

Pak police round up Musharraf opponents

AFP, Islamabad

A Pakistani opposition leader yesterday accused President Pervez Musharraf of trying to crush dissent after police held dozens of people who vowed to protest against the military ruler's re-election.

Police served four leaders of a pro-democracy alliance with 30-day detention orders on Saturday night and kept them under heavy guard at their parliamentary lodgings in Islamabad.

Security forces arrested dozens more activists in raids on their homes, while party officials said other opposition figures have gone underground to avoid being rounded up.

Javed Hashmi, the acting chief of exiled former premier Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League party, said his lawyer would challenge his "illegal" detention in court.

"They want to crush every voice of dissent," Hashmi told AFP from the parliamentary apartment where he is being held.

The other leaders held are Raja Zafar ul-Haq, from the same party and Hafiz Hussain Ahmad and Mian Aslam of the pro-Taliban Jamiat-ulema-e-Islam party. Party sources said they would also appeal against their detention.

The opposition coalition, called the All Parties Democratic Movement, has vowed to block Musharraf's bid to win another five-year term in a vote by the federal and provincial assemblies on October 6.

"They have confined me for 30 days, but we will continue to raise our voice for the rights of the people of Pakistan, for democracy and against military dictatorship," Hashmi said.

"They want power by the use of force, not by the power of the ballot," added Hashmi, who was freed from jail by the Supreme Court in August after serving three years on sedition charges.

Deputy information minister Tariq Azeem said the "preventative detentions" were justified.

"These people were threatening to storm the Supreme Court and attack the election commission. No government can allow them to take the law into their hands," Azeem told AFP.

"Some leaders are under preventative detention to ward off any threat to law and order to protect the sanctity of the institutions," he said.

The alliance staged protests on Friday and says that it will blockade the election commission to stop Musharraf filing his nomination papers on Thursday. It has also vowed to resign from parliament.

The Supreme Court is meanwhile hearing a set of petitions filed by the opposition claiming that Musharraf is ineligible to stand in the elections and that he should quit as army chief.

Musharraf, a key US ally, says he will hang up his uniform and be sworn in as a civilian before his current term as president ends on November 15.

As police sources said that more arrests were likely, Sharif's party and the biggest coalition of religious parties, the Muttahida-Majlis-e-Amal, or United Action Front, said most of their leaders had gone into hiding.

"The leadership has gone underground to keep the movement alive. Hundreds of our workers have been detained," said Shahid Shamsi, a spokesman for the Islamist alliance.

Sharif's party said its leaders have "left their homes for safer places" while several dozen had been detained.

"This is sham democracy," spokesman Ahsan Iqbal said. "The regime is proving our point that it is autocratic not democratic."

Police would not confirm the full number of arrests.

Musharraf has faced mounting protests and slumping popularity ever since his failed bid to sack the Supreme Court chief justice in March.

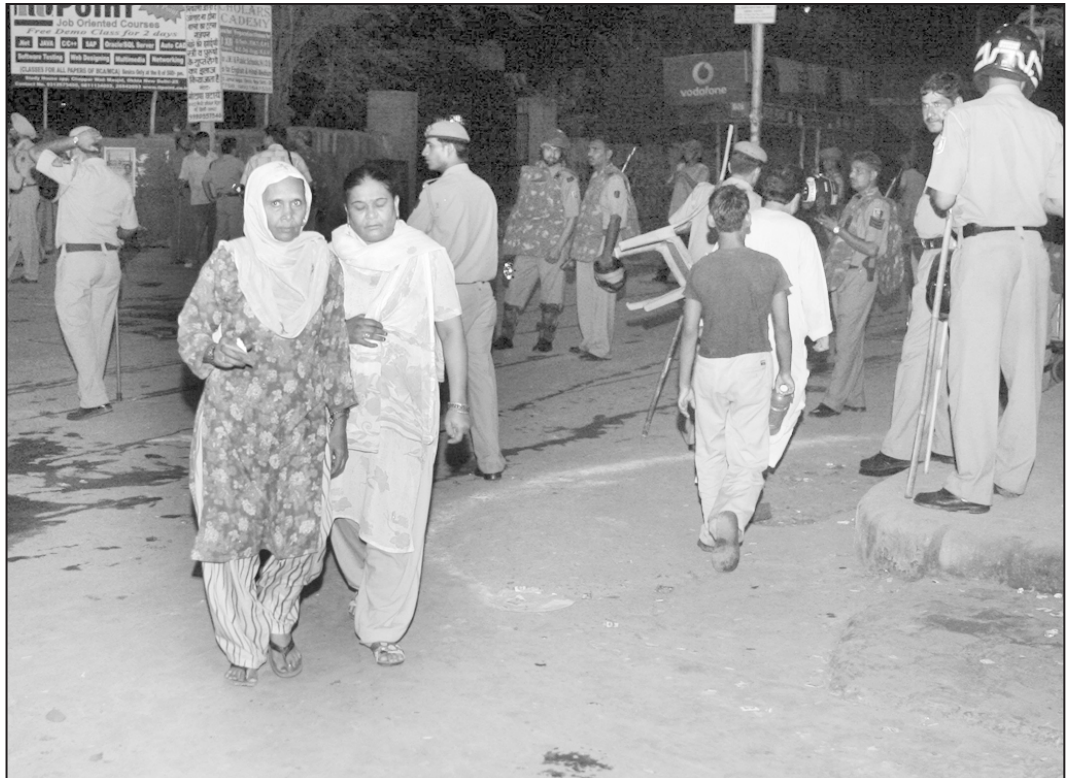
The Supreme Court has shown increasing autonomy, ruling in August first that Hashmi could be freed and then that party leader Sharif himself was allowed to return from seven years in exile.

