

Musharraf assured of reelection before Benazir return

Pakistan amends rules for presidential polls

AP, PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan's ruling party assured President Gen Pervez Musharraf on Saturday that he would be elected to a new five-year term in October before exiled opposition leader Benazir Bhutto returns to the country.

The Election Commission has cleared the decks for Pervez Musharraf's re-election as Pakistan's President for another five-year term by amending the rules governing the presidential polls, according to a government minister.

"The Election Commission has amended the Presidential Election Rules 1988 so that Article 63 of the Constitution no longer applies to the President," media reported here on Sunday, quoting Federal Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Sher Afgan

Niazi as saying.

Article 63 lays down various conditions under which a person can be disqualified from being a Member of Parliament.

"Now Article 63 does not apply to the President. Its clauses which prevent government servants from participating in elections unless they have been retired for at least two years, and stop anyone who holds an office of profit in the service of Pakistan from participating in elections, also do not apply to the President," the Minister said.

Benazir Bhutto, the former prime minister who plans to come home from eight years in exile on Oct. 18, had urged the presidential vote be delayed until after parliamentary elections that must be held by mid-January. She said he should resign as army chief first.

The ruling party dismissed

Benazir's suggestions.

The president is chosen by an electoral college of all national and provincial lawmakers. Musharraf, whose term expires Nov. 15, wants to seek re-election from the current assemblies where he enjoys a majority because the next parliament may be less supportive.

"We have finalized our strategy to elect the president for another five-year term. ... We have enough votes to easily elect President Musharraf for another term," said Azeem Chaudhry, a senior official with the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Q party.

The US-allied Musharraf's popularity has slipped in recent months after he tried to fire the country's top judge and following a surge in attacks by Islamic militants suggesting his policies against extremism have failed.

6 killed in Russian helicopter crash

AFP, Vladivostok

Six people including two Polish tourists have been killed in a helicopter crash in far eastern Russia, a local official from Russia's emergency situations ministry said yesterday.

The pilot survived the crash and has been hospitalised in a serious condition, the official from the ministry's far eastern division in the city of Khabarovsk told AFP by telephone.

"Only the pilot was found alive, with serious injuries. The other six people died -- two crew members, two tourists from Poland, a wildlife official and a hunt organiser," the official said.

The helicopter was monitoring a section of taiga forest in the remote Magadan region on Saturday that was on fire. The crew informed air traffic controllers that visibility in the area was low.

Contact with the helicopter was then lost. The next call came from a crew member on an emergency channel to say that the helicopter had crashed into a hillside near the village of Seimchan, the official said.



Indian activists of the headline Hindu party Shiv Sena shout anti-government slogans while burning mock funeral pyres of Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi during a protest in New Delhi yesterday against the proposed construction of the Ram Sethu Samudram Shipping Canal Project in the Palk Strait between India and Sri Lanka.

US to stick to diplomacy on Iran nuclear drive Says Gates

AFP, Washington

The United States will continue to pursue diplomatic and economic means to force Iran to halt its nuclear drive, but "all options are on the table," Defense Secretary Robert Gates said Sunday.

Asked on Fox News if President George W. Bush would consult Congress before launching any strikes on Iran, Gates said he would not be drawn on "hypotheticals about what he may or may not do."

"I will tell you that I think the administration believes at this point that continuing to try and deal with the Iranian threat, the Iranian challenge through diplomatic and economic means is by far the preferable approach," he said.

Iran vehemently denies Western allegations it is seeking an atomic weapon, saying its nuclear drive is aimed at providing electricity for a growing population whose fossil fuels will one day run out.

"We always say all options are on the table," Gates said. "But clearly, the diplomatic and economic approach is the one we're

pursuing."

Washington also accuses Iran of providing sophisticated weaponry to Shia militias in Iraq, and Syria of turning a blind eye to infiltration of its borders by Sunni insurgents, charges both governments deny.

Announcing a limited pullout of troops from Iraq on Thursday, Bush demanded that Iran and Syria end attempts to "undermine" the government of insurgency-racked Iraq.

But the Pentagon chief ruled out using US forces to chase Shia extremists in Iraq over the Iranian border.

"First of all, there's a question of just how much intelligence we have in terms of specific locations and so on," he said on Fox.

"But beyond that, I think that the general view is we can manage this problem through better operations inside Iraq and on the border with Iran -- that we can take care of the Iranian threat ... inside the borders of Iraq.

"Don't need to go across the border into Iran."



A Pakistani youth throws stones towards a room where government officials gathered during the funeral ceremony for Maulana Hassan Jan in Peshawar yesterday. Thousands of people attended the funeral of a prominent pro-Taliban cleric who was shot dead in northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar on Sunday.

Angry mourners chase away Pak officials

AFP, Peshawar

A chanting throng of more than 100,000 mourners chased away senior Pakistani officials from the funeral of a leading pro-Taliban cleric, police and witnesses said.

