



PHOTO: AFP  
Pakistani lawyers and opposition parties activists hold torch lights and march toward the Supreme Court during an anti-Musharraf protest rally in Islamabad Saturday. Pakistani lawyers and opposition party members rallied outside the Supreme Court to support the judge at the centre of a row threatening President Pervez Musharraf's hold on power.

## Courts must be free

### Says sacked Pak judge

AP, Islamabad

The country's chief justice returned to the Supreme Court Saturday for the first time since being suspended by President Gen Pervez Musharraf, making his way through jubilant crowds before delivering veiled critiques of the military ruler.

Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry warned of the dangers of absolute power as thousands of his excited supporters danced in the streets and shouted anti-Musharraf slogans.

Addressing a televised, packed seminar on the separation of government powers, Chaudhry, who was suspended two months ago, called judicial independence a "bulwark against abuse of power."

"Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely," Chaudhry said, slightly misquoting 19th century British historian Lord Acton. "The courts must be inde-

pendent. Courts should remain free from the pressure of the executive."

Musharraf plans to seek another five-year term as president this fall. Political parties who have been sidelined since he seized power in a 1999 coup say the president wanted to get rid of the independent-minded judge in anticipation of legal challenges to his intention of seeking the new term while remaining head of the army. The government denies the move was politically motivated and says the judge had abused his office.

Numerous street protests have been held in support of Chaudhry, and a clash broke out between his supporters and a government party that killed 41 people in the southern city of Karachi two weeks ago.

Two days after the clashes, Chaudhry challenged his ouster before the Supreme Court, which has yet to make a ruling whether

Musharraf's action was valid.

It took Chaudhry more than two hours to cover the roughly three miles from his home to the court before his speech Saturday as supporters danced in front of his car and covered it in flower petals. About 8,000 jubilant lawyers and supporters from opposition parties later gathered outside the court building, chanting slogans against Musharraf.

"The bloodshed in Karachi will not go to waste! Revolution will come!" several people in the crowd shouted, punching the air with their fists. "Go, Musharraf, go!" chanted others. Large television screens were set up outside the building for those who couldn't squeeze inside.

Musharraf and his government insist Chaudhry was suspended only after they received credible complaints that he had abused his office, including allegedly using his position to seek a lucrative police job for his son.

## 3 Afghan aid workers released by Taliban

AP, Kandahar

The Taliban released three Afghan aid workers yesterday who were kidnapped with two French colleagues nearly two months ago, a Taliban spokesman and relatives said.

The three aid workers from the France-based group Terre d'Enfance Mohammad Hashim and brothers Ghulam Rasul and Ghulam Azrat were abducted April 3 along with the two French nationals in the southwestern province of Nimroz.

The Taliban released the French woman, Celine Cordelier, on April 28, and the man, Eric Damfreville, on May 11.

"The three Afghans who were detained with the two French aid workers have been released today in Nimroz province at the request of tribal leaders," purported Taliban spokesman Qari Yousef Ahmadi said Sunday.

A brother of Rasul and Azrat, Abdul Wahab, said relatives and

neighbours had gathered to greet the three hostages when they returned home.

"They're fine. They're very happy. My brother Ghulam Rasul is holding his two sons, crying and kissing them. Ghulam Azrat is holding his two daughters, and crying happily, kissing them, as all the relatives watch," Wahab said by telephone from Nimroz.

After taking the Terre d'Enfance group captive, the Taliban demanded the withdrawal of all remaining French troops from Afghanistan. France pulled 200 French special forces out of Afghanistan late last year and still has about 1,000 troops stationed in the country.

The French aid workers were kidnapped two weeks after Afghan authorities released five Taliban prisoners in exchange for an Italian newspaper reporter who was abducted along with his two Afghan colleagues in southern Helmand province on March 5. The two Afghans were killed.

## Imran banned from travelling to Karachi

AP, Lahore

A prominent opposition lawmaker and staunch critic of President Gen Pervez Musharraf was banned from travelling to Karachi yesterday because of his "provocative" statements about deadly violence in the southern port city, officials said.

Imran Khan, a former cricket star, was barred from taking a flight from Lahore to Karachi, said Omar Cheema, a spokesman for Khan's Tehreek-e-Insaf, or Movement for Justice party.

Khan has accused the Muttahida Quami Movement, or MQM, a

Karachi-based party allied with Musharraf, of stoking violence in the city during a visit by suspended Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry on May 12. Some 41 people were killed and dozens were injured, many from gunfire.

Musharraf suspended Chaudhry in March over alleged abuse of authority. The move sparked widespread protests by lawyers and opposition groups, accusing the president of attempting to remove an independent-minded judge to forestall likely challenges to his continued military rule in an election year.

## Taliban launches new Afghan operation

AP, Kandahar

The Taliban has launched a new operation targeting government and foreign forces in Afghanistan, a spokesman said Sunday, as two policemen died in an ambush in the volatile south.

Purported Taliban spokesman Qari Yousef Ahmadi said the group's leaders announced the beginning of operation "Kamin," or Ambush.

