

Afghanistan, Pakistan can defeat militancy

Says Karzai at anti-terror meet

AFP, Kabul

Afghan President Hamid Karzai told hundreds of Afghan and Pakistan tribal leaders yesterday that both nations could defeat a resurgent al-Qaeda and Taliban if they worked together.

Karzai's remarks came as he opened three days of talks on rising Islamist extremism in the absence of his Pakistani counterpart Pervez Musharraf, who abruptly pulled out of the meeting the day before.

With 700 delegates and elders on hand from tribal areas straddling the rugged border region between Afghanistan and Pakistan -- an area said to be rife with militants -- he said

the two nations shared a common destiny.

"I am confident, I believe ... if both Afghanistan and Pakistan put their hands together, we will eliminate in one day oppression against both nations," he said in his opening address at the so-called "peace jirga".

"If the problem is from the Afghanistan side, we should seek ways to solve it. If the problem is in Pakistan, we should find solutions for it," he said in Kabul, where thousands of police and soldiers were on patrol for the meeting.

"Our future and our destiny is intertwined," Karzai said.

Along with elements from al-

Qaeda, the Taliban have been able to regroup since being ousted from power in Kabul by the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001.

Karzai and Musharraf have traded recriminations about the root of the unrest, while the Pakistani leader has been angered by US accusations that his government is not doing enough to counter the militant threat.

Musharraf is a notable absentee from the talks, having abruptly pulled out on Wednesday citing an engagement in Islamabad, ostensibly to deal with rising domestic insecurity.

Nearly 100 Pakistani delegates, from one of the tribal areas where al-

Qaeda and Taliban extremists are said to be most active, also boycotted the meeting.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz, the last-minute replacement for Musharraf, denounced the extremists.

"Terrorism, militancy, the violent creed preached by al-Qaeda, extremism and Talibanisation represent pain, intolerance and backwardness in our societies and a phenomenon that has maligned our great and noble faith, Islam."

"They are not the future of Pakistan or Afghanistan. We must fight these dark forces with determination and resolve," he said.



Afghan President Hamid Karzai (R) and Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (L) stand together during the landmark meeting of hundreds of Afghan and Pakistan tribal leaders in Kabul yesterday. The three-day anti-terror meeting aimed at halting the escalating al-Qaeda and Taliban threat opened Thursday.



Attack on Taslima Nasreen's book launching function in India

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Activists of an Islamic party yesterday attacked a book launching ceremony of exiled Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad.

Nasreen, who was here to release the Telugu translation of her latest work "Shodh", escaped unhurt as organisers and journalists shielded her and escorted her to safety.

A group of over 40 Majlis-e-Itehadul-Muslimeen (MIM) workers, led by three party legislators Afsar Khan, Ahmed Pasha and Mouzam Khan, stormed into the Hyderabad Press Club when the function was about to conclude.

Hurling abuses and raising full-throated slogans, the MIM workers surged menacingly towards the dais as a stunned Nasreen looked on.

The attackers threw papers and books at the novelist. In the melee, Telugu language writer N Innaiah, who is the organiser of the function and President of Centre for Inquiry, a rationalist organisation, was injured along with a press photographer.

Alert organisers and journalists, covering the event, threw a protective cover around Nasreen and later took her to the adjoining room.

The MIM activists, who demanded that the Bangladeshi author be sent back immediately, broke window panes and damaged furniture at the venue.



Pakistani police commandos stand guard in front of the President's House in Islamabad yesterday. Embattled President Pervez Musharraf decided against imposing a state of emergency in Pakistan. Musharraf met with senior political aides last morning to discuss whether or not to impose emergency rule, prompted by escalating security concerns and political instability in the country.

UN urges Lanka to disarm pro-govt paramilitary group

AFP, Colombo

The United Nations on Thursday urged Sri Lanka to disarm a pro-government paramilitary group operating in the east of the island to ensure safety and security for aid workers and residents.

John Holmes, the UN under-secretary general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, ended a four-day tour of the country urging demilitarisation of the troubled eastern region.

"It is important that the disarmament of the Karuna faction should happen as soon as possible," Holmes told reporters here, referring to a breakaway faction of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

"It is important that, in principle, only people bearing arms should be local authorities. Karuna operates in areas controlled by the government," he said.

