

Musharraf tightens grip on nuclear arms

AP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf has tightened his control over Pakistan's nuclear weapons, anchoring in law a commission responsible for overseeing the nuclear arsenal and preventing further proliferation.

Opposition leaders said Saturday the move gives Musharraf unwarranted powers that they will try to take away from him after Pakistan's fraught parliamentary elections on Jan. 8.

Musharraf on Friday issued an ordinance that gives a firmer legal footing to the National Command Authority, or NCA, the oversight commission, which includes top civilian and military officials.

Chaired by Musharraf, the NCA has been in place since he created it by executive order seven years ago. But only with the ordinance, do the commission's powers become enshrined in law.

The ordinance reinforces the NCA's "complete command and control" over all aspects of the nuclear programme and grants the chairman "all the powers and functions of the authority."

The ordinance takes immediate

effect, though parliament may choose to review it.

Talat Masood, a military analyst and retired general, said the ordinance gave the NCA considerable new power to control the activities of current and former employees of the nuclear programme. The ordinance says anyone breaching national security can be punished with a jail term of up to 25 years.

"It has become much more independent now and autonomous," Masood said.

Spokesmen for opposition leaders Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif denounced the change as a bid to keep nuclear control in Musharraf's hands and said they hoped lawmakers would put the next prime minister in charge of defence matters including oversight of nuclear weapons.

Farhatullah Babar, a spokesman for Benazir, said the NCA ordinance showed Musharraf "grabbing more and more power."

Benazir and Sharif have argued in their manifestos for next month's election that nuclear command and control should be overseen by the cabinet's defence

committee, chaired by the prime minister.

"The prime minister is answerable before the parliament, so you have some accountability," said Ahsan Iqbal, a spokesman for Sharif, who was ousted by Musharraf in a 1999 coup. "But with the president, there is no accountability."

Iqbal accused Musharraf of a ruse to shore up Western support by reminding them of speculation about whether Pakistan's nuclear weapons could ever fall into the hands of Islamic radicals. In the past, Pakistan's nuclear secrets have been leaked to Iran, North Korea and Libya.

"The real issue is not nonproliferation. That is already very secure. The real issue for Pakistan is rule of law," Iqbal said.

The manoeuvre comes amid uncertainty about the country's political stability triggered by Musharraf's month-long confrontation with the opposition and the judiciary against the backdrop of rising Islamic militancy.

Army spokesman Maj Gen Waheed Arshad said the government wanted to put the NCA on a firm legal footing before the par-

liamentary elections.

"There is a transition in process and the country is returning to full democracy, so whatever things were left to be done are being done," Arshad said.

Arshad insisted that the ordinance changed nothing about how the body would function.

Presidential spokesman Rashid Qureshi did not return calls seeking an explanation of Musharraf's action.

