

Musharraf orders firm action against rioters

Pakistan cities closed amid turmoil

AFP, Islamabad/Karachi

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf yesterday ordered security chiefs to take firm action against rioters following the assassination of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, state media said.

Musharraf gave the directive at a meeting of senior officials including the heads of the army and other security agencies, as well as the country's caretaker prime minister, the Associated Press of Pakistan news agency said.

"Elements who wish to exploit the situation by looting and plundering must be dealt with firmly and all measures be taken to ensure safety and security of the people," it quoted him as saying.

Musharraf said that shops,

chemists and petrol stations were shut down "due to the fear of hooligans and looters", causing difficulties for the Pakistani people.

"While the entire nation was in mourning over the tragic death of... Benazir Bhutto, miscreants and anti-social elements cannot be allowed to damage lives and property of the common man in the guise of protest," he said.

He ordered law enforcement agencies "to take serious note and ensure early return to normalcy".

Meanwhile, daily life for tens of millions of Pakistanis was on hold yesterday, with major cities virtually shut down as the nation mourned the assassination of Benazir Bhutto.

On the second day of official mourning for the slain opposition

leader, most people were unable to buy food or petrol, with all shops, fuel stations, banks and offices closed down.

The streets of the country's main cities -- Karachi, Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Lahore and Peshawar -- were largely empty, and in many places there was evidence of the unrest that has left more than 38 dead since Benazir Bhutto's killing.

Burnt-out cars littered the streets in the southern town of Larkana, a Bhutto stronghold where groups of her supporters were roaming the streets shouting slogans against President Pervez Musharraf.

The situation was tense in Karachi, Pakistan's largest city and the economic hub of this nation of 160 million people, with a heavy

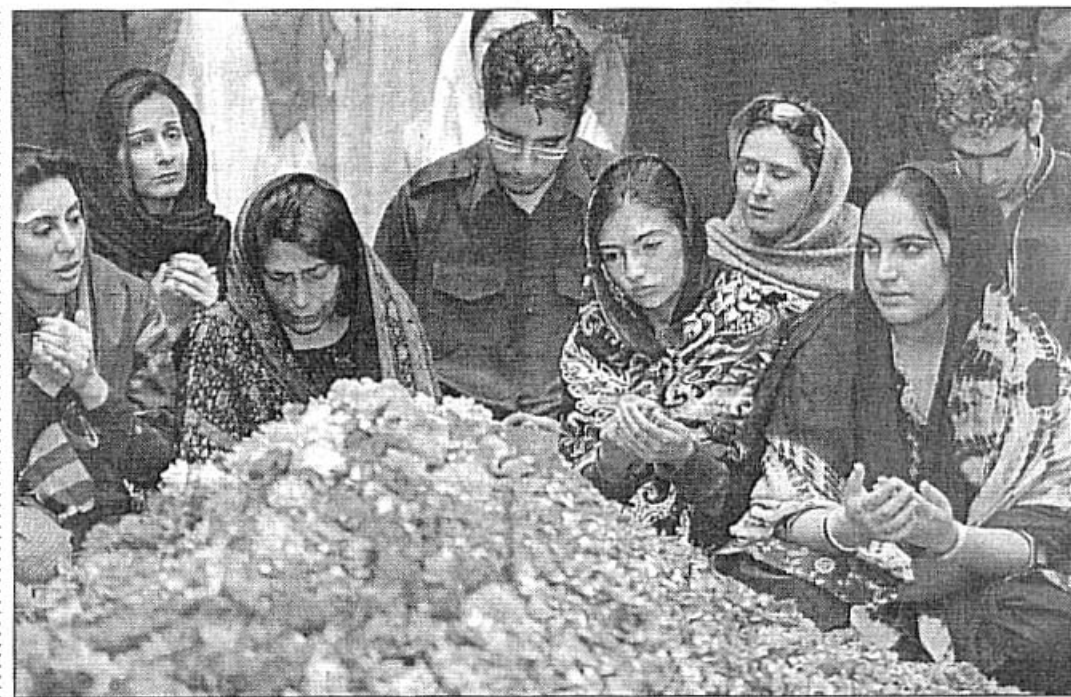
army and paramilitary presence on the streets.

