

# US presses Pakistan to hold free elections

Islamabad denies presence of Laden, Omar in Pak soil

AFP, Islamabad

Top US diplomats are visiting Pakistan this week for talks with embattled anti-terror ally President Pervez Musharraf on holding free and fair elections due later this year, officials said yesterday.

Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte and Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher were expected to steer clear of a political crisis over the suspension of Pakistan's top judge.

But Boucher -- who on Wednesday met Foreign Minister Khurshid Kasuri and members of Pakistan's election commission -- said the United States wanted the upcoming general election to be fully democratic.

"The elections should be free, fair and transparent. They should meet international standards," the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) quoted Boucher as

saying at a reception in Islamabad late Wednesday.

Boucher said that American observers would help monitor the election.

He also discussed the election process with MPs from the ruling party and the opposition.

Negroponte, the former US director of national intelligence, was due to visit Pakistan later in the week for talks with Pakistani leaders, a US official said on condition of anonymity.

Pakistan's once fractious opposition has united over military ruler Musharraf's March 9 ouster of Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry. Clashes over the issue last month claimed more than 40 lives.

Around 3,000 lawyers and opposition supporters chanting "Go Musharraf, go" rallied in the eastern city of Lahore on Thursday and called for free elections to be held as soon as possible.

When asked about the judicial

issue, Boucher replied that it "should be settled within the court," APP said.

Opposition parties allege Musharraf suspended Chaudhry through any legal hurdle to re-elect as president-in-uniform for another five years, which the constitution prohibits.

The presidential election by the federal and provincial assemblies is expected in September, while the general election is likely in late 2007 or possibly early 2008.

US officials would not comment on whether Boucher would talk with Musharraf about his role as army chief. Musharraf seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999.

They added that security issues would still feature at the talks.

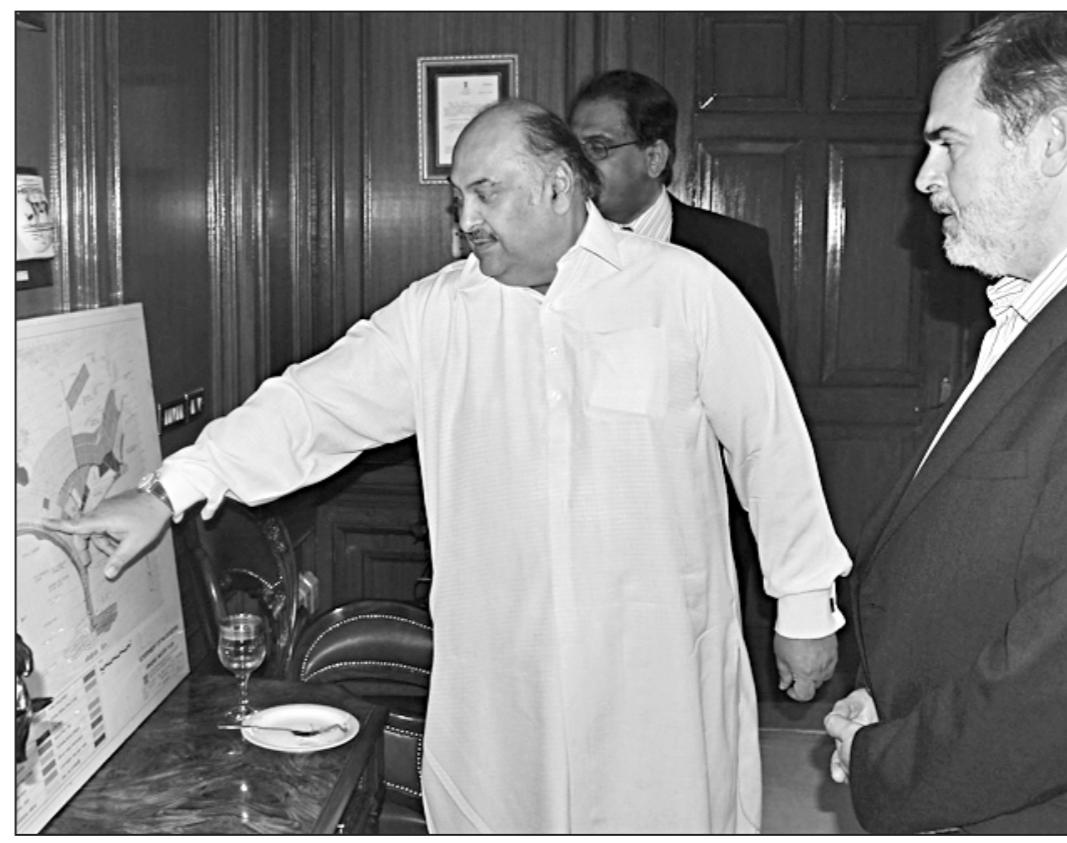
However the focus of the US visits is in contrast to previous trips, which have concentrated on Pakistan's role in the fight against al-Qaeda and Taliban militants based near the border with Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden and Taliban supreme Mullah Mohammad Omar are not in southwestern Pakistan, a provincial chief minister told a top US diplomat yesterday.

