

Independent judiciary will soon be restored

Hopes sacked Pak judge as lawyers protest

AFP, Islamabad

An independent judiciary will soon be restored in Pakistan, the country's deposed chief justice said Thursday, as thousands of lawyers and others denounced an embattled President Pervez Musharraf.

Police fired tear gas and baton charged lawyers during a demonstration in the southern port city of Karachi. They said nine lawyers were arrested during the rally.

In eastern Lahore about 2,000 lawyers and political party supporters chanted "Go Musharraf, go" and "Restore independence of judiciary" during a rally.

"Victory is not far now and we'll achieve our goal for an independent judiciary soon," Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, sacked from his post of chief justice by Musharraf in November, said in a telephone address to lawyers at the Sindh province High Court.

They were his first comments

since Monday's parliamentary elections, which analysts and diplomats say have left the political future of Musharraf in doubt.

When Musharraf declared a state of emergency on November 3, he sacked 63 judges including then-Chief Justice Chaudhry, who was also detained at his home.

The independent-minded Chaudhry became a pro-democracy icon when he fought back against Musharraf's initial attempt to oust him in March 2007 over allegations of misconduct and abuse of power.

Lawyers around the country have held regular Thursday demonstrations since the judges' dismissal and have threatened a large-scale march on Islamabad next month if they are not reinstated.

In his address, Chaudhry said Musharraf's state of emergency "in fact was a martial law". He added there were no constitutional hurdles to returning the judges to their

posts.

"I was deposed by an executive order and I can be restored by an executive order. There is no need of two-thirds majority of the parliament," Chaudhry said.

During his 35-minute speech the lawyers cheered, demanded Musharraf's resignation and called "Long live Iftikhar".

Opponents say Musharraf imposed emergency rule amid fears that the Supreme Court, under Chaudhry, was set to overturn his victory in a presidential election the previous month.

During the Karachi demonstration police baton-charged and fired tear gas at about 100 lawyers wearing suits and ties.

"We have arrested a few people and police had to use tear gas to disperse lawyers who were trying to hold a rally," senior police official Tahir Naved told AFP.

Lawyers later rallied outside Chaudhry's house in Islamabad.

Ex-Pak minister foresees fresh polls in 3 months

THE DAWN, Islamabad

Former federal minister and self-proclaimed Farzand-i-Pakistan Sheikh Rashid Ahmed, who is considered to be close aide of President Pervez Musharraf, on Wednesday predicted fresh elections any time soon, claiming that the new parliament and president could not co-exist for long.

"You will see a cat and mouse game starting within three months," he told reporters here at a local hotel without explaining who will be the cat or mouse.

However, he made it a point to clarify that the president wanted to continue with the new set-up but "the masters of gloom and crisis" were not willing to see this relationship flourish.

The press conference he called seems more of an attempt to dispel rumours by letting the world know of his presence at home and open-hearted acceptance of the defeat he faced in the February 18 elections.

He also announced to continue his political career by forming his own political party instead of quitting it, but after consulting PML-Q President Chaudhry

Shujaat Hussain.

He conceded that Lal Masjid operation had bitten the PML-Q badly and led to the resounding defeat of the party in the elections, adding that "being in the government it was very difficult for us to ask for vote when the voters were without gas, electricity or had no wheat flour or sugar in their homes."

He, however, averted a direct question that election defeat of the King's party was the result of toeing President Pervez Musharraf's policies.

In an advice to the parties which won and were going to form a parliamentary government, he said it was time to show political maturity instead of choosing confrontation, saying the people of Pakistan had given their mandate against the US policies and therefore the ball was now in their court to honour the responsibility vested with them by the people.

To him, Nawaz Sharif's PML-N had no political role in the new set-up despite performing fairly well by bagging 67 seats in the national assembly, thus hinting that the PPP might form government without the PML-N in their folds.