Few people dared to venture outside and even the country's largest private charity, the Edhi Foundation, said its ambulances had been wrecked by vandals.

"They've smashed our ambulances," a foundation official in Karachi told AFP. "And we don't have any fuel."

With the fuel shortage, the unrest and the official mourning period which ends Sunday night following Benazir Bhutto's murder on Thursday, most people were unable or unwilling to move about.

Buses were not running, few taxi drivers were working and the roads were dotted with vehicles left behind when they ran out of petrol, AFP reporters said.



Slain Pakistani premier Benazir Bhutto's son Bilawal (C), daughters Bakhtawar (R), Asifa (2R) and Bhutto's younger sister Sanam Bhutto (3-L) pray at her graveside at the Bhutto mausoleum in Ghari Khuda Baksh yesterday.

'Pakistan's nukes safe despite unrest'

AFP, New York

The chance of Pakistan's nuclear weapons falling into the hands of Islamic militants is slight, even if unrest persists in the wake of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto's death, US analysts said.

The security of Pakistan's estimated 50 nuclear warheads has been under global scrutiny since President Pervez Musharraf imposed a state of emergency in November and concern has only risen since Benazir's assassination Thursday.

But analysts said Pakistan's military was firmly in control of the nuclear arsenal and that it was unlikely al-Qaeda or Taliban militants could get hold of the weapon components and missiles, which are kept separately.

Leonard Spector, deputy director of the James Martin Centre for Non-Proliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, said he thought the risk of weapons falling into rogue hands was slight.

"Pakistan's weapons are under the control of the military, and by and large that will remain unchanged, I think. From a standpoint of security we'll probably have continuity and relatively satisfactory control," he told AFP.

Even if the country descended into chaos, leaving the government unable to govern, the military's line of author-

ity would remain in place, he said.

"This is not a reassuring set of changes that we're experiencing, but on the other hand I think the military for the moment has a lot of coherence and solidarity. I think we'll see that continue," Spector said.

"I think the cadres that actually protect the weapons and guard the sites are fairly disciplined and for the last five years or so I think they've been better trained and individuals with Islamist leanings have been called out."

"I think this is cause for watchfulness, but I would not say alarm," Daniel Markey, from the Council on Foreign Relations think tank, said Pakistan faced a very real threat "because they have a nuclear arsenal and because they are operating in a very dangerous environment."

"But that hasn't changed over the last 24 hours, and the type of street violence that we are likely to see is not directed in any way towards the nuclear establishment," he said.

He said the real threat would come if violence escalated beyond the control of the police and paramilitary forces and the government used the military against people on the streets.

"That's where the army could, as an institution, break apart," he said.

"That's at the only stage where you could see the nuclear weapons establishment coming under

threat, because it would be unclear as to where the nuclear establishment stood within that larger army infrastructure."

"But we're not there yet and, hopefully, we won't get there," stressed Markey, a former US State Department policy planner for South Asia.

Benazir herself said in an interview in November with the German daily Bild that she was worried about what would happen if extremists managed to take control of the country's nuclear capability, which Pakistan gained in 1998.

Musharraf, who seized power in a 1999 bloodless coup and who became a frontline US ally in the war on terrorism after the September 11, 2001 attacks, said there was nothing to worry about.

In an interview with Fox News radio earlier this month, he said Pakistan's nuclear weapons were under "total custodial controls," a view echoed by White House spokesman Scott Stanzel on Friday. "At this time, as far as I know, it is the assessment of the intelligence community that Pakistan's weapons arsenal is secure," he told reporters.

Andrew Koch, a defence and security analyst with the consulting firm Scribner Strategies and Advisors, told AFP that the safety of the nuclear arsenal was not generally affected by day to day political movements.

