

Taliban links to Pakistan blasts probed

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan yesterday probed suspected links between pro-Taliban militants and the twin suicide blasts that killed 31 people and heightened the crisis facing President Pervez Musharraf.

The bombings on Tuesday in Rawalpindi, a city near Islamabad where the army is based, added to insecurity in the country as military ruler Musharraf seeks re-election as president in the face of mounting opposition.

One bomber blew himself up on a bus carrying defence ministry workers and another struck on a route used by army officers to travel to the military headquarters in the sprawling but heavily-secured city.

Interior ministry spokesman Brigadier Javed Cheema said there were suspected links to pro-Taliban militants backed by Al-Qaeda who are fighting military operations in Pakistan's lawless tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.

Investigators are focusing on Baitullah Mehsud, one of the most senior militant commanders in the region, who is based in the semi-autonomous district of South Waziristan, he said, an area largely contemptuous of Musharraf's rule.

"No one has claimed responsibility but the previous several attacks were linked to Baitullah Mehsud," Cheema told AFP. "The investigations are continuing."

Officials have previously connected Mehsud with the radical clerics who ran the Red Mosque in Islamabad, which government forces besieged and stormed in July in an operation that cost more than 100 lives.

Mehsud has reportedly claimed responsibility for a series of attacks on military and government targets since then, including what he claims is the abduction of around 150 soldiers in South Waziristan last week. The army insists the soldiers are stranded in the area due to a tribal dispute.

Four US troops killed in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

Insurgents killed four American soldiers and wounded four more in separate attacks in Baghdad, the US military said yesterday.

Three soldiers were killed and two wounded by an explosively-formed penetrator, which is a bomb the US military alleges is supplied to Iraqi extremists by Iranian-linked groups.

The bomb struck the soldiers' patrol in east Baghdad on Tuesday, the military said in a statement.

Another soldier was killed and two more wounded during combat operations in a western Baghdad area on Tuesday.

The latest fatalities took the military's losses in Iraq since the March 2003 invasion to 3,736, according to an AFP count based on Pentagon figures.

Bush, Howard vow to stand firm on Iraq

AFP, Sydney

US President George W Bush and Australia's John Howard vowed yesterday to stand firm on Iraq in a strong defence of their strategy to contain violence in the war-torn country.

Bush said he saw crucial security and political progress in Iraq and vowed to "hang in there" despite steep pressure to pull US forces out, insisting it was not the time to give up.

In a joint press conference with the Australian prime minister, Bush also condemned Myanmar's junta for cracking down on street protests, saying "it's inexcusable that we've got this kind of tyrannical behaviour in Asia."

The two leaders spoke after talks ahead of this weekend's summit of Asia Pacific leaders in Sydney, which has been locked down in the tightest security clampdown in Australian history.

Many of Sydney's usually bustling streets were almost deserted as Bush and Howard

met, while helicopters buzzed over city office buildings and heavily armed police swarmed through the central business district.

Their talks swung from Iraq to the Middle East peace process, the nuclear programmemes of Iran and North Korea, and trade and climate change.

But it was Iraq that dominated after Bush's surprise visit to the country earlier this week where he hinted at a possible future troop reduction.

"There's more work to be done," Bush said. "But reconciliation is taking place. And it's important, in my judgment, for the security of America and for the security of Australia, that we hang in there with the Iraqis and help them."

At the same time he sought to downplay suggestions he might announce a US drawdown later this month, even as reports emerged in the United States of the top US military commander saying he may recommend a reduction by March 2008.

Howard for his part said Australian forces would remain at

their present level in Iraq "not based on any calendar but on conditions on the ground."

Australia currently has about 1,500 troops on operations in support of the war, of whom a third are based in Iraq itself, and Howard's support for Bush has made him increasingly unpopular ahead of elections later this year.

"We believe that at a time like this, a close ally and friend such as Australia should be providing the maximum presence and indication of support to our very close ally and friend in the president of the United States," added Howard.

