



Kim Yoon-Young, one of 19 released South Korean hostages held in Afghanistan, reunites with her children at a hospital in Anyang, south of Seoul yesterday after returning home.

Sharif warns West against ‘blind support’ for Musharraf

AFP, London

The West should not give "blind support" to Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and must distinguish between democracy and his "misrule", ex-prime minister Nawaz Sharif told AFP Saturday.

Speaking at the plush west London offices of his political party, the Pakistan Muslim League-N, Sharif added that he would never negotiate with the military leader who ousted him nearly eight years ago.

He said that the West "should clearly differentiate between a democratic rule and misrule because he (Musharraf) is the one who has brought Pakistan to the brink ... I only want that the West should take note of what he's doing, and not provide blind support to a dictator."

"This dictator has his own personal agenda, which differs from the agenda of the country, and he's using the army to perpetuate his illegal rule," he said.

He added that the Pakistani people were "dismayed and disappointed" by American support for Musharraf.

Sharif, who was Pakistan's prime minister from 1990 to 1993, and again between 1996 and 1999, pledged at a London press conference on Thursday to return to Islamabad on September 10 to lead a campaign to oust Musharraf from office.

He himself was ousted in a bloodless military coup led by Musharraf, and was then exiled to Saudi Arabia for a decade in a deal struck with Musharraf.

The president's popularity has plummeted in recent months, with dissenters taking to the streets over his decision to suspend Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry in March.

Chaudhry, who has since been reinstated by Pakistan's Supreme Court, opened the door for Sharif's return last week in a Supreme Court ruling.

Sharif's opposition to Musharraf's rule contrasts with that of fellow exiled former premier Benazir Bhutto, who said in London on Saturday that a power-sharing deal she has been negotiating with Musharraf was "80 percent successful" -- an agreement Sharif criticised.

Benazir is demanding that Musharraf shed his military uniform before seeking reelection, give up his powers to dissolve parliament and allow prime ministers to serve a third term.

"We both committed to not having any negotiations or parleys with dictators," Sharif said, referring to a deal the pair reached last October to return to their country to demand free and fair elections, which are due next year.

"Talking to Musharraf today means that we are strengthening the dictatorship in Pakistan, talking to Musharraf means that we don't want undiluted democracy in Pakistan," he said.

"This is no service to democracy."

Asked whether he would consider negotiating with Musharraf were he to be sent to prison upon his return later this month, Sharif replied: "Musharraf put me in jail for 14 months ... I didn't think of negotiating then, so why would I negotiate now, after seven long years, eight years, when the movement is heading for success?"

For her part, Benazir said on Saturday that she thought Sharif had embarked upon a "personal vendetta" against the president.

Despite noting that of the 60 years since Pakistan's independence from British colonial rule, 32 of them had seen military rule in the country, Sharif also said that reforming the army's role was not necessary.

"It's very clear in the constitution that the Army has its own specific role to play. If the Army confines itself to that role ... there would be no problem."

"The problems only arose when the Army stepped outside of its domain."

Freed Taliban captives return to S Korea

AP, Anyang

Nineteen South Koreans freed by Taliban insurgents after six weeks in captivity returned home to tearful embraces from loved ones yesterday, expressing sorrow for two in their group who were killed in Afghanistan and apologising to the nation.

The former hostages, let go in stages last week under a deal between the insurgents and the South Korean government, arrived on a flight from Dubai. Before undergoing medical checks at a hospital in Anyang, just south of Seoul, they were reunited with their family members.

After the hugs and tears, some family members were gently critical, questioning why the group went to Afghanistan in the first place.

"I thought you would be killed," Cheon Kwang-sil, 77, told her granddaughter Lee Young-kyung, who at 22 was the youngest of the hostages. "I told you not to go there."

Lanka takes Sea Tiger base after fighting

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka said Sunday that troops captured a Tamil Tiger naval base during a weekend advance into rebel-held territory that the guerrillas said killed nine civilians.

