

Benazir says no deal with Musharraf until he gives up uniform

AFP, Karachi

Exiled former Pakistan prime minister Benazir Bhutto said yesterday she will not make any deals with President Pervez Musharraf until he gives up his position as chief of the army.

Her comments to a private television channel come after Pakistani officials said military ruler Musharraf had been in talks with Bhutto, now in exile in Dubai and London, and her opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

There has been speculation that Bhutto, the country's first female premier, could return home to stand in elections due at the end of this year or early next and lend support to the embattled Musharraf.

"I deny all reports of a deal. We don't want army rule as it is not compatible with our politics," Bhutto told Hum TV in Dubai in an interview to be aired later Wednesday, a transcript of which was obtained by AFP.

"The contacts were there since 2002, and it's no secret. We are dealing with issues as we want a reformist agenda. If something happens I will tell you, but I've been hearing reports of a deal for the last seven years," Bhutto said.



When asked if she would accept a deal with Musharraf still in uniform, she replied: "Musharraf knows the opposition's views about the uniform issue. He knows what civil society and people from a cross-section of society want."

Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless military coup in 1999 and has since become a key US ally in the "war on terror", faces multiple challenges to his eight-year hold on power.

The most serious is a crisis over

his removal of the country's chief justice, which has sparked a series of protests backed by Bhutto's party along with other opposition groups.

Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid told AFP last week that "serious negotiations" were under way between the PPP and the government but that they would not necessarily succeed.

But Bhutto also hit out at the government for failing to deal with corruption cases which have been hanging over her and her husband for the past 10 years and which forced them to go into exile.

Bhutto said that her contacts with Nawaz Sharif -- her exiled former rival and successor as prime minister, with whom she has formed the opposition Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy -- were "intact".

The pair have held several meetings in the past year.

Meanwhile Bhutto also criticised Musharraf for failing to tackle a "soft revolution" by Islamists, after a hardline mosque in Islamabad threatened to launch suicide bombings and issued a fatwa against a female minister.

Lebanon tries 6 suspects in German bomb plot

AFP, Beirut

The trial of six Lebanese accused of plotting to bomb trains in Germany last July opened in Beirut yesterday, but was swiftly adjourned after warrants were issued for two being tried in absentia.

Minutes after the trial opened under tight security, judge Michel Abu Arraj decided to adjourn the hearing until April 18 after the defence said the Beirut criminal court was not entitled to try the four suspects in Lebanese custody.

Defence attorney Fawaz Zakaria said the four should be tried in northern Lebanon where they live and where they were arrested by Lebanese authorities on September 4.

The four men in the dock are the suspected mastermind Jihad Hamad, as well as Khaled al-Haji Dib, Ayman Hawwa and Khalil Bubu, judicial sources said.

The Beirut court also issued arrest warrants for Saddam al-Haji Dib, who remains at large, and his brother Yusef Mohammed al-Haji Dib, who is in custody in Germany. Both are being tried in absentia.

Hamad has confessed under judicial interrogation to having placed a suitcase containing explosives on a train in Germany last July, Lebanese judicial sources said.

"The intention was not to kill people, but to avenge any harm done to Muslims after the publication in Denmark of cartoons that were harmful to the Prophet Mohammed," Hamad was quoted as saying.

German federal police said the publication of cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed in Western and some Arab media had been the "detonator" which pushed the gang to organise a plot to bomb German trains on July 31.

The plan failed when bombs concealed on two regional trains did not explode because of faulty detonators.

Two Buddhists killed in Thai restive south

AFP, Yala

Two Buddhists were killed in separate attacks Wednesday in Thailand's restive Muslim-majority south, police said, as the country's junta leader began a visit to the region.

A 26-year-old Buddhist woman was shot dead and her body set ablaze by suspected Islamic militants in Yala, one of three insurgency-torn southern provinces bordering Malaysia.

"It's the work of the same group of militants who are active in this predominantly Muslim village," police said, adding her body was burned beyond recognition.

She was riding a motorcycle on her way to work on the outskirts of Yala town when rebels attacked her.

Also in Yala, a 19-year-old Buddhist man was killed in a drive-by shooting that also left his 47-year-old mother seriously wounded.

Wen for new ties of trust with Tokyo

AFP, Tokyo

Wen Jiabao, paying the first visit by a Chinese premier to Japan in seven years, called yesterday for the Asian powers to build a relationship of trust amid disputes over the past and future.

On a trip that would have been unthinkable just months ago, Wen received red-carpet welcomes at the airport as children waved the countries' flags, followed by a summit with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

"Our talks will be a big step toward building strategically and mutually beneficial relations," Abe told Wen as he welcomed him at his residence under pouring rain.

"That is the most important goal of my visit," Wen said in response.

"We need to talk about the details of what strategically and mutually beneficial relations would entail."

Upon arrival, the Chinese leader said he came to Japan "to enhance mutual political trust and to deepen a relationship of mutual benefit."

"China and Japan are important countries, both in Asia and the world, and their bilateral relationship is one of the most important for both countries," Wen said in a statement.

Both countries have been seeking to defuse political tensions that had been building for much of the past decade even as their economies become increasingly dependent on each other.

China refused any summits with Abe's predecessor Junichiro



PHOTO: AFP

Visiting Chinese Prime Minister Wen Jiabao (L) toasts rice wine or "Sake" with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (R) during the banquet at Abe's official residence in Tokyo yesterday.

