



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani religious students watch as others paint a wall and the dome of The Red Mosque in Islamabad yesterday. Hundreds of Islamists occupied Pakistan's Red Mosque, painting the walls in their original colour and wrecking the official reopening of the complex after a bloody army assault on militants.

Musharraf firmly rejects US strike threats

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf yesterday firmly rejected US threats to strike militants holed up near the Afghan border, saying that American forces will not be allowed to operate in the area.

Military ruler Musharraf's remarks come amid mounting anger at warnings from key ally Washington that it will not allow Osama bin Laden's rejuvenated terror network to use the South Asian nation's frontier regions as a safe haven.

"Inside Pakistani territory only Pakistani forces will operate and they are fully capable of performing this task," Musharraf told reporters as he left for a visit to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

"We are fighting extremism and terrorism in our national interest and we do not have to please anyone," state media quoted him as saying.

Musharraf also rejected the US allegations that al-Qaeda is regrouping in Pakistan's rugged tribal belt, where hundreds of Islamic militants took shelter after US-led forces overthrew Afghanistan's Taliban regime in 2001.

"A small number of al-Qaeda elements present in the area are on the run and we are pursuing them," the president said.

Pakistan has bristled against the recent string of US threats of strikes against al-Qaeda, calling them "irresponsible and dangerous", while hundreds of people have fled the tribal zone fearing military action.

The country has been gripped by a wave of suicide attacks and other militant violence since a bloody army operation to clear militants from Islamabad's Red Mosque earlier this month. More than 200 people have died in the attacks.

Senior US State Department troubleshooter Nicholas Burns said this week that Washington would retain the option of targeting Osama bin Laden's terror group in Pakistani-Afghan border areas in some circumstances.

The White House's top counter-terrorism official Frances Townsend on Sunday caused a stir by refusing to rule out a military incursion into the remote Pakistani regions close to the border with Afghanistan.

Commanders advise Musharraf to quit

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has been advised by his top military commanders to quit in the wake of the restoration of Chief Justice Iftikhar M Chaudhry, a daily reported on Friday.

During his six-day long discussions with his top military aides in Rawalpindi after the reinstatement of the Chief Justice by the Supreme Court, Musharraf was advised to seek an "honourable exit", The News quoted unnamed sources as saying.

Though the President did not react to the suggestions, the sources said he might make a decision after his return from an official tour of Saudi Arabia where he's likely to raise this issue with the Saudis in a bid to find "a way out of the political mess without any loss of face".

US, India adopt nuclear accord

AFP, Washington

The United States and India have reached a "historic milestone" by adopting an operating agreement for a landmark nuclear deal, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced yesterday.

"The United States and India have reached a historic milestone in their strategic partnership by completing negotiations on the bilateral agreement for peaceful nuclear cooperation," she said in a statement.

She did not provide details of the agreement, which according to reports had gone beyond the terms approved by the US Congress, where lawmakers have threatened

to block the deal if it sidestepped safeguards to prevent military uses of the technology.

Under the pact, Washington has promised to help India build a nuclear fuel repository and find alternative sources of nuclear fuel, an arrangement that skirts some of the provisions of the law, the New York Times reported Friday.

In December, Congress gave approval to landmark legislation allowing US export of civilian nuclear fuel and technology to India for the first time in 30 years.

It was aimed at reversing three decades of sanctions on India for its nuclear tests. India has not signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

"The successful completion of the (operating agreement) text permits us to move forward" on the nuclear deal, first announced by President Bush and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh two years ago, Rice said.

The next steps include India's negotiation of a "safeguards" agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency watchdog and support for nuclear trade with India in the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group, she said.

"Once these additional actions have been completed, President Bush will submit the text of the agreement to the US Congress for final approval," she said.

MUMBAI BLASTS Bomb plotter Memon to die

AFP, Mumbai

An anti-terror court in India yesterday sentenced to death one of the main conspirators behind serial bomb blasts in Mumbai in 1993 that killed 257 people, prosecutors said.

Yaqub Memon, the brother of the alleged main plotter and fugitive Tiger Memon, faces the gallows while his brothers Essa and Yusuf and sister-in-law Rubina were each given life sentences.

The "Black Friday" attacks, which also injured more than 800 people, were believed to have been staged by Mumbai's Muslim-dominated underworld in retaliation for deadly Hindu-Muslim clashes a few months earlier.

"The court gave (the) death sentence to Yaqub for distributing funds and assisting acts of terror," chief prosecutor Ujjwal Nikam said.

Australia drops terror charges against Indian doctor

AFP, Sydney

Australia dropped charges against an Indian doctor accused of involvement in failed British car bombings and released him from custody yesterday, admitting mistakes were made rushing the case to court.