Pak SC admits Nawaz Sharif's petition

Court issues notices to govt

PTI, AFP, Islamabad

An angry Pakistan Supreme Court yesterday asked the government why its earlier order to permit former premier Nawaz Sharif and his brother Shahbaz to come back home was not implemented as their petition seeking their return was admitted in the apex court.

The court issued notices to the federal government and posted the case for hearing on August 16.

Pak Supreme Court began deliberating an application by Nawaz Sharif to have his exile overturned and be permitted to return to the country.

Sharif lodged his appeal earlier this month to end seven years of exile, which began when he was overthrown in a coup by military ruler President Pervez Musharraf in

October 1999.

The application was heard by Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, who was suspended by Musharraf on allegations of corruption and conflict of interest before being reinstated by the Supreme Court last month.

"It is Nawaz Sharif's unconditional and unequivocal right to return to the country, which cannot be either curtailed or denied," his lawyer Fakhruddin Ibrahim told the court.

Returning to Pakistan was a "fundamental right," Ibrahim said, adding that Sharif's desire to come home was "linked with his concerns for the future of democracy in the country."

"We are concerned with the future of parliamentary democracy in the country, which cannot be

undone by a gentleman in uniform," Ibrahim said, referring to Musharraf.

The appeal comes after Sharif and another former premier, Benazir Bhutto -- who is living in self-imposed exile due to corruption charges -- have both said they would return to Pakistan for elections that are due by early next year.

Sharif still officially heads his faction of the conservative Pakistan Muslim League party from exile, while Bhutto is the leader of the centrist Pakistan People's Party.

Musharraf was reportedly meeting with senior aides Thursday to decide whether to impose a state of emergency, a decision government sources told AFP could be made later in the day.

US allays fears of divisions in anti-terror drive

AFP, Washington

The United States moved to allay fears that Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's absence from a Washington-brokered anti-terrorism meeting in Afghanistan reflected divisions in the "war on terror."

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 Pakistani president, who is sending Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz in his place, had assured Karzai of Islamabad's full support but the Afghan presidency expressed annoyance at the pullout from the "peace jirga" talks.

The United States said it understood that Musharraf had compelling reasons for not attending the talks aimed at bringing together tribal leaders from the troubled mountain region bordering the two countries, which is believed to be a haven for Taliban and al-Qaeda

militants.

"Obviously, President Musharraf has good reason for deciding that he was going to stay back in Islamabad," said State Department spokesman Sean McCormack. Washington has spoken to both Musharraf and Karzai, he said.

"What's important here is that you have the support of both presidents for this process," he said. "Both of them have an interest in seeing this process succeed" and in cooperating to fight violent extremism, he said.

A US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said there was still a glimmer of hope that Musharraf could attend the talks, billed as an opportunity to thrash out an anti-terrorism strategy.

"I think it's still a possibility" but "less likely though that he will go," the official said.

Manmohan stands firm against left veto of US nuclear deal

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is standing firm in the face of opposition from his government's communist partners, insisting that a key civilian nuclear deal with Washington will not be renegotiated.

Singh's unequivocal "no" to the left parties' call not to make the complex "123 agreement" operational came after the communists said they were "unable to accept the agreement," the Times of India reported Thursday.

The accord, which covers civil nuclear technology and seeks to bring India into the loop of global atomic commerce after a gap of three decades, has also been rejected by India's main opposition Hindu nationalists.

The Hindu newspaper said Singh made his views clear to top leaders of the four parties making up the Communist bloc late Tuesday.

A spokeswoman for Singh's Congress party said she was "confident that the prime minister and the

government would be able to convince the left that the steps were taken in the best interest of the nation."

The deal clinched in Washington last month allows India to buy civilian nuclear technology while possessing nuclear weapons despite not adhering to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Singh is to defend the deal in a statement to India's parliament on Monday.

The accord has to be approved by the US Congress, while India needs a clearance from the Nuclear Suppliers Group of nations and also reach an agreement to place its civilian reactors under international safeguards before the deal can be operationalised.

The accord does not require parliamentary approval but Singh's failure to secure the backing of key allies would cause embarrassment and make the administration's continuation in office difficult, political analyst Rasheed Kidwai said.



Bangladeshi Nobel laureate Dr Muhammad Yunus (R) is greeted by United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) country representative Zahidul Huque prior to a meeting in Jakarta yesterday. Yunus is here to give lectures on his experience in helping the poor.



An Iraqi Shia worshiper holds aloft a picture of the revered Imam Musa Kadhim as he marches with hundreds of others to pay homage at the seventh Imam's shrine in the Kadhimiyah district of Baghdad yesterday.

