

Pakistanis have no key role in London attacks

Britain soft on extremism: Musharraf

AFP, London

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf denied that his country played a pivotal role in the London bombings last month and accused the British government of being too soft on Islamic extremism in Britain.

In a rare interview with the BBC, broadcast late on Monday, Musharraf also said he thought that there was a mastermind behind the July 7 suicide attacks on three subway trains and a bus, which left 56 people dead, who may also have planned a failed copycat attack two weeks later.

"Pakistan has not played a pivotal role. There is no such evidence to prove that," said the Pakistani leader, whose country became a focus of a huge international probe into Britain's worst terrorist atrocity.

Musharraf acknowledged, how-

ever, that at least two of the four suspected suicide bombers visited Pakistan prior to their attack, and said investigations into their movements were ongoing.

"We have some clues on certain contacts of telephone numbers that they contacted," he told the BBC. "There were two of the bombers who came here and when they came here who they contacted we are trying to find out and then we will be able to establish clearly linkages."

Three of the gang -- Shehzad Tanweer, 22, Mohammed Sidique Khan, 30, and Hasib Hussain, 18 -- were British Muslims of Pakistani origin. The fourth suspect was a 19-year-old Muslim convert born in Jamaica, Germaine Lindsay.

In the interview for "The New al-Qaeda", a series about the terror threat, shown on Britain's BBC2

channel -- extracts of which were broadcast on the BBC's Newsnight -- Musharraf suggested that the carnage of July 7 and the abortive bombings by another gang of four men on July 21 were linked.

"Possibly," he said, when asked if he thought there was a connection. "Because the pattern is similar, therefore while the people were different and maybe the groups didn't know each other, but the planner must be the same."

Musharraf said he strongly suspected that a network was behind the bombings, while noting that this was his personal belief, rather than a suspicion backed up by intelligence reports.

"Certainly those four boys who killed themselves, committed suicide, were not experts in handling bombs and handling a complex

operation like timing it so well so I am sure there must be a brain behind it," he said.

After July 7, Britain pressed Pakistan to move against radical madrasas following news that some of the British suicide-bombers had previously visited Pakistan and that one may have studied at a seminary there.

As a result, Musharraf has ordered more than 800 militant suspects arrested in sweeping raids and told some 1,400 foreign madrasa students to leave Pakistan, sparking widespread anger across the country.

The president, however, rounded on the British government of Prime Minister Tony Blair for failing to take a tougher line against extremist activity here, expressing concern about radical groups preaching hate.



Italian penitentiary police are reflected in a car window outside the main entrance of Rome's Regina Coeli prison, where British-Ethiopian citizen Osman Hussain, also known as Hamdi Issac, is held yesterday. An Italian judge, flanked by British police officers, started questioning the key suspect in last month's attempted London bombings. Hamdi Issac is one of the key suspects who had planted bombs on London's transport network on July 21.

AMERICANS SAY Iraq war made US more vulnerable to terrorism

AFP, Washington

By a record 57-34 percent margin, most Americans believe the Iraq war has made their country more vulnerable to terrorist attacks, according to a poll published yesterday.

And by a 56-41 percent margin, Americans believe some or all US troops should be withdrawn from Iraq -- a record 33 percent said all troops should be pulled out, according to the USA Today/CNN/Gallup poll.

By a 54-44 percent margin, the 1,004 adults polled by telephone August 5-7 said the Iraq War was a mistake and by a 56-43 percent margin, they felt the war was going badly.

The survey, which had a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points, found that President George W. Bush's approval rating was 45 percent -- one point higher than his lowest score -- and his disapproval rating 51 percent.



India's Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) President L. K. Advani (2R) is joined by senior BJP leaders Rajnath Singh (R), Venkaiah Naidu (L) and Sushma Swaraj (2L) as they wave to the crowd during a rally against reservation in New Delhi yesterday. BJP activists led by Advani held the rally against reservation of university seats based on religion saying such a move would sow the seeds of disintegration. The UPA government recently allowed the Aligarh Muslim University to reserve 50 per cent of seats in 36 courses for Muslims.

KSA raises security at foreign embassies after terror threats

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia intensified security yesterday around foreign compounds in Riyadh after the United States, Britain and Australia warned that terror attacks may be imminent in the wealthy oil kingdom.

