

Zardari calls for change in US anti-terror policy

AFP, Quetta

Pakistan President Asif Ali Zardari called for a US change of policy and voiced opposition to missile strikes, as President Barack Obama was to unveil yesterday a new strategy against al-Qaeda.

"As far as the question of policy is concerned we have to wait and see that what is the new policy of (the) Obama government towards Baluchistan and this region," Zardari told a news conference in English.

He was speaking during a visit to Quetta, the capital of southwestern Baluchistan province, which borders Afghanistan and Iran and where an American UN official was kidnapped last month.

Obama was Friday to announce a new strategy to "disrupt, dismantle and defeat" al-Qaeda in safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan and deploy an extra 4,000 military trainers.

US missile strikes anger many across nuclear-armed Pakistan and the govern-

ment has warned that they risk a domestic backlash in a country where more than 1,600 people have died in extremist bombings in less than two years.

The New York Times reported last week that Obama and his top aides are considering expanding covert operations against Taliban leaders to Baluchistan.

"We hope that Obama is a name for a change and in this change a new policy, a new approach can be adopted to the issues of this region, because this is a regional issue," Zardari said.

"As far as the drone attacks are concerned it is the stated policy of Pakistan government that we are against them," he said.

"We find them counterproductive and we do not encourage this exercise."

Zardari said Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani and the foreign ministry were in constant contact with the United States and other countries about missile strikes and the "war on terror".

"Several meetings and exchanges of ideas have taken place," he added.

Some US officials fear that strikes in Baluchistan could increase tensions with Pakistan, which said in late February it wanted to discuss ending controversial US drone attacks inside its territory, the New York Times said.

More than 35 such strikes have killed more than 340 people since August 2008, shortly before Zardari was elected. A suspected US strike Wednesday killed up to seven alleged militants in a Taliban stronghold.

The US military as a rule does not confirm drone attacks but the armed forces and the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operating in neighbouring Afghanistan are the only forces that deploy the aircraft in the region.

In February, John Solecki, a US citizen and the local head of the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), was kidnapped in Quetta. Baluch rebels claim to be holding him.

"As far as the disappearance of the UN gentleman is concerned it is an ongoing process," Zardari said.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian soldiers work on the disaster site with debris (R) piled up after a dam wall burst in Tangerang yesterday flooding an area near the Indonesian capital Jakarta overnight. The floods killed at least 58 people and left hundreds of homes underwater, a health ministry official said, with the toll expected to rise as search teams look through submerged homes.



PHOTO: AFP

UN atomic agency board chairwoman and Algerian Ambassador Taous Feroukhi of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) talks to the media yesterday in Vienna, following a closed door meeting of the organisation to elect a successor to Egyptian-born Mohamed ElBaradei. But the meeting failed to elect anybody despite voting thrice.

Weakness may prompt Indian attack: Gilani

'Internal threat has weakened Pakistan'

THE DAILY TIMES, Islamabad

Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani on Thursday warned that any internal weakness might prompt India to attack Pakistan.

Addressing a conference at the National Defence University, the prime minister stressed the need for an effective strategy to deal with both external and internal threats facing the country.

"When seen with the widening force differential between ours and Indian armed forces, it explains to us New Delhi's emboldened posture and its urge to find space for a conventional war," he said.

Designs: But Gilani said Pakistan had no aggressive designs against any country, however, he warned that any threat to its territorial integrity and sovereignty would be countered with full force.

Gilani said Pakistan was passing through a critical phase and was confronted with a number of challenges.

He said Pakistan had been ready for any external eventuality all these years, however, the "internal threat has been evolving beyond comprehension and has weakened us considerably."

Gilani added that history had shown that any weak internal front invited external aggression on a country.

US, Iran may work together in Afghanistan

AFP, Moscow

Afghanistan is a "very productive area" for engagement between the United States and its arch foe Iran, a US official declared yesterday, at a meeting in Moscow aimed at curbing rising violence in the conflict-torn country.

The meeting, led by the Shanghai Group which groups China, Russia and Central Asian states, came amid mounting international concerns over the resurgence of the Taliban Islamist militants in the country.

