

Cracks emerge in Musharraf regime

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's military ruler President Pervez Musharraf is battling serious dissent within his own party, weakening a crucial cornerstone of the US-led "war on terror," analysts and party officials say.

The man who survived at least two al-Qaeda assassinations attempts stirred up a hornet's nest when he suspended the country's top judge, Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, on March 9.

Opponents say he wanted to intimidate the judiciary before seeking re-election in uniform from the outgoing parliament -- despite the fact that the constitution says he should quit as army chief by the end of 2007.

After trying to present a united front in the face of nationwide protests, newspapers reported this week that Musharraf had blasted members of his ruling party, the

Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q).

"I bluntly say you always leave me alone in times of trial and tribulation," The News, a respected daily, quoted a "shaken" Musharraf as telling the members on Wednesday.

He reportedly warned that without him, the country risked "Talibanisation" by militants from the Pakistan-Afghan border.

But hours after he spoke, fresh divisions emerged when Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz abruptly suspended tough curbs on the media that Musharraf himself had introduced three days earlier.

Part of the problem, analysts say, lies in the ragtag origins of the PML-Q, which is named after Pakistan's founding father Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

To back him in 2002 elections, Musharraf gathered disaffected members from the Pakistan Muslim League of Nawaz Sharif, the pre-

mier he overthrew in a 1999 coup, and the Pakistan People's Party of ex-prime minister Benazir Bhutto.

But the hybrid party is largely conservative and has failed to support some of Musharraf's measures to tackle sexism and religious extremism.

It now faces trouble in a general election expected late this year.

"The president is solely responsible for destroying the party. He never considered it important to seek its opinion," Kabir Ali Wasti, one of several PML-Q vice-presidents, told AFP.

So far the party has held only a handful of rallies to support its embattled president after commandeering local buses to bring in supporters.

Musharraf's strongest backing has come from his allies in Karachi, the Muttahida Qaumi Movement. However, they have been accused of involvement in violence there on

May 12 that claimed more than 40 lives when Chaudhry tried to speak in the city.

"I have told the president there is no consultative process in the party. We need to regroup to survive," said Farooq Amjad Mir, a PML-Q legislator from the eastern city of Lahore.

"Even on the judicial issue there was no parliamentary meeting called to work out a strategy in the face of the opposition and media onslaught."

Speculation has naturally turned to the military, General Musharraf's ultimate powerbase and the recipient of billions of dollars in US aid since Pakistan came over to Washington's side after the September 11 attacks.

The army last month issued an unprecedented statement that it fully stood behind him.

5 die as ferry catches fire in Philippines

AFP, Manila

Five people were killed when a ferry with more than 200 people on board caught fire Sunday in waters off the central Philippine island of Mindoro, the coast guard said.

Initial reports said the MV Catalyn-D was en route to the western island of Palawan when the blaze erupted, the coast guard said. It had set sail from Manila Saturday evening.

The flames were quickly contained and a coast guard vessel was dispatched to transport the passengers to Manila, the coast guard said.

The blaze began in the cargo hold of the vessel and quickly spread to the passenger deck, the coast guard said.

Some frightened passengers who had jumped overboard to escape the flames were plucked from the sea by passing fishing vessels while the rest were safely recovered by the responding coast guard boat, said coast guard spokesman Lieutenant Commander Joseph Coyme.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan President Hamid Karzai (C) greets the crowd as he arrives for a Shura (meeting with tribal leaders and village leaders and members of the Afghan government) at the Sultan Shahabuddin Ghori high school, in Miri village, Ghazni Province, some 200km south west of Kabul yesterday. Several rockets were fired near a school where Afghan President Hamid Karzai was meeting tribal elders but caused no casualties.