But when he did so nearly two weeks ago Pakistani authorities immediately dumped Sharif, the man Musharraf ousted in a 1999 coup, on a plane to Saudi Arabia.

Another ex-prime minister, Benazir Bhutto, has vowed to return to Pakistan on October 18 amid stalled talks on a power-sharing pact with Musharraf.



Monks and their supporters take part in a march in Yangon yesterday launching the biggest challenge against military rule in nearly two decades. Some 20,000 people marched in the rain-sodden streets of Yangon from the golden Shwedagon Pagoda, Myanmar's most important landmark, and numbers swelled as they crossed downtown Yangon and circled the Sule Pagoda, witnesses said.



Indian security personnel stand by as devotees leave a mosque in the Okhla District of New Delhi Saturday. Security forces gathered in the southern district of the Indian capital after a mob allegedly burnt a police post.

Nato sees hope for Afghan peace talks

AP, Kabul

Six years after the fall of the Taliban, the fighting in Afghanistan is growing more intense but so is talk of peace.

President Hamid Karzai has signalled increased interest in negotiating with the Taliban, and the UN and Nato say a growing number of militants want out of the conflict.

With Taliban leaders demanding a pullout of foreign forces, and the US rejecting all-inclusive negotiations, high-level talks to end the war remain a distant prospect. Still, there appears to be a sliver of hope for peace talks.

One analyst suggested talks with the Taliban could be a way to separate the militia from al-Qaeda, like the US has done in western Iraq where a new alliance with Sunni militants has splintered their relationship with al-Qaeda.

"The climate for talks is more

conducive than it ever has been," Daan Everts, Nato's ambassador to Afghanistan, said this week. "We're going to look into this more systematically, although of course this is essentially an intra-Afghan issue."

President Hamid Karzai reiterated his long-held willingness to engage the Taliban diplomatically. A Taliban spokesman originally signalled that the hardline militia might consider that. But the group's leadership has since said the US military and Nato must first leave the country and that a harsh brand of Islamic law must prevail in Afghanistan conditions the West won't accept.

The American military urges fighters to lay down their weapons and seek reconciliation. But the US Embassy says Washington will not negotiate with terrorists.

Fujimori returns to Peru to face trial

AP, Lima

Former President Alberto Fujimori returned to Peru on Saturday to face charges of corruption and sanctioning death-squad killings, a grim homecoming for the strongman who fled the country seven years ago as his government collapsed in scandal.

The plane carrying the 69-year-old former ruler landed in a heavy mist at Lima's Las Palmas air force base, a day after Chile's Supreme Court authorised his extradition. He was then flown by helicopter to a police base, where he is to be held until a permanent facility is prepared for his detention.

Some 700 supporters who gathered outside the police air terminal across town to greet him were frustrated when his plane was diverted to the air base.

Myanmar's junta faces rebuke at UN General Assembly

AFP, United Nations

As protests intensify against the military generals in Myanmar, world leaders at the United Nations General Assembly are expected to push the ruling junta to adopt democratic reforms.

The United States and European nations are to spearhead a diplomatic blitz at the annual gathering this week in an apparent bid to lend support to the biggest democratic campaign in two decades in the tightly ruled Southeast Asian state, diplomats said.

The move comes as Myanmar's democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest, appeared in public Saturday for the first time in four years, greeting and paying respect to thousands of monks and their supporters protesting in the commercial capital Yangon against the military junta.

