



Abdul Majeed, Additional Inspector General and head of Pakistani investigators probing the assassination of slain opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, shows a copy of the Scotland Yard report based on findings of Benazir assassination during a press conference in Rawalpindi yesterday.

al-Qaeda plotting attacks on Germany

AFP, Berlin

German authorities have learnt that al-Qaeda is preparing to carry out attacks in Germany, a senior official said in an interview with DieWelt newspaper on Friday.

The secretary of state in the interior ministry, August Hanning, said al-Qaeda leaders based in the border area between Pakistan and Afghanistan have "decided to carry out attacks in Germany."

"We are worried that we will not be able to foil every plot," he added. Die Welt said the federal intelligence agency and police have established that Germany's military mission in Afghanistan prompted al-Qaeda to move the country "much higher" on its list of targets.

In September 2007, two German converts to Islam and a Turkish man were arrested in the western Sauerland region on suspicion of planning to blow up US installations in Germany, including the southwestern US military airbase at Ramstein.

Afghan government must improve Says Nato chief

AFP, Vilnius

The Nato chief yesterday called on Afghanistan to improve its government and boost support for its security forces to step up the fight against the Taliban.

Speaking at a Nato defence ministers meeting dominated by the conflict in Afghanistan, Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer warned that "governance must visibly improve."

The ministers set aside a dispute over foreign troop levels in the country to discuss international aid for Afghanistan with representatives of the United Nations, European Union, World Bank and Afghanistan's Defence Minister Abdul Rahim Wardak.

"Governance must visibly improve, so that the Afghan people have trust in their leaders," the Nato chief told the meeting.

"The police need robust support to develop and they need it now. The narco-economy must be replaced by a legal, sustainable economy. And the Afghan army must get more support from Nato nations and from partners, to stand on its own feet and defend its own country," he added.

Scheffer said "Nato will play its part -- but Nato and Isaf (International Security Assistance Force) are only part of the answer."

"Our goal today will be to see how all the countries and organisations represented here today can step up our efforts and our cooperation," he said.

The UN-mandated Isaf has 43,000 troops from 40 states, but is now struggling against a renewed Taliban insurgency and Nato commanders have sought more troops and weapons.

Germany has rejected calls from the United States and Canada to

move some of its troops to the frontline in southern Afghanistan amid warnings that the dispute could harm Nato's cohesion.

But US Defence Secretary Robert Gates adopted a pragmatic line on Thursday suggesting that states which could not send more troops because of domestic politics should send equipment or non-combat troops instead.

"We are realistic about politics here in Europe," Gates told journalists. "The governments here in Europe get it, they understand the importance of Afghanistan but many of them are in coalitions and just aren't able to do certain kinds of things."

"If somebody can't send combat soldiers in certain areas because of the politics at home then perhaps they could pay for helicopters or provide helicopters," said Gates, in what appeared to be a reference to Germany.

Dozens killed in LRA attack in S Sudan

AFP, Juba

Ugandan rebels from the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) killed 136 people and looted property during an attack earlier this week in southern Sudan, a senior military officer said yesterday.

"On February 4, the LRA killed 136 people in areas in and around Kajo-Keji and looted their property," Michael Kuel, a military intelligence officer with the Joint Integrated Unit (JIU), told AFP.

The JIUs were formed as part of the 2005 north-south peace agreement in Sudan and comprise equal numbers of members of the armed forces and former southern Sudanese rebels from the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM).

"When the SPLM arrived there, these fighters fled. We are still pursuing them," Kuel added.

"Our forces are on the ground and we are doing everything to arrest the culprits but the priority now is to restore law and order," SPLM official Pajan Pal told AFP.

Strong Russia will spend on new arms race: Putin

AFP, Moscow

President Vladimir Putin heralded a wealthy Russia able to compete in a new "arms race" with a speech Friday setting long term priorities for his hand-picked successor ahead of next month's presidential election.

Putin used the televised address in an ornate Kremlin hall before Russia's ruling elite, including the full government, parliamentary leaders and top generals, to outline a roadmap up to 2020.

Putin said his "plan to bring Russia out of systemic crisis" meant the country was again "respected" and that "lawlessness is over." However more must be done in coming years to pull the economy from "extreme inefficiency" and to guard against Western pressure, said Putin, whose eight year presidency has seen a flood of energy export revenues and the return of military clout.

"There is a new turn in the arms race... Russia will always respond to this new challenge," Putin said, promising "new weapons that are qualitatively the same or better than those of other countries."