But Australia's top police officer refused to apologise to Mohamed Haneef after the embarrassing backdown and the medic still faces possible deportation as he adjusts to house arrest after almost four weeks in custody.

Red-faced officials said they withdrew the charge that Haneef "recklessly" supported the terror group behind attempted bombings in Britain last month after a review

revealed mistakes in rushing the case to court.

It also found there was not enough evidence to support a conviction.

"On my view of the matter a mistake has been made," Commonwealth Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) Damian Bugg told reporters.

Bugg described the errors that led to the collapse of the case as "disappointing" and "embarrassing," adding "we're all human."

The case against Haneef, who was arrested on July 2 as he attempted to leave Australia on a one-way ticket to India, has been dogged by controversy and labelled a bumbling "Keystone Cops" investigation by critics.



PHOTO: AFP
Firdous Arshiya, the wife of Indian doctor Mohamed Haneef detained in Australia in connection with supporting terrorism, reacts as she answers a question from a media representative in front of her home in Bangalore yesterday. The wife of an Indian doctor accused in Australia of supporting terrorism said she was extremely pleased charges had been dropped and that the "truth has come out."

US Senate okays nat'l security bill

AP, Washington

The Senate on Thursday night approved a package of security measures recommended by the 9/11 Commission, shifting more federal money to high-risk states and cities and requiring more stringent screening of air and sea cargo.

The measure passed by a 85-8 vote.

The House was expected to pass the bill as early as Friday, sending it to the president and giving Democrats a much-needed legislative victory just a week

before Congress adjourns for its August recess.

Along with a boost in the minimum wage, which went into effect on Tuesday, the 9/11 Commission bill would be at the top of the Democratic majority's achievement list if President Bush signs it into law.

The White House has expressed opposition to several provisions in the bill, particularly a requirement that within five years all ship containers be scanned for nuclear devices before they leave foreign ports for the United States, but it has not issued a veto threat.

Expelled Russian diplomats leave

AFP, London

Four Russian diplomats expelled from Britain in a stand-off over Moscow's refusal to extradite the murder suspect in the Litvinenko affair have left the country, the Russian embassy said yesterday.

A spokesman for the embassy confirmed to AFP that the four had left their posts in London, adding that they were middle-ranking diplomats.

Information on the date of their departure was confidential, he said.

Prosecutors here want to charge Russian businessman and former Soviet KGB agent Andrei Lugovoi with the radiation poisoning murder of outspoken Kremlin critic Alexander Litvinenko.

'Gates planning draw down of US forces'

AFP, Washington

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said in a letter made public Thursday he is actively involved in planning for a draw down of US forces in Iraq.

Gates' comments on the subject was in response to a letter from Senator Hillary Clinton requesting briefings on contingency planning for a future withdrawal of US forces.

In his response, Gates rebuffed the request but promised to find a way "to keep you apprised of the conceptual thinking, factors, considerations, questions and objectives associated with draw down planning."

"Further, you may rest assured that such planning is indeed taking place with my active involvement as well as that of senior military and civilian officials, and our commanders in the field," Gates said.

"I consider this contingency planning to be a priority for this Department," he wrote.

The letter offered no details on the planning or possible scenarios for a reduction in US forces.

General David Petraeus, the US commander in Iraq, and US Ambassador Ryan Crocker are supposed to report to Congress in mid-September on the impact of a surge in US forces and what should be done next.

Sacred bull killed in Britain

AP, London

A sacred bull seized from a Hindu monastery in Wales because he tested positive for tuberculosis has been slaughtered, officials said Friday.

The plight of Shambo the bull had attracted international attention since his diagnosis this spring and prompted an Internet campaign by the Skanda Vale monastery to save him. Hindus revere cattle and said killing the bull would violate their religious rights.

More than 100 devout Hindus and their supporters prayed and chanted outside the bull's paddock throughout Thursday, but animal health officials and police led Shambo from the monastery to a trailer at around 7:30 pm.

IAEA team on the way to N Korea

AP, Beijing

A second team of UN nuclear experts arrived in Beijing yesterday on their way to North Korea to monitor the shutdown and sealing of the country's sole plutonium-producing reactor.

The six-member International Atomic Energy Agency team will replace an initial team that went to North Korea on July 12 to supervise the shutdown of the Yongbyon reactor, the key component of the North's nuclear programme.

"I am leading the second verification mission to the DPRK," Ryszard Zarucki, a Pole, told reporters at the Beijing airport. The

Democratic People's Republic of Korea is the formal name of North Korea.

"We will travel tomorrow to Pyongyang and will continue activities as stated in the board documents," he said, referring to the IAEA board.

Once it arrives on Saturday, the team is expected to stay in North Korea for about two weeks.