Benazir note on party's future to be read today: Husband

AFP, London

Benazir Bhutto's husband said in an interview yesterday that she left instructions about the future of the Pakistan People's Party to be read in the event of her death, which would be made public today.

Asif Zardari told BBC radio that the couple's son would read out the message from the former prime minister and opposition leader, who was assassinated in Pakistan Thursday.

Zardari also revealed that his wife had made detailed plans for her burial, including changing the location of the plot from his family's ancestral tomb to her family's mausoleum following another recent suicide bomb attack.

"She has left a message for the party and she has left a will, so we shall be doing that tomorrow (Sunday) after the third day (of official mourning)," he said.

"We have called for a meeting and her will will be read out there and the instructions she has left will be read out there."

Afghan ministers call for unity against terror

AFP, Kabul

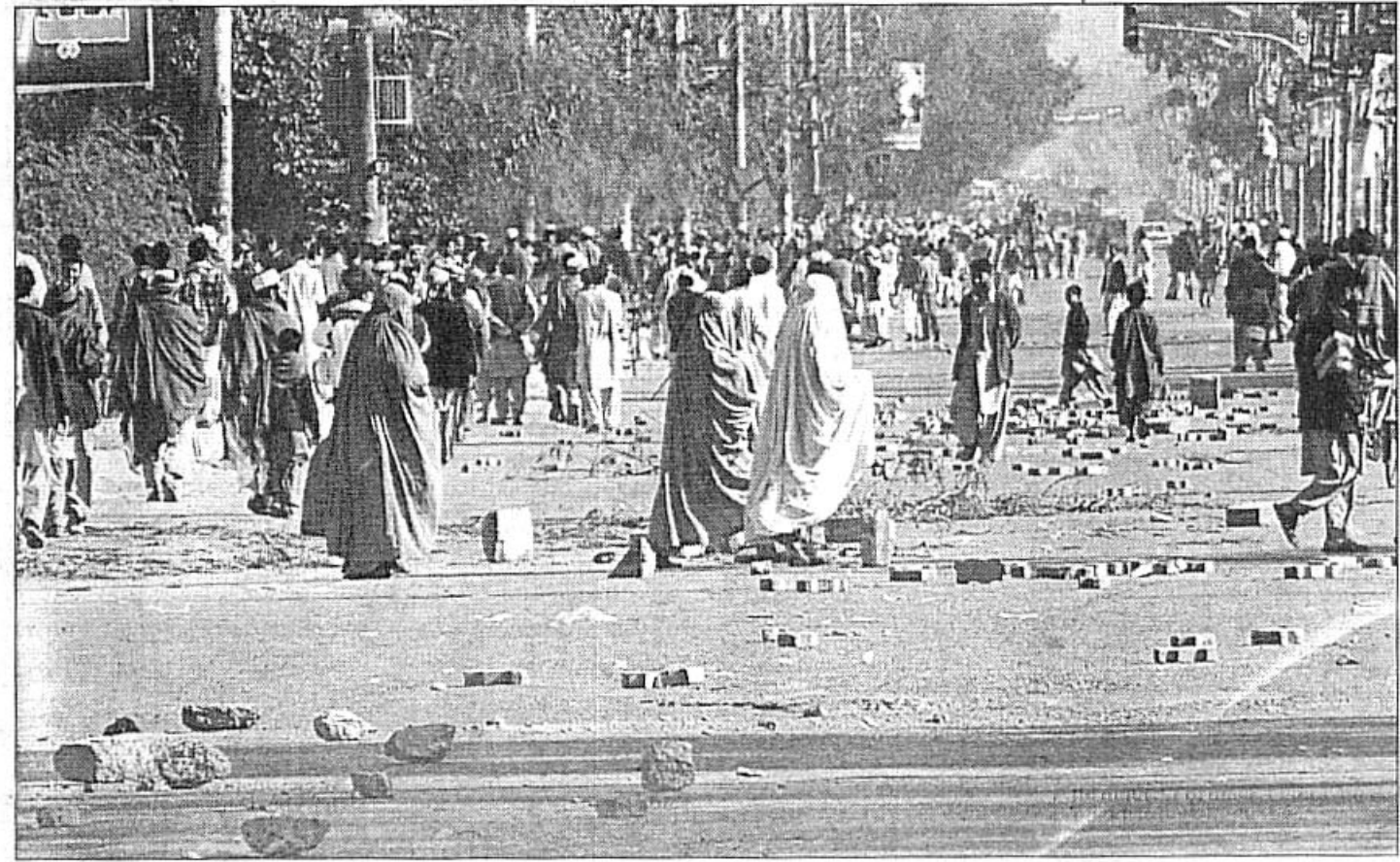
Afghan leaders expressed concern Saturday that the killing of Benazir Bhutto would harm stability in the region and called for "honest" cooperation against extremism affecting both nations.

