

Musharraf's ego and stubbornness coming in my way: Sharif

PTI, Islamabad

Former Pakistan premier Nawaz Sharif, who was deported shortly after his return to Pakistan from a seven-year exile, yesterday said President Pervez Musharraf's "ego and stubbornness" was responsible for him not being able to stay in his own country.

"It is only Musharraf's ego and his stubbornness that is standing in my way," Sharif told ARY TV Channel at the Islamabad Airport Lounge, as he waited for the authorities' plan of action after his aircraft landed from London.

Describing as painful the situation he was in, the 57-year-old Pakistan Muslim League-N leader regretted that he and his supporters who accompanied him from London were not able to make any telephonic contact with the outside world after their arrival in Islamabad.

"This indicates the sorry state of affairs in the country. Emigration should be allowed. I should get my vehicle and be allowed to start my journey," he said.

Sharif had planned to hit the road to reach Lahore after reaching Islamabad.

Sharif said telephones were not working and that they were all jammed. "Telephones in the plane were jammed. Phones in the lounge were jammed," he said.

"The government as I told you earlier doesn't believe in any ethics, morality, law. We were right here. You know what happened in the plane. We kept sitting in the plane for more than an hour and then things have never happened like that," Sharif said.

"This is a very painful situation. Obviously there should be emigration and our people should have been here. There should have been

vehicles so that we could proceed towards Lahore. There are no vehicles here and no people. Everywhere, the government has put in barricades, big trailers have been put on the bridges," he said.

Asked whether there were any pending cases against him, Sharif said he was not aware about them.

"I don't know anything. No one has served me with an arrest warrant. No one has told me where will I be taken to. They treated me like this soon after my arrival," he said.

"If my phone would have been working, I would have called my party leadership. I don't know even where they are. Yesterday, it was in news that all leaders have been arrested. Qazi Hussain, Javed Hashmi - arrested. But we are sitting here, you also sit here. As the situation changes, you will get to know," Sharif told the TV reporter.

Nawaz Sharif supporters, police clash in Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani police arrested key supporters of former premier Nawaz Sharif and clashed with around 100 others as they tried to reach Islamabad airport to welcome him on his return from exile.

The activists from Sharif's faction of the Pakistan Muslim League party had their cars halted by police about five kilometres (three miles) from the airport and then tried to walk, an AFP reporter at the scene said.

Police hit some people with sticks and arrested dozens of senior party members including Zafar Iqbal Jhagra, the party's secretary general, the reporter witnessed.

They also detained leaders of several nationalist parties.

More than 1,000 police were deployed to seal off the airport as Sharif's flight from London touched down early on Monday.

