

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.

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 show 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 unbridled 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 "working 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 statement 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 ministers 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, including 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 different 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 consistently 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."

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 colapsed.

"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.

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.

However, local administration

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.

India, Pakistan to resume talks

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan will hold new peace talks next month to boost efforts to cooperate against terrorism 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 confidence-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 safeguards, 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.

The talks will continue on to

Shedding military 'skin' no easy call for Musharraf

AFP, Islamabad

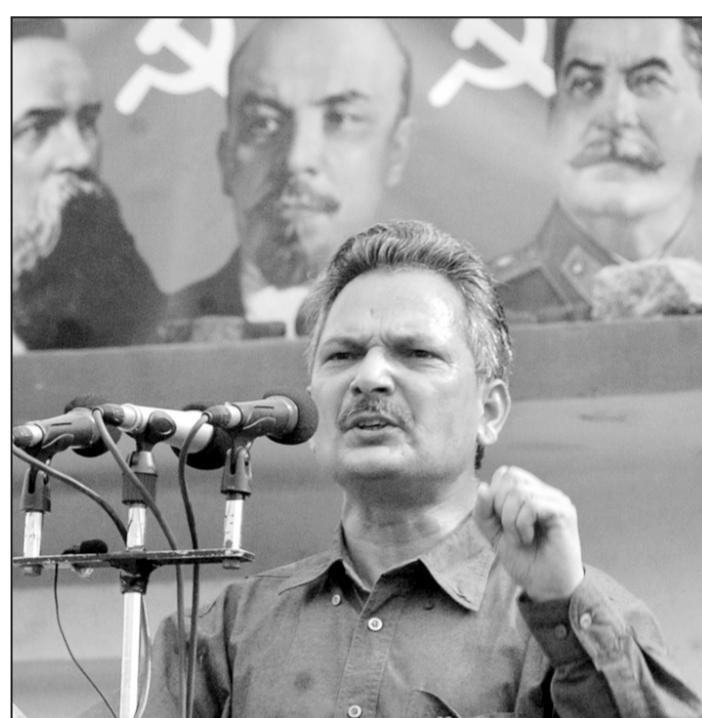
knows his strength comes from being the army chief," political analyst Kamal Matinuddin told AFP.

"He also knew he would be backed by the US in its 'war on terror'."

By his own admission, indiscipline marred Musharraf's early army career.

After joining the Pakistan Military Academy aged 18 he was court-martialed for taking unauthorized leave. He was only spared when war broke out with India in 1965, and won a gallantry award.

He became a commando in 1966 but admitted on his website that "my bluntness and indiscipline landed me in many a serious trouble" until his marriage in 1968. He now has a son and a daughter.



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, according to the survey.

The figures continued a trend that has seen his ratings recover from single digits where they wavered 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

a security guarantee for their negotiators."

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, Yousaf Ahmad, 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 targeting 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.