

Elections on time, no state of emergency

Says Musharraf

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said on Monday elections due this year will be held on time and ruled out imposing an emergency to end the uproar over government moves to sack the country's chief judge.

The suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Chaudhary on March 9 has outraged lawyers, the opposition and many ordinary Pakistanis, and presented Musharraf with his biggest political crisis since he seized power in 1999.

The move against Chaudhary has fuelled suspicion Musharraf feared the independent-minded judge would block any move by the president to retain the role of army chief, which he is due to relinquish

this year.

Protesting lawyers and opposition activists clashed with police in the capital, Islamabad, and in Lahore last week.

There were no demonstrations in those cities on Monday but several hundred lawyers marched in Karachi and lawyers across the country stopped work for an hour in a token protest.

The government has not given details of the accusations against Chaudhary but a state news agency cited "misconduct and misuse of authority". The accusations have been referred to a judicial panel that will sit for the third time on Wednesday.

At least six judges resigned to show support for Chaudhary, judicial officials said, and the leader of

an opposition alliance of conservative religious parties called for more protests.

Speaking on a television current affairs talk show that authorities briefly banned last week for focusing on the Chaudhary case, Musharraf said everything he had done had been within the constitution.

He said some mistakes had been made in handling the case, such as not keeping the public better informed, and he warned political parties not to try to take advantage of the situation.

"Elections will be held on time. This is my assurance to the nation," he said, referring to polls for the national and provincial assemblies. Under the Pakistani system, parliament and provincial assemblies elect the president.

Musharraf, who is also army chief, dismissed speculation an emergency might be declared: "I will never use the army."

Asked if he would keep his post as army chief, Musharraf said: "We will follow the constitution." He has previously said, under the constitution, he was allowed to remain army chief and president until the end of 2007.

The leader of the opposition Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal alliance of religious parties called for a protest outside the Supreme Court in Islamabad on Wednesday when Chaudhary appears before the panel.

"We have to intensify street protests," Qazi Hussain Ahmed, president of the six-party alliance, told reporters.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) shout anti-Musharraf slogans during a demonstration against the sacking of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry in Karachi yesterday.

US troops want to quit Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

For US troops from 9th Cavalry Regiment bumping around the dangerous streets of Baghdad in Humvees after dark on Monday, news that their deployment in Iraq could be extended fell like a hammer blow.

Their commanders had cautioned that their second one-year tour due to end in October could be prolonged while US President George W Bush later warned troops it was too soon to "pack up and go home."

The expletives during the four-hour night patrol turned the air in the Humvee, already thick with cigarette smoke, a dark shade of blue.

"We just want to get out of here as soon as possible," said one vehicle commander in one of his few

printable comments.

"It's because the Iraqi army is so scared that we have to come here to die," he added, asking not to be named.

"Ninety-five percent of Iraqis are good but five percent are bad. But the 95 percent are too weak to stand up to the five percent."

"Bush should send all the Death Row prisoners here and they can be killed fighting the terrorists. We've had enough," said another soldier, as the Humvee accelerated past a roadside car in case it exploded.

Added yet another, "Bush can come fight here. He can take my 1,000 dollars a month and I'll go home."

Commander of the night operation, Lieutenant Brian Long, said the anger was understandable.

Russia issues ultimatum to Iran over nukes

AFP, Washington

Russia has warned Iran it will withhold nuclear fuel for Iran's atomic power plant unless Tehran suspends uranium enrichment as demanded by the UN Security Council, the New York Times reported Tuesday, citing unnamed US, European and Iranian officials.

Igor Ivanov, secretary of Russia's National Security Council, delivered the ultimatum last week to Ali Hosseini Tash, Iran's deputy chief nuclear negotiator, the paper wrote, quoting officials who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Moscow infuriated Tehran last week by cancelling its March deadline to deliver fuel for the one-billion-dollar plant it is constructing near the Iranian city of Bushehr.

In public statements, Russia has accused Iran of failing to make payments owed to Moscow for the Bushehr project.

But European officials told the Times that Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had informed some European governments last month that Russia made a decision not to deliver the nuclear fuel for the plant and that Moscow would publicly say the sole reason was financial, the paper wrote.

"We consider this a very important decision by the Russians. It shows that our disagreements with the Russians about the dangers of Iran's nuclear programme are tactical," a senior European official was quoted as saying.

"Fundamentally, the Russians don't want a nuclear Iran," the official said.

A senior Iranian official had also confirmed in an interview that Russia had threatened Iran that fuel would be delivered only after uranium enrichment work was suspended, the Times reported.

30 die as Uzbek militants, Pak tribesmen clash

AFP, AP, Wana

Uzbek al-Qaeda militants and local tribesmen in northwestern Pakistan fought pitched battles that left 30 people dead including four children, officials said yesterday.

Heavy exchanges of rocket and mortar fire broke out on Monday and continued on Tuesday in Kalusha town in the troubled tribal region of South Waziristan, which borders Afghanistan, security officials said.

