

Pak peace deal depends on Sharia enforcement: Taliban

UN peacekeeping chief monitors rebel pact

AFP, Peshawar

Pakistani Taliban militants said Thursday that the success of a peace deal with the government in a northwestern area depends on the complete enforcement of Islamic law in the region.

The agreement in the scenic Swat Valley ends months of fighting between troops and rebels loyal to a pro-Taliban commander, Maulana Fazlullah, who was campaigning for the introduction of harsh Sharia law.

Under the terms of the deal signed on Wednesday the government agreed to gradually pull out troops and introduce an Islamic justice system, while the rebels said they would halt attacks and surrender arms.

"We have accepted to give up

the armed struggle because the government has agreed to the complete enforcement of the Sharia laws," Taliban spokesman Muslim Khan told AFP.

"We are happy about the agreement but the success of it depends on the conduct of the government, especially in enforcing the Sharia laws," Khan said by telephone from an unknown location.

Pakistan's new government launched negotiations with militants in Swat and separately in the lawless tribal areas bordering Afghanistan after routing President Pervez Musharraf's allies in elections in February.

The army launched a major offensive in October to clear Swat of militants loyal to Fazlullah after they drove police and paramilitary forces from their posts and effectively established their own law.

Dozens of people have died in suicide bombings in Swat over the past year.

Residents said they were happy about the prospect of peace finally returning to the picturesque valley.

"Thank God, we will be able to live peacefully and resume our normal lives," a shopkeeper in Mingora, the main town in Swat, told AFP.

A senior government official in North West Frontier Province said secular courts would be assisted by an Islamic scholar to decide disputes according to Islamic laws, but a parallel mainstream judicial system would still function.

"It will be the choice of the complainant whether to go for settlement according to Sharia or the Pakistan penal code," the official said.

The United States said Wednesday it would "reserve judgment" on the peace deal and would monitor how effective it was in stopping attacks. Pakistan is a key partner in the US-led "war on terror" launched after the 9/11 attacks.

"We'll see. We'll reserve judgment on these things," State Department spokesman Sean McCormack told reporters.

UN peacekeeping chief Jean-Marie Guehenno meanwhile said during a visit to Afghanistan that the world body would "watch closely" the peace deal.

"Certainly any cross-border movement is bad, is dangerous," he told reporters. "We will watch closely the situation in the area concerned and make sure that the situation does not deteriorate on the other side of the border."



Pakistani lawyers and political activists listen to the telephonic speech of deposed chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, prior to an anti-President Pervez Musharraf protest in Karachi yesterday. Deposed Pakistani chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry on Thursday termed former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's party's quitting of Pakistani cabinet a 'milestone' in the political history of Pakistan.

Nepali king to quit Kathmandu palace

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's embattled king is expected to quit his Kathmandu palace soon, reports said yesterday, just days before the Himalayan nation's monarchy is due to be abolished.

King Gyanendra was likely to move to Nagarjun, a palace on the outskirts of the city, before he loses his status and becomes a common citizen, newspapers said.

He has been ordered to leave the city-centre Narayanhiti palace before the first meeting of the constitution-writing assembly on May 28, when it is set to formally end the monarchy, turning the impoverished nation into a republic.

"There is a possibility that the suspended king will leave Narayanhiti palace around the time of the deadline he was given to leave," the state-run Gorkhapatra newspaper reported Thursday.

"The suspended king will spend some time in Nagarjun before going to his own house -- Nirmal Niwas -- after abandoning Narayanhiti," the newspaper said, quoting unnamed palace sources.

Pakistan to ask UN for Benazir probe 'soon'

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's new government will "very soon" submit a formal request to the United Nations for a probe into the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the foreign minister said Thursday.

Former premier Bhutto was slain in a suicide and gun attack at an election rally in the garrison city of Rawalpindi on December 27, triggering days of deadly riots across the country.

President Pervez Musharraf blamed an Al-Qaeda-linked militant for the attack and refused to seek a UN probe. A coalition led by Bhutto's party trounced Musharraf's allies in general elections in February.

