

Musharraf in Karachi to ease tensions

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf held talks with officials and residents in Karachi Friday to defuse tensions after violent political and ethnic fighting left 40 people dead, officials said.

Military ruler Musharraf is facing the biggest crisis of his eight-year rule after suspending the head of the country's Supreme Court, Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, on March 9 for alleged misconduct.

Clashes erupted in Karachi on May 12 after Chaudhry was stopped from holding a rally. They developed into running battles between people whose families fled India after partition and Pashtuns from north-west Pakistan.

Musharraf, who lived in Karachi as a boy, met top law and order officials and was later to chair a meeting of people from a cross-section of society, officials said. He is expected to stay until Sunday.

Tigers move to retake Jaffna

12 rebels killed in fresh fighting

AFP, Colombo

A Tamil Tiger assault on a strategic naval base in northern Sri Lanka was part of an attempt to re-capture their former bastion on the Jaffna peninsula, a state-run daily reported yesterday.

Sri Lankan government troops have shot dead 12 suspected Tamil Tiger rebels, the defence ministry said Friday, the day after the rebels attacked the capital and a key naval base.

Security forces killed the suspected Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fighters along front lines in northern Vavuniya district, the defence ministry said in a statement. The first deaths came in clashes early Thursday.

"Initially 10 LTTE cadres were killed in a successful assault launched by the army," the state-

ment said. "Subsequently, two more Tiger cadres were killed in a separate incident."

The claim came a day after the Tiger rebels blew up an army bus in Sri Lanka's capital, killing one soldier, and stormed a naval base where they claimed 35 sailors were killed. This figure is disputed by the government.

"The incident in Delft in the wee hours of yesterday clearly indicates that the LTTE has not given up their idea of capturing Jaffna, which is considered the nerve centre of their activities," the Daily News said.

Fighting has intensified across the island in recent days, and on Wednesday the International Committee of the Red Cross said it had pulled its staff away from northern front lines dividing government and rebel forces.

The Tigers ran Jaffna as a de facto separate state for five years before security forces drove them out in December 1995.

Numerous small islands around Jaffna are seen as potential launching pads for any rebel offensive against the Tamil-majority peninsula.

In its "Defence Column," which reflects government thinking, the newspaper noted that Thursday's attack on Delft -- as well as the bombing of a military bus in the capital Colombo -- had ended a month-long lull in rebel attacks.

"The events unfolded yesterday as security forces and also the public were on alert about a pending air attack by the LTTE targeting a security or economic nerve centre on Colombo or the north or east," the daily said.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan Special Task Force soldiers search a car in Colombo yesterday following a Tamil Tiger attack in the north of the island a day earlier. Tamil Tiger rebels blew up an army bus in Sri Lanka's capital on Wednesday, killing at least one soldier, just hours after the guerrillas said they had stormed a naval base and killed 35 sailors.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf waves to his supporters during a public meeting in Dara Ghazi Khan Wednesday. Thousands of people rallied against Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on May 24 for the first time since violent clashes in Karachi as the military ruler headed to the still-tense city.

Nepali Maoists call for end to Gurkha recruitment

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist activists in Nepal yesterday called for an end to the recruitment of Nepali youths for Britain and India's legendary Gurkha regiments, prompting concern from Britain and Gurkha veterans.

The Young Communist League, a branch of the country's powerful former rebels, also vowed to pile pressure on the Himalayan nation's government to bring about an end to the nearly two century-old practice.

"It drains the country of capable young people," Ganesh Man Pun, the head of the Young Communist League told AFP at the end of a three-day high-level policy meeting.

"Recruiting Nepali youths into the Gurkhas should be stopped as soon as possible," he said.

Famed for their loyalty, discipline and courage in battle -- as well as their sharp knives -- Nepali Gurkhas have been taken into the British Army since 1817.

Competition is fierce, with more than 15,000 people tried out for 230 places last year alone.

The British Army currently has around 3,400 Gurkhas serving in countries including Iraq and Afghanistan, while the Indian Army also has some 40,000 in its ranks.

Tens of thousands of family members are also dependent on Gurkha salaries and pensions, or the income of Gurkhas who go on to work in the booming private security sector -- for sums of money that would be otherwise unobtainable in the largely agricultural, impoverished country.

The Maoists, however, said prospective Gurkha fighters should instead be given opportunities at home.

Afghan civilian deaths stir Nato unease

AP, Kabul

Recent US special forces operations that killed 90 Afghan civilians have caused friction with America's Nato partners, who are concerned that such deaths hurt the standing of Western troops fighting the Taliban insurgency.

The deaths involved troops from the 12,000-member US-led coalition and not Nato's 37,000-member International Security Assistance Force. But Nato officials fear that Afghans and others don't understand the distinction.

Mounting civilian casualties have already dented support for the international mission, sparking angry demonstrations and a warning from President Hamid Karzai that Afghans can accept them no longer.

German Defence Minister Franz Josef Jung said Wednesday the recent operations by US-led troops exposed the need for restraint.

"We have to do everything to avoid that civilians are affected,"

Jung said on Germany's ZDF television. "We are in talks with our American friends about this."

Insurgency-related violence has spiked in 2007, with more than 1,800 people killed, according to an Associated Press count based on US, Nato and Afghan reports.

They include about 135 civilians killed by US or Nato action, a figure that also could undermine support in Western countries, especially in Europe, for the faraway deployment. About 135 civilians have also been killed by Taliban suicide bombs and attacks.

