

Musharraf admits lapses in anti-terror war

Pakistan to fence part of Afghan border

AFP, Rawalpindi

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf said yesterday that some members of the security forces had turned a "blind eye" towards Taliban militants launching attacks in Afghanistan.

But the president angrily rejected allegations, by Afghanistan in particular, that Pakistan's intelligence services or the army were collaborating with the insurgents.

"We had some incidents I know of that in some posts, a blind eye was being turned," Musharraf told a press conference when asked about criticism of Pakistan's cooperation in the US-led "war on terror."

"So similarly I imagine that others may be doing the same."

Musharraf gave the example of a typical checkpoint on the Afghan



Pervez Musharraf

border, saying it was difficult if only two men on guard are faced with a group of "20 well-armed, well-trained and well-motivated people challenging them."

His remarks came two weeks after outgoing US intelligence

director John Negroponte said that Pakistan was harbouring al-Qaeda and Taliban insurgents.

Musharraf became a close US ally in fighting terrorism after the September 11 attacks on the United States but his country -- including the ISI intelligence service -- has been repeatedly accused of helping militants.

"To cast aspersions on the army or ISI is absolutely wrong," he told around 100 journalists at Camp House, his official army residence.

Musharraf said during a visit to the United States in October that he was investigating possible support to the rebels from retired Pakistani intelligence officials. He made no comment on the matter on Friday.

But the president called on Nato and US forces based in Afghanistan to do more to tackle the cross-border movement of militants, adding that Pakistan

could not win the fight against militancy on its own.

"It is also up to Nato, Isaf (international troops) -- and we refuse to take full responsibility for crossing of the border," Musharraf said.

"They must increase their (border) posts and hold the border more strongly."

Musharraf said that Pakistan would fence 35 kilometres (22 miles) of its northwestern border with Afghanistan to stop the movement of Taliban militants.

"We are doing it, we have decided. The movement of logistics has taken place," Musharraf said.

The president said the construction of the fence "will take a few months to execute."

"The area we are fencing at the moment is about 35.2 kilometres in all, they are in seven or eight different pieces," Musharraf said.

Kashmir vows 'iron hand' against custodial killings

AFP, Srinagar

Indian Kashmir promised yesterday to use an "iron hand" against police who kill civilians and claim they are rebels in the hope of getting rewards or promotion.

The pledge came a week after authorities began a probe into the death of a carpenter allegedly shot in a "false encounter" with police in Kashmir, where an Islamic separatist revolt has been raging since 1989.

The victim, Abdul Rahman Padder, was reportedly detained in the summer capital Srinagar in December 2006. He was killed and later described by police as a Pakistani militant.

"It is the government's firm resolve to deal with an iron hand with those policemen responsible for killing of innocents just for getting promotions or rewards," Indian Kashmir chief minister Ghulam Nabi Azad said.

His statements came as police exhumed a second body from a graveyard in Gandherbal, 30km northwest of Srinagar, as thousands of villagers shouted, "Down with police," an AFP photographer said.

Nepali ethnic group sets terms for talks

Day-time curfew slapped in 4 towns

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal must end police action against ethnic Madhesi protesters and create an atmosphere for talks to end protests in which at least 13 people were killed in two weeks, a community leader said yesterday.

Four towns in Nepal were under day-time curfew yesterday as the government set up a three-member talks team to try to end ethnic unrest.

"The committee, comprising three ministers, will start its work from Friday to resolve the Madhesi problem," tourism minister Pradeep Gyawali told AFP.

Two protesters died Thursday in the violence that has swept the Terai plains bordering India in the last two weeks after former rebel Maoists shot and killed a Madhesi protester.

The call by the head of the Madhesi People's Rights Forum

came two days after Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala vowed to turn Nepal into a federal state and to increase representation of ethnic groups in a constituent assembly due to be elected later this year.

Koirala also invited protest leaders for talks with the government in a bid to end the unrest in the southern plains.

"This is positive but incomplete," Upendra Yadav told Reuters. "There should be a proportional election system to give fair representation."

Besides, Yadav said officials and policemen responsible for the killing of what he called peaceful protesters in the Terai should be punished before talks with the government.

"The prime minister's offer is unsatisfactory and does not address our demands completely. We will continue our protests until the genuine demands of the

Madhesi people are met," he added.

Angry demonstrations in the Terai, a narrow strip of fertile plains bordering India and populated mainly by Madhesis, have also left scores wounded and cast a shadow over Nepal's fledgling peace process.

Yadav's forum has led the protests saying "ruling elites" dominated mainly by the people from the hills had undermined them over jobs in the government, police, army and seats in parliament.

The violence has cast a shadow over a landmark peace pact between the government and Maoists ending a decade-old conflict.

Separately, many districts in Nepal's eastern hills were closed on Friday, the third day of a general strike sponsored by ethnic groups living in the mountains and also demanding more seats in the constituent assembly.

