



Pakistani paramilitary soldiers patrol the streets of Karachi yesterday, on the eve of the country's general elections. The government stepped up security for the polls after the final day of campaigning was marred by the deadliest attack since the assassination of former premier Benazir Bhutto late last year.

Sharif warns of chaos if Pak polls rigged

AFP, Lahore

Pakistan's two-time former premier and key opposition figure Nawaz Sharif warned Sunday on election eve that the polls would be "massively rigged" and could plunge the country into chaos.

Speaking ahead of Monday's parliamentary elections seen as crucial to future stability in this nuclear-armed nation, the leader of the Pakistan Muslim League-N party claimed to have compiled extensive evidence of electoral fraud.

"I think it is more than clear that a massive rigging plan is in place, it has been implemented," Sharif told reporters in the political hub of Lahore.

If vote fraud denied victory to his party and the Pakistan People's

Party (PPP) -- which was led by Benazir Bhutto until her death in a suicide bomb attack in December -- Sharif said unrest could erupt in Pakistan.

"It could turn into a very chaotic situation and lead to some sort of anarchy," he said.

Sharif said he and Bhutto's husband and successor Asif Ali Zardari had sat down on Saturday and agreed to meet on Tuesday or Wednesday in Islamabad to assess the election results and decide what action to take.

"One thing is certain, by the grace of God -- that the two of us, we and the People's Party, must win more than (a) simple majority," he said.

"If we are deprived of that, that means massive rigging has taken place. And I think both of us will then protest and protest very

strongly... protest on the streets and also in the parliament."

Sharif was twice prime minister of Pakistan before being ousted in a coup in 1999 by current President Pervez Musharraf, whose political future hangs on the result of Monday's election.

Musharraf has insisted that the polls will be free and fair, and the man seen as his choice for prime minister -- Chaudhry Pervaiz Elahi of the pro-Musharraf branch of the Muslim League -- refuted Sharif's claims.

"All charges are frivolous and we are going to win the election tomorrow on the basis of our five year's performance," Elahi told AFP.

As president, Musharraf is not contesting the elections, but he faces impeachment if the opposition wins more than two-thirds of

Female suicide bomber kills 3 in Baghdad

AP, AFP, Baghdad

A female suicide bomber blew herself up in a predominantly Shia area in central Baghdad yesterday, killing at least three people while three others were killed in a car bomb blast in Mosul, police said.

Police in the Masbah commercial area suspected the woman, who was in a black Islamic robe, and asked her to stop but she fled to a nearby building, said an officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity as he was not authorised to release information.

The attack was one of two bombings in Iraq on Sunday morning.

In the northern city of Mosul, a bomb in a parked car detonated, killing a police officer and two civilians, police there said.

The slain policeman was examining the car, which was parked in the eastern section of Mosul, 225 miles north of Baghdad, when it was exploded remotely, a police officer said.

Musharraf's loss could be world's gain in fight against al-Qaeda

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf faces a no-win situation in today's elections, but his loss could be the world's gain in the fight against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, analysts said.

The opposition has pledged mass protests if Musharraf's allies win the polls -- while if his enemies seize control of parliament, the key US ally in the "war on terror" faces impeachment.

Yet with Western officials looking beyond Musharraf to his replacement as army chief when it comes to security matters, fears that nuclear-armed Pakistan would be worse off without him could be unfounded.

"Musharraf is in a no-win situation," Pakistani political analyst and newspaper columnist Shafiqat Mahmood told AFP.

But his ouster would not affect the war on terror, it might even be strengthened. A legitimate government will have popular support in

the war on terrorism, which you do not have with Musharraf sitting there," he said.

Musharraf stood down as chief of Pakistan's 600,000-strong army in November, shortly after imposing a state of emergency and sacking the judiciary to push through his contested re-election as president.

The army has shown no sign of open dissent against its former leader, but new military supremo Ashfaq Kayani has reversed Musharraf's policy of involving the military in politics by withdrawing officers from civilian roles.

The taciturn, chain-smoking Kayani is widely respected in Western circles and is seen as a safe bet to pursue Pakistan's difficult campaign against al-Qaeda and Taliban militants.

Terrorism expert Rohan Gunaratna, the author of "Inside al-Qaeda: Global Network of Terror," said there was no likelihood of any rollback in Pakistan's commitment.

"Whosoever comes to power, Pakistan's military and intelligence community will play the lead role in fighting terrorism," Gunaratna, head of the Singapore-based International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, told AFP.

"Musharraf is the architect of Pakistan's policy in fighting terrorism and extremism but this fight will continue even if he is not in power, because it is the biggest threat the country faces today," he said.

Musharraf's own political future is far less certain. Monday's vote is not a presidential election, but analysts say it will serve as a referendum on a leader a series of surveys show is more unpopular than ever.