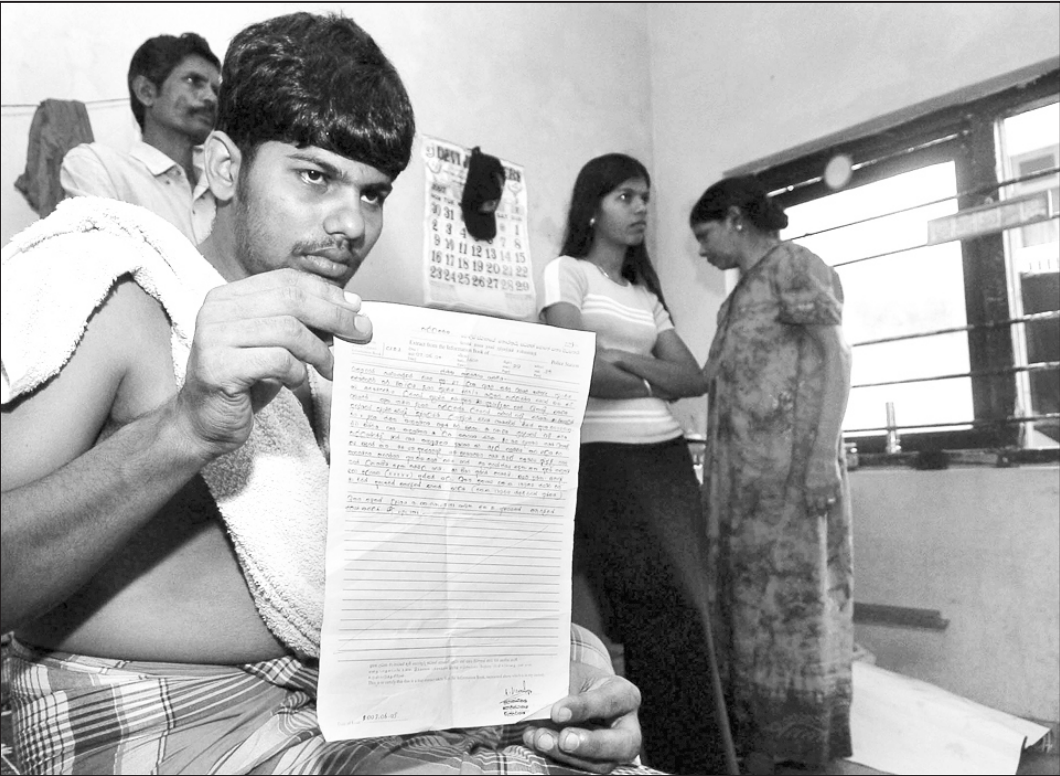


PHOTO: AFP

A Sri Lankan Tamil man displays a receipt on June 9 received from the police after they confiscated his national identity card, apparently to prevent him from moving about in the capital Colombo where he has been living for seven months. Life for ordinary Tamils in Colombo is getting worse -- with the community caught in the middle of a once again escalating ethnic war between the island's Sinhalese-dominated authorities and Tamil Tiger rebels.

Lanka says sorry for evicting Tamils

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's prime minister yesterday apologised to ethnic minority Tamils for evicting them from the capital, promising there would be no repeat of the controversial operation.

"It was a big mistake," Ratnasiri Wickremanayake told reporters here, referring to Thursday's expulsion of hundreds of Tamils at gunpoint from low-budget Colombo hostels.

Police had justified the operation by arguing that Tamil Tiger rebels had been using the hostels to plan attacks, but the government has come in for fierce criticism from foreign governments and human rights groups.

"I express regret and apologise to the Tamil community on behalf of the government," Wickremanayake said, rejecting claims by the country's police chief Victor Perera that the Tamils had left Colombo of their own accord.

The premier discounted the

defence offered by the police inspector general and said the government stand was that the police and military action was "wrong" and that minority Tamils had a right to live anywhere they pleased.

"They (the police) asked people whether they want to go back to their village or not only after bussing them (256 kilometres, 160 miles) to Vavuniya," Wickremanayake said.

"We want to tell the Tamil people that everyone has a right to live anywhere," he said, adding that the government was considering compensation to 376 men, women and children who were evicted.

Some of these people have since returned to the capital in buses provided again by the state after the Supreme Court ordered an immediate halt to the evictions, which were described as "ethnic cleansing" by rights groups.

The premier declined to name the individual in the government who had ordered the unprecedented move, but said an investiga-

tion was under way and that officials held culpable will be disciplined.

"This is not the way to deal with such a problem," he said of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) operatives. "We have legal avenues to deal with wrongdoers."

Perera was earlier Sunday quoted as saying that the Tamils had volunteered to quit the city of 650,000 people.

"He (the police chief) may have said it in the morning but I am now telling you (in the afternoon) what the government position is. It is final. We accept what happened was wrong," the prime minister said.

"That is why I am expressing regret and apologising on behalf of the government."

The premier acknowledged that people in the capital face inconvenience as a result of regular checks and road blocks, but said such measures were needed to prevent Tamil Tiger bomb attacks.

Pakistan joins fight on nuke terror

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan will join an international initiative aimed at keeping nuclear materials out of the hands of terrorists, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs said.

The initiative, however, only applies to civilian "facilities and activities," the ministry said in a statement late Saturday. "Pakistan has declared that the global initiative does not cover Pakistan's military nuclear facilities or activities."

The programme, known as the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism, calls on states to improve accounting, control and physical protection of nuclear material and radioactive substances as well as the security of nuclear facilities.

It built on an existing "Proliferation Security Initiative," a US-led group of dozens of nations working together to help seize illicit weapons as they are transported around the world.

The world's five leading nuclear powers the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France form the core of the Global Initiative to

Combat Nuclear Terrorism.

