

World leaders condemn bombing targeting Benazir

AFP, Washington

World leaders yesterday condemned a suicide bombing targeting former Pakistani premier Benazir Bhutto that killed at least 133 people, urging the country to pull together in the face of the tragedy.

The United States, which counts Pakistan as a valuable ally in its "war on terror," said the blasts aimed to stifle freedom in the country but should not be allowed to derail pending elections.

Regional powers China and India, the United Nations and the European Union also denounced the attack, which came just hours after Bhutto had returned to Pakistan after eight years of self-imposed exile.

"The United States condemns the violent attack in Pakistan and mourns the loss of innocent life there," White House national security spokesman Gordon Johndroes said.

"Extremists will not be allowed

to stop Pakistanis from selecting their representatives through an open and democratic process."

Bhutto returned to Pakistan vowing to lead her party into elections due in January after President Pervez Musharraf agreed to drop outstanding corruption charges against her.

Australia, another close US ally, said the parade attack bore the hallmarks of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

"It is a reminder of the evil of al-Qaeda. It is a reminder of how important it is not to concede a victory to them in Iraq or in Afghanistan," Australian Prime Minister John Howard said.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer also suggested al-Qaeda was responsible, as it would have been "deeply offended at the possibility of a woman taking a leadership role in politics in Pakistan in a Muslim country."

China, one of Pakistan's closest allies, urged Islamabad to maintain stability.

"China sternly condemns the

explosion. We hope Pakistan will maintain social stability," the official Xinhua news agency quoted foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao as saying.

India, which routinely accuses Islamabad of fomenting an Islamic insurgency in disputed Kashmir, added its condemnation.

"The spectre of terrorism confronting our region requires strong and determined action by all our governments," said Indian foreign ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna.

In Pakistan's neighbour Afghanistan, President Hamid Karzai said the bombing against his Pakistani "brothers and sisters" showed the need for the strongest attention to the fight against terrorism.

Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, which has also suffered repeated attacks by Islamic militants including bombing Bali in 2002 and 2005, voiced its sympathy and condolences.

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said he was shocked.

"The secretary general strongly condemns this terrorist attack and

trusts that all political forces will act together to strengthen national unity," a statement said.

The European Union presidency also condemned the "terrorist attack" and urged the Pakistani authorities to bring those responsible to justice.

British Foreign Secretary David

Miliband said he was "appalled." French President Nicolas Sarkozy sent condolences to victims' families and urged Pakistani authorities "to ensure that the process ahead of legislative elections is conducted in the best possible circumstances."

Japan's foreign ministry offered its "deepest sympathies" while pledging to "continue to fight against terrorism in cooperation with the international community," a statement said.

In Russia, President Vladimir Putin sent Musharraf a telegram saying the attack was a "vile crime" and confirmation of the need for global unity in the fight against terrorism, the Kremlin press service said.



Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (C) chairs a meeting in Rawalpindi yesterday. Musharraf telephoned former premier Benazir Bhutto to offer his condolences after a "terrorist" blast targeting her homecoming parade in Karachi. At least 138 people were killed in the suicide blast. PHOTO: AFP

Sacked hospital worker shoots 4 dead in S Africa

AFP, Johannesburg

Four staff at a hospital in South Africa were killed yesterday when a sacked employee went on a shooting spree shortly after being handed his dismissal notice, police said.

The victims of the shootings at Seshego Hospital, near Polokwane in northern Limpopo province, were the chief executive officer, the human resource manager, the administration officer and a fourth, unidentified employee.

"The man had been sacked and handed his dismissal notice," Senior Superintendent Motlaleli Mojaelo told AFP.

"He left the hospital but returned later, telling the security guards that he had been called to fetch something."

While he was being escorted into the administration area, he then overpowered one of the guards, seizing his weapon, Mojaelo added.

A spokesman for the provincial health department said the gunman, who was employed as a driver, had been fired for misconduct after being involved in a hit-and-run accident while driving a car which he had stolen from the hospital.

