

Pak Taliban outlines ceasefire conditions

REUTERS, Islamabad

The Pakistani Taliban have outlined conditions for a ceasefire, including the adoption of Islamic law and a break with the United States, a spokesman said yesterday, an offer a senior government official described as "preposterous".

The Taliban, in a letter sent to the Pakistan daily The News, also demanded that Pakistan stop its involvement in the war pitting Afghan insurgents against the Kabul government and refocus on a war of "revenge" against India.

The letter from Taliban spokesman Amir Muawiya comes as the focus in Afghanistan shifts from a military push by Nato troops to potential peace talks, and amid speculation of a rift between top Pakistan Taliban leaders.

The Pakistani Taliban are a separate entity allied to the Afghan Taliban. Known as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), they have launched devastating attacks against the Pakistani military and civilians.

"No one can take such an offer or terms seriously. The TTP is not a proper entity, certainly not one any government can negotiate with," said one senior government official.

The ceasefire conditions, confirmed by spokesman Ihsanullah Ihsan in a phone call to Reuters, said Pakistan should rewrite its laws and constitution according to Islamic law.

Tea workers burn boss alive in India

AFP, Guwahati

Tea plantation workers torched the home of their boss, killing both him and his wife, following a labour dispute in the northeastern Indian state of Assam, officials said yesterday.

Around 1,000 workers at the privately-owned MKB Tea Estate attacked the plantation owner's bungalow on Wednesday and set it on fire.

Mridul Bhattacharya and his wife Rita were burned to death as workers armed with homemade weapons prevented police from rescuing them, they said.

The grisly attack occurred in Assam's tea-growing Tinsukia district.

Pranab's son sorry But row over 'dented, painted' remarks continues

HINDUSTAN TIMES, Kolkata

President Pranab Mukherjee's son Abhijit Mukherjee has tendered unconditional apology for his 'dented and painted' remarks on the Delhi anti-rape protesters, admitting his statement was 'outrageous'.

Earlier, Abhijit stoked a major controversy by describing women participating in Delhi protests against gangrape of a student as 'highly dented and painted', triggering angry backlash.

"Those who are coming in the name of students in the rallies, sundori, sundori mahila (beautiful women), highly dented and painted," Abhijit Mukherjee, an MP from Jangipur seat which the President had vacated before his election, told a news channel.

Two days later as the comment drew sharp reactions from different sections of the country, Mukherjee promptly retracted his statement.

As his "insensitive" remarks sparked outrage with even his sister Sharmistha expressing "utter shock and anguish" and apologising on his behalf, Abhijit "withdrew" his comments and said they were not meant to hurt "any particular section or any particular sentiment".

