



Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (L) salutes as he arrives at a meeting with members of the US House International Relations Committee Thursday on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. The United States threatened to bomb Pakistan "back to the stone age" unless it cooperated in the US-led war on terror, President Pervez Musharraf said in an interview released on September 21.

Chavez continues anti-Bush harangue

REUTERS, New York

After branding President Bush as the devil at the United Nations, Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez took his anti-imperialist rhetoric to Harlem on Thursday and ridiculed the Texan as a puffed-up John Wayne wannabe.

And the crowds -- a carefully selected group of leftists and liberals -- loved it.

Chavez stunned delegates at the UN General Assembly on Wednesday by calling Bush "the devil himself" and saying he left the smell of sulphur hanging in the chamber from his appearance the previous day.

He received an ovation at the United Nations, but nothing like the raucous and upbeat receptions later Wednesday at a free university and again on Thursday at a Baptist church in the predominantly black neighbourhood of Harlem.

Pak-US relationship getting shaky

AP, Islamabad

Threats of US military action inside Pakistan to counter al-Qaeda militants have highlighted the shaky relationship between these two key players in the war on terror.

President Bush said this week that he would "absolutely" order military operations inside Pakistan if Osama bin Laden or other top terrorists were found to be hiding here.

Pakistan's leader, Gen Pervez Musharraf, also said the United States had threatened to blow his Islamic nation "back to the Stone Age" if he didn't switch his support from Afghanistan's pro-al-Qaeda Taliban regime to the American-led war on terror following the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

"These comments only expose how tenuous and fragile Pakistan's relationship is with the United States,"

Pakistani analyst and retired army general Talat Masood said on Friday. "They prove a lot more has to be done to establish a relationship on a much more solid foundation."

Bush, who meets Musharraf on Friday at the White House, has repeatedly praised Pakistan for arresting hundreds of al-Qaeda operatives inside this South Asian nation, the world's second-biggest Islamic country with a population of 160 million.

But the United States has also said Pakistan can do more to prevent militants crossing from its tribal regions into Afghanistan, where Taliban-fanned violence has reached its deadliest proportions since the American-led invasion that toppled the hard-line regime.

On Thursday, Pakistan's government vowed to not let foreign forces enter its territory, a day after Bush told CNN he would order American

Saudis maintaining secret contacts with Israel

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel and Saudi Arabia have been conducting secret negotiations, the top-selling Hebrew daily reported on its front page yesterday.

"Secret negotiations between Israel and Saudi Arabia," headlined Yediot Aharonot, reporting that contacts had begun during the recent 34-day war in Lebanon between Israel and Shia militant group Hezbollah.

Asked whether there were secret talks going on with Saudi Arabia, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert was quoted as saying: "I don't have to answer every question".

Olmert was quoted as saying, however, he was "very impressed with various acts and statements connected with Saudi Arabia, both those that were made publicly and others as well."

"I am very impressed with King Abdullah's insight and sense of responsibility," he added, when asked about whether he regarded a Saudi peace initiative favourably.

Nepal tightens civilian control over the army

Nepalis evenly divided over monarchy's future

AFP, REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal's interim parliament passed yesterday a new law imposing tighter civilian control over the army, which was once fiercely loyal to the nation's royal family.

Accusations such as corruption, rape and murder against members of the army will now be heard by civilian courts instead of by military ones.

"MPs unanimously passed the military bill in Friday's sitting, marking a major breakthrough in the democratisation of the Nepal Army," Pradeep Gyawali, a government minister told AFP.

Earlier this year, parliament stripped King Gyanendra of his control over the 90,000-strong armed forces after popular street protests forced him to end 14 months of direct rule.

It also removed "royal" from the army's name, turning it into the Nepal Army.

Nepal's multi-party government and rebel Maoists have been observing a ceasefire for nearly five months since the monarch restored parliament.

Also under the legislation, army recruitment will be carried out through public examinations instead of by the army.

"Traditionally, the army has conducted its activities in a very confidential manner. With the new bill, the Nepal Army should become more transparent," said member of parliament Lilamani Pokhrel.

But Nepal's rebel Maoists who are engaged in a slow-moving peace dialogue with the government aimed at ending their 10-year insurgency said that wider consultation was needed before passing the legislation.

Meanwhile, Nepalis are evenly divided over the future of the monarchy, with nearly half wanting the king to play no role in the Himalayan nation in future, a poll showed yesterday.

Nepal's King Gyanendra seized absolute power last year but was forced to hand it back to an interim government in April after weeks of pro-democracy protests. Since then he has been stripped of most of his remaining powers.