US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher travelled to Quetta, the capital of rugged Baluchistan province bordering Afghanistan, for talks with local officials.

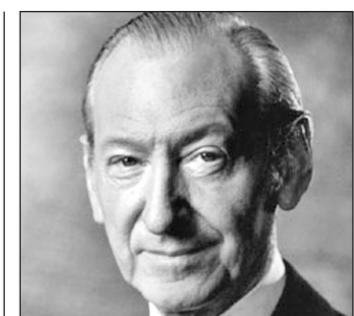
Afghan officials and some Nato commanders have alleged that Taliban leaders are based in the city and using outposts in Pakistan to launch cross-border attacks on international and Afghan troops.

"There is no Taliban headquarters in Baluchistan nor are the Taliban chief Mullah Mohammad Omar or Osama bin Laden in Baluchistan," provincial chief minister Jan Mohammad Yusuf told Boucher, according to an official statement.



Chief Minister of Baluchistan Province Jam Mohammad Yusuf (L) points towards a map as visiting US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher (R) looks on prior to their meeting at the Chief Minister House in Quetta yesterday. Top US diplomats are visiting Pakistan for talks with embattled anti-terror ally President Pervez Musharraf on holding free and fair elections due later this year.

PHOTO: AFP



Ex-UN chief Waldheim no more

AFP, Vienna

Kurt Waldheim, the former UN secretary general and president of Austria whose reputation was tarnished by revelations over his Nazi past, died Thursday at the age of 88, his family said.

The former statesman suffered a heart attack in May and had been ailing ever since. He left a Vienna hospital last week and died surrounded by his family, they told the APA news agency.

Waldheim was UN chief from 1972 until 1982 and then president of Austria from 1986 to 1992, when he was at the centre of an international storm over his wartime links to a Nazi militia.



Militant of the Islamic movement Hamas tot their rifles as they stand inside the bullet scarred pro-Fatah Preventative Security compound after they took over the headquarters following clashes in the Tal al-Hawa neighbourhood in Gaza City yesterday. The main Fatah headquarters in the Gaza Strip fell to fighters of Islamist Hamas as the Palestinian president mulled firing the teetering coalition cabinet uniting the rivals.

## Israel rules out military intervention in Gaza

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel voiced increasing alarm on Thursday about raging Palestinian warfare in Gaza but ruled out military intervention to stop Hamas from gaining the upper hand over its Western-backed rivals.

"Israel has no intention of reoccupying the Gaza Strip," said Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's spokeswoman Miri Eisin while bitter clashes between the Islamists and the secular Fatah pushed into a second week, killing more than 80 people.

"Our military presence in Gaza will only create problems rather than solve them," said Eisin, just days after Olmert himself said Israel could not enter Gaza "to fight the extremists on behalf of the Palestinian pragmatists".

"The only certainty is that this civil war, triggered by a military operation launched by Hamas, is good neither for the Palestinians, nor for the Israelis," his spokeswoman stressed.

The Palestinian question would be central to next Tuesday's talks between Olmert and US President

George W. Bush at the White House, she indicated.