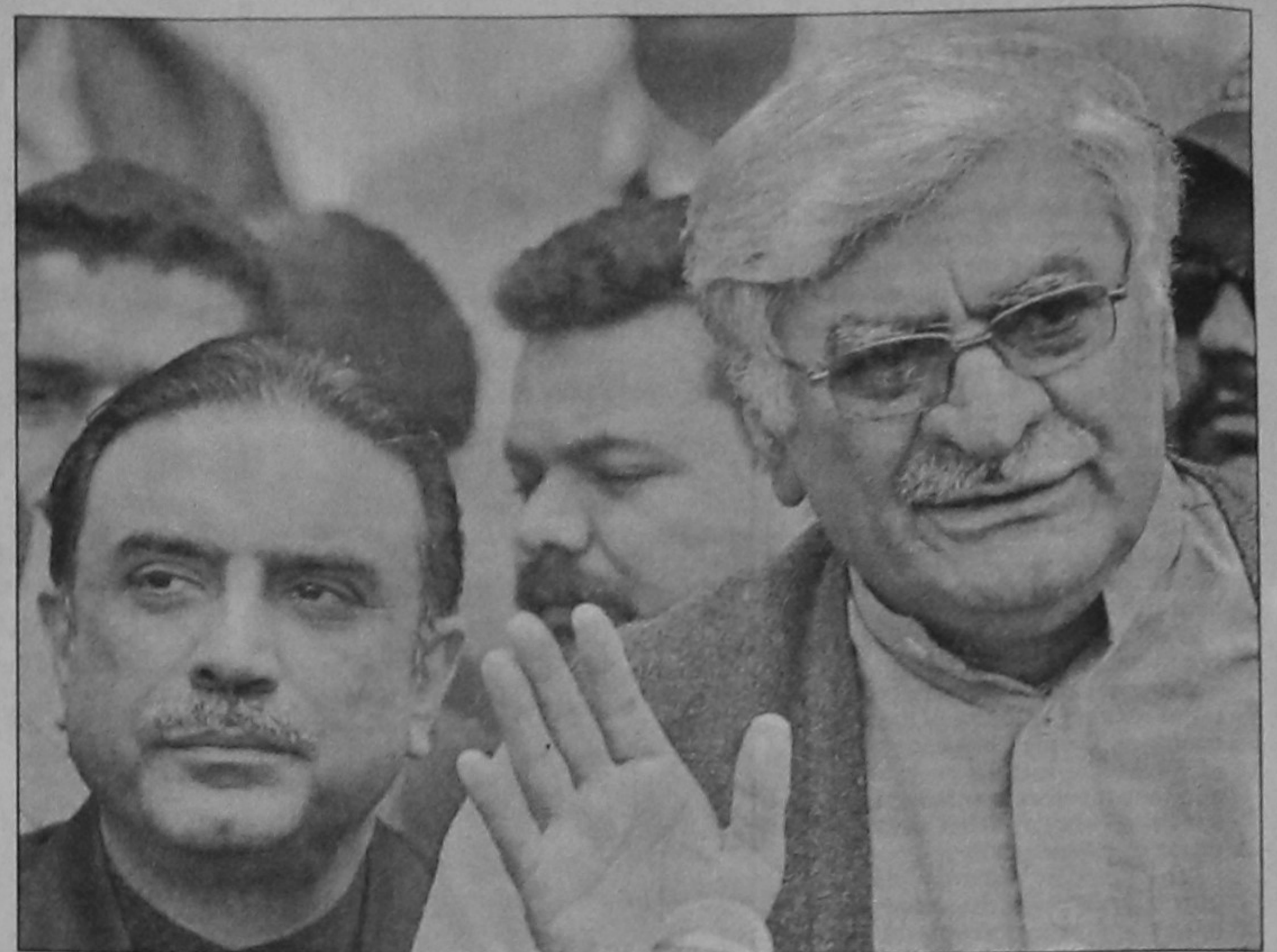


PHOTO: AFP

Widower of slain former Pakistani premier Benazir Bhutto, Asif Ali Zardari (L), and the chief of the Awami National Party (ANP), Asfandiyar Wali Khan speak at a joint press conference after their meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Zardari is meeting with opposition leaders including former premier Nawaz Sharif on a coalition that could topple Pakistan's US-allied president Pervez Musharraf.