Troops took the "Sea Tiger" base at Silavattura on Sunday following intense fighting in the Mannar district on Saturday, the defence ministry said in a statement.

"The army successfully captured an LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) Sea Tiger base, including three boats and a large quantity of anti-personnel mines and detonators," the ministry said.

It said an unspecified number of civilians had fled and sought shelter in schools and a church within the government-controlled area of Mannar.

Security forces seized territory that had been held by the LTTE just south of Mannar on Saturday, military officials said.

"The army is now engaged in consolidation operations to retain control of the area," the defence ministry said.

The ministry said that another five guerrillas were killed in a separate confrontation with the security forces in the adjoining Vavuniya district on Saturday.

In an earlier statement, the LTTE said nine people were killed and four injured in a landmine blast caused by Sri Lankan troops during the fighting in the coastal Mannar district.

The defence ministry, however, accused the LTTE of attacking civilians for allegedly trying to enter

government-held parts of the Mannar.

The LTTE also said Sunday that they killed a government soldier and lost one of their men in Saturday's fighting. The defence ministry said intercepts of rebel radio communications indicated that 11 guerrillas were killed.

Both sides regularly make casualty claims that cannot be independently verified.

Earlier government forces and Tamil Tiger rebels traded artillery fire in the island's northwest, with each side claiming heavy casualties against the other as well as among civilians.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they killed a government soldier and lost one of their own during Friday's clashes in the coastal district of Mannar and accused the army of killing eight civilians.

The pro-rebel Puthinam.com website said the victims were fleeing a military push into rebel-held territory in the Mannar district when they were killed in a mine attack carried out by the security forces.

There was no immediate comment from the military.

Government forces have been trying to break into rebel-held territory in the Mannar district for weeks, but have faced stiff rebel resistance.

The two sides have been locked in combat since 1972, with the Tigers fighting for a separate state for minority Tamils. The 35-year-old ethnic conflict has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

Pro-Taliban militants claim abduction of 150 Pak soldiers

AFP, Peshawar

Pro-Taliban militants said yesterday they had abducted scores of Pakistani soldiers, demanding the withdrawal of troops from tribal areas near the Afghan border in exchange for their release.

Military authorities have insisted that some 150 soldiers were stranded after straying into Ladha region in restive South Waziristan district in stormy weather on Thursday, amid tensions between militants and local tribesmen.

"Our colleagues have captured them and put them in jails," Zulfikar Mehsud, a spokesman for the militants, told AFP by telephone

from an undisclosed location.

Mehsud said the fighters had "surrounded the soldiers and forced them to surrender" their weapons.

"We took them into custody because the soldiers were preparing to launch an operation in South Waziristan," he said, claiming responsibility for the kidnapping Saturday of 10 additional soldiers from the army's Frontier Corps.

He said negotiations for their release could start once the government agreed to "honour" a peace accord it concluded with tribal militants in February 2005, under which Islamabad agreed to withdraw troops from the area.

Manhunt for dissidents in Myanmar

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's junta has stepped up a manhunt for pro-democracy activists after a rare string of protests, raiding homes and subjecting citizens to arbitrary searches, campaigners and residents say.

More than 10 plainclothes policemen have surrounded the home of 34-year-old labour rights campaigner Su Su Nway, who went into hiding after leading a brief demonstration last week in Yangon over soaring fuel costs.

Dozens of protesters were detained after that march, one of a series of anti-junta rallies that began here two weeks ago after the generals doubled key fuel prices, and later

spread to other parts of the country.

The price hike has left many workers unable to even afford bus fare in the impoverished nation formerly known as Burma, which has been under military rule since 1962.

Su Su Nway, who managed to evade arrest by jumping into a taxi, told AFP by telephone on Sunday that she was ready to stand up to the generals, who tolerate little public dissent.

"I will not hide forever. I have to stand up for our people," said the activist, who is a member of Myanmar's opposition party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), headed by detained leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Amnesty International said Friday that more than 150 people have been detained since the protests broke out on August 19.