"The letter of request is ready and it has been decided that the law minister and I will carry the letter with us and deliver it to the UN Secretary General," Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi told a news conference.

Qureshi, a member of Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP), said they were waiting for an official appointment with UN chief Ban Ki-moon, saying they expected to deliver the request "very soon."



United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon (2nd L) talks to a displaced family in their tent yesterday in the Kyondah village, Myanmar on a tour to view conditions in cyclone damaged areas and to meet with Myanmar government officials. Ban toured Myanmar's disaster area, on the first day of a visit aimed at pushing through a full emergency relief effort after Cyclone Nargis.

Mynamar junta should be tried for crimes against humanity: EU parliament

AFP, Strasbourg

The European Parliament yesterday called for Myanmar junta leaders to be brought before the international court in The Hague if they continue to prevent aid from reaching cyclone-stricken regions.

The euro deputies, meeting in Strasbourg, voted overwhelmingly -- 524 votes for, three against with 13 abstentions -- in the non-binding resolution that "if the Burmese (Myanmar) authorities continue to prevent aid from reaching those in danger, they should be held accountable for crimes against humanity before the ICC (International Criminal Court)."

The MEPs also called on EU member states to push the UN Security Council to adopt a resolution to refer the matter to the court "for investigation and prosecution."

The assembled MEPs strongly condemned the "unacceptably slow response to this grave humanitarian crisis by the Burmese

authorities, which have put preservation of their own power before the survival of their citizens."

The resolution came before Myanmar voters in the cyclone-ravaged Irrawaddy delta region are asked to approve a new constitution Saturday, even with two million people still hungry and homeless three weeks after the killer storm.

The regime has already declared a 92.4 percent victory in the first round of voting on May 10, which was held in regions that were spared by the cyclone.

The European Parliament deplored "the distorted priorities of the regime in pushing ahead with its so-called referendum on the sham constitution and rejects the implausible outcome at a time when a large part of the country has been devastated and millions are suffering from what has been aptly described as a natural disaster turned into a man-made catastrophe."

Musharraf to resist moves to oust him

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has served notice that he would firmly resist moves to curb his powers or remove him from office, saying he has the support of "powerful" friends like the US.

"If the coalition government tries to clip the powers of the president or proposes his impeachment, Musharraf is all set to go all out to counter the move," The News reported Thursday.

The president reportedly told a delegation of the Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) that he had no confidence in Asif Ali Zardari,

co-chair of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) that leads the country's ruling alliance.

The PML-Q delegation met Musharraf Wednesday to discuss the PPP's proposed constitutional amendments under which the Supreme Court and high court judges the president sacked after declaring an emergency last November would be restored.

This apart, the amendments would enable the impeachment of the president for any unconstitutional acts he might have committed.

Quoting a source in the PML-Q, The News said: "The president told the PML-Q leaders that he enjoyed support of the powerful national

institutions, the US and some political parties, including the Muttahida Qaumi Movement."

Musharraf also advised the PML-Q leaders to devise their strategy to counter any moves against him.

"Musharraf told the PML-Q leaders to strengthen their position in the Senate and the National Assembly as well as outside parliament and intensify their interaction with other political parties," The News quoted its source as saying.

Former information minister Senator Muhammad Ali Durrani has been assigned the special task of consolidating the party's position in parliament's upper house.

Israel, Syria 'satisfied' with talks: Turkish FM

AFP, Ankara

Three days of indirect peace talks between Israel and Syria, mediated by Turkey, "satisfied" both sides and will continue periodically, Turkish Foreign Minister Ali Babacan said yesterday.

"Both sides were satisfied that the talks -- which went on for three days on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday in Istanbul -- resulted in finding a common ground," Babacan told reporters.

"The talks will continue periodically," he added.

The peace negotiations between Israel and Syria resumed after an eight-year freeze, with Turkey acting as a go-between.

