

Musharraf pulls out of Afghan anti-terror meet

12 al-Qaeda-linked men killed in Pakistan

AFP, AP, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf Wednesday cancelled a trip to Afghanistan to attend a key anti-terrorism meeting, citing a previous engagement amid heightened security concerns.

On the eve of a high-profile meeting of leaders from volatile regions bordering the two countries, Musharraf telephoned Afghan President Hamid Karzai to tell him that he would not attend, the foreign ministry said.

The Pakistani president would send Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz in his place, it said in a statement.

"The president assured the Afghan president of Pakistan's full support in making the joint peace jirga a success," the statement said.

Musharraf's no-show comes despite the fact that the council, or jirga, was brokered by US President George W. Bush in a meeting with the Afghan and Pakistani leaders in Washington last September.

"We believe the absence of President Musharraf, who is busy at home, won't effect the jirga," Afghan foreign ministry spokesman Sultan Ahmad Baheen told AFP in Kabul.

Despite the official explanation for Musharraf's withdrawal, a senior government source told AFP that

security concerns were behind the decision.

"The decision has been taken due to security concerns for the president," said the source, speaking on condition of anonymity and declining to elaborate.

The jirga, which aims to bring together tribal leaders from the troubled mountain region bordering the two countries -- believed to be a haven for Taliban and al-Qaeda operatives -- has been billed as an opportunity for them to thrash out an anti-terrorism strategy.

Both Musharraf and Karzai were due to attend the meeting, although leaders of two of Pakistan's seven

tribal regions, restive North and South Waziristan, have already announced a boycott.

Violence in Pakistan's tribal region has spiked since the collapse of a peace deal between pro-Taliban militants and government forces deployed there since 2002 to hunt down al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

Pakistan's military said Wednesday it killed at least 12 militants in a major raid near the Afghan border using helicopter gunships and mortars in Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan.

A local intelligence officer said the hideout was used by al-Qaeda operatives.

Tropical storm kills 34 in Vietnam

AP, Hanoi

At least 34 people have died and 17 more were missing and feared dead after a tropical storm lashed Vietnam, officials said Wednesday as downpours continued across central provinces.

Meanwhile, Tropical Storm Pabuk triggered landslides that killed at least 11 people in the Philippines this week before blowing across southern Taiwan's tip Wednesday.

Vietnam's central province of Ha Tinh province suffered the worst with 13 deaths, of those six were children. Another victim was reported missing said Trinh Nhu Tien, a provincial disaster official.

"It is still raining heavily in the mountains. The death toll could rise if the weather does not improve in the next few days," the official said, adding that several parts of the province were still isolated with no electricity and telephone links.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian villagers make a journey by boat through floodwaters in the village of Bhabanipur in Barpeta district, some 135 km from Guwahati yesterday. The annual monsoon has caused massive flooding and left a trail of destruction from Nepal through India to Bangladesh, killing around 1,900 people since June.

Global warming to hit poor hardest: UN

AP, New Delhi

Global warming will likely hit food production in developing nations the hardest, increasing the risks of drought and famine in the countries that already struggle to feed their populations, a senior UN official said Tuesday.

However, a rise in global temperatures would increase food production in most industrialised countries, which mostly have colder climates, said Jacques Diouf the director general of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation.

"Crop yield potential is likely to increase at higher latitudes for global average temperature increases of up to 1 to 3 degrees Celsius (2 to 6 Fahrenheit), depending on the crop, and then decrease beyond that," Diouf said, speaking at a conference in the southern Indian city of Chennai.

"At lower latitudes, especially in the seasonally dry tropics, crop yield potential is likely to decline for even small global temperature rises, which would increase the risk of drought," he said.

He estimated that a country like India could lose 18 percent of its annual cereal production.

Developing genetically modified crops that produce higher yields could offset the impact of climate change, Diouf said, while noting that crops designed to be resistant to drought and flourish in extreme conditions are not yet a reality.

Scientists have warned that unchecked greenhouse gas emissions are causing global temperatures to rise, leading to drought, floods and searing heat.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani women representatives arrive from Islamabad to Kabul International airport in Afghan capital yesterday. Some 700 tribal elders, Islamic clerics and other leaders from Pakistan and Afghanistan are scheduled to meet in the Afghan capital today to thrash out a united stand against the rising Taliban threat on both sides of the border.

Time running out for deal, says Benazir

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's former prime minister Benazir Bhutto yesterday warned the country's embattled military ruler Pervez Musharraf that time is running out for them to make a deal.

In an interview with Voice of America (VOA), Benazir -- who ruled Pakistan twice between 1988 and 1996 -- said Musharraf had as yet made no gestures suggesting he was willing to act on her key demands.

