



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Interior Minister Aftab Sherpao (L) receives US assistant Secretary of State for South Asia, Richard Boucher upon his arrival in Islamabad yesterday. Boucher's visit comes less than a week after President Pervez Musharraf conceded that al-Qaeda and the Taliban had established bases in Pakistan to plan international attacks.

US prodding Musharraf to share power with Benazir

THE NEW YORK TIMES, Washington

The Bush administration, struggling to find a way to keep Gen Pervez Musharraf in power amid a deepening political crisis in Pakistan, is quietly prodding him to share authority with a longtime rival as a way of broadening his base, according to American and Pakistani officials.

General Musharraf, an important ally since the Sept 11, 2001, attacks, has lost so much domestic support in recent months that American officials have gotten behind the idea that an alliance with Benazir Bhutto, a former prime minister, would be his best chance of remaining president.

The two met in an unannounced session in Abu Dhabi on July 27, but neither has publicly admitted to the meeting. Since then, many in Pakistan have heard the rumours and voiced their doubts about the workability and political wisdom of such a deal, and American officials concede that the

proposed power-sharing could come with problems as well as benefits.

But after weeks of unrest in Pakistan, the American officials say a power-sharing agreement that might install Benazir as prime minister could help defuse a confrontation in which General Musharraf has already flirted with invoking emergency powers. Administration officials have said they fear that General Musharraf could eventually be toppled and replaced by a leader who might be less reliable as a guardian of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and as an ally against terrorism.

Even if General Musharraf were to insist on remaining as the country's military leader, American officials say that sharing power could bring a more democratic spirit to Pakistan, which has been a quasi-military dictatorship since 1999, when General Musharraf seized power and ousted Benazir's successor, Nawaz Sharif.

Even in supporting a power-sharing agreement, the American

officials say they worried that any diminution of General Musharraf's power could only complicate American counterterrorism efforts at a time when al-Qaeda is believed to be rebuilding in Pakistan's tribal areas. They also say that Benazir's return could fuel Pakistani nationalism and kindle new calls for Pakistan to distance itself from Washington.

Benazir has been holding talks in recent weeks with senior Bush administration officials, including Zalmay Khalilzad, the United States ambassador to the United Nations, with whom she met privately late last week. Administration officials have taken pains not to endorse a power-sharing agreement publicly, so as not to seem as if the United States is trying to influence Pakistani politics.

But Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice did discuss the idea of a power-sharing arrangement when she called General Musharraf last week at 2 am in Pakistan to warn him not to declare emergency powers, American and Pakistani officials said.

Benazir and General Musharraf have a personal history going back many years. He was her chief of military operations when she was prime minister, yet he has said repeatedly that she would not be allowed to return before the coming elections. In fact, one of the biggest obstacles to any possible deal is whether Ms. Bhutto would demand that General Musharraf relinquish his post as army chief of staff before agreeing to a power-sharing deal. Benazir has said in the past that she would demand this, but there have been suggestions in Pakistan in recent days that in order to salvage a deal, she may be willing to concede that point.

Several Bush administration officials agreed to talk about the American role in the discussions but refused to speak for the record because of the delicacy of the talks.

Pak SC allows Sharif brother's return

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Islamabad

Pakistan's Supreme Court yesterday said Shahbaz Sharif, president of opposition Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N), now living in exile in London with his brother and former premier Nawaz Sharif, can return to the country, local television channel Dawn News reported.

A five-member bench of the Supreme Court headed by Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Choudhry heard Shahbaz's petition to be allowed to return with his family and participate in the next general elections.

A similar petition by Nawaz Sharif seeking permission to return to Pakistan and another against new electoral rolls by former prime minister Benazir Bhutto are being heard in the supreme court, the Dawn News report said.

The PML-N early this month had filed the two constitutional petitions arguing that the government could neither obstruct the Sharif brothers' return to the country nor could it prevent them from participating in the general elections.

INDEPENDENCE DAY CELEBRATIONS

Pak forces thwart suicide attacks

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's security forces said yesterday they had thwarted suicide attacks on Independence Day celebrations as a senior US official discussed the urgent terrorism threat with the country's leaders.

Militants had planned suicide attacks in the capital Islamabad on August 14, but security forces disrupted their plans, interior ministry spokesman Brigadier Javed Iqbal Cheema told AFP.

"Security forces have homed in on the gang plotting the attacks and they will soon be arrested," Cheema said.

Earlier reports quoted him saying that "would-be suicide bombers" had been arrested in Rawalpindi, a garrison town adjacent to the capital, and that more arrests were expected in the coming days.

The threat of attacks was highest for Tuesday's Independence Day, which marked 60 years since the country was founded after the partition of the Indian subcontinent at the end of British colonial rule, he said.

Cheema's comments came as

'Ring of Fire' shows its power with Peru quake

AFP, Lima

Peru has become the latest country to feel the renewed heat from the "Ring of Fire" that unleashes earthquakes around the Pacific almost every day.