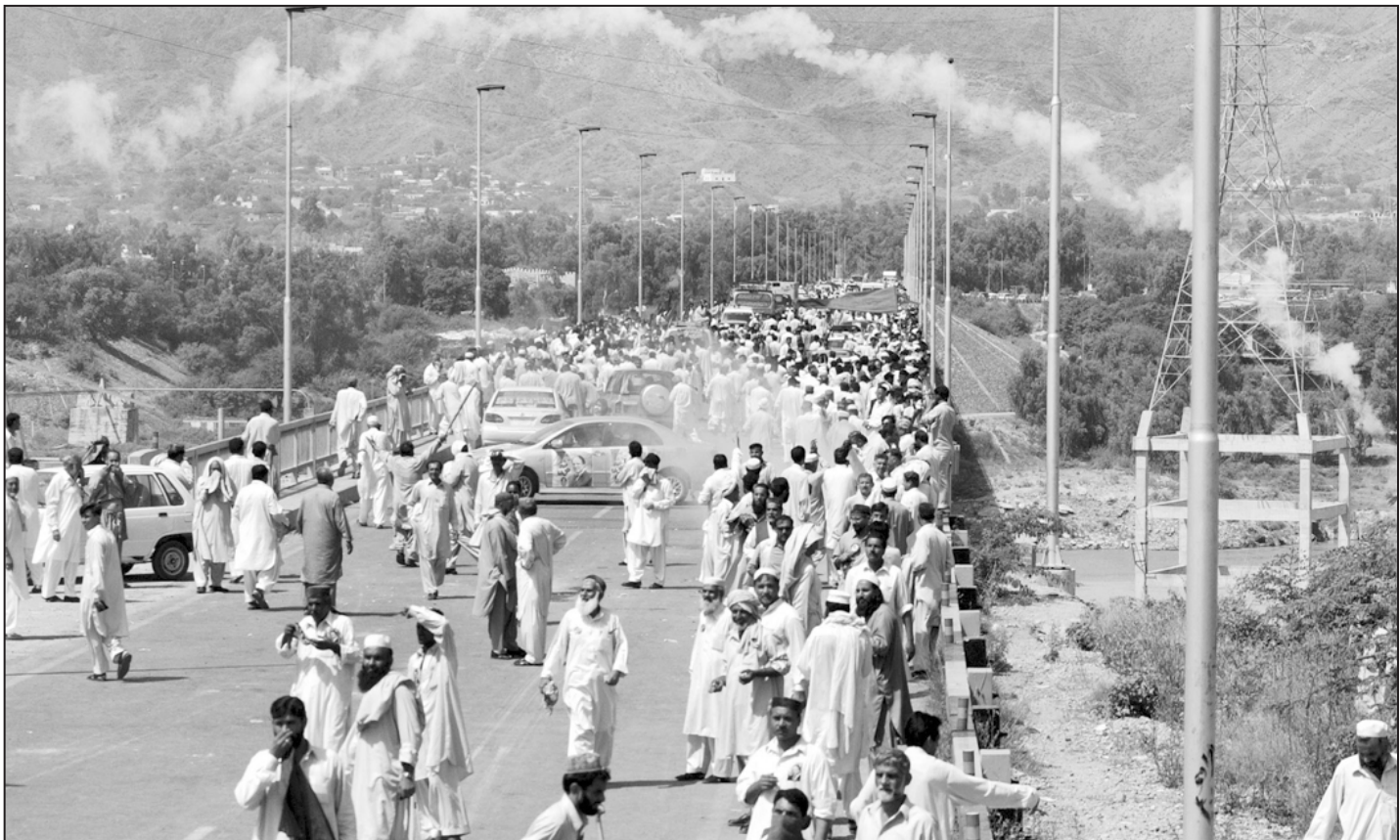


PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of former Pakistan prime minister Nawaz Sharif disperse after police fired teargas during clashes in Attock, some 70km west of Islamabad yesterday. Sharif was sent back to exile in Saudi Arabia, hours after he returned home vowing to topple President Pervez Musharraf, the man who ousted him eight years ago.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian Foreign Minister Salam Fayyad (L) looks on as Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas speaks with and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert prior to their formal meeting at Olmert's official residence in Jerusalem.

Abbas, Olmert reaffirms commitment to 2-state solution

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli and Palestinian leaders yesterday reaffirmed their commitment to a two-state solution to the Middle East conflict and appointed negotiating teams ahead of a US-sponsored peace conference.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert also promised Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas to release prisoners as a gesture of goodwill for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, after earlier refusing to agree to the Palestinian demand.

"The two emphasised their commitment to a two-state solution living side by side in peace and security and have therefore decided to appoint teams on both sides in order to promote this goal," said a joint statement released by the Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's office.

A senior Israeli government official told reporters that the teams would work "very intensively in the coming weeks to try to reach an understanding, preferably

before the summit."

A Palestinian official told AFP that the meeting -- the third in five weeks between the two leaders -- was "positive and successful."

"There was progress in the discussions," he said on condition of anonymity.

Abbas and Olmert met for more than two hours at the Israeli premier's Jerusalem residence, first in the presence of teams and then one-on-one as they once again tackled the thorniest problems in their decades-long conflict ahead of a conference called by US President George W Bush expected in November.

"Abu Mazen (Abbas) requested the release of prisoners and the prime minister promised he will recommend to his ministers to release prisoners back to the West Bank and Gaza as a gesture of goodwill for Ramadan," a senior Israeli government official told reporters.

Israeli officials had earlier said that Olmert would refuse such a gesture.

EU urges Pakistan to respect SC ruling

White House calls Sharif exile 'internal' matter

AFP, Brussels/ Washington

The European Union urged Pakistan yesterday to respect its own supreme court ruling and allow former prime minister Nawaz Sharif to stay in the country.

"In our view, the supreme court's view is very clear and should be respected," said Christiane Hohmann, the European Commission's external affairs spokeswoman.

