

Musharraf U-turn on independence bewilders Kashmiri separatists

AFP, Srinagar

Muslim separatists in Indian Kashmir yesterday said they were dismayed at an interview by Pakistan's president in which he said independence for the region was not an option in peace talks with New Delhi.

President Pervez Musharraf said in an interview to New Delhi Television made available late Monday that he was opposed to independence for Kashmir, and India and Pakistan would have to compromise over the disputed territory.

"Yes, we are against independence" for Kashmir, Musharraf told the Indian NDTV news channel.

The Himalayan region is claimed

by Islamabad and New Delhi and has triggered two of the three wars between the rivals since 1947. The two sides have held talks since January 2004 to resolve the dispute.

Kashmiri separatists claim the former kingdom has always been a separate region, and voiced concerns Tuesday that this was not an issue in the talks between New Delhi and Islamabad.

"It is not a good thing," said Shabir Shah, a leading separatist in Indian Kashmir said of Musharraf's comments.

"Independence can be one of the options to resolve the long-pending dispute. No one should rule that out," Shah told AFP.

Shah, who has spent more than 20 years in different prisons for

espousing Kashmir's independence, said only "people of Kashmir can decide what they want".

"Pakistan has maintained the Kashmir dispute will be resolved as per the aspirations of Kashmiris, and I hope there is no change in that stand," said Shah, who heads the Democratic Freedom Party.

While most moderate separatists want independence for Kashmir, hardliners and militants want to see Indian Kashmir as part of Pakistan.

"We always welcome suggestions, but what could be the final solution should be left for the people to decide," said Javed Mir of the pro-independence Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF).

US plans to colonise moon in 2020

AFP, Washington

The United States plans to set up a colony on the south pole of the moon around 2020 as a base for further manned exploration of the solar system, Nasa announced Monday.

The project, which would send a man back to the lunar surface for the first time since 1972, is designed as a long-term joint effort of 14 of the world's space agencies, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration said.

Nasa plans to set up a solar-powered base on the moon's south pole that, after construction is completed, could serve as a forward base for manned missions to Mars.

US President George W Bush declared in 2004 a vision of sending a manned exploratory mission to the red planet.

'World's richest 2pc own half of global wealth'

AFP, Helsinki

The world's richest two percent of adults own more than half of global household wealth, while half the world's population own only one percent, a UN report published yesterday showed.

"The study finds wealth to be more unequally distributed than income across countries," Anthony Shorrocks, director of the Helsinki-based World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University (UNU-WIDER) that published the report, said at a press conference.

The report, entitled "The World Distribution of Household Wealth", found that assets of 2,200 dollars (1,650 euros) or more placed a household in the top half of world wealth distribution in 2000.

Kolkata bans hand-pulled rickshaws

AFP, Kolkata

The West Bengal capital Kolkata has banned hand-pulled rickshaws after a debate that raged for more than a year and ended in a vote boycotted by the opposition.

"In the 21st century it is not right for a human being to pull another human being. It is a shame for our city and state," West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee told the state legislature ahead of the vote Monday.

The bill passed late Monday and now awaits the ceremonial signing by the state governor.

"When I go to Delhi, Mumbai or abroad, I am asked how long Kolkata will have hand-pulled rickshaws. This is inhuman. We should have done this much earlier," said Bhattacharjee.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian rickshaw-puller pulls his passengers on a road in Kolkata yesterday.

Typhoon kills 50 in Vietnam

REUTERS, Ho Chi Minh City

Typhoon Durian swept southern Vietnam with strong winds and heavy rains on Tuesday, killing at least 50 people, sinking hundreds of fishing boats and damaging houses, days after it battered the Philippines.

State-run Vietnam Television showed footage of a hospital receiving injured patients in Ba Ria Vung Tau province, which recorded 23 deaths, the largest number in the country. The roofs of houses were ripped off, electrical pylons and trees felled.