Britain and Australia said on Monday that terrorists were planning attacks in Saudi Arabia in the near future, a day after a US move to temporarily shut missions in the country pushed oil prices to record levels.

The spate of warnings over possible militant strikes came just days into the reign of newly enthroned King Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz over the world's top oil exporter, which has been battling Islamist violence for two years.

A Saudi official who did not wish to be named told AFP that "let them issue the warnings they want, as for us we have our own procedures that

we follow in order to confront and prevent any terrorist operation."

Officers, backed by military vehicles, enforced strict security measures at foreign residential compounds and the diplomatic neighbourhood where most western embassies and their staff reside in Riyadh, an AFP correspondent said.

The US, British and Australian embassies are located within the heavily-protected diplomatic neighbourhood.

Heavily-armed soldiers manned two checkpoints at the entrance of the Hay al-Wahidain, the diplomatic neighbourhood, to check vehicles and identity cards of passengers.

"Security has been heightened at the diplomatic neighbourhood ... and this usually takes places after security warnings of terrorist acts," said an Arab diplomat who did not wish to be identified.

2 UN officials singled out for taking kickbacks

REUTERS, United Nations

The former head of the UN oil-for-food programme, Benon Sevan, was accused on Monday of receiving nearly \$150,000 in kickbacks, and another UN official was charged of pocketing hundreds of thousands of dollars from UN contractors.

The UN-established Independent Inquiry Committee, headed by former US Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker, said in its third interim report that Sevan, who ran the \$67 billion humanitarian programme for Iraq, and Alexander Yakovlev, a former UN purchasing officer, should be prosecuted.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan lifted both men's diplomatic immunity and Yakovlev was arrested on the orders of federal prosecutors of the US Southern District of New York.

Yakovlev immediately pleaded

guilty to wire fraud, conspiracy to commit wire fraud and money laundering arising from getting "several hundred thousand dollars," the federal complaint said.

He was released on bail. Quick guilty pleas are often an indication of cooperation with prosecutors.

The Volcker panel, in its report, accused Yakovlev of pocketing more than \$950,000 from contractors not connected with the oil-for-food program. But it said he tried to solicit a bribe on one contract bid for the program.

The report was the first to accuse UN officials of outright corruption in connection with the programme.

"These are senior officers of the United Nations," South African Judge Richard Goldstone, a commissioner on the panel told Reuters. "It is serious for any organisation to have senior officials benefiting illegally."

Annan's chief of staff, Mark Malloch Brown, told a news confer-

ence that the United Nations last month had alerted the US Attorney of wrongdoing by Yakovlev and was working with the Manhattan District Attorney's office on complaints against Sevan.

The Volcker report said Sevan's finances had been "precarious" before the alleged wrongdoing. Sevan has vigorously denied the charges.

The Volcker panel was commissioned by Annan to examine charges of corruption in the program, designed to ease the impact on ordinary Iraqis of UN sanctions imposed in August 1990 after Baghdad's troops invaded Kuwait.

The program began in December 1996 and ended in 2003, when the United States invaded Iraq and ousted President Saddam Hussein, who himself had skimmed off money on illegal oil sales and kickbacks, most of them outside the programme.

Anti-Sikh riot report in India kicks up storm

REUTERS, New Delhi

Parliament was disrupted yesterday as rival lawmakers clashed over a report on anti-Sikh riots in 1984 which named ruling Congress party leaders in connection with the violence in which nearly 3,000 Sikhs died.

Opposition lawmakers want the government to take action against a junior minister, Jagdish Tytler, who the report said may have instigated rioters after then prime minister Indira Gandhi was killed by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984.

But the Congress party-led coalition government headed by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, himself a Sikh, said it would take no action against Tytler as the panel had found no conclusive evidence against him. Tytler has denied the charges.

The inquiry report by retired judge G.T. Nanavati, which was presented in parliament on Monday, probed one of India's worst religious riots, which broke out across the north of the country after Gandhi was assassinated on Oct. 31, 1984.

Media reports and human rights groups say the Congress party -- which was ruling the country at the time in 1984 -- had a hand in organising the killings, a charge denied by the party.

On Tuesday, opposition deputies -- including members of a small Sikh

party -- demanded an immediate debate on the report in the lower house, but the speaker said a time for such discussions must first be agreed.

"I deeply mourn the occasion (the riots)," speaker Somnath Chatterjee said as opposition lawmakers shouted anti-government slogans. He adjourned the house until Wednesday.

