

US senators push for military action against Pak al-Qaeda camps

REUTERS, Washington

Members of the Senate on Thursday urged the Bush administration to consider ways of taking military action against al-Qaeda camps in Pakistan if President Pervez Musharraf is incapable of acting on his own.

Democratic and Republican lawmakers on the Senate Armed Services Committee pressed Defence Department officials to clarify whether international law would allow US forces in Afghanistan to strike at ungoverned areas of Pakistan where US intelligence says al-Qaeda is rebuilding.

Republican Sen Jeff Sessions of Alabama suggested the United States could act under the same legal argument used to justify the 2001 US-led invasion that toppled Taliban rule in Afghanistan after the Sept 11 attacks.

"You either are supporting these people or you're not assuming control over your country. Either way, we cannot wait," Sessions told Defence Undersecretary for Policy Eric Edelman at a hearing.

Sessions was joined by other lawmakers including Democratic Sen. Evan Bayh of Indiana: "What (Pakistani leaders) need to contemplate is which is harder for them - acting to do something about this, or us acting to do something about

this."

A US-Pakistani agreement allows US forces to attack pro-Taliban militants across the border in Pakistan if the extremists have just carried out an attack in Afghanistan or pose an imminent threat.

But Edelman told lawmakers that al-Qaeda locations are in regions so remote that no power since Alexander the Great has been able to exercise authority there.

"I don't think that the situation we face right now ... (has) risen to the level that you just described," he replied to Sessions.

The spotlight on Pakistan has intensified in recent weeks, following US reports that al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and his second-in-command Ayman al-Zawahiri are establishing camps in the South Asian country.

President George W. Bush is also under pressure from the Democratic-controlled Congress, whose leaders accuse the US administration of losing sight of al-Qaeda while prosecuting the war in Iraq.

This week Vice President Dick Cheney urged Musharraf, a US ally, to take action against al-Qaeda and stop the flow of Taliban insurgents heading into Afghanistan for a spring offensive.

US officials say attacks by pro-Taliban militants in Afghanistan

along the Pakistan border have risen sharply since September, when Musharraf struck a deal with North Waziristan militants to halt attacks on the army and stop bordering crossings.

Pakistan has lost more than 700 troops during three years of fighting in the region.

Sen Carl Levin of Michigan, Democratic chairman of the Senate committee, criticised Musharraf for not acknowledging outright that the agreement had failed.

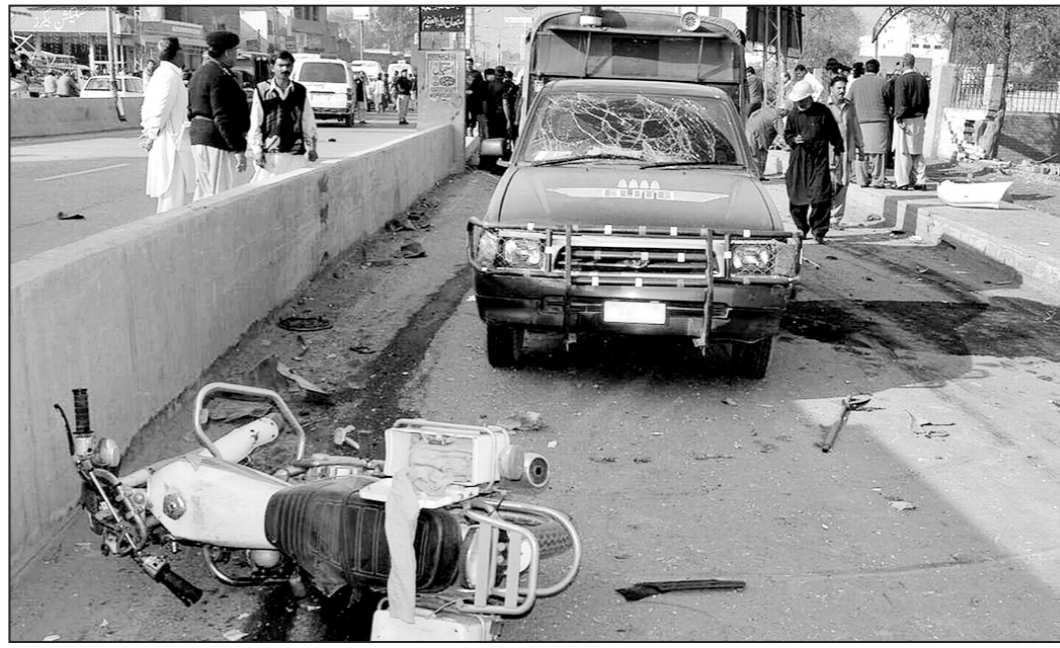
Levin said the panel would press the Defence and State departments for clarity on whether US troops under Nato could act against al-Qaeda camps in Pakistan based on information that attacks inside Afghanistan have been planned at the sites.