Thai junta threatens to shut down media for violating new rules

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's new military government threatened yesterday to shut down media that violate tough new regulations, including bans on radio call-in shows and limits on websites and text messaging.

The new regulations limit the public's ability to express themselves in the media, but did not include limits on newspapers or other publications.

"We have asked for cooperation, but violators ... could face a shut down of their businesses," Thaneerat Siritachana, the technology ministry official tasked with enforcing the new rules, told AFP.

"SMS and phone-in programs, as well as websites that allow readers to express their ideas and opinions have been banned," Thaneerat said.

The junta suspended the constitution and imposed martial law after taking power from former prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra late Tuesday. They said they would block "disinformation" deemed harmful to the junta, and have blacked out CNN and BBC reports on the coup.

Under the new rules, radio stations are prohibited from airing phone calls from listeners, even on topics as benign as traffic reports.

Television stations have also been barred from broadcasting text messages sent in from viewers' cell phones, a popular feature on several Thai television programs.

Websites, especially those with discussion boards, have been ordered to remove messages that refer to the monarchy, according to the Nation newspaper.

They are also banned from posting messages that are "detrimental to peace and morality, and webmasters must take responsibility for all messages posted on their site," the paper said.

Thai media executives met for nearly two hours Thursday with military officials to discuss the new rules, raising serious concerns about the new limits on press freedom.

"I want to know how free people are to express their opinions," an official from Chula radio, a university broadcaster, told the generals during the meeting.

"We have many critics and academics who express their opinions on our programmes," he said, worrying that dissenting voices would be silenced.



A Thai student shouts slogans for democracy during a protest against the country's coup leaders in front of a shopping mall in Bangkok yesterday defying the junta's ban on political rallies.

Myanmar junta leader hands over control of armed forces

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's junta leader Than Shwe has handed over control of the armed forces to one of his top deputies but will remain head of state, two sources close to the military said yesterday.

The military's second in command, Maung Aye, also handed over his position to a regional commander, marking the first change in the top two military posts since 1988, the sources said.

Both men are keeping their posts as the top two leaders of the governing State Peace and Development Council, as the junta calls itself.

"The two top posts of the military have been handed over to Shwe Mann and Thura Myint Aung," said one source close to the military leadership.

"The two posts were handed to a new generation of military leaders," he added.



An Indian rickshaw puller and a cyclist cross a waterlogged street in Kolkata yesterday. Some 106 people died and hundreds of fishermen were missing after a storm intensified in the Bay of Bengal and battered India and Bangladesh badly.

Indian general court-martialled for stealing army booze

AFP, New Delhi

India's million-plus army has court-martialled one of its generals on charges of stealing liquor meant for frontline troops, the defence ministry said yesterday.

A military court stripped major general Gul Iqbal Singh Multani of his rank and sentenced him to three years of imprisonment for commandeering four truck-loads of liquor and trying to sell it in the civilian market earlier this year, it said.

"The army has sent out a loud and clear message that corruption has no place in the forces," the ministry said in a statement, but added that Multani's sentencing was subject to confirmation by army chief General JJ Singh.

Officials said the stolen liquor, meant for sale to troops at a subsidised rate, was seized after the laden trucks were intercepted by the police in the northern Indian town of Dehradun.

Defence ministry sources said 16 other officers who worked in Multani's elite 6th Mountain Division were also facing disciplinary action.

Abbas seeks UN action to implement plan for Palestinian state

AFP, United Nations

Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas on Thursday urged the UN Security Council to set up an "effective mechanism" to ensure an international blueprint for a Palestinian state is carried out.

He made the comments shortly before the 15-member council was due, at the request of Arab countries, to hold a rare ministerial meeting here to discuss how to revive the stalled Middle East peace process.

"The roadmap (leading to a Palestinian state) exists and was endorsed by (UN Security Council) Resolution 1515," Abbas told AFP in his New York hotel. "We are asking for a mechanism to activate this resolution."

Resolution 1515, passed in 2003, endorsed the Middle East roadmap meant to lead to the cre-

ation of a Palestinian state living side by side with Israel and called on the parties to fulfil their obligations under the plan.

But the roadmap, drafted by the Middle East Quartet -- the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations -- has made virtually no progress since its launch in 2003.

"The international community must choose the mechanism it deems appropriate, whether through the UN or the Quartet," said the Palestinian president.

"We are not setting any conditions but we want a serious instrument to revive this plan," he added.

The council, to be attended by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and UN chief Kofi Annan, was to start at 3:30 pm (1930 GMT).