In 2004, the scientist considered to be the father of the Pakistan's nuclear weapons programme Abdul Qadeer Khan confessed that he had leaked nuclear technology to North Korea, Iran and Libya.

The ministry appeared keen to show it has moved on since the leaks.

"Pakistan's participation in the global initiative is a manifestation of the fact that nuclear security and export control measures in Pakistan are at par with latest international standards," the ministry's statement said.

President Gen Pervez Musharraf a close ally in the US anti-terrorism campaign has pardoned Khan for spreading nuclear technology, citing his contribution in making Pakistan a nuclear weapons state, the only country in the Muslim world to possess the capability.

Khan lives under tight security and virtual arrest at his home in an upscale residential neighbourhood of Islamabad. The government says the measures are for his security.

11 killed in Manipur rebel violence

IANs, Imphal

Authorities have issued shoot-at-sight orders in a Manipur town after 11 people were killed and half-a-dozen wounded in violent clashes between two separatist groups belonging to different ethnic communities, officials said yesterday.

A police spokesman said an indefinite curfew was imposed in Moreh, a town bordering Myanmar some 110 km from state capital Imphal, after five Kuki tribals were killed Saturday by suspected militants of the outlawed United National Liberation Front (UNLF). The UNLF is fighting for a separate homeland for the majority Meitei community in Manipur.

'Immediately after the incident, suspected Kuki National Army (KNA) rebels attacked and killed six Meitei daily wage workers and wounded six more,' an official in the state police control here told IANS on condition of anonymity.

Kuki rebels also set ablaze the

house of a prominent Meitei leader in Moreh.

Police blamed the recent ethnic violence as a clash between the UNLF and the KNA for territorial supremacy in Moreh, one of the biggest commercial towns in Manipur.

The KNA is fighting for an independent homeland for the minority Kuki tribe in Manipur.

'Army and paramilitary troopers have been deployed in strength with shoot-on-sight orders issued to bring the situation under control,' the official said.

Army soldiers Sunday staged flag marches trying to instill a sense of confidence in the town. Police Saturday burst teargas canisters to disperse thousands of people belonging to the two communities taking to the streets of Moreh to condemn the killings.

'The situation is still very tense, but there were no overnight reports of fresh violence,' the official said.

Heat wave claims 26 lives in Pakistan

AFP, Lahore

A scorching heat wave in Pakistan has killed 26 people in central Punjab province, where the temperature has soared to 48 degrees Celsius (118 degrees Fahrenheit), a health ministry official said yesterday.

"At least 26 people have died in Punjab over the past two days," the official said, requesting anonymity.

Six died in the provincial capital Lahore alone, where the mercury hit 48C, he said, adding that dozens of others were admitted to hospital after fainting due to heatstroke.

Another six people, including a woman and three children, died in the nearby town of Okara and four in Sargodha, he said, adding that other casualties were reported elsewhere.

The meteorological department has forecast hot and dry weather for the coming week.

Kashmir militants reject al-Qaeda presence claim

AFP, Srinagar

A Muslim militant alliance Saturday said al-Qaeda has no presence in Kashmir after a masked gunman in a video CD claimed that the network had launched an Indian unit.

"al-Qaeda has no presence in Kashmir," Syed Sadaqat Hussein, the spokesman for the region's sole militant alliance, United Jihad Council, said in a statement to the local Current News Servicenewsagency.

Hussein described the claim as "deceptive."

"There is no need or importance of al-Qaeda in Kashmir," Hussain said, adding that Kashmiri militants were "successfully continuing insurgency against Indian rule over the past 18 years."

Indian TV channels and local news agencies in Kashmir received the video CDs Friday showing a

masked man claiming to be from al-Qaeda and announcing the launch of its Indian wing.

Wearing combat clothing and brandishing an AK-47 rifle, the man declared the launch of "Jihad across India."

Hussein accused the Indian authorities of engineering the video claim with "an aim to hurt the indigenous character" of the movement.

In New Delhi, India's home ministry said "necessary inquiries" were being made and urged people to remain calm.

"A close watch is being maintained by the state and central government agencies and action is being taken on a continuous basis to foil such designs. There is no need for any panic," it said.



PHOTO: AFP

A rickshaw puller carries a passenger through a flooded street during the monsoon rain in Agartala, capital of India's Tripura state yesterday. The Regional Meteorology Centre (RMC) declared the onset of monsoon in the region on June 8 as the monsoon finally arrived in the North East region and almost all the states experienced drizzle or showers.

India 'bigfoot' sightings prompt official probe

AFP, Tura

Authorities in India are to investigate claims by terrified villagers that "bigfoot"-type hairy giants are roaming the jungles of the remote north-east, a local official said.