Pak moderate urges foreign aid to keep Islamists on run

AFP, Charsadda

The leader of a Pakistani secular party hailed its election win over Muslim hardliners as a triumph for moderate forces, but called for international aid to stamp out militancy for good.

Asfandiyar Wali Khan, chief of the Awami National Party (ANP), an ethnic Pashtun group, said economic assistance and political reconciliation were the key to success in a region where al-Qaeda and Taliban militants are holed up.

The ANP could form part of a national coalition government after it deposed the ruling fundamentalists in troubled North West Frontier Province in Monday's elections. The poll also saw defeat for allies of President Pervez Musharraf.

"The voters have made it clear that they do not want wars and militancy," Khan told AFP at an interview on Wednesday at his palatial house in the remote town of Charsadda, as armed police stood guard.

"The foremost priority for us now is to restore peace in this province, which is now known worldwide for producing extremists and terrorists," Khan said.



PHOTO: AFP

An anti-Musharraf lawyer throws a tear gas shell towards police during a protest rally in Karachi yesterday. Police fired tear gas in Karachi as lawyers in Pakistan opposed to President Pervez Musharraf took to the streets in the first protests since Monday's elections.

US hopes to keep working with Musharraf with new Pakistan govt

AFP, Brussels

Washington is hoping to keep working with President Pervez Musharraf and whatever government emerges following Pakistan's election, US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher said yesterday.

His comments came as the widower of assassinated former Pakistani premier Benazir Bhutto prepared for talks with fellow opposition leader Nawaz Sharif on a coalition that could topple the country's US-allied president.

"We look forward to working with whoever emerges as prime minister, we look forward to working with President Musharraf in his new role," said Boucher, who is Condoleezza Rice's deputy for south and Central Asian affairs.

"He's now a civilian president" having given up his military role, he told reporters during a visit to Brussels.

"With a civilian prime minister emerging in the country they are going to have to settle into what their futures and responsibilities are, what they want to undertake each in their own position."

On Wednesday US President George W. Bush had declined to

discuss the political fate of Musharraf, amid stepped up calls following the opposition's sweeping victory for the staunch US ally's resignation.

Musharraf has refused to quit.

Boucher also hailed the Pakistan election as one that the Pakistan people "can be proud of".

One of the noteworthy points that arose from the voting, he said, was that "the Islamic parties, the religious parties didn't do very well."

The good showing of "some of the more moderate and nationalist" parties in the restive North-West frontier region will have to be taken into account as the government is formed, he said.

Boucher stressed the United States' commitment "to help Pakistan with education, with economic growth, with healthcare and with providing security for its people."

And he voiced confidence that Washington would be able "to work with the new government on all these things".

Musharraf has been backed for most of his time in office by the United States as a key ally against Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

Govt pushes Swiss case to prosecute Zardari

Corruption case against PPP leader resurrected

THE GUARDIAN, London

The battle for power in Pakistan took a fresh twist Wednesday when the government reinvigorated a Swiss corruption case against the opposition leader Asif Zardari on the eve of post-election power sharing talks that threaten President Pervez Musharraf.

Government lawyers urged a court in Geneva to prosecute Zardari - whose Pakistan People's party won the most seats in Monday's election - on 10-year-old charges of stashing \$55m in kickbacks in a Swiss bank account.

The move was seen as a pressure tactic against Zardari, the husband of the assassinated Benazir Bhutto, as he prepared to start negotiations later today for a coalition government with the second-placed opposition leader, Nawaz Sharif, who has campaigned to oust Musharraf.

Despite a massive anti-Musharraf factor in Pakistan's general election, the retired army chief rejected calls for his resignation from the presidency, indicating that he would serve out his five-year term of office. His staunch ally, the

US, urged the opposition to work with him.

The Swiss case against Zardari struck a "reconciliation" deal with Bhutto under which all corruption charges would be dropped. But since her assassination on December 27, and this week's election victory, all bets appear to be off.