The president is trying to win support from the opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP) that Benazir leads in order to get through the worst crisis since he seized power in a coup in 1999.

Benazir, currently living in exile, suggested that she wants the military ruler to lift a ban on her returning to Pakistan and drop the corruption charges against her.

"One thing is certain, that time is running out for General Musharraf's side to reach some kind of an accommodation with the opposition," she told VOA.

"And unless they can come up with up-front gestures, I think it is going to be very difficult, given that nothing has happened since the process began."

Benazir again declined to confirm a reported meeting with Musharraf in Abu Dhabi last month, where they reportedly discussed making a deal.

She has repeatedly asked Musharraf to give up his military post, saying that his uniform "blurs the distinction" between military and civilian rule.

"The uniform is not negotiable," Benazir said.

"It is something that is not constitutionally permissible, and it is not negotiable because the whole country is against it, and PPP has spent its whole life fighting to make a distinction between democratic government and military government," she said.

Musharraf is facing trouble from many sides, with a wave of Islamist violence sweeping the country, US accusations that Pakistan is providing safe haven to al-Qaeda and the Taliban, and the once-compliant court system displaying defiant independence.

There has been mounting unrest across the country since he suspended chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry in March on charges of misconduct and abuse of authority.

The Supreme Court overturned Musharraf's allegations and reinstated Chaudhry.

Since then the president has faced accusations from a broad cross section of society that he is denying them their democratic rights and manipulating state institutions to remain in power.

Benazir said if Musharraf tried to seek reelection before the general elections, due early next year, the PPP might resign from

parliament or boycott the polls.

Musharraf has said he intends to have himself reelected by the sitting assemblies for another five-year term and will decide on giving up his post as head of the military at an "appropriate" time.

Benazir has vowed to return to Pakistan to contest the election as head of the PPP, and has said she is open to a power-sharing deal with Musharraf as long as he gives up his role as head of the military.

Musharraf would have to ensure a balance of power between the parliament and the presidency if she were to resume the premiership, she has said.

Benazir's participation in the election would depend on a constitutional amendment that would allow prime ministers to serve a third term.

The ban was inserted into the constitution by Musharraf in 2003, with support from an alliance of hardline Islamist parties which have since turned against him.

The amendment was aimed at preventing Benazir and former prime minister Nawaz Sharif -- whom Musharraf ousted in the 1999 coup -- from taking office a third time as both have ruled the country twice.

UN warns of health crisis in Indian flood zones

AP, New Delhi

Health workers disinfected wells and distributed chlorine tablets to thousands of villagers rushing back to their homes as water levels receded sharply in northern India, officials said yesterday.

Many defied warnings to remain in relief camps to ensure it was safe to return to their flood-hit homes, said LB Prasad, the Uttar Pradesh state director-general of health services.

More than two weeks of monsoon rains across much of northern India, Bangladesh and Nepal have flooded rivers and inundated plains, killing at least 443 people and stranding some 19 million more, officials said.

Villagers have been given chlorine tablets to purify drinking water and were advised to take precautions for the next few days, Prasad told The Associated Press in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh.

International aid groups have warned of an impending health crisis if help does not reach millions of South Asians stranded by heavy flooding, amid forecasts of more rain in the devastated region.

With weather clearing this week, aid workers, government officials and the military have rushed food, drinking water and medicines to flood-hit areas.

Flood victims face a shortage of drinking water in Bihar, said R. K. Singh, the state's relief coordinator. Authorities stopped air dropping water pouches after complaints that they broke upon landing, Singh said.

Water will be supplied in plastic bottles and other containers, along with packets of flour, salt, candles and matches, he said.

The disaster's scale has dwarfed

relief efforts.

Stagnant waters left by the floods are a lethal breeding ground for diarrhoea and waterborne diseases at an epidemic level, he said.

Babille said people are also at risk from skin infections, malaria, leptospirosis and dengue fever.

More than 1,000 people in Uttar Pradesh state are sick, mainly from cholera and gastroenteritis, officials said.

In Bangladesh, there were 1,400 reported cases of diarrhea this week, said Fadela Chaib, a spokeswoman for the World Health Organisation.

The World Food Programme and Unicef have been distributing emergency food supplies to thousands of people in Bangladesh and Nepal, said WFP spokesman Simon Pluess in Geneva.

At least 251 have died in India since last week because of the monsoon floods. Another 192 people have died in Bangladesh, mostly from drowning in swirling floodwaters, waterborne diseases like diarrhoea, snake bites or electrocution from contact with submerged electric wires, the Information Ministry said.

Since Tuesday, 25 bodies have been recovered in India's eastern Bihar state and 14 in northern Uttar Pradesh state, officials said. Another 28 deaths were reported Wednesday from Bangladesh's 38 affected districts, the ministry said.