At least 337 people were killed and several hundred injured, according to Peruvian authorities after the 7.9-magnitude quake rattled the country late Wednesday. Several cities were devastated and aftershocks measured up to 6.3, according to the US Geological Survey.

The Ring of Fire stretches along the western coast of the Americas through the island nations of the South Pacific and on through Southeast Asia. It is a series of fault lines in the hardened upper layers of the Earth's crust.

These lines of weakness are the meeting points of huge continental plates that make up the crust and which literally float on the molten rock of the Earth's core.

These plates are in constant motion, clashing into each other or

moving away from each other, creating stresses and pressure build-ups at their margins.

This stress is released through volcanic eruptions, when the molten rock is ejected as magma through fissures in the crust, or via earthquakes, when the pressure causes the crust to buckle and shift.

Most of these seismic events are small and occur under the sea, where the majority of the continental plate margins are found.

But occasionally they generate volcanic explosions, earthquakes or landslides.

Although this activity is the result of the weak points in the Earth's surface, experts are not convinced that they create a ripple, or domino effect, of one quake setting off another.

"Earthquakes do tend to happen in clusters but they aren't triggered by one another," according to Gary Gibson, professor of seismology at the RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia.

These plates are in constant motion, clashing into each other or



PHOTO: AFP

Quake victims sit next to their destroyed house in Canete, more than 120km south of Lima yesterday after a massive 7.9-magnitude earthquake rocked Peru late Wednesday. A powerful earthquake devastated several Peruvian cities killing at least 337 people in toppled buildings and forcing the government to declare a state of emergency.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian President Pratibha Patil (C) smiles while talking to Indian Vice President Hamid Ansari (2L) and Lok Sabha (Lower house of Parliament) Speaker Somnath Chatterjee (L) as Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh looks on, during a reception at the Presidential Palace on the occasion of India's 60th anniversary of independence in New Delhi on Wednesday.

20,000 migrants flee Kashmir after threats by militants

AFP, Srinagar

Some 20,000 migrant labourers have fled insurgency-hit Kashmir in the past three weeks after Muslim rebels told them to leave, officials said yesterday.

The mainly Hindu migrants, who work as low-paid masons, carpenters, painters and barbers, began leaving last month when two of them were accused of raping and killing a teenage Muslim girl.

The incident evoked sharp condemnation, with the Muslim-majority region's most powerful militant group Hizbul Mujahedin demanding that all migrant workers leave or face unspecified consequences.

Days later Hizbul retracted the threat and said only "criminal elements should leave" but the exodus has continued from the state, where a nearly two-decade insurgency is raging against New Delhi's rule.

"Some 20,000 non-locals have already left and this exodus may continue," said Kashmir Governor SK Sinha, India's top representative in the scenic Himalayan region.

Some migrants said growing local hostility towards them was forcing them to leave.

"Since the incident we're being looked down as criminals," Sant Ram, a labourer from Bihar state, said. Ram said he would leave by the end of this month.

Newspaper reports say there are over 100,000 non-local labourers in Kashmir which has a population of around 10 million people.

Sinha termed the fresh exodus as "another ethnic cleansing" by militants, who favour either independence or a merger with Pakistan.

Iraqi leaders forge new alliance sans Sunnis

US troops kill 9 militants, 7 others die in bombing

AFP, AP, Baghdad

Iraq's president and prime minister announced a new political alliance between mainstream Shia and Kurdish parties yesterday but, crucially, no Sunni leaders have yet signed up.

"Signing this agreement will help solve many problems in the present crisis and encourage the others to join us," President Jalal Talabani said at a joint press conference with Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

Maliki's government has been paralysed by the decision of the main Sunni political bloc to withdraw its ministers from the government during a power sharing dispute with the premier's Shia supporters.

The deal formalised an alliance between Maliki's Dawa Party, Vice President Adel Abdel Mehdi's Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC), Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and Massud Barzani's

Kurdish Democratic Party (PDK).

But Sunni Vice President Tareq al-Hashemi and his National Concord Front, the main Sunni faction, boycotted talks that led to the bloc's creation, and the government remains bitterly split on sectarian and ethnic lines.

Leaders of Iraq's divided Shia, Kurdish and Sunni communities have often clashed on security, political and social issues leading to delays in the passage of crucial laws aimed at rebuilding the violence-struck country.

Meanwhile, US troops killed nine militants and detained over the past week nearly three dozen more, including a smuggler accused of bringing arms from Iran into Iraq, the military said yesterday.

During the raid three gunmen were killed while five others were arrested of which four tested "positive for explosives residue."

A car bomb exploded in a popular

Baghdad shopping complex on Thursday, killing at least seven people and wounding another 15, security officials said.

The blast, which took place at around 9:00 am (0500 GMT) in the car park of Al-Rusafi shopping complex, sent a thick plume of smoke skywards and shook the window panes of buildings several hundreds metres (yards) from the site.

Firemen scrambled to the scene where a blaze had engulfed the building.

Initial reports indicated that at least seven people were killed and 15 wounded, security officials said.

The Al-Rusafi market is popular with Baghdadis who visit it to buy clothes, dress materials and leather goods.