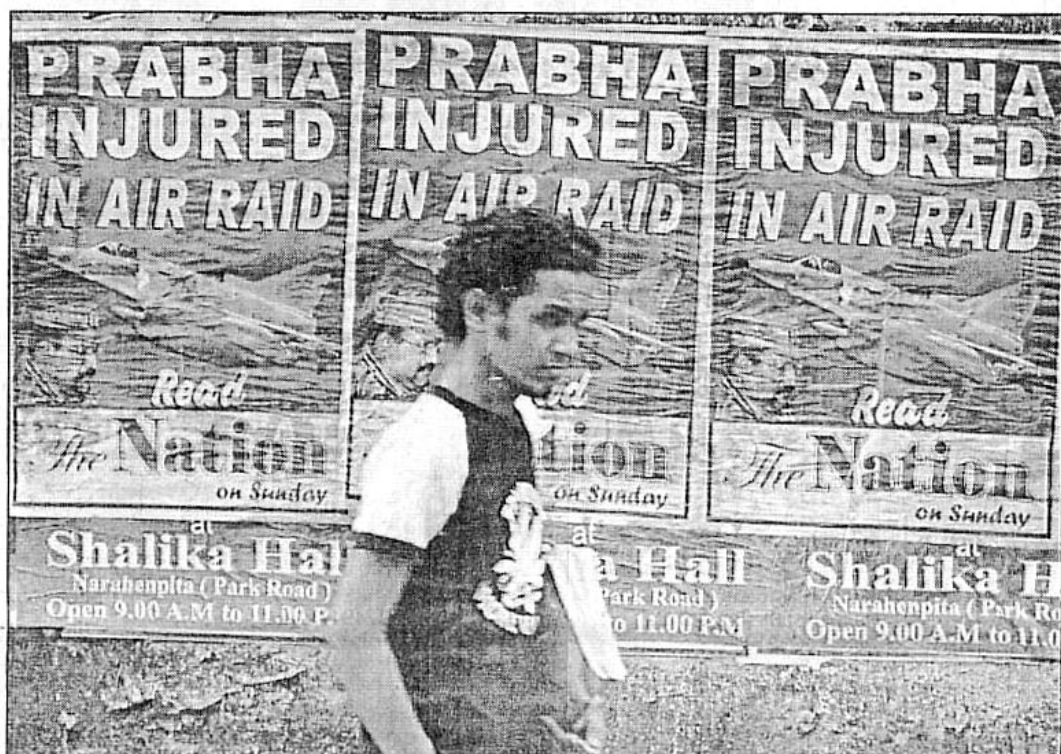
Musharraf set up the NCA in 2000 in the wake of his 1999 coup and two years after Pakistan detonated several atomic devices to establish itself as the Islamic world's only declared nuclear power.

It was created at a time of mounting suspicions about the activities of Abdul Qadeer Khan, the top Pakistani scientist who was exposed in 2004 as the head of an international black market in nuclear technology.

US officials have praised Pakistan's efforts to ensure there is no repeat of Khan's proliferation, which stretched back to the late 1980s, though experts say the full extent of his activities remains unclear.



Indian Defence Minister AK Antony (L), along with the Chiefs of Defence Services pay respect to Indian soldiers killed during the 1971 Indo-Pakistan war at Amar Jawan Jyoti, India Gate in New Delhi yesterday, on the occasion of 'Vijay Diwas' or Victory Day. Since their division into separate nations and independence from British colonial rule in 1947, Pakistan and India have fought three wars, two of which were over their competing claims to the Himalayan region of Kashmir.



A Sri Lankan youth walks past posters on a wall in the capital Colombo yesterday announcing an "exclusive" in the English language newspaper Nation that the island's top Tamil Tiger leader had been wounded in an air strike. The privately-run newspaper said the elusive Velupillai Prabhakaran had been wounded in an air attack in November, two days after his 53rd birthday.

Lanka talks with Russia, India on arms purchase as war escalates

Tiger supremo wounded in air attack

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka will meet with Indian and Russian delegations this week on possible arms purchases including air defence weaponry as clashes with Tamil Tiger rebels escalate, press reports here said Sunday.

Defence officials from India and Russia will hold separate talks with Sri Lankan authorities on improving systems used against the low-flying Czech-built Zlin Z-143 operated by Tiger guerrillas, the reports said.

India which has provided a radar system to Sri Lanka's military was expected to hold talks on upgrading the equipment and improving the air defence capability of government forces, the

SundayTimes here said.

The military is seeking to upgrade its fleet of Mi-35 helicopter gunships and talks with the Russian delegation from Monday will focus on buying a "major consignment" of Russian-made weapons, the Lakkimnews weekly said.

"There was no immediate comment from the defence ministry or the Russia and Indian diplomatic missions in Colombo.

Sri Lanka has been trying to upgrade its weapons and air defences since Tamil Tiger rebels earlier this year began flying light aircraft smuggled into the country in pieces to be later re-assembled.

Fighting between troops and Tamil Tigers has escalated since a

Norwegian-brokered 2002 truce began to unravel in December 2005.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's elusive Tamil rebel supremo was wounded in an air strike last month by security forces shortly after his annual policy broadcast, a privately-run newspaper here reported Sunday.

The Nation newspaper said Velupillai Prabhakaran, leader of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was wounded in an underground bunker in the northern district of Kilinochchi on November 28.