"In this operation, we will target our enemies and use our tactics suicide bombs, remote-controlled

(roadside bombs) and ambushes against occupying forces and the government," Ahmadi said by satellite phone from an undisclosed location. "We start this operation today in all of Afghanistan."

After a winter lull in violence, militant attacks and military operations have surged. Nato and the US-led coalition stepped up operations in the early spring, hoping to pre-empt a spring offensive by militants that threatened the already-shaky grip of President Hamid Karzai's government.

In Kandahar, the Taliban ambushed a police convoy on Saturday, and the ensuing one-hour gun battle killed two policemen and wounded three others, said Shah Wali Kot district chief Obaidullah Khan. He said the Taliban also suffered casualties, but he had no details.

In neighbouring Zabul province, a roadside bomb exploded Saturday as an Afghan army vehicle passed, wounding two soldiers, said Gen. Rahmatullah Raufi, the regional army corps commander.



PHOTO: AFP  
Members of the National League for Democracy (NLD) shout slogans during a demonstration at the party headquarters in Yangon yesterday. Hundreds of pro-democracy activists gathered in Yangon on May 27 to commemorate the 1990 election victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party, amid growing outrage over the extension of her house arrest.

## 'Lanka set for more bloodshed'

AFP, Colombo

A new wave of air and naval combat is likely in Sri Lanka as government troops and Tamil Tiger rebels step up battles that have killed more than 5,000 people since peace talks collapsed, analysts say.

Defence officials say the military is planning to buy MiG-29 supersonic jet fighters, Mi-24 helicopter gunships and bigger guns for navy fast attack craft to counter growing threats from the rebels at sea and in the air.

"There is very little chance of reviving the peace process," said

Sunanda Deshapriya, a director of the Centre for Policy Alternatives, describing the February 2002 truce as all but dead.

"I don't think it is possible to salvage the ceasefire. We will see more fighting in the months to come."

The Tigers ended a month-long lull in their attacks last week with the launch of a major sea-borne assault that saw the brief fall of a strategic naval facility on remote Delft island off Jaffna in the north.

Both sides suffered casualties, but defence sources said the bigger loss to the military was a coastal radar station at Delft that was used

to track gunrunning across the narrow Palk Straits between India and Sri Lanka.

"The Tigers demonstrated their sea-going capability with the attack on Delft island," defence columnist Namal Perera said. "Their bomb attack in Colombo on the same day also showed that their guerrilla capability is intact."

The state-run Daily News said the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were preparing to carry out more attacks because they were "desperate" after losing territory in the east of the island in recent months.

## Bhutan takes another tilt at election

AFP, Thimphu

The small Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan takes another swing at the art of voting this week, undeterred by the challenges of reaching remote villages and a marked reluctance to abandon the monarchy.

The Buddhist country, sandwiched between Asian giants China and India, is preparing for its first ever election next year by holding a second round of dummy polls Monday.

After April's first round produced a turnout of just 30 percent, officials are hoping for a better response from the 400,000 eligible

voters this time.

But they face major hurdles in their effort to educate people on the finer points of parliamentary democracy.

"The geography of Bhutan and literacy levels are major challenges to us. There are many communities that live in remote and inaccessible areas," said Dasho Kunzang Wangdi, Bhutan's chief election commissioner.

"We need to make sure that not only do they have the opportunity to vote but that they understand the process."

Wangdi's concerns seemed well founded.

## Suu Kyi supporters rally in Yangon

AFP, Yangon

Hundreds of pro-democracy activists supported by foreign diplomats rallied Sunday near the home of Myanmar's detained Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, lighting candles to mark the election her party won in vain in 1990.

Members of the National League for Democracy (NLD), some wearing T-shirts emblazoned with pictures of Aung San Suu Kyi, gathered at party headquarters, not far from the lakeside home of the democracy icon.

They were joined by former

student activists, and the crowd of about 350 people lit candles and chanted "Free Aung San Suu Kyi" as they released more than 100 balloons carrying the same slogan into the skies above Yangon.

Aung San Suu Kyi was on Friday informed that she would spend yet another year confined to her house, which police barricaded with barbed wire late Saturday, witnesses said.

On May 27, 1990, the NLD won elections here by a huge majority, but Myanmar's military rulers did not allow it to take power, and Aung San Suu Kyi has since spent most of the last 17 years in detention.

Diplomats from countries including the United States, France and Australia joined the pro-democracy activists at their headquarters at midday for a ceremony marking the NLD victory.

About 300 activists then tried to march to Yangon's famous Shwedagon pagoda to hold a prayer vigil for Aung San Suu Kyi, but witnesses said they were blocked by a pro-junta group, provoking tense scenes before they decided to turn back.

"We decided to turn back to the NLD headquarters because we don't want to waste our strength for no reason," said one activist who declined to be named.



PHOTO: AFP  
Nepalese protesters gather around a burning stump at Ratnapark during a day-long general strike in Kathmandu yesterday. Traffic and business came to a halt in Nepal's capital as a teachers' union affiliated with the former Maoist rebels called a strike to protest alleged police brutality.