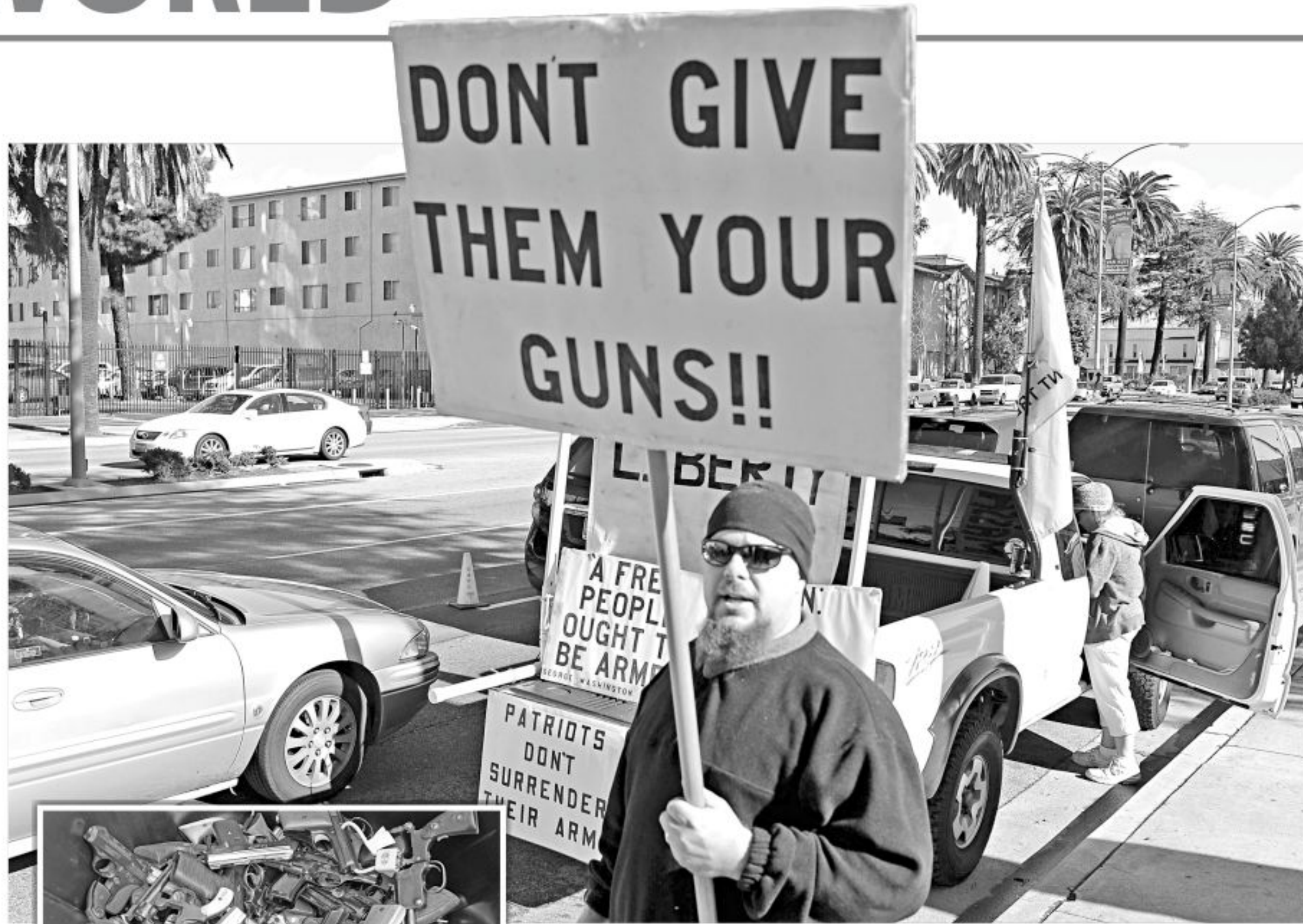


PHOTO: AFP

One of two pro-gun activists protests against the Gun Buyback Program organized in the traditionally liberal Los Angeles during the LAPD Gun Buyback Program event in the Van Nuys area of north Los Angeles on Wednesday. The event, where weapons could be exchanged for up to \$200, has collected 420 weapons. Inset, a trash bin full of handguns collected during the event.

Peace envoy urges 'real' change

Russia denies joint plan with US in solving Syria crisis; 121 killed

AFP, Damascus

International peace envoy Lakhdar Brahimi yesterday called for "real change" and a transitional government in Syria but the armed opposition swiftly retorted that that could not include President Bashar al-Assad or his top lieutenants.

The envoy unveiled his initiative in Damascus as Russia, the Syrian regime's most powerful ally, denied the existence of a joint peace plan with the United States, amid a flurry of year-end diplomatic activity to try to end the bloody 21-month conflict.

But Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov insisted after talks with a Syrian delegation that the only alternative to a negotiated solution was "bloody chaos."

"Change should not be cosmetic; the Syrian people need and require real change, and everyone understands what that means," the UN-Arab League envoy said on the fifth and final day of his latest peace mission to Syria.

"We need to form a government with all powers... which assumes power during a period of transition. That transition period will end with elections," Brahimi said.

He did not specify a date for the envisaged elections,



either presidential or parliamentary depending on what could be agreed. He also made no mention on the fate of Assad, whose current term expires in 2014.

"The transition period should not lead to the collapse of the state and its institutions," Brahimi said.

The armed opposition National Coalition and Western governments that recognise it reiterated yesterday that no transition that gave a role to Assad and his inner circle would be acceptable.