"A section of the bunker had crumbled and some falling debris had struck the LTTE leader," the newspaper said, quoting sources in rebel-held territory.

Nepali election by mid-April next yr

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's political parties and former rebels Saturday agreed to hold elections by mid-April next year, a top minister said.

"We have agreed (leaders of mainstream parties and the Maoists) to hold constituent assembly elections by the end of Nepali calendar year (April 12, 2008)," Ram Sharan Mahat, Finance Minister from Nepali Congress party, told AFP after meeting with Maoist leaders.

"The government will announce the date for polls soon."

The impoverished Himalayan nation has twice been scheduled to hold elections on its political future, but these polls have been postponed due to Maoist demands that the electoral system be reformed and the monarchy abolished.

The former rebels have threatened to take up arms again if their demands are not met.

But the minister said that dis-

cussions would continue with the Maoists to reach an agreement on declaring the country a republic and adopting a proportional election system.

"We are very close to a deal and we are hopeful of reaching an agreement in the next few days," the minister said.

The ultra-leftists, who ended a decade-long insurgency late last year, stormed out of an interim government in September, complaining they were not being given equal representation in the peace process.

The Maoists formally ended their decade-long insurgency that claimed over 13,000 lives after striking a landmark peace deal in November last year.

The former communist rebels came out of the jungle and joined hands with the political parties after weeks of massive pro-democracy protests forced King Gyanendra to end his 14 months of direct rule in April 2006.

Four Taliban killed in first post Musa Qala operation

AFP, Kabul

Four militants were killed in fighting with Afghan troops in the southern town of Musa Qala Sunday, the defence ministry said, in the first battle since the rebels were ousted from there last week.

Afghan military forces backed by the mainly British Nato-led International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) entered the trouble-torn town in the southern province of Helmand after the Taliban retreated on Monday.

On Sunday the Afghan national army engaged with the enemy. During fighting four Taliban personnel were killed, "the defence ministry said in a statement.

General Mohammad Zahir Azimi, the spokesman for the ministry said Sunday's gunbattle in the east of the district was the first since the rebels were forced out of the area.

A significant amount of weapons and ammunition as well as a fuel cache and some police uniforms were seized from the area following the clash, the statement said.

British military forces also said on Saturday that two rockets were fired into Musa Qala but caused no casualties.

Military operations were meanwhile continuing to chase out remnants of the Taliban from the rest of Musa Qala district, Azimi told AFP.

"It's an ongoing operation and will continue until the district is totally cleaned of the enemy forces," the spokesman said.

Separately, the US-led coalition in Afghanistan said that two Taliban leaders were killed in airstrikes in Musa Qala just days before its recapture by Afghan and Nato troops.

BJP backs Advani as party's PM face

PTI, Chandigarh

BJP on Sunday rejected Congress' claims of a division in the party over Leader of Opposition LK Advani being chosen to lead it.

"BJP always followed single ideology... There is no division in the party," BJP president Rajnath Singh told reporters here when asked about the possible division, as claimed by the Congress, after party decided to transfer powers to Advani from Vajpayee recently.

About the party's policy on Ram temple, he said the party as an election issue never considered the Ram temple. "It is a national issue," he said.

Construction of Ram temple at Ayodhya has been the party's long-standing demand, he added.

Singh did not rule out the possibility of mid-term polls in the country and said "the constituents of NDA were united and were all prepared for a mid-term elections."

Millions vote in India's riot-scarred Gujarat to seal Modi fate

AFP, Ahmedabad

Millions in India's religiously divided Gujarat state voted yesterday in closely-guarded elections as exit polls predicted a Hindu hardliner accused of aiding deadly riots will be re-elected.

More than 18 million people are eligible to vote for 95 seats in the state's 182-member legislature in the second and last stage of the polls. A total of 599 candidates, including chief minister Narendra Modi, are vying for seats.

Para-military forces were deployed to help police provide security.

Elections for 87 seats were held on Tuesday, when nearly 60 per cent of 17.9 million voters cast ballots. Results are expected next Sunday, with the controversial Modi expected to be re-elected.

