

## No problem with Thaksin's return, says Thai PM

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's military-installed prime minister said yesterday he had "no problem" with the possible return of deposed premier Thaksin Shinawatra, whose allies claimed victory in weekend polls.

Surayud Chulanont, who was appointed by the generals who staged the September 2006 coup, said the country would have to wait for the election results to be confirmed, but was confident a government would be formed.

"I want the country's situation to return to normal soon and if (Thaksin) returns, there will be no problem," said Surayud, a former general.

Thaksin told reporters in Hong Kong on Tuesday that he wanted to return to Thailand from his self-imposed exile by February at the earliest, and called for reconciliation with the military.

People Power Party, made up of Thaksin's allies, won 233 of the 480 seats in parliament, just short of the absolute majority needed to govern alone. It is now wooing smaller parties to try to form a coalition government.

## Search for scores missing in Nepal bridge collapse

AFP, Kathmandu

Troops joined police searching yesterday for hundreds of people missing a day after a bridge collapsed killing 15 and injuring 40 more in a steep river gorge in Nepal, officials said.

Nearly 400 people were on the bridge over the Bheri river, 380 kilometres west of the capital Kathmandu, when disaster struck on Tuesday afternoon, witnesses said.

Scores of people were also hurt in the disaster.

"The rescue operations began early yesterday morning. Around 450 police and soldiers have been deployed to scour the river banks from three locations," district administrator Anil Kumar Pandey told AFP by phone.

# Benazir takes poll campaign to militants' heartland

## Teenager held with explosives at Peshawar rally

AFP, Peshawar

Opposition leader Benazir Bhutto took her election campaign yesterday to the heartland of Pakistan's militants, whose wave of violence has threatened to destabilise the nuclear-armed nation.

With just two weeks to go before the January 8 polls for parliament, which militants have vowed to disrupt, the two-time former premier again lashed out at President Pervez Musharraf over his handling of the bloodshed.

A suicide bombing last week killed 56 people, while an attack on her homecoming from years of exile in October left 139 dead -- the worst suicide attack in the country's history.

"Terrorists are killing innocent people. They are killing innocent children, men and women indiscriminately," she told a small rally outside Islamabad before heading

to North West Frontier Province, a militant stronghold.

Bhutto, who was the first female prime minister in the Muslim world, has repeatedly vowed to quash Islamist violence in her recent campaign appearances.

Security was extremely tight when she arrived in the provincial capital of Peshawar, where around 5,000 people had gathered in a cricket stadium to hear her address. Police and paramilitary soldiers were heavily deployed.

Pakistan has seen more than 40 suicide attacks this year which have killed more than 770 people -- most killed after a controversial military raid on a radical pro-Taliban mosque in Islamabad left more than 100 people dead.

The president imposed a controversial six-week state of emergency in November, citing what he said was the need to clamp down on militants as well as what he

called judicial interference in the running of the country.

But critics charged the emergency was only a cover for his decision to sack dozens of anti-Musharraf judges who might have entertained legal challenges to his re-election as president the previous month.

The state of emergency and his previous second role as head of the army -- which he only relinquished under intense domestic and international pressure after his re-election -- fuelled allegations he has ruled as an autocrat.

"Dictatorship has always damaged Pakistan and we must restore the supremacy of the people," Bhutto, head of the main opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP), told the earlier rally.

But he has failed to stop the unprecedented wave of suicide attacks, which were once rare in Pakistan. Analysts say the violence is driven in part by his decision to ally

the country with the United States.

Meanwhile, police said yesterday they arrested a teenager carrying a small quantity of explosives at an election campaign rally for opposition leader Benazir Bhutto.