Russia made no nuke proposal, says Ahmadinejad

AFP, Tehran

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad denied his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin has made a proposal over the Iranian atomic programme, contradicting Iran's top nuclear negotiator, media reported yesterday.

Ali Larijani had said on Wednesday Putin made a special proposal to break the deadlock over the Iranian nuclear programme in talks with supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei during his landmark visit to Iran this week.

But Ahmadinejad was quoted as saying by the semi-official Fars news agency: "There was no nuclear proposal."

According to the official news agency IRNA, Ahmadinejad said Putin's only message was "the message of friendship and cooperation."

When pressed over whether there was a nuclear proposal, he said: "Putin did not talk about this."

Myanmar monks stage protests in Malaysia

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

More than 200 Buddhist monks and Myanmar refugees staged pro-democracy demonstrations yesterday outside the country's embassy here.

It was the first time monks from Myanmar have joined protests in Kuala Lumpur against the ruling junta in the reclusive nation.

The military-run state violently suppressed mass anti-government rallies last month. The crackdown left at least 13 people dead.

About 20 monks stood shoulder to shoulder with refugees clad in T-shirts in torrential rain outside the Myanmar embassy in the Malaysian capital.

They also protested outside the Russian and Chinese embassies. They accuse those nations of backing the Myanmar regime and calling on them to withdraw that support.

The protestors also gathered at the Japanese embassy to pay tribute to Japanese journalist Kenji Nagai, who was shot and killed during the pro-democracy protests in Myanmar's main city Yangon.

They sang songs and placed a portrait of the slain journalist, framed with flowers, in front of the embassy.

The demonstrators hailed the intervention of UN envoy Ibrahim Gambari, who visited Myanmar to express international outrage over the crackdown, and travelled to Malaysia this week ahead of his next mission to Myanmar.

"Thank God for people like Gambari who are paying attention to our plight. It is time the people of the world stand alongside us to fight this corrupt and terrible regime that is currently running this country," Burmese Refugee Organisation chairman Maung Hla told AFP.

"There are 135 minor ethnic groups in Myanmar and they are being killed or running away from this country because of this mad government which is out to make life so very difficult for us," he added.

Gambari, who is on a tour of Asia to drum up support for his next mission to Myanmar, said Wednesday he had confirmed an invitation to visit the country by the third week of November.

Iraqi Kurds vow to fight if attacked

AFP, ARBU, Iraq

Iraq's autonomous Kurds vowed yesterday to fight off any attack on their region, as Turkey mullied a military incursion to crack down on Kurdish rebels.

Iraqi Kurds were not to blame for the trouble between Turkey and the rebels from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), said a statement issued from the office of Kurdish regional president Massoud Barzani.

"We frankly say to all parties: if they attack the region or Kurdistan experiment under whatever pretext, we will be completely ready to defend our democratic experiment and the dignity of our people and the sanctity of our homeland," it said.

The Turkish parliament gave permission to the military on Wednesday to launch an incursion into northern Iraq to pursue the rebels' although Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan has indicated that no such action is imminent.

Turkey says the PKK enjoys free movement in northern Iraq and is tolerated or even actively supported by Iraqi Kurdish leaders, something they strongly deny.

"We are astonished by this tension during the past few days and the Turkish stance in crossing Kurdistan's borders under the pretext of striking at the PKK."



Philippines police and military bomb personnel investigate damage at The Glorietta Mall in Manila's financial district of Makati yesterday following a powerful bomb explosion that killed eight people and injured at least 70 others. PHOTO: AFP

Japan probes US soldiers over gang rape

AFP, Tokyo

Japanese police are investigating four US Marines on allegations of gang-raping a young woman in Hiroshima, officials said yesterday.

The United States stations troops in Japan under a security alliance, but there has often been friction in locations that host the military.

"Needless to say it would be unforgivable if it is true," chief government spokesman Nobutaka Machimura said.