The upper house was also adjourned over the report.

Anger spilled on to the streets of the capital where dozens of Sikh protesters shouted "hang the killers" in a noisy demonstration against the Congress party in which they complained that the report had been watered down.

The demonstrators, some holding traditional spears, tried to break through police barricades. "You police are dogs. Where were you when Sikhs were being slaughtered?" a sobbing protester in a blue turban shouted at police officers.

The report said Delhi's police were passive spectators to the killing of Sikhs for over three days.

The demonstrators also slammed Singh, saying he had betrayed his own community. "He has done nothing for the Sikhs. He is just a Congress puppet," said Sattu Singh, a mattress maker, who lost his mother and brother in the riots.

\$65m stolen in Brazil's biggest bank heist

AFP, Brasilia

Thieves tunneled into a Brazilian Central Bank branch to steal 65 million dollars, officials said Monday. The country's biggest-ever bank heist was one of the largest in the world.

Thieves penetrated the Banco Central branch in the northeastern city of Fortaleza over the weekend after digging an 80-meter (260-foot) tunnel, the bank said in a statement.

They carted out 13.5 tonnes in notes without setting off alarms, police said.

"There were movement sensors in the safe and security cameras, which were not activated," police said.

Police said the thieves appeared to have made off with at least 65 million dollars.

Banco Central said the robbers opened five containers with 50-real notes, each worth 21.60 dollars.

The robbers operated from a nearby house where they created a fictitious gardening company, which allowed them to get rid of earth they dug without raising suspicion, police said. The tunnel was four meters (13 feet) underground.

Brazil's previous record bank heist took place in 1999, when robbers made off with 37 million reais (16 million in today's dollars) from Banespa bank in Sao Paulo, according to Folha Online.

Palestinians urged to hold fire during Gaza pullout

AFP, Gaza City

Mahmud Abbas called on the Palestinian people yesterday to show the world they deserved their independence by ensuring that this month's Israeli pullout from the Gaza Strip takes place free of violence.

"The withdrawal must take place in a responsible manner," the Palestinian Authority president said in a keynote speech at the parliament eight days ahead of the scheduled start of the pullout.

"This is a shared responsibility, not just of the Palestinian Authority but the responsibility of all our people to maintain security in a civilised manner so we can reassure the world and send out a message that we deserve our state."

Abbas, who has been a consistent critic of the armed Palestinian uprising, reiterated appeals for hardline factions such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad to refrain from firing rockets during and after the pullout.

"This must stop so that we can focus on security and economy," Abbas said. "When the occupation is lifted, weapons should no longer be seen on the streets."

Despite a de-facto truce agree-

ment, some militants have continued to fire home-made rockets on Israeli targets outside Gaza.

Israeli officials have said they will not hesitate to interrupt the pullout operation to respond to attacks from militants and warned of the risk of civilian casualties.

Israel is due to uproot the 8,000 settlers from Gaza and several hundred residents living in four northern West Bank settlements from August 17, the first time it has ever withdrawn from occupied Palestinian territory.

While the Palestinians have welcomed the prospect of an Israeli withdrawal from any parts of the occupied territories, they are also wary that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon will try and use the Gaza pullout to enable him to keep hold of large West Bank settlement blocs.

Abbas said that he had raised these fears during a summit meeting with US President George W. Bush in May.

"Mr Bush listened to us ... and said that any change to the borders should be done as a result of an agreement between the two sides."



Residents pray before the Peace statue during the 60th Nagasaki Peace Ceremony at the Peace Park in Nagasaki city yesterday. Nagasaki is marking the 60th anniversary of atomic bombing on August 9.

Nagasaki urges US to give up nukes

AFP, Nagasaki

Nagasaki yesterday marked 60 years after becoming the second city to suffer atomic attack with a call for the United States to give up its nuclear arsenal.

Three days after the world's first atomic bombing reduced Hiroshima to ruins, a second bomb, code-named "Fat Man" after Winston Churchill, hit the hilly southern port of Nagasaki, killing more than 70,000 people.

Some 6,000 people including Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi began with a minute of silent prayer at 11:02 am (0202 GMT), 60 years to the moment after the plutonium bomb was dropped on August 9, 1945.