US missile defence threatens Asia: Iran

AFP, Bishkek

A proposed US missile defence shield in central Europe would threaten Asia, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said Thursday at a regional summit in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek.

"Such a plan goes beyond threatening one country. It concerns most of the continent, Asia," he said at a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), according to a translation by organisers.

According to Ahmadinejad, the six countries of the SCO, including China, are among those threatened.

His remarks, made in Farsi, were simultaneously translated into Russian in a television link-up provided by summit organisers for journalists.

Iran has observer status in the SCO, which comprises China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

Washington says that Iran's alleged nuclear ambitions are one of the main reasons that missile defences are needed in central Europe.

The Pentagon wants to build a radar station in the Czech Republic and a launching site in Poland with 10 long-range interceptors capable of shooting down missiles.

According to the Pentagon, the system would defend Europe against attack from limited missile strikes by smaller military powers such as Iran, which Washington claims is reaching for a nuclear missile capability.

US authorities also name North Korea as a future threat.

Russia has led opposition to the plan, saying the defences would undermine its own massive nuclear missile force and upset the strategic military balance.

The United States rejects that, saying the Russians could easily overwhelm the system.

S Korean team meets Taliban again to talk fate of 19 hostages

AFP, Ghazni

Afghanistan's Taliban resumed talks yesterday with a South Korean delegation trying to free 19 aid workers held by the hardliners for almost a month, a Red Cross official said.

"The parties are discussing, the meeting has started," the deputy head of the International Committee of the Red Cross delegation, Franz Rauchensteiner, told AFP.

The negotiations are the first since Monday's release of two of 23 South Korean aid workers seized by the Taliban on July 19. Two others were shot dead.

Taliban spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi confirmed the talks had restarted mid-afternoon Thursday in the small town of Ghazni, about 140 kilometres (90 miles) south of Kabul.

India picks sites for new atomic plants despite nuke deal doubts

AFP, New Delhi

The future of the Indo-US civilian nuclear deal looks uncertain, but the government has already selected sites for new atomic power plants, a report said yesterday.

India's Department of Atomic Energy has already identified five coastal locations for the plants it intends to acquire, the Business Line newspaper reported.

The atomic energy department plans to generate 30,000 megawatts of power from imported nuclear fuel, SK Jain, chief of the Nuclear Power Corporation of India Limited, told the daily.

Western Gujarat state, southern Andhra Pradesh and the two eastern provinces of West Bengal and Orissa will host the plants, each with a capacity to generate 6,000-8,000 megawatts of electricity.

The Indo-US pact, which covers civil nuclear technology and seeks

to bring India into the loop of global atomic commerce after a gap of three decades, was concluded last month, capping two years of negotiations.

The accord permits India to buy atomic fuel, technology and plants from the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers Group of countries even though it is not party to the non-proliferation treaty.

But the deal remains under a cloud with India's main opposition Hindu nationalists and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's Communist allies, who provide valuable outside support to his government, rejecting it.

The left fears India's sovereignty will be compromised while the Hindu nationalists say the deal impedes New Delhi -- which came out of the nuclear closet in 1998 with five tests -- from conducting further weapons' tests.

AFP, Kabul

US and Afghan troops pressed an air and ground assault Thursday against al-Qaeda militants grouped in the Tora Bora mountains of eastern Afghanistan, the last known hiding place of Osama bin Laden.

Up to 250 families had fled the area near the Pakistan border as the attack pushed into a fourth day, Afghan officials said.

The US military and the Afghan defence ministry would not give details of the operation Thursday as it was still under way.

But US military spokeswoman Captain Vanessa Bowman told AFP it was intended to disrupt al-Qaeda and other militants who were massing in the region.

Intelligence indicated that the fighters had gathered in dug-in fighting positions, she said.

Bowman said Wednesday, when the US military announced the

assault, that the remote and rugged region was an "ideal" area to conceal militant support bases and training sites, as well as plan attacks.

The area, a complex of caves 50km south of the eastern city of Jalalabad, is known as the last stronghold of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

Bin Laden and fighters from Arab countries built the caves during the 1980s during the resistance to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

Bowman said Wednesday the assault was using precision munitions to avoid civilian casualties.

"The targets were carefully chosen to pinpoint enemy positions and eliminate the likelihood of harming innocent civilians," she said.

Between 200 to 250 families had fled the Tora Bora valley to other villages, said Mohammad Ali, governor of Nangarhar province's Pachir Wa Agam district which includes the targeted area.

"We have asked the provincial government for help for the displaced people," he said.

Afghan media reports said some 50 Taliban had been killed but the governor had no confirmation, saying: "These are only rumours at this stage."

al-Qaeda was sheltered by the 1996-2001 Taliban government in Afghanistan and allowed to operate training camps there until the hard-line Islamic regime was driven out in a US-led invasion in late 2001.

Bin Laden, the al-Qaeda chief behind the September 11, 2001 suicide plane attacks in the United States that triggered the invasion, was last seen in the Tora Bora mountains in December that year when US and Afghan forces tried but failed to capture him.