

# Musharraf Bans Opposition Leaders

**ISLAMABAD, Pakistan, May 18--** President Gen. Pervez Musharraf said he would not allow former premiers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif--his two main political rivals--to return to Pakistan to take part in upcoming elections.

Musharraf was asked during an interview with the private Aaj television channel about the aspiration of Bhutto and Sharif to return from exile to lead their parties in parliamentary elections, due at the end of the year, reported AP.

"No, they will not be returning before elections," Musharraf said in an excerpt shown before the screening of the full interview late Friday.

The announcement seems likely to deepen Pakistan's political crisis, in which the military leader faces accusations of authoritarianism as well as a growing challenge from Islamic extremists.



Nawaz Sharif



Benazir Bhutto

Musharraf has said he will ask lawmakers in the outgoing parliament to elect him to another five-year term as president. He has also resisted calls to give up his post as army chief.

Opposition parties were expected to challenge that stance before the Supreme Court, and have cried foul over Musharraf's decision in March to suspend the court's top judge for alleged misconduct.

There had been speculation that Musharraf would team up with Bhutto

under an arrangement that would see her return to the country, in return for her Pakistan Peoples Party's support for his presidency.

But deadly violence between government and opposition supporters in Karachi last weekend, and now Musharraf's unequivocal rejection of Bhutto's return, appear to have killed off the chance of a pact with her party, which espouses a similarly moderate, pro-Western course.

Musharraf banished Sharif to Saudi Arabia for

10 years after seizing power in a bloodless coup in 1999. Bhutto left the country months earlier to avoid arrest in corruption cases registered against her by Sharif's government.

Musharraf has dismissed both of them as corrupt and incompetent, but had recently appeared more conciliatory, and officials recently scaled back corruption investigations against her.

He said Al-Qaeda was still present in the area of Mir Ali, a town in the North Waziristan region near the border with Afghanistan. The remote area is considered a potential hiding place for Osama bin Laden and his deputy Ayman Al-Zawahiri.

The government in 2006 signed a peace deal with pro-Taliban militants in North Waziristan, pardoning them in return for a pledge that they would halt attacks on security forces and raids into neighboring Afghanistan.

# 5 Killed in India Mosque Blast

**HYDERABAD, India, May 18--**An explosion ripped through a historic mosque as Friday prayers were ending in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad, killing at least five people and wounding several others, police said.

Many of those injured in the explosion at the 17th-century Mecca Masjid were severely wounded, and the city's police chief, Balwinder Singh, warned the death toll could rise, AP said.

There was no immediate word on what caused the blast, but the high intensity of the explosion indicated it could have been the result of a bomb, Singh said, adding that police had cordoned off the area and begun searching for any unexploded devices.

The independent CNN-IBN television program, meanwhile, reported that a second, unexploded bomb had been found. But Singh refused to confirm the report, saying only that "one bag has been found and we have taken it away."

About 10,000 people usually attend Friday prayers at the mosque, which is located in a



Police investigators and media representatives walk around the Mecca Masjid in Hyderabad following a blast at the mosque, May 18.

Muslim neighborhood of Hyderabad, a city that has long been plagued by tensions--and occasional spasms of violence--between its Hindu and Muslim communities.

There was chaos outside the mosque following the attack with throngs of people gathered in the streets, some chanting

angry slogans. Ambulances struggled to get through the crowds and ferry the wounded to

hospitals, aided by police in full riot gear who were trying to control the situation.

# Russians Gather For Tense Protest

**MOSCOW, May 18--** Russian opposition groups were set for a tense demonstration Friday near an EU-Russia summit meeting in protest against what activists say is President Vladimir Putin's growing authoritarianism.

According to AFP, the rally in Samara organized by The Other Russia coalition has been authorized, unlike several others this year which have been violently dispersed by riot police.

About 1,000 people, including ex-chess champion Garry Kasparov, who is now a leading anti-Putin activist, were expected to attend the "March of the Dissenters," organizers told AFP.

However, police over the last fortnight have arrested a series of organizers, journalists and human rights experts, including several as they boarded planes or trains to Samara on Thursday.

The arrests fuelled criticism of the Kremlin as German Chancellor Angela Merkel and European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso met with Putin in the Samara region to discuss troubled EU-

Russian relations. The US-based Human Rights Watch called on the European Union to make "the deteriorating human rights situation in Russia a focus of this weekend's EU-Russia summit."

"The crackdown in Samara gives EU leaders a firsthand view of Russia's human rights crisis," the US-based organization's regional director, Holly Cartner, said in a statement. "The Kremlin is reversing all the achievements of the glasnost era."

Meanwhile, a pro-Kremlin youth group vowed to gather some 15,000 people in Samara on Friday.

Little is known about the group, called "New People," or its planned Samara protest, but a representative told AFP that they would be gathering almost at the same spot as the anti-Kremlin demonstration.

Masha Lipman, an analyst with the Moscow Carnegie Centre, said the harassment of opposition figures showed that despite giving permission for the march to go ahead, the authorities want to "make clear (that) street protests are intolerable and that the authorities will never allow them."

# Deputies Abolish Term Limit for Nazarbayev

**ASTANA, Kazakhstan, May 18--** Kazakhstan's parliament voted on Friday to allow President Nursultan Nazarbayev to stand for an unlimited number of terms in a move likely to raise further concerns

about democracy in this key US ally in Central Asia.

