

# 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 eighth 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 Khalil Rubi, judicial sources said.

The Beirut court also issued arrest warrants for Saddam al-Hajj Dib, who remains at large, and his brother Yusef Mohammed al-Hajj 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

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.

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.

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 cases 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 Enchainé.

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.

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printing firm which is suspected of rigging public tender contracts and of funding the RPR via the mayor's office.

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."

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