"It's the hardest storm we've ever felt," one resident near commercial hub Ho Chi Minh City told VTV. One of Vietnam's deputy prime ministers Le Thanh Hai said the government would help residents rebuild their homes.

At least 50 people were killed and 46 reported missing in five provinces -- Ba Ria Vung Tau, Ben Tre, Binh Thuan, Vinh Long and Tien Giang -- and a commune on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City.



PHOTO: AFP

Soldiers force back the media as a truckload of around 30 soldiers arrived and cleared a large group of journalists and onlookers in front of the residence of Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase, blocking the view of the house where the premier was meeting with key cabinet ministers in Suva yesterday.

C'wealth 'likely' to suspend Fiji

AFP, London

The Commonwealth is likely to suspend Fiji's membership later this week after its latest coup, the grouping's secretary general Don McKinnon said yesterday, condemning the military takeover.

Foreign ministers from nine Commonwealth countries will meet in London on Friday to discuss the situation after Fiji's military commander seized control of the country -- the former British colony's fourth coup in two decades.

"The likelihood of Fiji being suspended is very high," McKinnon told reporters, adding that the Commonwealth "unreservedly condemns any military action against a democratically elected government".

Foreign ministers from Canada, Britain, Lesotho, Tanzania, Papua New Guinea, St Lucia, Malta, Malaysia and Sri Lanka will meet in the Commonwealth Secretariat in London to consider suspension and other action against Fiji.

NUKE DEAL WITH INDIA US Congress preparing final legislation

AFP, Washington

The US Congress on Monday began preparing final legislation to give India access to civilian nuclear technology amid concerns that inclusion of sensitive provisions may break the landmark deal.

The House of Representatives and Senate this week will reconcile their bills on the nuclear deal into uniform legislation to be put before the two chambers for approval again and signed into law by President George W Bush, officials said.

"Work will begin immediately with the intention of completing all action by week's end," Bill Frist, the Republican majority leader in the Senate, said Monday as he appointed five senators from both sides of the political divide to work on the single legislation.

Indian officials have expressed concern that some of the provisions proposed contradicted the spirit of the original agreement first reached between Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh in July last year.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf (L) salutes after delivering his speech as Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (R) looks on at the Women Convention 2006 in Islamabad yesterday.

Pakistan to ban forced marriages: Musharraf

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf yesterday said the government would shortly push through new legislation aimed at empowering women and outlawing forced marriages.

The laws would also ensure women's right to their inheritance, ban the sale of women in the name of marriage and end the age-old practice of marrying women to Koran to deprive them of their share in property, he said.

Musharraf's pledge comes a week after he defied protests by religious fundamentalists and signed into law a "Protection of Women" bill amending the country's Islamic rape legislation.

Fresh fighting kills 19 in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

At least 19 people have been killed in fresh violence in Sri Lanka as peace broker Norway cancelled a meeting with Tamil Tiger rebels, defence officials said yesterday.

Two soldiers and 15 guerrillas were killed in a confrontation in the eastern district of Batticaloa on Monday while 19 troopers were also wounded, the defence ministry said.

Two Muslim civilians were shot dead in the northern town of Vavuniya on Monday evening, officials said.

The reports of fresh fighting came as a top Norwegian envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer cancelled a scheduled meeting Tuesday with the political leadership of the Tigers in

the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi.

Hanssen-Bauer put off the meet after Colombo asked him not to go ahead until the government here reviewed its relations with the Tigers following Friday's suicide bomb attack against defence secretary Gotabaya Rajapakse.

The pro-rebel Tamilnet website said the Sri Lankan government had scuttled the peace initiative by asking Oslo to suspend its contacts with the rebels.

The government is also considering reactivating the tough Prevention of Terrorism Act after the suicide bombing attempt against Rajapakse, the younger brother of President Mahinda Rajapakse.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents clean up a collapsed structure in Ben Tre province in the Mekong river delta after being hit by tropical storm Durian yesterday. At least 50 people died and 12 others are reported missing as the storm battered Vietnam's several southern provinces.