The creatures have apparently been spoken of, and occasionally spotted, for years, but a rise in the number of sightings over the past month has prompted authorities to look into the matter further.

The bizarre sightings have reportedly been made in the Garo hills area of Meghalaya state, close to the borders with Bangladesh and Bhutan.

Villagers have dubbed the mysterious creatures "Mande Buring" -- or Jungle Man.

"A team of wildlife officials and other experts will conduct a study to find out if there is any truth in the locals' claims about these hairy giants," said Samphat Kumar, a district magistrate in the West Garo Hills district.

One local farmer, 40-year-old Wallen Sangma, claimed he had seen an entire family of the creatures -- possibly a lowland relative of the Himalayan Yeti, or perhaps a distant cousin of the North American bigfoot known as Sasquatch, or Australia's Yowie.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian actress and model Shilpa Shetty holds an award during the International Indian Film Academy Awards (IIFAs) ceremony at the Hallam Arena in Sheffield, northern England, early yesterday.

'BOLLYWOOD OSCARS' 'Rang De Basanti' wins best film award

AFP, Sheffield

"Rang De Basanti" was named best film Sunday at Bollywood's version of the Oscars, a star-studded, spectacular celebration of song, dance and stagecraft.

The movie scooped a total of 10 awards from 15 nominations at the International Indian Film Academy Awards (IIFAs) in Sheffield, northern England, designed to honour Bollywood talent and promote its films abroad.

Directed by Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra, "Rang De Basanti" is about a filmmaker who wants to shoot a movie on Indian nationalists who rose up against British colonial rule.

The director, played by Alice Patten -- daughter of Chris Patten, Britain's last governor in Hong Kong -- tries to cast five friends but finds they are more interested in dancing than history.

"Rang De Basanti" -- which means "Paint It Yellow" in English -- beat off challenges from movies including

"Dhoom 2", a thriller starring Bollywood golden couple Abhishek Bachchan and Aishwarya Rai, and sci-fi hit "Krish".

Showing no hard feelings, Bachchan and Rai presented the award at the climax of a marathon five-hour ceremony which finished well past midnight and was watched by a capacity 12,500 arena crowd as well as some 500 million people in 110 countries on television.

Earlier, Hrithik Roshan won best actor in a leading role for "Krish", while Rani Mukherjee was best actress for her part in "Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna".

The award for best director went to Rajkumar Hirani for "Lage Raho Munnabhai", a comedy about the enduring influence of Indian independence movement leader Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophy of non-violence.

But the event was not only about awards -- a series of high-octane stage performances by stars like Shilpa Shetty, Akshay Kumar and Saif Ali

Khan had the mainly British South Asian crowd swaying in their seats and, later, dancing in the aisles.

Abhishek Bachchan and his father Amitabh, voted the biggest star of the millennium in a 1999 BBC poll, danced together on stage to deafening cheers and screams from the crowd.

Cheers were only slightly less loud for heartthrob Salman Khan, who snaked through the audience on a golden pantomime horse, pursued by a brass band and dancers, before leaping on stage for a song-and-dance routine in front of huge Easter Island-inspired masks.

Other highlights included an award for outstanding contribution to Indian cinema for legendary actor and politician Dharmendra, who was joined on stage by his two weeping sons, Sunny and Bobby Deol.

Floods leave 66 dead in China

AFP, AP, Beijing

Floods and landslides triggered by torrential rains in southern China have killed at least 66 people, left 12 others missing and forced nearly 600,000 from their homes, state media reported yesterday.

Four days of heavy rains have battered Guangdong, Guangxi, Guizhou, Hunan, Fujian and Jiangxi provinces, affecting nearly nine million people, Xinhua news agency reported, citing figures released by the civil affairs ministry.

The floods and landslides have caused overall economic losses of more than 2.9 billion yuan (380 million dollars), the ministry said, according to Xinhua.

The report did not give a breakdown of the death toll by province.

Some 48,000 houses have been completely destroyed and nearly 100,000 others damaged, Xinhua quoted an unnamed ministry official as saying.

Nearly 300,000 hectares

(741,000 acres) of crops have been affected, with one-sixth of them completely destroyed, the report said.

The ministry has dispatched rescue teams to assist in relief efforts, it added.

China suffers deaths and damage every summer when seasonal rains cause flash floods.

Big cities are sheltered by giant dikes but fatalities are reported in farm communities that lack protection from rising rivers, and in mountain towns that are hit by flash floods.

Millions of people in central and southern China live on flood-prone reclaimed farmland in the flood plains of rivers.

Flooding and typhoons killed 2,704 people last year, according to the China Meteorological Administration. That was the second-deadliest year on record after 1998, when summer flooding claimed 4,150 lives.