

Bush admn grilled over support for Musharraf

AFP, Washington

US President George W Bush's administration came under intense grilling in Congress Thursday over its unconditional support for Pakistan leader Pervez Musharraf.

Just days after the military strongman ordered troops into an Islamabad mosque to flush out Islamic militants in a daring assault that left 86 people dead, lawmakers doubted his ability to take strong action to reign in the problem and called for a reevaluation of US policy towards Pakistan.

They accused him of thwarting democracy, turning a blind eye towards the growing ranks of the Taliban and al-Qaeda militant groups and lacking the ability or will to crack down on terrorist training camps in his country.

A lawmaker cited reports which he said confidently spoke of Osama bin Laden hiding in a training camp near the Pakistan-Afghan border, not far from Peshawar, the capital of

Pakistan's North West Frontier Province and a base of support for the Red Mosque stormed into by military commandos this week.

"Yet somehow President Musharraf has not been able to find it," remarked Christopher Shays, a ranking lawmaker from Bush's Republican party.

"How de we in Congress justify to the American people writing checks for billions of dollars to a regime that may not be the partner against terrorism the US needs it to be, but may actually be hurting the national security interests of the United States and our allies," he asked at a Congressional hearing.

"Our support cannot be conditional," Shays told the hearing, where US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher, the Bush administration's pointman on Pakistan policy, was pounded with questions.

There is a "growing chorus" calling for a significant reevaluation of US policy toward Pakistan, said Democratic lawmaker John

Tierney, head of a House of Representatives panel on national security and foreign affairs.

He accused Musharraf of extending only "tepid" cooperation in controlling extremism and disrupting terror networks.

"The Red Mosque is merely a stark symbol of a deeper and more pervasive problem in Pakistan, where there are far more Jihadis, extremist madrasas, al-Qaeda operatives, Taliban safe havens and international terrorist camps than Pakistani government officials are willing to admit," he said.

Boucher replied that Musharraf was striving to turn Pakistan into a modern, open, prosperous, democratic state and a moderate voice in the Islamic world and that it was "strongly in the US national interest that Pakistan succeeds in realising this vision."

He said despite the charges levelled against Musharraf's administration on the fight against extremism, "its contribution has

been significant."

There are 85,000 Pakistan security forces stationed on the rough terrain of the Afghanistan border region while more than 450 of them have died in support of anti-terror efforts, Boucher said.

Even though there were parts of Pakistan where the government did not hold away, he said Islamabad had in recent months arrested many militant leaders.

Democratic lawmaker Jim Cooper accused Boucher of "putting a positive spin" on US-Pakistan ties.

"I am still trying to decide whether you are being moderate and fair or just making excuses," Cooper said.

"I'm trying to look at the whole picture," Boucher shot back.

Cooper said Pakistan could be harbouring not only Bin Laden but other internationally wanted senior al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders.



PHOTO: AFP

Christopher Hill (L), the chief US negotiator on North Korea, answers questions while his Japanese counterpart Kenichiro Sasae (R) listens after their talks at the foreign ministry in Tokyo yesterday. Hill is in Japan for the start of the regional tour ahead of the six-nation talks on North Korea.

N Korea wants direct military talks with US

Washington ready to talk 'broader issues' with Pyongyang

AP, AFP, Seoul/ Narita

North Korea's military proposed yesterday holding direct talks with US forces, an unusual plea amid recent progress on the nuclear standoff between the two countries.

The North's Korean Peoples Army proposed the talks, also be attended by a UN representative, "for the purpose of discussing the issues related to ensuring the peace and security on the Korean peninsula," the chief of the North Korean military's mission at the truce village of Panmunjom said in a statement carried by the official Korean Central NewsAgency.

"It is easy to miss a chance, but difficult to get it," the North warned.

The plea comes amid rising hopes for a peace treaty to replace the 54-year-old Korean War armistice in light of progress on the nuclear issue. The North is expected to soon shut down its sole operating atomic reactor that generates plutonium for bombs in accord with a February agreement with the US and other regional

powers.

Under agreements to resolve the nuclear issue, the sides also agreed to start discussing a peace regime to replace the armistice that ended the 1953 Korean War. That cease-fire has never been replaced by a peace treaty, leaving the peninsula technically in a state of war.

Kim Yong-kyu, a spokesman for the US military in South Korea, said American officers were studying the North's statement.

But indicating that any further progress on detente will be difficult, the North's proposal came at the end of a lengthy statement criticising Washington for stoking tension on the peninsula through the international standoff over Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programme.

The military said that if US pressure persists, implementing recent agreements on the nuclear issue would not be possible.

It added that the North also "will have no option but to exert utmost efforts for further rounding off the

means for retaliatory strike strong enough to cope with the US nuclear attack and pre-emptive strike in order to protect its dignity, sovereignty and right to existence."