"We see Iran as an important player related to Afghanistan. We see this as a very productive area for engagement in the future," the US official, who asked not to be named, said on the sidelines of the conference.

The United States and Iran have had no diplomatic ties for almost three decades but President Barack Obama in a message on March 20 offered to end the animosity, in a departure from the previous administration's tough line.

Obama was Friday to unveil a new offensive against terror havens in Afghanistan, by dispatching 4,000 extra troops to train the Afghan army and sending in hundreds more civilians.

The Moscow meeting is also being attended by Shanghai Group observers, Nato officials, delegates from Afghanistan and Iran as well as representatives of the G8 group of leading industrialised countries.

The United States has sent Deputy Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Patrick Moon to the conference but there appeared little chance he could meet Iranian delegates.

"Such a meeting is not on the agenda," Iran's ambassador to Russia Mahmoud Reza Sajjadi was quoted as saying by the Interfax news agency.

The meeting comes ahead of another international conference on Afghanistan in The Hague on March 31, due to be attended by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other top diplomats.

18 militants killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Security forces in Afghanistan announced yesterday that they had killed 18 militants in various operations while a Taliban suicide bomber blew himself up near Italian troops but only killed himself.

The incidents came as US President Barack Obama was due to announce a new strategy to battle extremists in the region that will likely include more troops and reconstruction and a focus on militant bases in Pakistan.

The deadliest battle was late Thursday during a raid against a "key Taliban insurgent" and to disrupt a bombing cell, the US-led coalition said in a statement.

Afghan and coalition troops were attacked immediately when they arrived at a civilian compound where the militants were taking

shelter, it said. Eleven rebels, including the "key Taliban insurgent", were killed.

Bombings are the main Taliban tactic in an insurgency that last year reached its deadliest since the headline Islamists were removed from government in a late 2001 US-led invasion.

Also in Helmand, a police operation killed five militants, including a commander who had planned a bomb blast a week ago which took the life of anti-Taliban parliamentarian Dad Mohammad Khan, the interior ministry said.

Elsewhere Thursday, Afghan forces assisted by US-led coalition troops killed two militants allegedly planting a bomb on a road in the southern province of Uruzgan, a separate US military statement said.

On Friday meanwhile a suicide bomber blew himself up near an Italian military convoy in the western province of Herat, Afghan authorities said.

Myanmar leader warns on democracy at military parade

AFP, Naypyidaw

Myanmar junta chief Than Shwe urged political parties to shun foreign ideologies if they want democracy as the military put on a show of might at its annual parade yesterday.

More than 13,000 troops marched on the parade ground of the military-ruled nation's remote administrative capital Naypyidaw for Armed Forces Day in the shadow of statues of old Burmese kings.

"Democracy in Myanmar today is at a fledgling stage and

still requires patient care and attention," Senior General Than Shwe said in a 25-minute speech.

"Some parties look to foreign countries for guidance and inspiration, follow the imported ideologies and directives irrationally," he added.

Senior Myanmar junta officials attended the ceremony that began early in the morning amid tight security following a bomb blast in the commercial hub Yangon overnight that killed one person.



PHOTO: AFP

Myanmar's junta chief Than Shwe reviews a guard of honour from his car on Armed Forces Day in the administrative capital of Naypyidaw yesterday. Than Shwe urged political parties to shun foreign ideologies if they want democracy as the military put on a show of might at its annual parade.



PHOTO: AFP

Volunteers use a boat and canoe to shuttle sandbags to residents fighting rising floodwater on Thursday in Oxbow, North Dakota. Water from the Red and Wild Rice Rivers has started to overtake the small community about 23km south of Fargo.

Massive floods swamp North Dakota

AFP, Fargo, North Dakota

Officials readied mandatory evacuation orders late Thursday as rapidly rising floodwaters lapped sandbag dikes built to reinforce defences against what is forecast to be North Dakota's worst floods in recorded history.

The city of Fargo implemented emergency plans for vulnerable populations, opening shelters and evacuating nursing homes, officials said.

In a bid to loosen clogged waters swamping the flat prairie state, authorities blew up ice jams with explosives, and residents trapped across the state were rescued by boat and helicopter.