"To the citizens of America: we understand your anger and anxiety over the memories of horror of the 9/11 terrorist attacks," Nagasaki Mayor Ichio Ito told the ceremony in the city's peace park.

"Yet, is your security actually enhanced by your government's policies of maintaining 10,000 nuclear weapons, of carrying out repeated sub-critical nuclear tests, and of pursuing the development of new 'mini' nuclear weapons?" Ito asked.

"We are confident that the vast majority of you desire in your hearts the elimination of nuclear arms."

GI, 16 militants killed in Afghan clash

AFP, Kabul

One US soldier and at least 16 militants were killed in a clash after insurgents attacked a patrol of Afghan and US troops in southern Afghanistan, the American military said yesterday.

The firefight occurred on Monday in the Deh Chopan district of Zabul province, which has been the scene of violence linked to Taliban and al-Qaeda militants in recent weeks.

"The service member was killed when an Afghan and US patrol conducting operations aimed at routing enemy forces from the Deh Chopan area came under an unprovoked attack by enemy forces with small-arms fire and rocket propelled grenades," the US military said in a statement.

US warplanes and other coalition aircraft "arrived at the scene and provided continuous close air support," the statement added.

"Battle damage assessment is currently ongoing. Initial estimates

indicate at least 16 enemy forces were killed. Non-combatants were not involved in the attack," it added.

Militants from the Taliban, whose fundamentalist Islamic regime was toppled by a US-led invasion in late 2001, have stepped up their attacks on American and government targets ahead of key parliamentary elections in September.

Nearly 800 people have been killed so far this year, compared with only 700 in the whole of 2004. Separately on Monday, an Afghan doctor was shot and killed by suspected Taliban rebels in the restive southeastern province of Ghazni, the latest attack on medical workers by the ousted Islamic movement.

Gunmen opened fire on a clinic in the Andar district and killed Mohammed Hashim, said interior ministry spokesman Lutfullah Mashal.



Indian motorists wait in a queue for fuel supplies outside a petrol station in Imphal yesterday as an economic blockade of the north-eastern state of Manipur continues. Motorists have been spending more than 24 hours queuing for petrol which is rationed to two litres per two-wheeler and five litres per four wheeler every three days.

Insurgents kill GI, 27 Iraqis

AFP, Baghdad

Insurgents killed at least 27 Iraqis and one US soldier as a crucial meeting of top politicians began yesterday to hammer out a deal on the country's new constitution ahead of an August 15 deadline.

An intense sandstorm that brought Baghdad to a standstill Monday had delayed the meeting for more than 24 hours as many leaders were unable to reach the Iraqi capital.

The meeting started late in the afternoon, an official statement said.

It was due to involve "five to seven" top leaders, including Prime Minister Ibrahim Jaafari, his spokesman Leith Kubba had earlier told reporters.

"There will then be a larger meeting of some 30 to 35 leaders" to consider details of the proposals, Kubba added.

"We are waiting for Mr. Barzani to come," US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad told AFP early Tuesday afternoon. "The weather has been the factor impeding his arrival," he added.

A severe sandstorm, which reduced visibility to less than 100 yards (meters), forced meetings to be cancelled Monday and delayed them further Tuesday morning.

Kubba provided no details on the talks, but said the question of the rights of women "much debated by the western press" was "not a great problem."

Even as he Kubba spoke, a small group of ultra-conservative Iraqi women mounted a counter demonstration to one organized by some 50 of their liberal opponents in central Baghdad on Tuesday over the issue of women's rights.

"We want the constitutional drafting committee to hear our voices," said Environment Minister Narmine Othman, associated with the liberal group. "We fear that some articles (in the constitution) will be unjust for women."

Counter-demonstrator Fadia Al-Aaraji carried a banner stating the rights of Iraqi women were guaranteed by Islam.

"We are demanding that the Iraqi people's Islamic identity be respected and included in the constitution," she said.

Other key issues involve the role of Islam and scope of federalism, with Kurds insisting on maximum autonomy for their northern region, while Shias and Sunni Arabs are divided over whether other provinces should also get autonomy.

Khalilzad assured reporters that while the Kurds wanted autonomy, they would not be pushing for independence.

"Barzani himself has said that while the Kurds have the right to self-determination they have decided not to exercise that ... the issue is not on their agenda," the ambassador said.

"There are some issues over the role of Islam and whether it should be 'a main source' or 'the main source' of legislation," he also said.