

'Pak vote needs delay to avoid chaos'

AFP, Washington

Pakistan should delay next month's parliamentary elections to prevent a meltdown in the nuclear-armed nation following the assassination of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, analysts say.

The United States called on Pakistan on Thursday to hold its election as scheduled on January 8 as a tribute to Benazir, who was slain by a suicide attacker at a campaign rally.

But Asia-watcher Brian Katulis, who returned last week from a 15-day trip to Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore, said Pakistan would be better off if the election was postponed and that Washington should drop its insistence that it go ahead as planned.

"Delaying the vote would open the door to not only de-escalating the situation but also to having a better process than if we just go forward," he told AFP.

Putting off the election could also help to patch up the badly bruised image of the United States

in Pakistan.

"Pakistanis don't have a lot of love for the United States. If the US blindly supports moving forward with the elections, given the deep scepticism about those elections and the scepticism about Pakistani institutions being able to deliver the basics needed to survive, like wheat and bread, that further widens the divide," Katulis said.

"Our fetish with elections does not help us," Katulis, of the Centre for American Progress think tank, warned that forging ahead with the election could result in more violence and deaths.

"I attended a rally and the security situation is just impossible. You have thousands of people who show up, allegedly because they get money -- they're very poor," he said.

"If they don't have a postponement, we're likely to have more of these problems."

"We need to encourage postponing the elections, but it has to be a closed-end postponement,

during which a list of things need to get done, including the restoration of the judiciary," he said.

Daniel Markey, of the Council on Foreign Relations, called Benazir's assassination "a bad day for Pakistan and the United States" that was likely to throw off the election process.

"The government of (President) Pervez Musharraf has over time expressed concern about their ability to hold elections without a great deal of violence and this was just another indication of what they're dealing with," he told reporters.

"There is every chance that the government will seek to delay the election... Everything is too messy to move forward," Markey said.

"The worst case scenario is that the level of violence gets out of hand, the army is not able to control it and breaks down. This sort of tragic event raises the stakes for something like that to materialize," he said.

Anthony Cordesman, an expert at the Centre for Strategic and

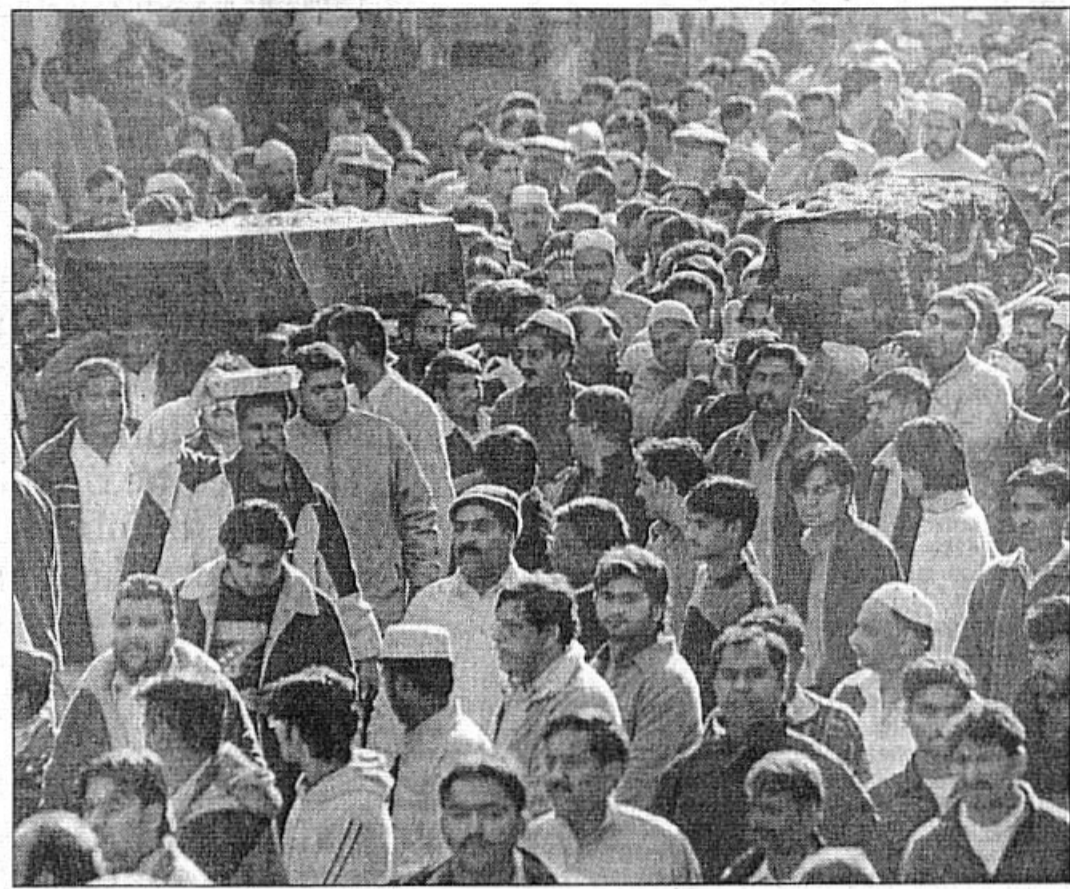
International Studies, a Washington think tank, called on Pakistan's leaders to show unity in the face of the tragedy.

