

MUSHARRAF SAYS

India aiding rebels in Baluchistan

REUTERS, New Delhi

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf accused India of arming and financing rebels in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan, charges that could push back a peace process between the two nuclear-armed neighbours.

Pakistan's army launched a crackdown against Baluchistan militants after a Dec. 14 rocket attack while Musharraf was visiting the region. Baluchi nationalists say 200 people have since been killed, but Pakistan has not commented on casualties.

Though India and Pakistan are involved in a two-year peace process that has seen economic, sporting, cultural and transport links

improve, tensions remain over Kashmir, their main dispute.

When asked whether India was backing armed Baluchi rebels, Musharraf told TV channel CNN-IBN in an interview aired on Sunday: "There are lot of indications, yes indeed."

There is a "lot of financial support, support in kind being given to those who are anti-government, anti-me and to those feudal people who are anti-national," the Pakistani leader said.

A spat erupted this month after India expressed concerns about the situation in Pakistan's southwestern province of Baluchistan.

India on Saturday rejected earlier Pakistani charges of involvement in Baluchistan.

"As far as any allegations about India's interference in Baluchistan are concerned, I would like to categorically reject these allegations as being utterly baseless and false," Indian Foreign Ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna said.

Musharraf said he hoped the dispute over Baluchistan would not hurt the peace process between the two nuclear-armed neighbours, which have fought three wars.

"It should not be a setback to the process of dialogue of resolution (of disputes).

Opposition parties in Baluchistan accuse the government of using helicopter gunships and warplanes to rocket and bomb civilians in northern Baluchistan.

New Delhi last month said it had noted with concern reports of the use of gunships and jet fighters in Baluchistan and hoped Islamabad would show "restraint".

Musharraf said he has "annoyed" and "disappointed" by New Delhi's statements and alleged actions in Baluchistan.

"It's a direct interference in our internal affairs," he told CNN-IBN.

Earlier a call by Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf for the demilitarisation of three cities in Indian Kashmir has found favour in the restive region, despite being rejected outright by New Delhi.

Taliban scorn Karzai offer to Mullah Omar

REUTERS, Kabul

A deputy for fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar yesterday rejected an offer from Afghanistan's president, Hamid Karzai, to "get in touch" if he wanted peace.

Mullah Obaidullah Akhund, defence minister in the Taliban government ousted by US-backed forces in 2001, called Karzai an "American puppet" who should be tried in an Islamic court.

"Hamid Karzai, the American agent, has turned Afghanistan into an American base and has killed thousands of Afghans," Akhund told Reuters by satellite phone from a secret location.

Karzai told the Associated Press news agency on Sunday he was willing to listen to what Omar had to say, but warned the Taliban leader would first have to account for his actions.



A frame grab taken from Iranian Al-Alam TV shows the wreckage of the Falcon military plane that crashed yesterday near Orumiye in northwestern Iran near the Turkish border. Several top Iranian military officers were among at least 11 people killed in the crash, the second such crash in a month.

Northern India shivers as cold wave continues

AFP, New Delhi

Northern India woke to another icy morning yesterday as an extreme cold spell continued and farmers expressed fears that frost will damage their winter crops.

Residents of New Delhi, who experienced the coldest day in 70 years Sunday with the minimum temperature at 0.2 degrees Celsius (32.36 degrees Fahrenheit), found little respite Monday.

The temperature was a slightly warmer 1.4 degrees Celsius overnight but freezing winds kept most people shivering and huddled around electric heaters or bonfires.

The city's estimated 150,000 homeless face even more misery as the weather office has warned the big chill will continue.

The northern provinces of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh have all been gripped by the cold wave, weather office officials said, with the number of deaths linked directly to the cold nearing 150.



Indian train passengers wrapped in warm clothes wait on a platform of a railway station in New Delhi yesterday. India's capital continued to reel under intense cold conditions with the minimum temperature remaining below two degrees Celsius for the second consecutive day.

Sharon exit opens door for Peres comeback

AFP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's likely exit from political life has opened the door to yet another possible comeback by his erstwhile rival Shimon Peres, reprising his familiar role as Israel's elder statesman.

Little more than a month ago, the 82-year-old Peres announced he was finished with party politics after announcing he was rescinding his life-long membership of the centre-left Labour, endorsing Sharon in the process.

Although the Nobel prize winner said he wanted to continue

working towards peace with the Palestinians, it had been assumed that his declaration that "my party activity has come to an end" would herald an end to record-breaking parliamentary career which began in 1959.

However the fierce ambition which has guided Peres throughout his career still appears to be burning brightly. He told an interview with CNN on Sunday that he would probably be on the list of candidates from Sharon's new Kadima party fighting a general election on March 28.

