

Over 1 lakh throng Karachi streets to greet Benazir

AFP, Karachi

More than 100,000 Benazir Bhutto supporters massed in Karachi yesterday as security forces turned Pakistan's biggest city into a fortress ahead of the former premier's return from exile.

Paramilitary soldiers took over the airport where Bhutto was due to land at 1:00 pm (0800 GMT), following warnings that militants from Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network could try to assassinate her.

More than 20,000 police and troops, backed up by bomb squads with sniffer dogs, patrolled the route of her planned homecoming parade from the airport to the imposing mausoleum of Pakistan's founding father.

The city was decked out with massive billboards of Bhutto and her father Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was executed by a military regime in 1979. They bore slogans including "Anewdawn for Pakistan."

Senior police officials said more than 100,000 had turned up and still more were arriving, while Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party said a million people were on the streets. The figures were impossible to verify independently.

"We began walking here 12 days ago, but this is nothing compared with Benazir's sacrifices for us," labourer Dana Ram, who arrived in Karachi late Wednesday from the central town of Mirpurkhas with nine friends, told AFP.

Most of the flag-waving supporters, who chanted "Benazir welcome" throughout the morning, gathered outside Jinnah International airport, many of them dancing to frenzied drums.

Celebratory gunfire echoed late into the night Wednesday in the port city of 12 million people, despite a government ban on carrying weapons.

Bhutto loyalists flocked to Karachi by bus, train, car, bike and on foot.

"A very safe estimate is that more than a million people have turned up at this moment and more are coming," central party

leader Taj Haider told AFP. "But more than that is the overflowing sentiments of the people in the streets."

The party was hiring a plane to shower rose petals over Bhutto during the cavalcade, in an echo of her last homecoming from exile in 1986, a newspaper report said.

Security forces were keeping a close watch on the crowds amid fears that the pro-Western Bhutto, the first woman premier of an Islamic country, could be a target for extremists.

She is due to lead a procession through Karachi from the back of a specially modified lorry equipped with bullet-proof glass screens. Her party said the rally could last up to 18 hours.

"Benazir Bhutto is a twice-elected prime minister and she will be accorded security protocol accordingly in view of the prevailing threats," Deputy Information Minister Tariq Azim told AFP.

Suicide bombers linked to al-Qaeda and pro-Taliban militants in Pakistan's tribal zone bordering Afghanistan may try to attack Bhutto, Karachi officials said.

All flights into Karachi were cancelled save for Bhutto's plane from Dubai, and 2,500 troops from the paramilitary rangers force had taken control of the airport, officials said.

