

Pakistan backed by West despite rights abuses

US, Europe embrace false democrats out of self-interest: HRW

AFP, New York

Europe and the United States increasingly tolerate autocrats posing as democrats out of pure self-interest, in countries such as Pakistan, Kenya, Nigeria and Russia, as human rights abuses go on, Human Rights Watch charged yesterday.

"By allowing autocrats to pose as democrats, without demanding they uphold the civil and political rights that make democracy meaningful, the United States, the European Union and other influential democracies risk undermining human rights worldwide," the rights watchdog warned in a statement on releasing its World Report 2008.

Countries including Kenya and Pakistan must guarantee the human rights central to democracy -- not just profess to be democrats, the group said.

"In 2007 too many governments, including Bahrain, Jordan, Nigeria, Russia and Thailand, acted as if simply holding a vote is enough to prove a nation 'democratic,' and Washington, Brussels and European capitals played along," Human Rights Watch argued, adding that the current US administration has not pushed for all governments to respect human rights.

Western powers have ignored undemocratic acts and rights abuses by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's government because of its support for the "war on terror," Human Rights Watch said Thursday.

The group said in its annual report that Musharraf used a state of emergency in November to head off a Supreme Court ruling on the legality of his re-election and crack down on a movement for judicial independence.

Thousands of lawyers and political opponents were arbitrarily detained in 2007, most of the country's senior judges sacked and harsh curbs were imposed on the media, it said.

"The US, UK, and EU all issued statements urging Musharraf to end the state of emergency, release those arrested, and hold free and fair elections. However, their actions did not match their words," the HRW report said.

"At this writing, all three were continuing to prop up Musharraf with substantial military and economic assistance."

The group singled out the administration of US President George W Bush for failing to press for rights improvements or the restoration of the country's sacked chief justice.

"As in previous years, the US muted its criticism in exchange for Pakistan's support in counterterrorism operations," HRW said.

Musharraf had changed the constitution to legalise measures brought in under emergency rule that muzzle the media, allow the military to detain and try civilians and permit courts to revoke lawyers' licences, it said.



Pakistani lawyers march during an anti-Musharraf protest in Karachi yesterday. Thousands of Pakistani lawyers burned an effigy of President Pervez Musharraf during nationwide protests Thursday to press for the release of the country's deposed chief justice, witnesses said.

Lankan blast kills 4

AFP, Colombo

At least four people were killed and 17 hurt in a powerful explosion in Sri Lanka's embattled northern peninsula of Jaffna yesterday, authorities said, blaming the blast on Tamil rebels.

The explosion at Thirunelveli was believed to be the work of a suicide bomber on a bicycle, the statement said, accusing the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of being behind the blast.

There was no comment from the rebels, who have fought for more than three decades to carve out an independent homeland for minority Tamils in the north and east of the majority Sinhalese island.

The bombing came a day after both Tamil Tiger rebels and government forces claimed they had the upper hand in the conflict after smashing each other's fortifications on the peninsula.

Jaffna, at the northern tip of Sri Lanka, is a Tamil-majority area controlled by the government, but which is cut off from the rest of the island by rebel territory.



Protesters display banners during an anti-corruption demonstration in Jakarta yesterday. The United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) conference opened on January 28 on the resort island of Bali, where some 140 countries and organisations were participating in a debate on the question of how to strengthen the UN treaty against corruption and improve its implementation.

Afghanistan may plunge into 'failed state' Warn experts

AFP, Washington

Afghanistan will become a failed state unless urgent steps are taken to tackle worsening security, US experts said, as a British charity warned Thursday of a looming humanitarian "disaster".

The reports came amid new concerns over the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's commitment to providing more troops to fight a resurgent Taliban militia.

Canada's prime minister made Nato reinforcements a condition of keeping his troops there.

"Urgent changes are required now to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a failing or failed state," cautioned one report from the Atlantic Council of the United States, led by retired Marine Corps general James Jones.

Taliban control of the sparsely populated parts of Afghanistan was "increasing", it said, while civil reforms, reconstruction, and development work had not "gained

Suspected US missile hit al-Qaeda den Say Pakistani officials

AFP, Islamabad

A group of al-Qaeda militants, including seven Arabs and six Central Asians, were killed this week when a suspected US missile hit their hideout in Pakistan, security officials said yesterday.

