

Pakistan's 'silent majority' welcomes mosque raid

AFP, Islamabad

The army raid on a pro-Taliban mosque has raised fears of an extremist backlash in Pakistan, but many in the country's so-called "silent majority" say the government was right to act anyway.

While hardliners have been able to stir up anger each time President Pervez Musharraf moves against them, most people in Pakistan have traditionally been tolerant Muslims — and many oppose the militant drive to install Islamic law.

For many of the one million people in the capital Islamabad, the raid — the deadly climax of a three-month standoff with radicals — has restored an uneasy calm despite a lingering fear of revenge.

"Never before has Islamabad

seen anything like this, nor should it be allowed in future," said garment shop owner Mohammad Siddiq. "We are all Muslims, but that doesn't give a few clerics the right to teach us Islam."

The standoff at the Red Mosque, less than two kilometres (one mile) from the presidential palace, began in April when chief cleric Maulana Muhammad Abdul Aziz set up a religious court to bring the capital under Islamic law.

In the final battle with radicals holed up in the mosque, firebrand cleric Abdul Rashid Ghazi died in a hail of bullets while militant snipers fired at soldiers from the minarets and booby-trapped the compound.

In recent weeks, his radical students, including bearded talibas and women in burqas, had abducted Chinese women they accused of prostitution and harassed shops

selling Western DVDs in the city, which is among Pakistan's most liberal.

"These people were making life difficult for everyone and that, too, in the name of Islam," said Mehreen Shah, a housewife. "They should not have been given such liberty in the first place.

"Enlightened people were under threat from bearded militants — whether they are video shop owners, beauty parlours or even school and college girls."

A female student who asked not to be named said: "How can you allow someone to start running around and enforcing Sharia the way Ghazi was, through kidnappings, threats and attacks?"

Reacting with fury to the massive raid, al-Qaeda's global deputy commander Ayman al-Zawahiri has called for holy war, saying in a

new Internet posting: "Muslims of Pakistan, your salvation is only through jihad."

But many members of Pakistan's silent majority of moderate Muslims would prefer to just get on with life after a traumatic week that saw plumes of smoke billowing above the Pakistani capital.

"It's a sad end but life may return to normal in one or two days, which is good news for a poor person like me," said taxi driver Rahim Shah, who has manoeuvred around road blocks and police checkpoints for more than a week.

"If half the city is under curfew and the other half under construction, it affects your business, even if you're a taxi driver."

The guns have fallen silent for now, but many residents said the battle and Ghazi's death had escalated tensions and predicted it would embolden those who are fighting to turn their country into a hardline Islamic state.

"I don't agree with his style of politics," said college student Umer Farooq of the dead cleric. "But he has certainly become a symbol of defiance and did not surrender despite the odds against him."

US ties with SE Asia face setback

AFP, Washington

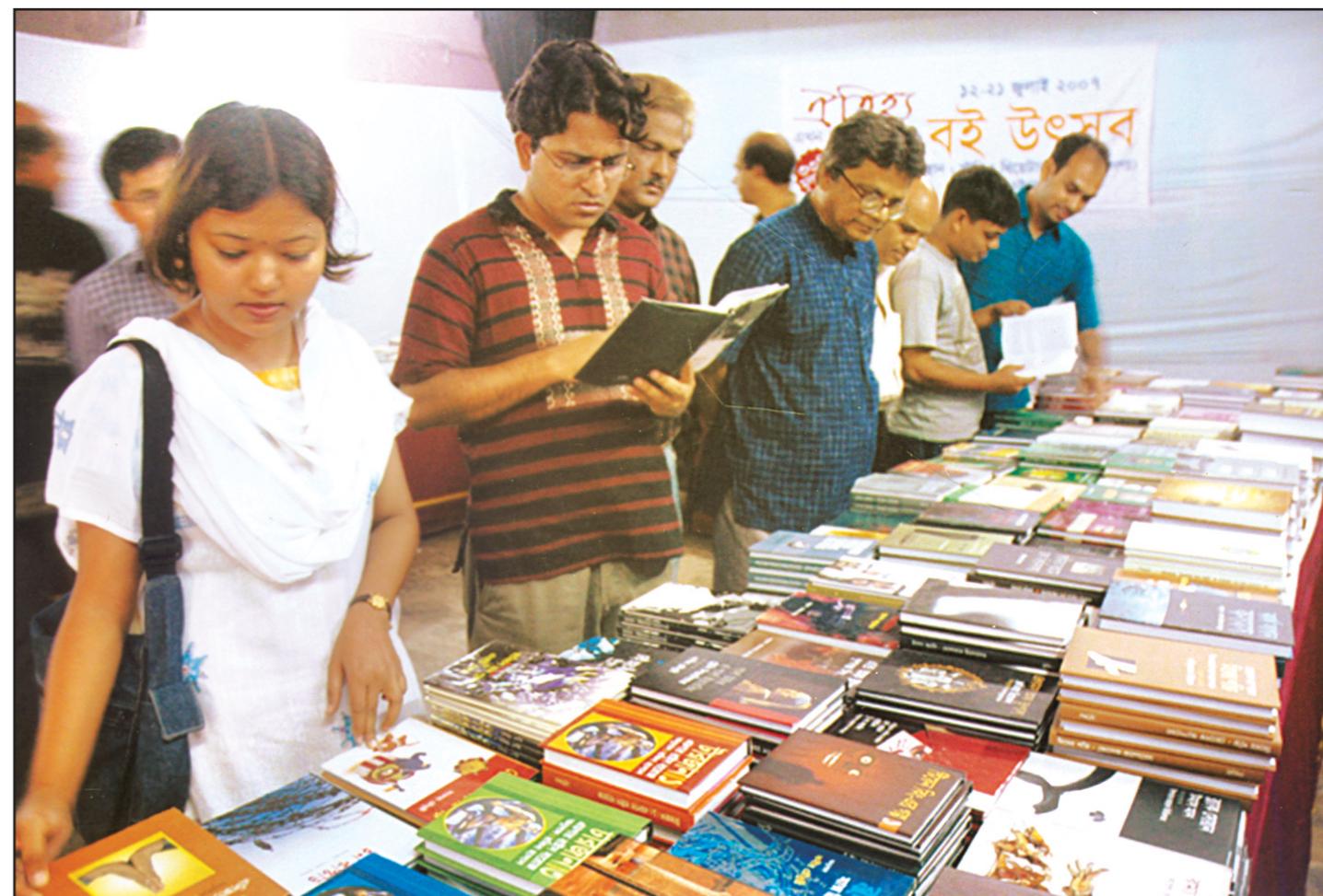
US ties with Southeast Asia are facing a setback as President George W Bush cancelled his scheduled first summit with ASEAN leaders and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's trip to the region for annual talks seems uncertain.