Since the start of the monsoon in June, the government says more than 1,200 people have died in India alone.

'N Korea's Kim eyeing quick summit gains'

AFP, Seoul

North Korea's Kim Jong-Il will use summit talks with South Korea this month to shore up his nation's sagging economy in case a less sympathetic leadership takes power in Seoul, analysts said yesterday.

They suggested that with South Korea's opposition, which has traditionally taken a tougher line with the North, set to win December's presidential vote, Kim is aiming to secure deals while conditions are still favourable.

Whatever his motives, officials were upbeat about Wednesday's announcement of the August 28-30 summit, only the second in the country's history.

They said the Pyongyang meeting would help revive the mood of rapprochement after the 2000 summit, which led to cross-border economic projects and family reunions.

It could also give fresh momentum to a six-nation nuclear disarmament deal under which the North has promised to shut down its atomic programme in return for energy aid and diplomatic concessions.

South Korea's opposition Grand National Party -- reviled by the communist North's official media as "a treacherous pro-US conservative force" -- is far ahead of pro-government parties in opinion polls some four months before the presidential vote, although neither camp has finalised its candidate.

Korea University professor Nam Sung-Wook told AFP that Pyongyang seemed to want a summit now "to fan anti-GNP sentiment and help support a pro-government candidate."

Dongguk University professor Koh Yu-Hwan agreed there was a political reason. "The Pyongyang regime seems to be worried about the direc-

tion of inter-Korean relations if the GNP secures an election victory."

The GNP itself branded the summit announcement an election stunt to boost the chances of President Roh Moo-Hyun's supporters, a charge the government denies.

But Sejong Institute analyst Paik Hak-Soon said politics was a secondary factor.

"The summit comes at a time when a major change is emerging in and around the Korean peninsula. It will expedite this process," Paik said.

He said the presidential election could be a consideration in Kim's desire to push for the summit this month.

"But there are fundamental reasons -- survival of the regime, its security and economic development," Paik told AFP.

Abbas insists no talks with Hamas

Israeli troops kill 3 Hamas militants

AFP, Ramallah/gaza City

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas yesterday insisted there would be no dialogue with Hamas until the Islamists return Gaza to his legitimate authority after seizing the territory in June.

"What Hamas did was a destructive operation which helped those who don't want to see an independent Palestinian state," Abbas told journalists after talks with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in the Egyptian port of Alexandria.

"There is no dialogue with Hamas until they go back on what they did and return what they took," he said, reiterating that he himself had been elected as the legitimate president of the Palestinian Authority.

"They know what they took and they know how to return it," he said of Hamas, whose fighters ejected Abbas' Fatah faction from the Gaza Strip on June 15.

Abbas' words followed a similar declaration by Azzam al-Ahmad, the chief of Fatah's parliamentary bloc, in the West Bank.

"To end the crisis, Hamas must end its putsch in the Gaza Strip and return this territory to the elected and legitimate president Mahmud Abbas," Ahmad told AFP in Ramallah.

Meanwhile, Israeli troops shot dead three Palestinian militants from the Islamist Hamas movement on Wednesday in separate incidents near Israel's border with the Gaza Strip, medics and the army said.

Iraq security talks open in Syria

AFP, Damascus

Representatives of Iraq's neighbours and the global community, including the United States and its arch-foe Iran, opened talks in Damascus yesterday aimed at restoring security in the violence-plagued nation.

The meeting began just as Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki arrived in Iran on a visit aimed at winning Tehran's full support for restoring security to his country and continuing talks with the United States.

"Our aim is to help the Iraqi people overcome this crisis and to preserve their territory," said Syrian Interior Minister Bassam Abdel-Majid, whose country is accused by the United States of fomenting unrest in Iraq.

"We feel great suffering in the

face of terrorist acts, murders and destruction that are perpetrated in Iraq," the minister said, adding that his country had taken steps to ensure security in there.

"We have reinforced border controls with the aim of halting the illegal passage of people and of prohibited goods," he said, while complaining that promises by unnamed donors to provide nighttime surveillance equipment had gone unfulfilled.

Even so, he said a "large number of foreigners and Syrians who tried to cross the border have been stopped."

In the end, though, he said "all of these measures will be insufficient if they are taken only on side of the border. Border control is the common responsibility of (both) the neighbouring states."



PHOTO: AFP

Michael Corbin (R), charge d'affaires at the US embassy in Damascus, and Russian delegate Alexander Kanschchak attend the opening of a two-day meeting of representatives of Iraq's neighbours, in the Syrian capital yesterday. Delegates including the US and its arch-foe Iran met for talks aimed at restoring security in violence-plagued Iraq.