Global warming means millions of climate refugees: Experts

AFP, Paris

A decade or so ago, greens coined the term "climate refugees" to describe the future victims of global warming.

Today, experts say such refugees may already number in the millions and could reach 200 million by century's end, stoking tensions and potential for conflict.

They point to Inuit communities literally undercut by melting ice in North America and Greenland, the thirsty people around central Africa's fast-shrinking Lake Chad, and the tens of thousands displaced from New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina.

In the future, these ranks could be swollen by refugees fleeing flooded homes, parched farmland or wrecked economies, from small island states in the Pacific to tropical Africa and the

Mediterranean rim.

"The issue of environmental refugees promises to rank as one of the foremost human crises of our time," said Norman Myers, an Oxford University professor.

What constitutes a refugee can stoke emotional debate.

Critics of the term say it is a politically-charged misnomer, liable to hype or inaccuracy.

Climate refugees, they argue, should not be confused with people who flee their homes because of ecological stress caused by over-population, pollution, abuse of freshwater or other acts of greed, ill judgement or bad planning.

In the case of Katrina, scientists acknowledge a single extreme weather event cannot by itself be pinned to a long-term phenomenon, although they also point out that warmer seas provide raw fuel to make hurricanes more vicious.

Floods cripples Jakarta

REUTERS, Jakarta

Torrential rain triggered floods in the Indonesian capital yesterday, blocking roads and trapping residents in their homes as torrents of muddy water reached a depth of 2 metres (6.7 ft), police and witnesses said.

Floods during the rainy season in Indonesia are common, but the heavy rains this week have caused chaos on roads and shut some train lines around Jakarta, police said.

"There is waist-deep water outside my building," said Rhea Chand, who works in the development sector and lives in South Jakarta.

There had been no reports of deaths so far, but a string of major roads and flyovers in the city were closed, police said.

A major toll road leading to the airport was closed briefly and telephone lines were also down in some parts of the city of 9 million as flooding affected underground cables, officials said.

27 militants killed in Afghan violence

AFP, Kabul

Up to 27 militants were killed yesterday in separate clashes with Afghan police and US-led coalition forces in the latest violence to hit Afghanistan, officials said.

Twenty Taliban were killed after a seven-hour gun battle with a police convoy in the western province of Farah, interior ministry spokesman Zemarai Bashary told AFP.

"Our police engaged the enemy with bravery and killed 20 Taliban," he said, adding that three policemen were also injured during the fighting in the Dasht-i-Bakwa area.

Officials say insurgents have infiltrated Farah province bordering Iran after being defeated by foreign and Afghan troops in the troubled southern provinces last year.

Separately, US-led troops and aircraft attacked a group of militants preparing to launch a rocket attack in the eastern province of Paktika and killed up to seven rebels Friday,

the coalition said in a statement.

The attack happened in Bermal district, a township on the Pakistani border.

"Coalition forces spotted a group setting up rockets and engaged the group with indirect fire... Coalition aircraft dropped two munitions on the site and then another one on five personnel moving into a wadi (valley)," it said.

A ground patrol moved to the site and confirmed that two were killed and another five are suspected dead," the statement said.

A militant was killed and another was injured late Thursday when a bomb they were planting on a roadside went off prematurely in eastern Kunar province, a police official said.

The injured man was detained by US-led troops for questioning, the official told AFP on condition of anonymity.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian youths are taking furniture from the Riot Police headquarter after militants from the ruling Hamas movement occupied it in Gaza City yesterday. 21 Palestinians have died in 24 hours of fighting between warring factions in the Gaza Strip, with shootings, mortar attacks and the storming of a university torpedoing yet another truce.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents waded through a flooded street to a safer place in Jakarta yesterday. Floods blocked roads and railways in Jakarta stranding thousands of people at their homes in low-lying areas as torrential downpours virtually paralysed the Indonesian capital.

US defends military build-up against 'aggressive' Iran

AFP, London

The United States' ambassador to Nato defended yesterday a US military build-up in the Gulf in response to what she said was an increasingly "aggressive" stance by Iran.

Victoria Nuland, in an interview with Sky News television, vowed to defend US interests in the region, where she said many people were "very scared" of the Islamic republic's intentions.

US President George W. Bush recently ordered a second aircraft carrier strike group to the Gulf, raising the US naval presence in the region to its highest level since the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

"For a long time the Iranians have

been increasing their aggressive actions in the region, and they have been counting on the US being too tied down in Iraq to do what we have traditionally done, which is to maintain a strong military presence in the Gulf," Nuland told Sky.

The US is committed to "support our friends and partners in that part of the world, many of whom are very scared, particularly in the Gulf region, of Iran's aggressive behaviour," she said.

"So it is appropriate that we show our presence, that we be there and that we make clear that we are prepared to defend our interests and we are prepared to support our friends."

