

Pakistan govt to grant amnesty to Benazir

Musharraf rival files fresh appeal against election

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's government will grant an amnesty to Benazir Bhutto on corruption charges, meeting one of the former premier's main demands for a power-sharing deal, a cabinet minister said Tuesday.

Two-time prime minister Benazir has vowed to return to Pakistan on October 18 after living in self-imposed exile in London and Dubai since 1999 because of the allegations against her.

"The government has agreed to grant an indemnity on cases against Benazir Bhutto," Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid, a close confidant of President Pervez Musharraf, told AFP.

"The decision was taken in a meeting chaired by Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz.

"The meeting decided to with-



draw the cases against Benazir Bhutto.

Senior government officials said the move would soon be formalised in a presidential order issued by Musharraf, who is seeking re-election on Saturday in a bitterly contested vote.

"The president is issuing an ordinance granting amnesty to politicians against whom cases were constituted between 1985 and 1999 as part of his national reconciliation drive," a top government official told AFP.

Another official confirmed that the formal announcement of an amnesty was likely to be made later Tuesday.

Benazir has held months of power-sharing talks with Musharraf but they stuck on a number of issues including her demand that politicians who served during her time in power should be given amnesty.

They also disagreed on whether Musharraf should give up his role as army chief before he seeks another five-year term in the presidential election.

Benazir has additionally

demand that the government overturn a bar on people serving a third time as prime minister. Benazir served as premier between 1988 and 1990 and again from 1993 to 1996.

Meanwhile, an ex-judge standing against Pakistani leader Pervez Musharraf in this weekend's presidential election filed a new legal petition yesterday challenging the legality of the vote, his lawyer said.

Wajihuddin Ahmad -- who quit as a judge rather than swear allegiance to Musharraf after the army chief took power in a coup in 1999 -- handed his challenge to the Supreme Court.

"The petition asks that all Musharraf's nomination papers be rejected and that the presidential election should be stayed," his lawyer Ashtar Ahsan Ali told reporters.



South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun (L) and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il watch a military parade during a welcoming ceremony in the capital Pyongyang, North Korea yesterday. Japan voiced hope that a historic summit between the two Koreas will help foster reconciliation and progress in multilateral talks on a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula.

NUKE DEAL Sonia plays down Left's concerns

PTI, New York

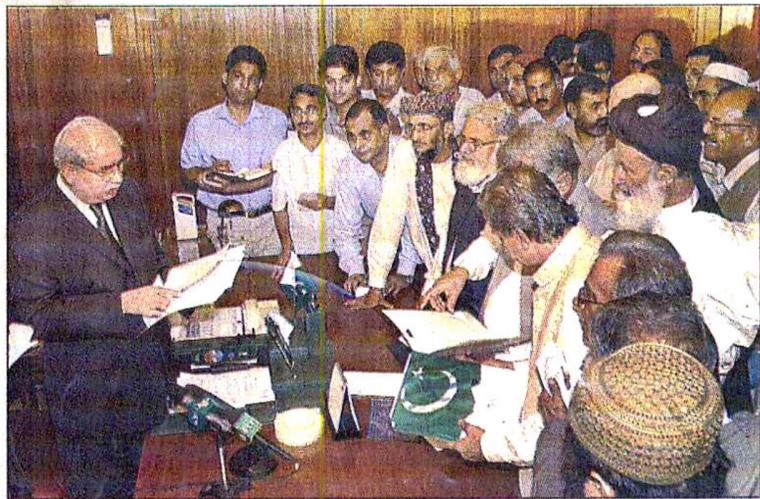
UPA Chairperson Sonia Gandhi has sought to play down Left's concerns on the Indo-US nuclear deal saying they were not a cause for "alarm".

"Some time a great deal is made in public domain of the opinions expressed by our friends who support our coalition but this should not alarm you," the Congress president said here without directly referring to the deal but apparently alluding to it.

Addressing a gathering of over 2,000 Indian-Americans on Monday evening, Gandhi said, "we believe that it is important to listen to all points of view because we believe that this only strengthens the democratic process and the process to arrive at a consensus."

Calling for a concerted fight against terrorism, Gandhi stressed on the need to ensure that no community feels targeted.

Paying tributes to the way the people of New York have rebuilt their lives after terrorist attacks of Sept 11, 2001, she said India has been confronting this scourge for a very long time.



Pakistani Speaker of the National Assembly Chaudhry Amir Hussain (L) receives the resignations of opposition leaders in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistani opposition MPs staged a mass resignation Tuesday in a bid to wreck the credibility of President Pervez Musharraf's expected re-election for another five-year term.

Nepal's PM furious with king over 'goddess' visit

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's premier is furious with King Gyanendra for making an unauthorised trip outside the palace to receive a highly symbolic blessing from a child "goddess," a minister said yesterday.

Gyanendra has been politically sidelined and largely confined to a palace since Nepal's mainstream parties and Maoist insurgents signed a peace deal last November and put the country on track to being declared a republic.

But on Sunday, the embattled king made a late-night trip to receive blessings from the Kumari, a young girl selected and worshipped as a living reincarnation of a powerful Hindu goddess.

"The prime minister strongly objected to the king's visit on Sunday," Nepal's Minister for Peace and Reconstruction, Ram

Chandra Poudel, told AFP.

"The prime minister said the king was trying to instigate a confrontation by visiting the Kumari without the government's permission."

In a tradition that dates back centuries, Nepal's rulers have to seek permission to run the country from the Kumari.

The king's visit could be taken as a swipe at Koirala, who replaced him at a public ceremony last week.

Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala has now ordered that the number of soldiers guarding the monarch be slashed as punishment, Poudel said.

