



PHOTO: AFP
Activists of Pakistan's fundamentalist party Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) shout anti-Musharraf slogans outside the Supreme Court during a hearing in Islamabad yesterday. Musharraf will step down as army chief if he wins re-election, his lawyer said, paving the way for power-sharing civilian rule after eight turbulent years.

18 Pak soldiers killed in clashes with rebels

16 pro-Taliban militants also slain

AFP, Islamabad

Up to 18 Pakistani soldiers and 16 militants were killed in heavy fighting in a restive tribal area bordering Afghanistan, officials said Monday.

Pakistani authorities yesterday recovered the bodies of 15 soldiers killed in clashes with pro-Taliban militants in a tribal area bordering Afghanistan, officials said.

Security forces deployed at a military post in North Waziristan killed about 16 pro-Taliban militants in clashes that began late Sunday, officials and residents said.

Military spokesman major general Waheed Arshad said security forces had clashed with "miscreants" in the area, but was unable to give further details as communication links had collapsed.

"We had 12 to 16 men at the post, but had not been able to establish a contact with them as communication links were down due to bad weather," Arshad told AFP.

"We are trying to gather details about the casualties. The latest contact we had was on Monday afternoon in which soldiers informed (us) about militant casualties."

However, local administration officials in Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan tribal district, told AFP militants had killed 16 soldiers and were not handing over their bodies to authorities.

"We have sent a jirga (tribal elders committee) in the area to recover the bodies of soldiers from the miscreants," a local administration official said.

Clashes erupted in the region when militants attacked troop positions with rockets late Sunday, killing two soldiers and injuring another five, an intelligence official told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP
Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) activists shout slogans yesterday against the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government during a demonstration protesting the Indo-US nuclear deal in New Delhi.

N Korea denies nuke ties with Syria

AP, Seoul

North Korea strongly denied yesterday that it has provided Syria with secret nuclear cooperation, claiming the charge was fabricated to block progress in the North's relations with the United States.

North Korea's Foreign Ministry said the country has upheld a pledge made last October, when it conducted its first-ever nuclear test, that it would be "a responsible nuclear weapons state" and not transfer any nuclear material out of the country.

The North "never makes an empty talk but always tells truth," the ministry said in the statement carried by the official Korean Central News Agency.

7 die as bombers target Baghdad morgue

AFP, Baghdad

Seven people were killed yesterday when a car bomb and a mortar shell blasted Baghdad's main morgue as families were engaged in the grim search for the bodies of missing relatives.

The bomb detonated in the car park of the morgue in central Baghdad's Babel Muaddam neighbourhood at around 9:30 am (0530 GMT), and was followed minutes later by a mortar shell exploding, security officials said.

The double assault came at a time of day when the morgue, behind the health ministry building, fills with anguished people who come to view bodies of victims of the relentless sectarian violence ravaging the Iraqi capital.

Police scour the streets of Baghdad early each morning for bodies that have been dumped during the night. Most are found blindfolded, hands tied behind their backs and bullets in their heads. Many also shows signs of torture.

China, Russia warn against Iran war

AFP, Moscow/ Beijing

Russia and China expressed worry yesterday over the possibility of war with Iran as French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner pressed for tougher sanctions against the Islamic Republic's nuclear programme.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov emphasised Russia's "concern" over "multiple reports that military sanctions against Iran are being seriously considered. It's hard to imagine what that could do to the region."

Earlier China said yesterday it was opposed to threats of force in world politics, reacting to a warning by the French foreign minister that the standoff over Iran's nuclear programme could lead to war.

"We believe diplomatic negotiation is the best way of resolving issues," Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Jiang Yu told reporters.

"We are opposed to the unbri-dled threat of the use of force in international affairs," she said.

Jiang was reacting to remarks by Bernard Kouchner, France's foreign minister, who said Sunday: "We have to prepare for the worst, and the worst is war."

Kouchner also called for "work-ing on precise sanctions" and added that France and Russia had differences on the issue.

However, the French foreign minister also said that "everything should be done to avoid war."

"War is the worst, that could happen," he said. "Everything should be done to avoid war. We have to negotiate, negotiate, negotiate -- without cease, without rebuff."

His comments appeared aimed at quieting an uproar over his state-ment Sunday that the world should prepare for a possible war with Iran - a warning Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad dismissed Tuesday as fanciful.