"A great problem is going to be whether Pakistan's leaders will see this as a reason to come together and make compromises or see it as a reason on the part of Musharraf to crack down on security, and on the part of leaders like Nawaz Sharif to attack the Musharraf government," he said.

"We'll get preliminary indications soon but historically the implications of something like this tend to play out over a period of months," he added.

Markey said Benazir's death had robbed Pakistan of a rare chance of edging closer to democracy.

"The election in early January had the potential to take the country forward, at least haltingly or slowly, towards a more manageable civilian-military partnership to rule the country, and Benazir would have been a significant part of that," he said.



Mourners carry the coffin of people who died in the attack on former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto during a funeral ceremony in Rawalpindi yesterday. Assassinated Benazir was laid to rest in her family's ancestral graveyard to scenes of searing emotion from hundreds of thousands of mourners.

Oxford friends remember 'fiery and fun' Benazir

AFP, London

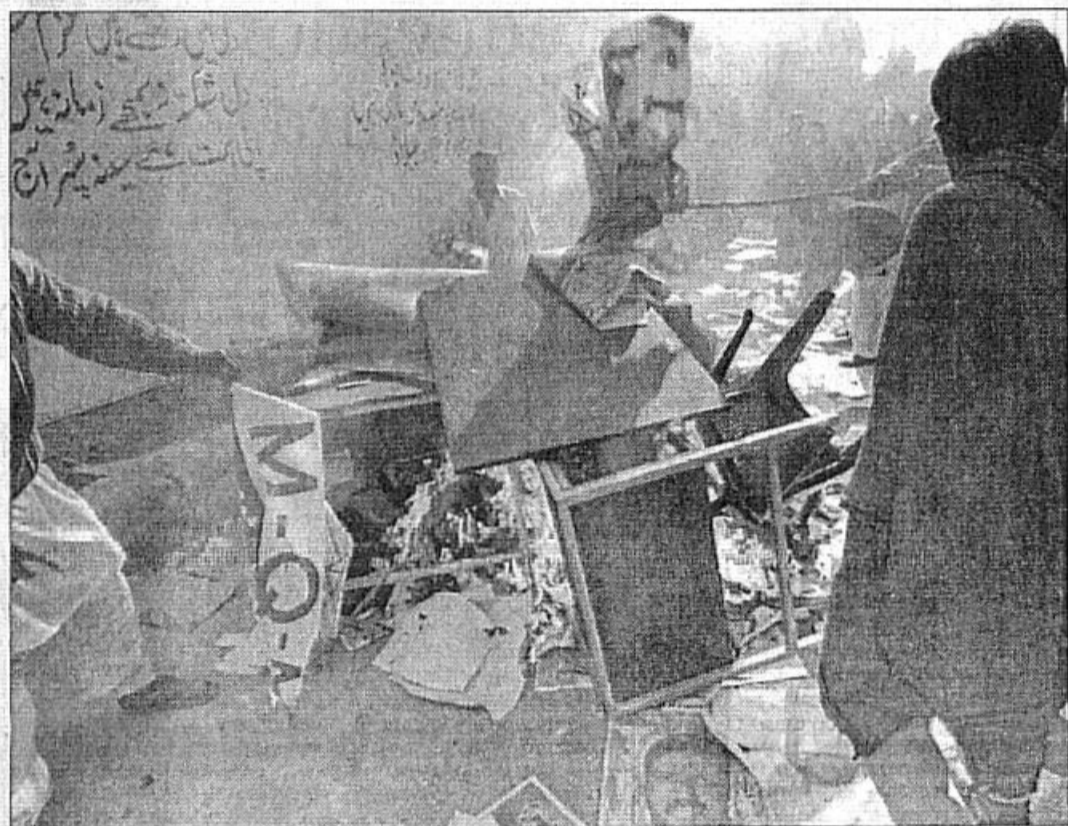
Benazir Bhutto's contemporaries at Britain's Oxford University remembered her as a "fiery and fun" student Friday, whose political awakening came after her father's ouster as Pakistani prime minister.