"If there is any legal case against Mr Sharif, he should have the chance to defend himself in a Pakistan court."

Pakistan deported Sharif to Saudi Arabia Monday, just hours after he returned from exile hoping to ignite a popular campaign to oust military ruler President Pervez Musharraf.

The White House on Monday described Pakistan's deportation of

former prime minister Nawaz Sharif as an "internal matter," but urged the upcoming elections to be "free and fair," a spokesman said.

"This is an internal matter for the Pakistanis to deal with," said national security spokesman Gordon Johndroe.

Sharif was deported from Pakistan just hours after returning from exile hoping to ignite a popular campaign to oust military ruler President Pervez Musharraf, a strategic ally of the United States.

The combative Sharif, who arrived in Saudi Arabia on Monday, had pledged his return to Pakistan would provide "a final push to the crumbling dictatorship" of Musharraf, who is facing the worst crisis since he took power amid a wave of political turmoil and Islamist violence.

Asked what impact the deporta-

tion might have on Pakistan's upcoming election, Johndroe said:

"We will continue our discussions with various Pakistani parties" for there to be "free and fair elections." After being ousted in 1999, Sharif was sentenced to life in prison for tax evasion and treason but was released in December 2000 on condition that he and his family live in exile in Saudi Arabia for 10 years.

The Supreme Court ruled last month that they could fly back. That bid set off the protests, which spiralled into a full-blown political crisis for Musharraf, who has recently been negotiating a power-sharing deal with another former prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, to try to stay in office.

Benazir Bhutto has said she will announce a date for her own return on Friday.

Taliban 'ready for talks' with Afghan govt

AFP, Kandahar

The Taliban said yesterday it was ready for talks with the Afghan government after President Hamid Karzai offered negotiations in a bid to end the rebels' nearly six-year bloody insurgency.

Karzai made the offer on Sunday, with the insurgency spiralling to its highest level this year, saying peace could not be achieved without dialogue.

"For the sake of national interests ... we are fully ready for talks with the government," senior Taliban spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi told AFP.

"Whenever the government formally asks for negotiations, we are ready," he said. The movement had a "limited" number of conditions for a meeting, he added without elaborating.

Ahmadi said the Taliban could hold talks with the Afghan government as they had with South Korean officials over 21 hostages who were freed after several meet-

ings.

"As we did hold negotiations with the South Korean government, we can hold talks at an even higher level with the government," he said by telephone from an undisclosed location.

Seoul was criticised for negotiating with "terrorists" to free the 21 aid workers, who had been captured mid-July.

Alluding to this, Ahmadi said it was not clear if Karzai's offer was genuine. "Our understanding is the government, which terms the Taliban as terrorists, would not ask for negotiations," he said.

Karzai has regularly offered talks with the Taliban, which was in government between 1996 and 2001, and there have been rumours that contact has already been made.

But he denied Monday that "formal negotiations" were under way with the militants but said he was ready to start such dialogue if he could find the "address for the Taliban."

Americans see 9/11 as most important event of their lives

AFP, Washington

Six years after the September 11 attacks on the United States, most Americans view the plane hijackings that killed around 3,000 people as the most significant historical event of their lives, according to a poll released Monday.

Eighty-one percent of those surveyed said they see the attacks as the most significant historical event of their lifetimes, with more people on the east coast -- 90 percent -- choosing this view compared to 75 percent on the west coast.

The Zogby International telephone poll surveyed 938 people between September 6 and 9 and

has a three-percentage point margin of error.

The poll also showed 61 percent of respondents saying they think of the events at least once a week and 16 percent saying they think of the attacks every day.

A full 91 percent said they believe the United States will be attacked again on US soil.

Sixteen percent said they had personally visited the site of the World Trade Center in New York City to pay tribute to those who died when two passenger jets plunged into the towers and caused them to collapse.

A third jet hijacked by al-Qaeda militants hit the Pentagon outside Washington, and a fourth plane crashed in a field in Pennsylvania.



PHOTO: AFP

India's ruling Congress party leader Sonia Gandhi poses for photographs with Kashmiri women dressed in traditional attire at a women's conference in Srinagar yesterday. Sonia addressed a women's conference close to picturesque Dal Lake in the summer capital Srinagar amid tight security.