Officers from the US and North Korea have held general-level meetings since 1953, and lower-ranking officers also regularly consult at Panmunjom over administration of the cease-fire.

Meanwhile, US chief negotiator Christopher Hill said Friday that the United States was ready to discuss "broader issues" with North Korea but that the nuclear issue came foremost.

Days before six-nation disarmament negotiations are set to resume, the North Korean army urged the military talks and warned that a February disarmament deal could be scrapped if Washington kept up its pressure.

Hill, arriving in Japan on the start of an Asian tour ahead of the talks, declined to comment directly on the military statement, saying he had not seen it.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani youths join activists of the hardline six Islamic party alliance, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), as they shout anti-Musharraf slogans during a protest rally in Islamabad yesterday against the military operation in the Red Mosque.

Victory elusive in 'war on terror'

AFP, Washington

Six years into the US "war on terror," al-Qaeda is gaining strength in its Pakistani sanctuary and Iraq is a fertile breeding ground for global extremism, according to bleak new assessments.

The sobering appraisals emanating in public and private from Washington have sparked questions over whether the United States is losing a campaign declared by President George W. Bush after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Even if al-Qaeda figurehead Osama bin Laden himself is confined to the anarchic borderland between Afghanistan and Pakistan, experts say, his group has spawned any number of offshoots that are only loosely affiliated.

Bush Thursday took issue with media coverage of a classified new intelligence assessment that suggested al-Qaeda is as strong today as prior to 9/11.

"That's just simply not the case," he told a White House news conference, arguing that because of US

offensive action, "al-Qaeda is weaker today than they would have been."

But Bush added: "They are still a threat. They are still dangerous. And that is why it is important that we succeed in Afghanistan and Iraq and anywhere else we find them."

Democrats, however, seized on the intelligence report reported by the Washington Post, which coincided with a bleak view of progress in Iraq contained in a new administration assessment.

US Senate Majority leader Harry Reid said the intelligence views "conclude al-Qaeda is growing stronger."

"But while Osama bin Laden is operating freely, we understand, on the Afghan-Pakistan border, the president wants to keep our troops in an open-ended war, a civil war in Iraq," he told reporters.

"It's really a travesty that Osama bin Laden is still at large almost six years after 9/11, but it's not surprising that al-Qaeda has been able to reorganise and rebuild because the administration has taken its eye off the ball when it comes to fighting terrorism."

Nepali Maoists accuse govt of deception over royal fund

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoists accused the government of deception yesterday after it said King Gyanendra would still get an allowance even though the budget made no provision for him.

The announcement by the government came a day after its 2.6-billion-dollar budget presented to parliament appeared to have stripped the monarch of any funding.

"The government has deceived the people," Suresh Ale Magar, a Maoist leader and member of parliament, told AFP.

"We are going to challenge this allocation when the budget comes to parliament for approval."

The budget made no mention of funding for Gyanendra but at a press conference Friday, Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat said 300,000 dollars was set aside under the category of "prime minister's expenses" for the king.

In previous budgets, cash for the royals had been allocated under a

special heading.

"We allocated the budget for the king because although he is in a suspended position, he still exists," the minister said. "But we got rid of the separate budget heading for the palace and heavily slashed the allowance."

Last year's budget for the royal household was three million dollars. The previous year it was 10.6 million dollars.

The king has been under pressure since fiercely republican Maoists signed a peace deal with mainstream parties last year, ending a decade of civil war, and entered Kathmandu's corridors of power.

Since the peace deal brought the Maoists into Kathmandu, the king has been stripped of most of his powers.

Gyanendra's fate is set to be decided after polls in November that will elect a body to rewrite Nepal's constitution -- and decide whether the 238-year-old monarchy should stay or go.



PHOTO: AFP

A man wades through the floodwater outside his half submerged home in Xinyang, central China's Henan province on Thursday. Continuous rain since June has caused rivers to rise to dangerous levels in central provinces of Anhui, Henan and Jiangsu as the region brace for the worst flooding in decades, with some 488,800 people already evacuated.

Autographed letters of Gandhi auctioned in London

PTI, London

Less than ten days after India acquired a rare manuscript of Mahatma Gandhi before it was to be auctioned, handwritten drafts of a series of articles and autographed letters of the 'Father of the Nation' went under the hammer.

Gandhi's manuscript and letters, written between the 1920s and the 1940s, were auctioned by auction house Sotheby's on Thursday as part of its English Literature and History sale.

The lot, which included 33 pages of handwritten drafts of a series of articles for Young India from 1921 and 11 autographed letters by Mahatma Gandhi, sold for 45,600 pounds.

The lot had been expected to sell for between 25,000 pounds to 35,000 pounds. The papers, which were mounted in a 79-page album included 12 autographed letters of Muhammad Iqbal, Sri Aurobindo and Sarojini Naidu.