The missile hit a house in the troubled tribal district of North Waziristan late Monday, but the Pakistani army has so far given no information about the incident.

Residents had reported that a pilotless drone aircraft of the type operated by US-led coalition forces based in Afghanistan was seen flying over the area shortly before the strike, near the town of Mir Ali.

"This compound was targeted on intelligence intercepts that it was used by foreign al-Qaeda militants," a senior security official told AFP, citing intelligence reports from local residents.

"After intercepts it was struck by a missile from across the border. Seven Arabs and six central Asians were killed."

Ex-Pak army officers call for Musharraf to go

AFP, Islamabad

A group of retired Pakistani military officers yesterday urged President Pervez Musharraf to step down and hand over power to the chief justice he sacked nearly three months ago.

The demand came at a meeting of the Pakistan Ex-Servicemen Society in Islamabad, the latest show of dissent against former army chief Musharraf by the group of 200 retired generals, air marshals and other officers.

"Musharraf should step down and hand over power to Justice (Iftikhar Muhammad) Chaudhry, who is still constitutional chief justice," former Pakistan Air Force chief Asghar Khan told reporters.

He said Chaudhry -- who was sacked by Musharraf on November 3 under a state of emergency and is still under house arrest -- should form a neutral caretaker government to supervise free and fair elections next month.

"We do not recognise any electoral process under Musharraf and the present election commission,"

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Khan said, adding that another senior former judge, Rana Bhagwandas, should be appointed election commissioner.

Last week more than 100 senior officers from the society issued an open letter calling on Musharraf to quit.

Former army chief General Mirza Aslam Beg, who headed the military from 1988 to 1991, said Musharraf had tarnished the image of the armed forces and called on all ex-servicemen to help restore it.

"We should also work together to strengthen democracy by removing the only impediment in its way -- Pervez Musharraf," he told reporters on Thursday.

Lawyers held nationwide protests and burned an effigy of Musharraf on Thursday in protest at the continued detention of Chaudhry.

Meanwhile, thousands of Pakistani lawyers burned an effigy of President Pervez Musharraf during nationwide protests Thursday to press for the release of the country's deposed chief justice, witnesses said.

19 killed in Istanbul factory blast

AP, Istanbul

An explosion at an unlicensed fireworks factory in Istanbul killed 19 people and injured nearly 70 others Thursday, an official said.

"The blast was caused by the fireworks," Gov. Muammer Guler said. He ruled out terrorism, and

said an investigation was under way.

Guler said there had been a small fire on the fourth floor of the building before the explosion occurred. NTV television quoted him as saying 19 people died.

The dead included eight people who had gathered in the street to watch the fire, Guler said.

Second lawmaker killed amid Kenya unrest

UN, African leaders press for end to bloodshed

AFP, Nairobi

A Kenyan opposition MP was shot dead by a policeman yesterday, raising fears of a fresh surge in post-election violence as negotiators for the country's feuding leaders met for the first time.

The incident followed the killing of another opposition lawmaker on Tuesday, which sparked violent unrest in flashpoint western regions and Nairobi slums.

Opposition leader Raila Odinga, who insists President Mwai Kibaki cheated him of victory in December's presidential elections, said the killings were "part of a plot" to reduce his Orange Democratic Movement's (ODM) majority in parliament.

The lawmaker killed Thursday was identified as David Kiumtai Too. A police commander said he was killed by a traffic policeman in a suburb of Eldoret in western Kenya, but added that the motive

did not appear political.

"He was with a girl who is a police officer. He was shot by another policeman believed to be her boyfriend," the commander said.

Kenyan police were given shoot-to-kill orders Wednesday in a bid to stem weeks of unrest.

Odinga called for the shoot-to-kill orders to be cancelled immediately, calling them "a sign of a government that has run amok."

With the toll from the post-poll violence nearing 1,000 and close to 300,000 people displaced, representatives of Kibaki and Odinga met for the first time together in Nairobi with former UN chief Kofi Annan.

Kibaki was in neighbouring Ethiopia to attend an African Union summit, where the current UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, urged the feuding leaders to find a peaceful way out of the turmoil.