The campaign has been overshadowed by renewed allegations that Modi encouraged anti-Muslim riots in 2002 in which at least 2,000 people were hacked, burnt and shot to death.

Exit polls from the first round have said that the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) -- to which Modi belongs -- would win re-election but see its majority cut.

"The BJP will win with a huge margin... I am confident that it will be a historic win," Modi told reporters after casting his vote.

Of the 87 seats up for grabs on Tuesday, the BJP was expected to see its share cut from 54 to between 40 and 48 due to gains by Congress, which governs India at the federal level, television news channels said, quoting exit polls.

Star News network said the BJP would keep control of the state

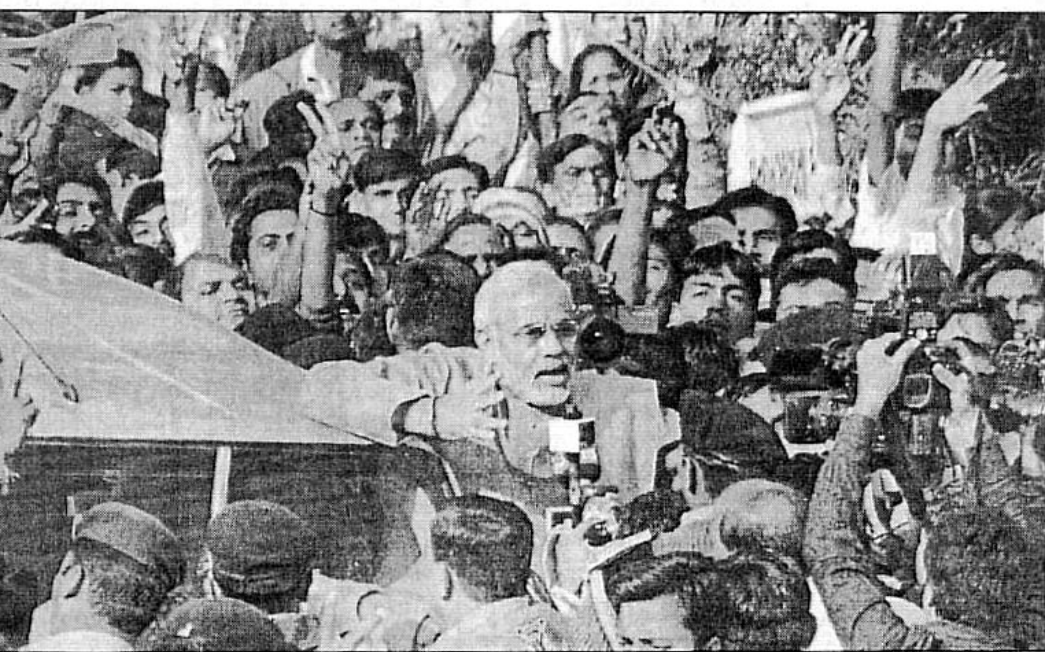
with 115 seats of the total 182, while Congress would bag 64 constituencies at the end of both rounds of polling.

In the last elections, the BJP swept the polls with 128 seats after Modi fought the election on an aggressively anti-Muslim platform in the aftermath of the riots. Congress won just 51 seats.

This time, however, Modi sought to shift the focus of the election campaign by highlighting the economic gains made by the affluent state.

But Modi courted controversy again when he was quoted as condoning the extra-judicial killing of a Muslim man falsely accused of plotting to assassinate him.

India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, of the Congress party, said there was an "atmosphere of fear" in the state.



Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi (C) addresses media representatives as he arrives to cast his vote in Ahmedabad yesterday. Millions in India's religiously divided Gujarat state voted in closely-guarded elections as exit polls predicted a Hindu hardliner accused of aiding deadly riots will be re-elected.

Musharraf explains state of emergency

AP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf lifted a six-week-old state of emergency Saturday, telling a skeptical nation the crackdown was to save Pakistan from a conspiracy rather than ensure his own political survival.