Benazir was always a well-known figure among the city's dreaming spires -- her election as president of the Oxford Union debating society, the first Asian woman to hold the post, attracted worldwide media attention.

She reportedly held some of the best parties in the university and drove a yellow MG sports car.

Benazir studied politics, philosophy and economics at Lady Margaret Hall from 1973 and later became an honorary fellow of the college, which was founded in 1878 and pioneered women's education at Oxford.

She described her university years as the best of her life and reportedly recalled punting on the River Cherwell and picnicking at Blenheim Palace, ancestral home of former British premier Winston Churchill.



Pakistan People's Party (PPP) supporters burn items from an office of the Pakistan Muslim League-Q party that backs President Pervez Musharraf during a protest in Pakistan's northwestern city of Peshawar yesterday following the killing of PPP leader Benazir Bhutto and other party workers the day before in Rawalpindi.

Pakistan in 'nightmare scenario'

Says world media

AFP, London

Fears of major unrest and civil war in nuclear-armed Pakistan were widely expressed by international media Friday after the assassination of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto.

The killing of the former premier, who had staged a political comeback after returning from exile to fight in elections next month, "is a disaster for a country that is already flirting with state failure," said the Financial Times, the British business daily.

"The violent death leaves a hole in national politics and adds a vicious extra dimension of disintegration to a country that is already falling apart after decades of civilian and military misrule," it said in an editorial.

Italy's Corriere della Sera said "Pakistan is becoming an ever bigger atomic time bomb" and highlighted fears that the military could take back power after the death of Benazir Bhutto, who was

killed by a suicide bomber on Thursday.

The Times of London said Pakistan was now in "The Nightmare Scenario".

Jordanian newspaper Al-Dustour said "Benazir's assassination is a terrible act that paves the way for a civil war in Pakistan, the country was already facing a difficult time because of religious, ethnic and political reasons."

"All indications show that Pakistan will go into a dark and a difficult stage."

Newspapers in Muslim Turkey warned that Pakistan risks prolonged instability.

"Pakistan's internal peace, stability and democratic future has been slain along with Benazir... This is a big blow for Pakistan that will ruin her future," the liberal Milliyet daily said.

Leading US newspapers urged President George W. Bush to reassess his unconditional backing of President Pervez Musharraf, a key ally in the US "war on terror".

India sees negative fallout in S Asia

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

With terror elements claiming the life of Pakistan opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, India, as next door neighbour, is apprehensive of a negative fallout of a volatile Pakistan on South Asia, officials and analysts said yesterday.

India has already sounded a high security alert along its borders with Pakistan amid reports of a backlash in Pakistan over Benazir's killing.

"The paramilitary forces have been put on alert all along the India-Pakistan border following the assassination of Benazir", a spokesman of Indian Home Ministry said last night.

Government leadership is worried that if terrorism grows in Pakistan further and religious extremist elements gain more upper hand, India cannot be immune to its dangerous repercussions, they said.

New Delhi's growing unease with escalating lawlessness in Pakistan is reflected in Prime

Minister Manmohan Singh's reaction to Benazir's assassination when he said that her killing is a "reminder of the common dangers that our region faces from the cowardly acts of terrorism and the need to eradicate this dangerous threat", officials said.

With the internal security situation in Pakistan in critical condition, analysts here projected two

NEWS ANALYSIS

basic scenarios emerging in that country: One Pakistan returning to the grip of the army or second, increased clout of fundamentalist forces in a new political set-up.

Both are ominous for India, they added.

Analysts like G Parthasarathy, India's former high commissioner to Pakistan, said Benazir's death could derail the peace talks started by the two countries in 2002.

"The democracy process having

been derailed in that country, the power will once again return to the hands of Pakistani military which does not want peace with India," he said.

Analysts here said that former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's decision to boycott next month's elections in Pakistan is a major blow to the credibility to the exercise which now looks in danger of being postponed.

The attack on the PPP leader shows the determination of fundamentalist forces to trigger chaos and havoc against political players opposed to them, they said.

India's anxiety is primarily due to its past experience as the known reflex in Pakistan at the time of its internal crisis is to step up terror activities in India to divert attention from problems at home, the analysts said.

Secondly, they added, absence of democracy in Pakistan could further encourage Talibanised elements there to fill the void.

Japan urges China to sway global issues

AP, Beijing

Japan urged China to use its growing influence to make an impact on key global issues such as climate change as the visiting Japanese prime minister opened a day of summit talks yesterday with Chinese leaders.