Nato's counterinsurgency strategy focuses on separating fighters from the general population and strengthening the Afghan government. The US-led coalition's counterterrorism mission involves taking out al-Qaeda or Taliban leaders and cells of skilled fighters.

While troops from the two missions communicate often and at times work together, they operate under different command structures and don't always coordinate their actions.

Fight over Iraq war has just begun: Democrats

AP, Washington

Democrats may have lost the first round -- with President Bush on ending the war in Iraq since taking over Congress in January, but they say their fight has just begun.

In the months ahead, lawmakers will vote repeatedly on whether US troops should stay and whether Bush has the authority to continue the war. The Democratic strategy is intended to ratchet up pressure on the president, as well as on moderate Republicans who have grown tired of defending Bush administration policy in a deeply unpopular war.

"I feel a direction change in the air," said Rep John Murtha, D-Pennsylvania, chairman of the House panel that oversees military funding.

Democrats looked to the upcoming votes after losing a bruising battle with Bush on an emergency war spending bill. Lacking the two-thirds majority needed to overcome another presidential veto, Democrats dropped from the legislation a provision ordering troops home from Iraq beginning this fall.

Congress passed the revised \$120 billion spending bill on Thursday, providing \$95 billion for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan through

September. The House voted 280-142 to pass the bill, followed by a 80-14 vote in the Senate.

Democratic leaders said they hoped to ready the bill for Bush's signature by this Memorial Day weekend.

Democratic presidential rivals Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama both voted against the bill. "I fully support our troops" but the measure "fails to compel the president to give our troops a new strategy in Iraq," said Clinton, D-New York.

Iran names envoy for US talks on Iraq

AFP, Tehran

Iran's envoy in Baghdad will lead his country's delegation in Monday's talks on Iraq with the US, the official IRNA news agency quoted foreign ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini as saying yesterday.

"Hassan Kazemi, the ambassador of Iran in Baghdad, has been designated to head the Iranian

delegation in the discussions with the representative of the United States about Iraq," it quoted Hosseini as saying.

"These talks will begin next Monday" with the aim of finding ways to improve the security situation in Iraq, he added.

Iranian television had earlier reported that Tehran's outgoing UN ambassador, Javad Zarif, would be

Iran's representative in the highest-level official bilateral talks between the two sides since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

The United States and Iran broke off diplomatic relations in 1980 after radical students stormed the US embassy in Tehran and held its diplomats hostage for 444 days.

US forces capture Iran-linked 'terror cell leader'

AFP, Baghdad

US and Iraqi forces yesterday captured a militant accused of smuggling lethal roadside bombs from Iran and working for an Iranian Revolutionary Guard officer after a fierce gunbattle, the US military said.

The joint snatch squad called in an air strike after coming under fire during a raid on the hideout of an alleged weapons smuggling gang in the notorious Sadr City district, a Shia militia bastion in east Baghdad.

Residents of Sadr City, a densely packed Shia suburb with an estimated two million inhabitants, awoke to a scene of devastation in a marketplace in the Dakhil area, with rubble from the air strike littering the area.

The Iraqi defence ministry said that four people were injured in the raid and six shops burned down.

Poll shows Ahern ahead in Irish election

AP, Dublin

Prime Minister Bertie Ahern appeared on course to extend his 10-year reign, after an exit poll gave his Fianna Fail party a surprisingly strong lead in parliamentary elections.

But the poll for national broadcaster RTE also indicated Ireland is likely turn to the left after a decade of center-right government.

The estimated outcome of Thursday's election was released shortly before vote-counting began Friday, with official results not expected before Saturday.

The survey of 3,000 voters measured voter support for Fianna Fail at 41.6 percent. That would be marginally better than the share his centre-ground party received in the last elections five years ago.

Russia willing to try Litvinenko murder suspect

AFP, Moscow

Russia will try ex-KGB agent Andrei Lugovoi for the murder in London of fugitive Russian agent Alexander Litvinenko if Britain provides sufficient evidence of his guilt, news agencies quoted Prosecutor General Yuri Chaika as saying yesterday.

British authorities said this week they would seek the extradition of Lugovoi, whom they formally charged with the poisoning murder of Litvinenko, though Russia has insisted it will not extradite him.

Sadr makes public appearance in Iraq

AP, Baghdad

Radical Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr appeared in public for the first time in months on Friday and delivered a fiery anti-American sermon in the holy Shia city of Kufa.

"No, no for the devil. No, no for America. No, no for the occupation. No, no for Israel," he chanted at the start of his speech. The roughly 6,000 worshippers in the mosque repeated after him.

Al-Sadr had gone into hiding in Iran four months ago at the start of the Baghdad security crackdown, but US military officials said early Friday that he had returned to the holy city of Najaf, where he has a

house.

Residents in Najaf said they saw his motorcade leaving the city and heading toward Kufa on Friday morning. The black-turbaned leader then entered the revered mosque for prayers.

The 33-year-old leader has had an antagonistic relationship with the United States. He is believed to have been honing plans to consolidate political gains and foster ties with Iran. His associates have said his strategy is based in part on a belief that Washington will soon start reducing troop strength, leaving behind a huge hole in Iraq's security and political power structure.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents of Baghdad's notorious Sadr City district inspect the scene of devastation in a marketplace hit by an airstrike early yesterday. US and Iraqi forces captured an Iraqi militant accused of "acting as a proxy for an Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps officer" Thursday after a fierce gunbattle.