INTERNATIONAL

ELECTION FRAUD ROW

Obama assures Karzai of support in letter

AFP, Kabul

The United States and Afghanistan yesterday sought to draw a line under a recent diplomatic row, downplaying talk of a damaging rift and stressing their commitment to work together.

President Hamid Karzai's office said his US counterpart Barack Obama wrote to thank him for his "warm hospitality" during his recent visit to Kabul and said his government would "remain as the strategic partner of Afghanistan".

Both sides are attempting a show of unity after international concern, led by the White House, at Karzai's claims that foreign governments orchestrated the fraud at the elections that returned him to power last year.

The Afghan leader's outspoken remarks came just days after Obama's unannounced visit to Kabul during which he pressured his opposite number to act on tackling corruption and implementing good governance measures.

Observers have said that Karzai's outburst may have been a reaction to direct US pressure or an attempt to boost flagging support domestically, where opposition groups, including the Taliban, see him as a Western "puppet".

Karzai's office said that Obama in his letter called the talks "fruitful and productive" and expected to see him in Washington next month, despite suggestions that the invitation could be withdrawn.

Washington's ambassador to Kabul, Karl Eikenberry, on Saturday downplayed the row as he announced a new 40-million-dollar US-funded project to improve governance in southern and eastern areas most affected by the insurgency.

"We're friends, we're allies, we're partners and there's going to be points

of time where we have disagreements and that's how it is between good friends," the diplomat told a news conference in Kabul.

"But we're going to continue to find ways through dialogues to get over those disagreements."

Obama had already reaffirmed in an interview with US television on Friday that he sees Karzai as a "critical partner" in the fight against global extremism.

A visiting cross-party delegation of US lawmakers also sought to soften hardening opinion towards Karzai, suggesting reports that he said he would join the Taliban if his electoral reforms were rejected were inaccurate.

Democratic Senator Tom Carper said Karzai -- who maintains he was trying to remind his foreign backers of Afghan sovereignty -- had agreed to restore his shaky standing with the US public in a television interview.



Afghan President Karzai (R) gestures as he speaks with Commander of US and Nato troops, General Stanley McChrystal (L) during a briefing at International Security Assistance Forces (Isaf) headquarters in Kabul yesterday. US President Barack Obama wrote to his Afghan counterpart pledging his government's continued support, Karzai's office said, as the two sides sought to improve strained ties.

No meeting scheduled with Manmohan: Gilani

INDO ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Islamabad

Pakistan Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani said yesterday that no meeting had been scheduled with his Indian counterpart Manmohan Singh on the sidelines of the Nuclear Safety Summit in Washington.

'It has not yet been scheduled,' Online news agency quoted Gilani as telling reporters at the Chaklala air base before departing for Washington for the April 12-13 summit.

The two leaders had last met at Sharm el-Sheikh in July 2009 on the sidelines of the Non-Aligned Summit.

US NUCLEAR SUMMIT

India asks to focus on nuke terrorism

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh left for the United States yesterday to attend a two-day security summit, saying he hoped the event would focus on issues such as "nuclear terror-

Singh, who is also expected to meet US President Barack Obama on Sunday, also insisted India had an "impeccable record" in non-proliferation.

The 47-nation summit on improving nuclear security begins on Monday.

Singh said development would only be possible if govern-ments ensured "the highest standards of security" for the civilian use of nuclear energy.

"I expect the summit to focus on nuclear terrorism and proliferation of sensitive nuclear materials and technologies," Singh said in a statement before leaving for Washington.

"These are legitimate concerns which require firm responses."

Pak troops kill 48 militants in NW

AFP, Peshawar

At least 48 militants were killed in a gunfight and an air strike in Pakistan's north-western tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, officials said yesterday.

The air strike targeted a meeting of Lashkare-Islam, an Islamist group blamed for attacking Nato supply convoys, in the remote Tirah valley of Khyber tribal district, they said.

"At least 42 militants of Lashkar-e-Islam were killed and two militant hideouts were also destroyed," Khyber administration chief Shafeerullah Wazir told AFP.

"The death toll may rise as dozens of others were also injured in the air strike."

A military official and another tribal administration official confirmed the incident and death toll.