The countries have a history of animosity stemming from disputes over territory, resources and war-time history, but Yasuo Fukuda's four-day visit, his first as prime minister, follows several friendly meetings between leaders and a Chinese warship's historic port call to Japan.

"In the long history of our relations, there has never been a time when Japan and China has had more influence or responsibilities in Asia and the world," Fukuda said at a joint news conference with Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. "We face a big opportunity going forward."

The two held friendly talks on the sidelines of a Southeast Asian summit last month, and Wen said he felt bilateral relations had entered a season of "spring".

Fukuda was to meet later Friday

with President Hu Jintao. An afternoon speech at the prestigious Peking University was to be broadcast live on television, Japanese officials said.

"China is now becoming a big economic power so those two big economic powers in East Asia should jointly contribute to the stability and development of Asia and the world," said Mitsuo Sakaba, press secretary for Japanese Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura. At the top of Fukuda's agenda was climate change, with topics such as energy efficiency and projects to help China tackle pollution that is increasingly felt across the sea in Japan.

"China is the major emitting country of greenhouse gases. So without Chinese engagement in programmes of reducing the emission of greenhouse gases, any international effort will inevitably be without effect... without China," Sakaba said in an interview.

"We want to engage China in concrete terms in the programmes of reducing emissions," he said, though he added

that there would be no announcements of funding.

Industries in China are notorious for their inefficiency, requiring more coal or other energy sources to produce the same amount of output as a plant in Japan.

Other topics will include a long-running dispute over China and Japan's competing claims to gas reserves in the East China Sea, which both nations hope to exploit to feed their fuel-hungry economies.

"We will continue negotiations and aim for a resolution as quickly as possible," Fukuda said after meeting with Wen.

Fukuda planned to talk with Chinese leaders about North Korea, a close ally of Beijing that has been accused of abducting Japanese citizens during the 1970s and '80s.

Japan also has expressed its concern about surging Chinese military spending and wants more transparency from Beijing. Sakaba said Japan wished for more military exchanges, but did not answer a question on whether Fukuda had asked to visit any military sites. None was on his itinerary.



Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda (R) shakes hands with Chinese President Hu Jintao upon his arrival at the Diaoyutai guesthouse in Beijing yesterday. China and Japan pledged on Friday to build on their rapidly warming ties as Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda met the Chinese leadership, but a dispute over maritime gas fields remained unresolved.

7 Gaza militants killed in Israeli raids

Two Israeli settlers killed in West Bank

AFP, Gaza City

Seven Palestinian militants, one of them a senior commander, were killed and 16 other people wounded in the Gaza Strip on Thursday in four Israeli raids on the Hamas-run territory, medics and witnesses said.

In the first Gaza raid three men -- two of them from the radical Islamic Jihad group and a third from the armed wing of Hamas -- were killed around the southern town of Khan Yunis. Six people were also wounded.

The Israeli army said that infantry units backed by air power carried out a "routine operation" targeting gunmen who were firing rockets and mortars into Israel.

"Units that entered several kilometres (miles) into the Gaza Strip were fired at by an anti-tank shell. They responded and hit three armed men," said a spokesman.

Shortly afterwards, two Islamic Jihad militants were killed and two wounded in an air raid in the central Gaza Strip, medics said.

"The military carried out an air raid in the central Gaza Strip

against a vehicle loaded with weapons and carrying terrorists that was headed to carry out an attack," an Israeli spokesman said.

"The vehicle was hit." A third Israeli raid, which witnesses said was carried out by either helicopters or drones, killed an Islamic Jihad militant and wounded two more south of Gaza City, medical sources said.

Islamic Jihad named the dead man as Mohammed Abdullah, 40, a senior commander of its Al-Quds Brigades military wing who operated under the nom de guerre of Abu Morshid.

An Israeli army spokesman confirmed an air raid had been carried out.

Last week, the Israeli military killed Islamic Jihad's Gaza commander Majed al-Harazin and 12 other militants in a series of raids.

In the fourth Gaza raid a Hamas member was killed near Khan Yunis. Five other people were wounded by air to surface missiles, medics said.

In a raid in the West Bank, Israeli soldiers killed a member of the security force of former Palestinian

prime minister Ahmed Qorei, currently the senior Palestinian peace negotiator with Israel, witnesses said.

Motasseem Ash-Sharif, 22, was killed while trying to flee Israeli soldiers who had arrived at his house, the witnesses said.

An Israeli military spokesman said he was killed "during an exchange of fire after he shot at soldiers who had come to arrest him," and that he was suspected of supplying weapons to armed Palestinian groups.