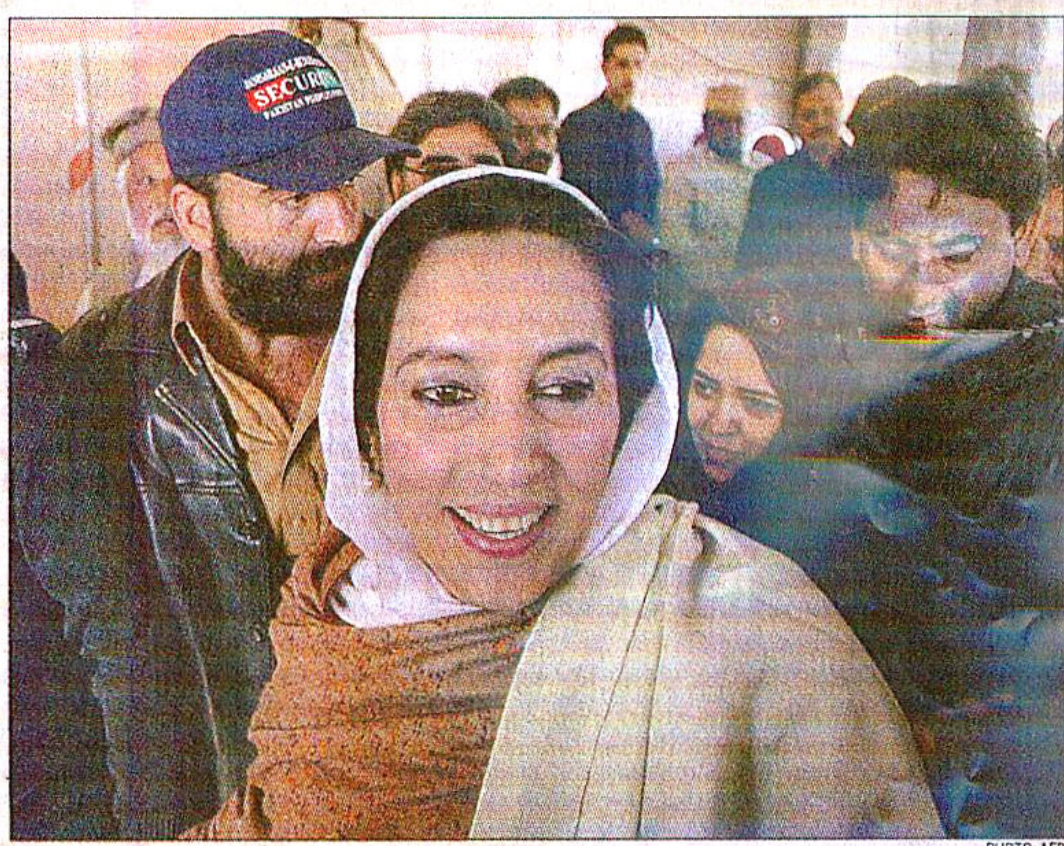
The boy, aged about 16, was caught at the gate of the rally, held amid tight security.

"He was carrying explosive material. We are investigating," city police chief Mohammad Tahir told AFP. He gave no details.

Shaheen Khan, an official who was on security duty at the rally, said the boy was carrying explosive material and nails in his pocket.

He said the quantity of explosives -- about 200 grams (seven ounces) -- would not have caused casualties but could have set off panic in the crowd.

The boy said he had attended a wedding the previous night and forgot to empty his pocket before coming to the rally, Khan said.



Former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto is surrounded by her supporters during an election campaign in Hassan Abdal, 35 kilometres west of Islamabad, yesterday. Benazir takes her election campaign to the heartland of Pakistan's militants, whose wave of violence has threatened to destabilise the nuclear-armed nation.



Turkish soldiers patrol a road near Yuksekova, southeastern Turkey near the border with Iraq. Turkish warplanes bombed Kurdish rebel targets along the Turkish border in northern Iraq yesterday, the Turkish military said, confirming Kurdish reports of a fresh airstrike.

## Turkish planes bomb Kurd targets again

AFP, Arbil, Iraq

Turkish warplanes bombed Kurdish rebel hideouts in northern Iraq yesterday, intensifying military action against the separatists with apparent US approval and despite Iraqi protests.

It was the third bombing raid against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) targets in Kurdish-run northern Iraq that the military here has confirmed since December 16, in addition to a ground cross-border operation.

The raid followed intelligence that "a large group of terrorists, who have been watched for a long time, are preparing to pass the winter in eight caves and hideouts in the Zap region", the general staff said in a statement.

"Our warplanes hit the targets in an effective air raid that started in the morning hours of December

26," it said.