US officials have informed Singapore, host of the much-touted US-Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit, that the September 5 date for the talks was now "not convenient," ASEAN diplomats said.

September is critical for Bush as a much-awaited assessment of the situation in insurgency-wracked Iraq would be released that month amid a revolt within his own Republican party over failed war strategy.

"We are actually disappointed," one ASEAN diplomat told AFP.

The landmark summit was aimed at highlighting 30 years of official ties between Washington and ASEAN, which comprises Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.



Book lovers flip through books on the opening day of a book fair organised by Oitijhya at Chittagong Studio Theatre yesterday.

10-day Oitijhya book fair begins

A ten-day book fair organised by Oitijhya began at Chittagong Studio Theatre yesterday, says a press release.

Prof Abul Monsur inaugurated the fair where book lovers will get 600 books published by Oitijhya at 33 percent discount. Besides, they will get special discount on the anthologies of famous writers published by Oitijhya.

General Secretary of Chittagong Press Club Ejaj Yusufi was also present at the fair that will run till July 21.

One held with pistol, 4 bombs

A CORRESPONDENT, Benapole

Members of Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) arrested a topnotch criminal and recovered a foreign pistol and four powerful bombs from his possession at Dholda village under Sharsha upazila in Benapole yesterday.

The arrestee was identified as Shafiqul Islam, son of Ataul Haq of Dholda village.

Acting on a tip off, Rab members raided the house of Shafiqul in the afternoon and arrested him with the pistol and bombs.

Police was interrogating Shafiqul till filing of this report.



Bulbul Academy of Fine Arts (BAFA) organises a five-day art exhibition at Russian Cultural Centre in the city that ended yesterday.

Same old Tigers

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not far behind — putting forth another feeble show, to make the situation gloomier, as they crashed to 131 all out. The only person who could count himself happy was predictably Muttiah Muralidaran, the off-spinner who claimed his 59th five-for with figures of 6 for 28.

After ninety minutes of play in the morning session, the match was halted for over four hours following heavy downpour and when the action resumed in the afternoon, only 8.2 overs could be managed within three short breaks before the umpires finally called off play due to bad light. The Sri Lankan openers Michael Vandort (25) and Upul Tharanga (4) batted through the short spell to finish the day on 30 without loss.

But even the shortened morning session was time enough for Bangladesh to return to their, by now routine, dismal first-inning showing. Resuming on 72-4, they lost their remaining six wickets for 69 runs, just half an hour before the lunch break.

Rain, when it came, was too late for the Tigers as the Sri Lankan bowlers had them under wraps by that time. It ensured that Bangladesh's first inning misery in the series would continue after they were bundled out for 89 and 62 in the last two Tests in Colombo.

With seven fielders on the off-side, left-arm paceman Sujeewa de Silva tempted the two overnight batsmen Mohammad Ashraful and Tushar Imran to fall prey to expansive drives.

Tushar Imran was the first victim of this trap as his flashing drive reached the safe hands of Mahela Jayawardene at second slip on 17.

And four overs later, a seemingly composed captain Ashraful fished at one outside off-stump getting the edge to wicketkeeper Prasanna Jayawardene to follow his partner back to the pavilion.

The departure of Ashraful, who scored 26 off 51 deliveries with the help of three boundaries, simply opened the door for Muralidaran to put more feathers on his cap. It once again proved that the Bangladesh tail-end has hardly any clue against his bowling.

Muralidaran took a return catch of Mohammad Rafique, who skied the ball, to complete his 100-wicket haul at the venue after achieving the same record at the Sinhalese Sports Club ground and in Galle.

With yesterday's success Muralidaran improved his tally to 694, just 15 wickets away from breaking Shane Warne's world record of 709 wickets.

Even the dull and drab atmosphere did not dissuade the small crowd who cheered every success of their local hero.