"It's a critically important point, and I think we've got to insist, on this issue, that we be given a clear answer," Levin said.

Retired US Marine Gen James Jones, former top Nato operational commander in Afghanistan, said Nato forces might not have member authorisation to take action in Pakistan.

But he told Levin that forces under the US command called Operation Enduring Freedom have a legal right to strike across the border.

"That mission, everybody agrees, could be done," Jones said.



Pakistani policemen examine the blast site after a bomb explosion in Multan yesterday. An anti-terrorism judge was wounded and three policemen were killed when a remote-controlled bomb attached to a bicycle exploded in the central Pakistani city of Multan.

Benazir decided to skip anti-Musharraf meeting

REUTERS, Karachi

Former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto has decided to skip a conference of parties opposed to President Pervez Musharraf scheduled to take place in London later this month, an aide said on Friday.

Benazir's absence, political analysts say, will inevitably refuel speculation that she will cut some deal with Musharraf either before or after elections due this year or early 2008, that could pave the way for her Pakistan People's Party to join the ruling coalition and her eventual return to Pakistan.

The All Parties Conference, to be hosted by another exiled former premier Nawaz Sharif, is due to be held on March 24-25 to chalk out an anti-Musharraf campaign ahead of the elections.

"Benazir will not be there and we have informed the PML-N about



this," said Farhatullah Babar, spokesman for Benazir Bhutto's PPP, referring to Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League party.

Benazir Bhutto will send representatives, Babar said.

Sharif, who was ousted by General Musharraf after a bloodless coup in 1999, and Benazir had appeared to set aside old enmities when they signed a Charter of Democracy last year, and joined an Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy in the wake of the military takeover.

'Anti-terrorism laws abused in Lanka'

REUTERS, New Delhi

Anti-terrorism laws in Sri Lanka have led to widespread and systematic rights abuses, a panel of global jurists said yesterday, charging government forces of extra-judicial killings and torture.

The panel was appointed in 2005 by the Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists to investigate the impact of "terrorism" and counter-terrorism measures on the rule of law and human rights.

It concluded a visit to India on Friday where it met affected people, activists and government representatives from the region including Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and

the Maldives. The experts are due to visit Pakistan separately.

"Sri Lanka is a country where there is, really, a full-scale armed confrontation, which has provoked very serious violations by the protagonists," Arthur Chaskalson, the head of the team, said.

A two-decade-old ethnic conflict between Colombo and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels has escalated after the virtual collapse of a truce and about 4,000 people have been killed in the past 15 months alone.

Around 68,000 people have been killed over the past two decades.

The panel expressed con-

cern over "extra-judicial killings, torture, enforced disappearances and arbitrary detentions" by troops in the Indian Ocean island nation.

It said the re-introduction of counter-terrorism measures and emergency laws, including a "wide arsenal of terrorism-related offences that can be used to criminalise anybody connected to any broadly defined terror suspect" had led to widespread and systematic rights abuses.

Chaskalson said the panel did not get an opportunity to meet Sri Lankan government officials.



Sri Lanka's foreign minister Rohitha Bogollagama (R) addresses heads of foreign diplomatic missions in Colombo yesterday. On behalf of the government, Bogollagama apologised to diplomats who were injured on February 27 when Tamil Tiger rebels fired at the helicopter transporting them during a state-sponsored tour to the island's east in Batticaloa.

New signs of US-Syria thaw as senior official sets visit

AFP, Washington

Washington pressed its new policy of diplomatic opening, saying Thursday it will send a high-ranking official to Syria for the first time in two years.