The far-ranging nature of the

speech underlined that Putin -- barred by the constitution from seeking a third consecutive term in the presidential vote and due to step down in May -- remains Russia's dominant leader.

His close ally Dmitry Medvedev, a career lawyer and bureaucrat who has never held elected office, is forecast to win by a landslide in the March 2 election where he faces little meaningful opposition.

Medvedev's main campaign message has been a promise to continue what he calls "the Putin plan."

Putin has said he may serve as prime minister if Medvedev is elected, prompting widespread speculation that the Kremlin master will retain significant influence in years to come -- possibly returning for a third, non-consecutive Kremlin term.

Putin listed "booming foreign investment, the crushing of the Chechen independence rebellion, and rising salaries as among his main achievements since taking power eight years ago."

"I know there is a lot left to do, but the course has been set," Putin said.

Domestically the biggest prob-

lems named by Putin were the need for a more modern economy and an end to widespread corruption. "You have to go to every agency with a bribe: to the firemen, the health inspection, the gynaecologists. Whom don't you have to go to? It's just terrible."

Putin also directed fire at Nato and the United States for their own military build-ups and accused unnamed Western forces of "interference in domestic political fights (which is) not only immoral but also illegal."

Putin went on to accuse Western governments of using "dishonest competition... to get themselves access to our resources."

The March 2 election pits Medvedev against Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, nationalist firebrand Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, and a barely known politician Andrei Bogdanov. Opinion polls give Medvedev between 63 and around 80 percent of support. Critics say that state-controlled resources, including national television, are being heavily manipulated to ensure that Medvedev faces no real difficulty in securing a landslide victory.

Pro-Musharraf party hit by defections

AP, Islamabad

A wave of defections from Pakistan's ruling party ahead of parliamentary elections is compounding the woes of Pervez Musharraf at a time of rampant Islamic militancy, soaring food prices and anger over the US-backed president's manoeuvring to prolong his eight years in power.

Most analysts expect the party of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto to win the most seats in the Feb. 18 vote, profiting from a sympathy vote over her Dec. 27 assassination, while a party led by another ex-premier, Nawaz Sharif, is predicted to do well in cities.

The pro-Musharraf party, Pakistan Muslim League-Q, is banking on victory in rural areas of Punjab, the largest province, which accounts for 183 of 342 National Assembly seats. But 13 National Assembly and 18 provincial assembly candidates have left the PML-Q, according to figures compiled from officials in the three main parties. They include two ministers in the outgoing Cabinet.

"I cannot go in my constituency to ask for votes in the name of the last Musharraf government. I have seen that Musharraf and his associates have lost confidence among

the public," said Mazhar Qureshi, a lawmaker for the Punjab city of Sargodha who has defected to Sharif's party.

The PML-Q defends its record and says it has promoted economic development. It also says lawmakers flitting between parties is customary in Pakistan's politics.

"It is a democratic process. People keep on changing parties. We have over 200 candidates all over Pakistan. If a few go to another party, it is not a big deal. It is not a defection in our ranks," said Kamil Ali Agha, the PML-Q's spokesman for Punjab.

Musharraf's presidency isn't at stake in this election -- he secured a new five-year term as president in a controversial parliamentary vote in October. But he could be impeached for purging the judiciary in November if opposition parties muster a two-thirds majority in the new parliament.

The election is difficult to call. There are no reliable opinion polls, and the opposition claims the vote will be rigged. But it is clear that many regard Musharraf, a key ally in the US-led war on terrorism, as an electoral liability after he declared a state of emergency and sacked top judges who threatened his dominance.



Supporters of US Democratic presidential candidate Illinois Senator Barack Obama cheer during a rally in Omaha, Nebraska on Thursday.

Hillary, Obama eye more prizes in 'Potomac Pry'

AFP, Washington

Democrats Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are setting their sights on a trio of presidential primaries on Tuesday that have gained unusual importance in the closest nomination race in recent memory.

Of little consequence in recent primaries, Washington, Maryland and Virginia have become key pawns in an electoral chessboard after Clinton and Obama shared the spoils of Super Tuesday this week, forcing them into a protracted battle for the Democratic nomination.

Virginia is the biggest prize of the lot with 83 delegates, while Maryland counts 70 of them. The US capital, which is not part of any state, offers 15 delegates.

The three primaries are of no consequence to the Republicans since John McCain emerged as the likely nominee on Thursday after his top rival, Mitt Romney, dropped out.