"Kenyan leader President Kibaki and opposition leader Raila Odinga ... have a special responsi-

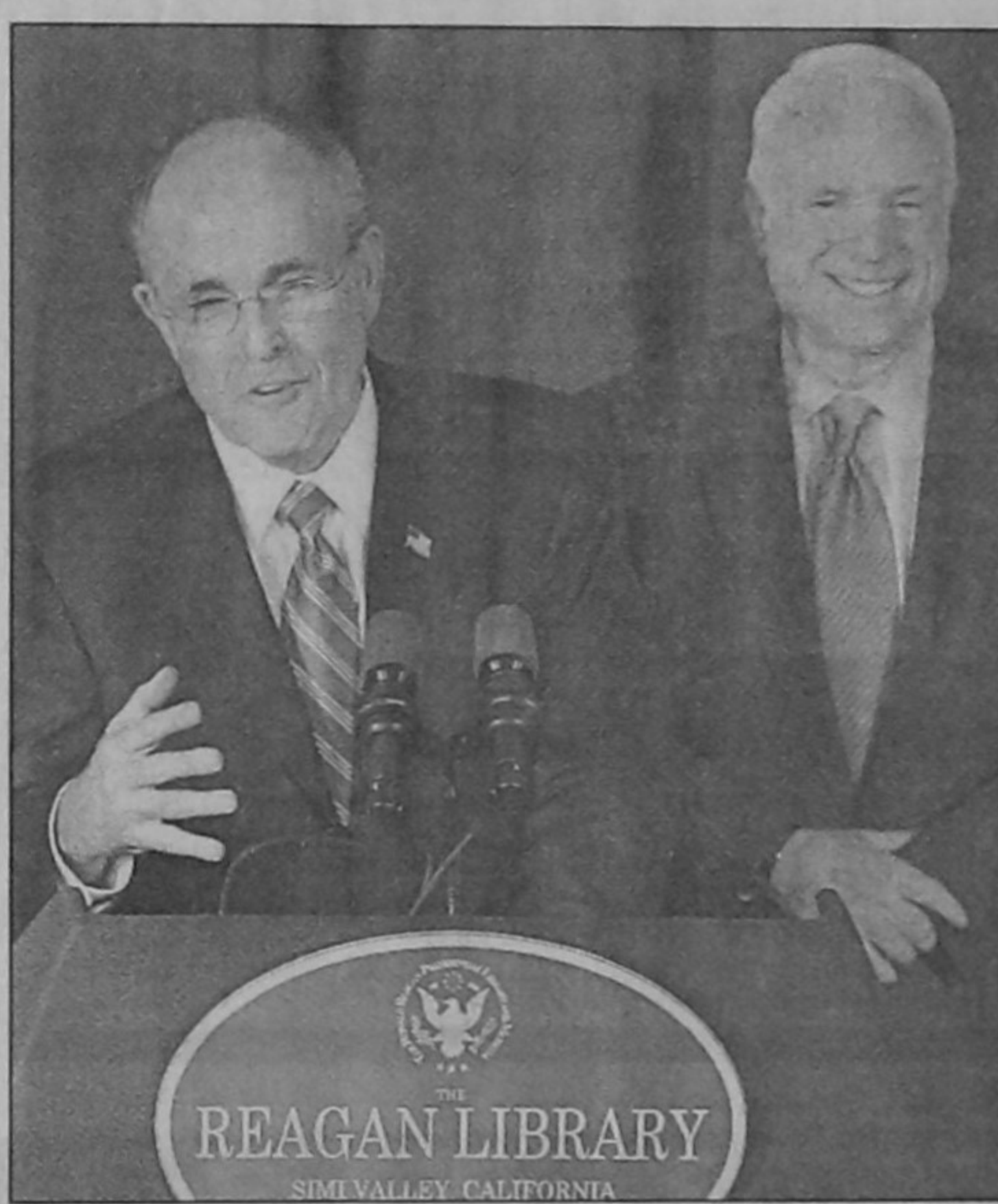
bility to solve the crisis peacefully," Ban told the assembled African heads of state.

The ODM protested that Kibaki's presence at the summit amounted to a recognition of his election, despite local and international concerns over flaws in the vote count of December 27 polls.