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem claimed Damascus had received Israeli commitments for a full withdrawal from the occupied Golan Heights, seized four decades ago, though Israeli officials have been tight-lipped on the controversial issue.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert said Israel was "ready to make substantial concessions to Syria that will be quite painful."

Babacan declined to comment on the topics the two sides discussed, saying only that "the basic philosophy is peace for land and

land for peace."

Face-to-face negotiations "will become possible if concrete, satisfactory progress is obtained in this process," he said, adding that the indirect talks will continue in Istanbul unless the parties request another venue in Turkey.

"We will do our best for the successful completion of this process... Both sides place importance on Turkey being involved until the end," he said.

The indirect negotiations between Israel and Syria in Istanbul began after Turkish efforts for about a year to broker the talks.

Turkey's mediation follows its increased efforts in recent years to have a greater say in the Middle East and balance its traditionally pro-Western orientation with closer ties with Arab countries.

The mainly Muslim, secular country is Israel's chief regional ally, but also maintains close relations with the Palestinians and in recent years made strides in mending fences with Syria.

Earlier the launch of indirect peace talks with Syria has caused a storm in Israel, where sentiments run high against returning the occupied Golan Heights, seized four decades ago.

Zardari calls for troop reduction in Kashmir

PTI, Islamabad

Following up on Pakistan's commitment of working for "grand reconciliation" with India, the ruling Pakistan People's Party today made two proposals -- reduction of army's presence in Jammu and Kashmir and creation of economic zones along the Indo-Pak border.

The PPP, however, suggested that any cuts in the army's deployment in Jammu and Kashmir could be compensated by India through deployment of more paramilitary forces and police which would be "more humane" and help in addressing the "60-year-old wound" of the Kashmir issue.

"We would appreciate the de-escalation of Indian troops in Kashmir and bringing normalcy in Kashmir. The army by design, wherever it is, by its nature is crude -- whether it is your army or any other army," PPP Chairman Asif Ali Zardari told PTI in a wide-ranging interview.

Zardari, who led the party to victory in the February 18 elections after his wife Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in December last year, responded to questions on the Kashmir issue, Indo-Pak composite dialogue process and the controversy over reinstatement of judges.

Lebanon leaders clinch deal to end crisis

AFP, Doha

Rival Lebanese leaders clinched a deal on Wednesday to end an 18-month political feud that exploded into deadly sectarian fighting and threatened to plunge the nation into civil war.

The agreement, announced after days of tense talks in Doha, will see a president elected on Sunday and the creation of a unity government in which the Hezbollah-led opposition will have the power of veto.

US-backed Prime Minister Fuad Siniora described the deal as a "great achievement... the history of Lebanon" although analysts said it appeared grievances remained unresolved particularly over Hezbollah's military might.

The two sides had been negotiating since Friday in an Arab-mediated bid to end a political standoff that erupted into deadly street battles this month, the worst sectarian unrest since the 1975-1990 civil war.

The accord was hailed in Washington and regional states, which back both factions, as signs of renewed stability in country that has been battered by years of conflict, political turmoil and a string of assassinations.

Lebanese themselves reacted

with relief but were wary this might be only a temporary reprieve for their deeply divided nation.

"Hopefully this is not a band-aid solution and is a long-lasting one; people need to live in peace," said Aleco Assaf, 64, as a long-running opposition protest that turned the heart of Beirut into a virtual ghost town was finally coming to an end.

The deal calls for the election of army chief Michel Sleiman as president, the formation of a unity government in which the Syrian- and Iranian-backed opposition has a veto, a new election law and a ban on the use of weapons in internal conflicts.

Parliament speaker Nabih Berri was to convene lawmakers within 24 hours for the vote but a senior Siniora aide said parliament would now meet on Sunday.

The rival factions had agreed last year on electing Sleiman as the successor to Damascus protégé Emile Lahoud, who stepped down at the end of his term in November.

But the Sunni-led government and the mainly Shia opposition differed over power-sharing and a new electoral law, and parliament has previously put off 19 attempts to elect a successor to Lahoud.

