

Musharraf in charge, peace process on course

Says Narayanan

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

The volatility and instability in Pakistan have neither dented President Pervez Musharraf's influence and credibility nor affected the peace process between New Delhi and Islamabad, National Security Adviser MK Narayanan said.

"There is some progress. Progress has always been slow, it's incremental, but it has not stopped," Narayanan told CNN-IBN news channel in an interview telecast Sunday when asked to comment on the impression that the peace process between India and Pakistan has been in abeyance for the last four months.

"Yes, we could always argue it could go faster but the point is that

it has not stopped," Narayanan told Karan Thapar in the interview.

There has been certainly no hiccup in the relationship, he stressed.

Narayanan underlined that although India was "concerned" about the volatility in Pakistan that was sparked four months ago by the suspension of Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry, it has not made a "major dent" in President Muhsarraaf's influence and he remained very much a man India can do business with.

"I think the chief justice issue was something that could have snowballed but it didn't. He managed to rectify the situation, if I may say so, by going by the Supreme Court's verdict," Narayanan said.

"I think the very fact that the Pakistani president and establishment have accepted the verdict, with grace, if I might say so, has certainly contributed," he added.

Asked about his perception of the threat to India from Pakistan in the context of the shimmering instability in that country that was underlined by the standoff between the government and Lal Masjid clerics this month, Narayanan chose to see the brighter side and said it showed Pakistan was waking up to the problem of extremist forces being encouraged.

"I think the sort of volatility we are now seeing in Pakistan will encourage them (to cooperate). I think Pakistan is now beginning to recognise the danger of encour-

aging forces of this kind."

Significantly, Narayanan said that infiltration across the Line of Control that divides Jammu and Kashmir had "come down appreciably" after a spurt in April and added that infiltration through other sectors like Bangladesh and Nepal are far more serious although not enough attention is being paid to it.

Narayanan also chose to take a more positive view of the anti-terror institutional mechanism that was set up over 10 months ago between India and Pakistan amid much controversy and said that although the start was slow he was hopeful that by the second or third meeting it "will make some progress".

Indian doctor says he was never a terror threat

AFP, Bangalore

An Indian doctor detained in Australia over failed car bombings in Britain said Sunday he had never been a terror threat and that even police investigators did not know what to ask him.

Gold Coast doctor Mohamed Haneef spent more than three weeks in detention on one count of "reckless" support for a terrorist group, but the case against him collapsed Friday for lack of evidence, and the charge was dropped.

Haneef, who was due in the southern Indian city of Bangalore at 1600 GMT to reunite with his wife and see his one-month-old daughter for the first time, said he had been traumatised by his experience.

"It is a tremendous amount of trauma that I have gone through, that I have never imagined in my life," he told Australia's 60 Minutes programme.

"People need to be detained, but not with such a long period."



PHOTO: AFP

Dr Mohomad Haneef (C) and his cousin, Imran Siddiqui (R), arrive at Brisbane International Airport Saturday. Dr Haneef is currently flying to India after a charge against him of providing support to a terrorist organisation was dropped. He has vowed to continue his fight to have his Australian work visa reinstated.



PHOTO: AFP

South Korean presidential envoy Baek Jong-Chun (L) speaks with Afghan President Hamid Karzai during a meeting at the Presidential Palace in Kabul yesterday. Chun has arrived in the Afghan capital to try to save 22 South Koreans kidnapped by the Taliban.

Draft US 9/11 law could harm relations: Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Draft US anti-terrorism legislation could undermine relations with Pakistan because of its allegations about terrorist safe havens and nuclear proliferation networks, the foreign ministry said.

The US Congress Friday approved a bill to implement key anti-terrorism recommendations of the independent probe into the September 11 attacks in 2001 that will become law if President George W Bush signs it.

Pakistan says the new law could undermine relations between the "war on terror" allies because it contained "unsubstantiated" allegations.

"The draft bill... contains references and provisions that cast a shadow on the existing cooperation between Pakistan and US," the ministry said in a statement at the weekend.

"Regardless of the fact that the

bill emphasises the importance attached by the United States to long-term strategic relationship with Pakistan... the bill is disappointing from Pakistan's point of view," it said.

It said references in the bill relating to the existence of so-called terrorist "safe havens" or "proliferation networks" in Pakistan were unsubstantiated and already rejected by Islamabad.

"Inclusion of these references in the bill cannot contribute to the trust that is necessary for the stated US objective to establish a strategic relationship with Pakistan."

Pakistan said the bill which linked US aid to the South Asian country for its performance in the fight against terrorism could damage ties between the two countries just like the 1985 Pressler Amendment on nuclear proliferation in South Asia which banned most economic and military assistance

to Pakistan.

"Conditionalities have been introduced for the continuation of US security assistance to Pakistan which is primarily aimed at capacity building in counter-terrorism. This is reminiscent of the infamous Pressler Amendment."

The draft bill comes at a time when Pakistan is already upset by US threats to strike militants holed up near the Afghan border.

President Pervez Musharraf on Friday firmly rejected US statements about attacking militants on its soil saying American forces would not be allowed to operate in the area.

Musharraf also rejected US allegations that Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terror network was 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.

Assam flood situation worsens, army called out for rescue mission

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Guwahati

Soldiers have been called out to rescue marooned villagers in Assam after 15 people were killed in floods and landslides that have displaced over 1.1 million, officials said on Sunday.