"The air strike was launched on a tip-off that a meeting of the Lashkar-e-Islam group was going on in Tirah," the military official told AFP. Lashkar-e-Islam, which means Army of said.

Islam, is a criminal home-grown Islamist group with ties to the Taliban that has stirred up trouble in Khyber and attacked Nato supply vehicles travelling through the area.

Khyber is on the main Nato land supply route through Pakistan into Afghanistan, where more than 121,000 foreign forces are battling to reverse an escalating Taliban insurgency, now into its ninth year.

The district neighbours the north-western city of Peshawar, increasingly on the frontline

of Taliban and al-Qaeda-linked bomb attacks. Pakistan has launched several operations in the past two years in Khyber to flush out militants.

Separately, a Pakistani solider and six Taliban militants were killed in a gunfight in South Waziristan, another tribal district where the military has launched a major ground and air offensive since last October.

The clash took place in the town of Sararogha when militants attacked a security forces post early Saturday, a military statement

Rajapakse vows peace after winning polls

AP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's President Mahinda Rajapakse, whose party cemented his political dominance by winning a majority in parliamentary elections, promised yesterday to bring peace and prosperity to a nation battered by decades of civil war.

Rajapakse said in a statement that his party's victory in Thursday's elections encourages the government's policies on "peace and reconciliation, reconstruction, greater infrastructure development."

"We are humbled by the size of the repeated mandates given by the people and pledge to respond, in full measure, to the trust placed in us," he said.

Several ministers in Sri Lanka's outgoing parliament lost their seats in this week's general election, which also saw former army chief Sarath Fonseka elected, according to results on Saturday.

Despite scoring a resounding re-election victory, the ruling party lost Foreign Minister Rohitha Bogollagama and Justice Minister Milinda Moragoda along with Ferial Ashraff, a key Muslim minister.

Thai military

calls for truce

6 dead, 500 injured

AFP, Bangkok

told AFP.

with Red Shirts

At least six people have been killed and almost 500 injured after

violent clashes in Bangkok between security forces and anti-

"So far there are six dead at this hospital," Pijaya Nagavajara,

Thai security forces called for a truce with anti-government

The army announced it would pull back after violence

"Soldiers will have to withdraw. There is no place to shelter.

Colonel Sunsern Kaewkumnerd said the call for a truce was to

erupted in the capital's historic district, where 20 soldiers were hurt

We cannot do anything," army chief General Anupong Paojinda

in a blast and security personnel fired warning shots and tear gas.

government protesters, emergency services said yesterday.

protesters after a crackdown that sparked fierce clashes.

director at the Bangkok General Hospital told AFP.

PRESIDENT'S PLANE CRASH

National mourning declared in Poland

AFP, Warsaw

Poland's acting head of state declared a week of mourning after the crash yesterday in Russia of a Polish government plane which killed president Lech Kaczynski and scores of other officials.

is no (political) left or right -- we are united in national mourning," said Bronislaw Komorowski, Poland's parliamentary speaker who took charge of presidential duties after Kaczynski's death. Poland must hold a

"We are united -- there

presidential election before the end of June in the wake of the death Saturday in a plane crash of President Lech Kaczynski, according to the Polish constitution.

Kaczynski and other Polish officials died as their plane crashed during landing in the western Russian city of Smolensk on Saturday morning.



Red-shirted supporters of former Thai premier Thaksin Shinawatra push against a line of Thai soldiers blocking the way during continued anti-government protests near the government offices in central Bangkok yesterday. Thai authorities launched a crackdown against protesters, which sparked violent clashes and left six dead and 500 injured.

more urgent than ever

halt fighting. "The military will withdraw, but it does not mean this rally is legal," he added. Protesters hurled rocks as troops tried in vain to clear them from one of their two main rally sites in Bangkok, where the "Red Shirt" protesters have held almost a month of rolling rallies, defying a state of emergency. Emergency services said at least three people have been

killed and more than 500 injured, including soldiers and policemen. Several ambulances were seen taking away people who

appeared to be seriously injured.

A grenade also exploded near to Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva's office in Government House but there were no initial reports of injuries in that blast. Abhisit remained holed up at an army barracks.