But with little separating the Democratic contenders following the 24-state Super Tuesday, Clinton and Obama are campaigning hard for what has been billed as the "Potomac Primary" -- named after the river separating Virginia, Maryland and Washington.



Gen David H Petraeus (R), commander of Multi-National Forces in Iraq, greeting actress Angelina Jolie (L), UN goodwill ambassador, at his office in Baghdad on Thursday. Jolie visited Iraq on a humanitarian mission and met top officials urging them to help people displaced by the war.

30 feared killed in Kashmir avalanche

PTI, Srinagar

At least 30 people were feared killed in a snow avalanche that hit a cluster of houses at Gulabbagh near lower Munda on Srinagar-Jammu National Highway on Friday.

Official sources said locals informed authorities about the mishap after which the army and police have rushed to the spot and launched a rescue operation.

Bodies of three persons - two men and a 12-year-old girl - have been recovered so far, the sources said.

Two of the three victims were identified as Shabina and Mohammad Shafi Gujjar of Gulabbagh-Gujjarparati. It is the first time that an avalanche has struck Gulabbagh.

On this day in 2005, a snow storm hit Walteng near Anantnag, claiming over 200 lives.

Iran starts up advanced centrifuges

AP, Vienna, Austria

Iran's nuclear project has developed its own version of an advanced centrifuge to churn out enriched uranium much faster than its previous machines, diplomats and experts said Thursday.

They said that few of the IR-2 centrifuges were operating and that testing appeared to be in an early phase, with the new machines rotating without processing any uranium gas.

More significant, the officials said, is the fact that Iran appears to have used know-how and equipment bought on the nuclear black market in combination with domestic ingenuity to overcome daunting technical difficulties and create highly advanced centrifuges.

Iran's uranium enrichment work has raised concerns in Washington and other Western capitals because it can produce the radioactive material needed for nuclear bombs. Tehran says it is only pursuing lower-level enrichment to make fuel for atomic reactors that will generate electricity.

Iran is under two sets of UN

Security Council sanctions for refusing to suspend uranium enrichment, which it started developing during nearly two decades of covert nuclear activity built on illicit purchases and revealed only five years ago.

That secrecy heightened suspicions about Iran's intent, but Iranian leaders argued the country has a right to run a peaceful enrichment programme and dismissed the UN demands, saying they planned to expand the project rather than freeze it.

Up until recent weeks, Iran had publicly focused on working with P1 centrifuges outmoded machines that it acquired on the black market in the 1980s. Workers set up more than 3,000 of the machines in the large underground hall near Natanz, a city about 300 miles south of Tehran.

But diplomats told The Associated Press that Iranian experts now are testing a small number of more advanced IR-2 machines. They described it as a hybrid of the P-2 centrifuge once peddled on the black market by A.Q. Khan, the scientist who oversaw Pakistan's development of nuclear weapons.

Hamas rejects Abbas truce offer

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas offered to help negotiate a ceasefire as Israel pounded Gaza on Thursday, killing seven people days after a suicide bombing claimed by the Strip's Hamas rulers.

Hamas promptly rejected the offer, with spokesman Fawzi Barham branding it a "blackmail attempt against the Palestinian people whom (Abbas) has left to be massacred."

Escalating violence has now seen 20 Palestinians, mostly militants, killed in Israeli strikes on Gaza and several Israelis, including two young children, wounded by militant rocket attacks during the past week.

Abbas offered to help broker a ceasefire, his spokesman said, amid fears that the violence could undermine recently revived peace talks.

"President Abbas is prepared to try to work towards a mutual ceasefire with Israel to stop the daily slaughter confronting the Palestinian people in Gaza," Nabil Abu Rudeina told AFP.

Abbas has repeatedly condemned both Palestinian rocket fire and Israeli strikes on Gaza, but he has little if any authority over the territory from which his security forces were ousted by Hamas in June 2007.

Israeli government spokesman Avi Pazner said the government had not yet received the offer, but said it was up to Hamas to end the fighting.

"The most simple thing is for Hamas to end its attacks against Israel and then we will not have to take measures to respond to them," he told AFP.

In one air strike on Thursday four militants -- three from the armed wing of Hamas and another from Islamic Jihad -- were killed near Jabalya in northern Gaza by a missile fired from a drone.

A second air raid killed two militants near Tuffah, also north of Gaza City, and wounded four more, two of them seriously, medics said.

A teacher was also killed when a tank shell hit a high school in the northern town of Beit Hanun, medics said.

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