The fighting started after a local former Taliban leader, Mullah Nazir, who backs the government's moves to expel foreign fighters from the area, ordered followers of Uzbek militant Tahir Yuldashev to

disarm.

One shell hit a group of private school students who had been left outside the town by a bus driver because of the violence. Four were killed and 27 were wounded, the officials said on condition of anonymity.

Seven local tribesmen, including some of Nazir's men, were killed, as well as 13 supporters of Yuldashev, the officials added, saying another 22 Uzbeks were detained.

Yuldashev, the head of a group called the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, was sentenced to death in absentia for bombings in the Uzbek capital Tashkent and security officials say he had links to al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

Meanwhile more than 2,000 Uzbek militants blocked the road from Wana, the main city in South Waziristan, to the town of Angoor Adda.

The local administration gave them a 48-hour ultimatum to end the blockade otherwise military action would be started against them, the officials said.

Clashes were continuing and several tribes had joined fighters on the both sides.

The fighting ended a ceasefire negotiated about two weeks ago after fierce gunbattles between Yuldashev's supporters and pro-government tribesmen in the nearby town of Azam Warsak in which 19 people were killed.

Muslim protest as UK schools allowed to ban veils

AFP, London

Britain yesterday gave school headteachers the right to ban the Islamic veil and other religious clothing from classrooms, reigniting a debate over multiculturalism and triggering Muslim anger.

Spokesman for the Department for Education and Skills stressed that the new guidelines did not mean that the government was imposing a blanket ban on religious clothing at schools.

But Massoud Shadijeh, chairman of the Islamic Human Rights Commission, voiced dismay at the new rules.

"Successive ministers dealing with education issues have failed to give proper guidance when requested by human rights campaigners about schools' obligations regarding religious dress," he said.

US grants 39 visas for Iranian leader, aides

AFP, Washington

The United States has granted visas to Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and 38 aides and bodyguards so he can address the UN Security Council when it votes on a new sanctions resolution to curb his country's nuclear programme, a senior US official said Monday.

State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said the visas, requested by Iran last week, covered 13 officials and diplomats and 26 security agents.

Iran made an additional request on Monday for visas for 33 air crew and those were also expected to be granted, he said.

"We are not going to be in any way hindering the ability of President Ahmadinejad to appear before the Security Council," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Guards stand at the yard of Ulyanovskaya mine near the town of Novokuznetsk in Kemerovo region, some 3,000km east of Moscow yesterday.

Russian rescuers struggle to reach trapped miners

Death toll rises to 106

REUTERS, Ulyanovskaya Mine

Rescuers yesterday tried to reach four miners still missing underground at a Siberian coal mine after a gas explosion killed at least 106 people including most of the pit's top managers.

Smoke, pockets of gas and collapsed roofs were hampering rescue efforts in the warren of shafts nearly 300 meters (990 feet) underground at the Ulyanovskaya mine in the region of Kemerovo, officials said.

"Our latest information is that 106 people have died and the fate of four people remains unclear," said an Emergencies Ministry spokeswoman. Ninety-three people have been brought safely to the surface.

Guards barred most journalists

from entering the mine complex, which is surrounded by birch forests and soot-blackened snow. Only reporters from state-controlled television channels were allowed in.

Vans drove out periodically through the gates, carrying away the bodies of the dead.

Emergency Ministry officials arranged for grieving relatives to wait at a nearby hotel, where psychologists were providing assistance. Local authorities declared three days of mourning, cancelling entertainment events and flying flags at half mast.

Amongst the dead was a visiting Briton, who was carrying out a coal reserves audit underground when a methane gas explosion ripped through the mine, Itar-Tass news agency reported.

Guards barred most journalists

US official meets minister of Hamas-led cabinet

AFP, Reuters, Jerusalem

A senior US official yesterday met with an independent member of the new Palestinian unity government as world powers mulled how to deal with a cabinet led by the Islamist Hamas movement.

US Consul General in Jerusalem Jacob Walles met with finance minister Salam Fayyad in the occupied West Bank town of Ramallah, Palestinian sources told AFP - the first US official has met with a member of the new administration.

A spokeswoman for the US consulate declined to comment on the report.

World powers will continue an aid embargo against the Palestinian government but European officials said on Monday they were optimistic the new authority would ultimately

meet conditions needed for it to be scrapped.

The United Nations, the European Union, Russia and the United States - the so-called quartet members - have demanded the Hamas-led government recognise Israel, renounce violence and agree to Israeli-Palestinian accords before the embargo is lifted.

But the new Palestinian government, which was sworn in last weekend and brings together Islamic Hamas and the more moderate Fatah party of President Mahmoud Abbas, had not yet met those conditions, said Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy chief. "We expect very much that this government ... will be taking the positions of the quartet as much as possible and in the end completely," he told a news conference with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and other European ministers.