Pollsters meanwhile say the Pakistan Muslim League-Q, which backed him in his last term in office, is trailing in third place behind Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party and the party of former premier Nawaz Sharif.

Kenya rejects US pressure over power-sharing deal

AFP, Nairobi

The Kenyan government Sunday issued a veiled warning to the United States not to put "a gun to anybody's head", on the eve of US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's visit to push for a power-sharing deal.

Rice is due in Nairobi on Monday for meetings with President Mwai Kibaki and opposition leader Raila Odinga, whose dispute over who won the December 27 presidential election plunged once stable Kenya into violence in which more than 1,000 people have died.

"We encourage our friends to support us, to encourage us, but not to make any mistake by putting a gun to anybody's head and say 'either or' because that cannot work," Foreign Minister Moses Wetangula told reporters.

US President George W. Bush called for a power-sharing deal at the start of his Africa tour on Saturday and said he was sending Rice to Kenya to support Kofi Annan's mediation, which appears deadlocked over a proposed coalition government.

Abbas-Olmert to meet tomorrow

AFP, Ramallah

Israel's Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas will meet tomorrow for the next round of revived peace talks, a Palestinian official said on Sunday.

Prime Minister Olmert and president Abbas will meet once more in Jerusalem on Tuesday," senior Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat told AFP.

A senior Israeli official, speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity, said the talks would be on either Tuesday or Wednesday.

The official added that in parallel meetings between Israel's Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni and top Palestinian negotiator Ahmed Qorei the two sides have "made progress and are discussing core issues."

Last month negotiators began discussing the thorniest issues of the decades-old Middle East conflict -- the fate of Jerusalem, West Bank settlements, final borders, and the issue of Palestinian refugees.

But last week Abbas bemoaned the lack of progress in the peace talks, which were formally relaunched at a US conference in November after a near seven-year hiatus.



US Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee (2-L), co-chair of the Congressional Pakistan Caucus addresses media representatives at the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) offices in Islamabad yesterday as PPP information secretary Sherry Rehman (L) and PPP senator Anwar Baig (2-R) look on. Jackson Lee attended the offices of the PPP to sign the book of condolences for Benazir.

Major EU nations join US in championing Kosovo

AFP, Brussels

Four major European Union nations are expected to swiftly back a declaration of independence by Kosovo, although some fellow member states with their own separatists in mind oppose the move.

Despite Serbia's refusal to let go of its largely ethnic-Albanian territory, Britain, France, Germany and Italy, along with the United States, were expected on Monday to formally endorse an announcement of independence expected from Kosovo's parliament later Sunday.

The move is strongly opposed by Belgrade as well as its ally Russia. Some of the 27 EU nations will also oppose the setting up of a new Kosovo state, at least in the short term.

Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain are among them, while others like Malta and Portugal would prefer that Kosovo's future be decided in the UN Security Council.

With veto-wielding Russia

opposed, there is no chance of a UN Security Council resolution formalising Kosovo's independence.

Some see Kosovo as potentially setting a dangerous precedent of separatist movements getting their way, despite reassurances from Brussels that Kosovo is a unique case.

Cyprus is already a split island, with a Turkey-recognised statelet in the north, and Spain has long been confronted with Basque and Catalan nationalists.

"We do not support a unilateral declaration of independence," Spain's Deputy Prime Minister Maria Teresa Fernandez de la Vega said on local radio Saturday.

"We think that... it should have been in agreement with the various parties, which is not the case, or in line with international standards, that is to say with a (UN) Security Council resolution."

All EU foreign ministers are due to meet in Brussels on Monday with the issue at the top of their agenda.

The ministers from the four main countries supporting Kosovo

Israel hits Gaza as PM pledges protection from rockets

Four more Palestinians killed

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli troops killed four Palestinians, three of them militants, in its latest assault on the Gaza Strip yesterday as Prime Minister Ehud Olmert unveiled plans to protect nearby homes from rockets.

Troops supported by helicopters moved into the southern Gaza Strip overnight, killing a civilian and three militants from the armed wing of the Islamist Hamas movement that has ruled the Strip since June, medics said.

"The army is operating in the south of the Gaza Strip against the infrastructures of terrorist organisations," an Israeli military spokesman told AFP. "We attacked armed men."

The latest deaths came as Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert unveiled plans to reinforce Israeli homes near the border with Gaza, which have come under near-daily rocket and mortar attack in recent months.

"I will convene a ministerial committee on the issue of reinforcing homes in the area of Sderot and the area surrounding Gaza,"

Olmert said at the weekly cabinet meeting, referring to the southern Israeli town most hit by rockets.

"It is part of several steps Israel is taking to counter Qassam (rocket) fire," including continuing military operations and economic sanctions.