Shias flood Baghdad for pilgrimage

AFP, Baghdad

Hundreds of thousands of Shia pilgrims braved fears of attack yesterday to march into Baghdad to commemorate an eighth century imam, amid a massive security effort aimed at preventing bloodshed.

Waving green and red flags and marching to a drum beat, men, women and children -- many of them barefoot -- flooded into the capital from across Iraq, defying threats and vowing not to be intimidated by Sunni insurgents.

Picking their way past tanks, armoured vehicles and gun-toting soldiers, the masses descended on the Imam Kadhim shrine in Kadhimiyah to kiss his tomb as the whirring blades of US helicopters drowned out the wailing of muezzins.

Old men and young boys, dressed in black and barefoot, whipped themselves with chains in self-flagellation, drawing blood in pain for the mourning of their seventh imam, who was poisoned in a Baghdad prison 12 centuries ago.

Pressing against each other, men and women dressed in flowing black robes beat their breasts in

unison, pushing children in buggies draped with shawls to keep off the heat and stopping to quench their thirst with ice-cold water.

Ali Karim al-Daraji, 19, who works in a paper press and set out at daybreak, had first to fend off a tantrum from his young bride petrified that he would be killed after only five days of married life.

"I wanted to do the pilgrimage as every year but my new wife strongly objected. She cried and said 'I don't want you to die after five days in a car bomb and I won't even be able to find your corpse'."

"I told her 'Kadhim will protect us' and my mother tried to tell her everything would be fine ... Now I'm back peacefully," he told AFP.

Kadhim was the seventh of the 12 Shia imams and died in Baghdad in 799. Every year since the US-led invasion toppled executed dictator Saddam Hussein, who banned the event, Shias have marched in pilgrimage.

Well-wishers set up stalls offering refreshments to weary pilgrims, as the faithful re-enacted Kadhim's final moments, dressed up in colourful guards' outfits to pull a wooden prison cell through the streets.

No breakthrough likely in summit of Koreas

AP, Seoul

North Korean leader Kim Jong Il will likely put on his best show for South Korea's visiting president, with thousands of enthusiastic supporters called out to line the streets of the capital to herald the second-ever summit between the two Koreas.

But when those cheers die down, the actual results from Kim's meeting with South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun later this month may prove to be more emotional than concrete.

The summit, which has no specific agenda, will be a milestone in North-South relations but likely not bring any dramatic new initiatives in a region where North Korea has been a consistent threat to stability. Instead, the leaders are expected to reaffirm the important strides made so far, express their common will to rid the peninsula of nuclear weapons and ensure that both sides keep up the momentum toward reducing tension.

The North does not enter into any international negotiation without expecting to get something in return, which in this case could also mean more assistance for its ailing economy.

The first meeting of the leaders of

North and South, in June 2000, captured the hearts of the Korean people. Kim grasped the hand of then-South Korean President Kim Dae-jung as he stepped onto the tarmac in Pyongyang, a moment immortalized on magazine covers and even a North Korean postage stamp.

The most poignant result came in the thousands of aging Koreans who fulfilled dreams of seeing relatives on the other side of the peninsula in a series of tear-filled reunions that continue to this day. Roads and rail lines were reconnected across the heavily fortified Demilitarized Zone that divides the countries, and North and South Koreans now work together at a joint industrial park in the North.

This time, finding such landmark goals may prove elusive.

The summit comes as the North already appears to be eagerly responding to US efforts to defuse a nuclear crisis, after Washington eased its hard-line stance and agreed to North Korean demands to resolve a separate financial dispute.

North Korea shut down its plutonium-making nuclear reactor in July, and the communist nation is already

talking about next steps to disable the facilities so they cannot easily be restarted. In talks that ended Wednesday at the truce village in Panmunjom, the North offered to move quickly to disarm even if some aid in exchange is delayed because of technical reasons, South Korea's deputy nuclear envoy Lim Sung-nam said.

With the nuclear issue really turning on relations between Pyongyang and Washington, the North and South Korean leaders will likely just reaffirm at their summit that they share the goal of denuclearising the Korean peninsula -- an oft-stated mantra by both sides.

Progress on denuclearisation could eventually foster a more profound achievement: finally signing a peace treaty to end the Korean War and setting up a peace regime that would spread stability across northeast Asia.