Russia, which to the fury of the West has refused to cut cooperation with Damascus, hosted a Syrian delegation headed by Deputy Foreign Minister Faisal Muqdad, ahead of talks on Saturday with Brahimi.

Moscow denied reports of a new initiative with Washington that would see Assad stay in power until 2014 while preventing him from renewing his mandate.

There was more violence yesterday, with a car bomb in a Damascus suburb killing four people and wounding 10, a day after 121 people died nationwide, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights says.

The Britain-based watchdog also says it has documented more than 45,000 deaths in violence since the uprising erupted in March last year.

Bhutto heir launches political career

AFP, Garhi Khuda Bakhsh

The son of Pakistan's slain former prime minister Benazir Bhutto launched his political career yesterday on the anniversary of his mother's death, vowing to continue her fight for democracy.

More than 200,000 people gathered at the Bhutto family mausoleum in Garhi Khuda Bakhsh in the southern province of Sindh to pay their respects to Benazir and to hear Bilawal Bhutto Zardari make his first major public speech.

Bhutto, twice elected prime minister, was killed in a gun and suicide attack after an election rally in Rawalpindi, the headquarters of Pakistan's army, on December 27, 2007.

In an impassioned speech amid tight security, Bilawal -- the third generation of his family to go into politics -- promised to continue the fight for the poor and against



"anti-democratic forces".

The Bhutto family has been a force in Pakistani politics for nearly all of the country's 65-year history.

Bilawal also took aim at Pakistan's vocal Chief Justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, demanding to know why the Supreme Court could find time to deal with issues such as compressed gas and sugar prices but not punish his mother's killers.

The ruling Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and the judiciary have been at loggerheads for more than two years over the Supreme Court's attempt to reopen graft cases against Benazir and her husband President Asif Ali Zardari.

A general election is due in the spring and though the 24-year-old will be too young to stand -- the lower age limit is 25 -- he could act as a figurehead for the campaign.

Gun database release sparks outrage in US

AFP, New York

A New York newspaper has sparked outrage by publishing a detailed map with thousands of names and addresses of gun permit holders in the wake of the Newtown school shooting.

The publication came amid a heated debate over gun control revived after the Connecticut massacre and drew intense criticism on social media outlets from gun owners, who called it a violation of privacy.

The Journal News in New York state's Westchester County obtained the publicly available information from county clerks and published it earlier this week in an interactive map alongside an article entitled "The Gun Owner Next Door."

The newspaper defended the publication, saying the information was legally obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request and that its readers had a right to know whether their neighbors owned firearms.

Critics slammed the move as an invasion of privacy that could put gun owners at risk, and the newspaper said it had received hundreds of calls from people who feared for their safety or felt their privacy had been violated.

The school shooting at Newtown, Connecticut earlier this month -- in which 26 people, including 20 young children -- were shot dead, has sparked renewed calls for new gun regulation.

NEWS IN brief

Japan to review zero-nuke policy

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's new leaders yesterday were set to work on dismantling plans to rid the country of nuclear power by 2040, pledging to review a post-Fukushima policy.

The pro-business Liberal Democratic Party-led government also said they would give the green light to any reactors deemed safe by regulators, indicating shuttered power stations could start coming back online.

LDP won a landslide victory in the December 16 election, returning to power after a three-year break. Despite anti-nuclear sentiment running high in Japan following the Fukushima disaster, parties opposing atomic energy made little impact at the ballot box.

Cold snap toll hits 30 in UP

IANS, Lucknow

The cold wave sweeping through Uttar Pradesh in India has claimed more than 30 lives in a 24-hour span, officials here said yesterday.

The mercury dropped below four degrees Celsius in most parts of the state even as the day temperatures plummeted below 10 degrees Celsius. Although the thick fog cover has receded in some regions, cold winds continued to add to the troubles of the people.

The Met Office in the state capital Lucknow does not see any respite from the cold weather

HW Bush in intensive care unit

GUARDIAN ONLINE

Former US president George HW Bush has been admitted to a hospital's intensive care unit "following a series of setbacks including a persistent fever", but he is alert and talking to medical staff, his spokesman said.