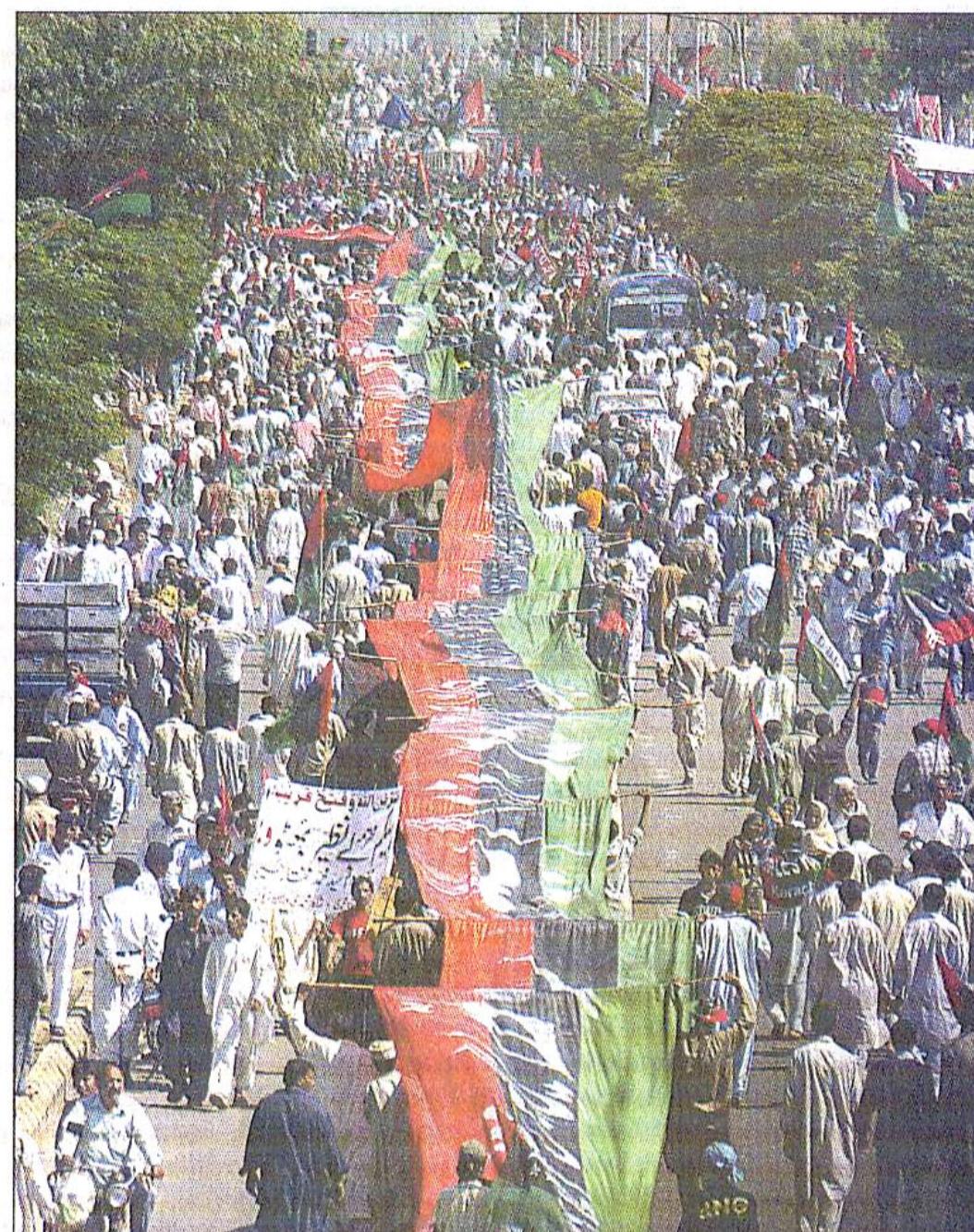
Giant shipping containers painted black and marked "police" were used to block access roads. Many schools were closed for the day.

Bhutto's arrival is set to transform the political landscape as President Pervez Musharraf battles growing unpopularity with general elections looming in January 2008.

Military ruler Musharraf earlier this month gave Bhutto an amnesty on the graft charges that had driven her abroad eight years ago.

But he later appeared to back-track when the Supreme Court put his victory in a presidential election on hold, and the court said it would also rule on her amnesty.

Bhutto chose to return despite repeated suggestions by Musharraf to delay her homecoming in view of the ongoing court cases.



Activists of former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto hold a giant party flag during a march towards the Jinnah Terminal in Karachi yesterday. Benazir supporters thronged the streets of Karachi, as security forces turned Pakistan's biggest city into a fortress as the former premier returned from exile.

27 Tamil Tigers killed in clashes

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's military said yesterday that its troops killed 27 suspected Tamil Tigers in renewed clashes in the island's north, although the rebels dismissed some incidents as attacks on civilians.

The Sri Lankan navy fired early yesterday at a cluster of Tamil Tiger boats off the northwest coast. They recovered an abandoned rebel boat with four bodies and three survivors, the defence ministry said in a statement.

The pro-rebel Tamilnet.com website, however, said the boat was carrying seven civilians who were fleeing Sri Lanka for India, and that at least at least three members of the same family were killed.

Elsewhere in the north, the military claimed it killed 23 rebels in sporadic clashes across the embattled north and northeast over the past 24 hours.

No independent confirmation of the claims was immediately available, and there was no comment from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Both sides are known to exaggerate casualty figures.

Iraqi Kurds protest Turkish threat

AFP, Arbil, Iraq

Several thousand Iraqi Kurds took to the streets of Arbil yesterday to protest the threat of a Turkish incursion.

"Violation over the Kurdish border is a violation of the people of Kurdistan," chanted one. "No no for the Turkish threat, yes yes for peace," shouted another.

Several thousand students, government workers and union representatives massed outside the UN building in Arbil, the seat of Iraq's autonomous Kurdish government in the north of the country, to denounce the developments in Ankara.

The Turkish parliament on Wednesday gave permission to the military to launch an incursion into northern Iraq to crack down on rebels from the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), which has bases in Iraqi territory.

Carrying Kurdish flags and banners written in Arabic, Kurdish and English, protesters called for help to stop the Turks from launching any military action.