No truce unless Israel lifts Gaza blockade: Hamas

AFP, Gaza City

Hamas insisted on Thursday there would be no Gaza truce unless Israel lifts its blockade of the territory, where a militant was killed in a failed suicide truck bombing near the main border crossing.

"The Palestinian groups will not give a truce to Israel if Israel does not accept our demand to end the closure, open borders and stop aggression," Hamas official Ismail Haniya said in a statement.

Haniya, a former Palestinian prime minister, said the Hamas delegation was returning from Cairo where Egypt has been battling to mediate a truce in Gaza between Israel and the Palestinians.

Israel has made agreement to a truce conditional on progress in negotiations for the release of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier captured

almost two years ago by Gaza militants in a deadly cross-border raid.

Hamas wants some 450 Palestinian prisoners released from Israeli jails in exchange for Shalit, and insists the swap is an entirely separate issue from the proposed truce.

Violence in and around the Gaza Strip has clouded renewed peace negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, increasing doubts that they will achieve their stated aim of reaching a deal by the end of the year.

A Palestinian militant died on Thursday in a failed suicide attack when the explosives-laden truck he was driving blew up just short of the Erez border crossing between Gaza and Israel.

Islamic Jihad said the bomber, Ibrahim Nasser, 23, was a member of its armed wing, the Al Quds Brigade.

It said the truck, which was packed with 400 kilos (almost 900 pounds) of explosives, blew up earlier than planned a few hundred metres (yards) from the border crossing.

There were no reports of Israeli casualties.

The powerful explosion damaged buildings on the Palestinian side of the border and Palestinians shot at Israeli troops at the crossing without hitting anyone, Israeli public radio said.

Other armed Palestinian militants who followed the truck fled after their car rolled over, witnesses said. Israel's army radio said the car was targeted by an military helicopter and that several militants were hit.

In another incident, 62-year-old Salem Al-Bahabsa, was killed by Israeli troops near Bureij, in central Gaza, according to Palestinian emergency services.

China preparing to restart Taiwan talks

AFP, Beijing

China said Thursday that it was preparing to resume direct talks with Taiwan for the first time in over a decade, in a sign of improving relations after the inauguration of the island's new leader.

Ma Ying-jeou, who took office Tuesday as Taiwan's president vowing to mend ties with China, has raised hopes that long-term tensions may ease across the narrow strait dividing the two rivals.

China and self-ruled Taiwan, which split from the mainland in 1949 after a civil war, have not held such high-level talks since 1993.

"Currently, good developing momentum is emerging in cross-strait relations, bringing a rare and important opportunity," said Chen Yunlin, head of China's ruling Communist Party Central Committee's Taiwan Work Office.

AP, Beichuan

China said the death toll from last week's powerful earthquake jumped to more than 51,000, as it appealed Thursday for millions of tents to shelter homeless survivors.

The confirmed number of dead rose to 51,151 -- a jump of almost 10,000 from the day before Cabinet spokesman Guo Weimin told a news conference. Another 29,328 people remained missing and nearly 300,000 were hurt in the May 12 quake centred in Sichuan

province, he said.

The disaster also left 5 million people homeless and leveled more than 80 percent of the buildings in some remote towns and villages areas near the epicentre. In bigger cities whole apartment blocks collapsed or are now too dangerous to live in because of damage and worries about aftershocks.

"We need more than 3.3 million tents," Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang told reporters, adding that 400,000 tents have already been delivered. It was the

second call for tents from China in recent days.

"We hope and welcome international assistance in this regard. We hope the international community can give priority in providing tents," he said.

As the misery of survivors wears on, China's leaders moved to contain the political fallout from the deadly earthquake, promising a \$10 billion reconstruction fund, reining in the media and trying to keep despair from turning to anger in the disaster zone.



Quake survivors walk past the rubble after receiving rice as food aid in Ziping yesterday in southwest China's quake stricken Sichuan province. The death toll from last week's earthquake in southwest China has risen to 51,151, with 29,328 others still missing, the government said.

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