On Myanmar, Bush said he would raise the junta's crackdown at the summit, which gathers the leaders of 21 Pacific rim countries including presidents Hu Jintao of China and Russia's Vladimir Putin.

"It's inexcusable that people who march for freedom are then treated by a repressive state. And those of us who live in comfort of a free society need to speak out about these kinds of human rights abuses," he said.

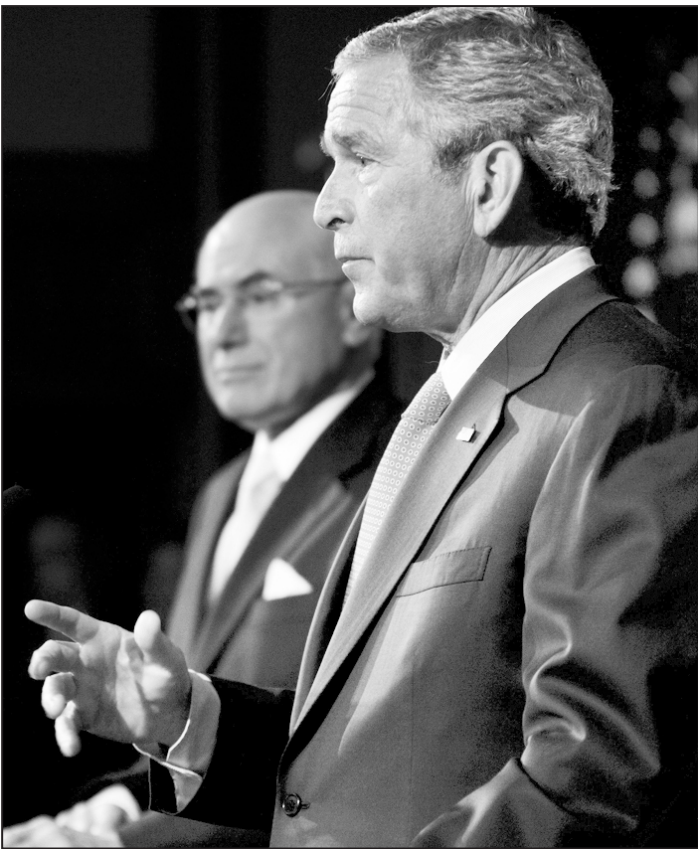


PHOTO: AFP

US President George W Bush (R) speaks during a joint press conference with Australian Prime Minister John Howard, at InterContinental Hotel in Sydney yesterday.

US calls for 'reasonable' Iran nuclear talks

AFP, Washington

Washington on Tuesday called for "reasonable" Iranians to take up negotiations over Tehran's disputed nuclear programme after pragmatic ex-president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was elected head of a powerful clerical body.

"Certainly we would hope that reasonable individuals in Iran would see the positive opportunity given to it by the international community to enter negotiations and be able to achieve a peaceful nuclear programme while still reassuring everyone else that it is not simply a cover for building a nuclear weapon," said State Department spokesman Tom Casey.

Casey was asked to comment on Rafsanjani's election Tuesday to head Iran's Assembly of Experts, part of a political comeback for the former president as his pragmatic

faction faces off against hardliners allied with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Rafsanjani has struck a moderate tone on the nuclear issue compared to the defiant Ahmadinejad.

"I'd like to believe that there are individuals in the Iranian leadership that would want to take what is in effect a rather unique and important opportunity, to allow Iran to engage with the rest of the international community," Casey told reporters.

He said Tehran had a chance to allay concerns about its nuclear ambitions, secure a civilian atomic energy programme and have for the first time "face-to-face" talks with major powers including the United States.

Asked if Rafsanjani could be described as "reasonable," Casey said: "I don't know. I think what is reasonable will depend on what policies are adopted."

The State Department spokes-

man also welcomed the release of Iranian-American academic Haleh Esfandiari, 67, who had been held in Tehran's Evin prison since May. The Iranian regime accused Esfandiari of helping an alleged US plot to topple Iran's rulers, a charge her family and colleagues dismissed.