He said a Japanese woman was "raped by several men" early Sunday.

"Following a report by the victim, Hiroshima prefectural police are investigating the case in cooperation with the US military forces in Japan to reveal the truth," Machimura said.

French unions mull more strikes against pension reform move

AFP, Paris

French commuters faced a second day of disruption on the rail network yesterday, as unions discussed more strikes against government plans to reform pension privileges enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of public sector workers.

After Thursday's day of action brought out some 75 percent of railwayworkers -- the biggest turnout in many years -- serious problems persisted yesterday on the Paris metro and regional train services.

Some 233 kilometres (150 miles) of traffic jams were reported on the Paris outskirts, more than double the daily average.

The state rail company SNCF and metro operator RATP said that the situation would gradually return to normal as the day progressed.

With tens of thousands of South African and English rugby fans expected in the capital during the day to attend Saturday's World Cup final, Eurostar connections with London were operating without problem, SNCF said.

Unions hailed as a massive success Thursday's 24-hour stoppage and threatened more action

unless the government of President Nicolas Sarkozy offers new proposals on the pension reform.

"In its current format the reform will not pass. The ball is in the government's court," said Bernard Thibault of the General Labour Confederation (CGT). A meeting of union leaders is to take place Monday to discuss the future of the movement.

Two small unions voted to continue striking Friday, but their impact was not expected to be large-scale. A third union representing train-drivers that had planned to strike Friday changed its mind after receiving guarantees that its members would remain a special category.

The government has said it will not be budged from plans to overhaul the country's so-called "special" pension systems, which are enjoyed by 1.6 million rail, energy and other workers.

Invoking social equity, Sarkozy has begun moves to lengthen contribution periods for these workers from 37.5 years to 40, closer in line with other public and private sector employees. Currently some railway staff can retire on a full pension at the age of 50.

Labour Minister Xavier Bertrand invited unions to talks next week, and said concessions could be possible on the "level of pensions payments." But he insisted the government would not give way on the contribution period.

"If we want to guarantee our pensions, we have to work longer," he said.

An opinion poll in the centre-right newspaper Le Figaro found that a large majority of the public does not want the government to give way.

Sixty-seven percent said the government should not "yield to the union's demands". Some 40 percent said they thought the strikes would last several more days and 32 percent said it would go on even longer.

"In the name of what do the beneficiaries of the special systems think that they alone in our country should be spared from longer contribution periods when life expectancy for the whole country is so much greater?" Le Figaro asked in an editorial.

But the left-wing Liberation said the success of Thursday's action showed how Sarkozy's popularity is fading, as he moves from tax-cutting reforms that help

the middle classes to austerity measures that affect the lower-paid.

It also accused Sarkozy of orchestrating Thursday's news of his divorce from his wife Cecilia in order to divert attention from the strikes.

The protest movement is seen as the first major challenge to Sarkozy, who has promised a root-and-branch overhaul of the country's economy and society.

The last time a French government tried to change the "special" pensions regimes was in 1995 when prime minister Alain Juppe was forced into a humiliating climb down by weeks of strikes. But French society has moved on, ministers now argue.

The "16-category-based" "special" systems were set up before the post-war introduction of a general pensions scheme for all workers. They are enjoyed by workers at SNCF, metro operator RATP, energy suppliers EDF and GDF as well as fishermen, miners and parliamentarians.

Some 500,000 workers pay into the systems but there are 1.1 million drawing pensions, and this has led to an annual shortfall of five billion euros (seven billion dollars) borne by taxpayers.



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apartment at **UTTARA**

Corporate Office : House No 67/B, Road No 26(Old), 15/A(New), Dhanmondi R/A, Dhaka-1209
Phone : 8122812, 8128169, 9125401, 9143101, 9143057, 9145076, 9142747,
01819261125, 0181925537, 01817040785, 01817141343,
01817035732, 01819273257.
Fax : (880-2) 8125274, E-mail: addl@dhaka.net www.addlbd.com

MEMBER REHAB