"Fifteen schools are already completely secure, and today we will decide on proposals which will be brought for government approval next week and are aimed at completing reinforcement measures," Olmert said.

The proposal would protect some 8,000 houses at a cost of around 97 million dollars (66 million euros), a senior official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

This new project will cover the reinforcement of 8,000 of the 10,500 homes within a range of 7 kilometres (4.3 miles) from the Gaza border, including all the houses within 4.5 kilometres (2.8 miles), said the official.

Until now the government has agreed to pay only for the part reinforcement of homes in areas vulnerable to fire from Palestinian militants in Gaza.



Afghan policemen and bystanders inspect the site of a bomb blast in Kandahar yesterday. A bomb that tore through a dog fighting match in Afghanistan's southern city of Kandahar has killed 80 people and wounded many more, provincial governor Assadullah Khalid said.

Obama, Hillary spar over role of 'superdelegates'

AFP, Washington

The US presidential race heated up yesterday after White House hopeful Senator Hillary Clinton clashed with rival Barack Obama over how the Democratic Party should choose its presidential nominee.

Trailing Obama in the nomination race after losing eight straight contests to the Illinois senator, Hillary Clinton and her advisers suggested hundreds of "superdelegates" -- party activists and elected lawmakers attending the Democratic convention in August -- were not bound by the results of voting in their states, US media reported.

"Superdelegates are a part of the process," Hillary Clinton was quoted as saying by the Washington Post.

"They are supposed to exercise independent judgment," Hillary Clinton said on Saturday while campaigning in Wisconsin, which holds primaries on Tuesday.

Hillary Clinton and her advisers made clear their view that the 795 unelected superdelegates could clinch the nomination for her even

if Obama prevails among voters in primaries and caucuses.

Obama, who has won the popular vote so far, has argued that superdelegates should back the candidate who wins the most delegates based on primaries and caucuses in states across the country.

He now has a slight lead in pledged delegates after a string of victories and hopes to extend his winning streak in Wisconsin and in caucuses in Hawaii on Tuesday.

But senior Hillary Clinton aide Harold Ickes told reporters the superdelegates should exercise "their best judgment in the interests of the party and the country."

Ickes predicted that after all primaries are concluded on June 7, "she (Clinton) will be neck and neck with Mr Obama ... Then she will wrap up the nomination."

Ickes also argued the results of delegates from Michigan and Florida should count even though the candidates agreed not to campaign in those states. The national Democratic Party stripped the two states of delegates after they flouted party rules and moved up the date of their primaries.

Lanka military kills 20 more Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan forces killed at least 20 Tamil Tiger guerrillas in clashes in the north of the island at the weekend, defence officials said yesterday.

Government forces backed by warplanes attacked Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) along the front lines in the north on Saturday, an official said.

He said the air force had made attacks at targets inside rebel-held territory over the weekend, but details of casualties were not immediately known.

There was no immediate comment from the Tigers who are leading a drawn out campaign for independence.

Earlier Sri Lanka's air force kept up air strikes on suspected Tamil Tiger rebel targets in the island's north for the third day in a row on Saturday, the defence ministry said.

It did not give details of casualties or damage but said a rebel coordination centre in Mannar on the northwest coast was hit.

The air attacks are part of an escalation of operations by the government, which pulled out of a Norwegian-brokered truce with the ethnic guerrillas last month.

"This (rebel centre) was located in the jungle and was a threat to the current army operations in Vavuniya and Mannar districts," the ministry said in a statement.

There was no immediate comment from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but the rebels said a raid on Thursday against the guerrilla stronghold of Mullaitivu in the northeast wounded five civilians.

The latest defence ministry figures show that at least 1,268 rebels have been killed by security forces this year. The military has placed its own losses during the same period at 70 soldiers and police killed.

Both sides are known to offer wildly different casualty claims that cannot be independently verified as journalists and human rights workers are barred from frontline and rebel-held areas.



Kosovo Albanian musicians play music in Pristina yesterday. After a night of jubilant celebrations, Kosovo becomes the world's newest state as it declared independence from Serbia on Sunday with US and European support.

India to relax arms purchase rules

AFP, New Delhi

India, which plans to purchase billions of dollars worth of military hardware in the next five years, will soon relax strict rules on arms imports, officials say.

A new Defence Procurement Policy, or DPP, will be unveiled by April, Defence Minister AK Antony said Saturday at a defence fair in the capital.

"We have been fine-tuning and improving the DPP based on periodical reviews (and) the current procurement procedure is also under review to make it more transparent and user-friendly," he said.

Many of the major players in the race to grab a share of arms deals worth 30 billion dollars by 2012 see the current so-called offset policy part of the DPP as restricting growth.

The policy stipulates foreign firms selling products to India must re-invest up to 50 percent of the total amount through tie-ups and services in the country.