Gyanendra's ultimate fate of is to be decided after elections due on November 22 for a body that will rewrite Nepal's constitution.

The Maoists have launched protests calling for the immediate abolition of the monarchy.

US backs Karzai's offer to talk to Taliban

AFP, Berlin

The United States backs Kabul's offer to hold peace talks with the Taliban but believes negotiations with the radical "hard core" in Afghanistan would be hopeless, a senior US official said Tuesday.

The deputy head of the European and Eurasian Affairs office at the State Department, Kurt Volker, said Washington welcomed President Hamid Karzai's bid to sit down with radical Afghan groups, as long as they rejected violence.

"Those who formerly were fighters who want to return to society ought to be able to do so," Volker told

reporters during a visit to Berlin.

"I think for the government of Afghanistan and President Karzai to want to reach out and work with people who renounce violence, who want to support the central government, who will support human rights, who will build peace and security and development in the country -- that's reconciliation, that's an important thing for the Afghan government to do and we support that."

But he warned against lowering the bar for an invitation to the negotiating table.

"There is a hard core in Afghanistan, people who don't

believe in those things, people who don't want to see Afghanistan succeed, people who don't believe in human rights, who want to reimpose a very dark regime on Afghanistan and they are willing to use brutal, violence to do that," he said.

"You can't negotiate with that kind of person -- they're aimed at a physical destruction of the country."

Karzai on Saturday made a direct offer of talks with Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar and radical warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, both of whom are wanted by Washington, even holding out the prospect of government posts if they gave up violence.

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US 'concerned' over violence in Myanmar

AFP, Washington

The White House expressed serious concerns about "continued reports of violence and intimidation" in Myanmar and kept up pressure for its military rulers to give way to democratic rule. At the same time, spokeswoman Dana Perino highlighted the importance of a diplomatic mission

there by UN special envoy Ibrahim Gambari, sent to Myanmar to express outrage over the deadly crackdown on anti-government protests.

And US President George W. Bush's deputy national security adviser, Jim Jeffrey, was to meet with China's ambassador to Washington, Zhou Wenzhong, to discuss Sino-US cooperation on the crisis, said Perino.

Bush wants diplomatic end to 'Iran problem'

AFP, Washington

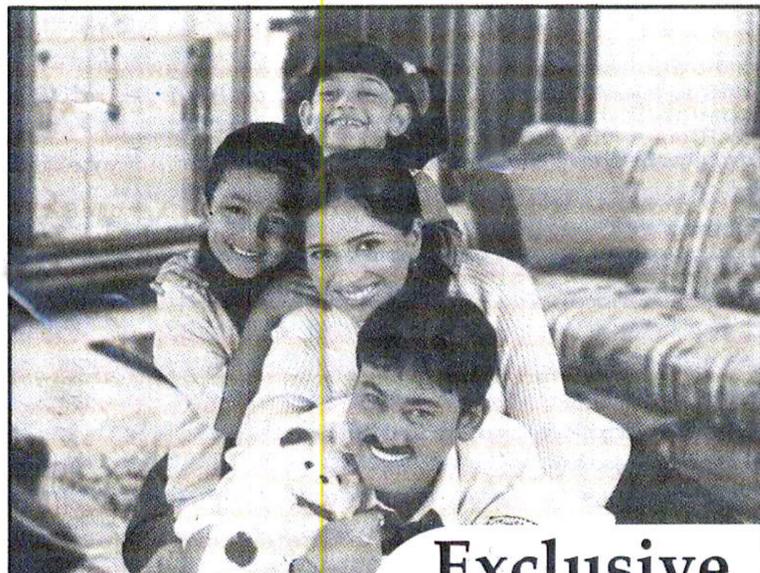
US President George W. Bush wants a peaceful end to "the Iranian problem," the White House said Monday after a fresh report that the United States is looking at possible military options.

"The president has said that he believes there is a diplomatic solution that we can use to solve the Iranian problem. And that's why we're working with our allies to get

there," said Bush spokeswoman Dana Perino.

Perino refused to comment on an article in The New Yorker magazine about alleged US preparations for war except to express frustration with its unnamed sources and with other US media outlets for reporting what the piece said.

"We don't discuss such things. What we have said and what we are working toward is a diplomatic solution in Iran," she said.



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British Prime Minister Gordon Brown (L) shakes hands with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki (R) in the heavily-fortified Green Zone in Baghdad yesterday. Iraq's southern province of Basra could be handed over by British forces to Iraqi control within two months, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown said on Tuesday.

Brown announces 1,000 troops cut from Iraq by Christmas

AFP, Baghdad

Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown announced yesterday during a visit to Iraq that 1,000 British troops could be home by Christmas as he aims to hand control of Basra province back to the Iraqis within two months.

"I believe that by the end of the year the British forces which have been 5,500 can be reduced to 4,500 and by Christmas 1,000 of our troops can be brought back to the UK for other purposes," Brown said.

After meeting Iraqi counterpart Nuri al-Maliki in Baghdad on his maiden visit to Iraq since succeeding Tony Blair in June, Brown travelled on to visit British troops based at Basra airport.

Maliki assured journalists after meeting Brown that Iraqi forces were ready to take over from the

British in the oil-rich southern zone.

"Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki confirms that the Iraqi security forces are ready to take over full responsibility of the Basra security file from the British as soon as possible," a statement from his office said.

Asked if Britain was planning a further reduction of troops levels in Iraq in early 2008, Brown replied that there would be no further announcement for the time being.

"We will make our decisions in the future based on our assessment on the ground," he told reporters outside the British embassy in Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone.

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