Kyrgyzstan holds funeral ceremonies

BBC ONLINE

Funeral ceremonies are being held in Kyrgyzstan for some of the at least 78 people killed during a violent uprising that ousted the president.

Thousands of mourners watched as 15 coffins draped in the national flag were carried through the burial ground outside the capital, Bishkek.

The interim leader, Roza Otunbayeva, said those killed were

Meanwhile, the US has suspended all troop flights to Afghanistan from Kyrgyzstan amid continuing tension. In the early hours of Saturday morning, hundreds of cars drove to a memorial site some 20km (12 miles) outside Bishkek for the funerals of 15 of those who died during last week's violence.

Other victims were being buried at private family funerals. The memorial site was the scene of a massacre by Soviet forces in the 1930s of Kyrgyz noblemen.

Solemn music played as families and friends laid name plates and pictures of the victims. The funerals marked the second day of mourning in the

country, where calm appears to have largely returned.

BBC ONLINE

The need for a new global climate deal is "greater than ever", according to developing country delegates speaking at the opening of UN climate talks.

called for intensive talks during the year, leading to agreement on a legally binding treaty in December.

The EU backed the call, re-stating that the conclusion of December's Copenhagen summit had not met its ambitions.

But other industrialised countries do not appear so keen for a new treaty. The three-day meeting here in Bonn is the

first since the Copenhagen summit concluded without the global treaty that many countries had aimed for, instead producing a political declaration known as the Copenhagen Accord.

The US and other rich countries see it as a positive development, but others decry it as a fig leaf that detracts attention from the real issues.

Describing Copenhagen as "a total failure",

Venezuela's delegation chief Claudia Salerno

on poorer countries. "My country raised its voice against the misnomer 'Copenhagen Accord' because... it contains proposals for voluntary reductions in Blocs representing the poorest nations carbon emissions that according to scientists

said the accord would not reduce emissions enough to prevent significant climate impacts

would lead to increases in temperature of about 5C (9F)," she said. "So nobody should be congratulating them-

selves on that. The urgency we face now is even greater than 2009." Not all analyses of the Copenhagen Accord's

pledges on curbing carbon emissions produce such high estimates for temperature rise, but many of those pledges are far from precise.

The US - which did not speak during the opening session here - has been the accord's principal champion, saying it "achieves a number of landmark outcomes".

Its written submission to the UN climate convention (UNFCCC) backs "further formalisation of the accord" at this year's summit in Mexico, and says that "it will be difficult to find consensus around alternative proposals that depart from the accord understandings".

Climate change treaty Conservative rebels launch new party in Japan

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's former finance minister Kaoru Yosano and four other political veterans yesterday launched a new party ahead of July polls as their conservative opposition camp struggles to regain power.

Former trade minister Takeo Hiranuma assumed head of the party, named "Stand up Japan" and consisting of former members of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which lost its halfcentury grip on power in last year's lower house election.

"Our main objective is to form a sound opposition force ahead of upper house elections," Yosano, 71, co-president of the party with Hiranuma, said in a television interview with TV-Tokyo.

The political heavyweight has just quit the LDP with his fellow defectors but has failed to win for his new party a conservative star such as former health minister Yoichi Masuzoe,

ranked as Japan's preferred premier in opinion polls. Voter support has dived for both the demoralised opposition LDP and the young centre-left government of Prime Minister

Yukio Hatoyama ahead of the key elections. The Liberal Democrats and their conservative predecessors, with their close ties to big business and the bureaucracy, ruled Japan as a virtual one-party state for almost the entire post-war period until the electoral earthquake.

Filipinos start diaspora voting

AFP, Hong Kong

More than half a million Filipinos living overseas, who help pump billions of dollars into the Philippines' economy, yesterday began voting for a new president.

Nine million Filipinos live outside the Philippines with many working as maids, nurses, construction workers and sailors and the 590,000 registered voters can cast their votes until May 10.

In Hong Kong an army of voters -- at least 80 percent are female domestic helpers -- was expected to flood the consulaterun polling station on Sunday, their usual day off, said election officialVictorio Dimagiba.

Foreign department spokesman Eduardo Malaya said in Manila that Filipinos around the world will cast their votes in 93 embassies and consulates to elect the succes-

sor to President Gloria Arroyo.