"There has been no ruling in 10 years. Why? The answer is simple - because this is all political," Zardari's lawyer, Saverio Lembo, said.

Musharraf's political survival could depend on preventing a united opposition front that, with enough votes in the new parliament, could impeach him. To do so he may try to exploit differences between Sharif and Zardari.

Sharif wants Musharraf to go and for senior judges who were sacked by the military leader last November to be reinstated. But Zardari's PPP has taken a softer line, keeping open the possibility of working with Musharraf and remaining ambiguous about the position of the former chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, who is currently under

house arrest. Addressing the media outside his Islamabad home last night, Zardari said both issues would be solved by the next parliament. "Parliament will decide which president it can work with and which president it cannot," he said.

The negotiations starting today will be complex and possibly slow. Under the constitution there is no time limit for forming a government.

On Wednesday the American ambassador, Anne Patterson, held a long meeting with Zardari. Afterwards he denied that she had tried to pressure him to work with Musharraf. "I don't think the diplomatic corps works on political lines. They do not give political positions," he said.

President George Bush, on a trip to Ghana, deemed the elections "fair" and said he hoped the new government would work with the US. "We need Pakistan as an important ally," he said. "We've got interests in helping make sure there's no safe haven from which people can plot and plan attacks against the United States of America and Pakistan."

Polls boycott hits shaky Nepal peace process

AFP, Kathmandu

Ethnic protesters blockading Nepal's capital stepped up their campaign for more political power yesterday saying they would boycott elections, dealing a fresh blow to the country's shaky peace process.

Election officials said ethnic Mahadhesi parties from the south, who claim to represent nearly half of Nepal's population, missed Wednesday's deadline to register candidates for key polls on April 10.

The elections are for an assembly that will rewrite Nepal's constitution, the climax of a peace deal between mainstream parties and former Maoist rebels that ended a decade of civil war.

"I don't know what the government is thinking about holding the elections without Mahadhesi parties and people," Rajendra

Mahato, the leader of the United Democratic Mahadhesi Front (UDMF), told AFP.

The UDMF argues that people in the Mahadhesi-dominated southern Terai region have long been treated as second-class citizens in Nepal, where hill-origin elites dominate politics, the security forces and business.

"For us Mahadhesi people, the election will not make any sense if we are not committed certain things before the polls," Mahato said.

Mahadhesi protesters blockading Nepal's capital said Thursday they were in talks with the government to try and end unrest that threatens to disrupt crucial polls and damage the country's shaky peace process.

"Informal talks and sharing of notes have been taking place and we are more positive than in previous days," Hridayesh Tripathi, a

UDMF leader, told AFP.

But he added that "government suppression has not stopped, and on the ground the protesters are getting more agitated and aggressive."

For the past week, Mahadhesi protesters demanding more power from Kathmandu to local levels have been blocking the main road between the capital and the Indian border, the main corridor for most of the landlocked country's imports.

Their increasingly violent general strike has left Kathmandu low on fuel and other key commodities.

"We just want certain ideological commitments, so that we can have good participation and representation in the polls," said Mahato referring to compensation for anyone injured or killed in protests, the release of anyone arrested and an end to "excessive force on protesters."

Sadr's truce in doubt

AP, Baghdad

With deadly attacks against US targets increasing around Baghdad, anti-American Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr raised the possibility Wednesday that he may not renew a six-month cease-fire widely credited for helping slash violence.

The cease-fire is due to expire Saturday, and there were fears, especially among minority Sunni Arabs, that the re-emergence of al-Sadr's Mahdi Army militia could return Iraq to where it was just a year ago with sectarian death squads prowling the streets of a country on the brink of civil war.

A surge of violence would also make it all the more difficult for Iraq's Shias, Sunnis and Kurds to reach agreements on sharing power and wealth, and greatly complicate the debate in the United States on whether and how quickly to withdraw troops.