Jim McGrath, Bush's spokesman in Houston, said in a brief email that Bush was admitted to the intensive care unit at Methodist hospital on Sunday. No other details were released about his medical condition, but McGrath said Bush is surrounded by family.

The 88-year-old has been in hospital since 23 November, when he was admitted for a lingering cough related to bronchitis after having been in

Mandela discharged from hospital

AFP, Johannesburg

Nelson Mandela has been discharged after 19 days in hospital during which he was treated for a lung infection and gallstones, the South African government said on Wednesday.

South Africa's anti-apartheid icon Nelson Mandela was recovering at his Johannesburg home yesterday, convalescing and receiving further care after a nearly three-week hospital stay, officials said.

The revered 94-year-old had been admitted to a Pretoria hospital on December 8, undergoing treatment for a lung infection and gallstones in the latest health scare for South Africa's first black president.

Chavez cedes some powers

AFP, Caracas

Ailing Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who is still in Cuba recovering from his latest cancer surgery, has delegated several economic duties to his vice president Nicolas Maduro.

According to a decree signed by Chavez and published on Wednesday in the country's government gazette, Maduro is now responsible for making certain decisions related to the national budget and expropriations.

Chavez signed the executive order earlier this month, one day before heading to Cuba, one of Venezuela's key allies, where he underwent surgery on December 11 in his ongoing battle with

US winter storms toll hit 7

AFP, Chicago

A massive Christmas storm that whipped up tornadoes, ice and snow from the Gulf of Mexico to the Great Lakes has killed at least seven people and grounded more than 2,000 US flights.

The storm snarled holiday travel as people were warned to stay home rather than brave the strong winds, freezing temperatures and treacherous roads.

Already, more than 200,000 people were without power, with tens of thousands of holiday travelers stranded across the country. More than 1,500 US flights had been canceled by Wednesday evening, after 536 were grounded on Tuesday, according to flight tracker FlightAware.

Victim flown to Singapore

Remains critical; Indian PM puts security of woman as top priority

STAR REPORT

Doctors in Singapore yesterday battled to save the life of an Indian student who sustained horrific injuries in a gang-rape, after she was dramatically airlifted from a hospital in New Delhi.

As India's prime minister vowed that the 23-year-old's attackers would face swift justice, doctors at Singapore's Mount Elizabeth Hospital described her condition in the intensive care unit as "extremely critical".

Dr Kelvin Loh, chief executive officer at the hospital said in a statement: "As at 7pm (1100 GMT) the patient remains in an extremely critical condition. She is under treatment at Mount Elizabeth Hospital's Intensive Care Unit.

"Prior to her arrival, she has already undergone three abdominal surgeries and experienced a cardiac arrest in India. A multi-disciplinary team of specialists is taking care of her and doing everything possible to stabilise her condition."

The Indian government, which is paying for the woman's treatment, approved the decision to transfer her from Delhi's Safdarjung Hospital where she had been treated since the December 16 assault on a bus in the centre of the capital.

The victim's relatives accompanied her to Singapore.

According to police, six men took turns to rape the woman and assault her with an iron bar, leaving her with severe intestinal injuries, before they threw her out of a bus that they had taken for a joyride.

All the six men are in custody in connection with the assault.

India has been rocked by a wave of protests since the attack, including one in Delhi yesterday which brought several hundred people onto the streets. Riot police prevented them from marching on government buildings.

Gang-rapes are reported on a daily basis, with police revealing yesterday

that a 42-year-old woman had been found overnight dumped on a road in southeast Delhi after being gagged, sedated and raped by three men.

As the outrage against the gangrape of a young student here continues, Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday said safety and security of women is of the highest concern of his government, reported our New Delhi correspondent.

Manmohan Singh told a gathering of chief ministers from across India that there was a "problem" which "requires greater attention".

He said the government has decided to review the present laws and examine the levels of punishments in cases of aggravated sexual assault.

As part of measures to fight crime against women, the Indian government also announced yesterday it will post identities and photos of rapists on official websites to shame them in public.

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