"Benazir Bhutto was a friend of Afghanistan, a friend of peace and stability in our region," Foreign Minister Rameez Dardar Spanta said after signing a book of condolence for the opposition leader, who was killed Thursday.

"It is a shock for us, for the democratic powers in our region," he told reporters at the Pakistan embassy in Kabul.

Spanta was with Afghan President Hamid Karzai when he met Benazir just hours before she was murdered in a killing Islamabad has blamed on al-Qaeda, which is also said to be involved in growing extremist violence in Afghanistan.

Kabul wanted to work with the government of President Pervez Musharraf "to strengthen our common struggle against terrorism and I am sure we will have success", Spanta said.



Pakistani people walk on a street littered with brickbats following a protest by activists of assassinated former premier Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in Peshawar Friday. Pakistan faces the worst crisis in its modern history after the killing of Benazir Bhutto, an attack aimed at destabilising the nuclear-armed nation and wrecking planned elections, analysts said.

US admn consults allies, Pak parties on crisis

AFP, Washington

The United States said Friday it is in close contact with Pakistani political parties and allies to keep Pakistan on the path to democracy after opposition leader Benazir Bhutto's assassination.

The US State Department's number three, Nicholas Burns, and the assistant secretary of state for South Asian affairs, Richard Boucher, have consulted allies including Britain, Canada, France and Russia, said spokesman Tom Casey.

"We're all interested in seeing that, in light of this tragic incident, that things still are able to move forward and that Pakistan is able to continue down a democratic path," Casey told reporters.

Concerns rose for security in Pakistan after the former premier, a popular opposition leader, was killed in a suicide bombing Thursday as she campaigned for

next month's elections.

"Both our embassy in Islamabad, as well as our various consulates in the country have been keeping in close touch with representatives of the broad political spectrum in Pakistan," Casey said.

These include representatives of Benazir's Pakistan People's Party and parties backing President Pervez Musharraf and another key political rival, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif, he added.

"We believe it's important that the political process, the process of developing Pakistan's democracy continue," he added, echoing Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice who on Friday hailed Benazir as a "champion for democracy."

"The way to honour her memory is to continue the democratic process in Pakistan so that the democracy that she so hoped for can emerge," Rice said, after signing a book of condolence at

Pakistan's embassy in Washington.

She did not comment on whether the vote should still be held on January 8 as scheduled.

"We are in contact with people in Pakistan, all of the parties," she said. "But obviously, it's just very important that the democratic process go forward."

Casey meanwhile did not insist, as he had Thursday, on clinging to the January 8 schedule, saying he did not consider it a "magic" date on which the vote must be held.

"If an election can be held smoothly and safely on January 8, as currently scheduled, then by all means it should move forward," he said.

"If political parties and actors in the country come to some different conclusion, then certainly we'll take a look at it then."

Pakistan has been a key ally in the US "war on terror" launched after the attacks on September 11, 2001.