Rear Adm. Gregory Smith, a US military spokesman, blamed Iranian-backed Shia extremists for a flurry of rocket attacks including one Monday against an Iraqi housing complex near the country's main US military base that killed at least five people and wounded 16, including two US soldiers.

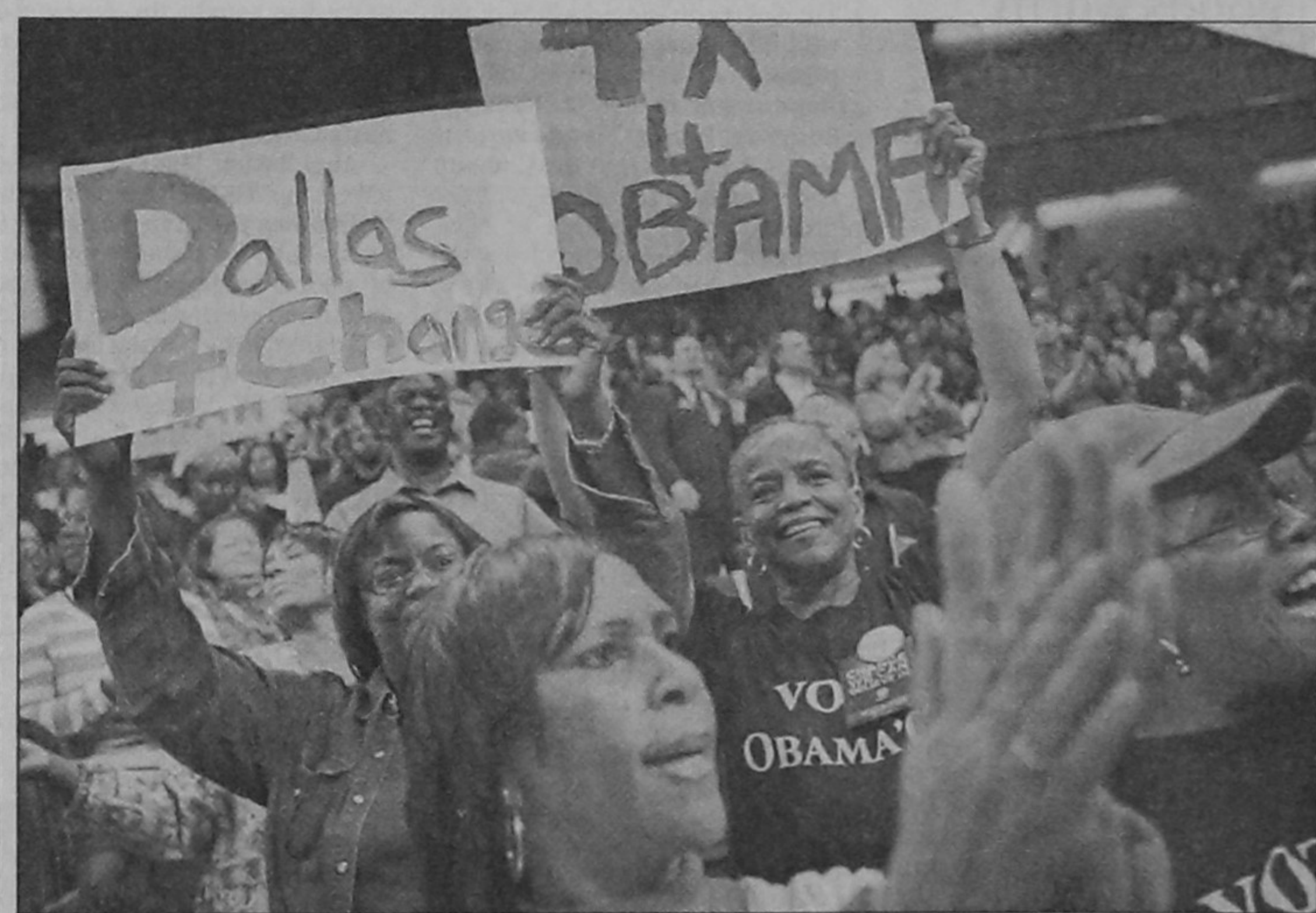


PHOTO: AFP

Supporters cheer Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama (D-IL) during a rally on Wednesday at Reunion Arena in Dallas, Texas. The junior senator from Illinois addressed thousands of people one day after he racked up his 10th consecutive win in the Democratic race for the presidential nomination.