The Russian and French minis-ters met ahead of a UN Security Council meeting on Friday that may impose new sanctions against Tehran for its controversial uranium enrichment activity.

Pressure on Iran has escalated in the runup to the meeting, includ-ing Kouchner's statement on Sunday: "We have to prepare for the worst, and the worst is war."

Ahmadinejad told journalists in Tehran on Tuesday: "We do not take these declarations seriously. Comments to the media are differ-ent to the real positions."

Tehran vehemently denies US accusations it is seeking an atomic weapon, saying its nuclear drive is aimed at generating electricity.

Russia, which is building Iran's first nuclear reactor in the southern Russian city of Bushehr, has consis-tently warned against attacking the Islamic republic.

In an interview published just ahead of the Kouchner-Lavrov meeting, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov warned that a "bombing of Iran would be a bad move that would end with catastrophic consequences."

India, Pakistan to resume talks

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan will hold new peace talks next month to boost efforts to cooperate against terror-ism and reduce the risk of a nuclear war beginning by accident, the Indian foreign ministry said.

The two sides, which launched a slow-moving peace process in January 2004, will discuss ways of implementing "conventional confi-dence-building measures" in New Delhi on October 18, the ministry said in a statement late Monday.

Top officials will also discuss issues relating to nuclear safe-guards, or ways of keeping their respective nuclear arsenals under control, a day later.

The talks will continue on to October 22, with New Delhi and Islamabad revisiting efforts to put in place a regular joint anti-terrorism mechanism designed to share intelligence on militant activity.

Both sides regularly accuse each other's intelligence outfits of sponsoring terror attacks across the border.

The anti-terror panel was launched a year ago when top Indian and Pakistani diplomats resumed peace talks after July 2006 train bombings in Mumbai, in which 186 people died.

The panel was supposed to meet every quarter, but the October meeting will only be its second outing.



PHOTO: AFP
The second-in-command of Nepal's former Maoist rebels, Baburam Bhattarai, gestures as he addresses Maoist supporters during a public meeting in Kathmandu yesterday.

Israelis back reported air raid on Syria

AFP, Jerusalem

The vast majority of Israelis support the apparent air strike on Syria, a poll showed on Tuesday, as North Korea denied helping Damascus to build a nuclear facility alleged to have been the target.

Asked if they supported the reported raid nearly two weeks ago - over which Israel has kept silent and which foreign press reports have said was aimed at a nuclear target -- 78 percent of Israelis polled said "yes."

Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's dwindling ratings also rose 10 percentage points on the back of this support to 35 percent, accord-ing to the survey.

The figures continued a trend that has seen his ratings recover from single digits where they wall-owed for months because of last year's inconclusive war in Lebanon and a string of corruption scandals implicating the government.

Kabul rejects conditions for talks with Taliban

US airstrike kills Taliban leader

AFP, AP, Kabul

The Afghan government strongly rejected yesterday any conditions for peace talks with the Taliban after the Islamic militants demanded the withdrawal of Western troops as a prerequisite for dialogue.

The government would guaran-tee safe passage for Taliban negoti-ators at any talks but this was all, President Hamid Karzai's senior spokesman told reporters.

"The Afghan government is not open to negotiations with any pre-conditions," Homayun Hamidzada said.

"The only precondition would be a security guarantee for their negoti-ators."

In an apparent drawdown from earlier remarks that the Taliban was ready for talks, a spokesman said at the weekend the Islamic rebels would only begin dialogue if it resulted in the withdrawal of nearly 50,000 mostly Western troops here.

"If these talks... rescue our country's independence and result in finding a way for the withdrawal of foreign forces, (Taliban) are ready to participate," the Taliban's main spokesman, Yousuf Ahmadi, said in a statement.

The Taliban, removed from government six years ago, are waging a bloody insurgency that has killed more than 5,000 people this year alone, with most of the dead rebel fighters.

Karzai has regularly offered negotiations with the Taliban but he has suggested this does not include the leaders of the insurgency, who are allied with al-Qaeda and wanted by the United States.

Meanwhile, US airstrikes target-ing a meeting of Taliban leaders killed a high-ranking commander involved in the kidnappings of 23 South Koreans two months ago, Afghan officials said Tuesday.