"I want to join with the Wilson Center and her friends and family, not only here in the United States but throughout the world, in welcoming Mrs Esfandiari's release," Casey said.

"We are very glad to see her depart Iran and to see her individual case resolved."

Esfandiari, who heads the Wilson Center's Middle East programme in Washington, was released on August 21 and left the country on Monday. She said she had spent 105 days in solitary confinement in the notorious Evin jail, but did not detail her conditions in detention.

Boby to review Indian left's objections to nuke deal with US

AFP, New Delhi

India's foreign minister will head a committee set up by the Congress party-led government to review objections by communist allies to a controversial nuclear deal with the US, reports said Tuesday.

The pact seeks to bring India into the loop of global atomic commerce after a gap of three decades, but the leftist parties, which oppose strategic ties with Washington, say the nuclear agreement threatens India's sovereignty.

Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee will head the 15-member committee, which will have six members from the government, six from the left and three from other allied parties, a Press Trust of India agency report said.

From the government, die-hard defenders of the nuclear deal Finance Minister P. Chidambaram and Kapil Sibal, India's science and technology minister, will be on the panel, Indian news channel CNN-IBN said.

Senior communist leaders

Prakash Karat and Sitaram Yechury, who have been equally vocal in their opposition to the deal - and to India's ever-closer ties with the United States -- will also be on the committee, it said.

Left parties have asked the government not to begin safeguards negotiations with the International Atomic Energy Agency, the next step towards implementing the deal, until their objections are addressed.

Karat, general secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), repeated his opposition to the deal Tuesday, PTI said.

"If the nuclear deal is through, it will break our foreign policy of 60 years," said Karat, as he flagged off an anti-American protest directed at five-nation naval games in the Bay of Bengal that will see a heavy US presence.

Ships from Australia, Japan and Singapore will also take part in the joint exercises with India's navy this week.

India proposes new anti-terror talks with Pakistan

AFP, New Delhi

India has proposed new talks with Pakistan as part of an initiative to share information and intelligence on terrorist attacks, an Indian foreign ministry official said yesterday.

The anti-terror panel initiative was unveiled late last year when top Indian and Pakistani diplomats resumed peace talks in New Delhi after the July 2006 train bombings in Mumbai in which 186 people died.

It was supposed to meet quarterly, but after its first meeting in Islamabad in March -- which focused on the firebombing of a train linking

the two countries that killed 68 people -- no further talks have taken place.

"We have suggested some dates (in October-November) through diplomatic channels. We are waiting for a response," said the Indian official, who did not want to be named.

Another official said political turmoil in Pakistan could be a cause of delays in contacts.

"With the kind of fluid situation that Pakistan is witnessing right now, it is natural that the anti-terror panel is not a priority at the moment," said the official, who also asked not to be named.

13 hurt in Bangkok hotel fire

AFP, Bangkok

Thirteen people, including 12 foreign tourists, were injured when a fire ripped through a downtown Bangkok hotel overnight, police said yesterday.

The fire broke out at around midnight in the 14-storey Mandarin Hotel, sending hundreds of people running into the streets, police said.

Thirteen people, mainly Asian tourists, suffered minor injuries as they escaped the blaze, police Lieutenant Colonel Jakkarin Panthong told the news agency.

The fire broke out near a storage area and the hotel's fitness centre, which was under renovation. Fire fighters spent three hours putting out the blaze.

"The initial assumption is that it was an electrical short-circuit that sparked the fire," Jakkarin said.

Authorities have ordered the three-star, 400-room hotel to remain closed until inspectors can certify the safety of the 40-year-old building, he added.

Lanka claims killing five Tamil Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Five Tamil Tiger rebels have been killed in overnight clashes across Sri Lanka's embattled north, the defence ministry said yesterday.

The military said they killed two rebels during artillery clashes across a key front line in the north late Tuesday. Troops on a clearing operation in the island's northern Wanni region also killed three rebels in a clash on Tuesday.

The ministry said security forces had recovered 14 boxes containing seven kilogrammes (15 pounds) of explosives near a railway line just outside the capital Colombo early Wednesday.

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.