"The flood situation has worsened overnight, drowning two more people in parts of western Assam and displacing about 250,000," Bhumidhar Barman, Assam's revenue, relief and rehabilitation minister, told IANS.

Earlier, nine people were killed in a landslide in the adjoining state of Meghalaya late on Friday while four were drowned in Assam.

"The current wave of floods that began last week has hit about 1.1 million people in 13 of Assam's 27 districts and affected a crop area of an estimated 26,000 hectares," the

minister said.

Indian soldiers on Sunday began a massive rescue and relief operation in parts of western and northern Assam with the rain-swollen Brahmaputra river cutting a treacherous swath across the region.

"Soldiers are engaged in rescuing marooned villagers in boats and rafts," Barman said.

A Central Water Commission bulletin on Sunday said all major rivers and their tributaries in Assam are flowing above the danger mark and in full spate. The worst hit by floods is the eastern district of Dhemaji where the authorities evacuated nearly 100,000 in the last two days.

"We have about 200,000 people taking shelter in makeshift arrangements on raised embankments, government schools and offices," said Diwakar Mishra, the Dhemaji district magistrate.

OIC urges end to Pak 'cycle of blind violence'

AFP, Jeddah

The 57-nation Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) on Saturday urged a halt to the "cycle of blind violence" in Pakistan, which it said contradicts the principles of Islam.

The plea from the Islamic nations bloc came a day after a suicide bombing during protests at Islamabad's pro-Taliban Red Mosque killed 14 people.

OIC chief Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, in a statement, condemned the attack and called on all sides involved to "stop the cycle of blind violence that contradicts the principles of Islam and its teachings of forgiveness."

The Pakistani government originally cracked down on the mosque after it led a Taliban-style vigilante campaign for Sharia law that climaxed with the abduction in

Islamabad of seven citizens from China.

Musharraf won plaudits for tackling militants holed up in the mosque, but the loss of more than 100 lives in the operation to clear it sparked the current militant backlash.

The president arrived late Friday in Saudi Arabia, where the OIC is based. He was due to hold talks with Saudi King Abdullah and perform the Umra mini-pilgrimage to Islam's holiest sites.

Musharraf has also been facing pressure after losing a legal battle with Pakistan's top judge that could yet undermine his eight-year military rule. He seized power in a coup in 1999.

The government denied reports on Friday that Musharraf had held a secret meeting with exiled premier Benazir Bhutto in Abu Dhabi in a bid to arrange a power-sharing pact.

UN envoy calls for deployment of more Western troops in Afghanistan

AFP, Berlin

The senior UN envoy to Afghanistan said the country needed more Western troops to fend off the Taliban insurgency, and stated that a Nato pullout would amount to capitulation.

Tom Koenigs told the online version of newsweekly Der Spiegel that in particular Germany, which has about 3,000 troops in the country, should send more soldiers and instructors to train the Afghan army and police force.

"Most Afghans do not want fewer but more Western troops to improve security," he said, noting that the United States and Britain had beefed up their military presence in the country.

In light of a heated debate in Germany about the future and goals of its engagement in Afghanistan, Koenigs said even a partial withdrawal would be "the worst thing one could do."

"A reduced engagement would immediately be read by the Taliban

as weakness and thus exploited for propaganda," said Koenigs, who is a member of the German Greens party.

He called for patience in the West while international peacekeepers and local authorities improve their cooperation.

"Anyone who wants to pull out now will be leaving the Afghan people in the lurch and abandon them to a terrible, brutal movement," Koenigs said.

The top US commander in Afghanistan General Dan McNeil reiterated a call for Nato countries to contribute more soldiers to the battle against Taliban insurgents, in an interview with Saturday's issue of the German daily Die Welt.

The German parliament is due to vote on extending its military deployment in Afghanistan in September or October.

A charged debate about the mission has already broken out in the wake of the recent kidnapping of two Germans by the Taliban.

5 die in Kashmir tourist bus blast

AFP, Srinagar

Five people including two young girls died and more than a dozen others were injured Sunday in an explosion aboard a tourist bus in insurgency-hit Indian Kashmir's main city, police said. Two of the wounded were in critical condition following the blast at the scenic Mughal-built Shalimar gardens in Srinagar, summer capital of the Himalayan state, a police spokesman told AFP.

The cause of the blast was not immediately clear, the spokesman said.

A young female tourist and her Kashmiri friend were among the victims. The three others killed were tourists from India's Gujarat state. The spokesman did not identify the victims or give their ages.

However, Kashmir's key ruling coalition partner, the Peoples' Democratic Party, described it as a "senseless attack" and "an act of frustration perpetrated by the elements having no regard for humanity or any religion."

Last year, 15 Indian tourists were killed and more than 70 others wounded in a series of grenade attacks by suspected militants fighting against New Delhi's rule in the divided region. The insurgency has claimed thousands of lives.



PHOTO: AFP

A young Indian girl (R) grieves over the dead body of her father in front of the District Collectors Office in Modigonda, some 350km east of Hyderabad yesterday, a day after the death of eight protesting left-wing activists. The bodies of the eight were displayed wrapped in Communist flags after their deaths in Andhra Pradesh after police started firing on protesters demanding land for the poor.