Meanwhile, two young Israeli settlers were killed by Palestinian gunmen on Friday while on a ramble in the south of the Israeli-occupied West Bank, emergency services said.

The two men in their 20s were fired on as they were walking with a female friend to a spring west of the flashpoint city of Hebron and the settlement of Telem.

The woman was in a state of shock but escaped unharmed after hiding from the gunmen, she told the emergency services.

Israeli troops launched a man-hunt for the killers.

Abbas, Olmert put aside settlement fight

AP, Jerusalem

Israeli and Palestinian leaders agreed Thursday to put aside a dispute over Israeli construction in a Jerusalem neighbourhood and get down to work on a final peace agreement, according to participants at the meeting.

The two-hour meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas appeared to break an impasse that has clouded renewed peacemaking, and cleared the way for a visit by President Bush next month.

It was the first summit between the two leaders since they

relaunched peace talks at a US-hosted meeting last month.

"Beginning next week, final status negotiations will be resumed," said Ahmed Qureia, the lead Palestinian negotiator.

Alongside the talks, violence continued in Gaza. Late Thursday, Israeli aircraft killed a senior Islamic Jihad commander, Mohammed Abdala, the militant group said. He was the third senior Islamic Jihad militant killed in the last two weeks. The Israeli military confirmed it carried out an airstrike.

Abu Hamza, an Islamic Jihad spokesman, pledged revenge. "We will continue to bring terror and destruction and death among the

Zionists until we uproot them from our land," he said.

Five other militants were killed in two Israeli attacks earlier Thursday.

At last month's summit in Annapolis, Maryland, Olmert and Abbas agreed to restart peace talks after seven years of violence, setting a 2008 target for a final peace agreement. But attempts to begin negotiations have foundered over a new Israeli plan to build more than 300 new homes in a Jewish neighbourhood of east Jerusalem.

The Palestinians claim east Jerusalem as their future capital and have demanded the project be halted.

Lanka claims killing 25 Tigers in fresh fighting

AFP, Colombo

At least 25 Tamil Tiger rebels were killed in fresh military attacks along the de-facto border of territory held by the guerrillas, the defence ministry said yesterday.

The members of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were killed in four separate attacks in Vavuniya district on Thursday, the ministry said, adding that one soldier also died.

However, the LTTE rejected the claims, saying they did not suffer any deaths and that they had thwarted military attempts to break into their territory.

The Tigers said in a statement that they also killed one government soldier in

Thursday's battles.

The latest casualty claims by the military bring the number of Tamil fighters killed since December 1 to at least 501, according to the defence ministry. This compares with less than 30 troops reported dead or missing by the military.

Both sides regularly make sharply differing claims about casualties and independent verification is rarely possible. Journalists are also not allowed access into rebel-held areas in the north.

Sri Lanka is pressing for a military victory over the rebels, fighting for a separate state for the ethnic Tamil minority in the Sinhalese-majority nation. Tens of thousands have died on both sides since the conflict erupted in 1972.

Iran gets 2nd Russian nuke fuel shipment

AP, Tehran

Iran received the second shipment of nuclear fuel from Russia on Friday for a power plant being constructed in the southern Iranian town of Bushehr, the official news agency IRNA reported.

The delivery signalled continued momentum toward beginning operations at the long-delayed 1,000 megawatt light-water reactor, which the Russians are helping to construct and the Iranians say will come online in 2008.

Ahmad Fayazbakhsh, deputy head of Iran's nuclear organisation, said the fuel was delivered according to a schedule agreed

with the Russians, which IRNA indicated would bring 82 tons of nuclear fuel in eight shipments.

"The amount of fuel delivered to Bushehr was equal to the previous shipment," Fayazbakhsh was quoted as saying by IRNA. "It was delivered within a specified timetable."

The Russian firm helping build the Bushehr reactor, Atomstroyexport, confirmed the delivery.

Iran received the first shipment of nuclear fuel from Russia on Dec. 17 after months of dispute between the two countries, allegedly over delayed construction payments for the reactor.

Tehran heralded the initial

shipment as a victory, saying it proved its nuclear programme was peaceful, not a cover for weapons development as claimed by the US and some of its allies.

The US downplayed the first delivery, and both Washington and Moscow said the supply of nuclear fuel meant Iran had no need to continue its uranium enrichment programme -- a process that can provide fuel for a reactor or fissile material for a bomb.

Iran insisted it would continue enriching uranium because it needed to provide fuel to a 300-megawatt light-water reactor it was building in the southwestern town of Darkhovin.