Musharraf-Benazir anti-terror pact shaky: analysts

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf and Benazir Bhutto plan to forge an alliance to fight extremism following the return of the former premier to Pakistan, but analysts warn the deal already looks shaky.

The United States in recent months has quietly supported moves towards a power-sharing deal between the pair, ahead of Bhutto's homecoming on Thursday after eight years in self-imposed exile.

An alliance would boost their support among Islamic moderates, the US hopes, and embolden the pair to step up US ally Pakistan's fight against extremists operating in the volatile Afghan border region, analysts said.

But rather than back the deal, many supporters have reacted with dismay, a major blow for Musharraf, who needs legitimacy after seizing power in a 1999 coup, and who is already suffering a severe slump in popularity, they said.

"America's main interest in Pakistan revolves around fighting the war on terrorism," political analyst Asif Asrar told AFP.

The Americans "are fully conscious of the fact that this war does not enjoy popular support because of the dubious democratic creden-

tials of Musharraf's regime," said Asrar, former head of political science at Punjab University.

"They think if Benazir comes on board the requisite support will be available and this would also stem the tide of extremism in Pakistan," he said.

Bhutto needs Musharraf's support ahead of a general poll in January to become prime minister in a new government. But supporters are angry that she is dealing with a military dictator, given her pledge to restore democracy, and for toeing the American line, analysts said.

Some 90,000 Pakistani troops

are fighting pro-Taliban and Al-Qaeda extremists in the lawless tribal region after hundreds fled over the Afghan border after the fall of the hardline Taliban regime.

But their success has been limited, according to experts, and the US says Osama bin Laden's network has been regrouping in the area.

Musharraf abandoned Pakistan's support for the Taliban after the September 11 attacks and joined Washington's war on terror. He has been bankrolled ever since by the US, which is seeking political stability in Pakistan.

Despite concerns over a Musharraf-Bhutto alliance, analyst Najam Sethi said they need each other to survive in Pakistan's volatile political climate.



French state workers demonstrate yesterday in Caen, western France, during a 24-hour strike against the government's reform plans of pension privileges. Street demonstrations are planned in some 60 towns and cities, as trade unions try to force French President Nicolas Sarkozy to drop plans to reform France's so-called "special" pension systems enjoyed by 1.6 million rail, energy and other workers.

Bombs kill 6 of Afghan security forces

AFP, Kabul

Bomb blasts killed six members of Afghan security forces yesterday while the US-led coalition said nine of its soldiers were wounded in an ambush in new attacks linked to a Taliban-led insurgency.

Four policemen were killed near the border with Pakistan when a remotely detonated bomb blew up their vehicle as they were patrolling a remote area of the eastern province of Khost, police said.

Three more policemen were wounded in the blast, police spokesman Wazir Badshah told AFP without saying who might have been behind the attack.

Afghan police are on the frontline of an insurgency led by the extremist Taliban militia that was in government between 1996 and 2001. Around 600 have been killed in violence this year, according to officials.

In another attack, two members of a militia working with the US military were killed in rugged northeastern Kunar when a bomb exploded on a road they were walking along, provincial police chief Abdul Jalal Jalal told AFP.

The US-led coalition, which along with a NATO-led force is in Afghanistan to help the government defeat the insurgency, announced separately that nine of its troops were wounded in an ambush in the southern province of Kandahar.

India, Pakistan resume peace talks

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan resumed talks in New Delhi yesterday as part of their slow-moving peace process, officials said.

The Indian foreign ministry said the day-long meeting between mid-ranking diplomats would focus on reducing tensions along maritime borders and the repatriation of people inadvertently straying across land frontiers.

At present, fishermen, farmers or other people caught by Indian or Pakistani coast guards or border troops are usually suspected of being spies and can languish in prison in bureaucratic legal limbo even after serving sentences.

The talks will be followed on Friday by discussions on nuclear safeguards, or ways of keeping their respective nuclear arsenals under control.

On Monday, Indian and Pakistani officials will revisit efforts to put in place a regular joint anti-terrorism mechanism designed to share intelligence on militant activity.

The latest round of talks comes in the wake of renewed accusations from New Delhi that Islamabad continues to support terrorist attacks in India.

India's national security advisor M.K. Narayanan said Pakistan, already accused of backing Islamic rebels in Indian Kashmir, was also trying to revive Taliban militancy in the northern state of Punjab.

The allegation came after a weekend bomb attack in a Punjab cinema killed six people and injured 32.