Koizumi due to the former premier's repeated visits during his five-year tenure to a war shrine which Beijing and Seoul see as a symbol of Japanese imperialism.

The two nations have also jostled for global influence, with Japan outraged when China in 2005 blocked Tokyo's cherished bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council.

Abe, despite a reputation as a hardliner on emotive history issues, went to Beijing in October just days after taking over.

Much of Wen's three-day visit will be about symbolism, including

a speech at parliament, an audience at the imperial palace and a game of baseball with Japanese students.

In a first agreement hours before Wen's arrival from Seoul, the two countries signed a deal to resume Japanese rice exports to China after a four-year gap.

China is the world's largest rice consumer, although it is self-sufficient. Japan, which heavily protects its rice farmers, is looking to tap a market among wealthy Chinese consumers for high-end rice.

Sarkozy made deal to bury Chirac's corruption files

Newspaper claims, Sarkozy denies

AFP, Paris

French right-wing presidential frontrunner Nicolas Sarkozy yesterday denied a newspaper report that he had agreed to shield President Jacques Chirac from a corruption probe in exchange for his backing.

"It's grotesque, it's hurtful and it's untrue," Sarkozy said after Le Canard Enchaîné satirical weekly published the report, quoting sources close to Chirac.

"I deny it in the firmest and fullest terms," said Sarkozy during a campaign swing through the Paris suburb of Villepinte.

The weekly reported that "in exchange for Chirac's support for his candidacy, Sarkozy made a commitment, if he wins, to avoid any judicial backlash for Chirac."

Chirac's office also denied the report, with an official saying: "These allegations, which are absolutely baseless, do not warrant a response." Rather than a specific amnesty for

corruption, Sarkozy would introduce a provision as part of a new anti-crime bill that would set a 10-year limit on the time a judge has to close a case, the weekly said.

That measure would close the book on three corruption cases that date back more than 10 years, when Chirac was mayor of Paris from 1977 to 1995, according to Le Canard Enchaîné.

Two cases deal with the illegal use of Paris city funds to pay staff and sympathisers of Chirac's Rally for the Republic (RPR) party, the predecessor of the governing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP).

Former prime minister Alain Juppé was convicted January 2004 for his role in that scheme, receiving a suspended jail sentence and a year-long ban on holding public office.

A third case surrounds a Paris printing firm which is suspected of rigging public tender contracts and of funding the RPR via the mayor's office.

Last month justice officials said Chirac, 74, would be questioned after he leaves office in May by a judge looking into the illegal party-funding scheme, although no date had been set.

Chirac's immunity from questioning by magistrates ends a month after he steps down on May 16.

Chirac gave his official endorsement to Sarkozy's bid for the presidency last month, shortly after announcing that he would be stepping down after 12 years in office and not seek a third term.

Once close allies, the two men fell out after Sarkozy backed a rival candidate in the 1995 presidential election.

Sarkozy, 52, went on to wrest control of the governing UMP from Chirac, becoming its president in 2004.

Sarkozy is currently the favourite to win the presidential election, taking place in two rounds on April 22 and May 6.

Malaysia mulls body on religious disputes

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia may create a special commission to hear disputes involving Muslims and non-Muslims following a series of cases that have raised racial and religious tensions, a senior minister said yesterday.

Nazri Abdul Aziz, minister in the prime minister's department, said the attorney-general was working on setting up a commission to arbitrate in religious disputes.

"The aim is to resolve the problems which have arisen and may arise in the future as a result of interfaith problems, problems like conversion and all that, which have occurred many times now," Nazri told AFP.

Malaysia is a Muslim-majority nation and conversion out of Islam,

or apostasy, is considered one of the gravest sins in the religion.

The proposal comes amid growing anger from minority religious groups, who say their rights are being undermined in legal battles involving Muslims and non-Muslims.

Malaysia has a dual court system, with civil courts as well as Islamic or sharia courts for Muslims in areas of personal law, such as divorce.

However, there is increasing confusion in legal disputes involving both Muslims and non-Muslims over which system has jurisdiction.

In one recent case, an ethnic Indian Hindu woman whose husband converted to Islam is fighting to have her divorce resolved in a civil court, after being told to go to a sharia one.

Tehran shows pictures of 'tortured' diplomat

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday showed footage of the wounds of an Iranian diplomat released after two months in captivity in Iraq, saying the pictures showed he had been tortured by US forces.

"The United States, whose officials make claims about human rights, drilled holes into the legs of Jalal Sharafi and there were signs of damage to his nose and neck," state television said.

Television showed footage of Sharafi in hospital, his feet badly bruised and body covered by sensors, as he was visited by the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegation in Iran, Peter Stocker.

Iraq's ambassador to Iran, Mohammed Majid al-Sheikh, was also present.

Washington has denied any role in the detention of Sharafi, who was freed on April 3 amid the standoff between London and Tehran over the captured British sailors who were released the next day.

However Stocker denied claims by state television that the ICRC had confirmed after the meeting with the diplomat that Sharafi, second secretary at the Iranian embassy in Baghdad, had been tortured.

"I saw wounds, on the back and feet, which were several weeks old and I could see that they were very serious," he told AFP. "But in these circumstances we cannot confirm how these wounds were carried out."