Assistant Secretary of State Ellen Sauerbrey will travel to Damascus "in coming weeks" as part of a regional tour dealing with "humanitarian issues related to Iraqi refugees," said State Department spokesman Sean McCormack.

Playing down the diplomatic significance of the trip, McCormack said Sauerbrey would be "paired" on the tour with a representative of the

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). "It's not a bilateral mission," he said.

But he said Sauerbrey, who handles refugee and migration affairs at the State Department, would be authorised to meet with her Syrian counterparts to discuss the refugee issue.

She will also visit Jordan and possibly other countries in the region, he said.

Sauerbrey will be the highest-ranking US official to visit Syria since early 2005, when then-deputy secretary of state Richard Armitage travelled to Damascus.

The United States withdrew its ambassador from Damascus after Syrian authorities were implicated in the February 2005 assassination in Beirut of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri.

Under President George W. Bush, the United States has since refused high-level contacts with Syria, which it accuses of backing anti-US insurgents in neighbouring Iraq and supporting efforts by the Lebanese Islamic movement Hezbollah to topple the pro-Western government of Lebanon.

'Pakistan becoming terrorist sanctuary'

AFP, Tehran

A top Iranian cleric accused Pakistan yesterday of becoming a "terrorist sanctuary," following an upsurge of violence on the two nations' border area that Tehran blames on plots by arch foe the United States and on Pakistan's inability to control its border.

"Though Pakistan is our neighbour, little by little it is losing its neighbourly manners. Pakistan has become a sanctuary of terrorists who kill people in Zahedan," hardline cleric Hojatolislam Ahmad Khatami told Friday worshippers in Tehran.

Zahedan is the capital of the southeastern province of Sistan-Baluchestan, which is home to a population of minority Baluch Sunni Muslims. It borders Pakistan to the south and Afghanistan to the north.

Thirteen Revolutionary Guards were killed last month when mili-

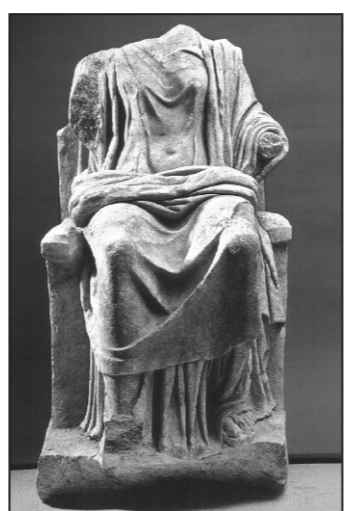
itants set off a car bomb in Zahedan, and security forces also clashed with militants in the city when a percussion bomb exploded.

And on Tuesday, four policemen were killed, one abducted and another wounded in Sistan-Baluchestan by rebels who then allegedly fled towards Pakistan.

"Pakistan should be careful not to fall into the US trap, since it will be the loser, undoubtedly," Khatami added in a sermon broadcast live on state radio.

"Iran is a strong country. Certainly being Iran's friend is much better than being the US and Israel's friend. There is no benefit in being the US and Israel's friend," he said to the habitual chants of "death to America, and death to Israel."

Iran summoned Pakistan's ambassador after the unrest last month and both sides agreed to reinforce border security.



A marble statue of the ancient Greek goddess Hera is shown in this undated handout photo.

Archaeologists find Hera statue

AP, Thessaloniki

A 2,200-year-old statue of the goddess Hera has been found in a wall of a city under Mount Olympus, mythical home of Greece's ancient gods, archaeologists announced Thursday.

The headless marble statue was discovered last year during excavations in the ruins of ancient Dion, some 50 miles southwest of Thessaloniki.

Archaeologist Dimitris Pantermalis said the life-sized statue had been used by the early Christian inhabitants of the city of Dion as filling for a defensive wall.

He said the 2nd century-B.C. find appeared to have originally stood in a temple of Zeus, leader of the ancient Greek gods, whose statue was found in the building's ruins in 2003. The statue of Hera stood next to that of Zeus in the temple, said Pantermalis, a Thessaloniki University professor who has headed excavations at Dion for more than three decades.

"The statue represents a female form seated on a throne, and is made of thick-grained marble like the one of Zeus," he said. "It shows exactly the same technique and size, which led us to link the two statues beyond doubt."