Although no breakthroughs are expected in the latest round of talks, Indian foreign ministry officials said it was nevertheless "significant" that dialogue was continuing.

The atmosphere between the two sides has improved. There are delegations crossing the borders. More people-to-people contacts are in place with improved bus and train links," a foreign ministry source told AFP.

"On October 1, we started a truck service to improve trade. Also significant is that despite all the political issues in Pakistan today no party there has questioned the dialogue process," he added.

"The best example are the events in Iraq, a country which was challenged in defending itself and

Nuke deal still on, says India's ruling party

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling Congress party said on Wednesday that a controversial nuclear deal with the United States was still on, despite stiff opposition within the coalition government.

The Congress statement came two days after Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh told US President George Bush about "certain difficulties" in implementing the nuclear agreement.

"The deal is not in cold storage and is very much in the offing," the Press Trust of India quoted Congress spokesman Shakeel Ahmed as saying.

"It is not correct to say that the deal has been put on hold or put on the back-burner."

The party official said the government would hold more talks with its Communist allies to iron out the differences.

Washington also said Tuesday that the accord could still be implemented, despite difficulties.

"The president is willing and is

very understanding that the Indians may need more time for this. But no, it's not -- it's not dead," White House spokesman Tony Fratto said.

The US State Department hoped India would move forward with the agreement, which it wanted completed in 2008.

Under the agreement, the US would provide India with nuclear fuel and technology even though nuclear-armed India has not signed the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

In exchange, India must put selected nuclear facilities under international safeguards, including inspections.

The nuclear deal's operational agreement was adopted in August after two years of complex negotiations.

New Delhi must still sign a separate pact with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and get the thumbs-up from the 45-member Nuclear Suppliers' Group, which controls global nuclear commerce.

Russia has strength to defend itself: Putin

AFP, Moscow

which had enormous oil reserves. "And everyone has seen what happened there. They learned to shoot at each other. But so far, establishing order has not really worked out."

He was responding to a question from a resident of the Siberian city of Novosibirsk, who had asked him to comment on a remark by a former US official suggesting that Russia should share the natural wealth of Siberia.

"I know you are worried about this," Putin said. "I know that these kinds of ideas are circulating in the minds of some politicians," he added, without elaborating.

Putin said Russia was working on strengthening and modernising its army and navy as was its "right" and added that "we will continue to do this."

Sarkozys separate

AFP, Paris

French President Nicolas Sarkozy and his wife Cecilia have separated "by mutual consent", according to a statement from the Elysee Palace yesterday.

"Cecilia and Nicolas Sarkozy announce their separation by mutual consent. They will make no comment," the statement said.

Rumours have been circulating for several days that the couple's 11 year marriage could be close to collapse.

French newspapers yesterday ran front-page stories reporting that President Nicolas Sarkozy and his wife Cecilia have initiated divorce proceedings.

The left-wing Liberation, which has so far refused to comment on what it called rumours, said it had information that Cecilia appeared on Monday before a judge to request a divorce by consent.

Its headline, beneath a full-page picture of the couple, was "Desperate Housewife."

Le Parisien newspaper also bore a front-page picture of the Sarkozys beneath the headline, "A page turns".

On Monday, two news organisations reported on their Internet sites that divorce proceedings were opened on Monday morning, when Cecilia saw a family court judge in the suburb of Nanterre.

prime minister tries to sack him as army chief.

-- 2002 --

March 9: Musharraf sacks chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, sparking protests and a political crisis. Chaudhry is later reinstated.

July 3-10: Pakistani troops besiege and storm the radical Red Mosque in Islamabad, killing at least 100 people.

July 13: Bhutto hails the operation, sparking outrage among hardliners. A suicide bomber later attacks her party headquarters, killing 15 people.

September: Musharraf and Bhutto agree on a power-sharing pact.

September 14: PPP announces Bhutto will return on October 18.

October 4: Bhutto and Musharraf agree on national reconciliation accord. He signs a deal for an amnesty which clears her of graft charges.

October 6: Musharraf wins the presidential election.

October 18: An emotional Bhutto touches down at Karachi airport, as more than 250,000 loyal supporters flood the city streets to greet her.

Chronology of Benazir's political life

AFP, Karachi

Former prime minister Benazir Bhutto stepped onto Pakistani soil yesterday after eight years in self-imposed exile.

Here is a brief chronology of key developments in her political life:

-- 1979 --