At a joint session of both houses of parliament, an overwhelming number of deputies approved a constitutional change that would exempt the country's first president from a bar on holding the post for more than two terms in a row, AFP said.

The change was introduced in the second and

final reading of legislation that was initially billed as strengthening parliament's powers at the expense of those of the president.

Nazarbayev, 66, has been the leader of this energy-rich country since the days when it was one of 15 republics of the Soviet Union and has clung to power through a series of referendums and elections that have been criticized by opponents

and the West for not meeting democratic standards.

The parliament's move, which could theoretically pave the way for Nazarbayev to remain president for the rest of his life, was defended by one of its authors, lower house of parliament deputy Vladimir Nekhoroshev.

"Remember how (US President) Franklin D. Roosevelt was re-elected four times in a row. In

France there are no term limits at all. We're doing this not for Nazarbayev himself but for the sake of the people," Nekhoroshev said.

Opposition leaders predicted the move would further blemish Kazakhstan's image abroad.

"The reaction of the West to this will be negative, but it is too early to say whether or not Nazarbayev will remain

president for life," said Oraz Dzhandosov, chairman of the opposition bloc "For a Just Kazakhstan."

"The move will negatively affect the image of the president," said Amirzhan Kosanov, of the ZSK opposition bloc. "All of the political initiatives, unfortunately, are not taking place in the interest of society, but in the interests of one man," he said.

# NATO: Kosovo Status Vote Delay May Cause Violence

**WASHINGTON, May 18--**NATO's top military commander warned that delaying a vote in the United Nations Security Council on a resolution endorsing supervised independence for Kosovo could provoke violence.

The US and the EU circulated a draft resolution last week that would ratify the province's independence from Serbia despite strong objections from Russia, a permanent Security Council member with veto powers, reported AP.

The council was expected to discuss the draft Thursday afternoon. US Army Gen. Bantz J. Craddock told the Senate Armed Services Committee that a speedy resolution would be helpful.

"I believe that the longer the resolution is delayed, the longer it takes to come to closure in the Security Council, the greater the opportunity for mischief and the more likely there will be violence in Kosovo," Craddock said.

**KANDAHAR, Afghanistan, May 18--**A Taliban insurgent freed in exchange for a kidnapped Italian journalist will replace his slain brother as the militia's top field commander, a spokesman said Friday--although Afghan intelligence insisted the new man had been killed, AP said.

Dadullah Mansoor was named to succeed his brother, Mullah Dadullah, a one-legged militant who orchestrated Taliban suicide

# Taliban Name Successor To Slay Commander

attacks and beheadings and who was killed last weekend in a US-led operation in southern Afghanistan.

Purported Taliban spokesman Shuhab Athul said Mansoor was one of the five prisoners released in March in exchange for Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo.

"Mullah Dadullah's death will not deter the Taliban's summer activities," Athul said by telephone.

"The Taliban will increase its activities

against the government and occupying forces."

He reiterated a Taliban demand that the government release Dadullah's body to his relatives, saying if they do not, "the consequences will be very bad."

The Afghan intelligence service said Wednesday that three Taliban prisoners exchanged for Mastrogiacomo were killed alongside Dadullah. It said Dadullah's brother, whom they identified as Mullah Shah Mansoor,

was among those killed. However, Athul said that the Mansoor who was killed was one of Dadullah's minor commanders--not his brother. "His brother, Dadullah Mansoor, is alive, and he is replacing Dadullah," Athul said.

Sayed Ansari, spokesman for the intelligence service, said Friday that the agency stood by its findings. "Our statement is correct," Ansari said. "We do not know about what they (the Taliban) are saying."

# Abe Warns on Security

**TOKYO, May 18--**Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe warned of a "dramatically more severe" security situation Friday as a panel of experts met to study how Tokyo can defend its allies without breaching its constitution.

The discussions by the panel of former officials and academics are part of Abe's drive to build a more assertive nation and reflect his desire to bolster military ties with the United States, Japan's main ally, AFP said. "The security environment surrounding our country is becoming dramatically more severe," Abe said at the start of the meeting.

"As prime minister, I have the responsibility of building a constructive security framework able to respond to events," said the premier, who is known for his hawkish views on North Korea.

The study panel is led by ex-ambassador to Washington Shunji Yanai and aims to draw up a report for Abe by the end of the year.

The current constitution, imposed by US occupiers after World War II, says Japan forever renounces the use of force to resolve international disputes.

However, Japan has been gradually boosting its military despite frequent tension with Asian neighbors haunted by its past aggression, and took the landmark step of sending troops to Iraq.

## WORLD News In Brief

### Landmark Visit

**FES--Saudi King Abdullah arrived in Morocco for a two-day official visit, his first to an Arab nation after ascending the throne in August 2005. After his official visit, the Saudi king will spend 15 days in Casablanca on a private holiday.**

### Controversial Bill

**ANKARA--Turkish President Ahmet Necdet Sezer has approved a controversial bill widely seen as a bid to hinder Kurdish politicians seeking parliamentary seats in the July 22 elections, his office said.**

### Myanmar Sanctions

**WASHINGTON--President George W. Bush renewed sanctions on Myanmar for another year, as the White House called for the immediate release of democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi.**

### Nigeria Rally

**LAGOS--Nigerian unions called for a two-day strike in protest at widespread vote-rigging in last month's elections, to coincide with the handover from the current administration to its successor.**



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