Sonia seeks to 'heal' Kashmir wounds

AFP, Srinagar

India's ruling party chief Sonia Gandhi yesterday called for Kashmir's "wounded hearts and minds" to be healed during a flying visit to the revolt-hit region.

The Congress party leader, who arrived two hours after Muslim rebels bombed a police vehicle in Srinagar, received a rousing welcome at the city's tightly guarded convention centre where a partisan audience chanted "Long live Sonia."

"For the past 20 years Kashmir has witnessed unmet problems and sufferings," Sonia Gandhi told thousands of women from the state's social welfare department, non-governmental organisations and Congress party members.

"The situation has not only left external scars but wounded more hearts and minds," she said.

"It is the prime responsibility for all of us to heal these wounds and bring back peace and tranquillity in the lives of the people," she said.



PHOTO: AFP

An Indian man carries a television set through floodwater in the flood-affected village of Nellie, in the Morigan district, some 75 km from Guwahati, the capital city of Assam state yesterday. More than one million people have been evacuated or stranded as rivers in northeastern India and Bangladesh rose to alarming levels or submerged vast swathes of countryside.

Mass evacuation in Assam flood zone

AFP, Guwahati

Hundreds of thousands of people threatened by overflowing rivers caused by monsoon rains in India's northeastern state of Assam have been evacuated, officials said yesterday.

The state has experienced flooding since Wednesday, state relief minister Bhumidhar Barman said, with the Brahmaputra and its tributaries breaching their embankments late Sunday, forcing the army to move an estimated 800,000 people.

"The flood situation has worsened," Barman said, adding that thousands of villages had been inundated and 20 of 27 state districts had been affected.

An official bulletin said the massive Brahmaputra River, which flows from Tibet through India to Bangladesh and the Bay of Bengal, was above the danger level in 17 places.

"The army is working overtime in the affected areas and we have kept on standby Indian air force helicopters to carry out relief and rescue,"

said Barman.

Soldiers rescued villagers marooned by waters in six hard-hit districts in Assam, a state of 26 million people, he said.

"Most of the displaced people are now lodged at makeshift shelters in schools and offices, as well as on raised embankments," said Barman.

"We are providing food and medical support to the flood-hit people. This is one of the worst floodings in recent years."

The Assam government says 54 people have died because of monsoon flooding this summer, while across India over 2,500 people have perished, over a quarter of them in Bihar state, according to official figures.

Every year floods across the country leave a trail of destruction, killing people, damaging property, washing away roads, submerging crops and drowning livestock.

In 2004, at least 200 people were killed and more than 12 million displaced by flooding in Assam.

Iraqi forces need time to take over security Says Al-Maliki

AP, Baghdad

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki told lawmakers yesterday that Iraqi forces were not ready to take over security from the US military across the country.

"We still need more efforts and time in order for our armed forces to be able to take over security in all Iraqi provinces from the multinational forces that helped us in a great way in fighting terrorism," he told parliament.

Al-Maliki made the comment hours before the US ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, and top US commander Gen. David Petraeus were to appear before Congress to deliver reports on Iraq's progress amid a debate over calls to start bringing American troops home.

The two Americans were widely expected to maintain that this

year's troop buildup has reduced violent attacks in Baghdad and argue for more time to restore security.

Al-Maliki said that violence had dropped 75 percent in the Baghdad area since the US began pouring in additional troops at the start of the year. He gave no figures.

"The key to reconstruction, economic development and improving peoples' standard of living is security," he said.

Still, attacks in the capital have picked up in recent days in the run-up to the report and as the Muslim holy month of Ramadan nears, a time when violence usually spikes higher.

On Monday, US and Iraqi troops backed by helicopters killed three civilians in the Shia slum of Sadr City in a pre-dawn raid on the home of a suspected militia leader, police and residents said.

Laden, Omar are alive and healthy Says Afghan warlord

AFP, Kabul

al-Qaeda's chief Osama bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar are alive and healthy, an anti-government militant group said after the Saudi millionaire appeared this month on a new video.

"I don't know exactly where they are but I absolutely know they're alive and healthy," Mohammad Haroon Zarghoo, a spokesman for the renegade warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, told AFP.

"We have no communications but we know through our channels that he (Osama) and Mr Omar are both alive," Zarghoo said by telephone from an unknown location.