Persistent low temperatures and heavy falls of wet snow hampered the efforts of thousands of volunteers and legions of state troopers building up improvised dikes -- even as flood forecasts were vamped up through the day.

"It's uncharted territory," Fargo Mayor Dennis Walaker said. "If nature has anything else to throw at us, it'd have to be a tornado."

North Dakota's Governor John Hoeven told CNN that hundreds of national guardsmen and thousands of volunteers were "working very hard to put the best protection in place" for vulnerable areas against surging floodwaters.

Iran, Nato in first talks in 30 years

AFP, Brussels

Iran and Nato have held their first talks since the Iranian revolution 30 years ago, officials at the military alliance said Thursday, in a new sign of a thaw in Tehran's ties with the West.

At allied headquarters in Brussels last week, an Iranian diplomat and a senior Nato official had an "informal contact" focused on Iran's neighbour Afghanistan, where the alliance is battling a stiff Taliban-led insurgency.

"The diplomat met with Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs and Security Policy Martin Erdmann," chief Nato spokesman James Appathurai said.

"It was a first informal contact about the subject of Afghanistan," he said, adding: "We have not yet programmed a second meeting."

A Nato official, speaking on condition of anonymity given the sensitive nature of the talks, said the visit by the diplomat, who was

not identified, was the first "since the regime of the Shah" of Iran, which collapsed in 1979.

He noted that "the Iranians are interested in possible cooperation on Afghanistan" to better confront the problems posed by opium production there and an influx of Afghan refugees across their border.

A second Nato official said: "There were exploratory contacts recently. Nothing of substance was discussed. It was a first informal contact between an Iranian diplomat and a representative of the secretary general."

Earlier Thursday, Iran confirmed that it would attend a major international meeting on Afghanistan in The Hague in the Netherlands next week.

The meeting on Tuesday comes as the United States undertakes a vast review of its strategy in Afghanistan, to be made public Friday, and amid new efforts by Washington to reach out to Tehran.

Japan ready to shoot down N Korea missile

AFP, Tokyo

Japan gave its military the green light yesterday to shoot down any incoming North Korean rocket, with tensions high ahead of a planned launch that the US and allies say will be an illegal missile test.

Japanese and US warships have already deployed ahead of the April 4-8 window, when the secretive North has said it will launch a communications satellite -- warning that shooting it down would be seen as an act of war.

But South Korea, Japan and the United States have all warned the North that any launch would be unacceptable, amid fears the regime is actually intending to test a long-range missile that could reach North America.

Russia -- which with the two Koreas, China, Japan and the US is part of a six-party forum

working on the North's nuclear disarmament -- urged Pyongyang not to carry out the launch, saying there was no need to "ignite passions".

The security council in Japan, officially pacifist since the end of World War II, decided ahead of time to shoot down any incoming missile that could hit its territory rather than wait until launch.

"The security council this morning decided to issue a destruction order in advance," said Defence Minister Yasukazu Hamada. "We will do our best to handle any flying object from North Korea."

The North said Thursday that even referring a launch to the United Nations would ruin the long-running and erratic six-nation nuclear disarmament talks, during which North Korea has already tested one missile and an atomic bomb.

Indian envoy urges Nepal to maintain security along the border

ANI, Kathmandu

Indian Ambassador to Nepal Rakesh Sood urged cooperation from the Nepal Government for maintaining security along the border in view of the upcoming general elections in India.

Sood urged this during the meeting with Prime Minister Prachanda here on Thursday.

Nepalnews quoted PM's press advisor Om Sharma as saying that Prachanda assured Indian envoy of necessary cooperation for border security.

Sood also expressed his concern on dispute between the Nepal Army and the Defence Ministry, army integration, peace process, among others.

In response, Prachanda said the army integration process would be completed within four months.

He also informed Sood that the political parties are committed to draft a new Constitution at the slated time.

Regarding the judiciary, Prachanda said that his party is fully committed to respect the judiciary.



PHOTO: AFP

Iraqi supporters of radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr shout slogans as they burn a US flag in Baghdad's Sadr City following Juma prayers yesterday. A Shia group that kidnapped five British men in Baghdad nearly two years ago claims a deal is in place to release the hostages in exchange for prisoners being held by US forces in Iraq.