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas was said to be seriously considering whether to sack the coalition government uniting his Fatah party and Hamas, faced with the escalating bloodshed that has eluded his calls for a ceasefire.

But Israeli officials also seemed to shy away from the possibility of approving arms deliveries to Fatah in Gaza in order to bolster its fighting capability against the frequently better disciplined Hamas.

"The situation is very complicated and all options should be examined with care," Eisin told AFP when asked about such a possible arms shipment or potential dialogue with Hamas, boycotted by Israel as a terrorist organisation.

The influential chairman of parliament's defence and foreign affairs committee said Israel would not allow arms to be handed over to Fatah in Gaza but that doing so in the West Bank "merits serious thought".

## 'LTTE planning attack on Colombo port'

Lanka slams West over rights outcry

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan police have uncovered a plan by Tamil Tiger rebels to launch a suicide attack against the country's main sea port in the capital, a report said Thursday quoting police investigators.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were ready to launch sea-borne attacks against Colombo harbour, which they had failed to attack on at least two previous occasions, the privately-run Sirasa channel said.

"The LTTE has planned to carry out the attack around mid this year," the television channel said, quoting the police Criminal Investigations Department.

The defence ministry's spokesman, Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe, said he was unaware of the plan. There was also no immediate comment from the guerrillas.

The television report said the Tiger planned to use suicide bombers to storm the port and later destroy containers while carrying out a simultaneous air strike against an oil depot and an electricity generating complex in Colombo.

The Tiger rebels staged a daring air attack on two oil storage facilities in and around the capital in April.

The low-flying light aircraft attack

prompted Sri Lankan authorities to shut the island's only international airport at night to prevent flying Tigers using the cover of commercial aircraft to slip into the skies over the capital.

On Tuesday, Tiger rebels came close to cutting off a large chunk of Sri Lanka's electricity supply by setting off a bomb against a key power line, officials said. The explosion only caused minor damage and no one was hurt.

Last week Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramayake also said authorities had information about a truck bomb that could destroy half the city, which is home to 650,000 people.

Sri Lanka has stepped up security in Colombo amid fears of rebel bomb attacks and last week evicted nearly 400 ethnic minority Tamils from the city, saying they were a threat to national security.

However, the move was halted by the Supreme Court amid allegations that the eviction was illegal and a form of "collective punishment" on the Tamil community for the actions of the Tiger guerrillas.

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Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's top defence official has accused Western nations of bullying his government over human rights and defended the eviction of ethnic

Tamils from the capital, a report said Wednesday.

Defence Secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse also rejected warnings from Britain that the former colony risked international isolation over the deteriorating rights situation in the island.

"British, or Western countries, the EU (European Union) countries, they can do whatever," Rajapakse said in an interview with the BBC. "We don't depend on them... they are not giving anything."

His move to evict nearly 400 ethnic minority Tamils from the capital was halted by the Supreme Court amid an avalanche of condemnation by local and foreign human rights groups.

The country's prime minister on Sunday expressed regret over the expulsions, promised it will not happen again and apologised to the Tamils after promising a disciplinary action against officials responsible for excesses.

The defence secretary, however, defended the action -- aimed at preventing Tamil Tiger rebels from infiltrating the capital -- and lambasted foreign governments, which condemned the Tamil evictions.



Activists of Pakistani opposition parties shout anti-government slogans as they march during a protest rally in Lahore yesterday. Thousands of lawyers and opposition supporters urged Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to quit in fresh protests over the suspension of the country's chief justice.

PHOTO: AFP

## Sunni mosques attacked after Shia shrine bombing

AP, Baghdad

A handful of Sunni mosques were attacked or burned yesterday, but curfews and increased troop levels kept Iraq in relative calm a day after suspected al-Qaeda bombers toppled the towering minarets of a prized Shia shrine.

Wednesday's attack on the Askariya shrine in Samarra, which was blamed on Sunni extremists with links to al-Qaeda, stoked fears of a surge in violence between Muslim sects. A bombing at the same mosque complex in February 2006 that destroyed the shrine's famed golden dome unleashed a bloodbath of reprisals.

