

Pak federal cabinet takes oath today

THE DAILY TIMES, Islamabad

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf will administer oath to 23 new federal cabinet members today at the Awan-e-Sadr.

"The authorities concerned have been issued invitation cards for the oath-taking ceremony," a senior Cabinet Division official told Daily Times on Saturday.

A source said that 11 of the 23 cabinet members would be from the Pakistan People's Party (PPP); eight from the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N); two from the Awami National Party (ANP); one from the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA); and one from among the National Assembly members from FATA.

According to the source, the cabinet members from the PPP are: Shah Mehmood Qureshi (Foreign Affairs), Ahmed Mukhtar (De-

fence), Sherry Rehman (Information), Raja Pervaiz Ashraf (Water and Power), Khurshid Shah (Labour, Manpower and Overseas Pakistanis), Naveed Qamar (Privatisation and Investment; Ports and Shipping), Farooq Naek (Law, Justice and Human Rights), and Qamar Zaman (Kashmir and NA Affairs).

Portfolios for Humayun Aziz Kurd, Nazir Gondal, and Najamuddin Khan would be decided later, the source said.

PML-N cabinet members will be: Ishaq Dar (Finance and Revenue), Chaudhry Nisar (senior federal minister, Communications), Khwaja Asif (Petroleum and Natural Resources), Mehtab Abbas (Railways), Shahid Khaqan Abbasi (Industries and Production), Ahsan Iqbal (Education), Saad Rafiq (Youth Affairs), and Rana Tanveer (Food, Agriculture and Livestock).

Rice secures Israeli pledge to remove West Bank roadblocks

AFP, Jerusalem

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Sunday secured a pledge from Israel to remove 50 West Bank roadblocks to improve the daily lives of Palestinians and reinvo-

lute Middle East peace talks. "Israel has pledged to reduce impediments to access and movement in the West Bank," the State Department said following Rice's meeting with Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad in Jerusalem.

"This will begin with removal of about 50 roadblocks and immediate steps to upgrade checkpoints, to reduce waiting time without

sacrificing security," the statement added.

It also said security forces loyal to Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas will assume greater responsibility for law and order in the West Bank with the deployment of 600 police to the northern town of Jenin.

Rice has called for improvements in the daily life of the Palestinians on her latest drive to advance faltering peace negotiations launched at a US conference in November.

"What we have to do is to have meaningful progress toward a better life for the Palestinian people, for economic viability for the Palestinians even as we move for the establishment of a state," she

told reporters in Jerusalem.

Rice began her visit on Saturday with a working dinner with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and on Sunday had breakfast with Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, who acknowledged the importance of improving the Palestinian economy.

"Israel and the Palestinians understand both that the Palestinians' economy is part of our interest and Israel's security is part of the Palestinians' interest," Livni told reporters at a press conference with Rice.

"Based on this understanding, I hope to find a formula to do it in a way that can give some hope to the people and more trust in the process itself."



An Israeli soldier throws noise grenades at Palestinian demonstrators during a protest to mark Land Day and against the Israeli occupation at the Hawara checkpoint near the West Bank city of Nablus yesterday.



Tibetan activists in exile kick a burning effigy of Chinese President Hu Jintao during a protest in New Delhi yesterday. Several dozen Tibetans unveiled an "independence torch" that will be carried around the world in an anti-China protest ahead of the Summer Olympics in Beijing.

Tibetan marchers light 'independence torch' in anti-China protest

AFP, New Delhi

Several dozen Tibetans in India on Sunday unveiled an "independence torch" in New Delhi that will be carried around the world in an anti-China protest ahead of the Summer Olympics in Beijing.

The torch was brought from the northern Indian town of Dharamshala -- home to the Dalai Lama, the Tibetan spiritual leader, and the government-in-exile.

The next stop for the protest flame is San Francisco, where the real Olympic torch is expected on April 9.

"This relay is to protest Chinese rule in Tibet. We also don't want the Olympic torch to go to Tibet because it is not a part of China," said Urgyen Chophel, president of the Tibetan Youth Congress.

China has come under increasing international pressure over its crackdown against protesters in the Tibetan capital Lhasa and Chinese provinces bordering the Himalayan region.

Tibetan activist groups have put the death toll from weeks of unrest at 135-140 Tibetans. China says rioters killed 18 civilians and two police officers.

Protesters disrupted the Olympic torch-lighting ceremony in Greece last Monday.

The official torch relay starts on Tuesday in Beijing when the flame is scheduled to depart for the Kazakh capital Almaty -- the first stop on an odyssey through 19 countries during April.

The international relay will be followed by an epic three-month tour around China, including Tibet.

The Indian Olympic Association has said that it has taken adequate security measures for the flame to be displayed in the country.

"Protesters here will try to see that the torch is not lit," Chophel said about the flame when it arrives in New Delhi on April 17.

The "independence torch" will also be taken through a few European cities, and finally to Tibet during the next three weeks, organisers said.

