financial empire despite his acquittal Monday in the dramatic finale of his child sex trial, experts say.

The 1980s "King of Pop," 22 years ago produced the best-selling album in history, "Thriller," and became one of the world's most famous entertainers.

But he is arguably now better known to many for his eccentric antics and the damaging accusations that he molested a young boy.

The 46-year-old musical legend's entertainment career was frozen after his November 2003 arrest as he focused on clearing his name, but it had been slowly declining for years before the case came to light.

"I don't think we're going to see Michael Jackson make a huge

comeback even with an acquittal," said pop culture expert Robert Thompson of the University of Syracuse in New York.

"Even before this trial, we had ceased to look forward to his latest music release and had started to look forward to his latest scandal," he told AFP.

Other experts agreed that Jackson's career, further damaged by his highly publicised trial, may never quite be the same again. "Things could work differently, but can a guy of his age make a comeback?" questioned Todd Boyd, a professor of film and pop culture expert at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

"I think it all comes down whether a new generation of fans is going to support him," Boyd told AFP.

But music fans appear to believe that Jackson's image is irreparably damaged and that his career will not survive trial.



PHOTO: AFP

Jacalyn Valla, 15, Kayli Grossi, 18, and Kayla Breen, 18, all friends from Lompoc, CA, stand outside of Michael Jackson's Neverland Ranch in Santa Ynez after Pop Star Michael Jackson's child molestation trial concluded Monday with a not guilty verdict on all counts in Santa Maria.