The statement did not mention casualties.

An Iraqi Kurdish official said the strike targeted deserted villages along the border.

"The planes targeted deserted villages but we do not know the extent of damages," said Jabbar Yawar, spokesman of the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga security force.

Another local security official said Turkish aircraft struck an area called Nirvorokan in Dohuk province at around 8:30 am (0530 GMT), while a news agency close to the PKK reported that some 10 warplanes took part in the raid.

Officials in northern Iraq have reported two other air strikes that the Turkish military has not confirmed, including a brief one on Tuesday.

Faced with mounting PKK violence and exasperated by the

safe haven the rebels enjoy in northern Iraq, the Turkish government secured in October a one-year parliamentary authorisation for cross-border military action.

The PKK, listed as a terrorist group by Turkey and much of the international community, has waged a bloody campaign for Kurdish self-rule in southeast Turkey since 1984. The conflict has claimed more than 37,000 lives.

An estimated 3,500 PKK militants have taken refuge in northern Iraq, using camps there as a springboard for attacks across the border.

At least 150 rebels were killed on December 16 in the largest air strike in northern Iraq so far, when fighter jets bombed positions along the Turkish border and in the Qandil mountains to the east, where the PKK is known to have camps, the military said Tuesday.

## 3 Thai soldiers killed in clash with rebels

AFP, Yala, Thailand

Three Thai soldiers were killed yesterday in a clash with separatist rebels in the kingdom's insurgency-hit deep south, police said.

The troops were on foot patrol in Yala province when the insurgents confronted them on the road and opened fire, prompting a 20-minute gun battle which left three of them severely injured, police said.

The separatists fled the scene, while the wounded soldiers died later in hospital.

Elsewhere in the troubled region, where more than 2,800 people have died in four years of unrest, two primary schools were burnt down overnight, local authorities said.

The Muslim-majority south was an ethnic Malay sultanate until Buddhist Thailand annexed it a century ago, provoking decades of tension.

## Egypt accuses Israel of meddling with US ties

AFP, Cairo

Egypt accused Israel yesterday of interfering in its relations with the United States as tensions rose over alleged arms smuggling into Gaza during a visit by Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak.

Barak was in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh for his first meeting with President Hosni Mubarak since assuming the defence portfolio in June, but Mubarak spokesman Suleiman Awad hit out at what he said was an Israeli-influenced US decision to suspend a slice of aid to Egypt.

"Egypt rejects and denounces the Israeli government's interference in the US Congress's decision to suspend 100 million dollars in military aid to Egypt," Awad told AFP.

The US Congress last week froze the aid until US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice could certify that Egypt was doing enough to stem the flow of arms into the Gaza Strip where the Islamist movement Hamas took over in June.

Awad said the Israeli accusations, increasingly frequent in recent days, were a way of distracting attention from Jewish settlement building in the occupied West Bank and from the lack of success

from last month's US-hosted peace meeting in the city of Annapolis.

"Israel's accusations towards Egypt are a smokescreen to deflect attention from the ongoing settlement construction and the failure to follow up on Annapolis," he said.

A senior Barak aide rejected the charges of interference, saying "Israel has never acted in that way and will never do so because in the end our joint interests are much stronger than this issue."

Barak, who also met his Egyptian counterpart Mohammed Hussein Tantawi and intelligence chief Omar Suleiman, sought to lower tensions with Egypt, the first Arab country to sign a peace treaty with the Jewish state.

"Peace with Egypt is a strategic asset to both sides and as in the past when there have been disputes they had to be worked out," the former prime minister said.

A senior defence ministry official travelling with Barak said Israeli officials had recently handed over to Egyptian security services "an array of evidence and intelligence reports on weapons smuggling".

He said the evidence included video footage of Egyptian border police allegedly helping militants cross into Gaza, but Awad said such

evidence "does not reflect the reality on the ground."

"We are exerting 100 percent effort but we cannot guarantee 100 percent results. No state can totally seal off its borders," Awad said, pointing out that when Israel controlled the Gaza Strip -- from 1967 to 2005 -- it also was unable to stem the flow of weapons and militants.