Bush facing resistance to Nato expansion

AP, Washington

Ahead of this week's Nato summit, President Bush has told alliance members he wants to expand the organisation to include three Balkan countries and put Ukraine and Georgia on track for membership.

Bush probably will get some of what he wants at the meetings Tuesday through Thursday in Bucharest, Romania. But with only nine months left in his term, Bush

may find his ability diminished to persuade European leaders, just as it is with Congress. That is a reflection of the president's low public approval ratings and the anticipation of a new administration that will set policy.

European leaders know the new president could shift course on Nato. For that reason, they may seek to put aside some decisions, including commitments to Ukraine and Georgia, until after Bush leaves office in January.

He also could see his goal of winning Nato membership for Albania, Croatia and Macedonia partially thwarted at the summit.

"I think this Nato summit is basically the 'Goodbye George' summit," said Daniel Hamilton, Director of the Centre for Transatlantic Relations at the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies. "A lot of the energy is looking beyond the administration."

NEWS ANALYSIS

US jittery over Pak war on terror commitment

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's new premier has vowed to tackle al-Qaeda and the Taliban, but the United States will remain nervous about the commitment of this frontline state in the "war on terror", analysts say.

With the power of stalwart US ally President Pervez Musharraf eroding fast, Washington sent two special envoys to Islamabad last week in a bid to woo new Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani and his government.

Gilani, who is from the party of slain opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, set out his policies to parliament on Saturday and said that rising Islamic militancy was the biggest threat to the nuclear-armed nation.

But his offers to negotiate with militants who renounce violence has caused jitters among US officials, who are already reeling from the loss of the "one-stop shop" they had in the form of former dictator Musharraf.

"The US nervousness will continue for some time till they recognise the political changes in Pakistan," political analyst Hasan Askari told AFP.

"The Americans will closely monitor what Pakistan is doing against terrorism -- they have strong reservations about negotiation," said Askari, who is teaching at the

School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Washington.

A key issue with the new Pakistani government will be its tolerance for unilateral US missile strikes on militant hideouts in its mountainous tribal badlands bordering Afghanistan.

The Washington Post reported last week that the United States was escalating such strikes amid fears that Gilani's administration will curtail such attacks.

The strikes followed a "tacit understanding" with Musharraf and army chief General Ashfaq Kayani that permits US strikes on foreign rebels in Pakistan, but not against Pakistani Taliban, the Post quoted officials as saying.

A senior partner in the new coalition government, former premier Nawaz Sharif, warned the US envoys who came last week that it was unacceptable for Pakistan to become a "murder-house" for the sake of US policies.

"The US appears to be nervous on negotiations because it thinks they give unnecessary space to the extremists. Further, the US wanted greater freedom itself to undertake direct military action in the tribal areas," Askari said.

Political solutions to the violence are high on Gilani's agenda, with his speech on Saturday promising a special package of reforms for the

tribal areas as part of a broad-based strategy to fighting terrorism.

"We are ready to talk to all those people who give up arms and are ready to embrace peace," Gilani said to loud support from MPs on Saturday.

But officials from Bhutto's party said newspaper editorials describing anger at the timing of the US visit in the week that Gilani was elected by parliament were "overcooked".

Political commentator and columnist Shaqat Mahmood said the aims of both US and Pakistani officials remained the same -- to tackle extremism.

Gilani's speech "shows fighting terrorism is a very important priority for the new government and the United States should welcome this statement," Mahmood told AFP.

But he warned: "Of course, words will have to be matched with action."

Najam Sethi, editor of Pakistan's respected English-language Daily Times newspaper and a political analyst, said Gilani's statements would ultimately reassure Islamabad's Western allies.

"It will allay the concerns of the international community regarding the new government's commitment to fighting terrorism while giving enough leverage to the new political set-up to follow its broad-based counter-terrorism strategy," he told AFP.



Arab League Secretary General Amr Mussa shows Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (L) the final resolution of the two-day Arab Summit in Damascus yesterday.

Rahul calls the shots in Congress

CNN-IBN, New Delhi

In a sign of changing times, the grand old party of India, the Congress, is getting younger with Rahul Gandhi and his team increasingly taking centre stage in the political arena.

The transformation brings in uncertainty because Rahul has his own ideas on how the party should be run and some of ideas clash with the way the party has functioned till now.

Rahul openly pitches for the youth, his advisors are below 40 and he thinks that both in Government and party the young should be given preference.

He is against the existing stringent norms for entry into the party. At a Congress Working

Committee meet, Rahul said that criteria like wearing khadi and abstinence from alcohol should not be considered before joining the party.

Rahul also has strong views on education. He says that merit rather than caste should be the criteria for admission to colleges and he also prefers entry of foreign universities in the Indian education circuit.

"We all work together. There is no such thing as the older lot feeling left out and the younger ones having more say," Congress Spokesperson Jayanti Natarajan said.

For the Congressmen however, there is plenty of confusion to contend with. The two power centres may not be in conflict but the party worker isn't sure which coterie to align with.

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