British Foreign Secretary David Miliband has said he will raise the Myanmar issue at the UN General Assembly in New York, following a briefing on the situation at the UN Security Council last week.

His counterparts from Europe, which has put off plans for a free trade pact with Asean due to Myanmar's human rights record, will also be highlighting the topic at the UN meeting, diplomats said.

Both the European Union (EU) and the United States have been at the forefront of political and economic sanctions against Myanmar's junta for years but to no avail.

US President George W. Bush, who delivers his address at the UN General Assembly and holds a roundtable meeting on democracy with a group of about 20 leaders on Tuesday, is expected to add to the international pressure on Myanmar's junta.

'Video shows Blackwater guards fired on Iraqis unprovoked'

AP, Baghdad

Iraqi investigators have a videotape that shows Blackwater USA guards opened fire against civilians without provocation in a shooting last week that left 11 people dead, a senior Iraqi official said Saturday. He said the case was referred to the Iraqi judiciary.

Iraq's president, meanwhile, demanded that the Americans release an Iranian arrested this week on suspicion of smuggling weapons to Shia militias. The demand adds new strains to US-Iraqi relations only days before a meeting between President Bush and Iraq's Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Interior Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Abdul-Karim Khalaf said Iraqi authorities had completed an investigation into the Sept. 16 shooting in Nisoor Square in western Baghdad and concluded that Blackwater guards were responsible for the deaths.

He told The Associated Press that the conclusion was based on witness statements as well as videotape shot by cameras at the nearby headquarters of the national police command. He said eight people were killed at the scene and three of the 15 wounded died in hospitals.

Blackwater, which provides most of the security for US diplomats and civilian officials in Iraq, has insisted that its guards came under fire from armed insurgents and shot back only to defend themselves.

Blackwater spokeswoman Anne Tyrrell said Saturday that she knew nothing about the videotape and was contractually prohibited from discussing details of the shooting.

Khalaf also said the ministry was looking into six other fatal shootings involving the Moyock, North Carolina-based company in which 10 Iraqis were killed and 15 wounded. Among the shootings was one Feb. 7 outside Iraqi state television in Baghdad that killed three building guards.

"These six cases will support the case against Blackwater, because they show that it has a criminal record," Khalaf said.

Under fire Lanka offers olive branch to Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka offered yesterday to halt major military operations against Tamil separatists in exchange for peace talks following intense international censure.

Troops will not press ahead with an offensive if Tamil Tiger rebels agree to talk, Defence Ministry secretary Gotabhaya Rajapakse told a newspaper amid pressure from the island's key foreign backers not to pursue the military option.

The country's top defence official said it was now up to the Tigers to decide if the military should keep up its drive and urged them to resume peace negotiations which collapsed in October last year.

"The decision (of war or peace) is theirs and I believe they wouldn't reject this opportunity," Rajapakse told the Sunday Island. "We'll not take advantage of the ground situation," if the Tigers agree to negotiate.

Rajapakse, who is also the president's younger brother, made the comments after the United States urged Colombo against pressing ahead with a military drive.

The European Union and neighbouring India have also warned against an all-out military campaign.

The surprise olive branch came just days after the defence secretary had vowed to crush the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Rajapakse had on Monday called for stepped-up military action to finish off the rebels.

"Without defeating terrorism, we can't have a political settlement," he said last week in a speech in the northeastern coastal city of Trincomalee as part of celebrations after the ministry said three rebel gun-running ships had been sunk.

'Terrorist threat high for France'

AFP, Paris

The terrorist risk for France is at a new high following threats last week from al-Qaeda and a failed suicide attack on French nationals in Algeria, the country's senior police officer said yesterday.

"We don't want to create panic, but the threat is strong today," Frederic Pechenard, director-general of the national police told Le Journal du Dimanche newspaper.

"It is strong because we are involved in Lebanon and Afghanistan; because the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) has radicalised, changing its name and getting closer to al-Qaeda; and because Algeria, which is so close to us, is going through a difficult period," he said.

Last Thursday al-Qaeda's number two Ayman al-Zawahiri called for the "cleansing of the sons of France and Spain from Islamic north Africa". Hours later a suicide-bomber rammed his car into a convoy in eastern Algeria, wounding two French engineers and an Italian.

The French foreign ministry said it takes the al-Qaeda threat "very seriously" and has stepped up security at diplomatic missions in north Africa.



Indian and Afghan officials cut a ribbon during an opening ceremony of a sanitation complex in Kabul yesterday. The government of India has donated a million US dollars to finish a sanitation project in Afghanistan.