US must burnish image in Pakistan

Say experts

AFP, Washington

As calls rose for the United States to toughen its stance towards Pakistan after the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, experts urged Washington to tread carefully to keep its volatile Asian ally on side and avoid the country imploding.

A day after Benazir was slain in a suicide attack, leading US newspapers said President George W. Bush's policies in Pakistan were in shambles as support for Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf crumbled.

"US policy is in tatters. The administration was relying on Benazir Bhutto's participation in elections (due on January 8) to legitimise Musharraf's continued power as president," Barnett Rubin, a professor at New York University, said in the Washington Post.

"Now Musharraf is finished," Rubin added.

But Daniel Markey of the Council on Foreign Relations said backing away from Musharraf, a staunch ally in the US "war on terror", would be "folly."

"The United States should be reaching out to Musharraf as the president of Pakistan and as a person who can take major decisions as to how Pakistan will respond to this," he said.

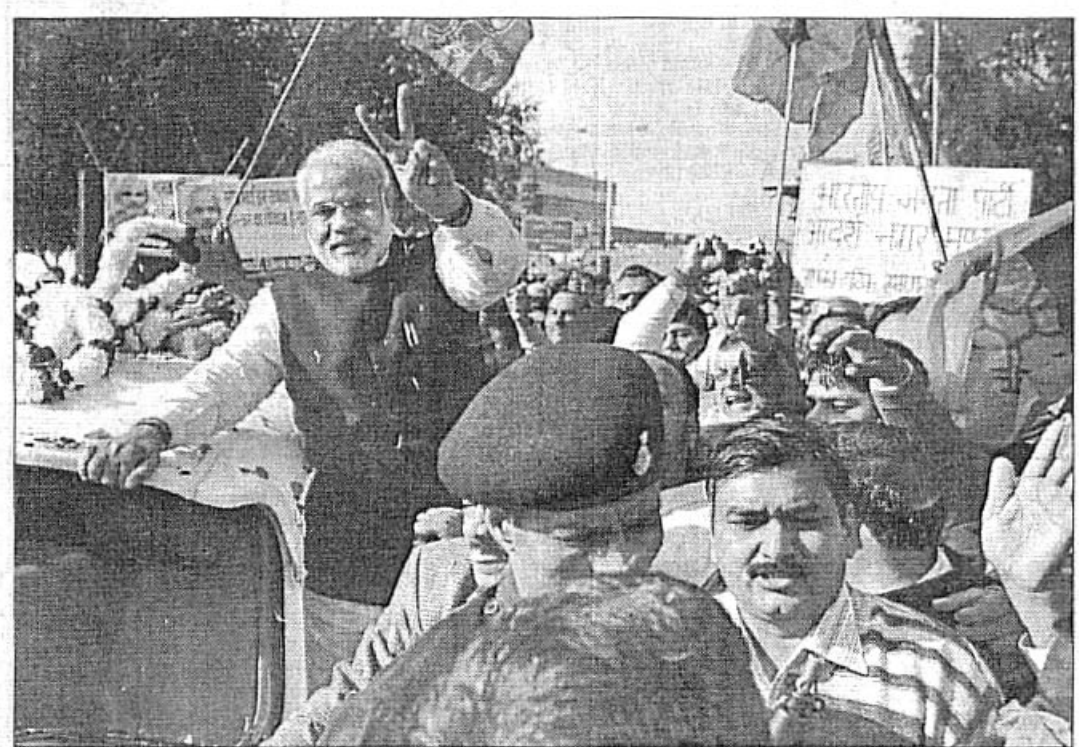
At the same time, the Bush administration must try to build up a broader base of allies in Pakistani power circles, analysts urged.

"We placed all of our bets on Musharraf, ignoring Benazir's pleas for some contact or recognition until a few months ago," said Stephen Cohen of the Brookings Institution.

Markey also argued that the US should have worked harder to establish links with more leaders in Pakistan.



Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda (L) and his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao (R) head for a breakfast meeting at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing yesterday.