They hurled shoes at government officials who tried to enter the sprawling stadium where the prayers were being held for Maulana Hassan Jan, 69, who was killed Saturday in the northwestern city of Peshawar.

"Get out!" they chanted when Interior Minister Aftab Sherpao arrived, and provincial chief minister Akram Durrani was given similar treatment.

Security officials hurriedly escorted Durrani out of the stadium to other chants directed against Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and US President George W Bush.

Olmert lowers ME confce expectation

AP, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert lowered expectations for breakthroughs in peacemaking yesterday, saying he and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas would go no further than a non-binding declaration of intent before an international peace conference this fall, officials said.

At a meeting of his Kadima Party, Olmert threw cold water on recent reports that he and Abbas have reached an agreement on binding principles that would guide peace talks.

"There are reports that we have reached an agreement on principles that just has to be fine-tuned," a participant in the meeting cited Olmert as saying. "But we are

talking about a joint statement that I hope will be the headline of the international peace conference in Washington in November. But there is a difference between an agreement on principles and a declaration of intent."

The participant spoke on condition of anonymity because the meeting was closed.

Olmert's comments came days ahead of a visit by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who is coming this week to gauge progress on preparations for the conference.

Palestinian response to Olmert's remarks wasn't immediately available.

Peace talks have snagged in the past over three key issues: final borders, control over disputed Jerusalem and a solution for

Palestinian refugees from the 1948 Mideast war that followed Israel's creation and their descendants.

Olmert and Abbas have broached these topics in recent talks, but the Palestinians have been pressing for greater Israeli commitment on the issues before the conference takes place. Without the outlines of a final peace deal, the Palestinians say, the conference will be a failure.

The Hamas group's violent takeover of Gaza this summer, and Abbas' subsequent expulsion of the Islamic group from government, has given traction to peacemaking. With Hamas out of the government, Western powers hope the moderate Abbas will have a freer hand to negotiate an agreement with Israel.

Iran a key issue at IAEA conference

AFP, Vienna

The UN nuclear watchdog opens a general conference of its 144 member states Monday, with its chief Mohamed ElBaradei under fire from Western quarters that he is too soft on Iran.

Iran is certain to be a key topic of discussion. Iranian vice president and head of the Atomic Energy Organisation (AEOI) Reza Aghazadeh will address the gathering of the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

US Energy Secretary Samuel Bodman and Sergei Kiriyenko, director of Russia's Federal Atomic Energy Agency, are also attending.

The criticism of ElBaradei centres on his cutting a deal with Iran for new nuclear inspections.

Washington fears Tehran will use this as a delaying tactic to avoid

Lankan troops steps up hunt for Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan troops stepped up search operations for Tamil rebels in the embattled north and east after 28 people were killed in a new wave of fighting at the weekend, officials said yesterday.

Troops recovered three "suicide jackets," three automatic assault rifles and a Claymore mine during a search in the Jaffna peninsula where at least 10 Tiger rebels were killed on Friday, the defence ministry said.

It said two soldiers were also

killed in a roadside bomb set off by suspected Tamil Tiger in Jaffna on Friday night.

Another 14 members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were killed Friday in two confrontations in the district of Vavuniya near rebel-controlled territory, the ministry said.

It said another Tiger and a police commando were killed in the east of the island on Saturday.

More than 5,400 people have been killed in fighting in the past 21 months following the breakdown of a Norwegian-brokered truce.

Dozen rebels killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Khost

Afghan and US-led forces backed by air power clashed with Taliban insurgents yesterday in Afghanistan, killing more than a dozen rebels, officials said.

About 10 insurgents were killed early Sunday when US-led warplanes pounded militant positions in the southern province of Helmand, the US military said.

"Precision munitions were employed on locations in Garmser district where the combined forces suspected Taliban militants were hiding," a statement from the US-led coalition said.

A military spokesman told AFP that about 10 rebels had been killed.

Four other rebels were killed overnight in a battle that erupted after they attacked a police post in the eastern province of Paktia, provincial police chief Esmatullah Alizai told AFP.

Five other rebels were wounded in that attack, he added.

Meanwhile two Afghan children were killed when a stray rocket hit their home late Saturday near a military base used by the US-led coalition in the troubled eastern province of Kunar, a local spokesman said.

The rocket was likely fired by Taliban insurgents aiming at the base, a spokesman for the local administration told AFP.

The attacks were the latest in an upsurge in violence over the past two years linked to the Taliban-led insurgency launched after the hardliners were removed from government in late 2001 by the US-led coalition.

Around 5,000 people have been killed this year, most of them rebel fighters, according to an AFP count. Nearly 550 Afghan security forces and 160 international soldiers have also died, most of them in action.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan children receive medical treatment at a hospital in Ghazni province Saturday. A district chief, his two bodyguards and 12 civilians were injured when a bomb planted at a bicycle at the bazaar of Andar district in Ghazni went off on Saturday.