Increased US and Iraqi military patrols crisscrossed the streets of the Iraqi capital, and additional checkpoints were set up along roads leading to Sadr City, witnesses said.

Hundreds of residents marched peacefully through the streets of that teeming neighbourhood, a stronghold of Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia.

Demonstrations also took place in Kut, Diwaniyah, Najaf and Basra all predominantly Shia cities in the south.

A ban on vehicular traffic was expected to remain in place in Baghdad until Saturday.

Attacks on Sunni mosques began within hours of Wednesday's bombings in Samarra.

Police in the southern city of Basra said Thursday that four people were killed and six wounded in attacks on the Kawaz, Othman, al-Abayshi and Basra Grand mosques on Wednesday, all involving rocket-propelled grenades that also damaged the buildings. Basra is Iraq's second-largest city, 340 miles southeast of Baghdad.

Four Sunni mosques near Baghdad also were attacked or burned within several hours of the Samarra bombings, police said.

One of those mosques, which had been only partly destroyed, was a target again Thursday, police said. Around 4 am, attackers broke into the Hateen mosque in Iskandariyah, 50km south of Baghdad, and

## Iran threatens to cut nuclear cooperation

AFP, Vienna

Iran threatened yesterday to further reduce cooperation with the UN atomic agency if new sanctions are ordered and insisted its uranium enrichment programme had gone too far to turn back.

For "each action there is a reaction, prompt reaction by Iran and that will continue", Iran's ambassador to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Ali Asghar Soltanieh, told reporters at a meeting of the International Atomic Energy Agency's 35-nation board of governors.

The UN Security Council has imposed two sets of sanctions since December in a bid to get Iran to halt uranium enrichment -- which can make fuel for reactors or for a bomb -- and to cooperate with an IAEA investigation over concerns Iran seeks nuclear weapons.

IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei reported Wednesday that the agency's ability to monitor Iran's nuclear work is "deteriorating" due to the reduced Iranian cooperation. ElBaradei also told the board that

Iran is still expanding uranium enrichment work, in defiance of the Security Council.

The IAEA board wrapped up its debate Thursday after both the United States and Europe warned that new UN sanctions against Iran loomed.

US ambassador Gregory Schulte told reporters: "We want negotiations. We want negotiations that get us to a diplomatic settlement."

"But for Iran to enter those negotiations, it needs to listen to the board of governors. It needs to listen to the Security Council and it needs to suspend those activities causing such international concern," Schulte said.

Iran refuses to suspend enrichment, saying it has the right to a peaceful nuclear programme under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

The Islamic state has reacted to sanctions already imposed by stopping voluntary cooperation with IAEA inspectors.



Mourners surround the ambulances carrying the coffins of slain MP Walid Eido, his eldest son and their bodyguards during their funeral procession in Beirut yesterday. Lebanon observed a day of mourning to bury Eido, whose death in a Beirut bomb blast was the latest in a string of killings the ruling coalition has blamed on Damascus.

## Angry mourners blame Syria at Lebanon MP's funeral

AFP, Beirut

Angry mourners cried out against Syria yesterday at the funeral of prominent MP Walid Eido, whose death in a Beirut bombing was the latest in a string of killings the ruling coalition has blamed on Damascus.

Eido was a vocal critic of the Syrian regime, and his assassination in a seafront attack on Wednesday stoked fears of instability in a country battling deep sectarian and political divisions.

Syria has so far made no official comment on his assassination, with the official press merely reporting the incident.

But the Al-Watan daily, which describes itself as independent, "directly accuses the (anti-Syrian) parliamentary majority of having sacrificed MP Eido in order to continue its destructive project in Lebanon."

Thousands of people, led by parliamentary majority leaders Saad Hariri and Walid Jumblatt, marched from the family home toward a mosque in southeast Beirut for mid-day prayers and then burial in a nearby cemetery.

"With our soul, with our blood we shall redeem you Saad," chanted the mourners, amid a sea of hands, which carried the coffins draped with Lebanese flags into the Khashokji mosque.