Climate change as dangerous as war

Says UN chief Ban

REUTERS, United Nations

Climate change poses as much danger to the world as war, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said on Thursday as he urged the United States to take the lead in the fight against global warming.

In his first address on the subject, Ban said he would make climate crisis the focus of talks with leaders at a meeting of the Group of Eight industrialized nations - Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Britain, the United States and Russia.

"The majority of the United Nations work still focuses on preventing and ending conflict," Ban said. "But the danger posed by war to all of humanity and to our planet is at least matched by the climate crisis and global warming."

"In coming decades, changes in

our environment and the resulting upheavals from droughts to inundated coastal areas to loss of arable land are likely to become a major driver of war and conflict," Ban told an international UN school conference on global warming, meeting in the UN General Assembly hall.

Last month a UN-organized panel of 2,500 top climate scientists from more than 130 nations blamed human activities for global warming and predicted more droughts, heat waves and a slow rise in sea levels that could continue for more than 1,000 years even if greenhouse gas emissions were capped.

The panel predicts a "best estimate" that temperatures would rise by between 1.8 and 4.0 degrees Celsius (3.2 and 7.2 Fahrenheit) in the 21st century.

Palestinian factions delay submitting cabinet list

REUTERS, Gaza

Palestinian factions Fatah and Hamas said they need more time and will not announce a line-up of ministers for a unity government as planned yesterday.

Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas had asked the factions to submit names ahead of a planned meeting on Saturday with President Mahmoud Abbas of Fatah in the Gaza Strip.

Hamas and Fatah officials offered no immediate explanation for the delay and it was unclear how long it would last. Both sides prom-

ised to accelerate formation of a unity government, fearing opponents would try to use any delay to scuttle the deal.

"We know that both Hamas and Fatah are serious about speeding up the presentation of their chosen candidates for ministerial posts and they could do so within the next two days," said Haniyeh aide Ghazi Hamad.

Hamad said he expected Abbas and Haniyeh to meet on Sunday, rather than Saturday. "I do not expect major obstacles before the formation of the government," he said.

Cassini snaps new views of Saturn

REUTERS, Los Angeles

Nasa's Cassini spacecraft has snapped never-before-seen images of Saturn showing the planet from perspectives above and below its ring system, the national space agency said on Thursday.

The images were taken in recent weeks by the probe, which blasted off on a mission to study the planet and its bands a decade ago.

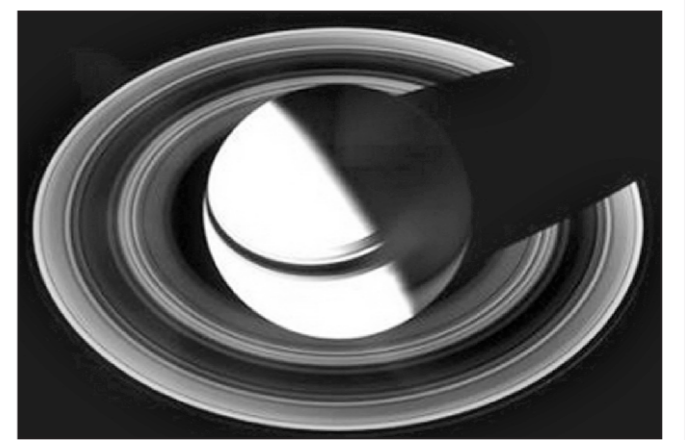
Over the last two months, the spacecraft has climbed to higher and higher inclinations, providing its cameras with glimpses of the planet and rings that have excited scientists.

"Finally, here are the views that we've waited years for," said Carolyn Porco, Cassini imaging team leader at the Space Science

Institute in Boulder, Colorado. "Sailing high above Saturn and seeing the rings spread out beneath us like a giant, copper medallion is like exploring an alien world we've never seen before. ... It's so utterly breath-taking, it almost gives you vertigo."

The images released on Thursday included a video sequence showing the rings as they appeared to Cassini while it sped from south to north, rapidly crossing the ring plane.

The spacecraft was launched on October 15, 1997 and entered into orbit around Saturn on July 1, 2004. The mission is a cooperative project between Nasa, the European Space Agency and the Italian Space Agency.



An image captured by Nasa's Cassini spacecraft on February 4, 2007 and released on Thursday shows never-before-seen views of Saturn.