US shoots down defunct spy satellite

AFP, Honolulu

A US Naval vessel hit a rogue spy satellite with a lone missile strike into space that appeared to have succeeded in destroying its tank of highly toxic fuel, defence officials said Wednesday.

A network of radars and satellites designed for the US missile defence system confirmed that the successful interception occurred some 247 kilometres (153 nautical miles) over the Pacific Ocean.

A senior Pentagon official said the missile appeared to have struck the targeted fuel tank containing hydrazine, which could have leaked potentially lethal toxic gas over a wide area if it had survived re-entry into the Earth's atmosphere.

"All indications are that the mission was a complete success. The missile appears to have destroyed the fuel tank. We will

need some time to confirm the extent of destruction, but it looks good," the official said.

And the missile that struck a rogue US spy satellite in space carrying toxic fuel reduced it to football-sized chunks, and the Pentagon said it had a "high degree of confidence" its fuel tank was destroyed, officials said Thursday.

General James Cartwright told reporters it would be 24-48 hours before a full confirmation would be available on the fuel tank.

The Defence Department has a "high degree of confidence we hit the tank" but "we can't say for sure," at this time, he said.

The operation raised concerns that the United States was trying to test an anti-satellite weapon, amid rising global tensions about the militarisation of space.

China responded swiftly, calling on Washington to provide more information and warning of potential international consequences.

Two Taliban commanders killed in Afghanistan

AP, Kabul

Afghan and Nato-led troops killed two regional Taliban commanders in southern Afghanistan, and an explosion in the same province claimed the life of a British soldier, officials said yesterday.

"As a result of this successful attack (on the commanders), the Taliban's networks have suffered another severe setback," said Brig Gen Carlos Branco, a spokesman for Nato's International Security Assistance Force.

The joint Nato-Afghan forces killed commander Mullah Abdul Matin and his associate, Mullah Karim Agha, in the southern province of Helmand on Monday, the alliance said in a statement.

Nato said Matin and Agha were behind several suicide bombings in Helmand, the world's largest opium poppy producing region.

US senators ask India to act now on nuke deal

AP, New Delhi

Time is running out for Indian leaders to finalize a landmark nuclear cooperation pact with the United States, three US senators said after meeting with India's prime minister.

Sen Joseph Biden, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said he told Prime Minister Manmohan Singh that "it was critical if India wanted that deal, that they move on it relatively soon, within a matter of weeks."

"You cannot run the clock out and expect us to be able to get it done," Biden said after he and Sens John Kerry, D-Massachusetts, and Chuck Hagel, R-Nebraska, met Wednesday with the Indian leader in New Delhi.

The deal, which must be approved by Congress, would reverse three decades of American anti-proliferation policy by allowing the US to send nuclear fuel and technology to India, which has been cut off from the global atomic

trade because of its refusal to sign nonproliferation treaties and its testing of nuclear weapons.

Kerry said the Senate needs to receive the deal "somewhere in May at the latest" so it has time to vote on it before the lawmakers' summer recess.

Biden, D-Delaware, said it was crucial that the current Congress vote on the deal because it was likely the next president would want to renegotiate the agreement.

Some members of Congress have expressed concern that the extra nuclear fuel could allow India to produce more atomic bombs.

India's government says the pact is vital for meeting the country's growing energy needs.

It has faced significant opposition from India's communist parties, which say the deal will strengthen ties to the US and give Washington too much influence over Indian foreign policy. Support from the communist parties is crucial for India's governing coalition.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents waded through floodwaters that submerged parts of Sorsogon City in Bicol region yesterday following heavy rains. At least 20 people were killed and more than 288,000 displaced by flash floods and landslides as heavy rain lashed the central and southern Philippines.