He also gave his backing to acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert

in a move designed to ensure that he is placed high up the list of candidates.

Peres, a two-time former premier, said he had thought about his future political role "and the answer is not to be a prime minister."

"When you're a prime minister you have to spend so much time on issues that are not necessarily connected to peace," he said.

"I want to devote whatever time and energy I have for the peace process."

Hajj pilgrims seek spiritual high

AFP, Makkah

Over two million Muslim pilgrims started moving after sunrise yesterday towards the plain of Arafat southeast of Makkah to perform the central rite of hajj, the annual pilgrimage to the holy city.

"I dipped my hands and feet in red henna to show how happy I am to be with Allah. I am all His today," said Zeinab Rifai, 69, from Banha, north of Cairo.

She slept in Arafat overnight with two other elderly female companions inside a small nylon camping tent.

Unlike the great majority of white-clad pilgrims, Rifai wore a flower print dress and a purple headscarf. Holding her worry beads, she raised her orange-coloured hands towards the sky in prayers and supplication as tears rolled down her wrinkled face.

The majority of pilgrims how-

ever started arriving after sunrise in Arafat, a small plain some 250 metres (800 feet) above sea level encircled by mountains.

They had spent the night in the valley of Mina to the north in tents or camped out with blankets and mats on the streets.

Pilgrims streamed on foot into Arafat through several wide pedestrian lanes or were carried by bus as thousands of Saudi policemen and security force members directed traffic.

"Go, go, go," shouted policemen over loudspeakers as the sounds of sirens and the din of the massed worshippers filled the morning air.

Tracing a journey made by Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM) more than 1,400 years ago and following a tradition they believe was laid down by Abraham before him, pilgrims will gather in the afternoon for an emotional assembly in Arafat.

Maoist threats will not delay polls: Nepal

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's chief election commissioner said yesterday that long-delayed municipal elections set for February would not be postponed despite a threat from Maoist rebels to disrupt polling.

Keshav Raj Rajbhandari said filing of nominations for thousands of positions on 58 municipal councils in towns and cities across the Himalayan nation would begin on January 26, with voting to be held in

all constituencies on February 8. Only 1.9 million out of Nepal's 26 million people are eligible to vote in the municipal polls.

The anti-monarchy Maoists, who have been fighting for a decade to turn Nepal into a communist state, have threatened to take "special action" against election officials or candidates.

In the past, the rebels have kidnapped, beaten or killed those who disobey them.

In his first comments since the Maoists ended a four-month unilateral ceasefire last week, Rajbhandari said voters would be safe despite the rebels' threat to focus their attacks on the elections.

"We have discussed this (security) with the government. And they have assured us that the security will be managed so that the elections are held safely," Rajbhandari told Reuters in his heavily guarded office in the heart of the capital, Kathmandu.

Israel allows some polls campaign in Jerusalem

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel is allowing candidates for Palestinian legislative elections on January 25 to campaign in Arab East Jerusalem as long as they do not belong to militant groups, Internal Security Minister Gideon Ezra said yesterday.

Palestinians demand political rights in East Jerusalem, which they want as capital of a future state. Israel calls all the city its capital -- a status not recognized abroad -- and barred Palestinian candidates when campaigning began last week.

The dispute led to a call by the United States, sponsor of a Middle East peace "road map," for Israel to allow Jerusalem Palestinians to have access to the parliamentary ballot.

"It has been decided to allow electioneering in Jerusalem by candidates who do not represent groups still carrying arms, such as Hamas," Ezra told Israel Radio, referring to an Islamic militant group spearheading a 5-year-old Palestinian uprising.

Lanka vows tough line on terror

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president yesterday vowed tough measures to prevent "terror attacks" that undermine an already troubled ceasefire with Tamil Tiger rebels as officials reported three more deaths in the embattled east.

President Mahinda Rajapakse told diplomats that his government will take "all necessary measures to deter further terror attacks," his office said in a statement.

Diplomats from the quartet known as "co-chairs," or the entities that helped raise money in support of the island's peace bid, met the president in the wake of Saturday's suicide bombing of a navy gunboat by a suspected Tamil Tiger official.

The attack that killed 15 sailors was the worst single loss suffered by security forces since a Norwegian-brokered truce went into effect in 2002 and sparked fears that the country could slip back to war.

"The ambassadors of the co-chairs expressed their strong appreciation of the restraint and responsibility shown by the government in the face of escalating attacks by the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam)," the statement said.

It said the president told the diplomats from the United States, the European Union, Norway and Japan that Colombo was ready to open peace talks with the Tigers at any time, but was awaiting word from the guerrillas.