Officials said the team would put agency seals on parts of the complex that have been closed and supervise the installation of surveillance cameras, whose recordings will be regularly downloaded and analysed.



PHOTO: AFP
Nepal's Minister for Peace and Reconstruction Ram Chandra Poudel (R) reads through documents at a meeting in Nepal's Election Commission in Kathmandu on July 25. Nepal has started work on a South Africa-style truth and reconciliation committee, a key part of a peace deal that ended an often brutal 10-year civil war, an official was quoted as saying.

Nepal starts work on 'truth commission'

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal said yesterday it had started work on a South Africa-style truth commission to deal with the rights abuses of a decade of civil war, but the UN voiced concern that offenders will go unpunished.

The truth commission, which will allow those behind atrocities to confess without fear of punishment, was part of the deal between the central government and Maoist insurgents at the end of the war that killed around 13,000 people.

"The government has already started work for selection of members in the commission," Peace and Reconstruction Minister Ram Chandra Poudel told the Kathmandu Post, an English language daily.

He said officials were still sticking by the idea of not punishing the guilty, asserting that this was the best way of holding together a fragile peace process and power-

sharing accord.

"If we push forward the concept with a view to remind them about past antagonism and to take revenge, it may affect the peace process," Poudel warned.

Both the Maoists and government security services committed serious human rights abuses during the war, including abduction, rape and torture.

Of the 13,000 people killed during the decade-long conflict, around half were killed by the former rebels and half by the police and army.

But the United Nations immediately repeated its deep reservations over the Himalayan country's plan on how to deal with its bloody past.

"The Office of the (UN) High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has serious concerns about a number of provisions in the Truth and Reconciliation Bill," Sandra Beidas, the officer in charge of OHCHR Nepal told AFP.

Israel, Palestinians set sight on peace agenda

AFP, Jerusalem

Israelis and Palestinians are setting their sights on talks to finalise the status of the West Bank based on an Israeli pullout from most of the occupied territory after seven years of stalemate.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas, faced with heightened foreign diplomatic overtures, have started to talk of peace despite the huge gaps between them and political difficulties at home.

In the first such public comments from a top member of the current Israeli government, Deputy Prime Minister Haim Ramon backed a withdrawal from most of the occupied territory as part of a peace agreement with the Palestinians.

It was in Israel's interest to "leave

the majority of the territory of Judea and Samaria while maintaining the large settlement blocs," Ramon told public radio in an interview on Friday.

"We should not insist on keeping territories when their continued occupation threatens our national existence and harms our position in the world," said Ramon, one of Olmert's closest colleagues.

Olmert's centrist Kadima party was elected in 2006 on a ticket of withdrawing from most of the West Bank while effectively annexing the largest Jewish settlements, but the project was shelved after the Lebanon war.

"The whole idea of unilateralism was based on the fact that we had no partner and now we have a partner," said Ramon, referring to Western-backed Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas and prime minister

Salam Fayyad.

Israel withdrew unilaterally from the Gaza Strip in September 2005, as it did from southern Lebanon in 2000 - decisions many Israelis now regard as flawed given the subsequent flare up of conflicts with both territories.

Ramon was speaking amid recent diplomatic overtures designed to revitalise peace talks that have been defunct for the past seven years and to bolster Abbas since Hamas - considered terrorists by Israel - seized control of Gaza.

In extracts from an Israeli newspaper interview published in full on Friday, Abbas said US President George W. Bush is looking to reach a final status Israeli-Palestinian agreement in the coming year before he leaves office.

Thailand to deploy 1,400 troops around Bangkok

AFP, Bangkok

At least 1,400 soldiers will be deployed around Thailand's capital this weekend to reinforce security amid fears of fresh violence during anti-coup protests, a junta spokesman said yesterday.

Bangkok will be divided into 14 zones, with at least 100 soldiers deployed in each, bolstering security measures already introduced by police in the city, junta spokesman Sansern Kaewkamnerd said.

The troops "will patrol in the capital and set up checkpoints to guarantee safety. We have stepped up security around Bangkok to ensure the general public will not see any violence," he told AFP.

Thailand's junta chief, General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, ordered the deployment to back up police after an anti-coup protest last Sunday turned violent with more than 100

injured in clashes with police.

The clashes were the first violence since Sonthi toppled the government of prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra in a bloodless coup last September, and came as campaigning got underway for an August 19 referendum to approve an army-backed constitution.

"We are taking tougher legal measures and will take serious legal action against those who violate the law," Sonthi told reporters.

The soldiers will deploy from Saturday through Tuesday, as Thailand observes a long weekend for a Buddhist holiday, but that period could be extended further, said junta spokesman Sansern.

The announcement of the deployment came one day after nine protest leaders were arrested over the clashes.