Apart from Su Su Nway, the regime has targeted key activists including Htay Kywe, who also went into hiding after the first rally in Yangon, which drew about 500 people -- the biggest anti-junta march here in at least nine years.

Authorities have sent Htay Kywe's picture to every police station in the country and raided his home in Yangon, along with the homes of other protest leaders, confiscating computers, mobile phones and documents, activists say.

Since the protests broke out,

S Korea hostage deal a blow to Afghan govt

AFP, Kabul

The South Korean hostage drama in Afghanistan undermined Kabul's fight against the Taliban by creating the impression that the extremists have a degree of political legitimacy, analysts say.

The 19 Korean aid workers returned home Sunday after being held for 42 days by the headline militia, which eventually struck a deal with the South Korean government for their release.

Seoul has been criticised for negotiating with "terrorists" and the Afghan government says it only allowed the talks to go-ahead to save the lives of the Koreans.

But analysts say Kabul ceded a critical advantage to its enemy, in a battle, which is as much about public perception as military action.

"This was a game which ended in the favour of the Taliban, from the very beginning to its end," said Afghan lawmaker and editor Shukria Barakzai.

"In short, this deal gives the Taliban legitimacy, publicity and identity."

The saga saw representatives of the al-Qaeda-linked militia guaranteed safe passage to talks with a South Korean team in the

small town of Ghazni, about 140km south of Kabul.

They held what was effectively the Taliban's first press conference since their government was toppled in late 2001, and were also able to frequently shuttle their hostages from hideout to hideout before agreeing to free them.

"The whole process was a blow to the government," said Afghan writer and analyst Waheed Mujda, who was a civil servant in the Taliban's 1996-2001 government.

"After this, anyone in the outside world is thinking if one wants to deal with Afghanistan, one must understand that the Taliban are also there as a reality and an existing power," he told AFP.

The Taliban's "smart" handling of the hostage crisis risked increasing opposition in European countries which are supplying troops to Afghanistan's anti-Taliban efforts, Mujda said.

This dissatisfaction is already high, according to a recent poll, with international casualties mounting and costly British- and US-backed efforts unable to stop opium production from reaching a new record this year.



Myanmar activists hold pictures of Myanmar's opposition party leader Aung San Suu Kyi while shouting slogans during a protest against the increase of the price of fuel, outside the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok yesterday.

Indian Kashmir minister survives assassination attempt

AFP, Srinagar

Indian Kashmir's education minister survived an assassination attempt on Sunday by Islamic militants who riddled his car with bullets outside the state's summer capital Srinagar, police said.

Peerzada Mohammed Sayeed, also a leader of the ruling Congress party in the disputed state, was travelling in a motorcade near the town of Patan when the attack took place, police said.

"Bullets hit his car but the minister is fine," police said.

Hizbul Mujahedin, the region's most powerful militant group, killed a retired former senior police officer in the Patan area on Friday.

Indian Kashmir is in the grip of an 18-year old insurgency against New Delhi's rule that has left more than 42,000 people dead by official count.

Advani questions PM's nuclear deal remarks

PTI, Kochi

Accusing the Congress-led UPA government of compromising national security through the "flawed" Indo-US nuclear deal, senior BJP leader L K Advani on Sunday asked the Prime Minister to clarify if all the previous governments had "missed the bus" by not signing the NPT.

Reacting to the Prime Minister's recent statement that India cannot afford to "miss the bus" of nuclear renaissance this time, Advani asked: "Why all previous governments, including the Congress, had not signed the NPT. Was it wrong?"

The BJP feels that the present agreement imposed curbs on India's strategic options. During the past 60 years, irrespective of which party came to power, they were all opposed to the Non-Proliferation regime. Now, by signing this agreement, India has been made part of the regime, he said.



Pakistani investigators inspect the site of a collapsed bridge in Karachi yesterday. A road bridge which Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf opened only last month collapsed on Saturday in the southern city, killing at least seven people with more trapped under the debris.