Cairo on Tuesday strongly rejected accusations by Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni that Egypt's actions along the Gaza border were "problematic."

"The Israeli minister would do better to concentrate on negotiation efforts with the Palestinians... instead of speaking without weighing her words about things she should not deal with without having enough information," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

Israel has often accused Egypt of doing too little to counter alleged arms smuggling via tunnels dug from Gaza into Egyptian territory. Cairo has denied the charge.

Shortly before Barak's arrival, Egyptian security forces announced the arrest of "one of the most dangerous arms smugglers to Gaza," and seized half a tonne of explosives from his house, a security source told AFP.

## Iraqi cabinet okays draft law pardoning detainees

AFP, Baghdad

The Iraqi cabinet yesterday approved a draft law that offers a general pardon to thousands of detainees held in US and Iraqi prisons in a bid to boost national reconciliation, an official told AFP.

"The draft law offering amnesty to detainees who are innocent was approved by the cabinet and forwarded to parliament today," said Sadiq al-Rikabi, an adviser to Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki.

Thousands of detainees, mostly Sunni Arabs, are being held in US and Iraqi prisons without formal charges. Most have been detained for more than a year on suspicion of backing insurgency in Iraq.

Their detention is seen fuelling animosity between the Shiite and Sunni communities in Iraq and the US military in particular has been strongly advocating their release in the wake of a growing alliance of Sunnis with American forces.

"The law will cover as many number of detainees as possible" who are not found to be guilty, Rikabi said, adding that some of the detainees include those held for corruption and other financial crimes.

## Lanka frees French TV crew

AFP, Colombo

A Sri Lankan judge yesterday freed two foreign television reporters held for two days by police while making a documentary about people detained under emergency laws, officials said.

The two-member crew of France 24 were detained overnight at Ratgama, 105 kilometres (65 miles) south of the capital, after they were taken into custody by the military on Christmas Eve.

"They were taken before a judge in Colombo after being questioned by the Terrorist Investigations Department," a court official said. "The judge ordered them to be freed without any charges."

The pair were taken Tuesday before another judge in the island's south who ordered that they be handed over to the TID for further investigation.

Sri Lanka's independent Free Media Movement (FMM) had called for their immediate release and accused the authorities of overreacting and suppressing the right to information.



Indonesian policemen push their motorbikes through a flooded street in Madiun district of east Java province yesterday. At least 10 people have been killed in this district when a bridge was swept away by swelling flood water, police said.

"Together we can change our world of tomorrow"

# FIRST NON-RESIDENT BANGLADESHI CONFERENCE 2007

**27, 28, 29 December 2007, Dhaka Sheraton Hotel**

DAY ONE	
<b>NRB Conference Information Center</b>	Time 09:00 AM
<b>Registration</b>	Venue- Dhaka Sheraton Hotel
<b>Opening Ceremony</b>	Time 02:30 PM
<b>Programme</b>	Venue- Winter Garden
<b>Recitation from the Holy Qur'an</b> <b>Welcome address:</b> <b>Address by special guests:</b>	Dilara Afroz Khan Dr. S M A Faiz, VC, Dhaka University Mr. Fazle Hasan Abed, Chairman, BRAC Dr. Jamilur Reza Choudhury, VC, BRAC University Major General (Retd.) Moin Hossain Choudhury, Former Adviser, Caretaker Government Dr. Wahiduddin Mahmud, Former Adviser, Caretaker Government Professor Hafiz G A Siddiqi, VC, North South University Professor Bazlul Mobin Chowdhury, VC, Independent University Dr. Muhammed Zafar Iqbal, Prof. CSE Dept. Shahjalal University NRB representatives
<b>Fair &amp; Exhibition</b>	Time 04:00 PM
	Venue- Marble Hall
<b>Cultural Programme</b>	Time 04:30 PM
	Venue- Winter Garden
<b>In honour of:</b> <b>Programme Theme:</b>	Pundit Ravi Shankar & George Harrison Patriotism & Liberation War
<b>Registration Fees</b> Tk. 500/- Per Seminar Tk. 3000/- for 3-Day Conference <b>* 50% Discount for Student Registration</b>	
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