Six Nepali ministers suffer from jaundice

AFP, Kathmandu

Six Nepali ministers are suffering from jaundice believed to have been caught from contaminated water at the prime minister's residence, Nepal's health minister told AFP Friday.

"Six ministers have been suffering from jaundice over the past few weeks. KP Oli (deputy prime minister and minister for foreign affairs) is quite seriously ill," said Amik Sherchan, a deputy prime minister and minister for health.

Two other ministers remain hospitalised but the other three have been discharged, Sherchan said.

One of the sick ministers, Hridayesh Tripathi, resigned on Monday over the government's handling of recent unrest in the southeast of the country.

US presents new ME peace initiative to Quartet partners

AFP, Washington

The United States presents its latest plan to revive Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts to major power allies Friday, with a flare-up in Palestinian factional violence adding new urgency to the task. US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will press her Russian, European and UN counterparts -- the so-called Quartet of Mideast mediators -- to endorse an accelerated approach to the group's moribund "roadmap" for achieving Palestinian statehood, officials said.

The US initiative involves a two-track effort that would tackle security and counter-terrorism issues which have dominated US diplomacy in the region since 2001 in parallel with long-neglected "final status" questions like the borders of a future Palestinian state, they said.

"Secretary Rice has staked out a position that she's going to be deeply involved in trying to move the process forward," said US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack.

Friday's meeting is "an important get-together at an important moment in that there are opportunities to mobilize support for an energised push to see what the Israelis and Palestinians together can accomplish," he said.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier of Germany -- the

current European Union president -- EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon will join Rice in the talks.

The meeting is timed to precede a rare three-way encounter between Rice, Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert tentatively set for mid-February.

The Quartet, which has not met formally since September, issued the roadmap in 2003, but the three-stage plan that should have led to the creation of a Palestinian state by 2005 has since languished.

Continuing attacks on Israel by Palestinian militants and the surprise election outcome a year ago that gave the Iranian-backed Islamic movement Hamas control over the Palestinian government have blocked movement along the route.

The plan's phased implementation meant crucial "final status" issues like the borders of a Palestinian state, the future of Jerusalem and the fate of Palestinian refugees could not be tackled until Israel's security was guaranteed -- handing rejectionist elements backed by Syria and Iran a virtual veto power over progress.

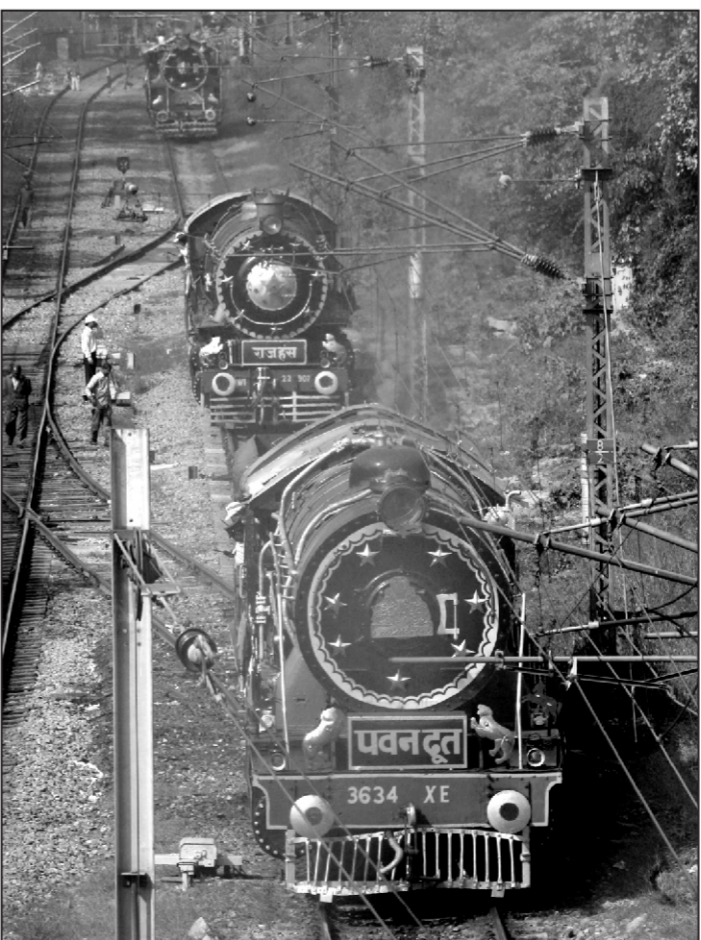


PHOTO: AFP

Steam locomotives puff along during the Heritage Steam Engines Parade in New Delhi yesterday. Steam engines, the Fairy Queen which was built in the UK in 1855, the XE 3634 built in England in 1930, the war class AWE 22907 built in the USA in 1940, the WL-15005 built in the UK in 1955 and given the majestic name of Shere-e-Punjab and the bullet-nosed WP-7200 built in the US participated in the parade which was organised by the Indian Railways for educational and entertainment purposes.