Protests against Kibaki's re-election quickly descended into ethnic violence as long-standing tribal and economic tensions flared up.

Members of Kibaki's Kikuyu tribe suffered heavily in the first wave of violence at the hands of Odinga's Luo tribe and other ethnic groups, but have since carried out numerous revenge attacks.

The main flashpoints in western Kenya and the Nairobi slums were calm Thursday, with most eyes on the latest mediation effort led by Annan. However, several houses were burnt along the Nakuru-Eldoret highway in western Kenya overnight.



Former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani (L) announces he is dropping out of the Republican presidential race and throwing his support behind Arizona Senator John McCain (R) during a press conference on Wednesday at the Reagan Library in Simi Valley, California.

Egypt starts talks with Hamas on Gaza border crossings

AFP, Rafah

The Egypt-Gaza border was sealed off to Palestinian vehicles on Thursday as talks began in Cairo to resolve a crisis triggered when militants blew holes in the frontier barrier last week.

Egyptian security forces and militants from the Islamist movement Hamas, which controls Gaza were working in tandem to control the frontier, an Egyptian policeman said.

"The order was given, there seems to have been an agreement," the policeman said at Saladdin Gate, one of the two crossings linking the divided border town of Rafah.

However, pedestrian traffic was still moving in both directions despite driving rain, and at Brazil Gate, Egyptian-registered vehicles laden with merchandise, were being allowed to move in both directions.

All breaches in the border barrier, which was blown up by militants on January 22 after Israel imposed a punishing blockade on

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Israeli report finds Lebanon war a 'serious failure'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's 2006 Lebanon war was a missed opportunity and a grave failure for the Jewish state, a key report said on Wednesday while sparing Prime Minister Ehud Olmert from a major roasting.

While the long-awaited report by a government-appointed commission into the conflict with Lebanon's Hezbollah militia listed a series of severe failings and shortcomings, it said Olmert had acted in Israel's best interest.

"Overall, we regard the second Lebanon war as a serious missed opportunity," commission head Elyahu Winograd said.

Olmert, who had faced mounting calls to quit ahead of the report's release, said he was "satisfied" by Winograd's findings, according to an official in his entourage.

Hezbollah, however, gloated that the report confirmed its guerrillas had defeated Israel, regarded as having the most powerful military in the Middle East.

In his report, Winograd said: "We found severe failings and flaws in the lack of strategic thinking and planning, in both the political and

the military echelons.

"The way the original decision to go to war had been made; the fact Israel went to war before it decided which option to select and without an exit strategy -- all these constituted serious failures, which affected the whole war."

"Responsibility for these failures lay, as we had stressed in the interim report, on both the political and the military echelons."

Winograd highlighted a controversial ground offensive launched in the final days of the war, when the United Nations was brokering a ceasefire agreement, saying it did not achieve its objectives.

But the retired judge said Olmert and then defence minister Amir Peretz "acted out of a strong and sincere perception of what they thought at the time was Israel's interest."

His findings come nine months after an interim inquiry found Olmert and other political and military leaders responsible for "severe failures" in the war, launched after Hezbollah seized two soldiers in a deadly cross-border raid in July 2006.

Olmert, 62, is the only senior leader criticised in the preliminary

report to have hung on to his job and has been quoted as saying he had "absolutely no intention" of resigning.

Former army chief Dan Halutz quit a year ago and Peretz was ousted from the ministry and as head of his Labour party less than two months after Winograd's interim findings.

Wednesday's report had been expected to focus on Olmert's decision to order a massive ground offensive in south Lebanon 60 hours before a UN-brokered ceasefire agreement was due to take effect on August 14.

Thirty-three Israeli soldiers were killed in the offensive launched just one hour after the final version of UN Security Council Resolution 1701 was presented to Israel.

Major Tomer Buhadana was one of those wounded during the last 48 hours of war, which in all killed 1,200 Lebanese, mostly civilians, and more than 160 Israelis, mostly soldiers.

Now Buhadana leads a group of reservists calling on Olmert to quit over the war, widely considered a failure for failing to stop Hezbollah rocket fire and retrieve the two soldiers whose fate remains unknown.

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