Chief Minister of the Indian state of Gujarat and senior Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) leader Narendra Modi (C) shows a victory sign to a crowd of supporters after arriving at Indira Gandhi Airport in New Delhi yesterday. Modi met with the central BJP leadership on his first visit to the Indian capital after being elected Chief Minister of Gujarat for a third term.

BENAZIR ASSASSINATION Hillary slams Musharraf, demands int'l probe

AFP, Des Moines

Hillary Clinton Friday called for an independent, international probe into Benazir Bhutto's murder, as the turmoil wracking US anti-terrorism ally Pakistan reshaped debate in the White House.

The Democratic front-runner's intervention came amid rising criticism from the 2008 field of Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and Bush administration tactics in the war on terror and failure to neutralise al-Qaeda.

"We need an international, independent investigation into the death of Benazir Bhutto," Clinton said during a pell-mell campaign swing through Iowa, which kicks off party nominating contests on Thursday.

The assassination of the former Pakistani premier was the kind of sudden, outside event with the potential to quickly roll presidential campaign plans, and revived the issues of national security and

experience in the 2008 race.

An unanswered question was how the shockwaves would play out in the minds of voters in Iowa, which kicks off the party nominating season with caucuses next Thursday, and New Hampshire, which has primary elections on January 8.

Benazir's murder, and a story of its political impact, was splashed Friday across the only statewide newspaper in Iowa, but it was unclear if fallout would remain a key issue over the New Year holiday.

Veteran Republican Senator John McCain, among hopefuls taking the chance to bolster his national security credentials, earlier called for extreme care in US dealings with Pakistan.

"We want to do everything we can, but it has to be practical and it has to be achievable, and it has to be not opening another front in a war that we are overstressed with today," McCain said on Fox News.

Tensions in Kenya over polls results

AP, Nairobi

Hundreds of people stoned cars and rival ethnic groups fought in a sprawling slum Saturday amid tensions over delayed results from the closest presidential election in Kenya's history, witnesses said.

A millionaire opposition leader who cast himself as a champion of the poor appears poised to win the race, but only partial and unofficial tallies have been released from Thursday's vote.

In the Kibera slum, the main constituency of opposition candidate Raila Odinga, young men with machetes were running through the maze of potholed tracks and ramshackle dwellings. People set up makeshift roadblocks.

About 20 miles outside Nairobi, hundreds of people were massed along a main highway.

"They are looting houses and stoning cars," Irungu Wakogi, a witness, told The Associated Press by telephone.

Japan PM plays catch with China's Wen as ties warm

AFP, Beijing

Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda enjoyed a round of baseball diplomacy with his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao Saturday, one day after the leaders pledged to build on their rapidly warming ties.

Fukuda and Wen smiled in front of the cameras while playing catch with a baseball following a breakfast meeting on the third day of the Japanese leader's landmark visit to China.

Fukuda held talks with Wen and President Hu Jintao on Friday to lay the groundwork for closer cooperation between the nations in trade, climate change and other fields, but a dispute over maritime gas fields remained unresolved.

"I have asked Prime Minister Wen to play catch with me," Japanese officials quoted Fukuda as telling Wen during a Friday meeting.

"I'm glad to play with you whenever," Wen replied, prompting laughter by diplomats of the two countries.

The five-minute catch session in a Beijing gymnasium included several dropped balls on Fukuda's part. A young Chinese baseball player was also drafted in to throw the ball around with the two leaders.

Wen sported the same Japanese university baseball uniform he wore when he wowed the Japanese public with his throwing skills in Tokyo in April. Fukuda wore a white shirt and a red cap.

Fukuda is on a four-day visit aimed at deepening ties between the two Asian giants, which have long been wracked over Japan's World War II invasion of China.

In Friday talks, the two nations agreed to continue to negotiate a territorial dispute over lucrative gas fields in the East China Sea and raise discussions to vice-ministerial level in order to bring a "quick" solution.

Prior to his trip, Fukuda had expressed hopes that the resolution of the dispute could be reached during the visit.