But Musharraf also made clear he would keep a tight lid on dissent, entrenching limits he imposed under the emergency including strict curbs on press freedom and the replacement of independent-minded judges with jurists friendly to the US-backed leader. Opponents have said the changes set the stage for national elections next month to be rigged, and have threatened to hold mass demonstrations.

Musharraf said in a nationally televised speech that the emergency helped slow the spread of Islamic militancy but the country still faces a "grave situation" with the approach of Jan. 8 parliamentary elections that will determine who will form the next government.

He said unnamed conspirators had hatched a plot with members

of the judiciary to derail the country's transition to democracy, and he warned political parties to avoid stirring up trouble.

"Against my will, as a last resort, I had to impose the emergency in order to save Pakistan," Musharraf said. "I cannot tell how much pain the nation and I suffered due to this conspiracy."

The response was muted from the White House, which has walked a fine line between criticising the democratic backsliding by Musharraf and supporting a key ally against Islamic militancy.

"It's a good step for the Pakistani people," said Jeannie Mamo, a spokeswoman for President Bush.

Musharraf has previously said he imposed the state of emergency to halt a conspiracy by top judges to end his eight-year rule, and to ward off political chaos that would hobble Pakistan's efforts against Islamic extremism. He has also insisted that the Supreme Court, which had been poised to rule on the legality of his October re-election, was acting beyond the constitution.

Pakistan orders probe into British terror suspect's escape

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's government yesterday ordered a high-level investigation into the escape from police custody of a British terror suspect, officials said, as a hunt was launched to track him down.

Rashid Rauf -- who is suspected of plotting to blow up airliners bound for the United States from London -- was being taken from a court hearing on Saturday when he broke free from his handcuffs and ran off, a senior officer said.

Islamabad police said they were questioning several officers over the disappearance, while an official statement also announced the top-level probe.

The three-member committee includes one officer each from the

police and interior ministry and a senior official of the Islamabad administration, the statement released by state media said. It has been told to report within 48 hours.

Earlier interior ministry spokesman Brigadier Javed Cheema told AFP: "Rashid Rauf escaped from police custody and we are making every possible effort to arrest him."

The police chief of Islamabad, Shahid Nadeem Baluch, told AFP early Sunday: "The hunt is on to track him down. We have conducted some raids but so far there hasn't been any breakthrough."

Rauf, 25, was arrested in central Pakistan in August 2006 and had been behind bars since. The arrest sparked a worldwide security alert and 24 people were detained in Britain in a major swoop.

WHO to investigate Pakistan bird flu

AP, Islamabad

International health experts have been dispatched to Pakistan to help investigate the cause of South Asia's first outbreak of bird flu in people and determine if the virus could have been transmitted through human contact, officials said Sunday.

Four brothers -- two of whom died and two cousins from Abbottabad, a small city about 30 miles north of Islamabad, were suspected of being infected by the H5N1 virus, said WHO spokesman Gregory Hartl in Geneva. A man and his niece from the same area who had slaughtered chickens were also suspected of having the virus.

Another person in a separate case who slaughtered poultry in

nearby Mansehra, 15 miles away, also tested positive for the disease, he said.

Details surrounding the cases remained confusing, with Pakistan's Health Ministry issuing a statement Saturday saying six people had initially tested positive for the virus last month, while the WHO said eight had been reported. Hartl said the discrepancy was likely linked to a technicality since six patients had tested positive using an internationally recommended method while a less reliable test was used on the others.

Specimens were never collected from one of the brothers who died, and many of those who tested positive experienced only mild symptoms and were not hospitalised, Hartl said.

India installs antennas for planned moon mission

AFP, Bangalore

India has installed a pair of giant antennas to monitor a planned robotic mission to the moon next year, making it one of a few nations with deep space tracking ability, officials said.

The deep space network at Bialalu, 45 kilometres (30 miles) from Bangalore, will keep track of the Chandrayaan-1 lunar mission and provide command support during its two-year orbit around the moon, India's space agency said.

The facility, which reporters visited Saturday, consists of two powerful dish antennas 32 metres (105 feet) and 18 metres in diameter.