

Musharraf says no regrets over Baluch rebel chief's death

AFP, New Delhi

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf says he has no regrets over the killing of a top rebel leader seen by many as a hero for his long-running confrontation with the central government.

Nawab Akbar Bugti, a Baluch nationalist who was killed in a Pakistani military operation last August, "was operating against the army," Musharraf said in an interview with India's NDTV network aired Friday.

Asked whether he had any regrets about the death of the white-bearded octogenarian, Musharraf replied "no."

Bugti was "maintaining an army of 6,000 people with... latest weapons and challenging the writ of the government, attacking our installations," the president said.

Lanka to buy MiG jets from Ukraine

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka is to bolster its air force by buying four Mig-27s from Ukraine as its battle with the Tamil Tiger rebels intensifies, a government minister said yesterday.

Policy Planning Minister Keheliya Rambukwella said Ukraine would also overhaul four identical ground attack aircraft already with the island's airforce.

The four new planes will be delivered shortly to the airforce, which carries out regular air raids against Tamil rebels in the island's north and east.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian retired Major General SK Awasthi (C) from the 22nd Battalion Punjab regiment salutes martyrs of the Indo-Pak war in 1971 at the 22 Punjab War Memorial at Khasa Military Station, some 15km from Amritsar yesterday. Soldiers of the regiment paid homage to colleagues fallen in the 1971 India-Pakistan war.

# UN signs key Nepali arms monitoring deal

AFP, Kathmandu

The UN representative to Nepal's fledgling peace process signed a crucial agreement yesterday that will see the world body monitor the rebel and government armies.

"We will now immediately form a joint monitoring coordination committee led by the UN," said Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula.

Ian Martin, the UN chief's personal representative to the peace process, signed the accord, which Nepal's government and rebels

signed in late November.

"Some technical wording has been changed, but the sense of the agreement is the same," said Maoist spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara.

The Maoists sealed a historic peace deal with the government in early November, which grants the leftists 73 of 330 seats in an interim government.

In return they agreed to UN supervision of their weapons and soldiers in seven camps.

Martin said that an initial party of

35 UN monitors was due to arrive.

"Recruitment of those 35 is going ahead. I can't tell you exactly when they will be arriving but we hope it will be in the next two to three weeks," he said.

Martin returned from New York Wednesday, where he had briefed Annan and the Security Council on developments in the peace process.

The insurgents controlled large swathes of the countryside and claim to have 35,000 fighters, but other estimates come in at closer to

12,000. In recent weeks they have faced fresh accusations of forcibly recruiting new cadres to swell the figures. The People's Liberation Army has long offered to merge with the 90,000-strong Nepal army, which is also putting weaponry and men under UN monitoring.

The Maoists and an alliance of political parties led mass protests in April that forced King Gyanendra to abandon the absolute rule he said was needed to crush the Maoist rebellion.



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula (L) and Maoist negotiator Krishna Bahadur Mahara (R) hand over a document to United Nations (UN) Secretary General's personal representative to Nepal's peace Process Ian Martin (C) in Kathmandu yesterday. The UN representative to Nepal's fledgling peace process signed a crucial agreement that will see the world body monitor the rebel and government armies.

# Norway fails to secure deal to lift Jaffna siege

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's peace broker Norway failed on Friday to secure an agreement to end a blockade on the Jaffna peninsula where nearly half a million people are trapped by fighting, officials said.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they told a Norwegian envoy to persuade the government to open the land access to the embattled north without conditions.

The government had asked Jon Hanssen-Bauer to secure a deal with the Tigers to allow a convoy of

some 400 trucks to travel through rebel-held territory, but the Tigers rejected a one-off convoy.

Instead, the LTTE political wing leader S. P. Thamilselvan told Hanssen-Bauer the government must open the disputed A-9 highway to Jaffna, as well as another highway to the island's east.

"He asked for the unconditional opening of the A-9 access to Jaffna and the A-15 access to Vaharai (in the east)," LTTE spokesman Rasiah Ilanthiriyar told AFP. "If the government agrees, that would be a confidence-building measure."

There was no immediate com-

ment from the Norwegians, but diplomats close to the process said the envoy failed to end the deadlock.

The defence ministry said the government was not ready to consider the unconditional opening of the highways, fearing the Tigers could use them for military purposes.

The envoy travelled to the rebel-held northern town of Kilinochchi on Friday to discuss faltering peace efforts and the situation in Jaffna, amid fears of full-scale war.

"We are ready with 400 trucks to take supplies to Jaffna and we

asked Mr. Hanssen-Bauer to get agreement from the Tigers for this convoy to go through an area held by them," Policy Planning Minister Keheliya Rambukwella said.

The main road to Jaffna has been cut since heavy fighting erupted along a de facto front line in August. Civilians are living under virtual siege conditions.

More than 3,400 people have died in the ethnic conflict this year as peace talks have collapsed and the rebels have hardened their demands for a separate state.

# Japan mulls support for Indo-US N-deal

AFP, Tokyo

Japan, a key civilian nuclear power, is considering supporting a landmark nuclear deal between India and the US ahead of a visit by the Indian premier next week, an official said yesterday.

A newspaper reported that Japan, the only nation to have been attacked with nuclear weapons, would relay its potentially influential approval of the agreement during a summit with Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh.

But an official said Japan had not yet decided.

"The Japanese government has

continued studying the possibility of supporting the deal between the United States and India, as we are aware of the strategic importance of India," said a foreign ministry official who handles disamament issues.

"But whether to support the deal ultimately depends on developments in US politics and talks between India and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)," he said on condition of anonymity.

Japan's support is considered crucial to allowing India into the Nuclear Suppliers Group that controls the export of nuclear materials to prevent weapons proliferation.

# SE Asian summits suspended

AFP, Manila

Philippine police are investigating the possibility that "terrorists" would try to poison the tap water source of Cebu, where Asian summits have been called off, an official source has said.

All law enforcement agencies in the country were alerted to the supposed threat, said a ranking official of the justice department's National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) on Friday. The source spoke on condition of anonymity.

Word came just before the Philippines announced that next week's Asean and East Asian summits had been postponed, but officials insisted the postponement was due to a tropical storm headed for Cebu.

# US Senators question Iraq panel's strategy

AP, Washington

Senators sharply questioned an Iraq commission's call for a new US war strategy Thursday, saying the Bush administration and Congress must work urgently together to find a more effective approach.

Sen John McCain, R-Arizona, a 2008 presidential hopeful, took strong issue with the commission's call for phasing out the US combat role in Iraq by 2008 and focusing instead more on training and advis-

ing the Iraqi army. He rejected the idea that the Army and Marines cannot spare more combat forces for Iraq duty.

"There's only one thing worse than an over-stressed Army and Marine Corps, and that's a defeated Army and Marine Corps," said McCain, a Vietnam veteran who will become the ranking Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee when the Democrats take control of both houses of Congress in January.

"I believe this is a recipe that will

lead to our defeat sooner or later in Iraq," McCain added.

One of the commission's co-chairmen, former Rep Lee Hamilton, D-Indiana, underscored the urgency of changing course in Iraq, where conditions were described as grave and deteriorating. He was asked at what point the situation there, if not corrected, would be hopeless.

"Well, there certainly is that point, and we're perilously close to that point," he replied.