

Musharraf on Collision Course With Islamists

ISLAMABAD, Pakistan, Dec. 31--Pakistan's opposition Friday geared up for a "black day" of protests after President Pervez Musharraf broke his promise to quit as army chief and accused his detractors of threatening democracy, AFP reported.

An alliance of Islamic parties and other groups plans to take to the streets on New Year's Day after General Musharraf told

the nation in a television and radio address late Thursday that he would not hang up his uniform.

Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999, has set himself on a collision course with the vocal religious right by going back on a pledge he made a year ago to quit his military role by Friday.

He accused the opposition, particularly the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal

Islamic alliance, of destabilizing Pakistan by refusing to accept the "ruling of the majority".

Musharraf, the latest in a series of military leaders who have ruled Pakistan for half its existence since 1947, said he was staying on as army chief to fight terrorism and poverty and continue peace moves with India.

But Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal parliamentary leader Hafiz Hussain

Ahmed told AFP it would observe January 1 as a "black day" and said Pakistan's Alliance for Restoration of Democracy had promised to help "mobilize the people".

The Islamists have already held four anti-Musharraf rallies in major Pakistani cities over the past month over the issue. Turnouts have been modest but they are hoping the general's latest statements will galvanize support.



Pervez Musharraf

Key Developments

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■ **JANUARY 4, GEORGIA** -- Mikhail Saakashvili, reformist opposition candidate and leader of the peaceful "rose revolution", is elected president, succeeding Eduard Shevardnadze, forced to resign in November 2003 after three weeks of mass demonstrations.

■ **JANUARY 27, BRITAIN** -- Prime Minister Tony Blair is exonerated in a report by judge Brian Hutton of any responsibility in the suicide of weapons expert David Kelly in July 2003. But the report criticizes the BBC for broadcasting an unfounded report. The corporation apologizes and high-level resignations follow.

■ **FEBRUARY 12, ASIA** -- An epidemic of bird flu reaches a peak in a dozen infected countries in Asia as the United Nations announces the spread of the disease has not been stemmed, despite the slaughter of tens of millions of chickens.

■ **FEBRUARY 19, ZIMBABWE** -- The European Union extends sanctions on president Robert Mugabe and his government for a further year, barring them from traveling within the EU and freezing their assets.

■ **MARCH 1, FRANCE** -- A controversial law banning the wearing of Muslim headscarves and other conspicuous religious symbols in French schools hits the books despite strong opposition, but doesn't go into force until the start of the new school year in September.

■ **MARCH 8, IRAQ** -- Signature of the provisional constitution leading to the transfer of power from the US-led coalition to Iraqis and providing for general elections before the end of 2005. Kurdistan is awarded autonomous status.

■ **MARCH 11, SPAIN** -- A dozen bombs explode aboard four Madrid commuter trains, killing 191 and injuring some 1,900 in a series of attacks claimed by the Al-Qaeda network, the worst terrorist incident in western Europe since 270 died in the Lockerbie bombing in 1988.

■ **APRIL 24, CYPRUS** -- Greek Cypriots reject a United Nations peace plan in a national referendum, while their Turkish counterparts in the breakaway north of the island vote in favor of reunification. The Greek republic of Cyprus is to join the European Union but the Turkish north will not be admitted.

■ **MAY 1, EUROPEAN UNION** -- Ten new states join the European Union, making it a 25-nation bloc with a population of more than 450 million people. The new members are: Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia.

■ **MAY 9, RUSSIA** -- Pro-Russian Chechen President Akhmad Kadyrov is killed along with six other people in an attack in the capital Grozny claimed by radical warlord Shamil Bassayev.

■ **MAY 18, INDIA** -- Sonia Gandhi, who has led the Congress Party to victory in the general election, announces she will not accept the role of prime minister after a virulent campaign against her due to her Italian birth and doubts about the stability of the government she might form. Manmohan Singh, a 71-year-old economist, is asked to form a cabinet.

■ **JUNE 3, UNITED STATES** -- CIA director George Tenet resigns after months of criticism for not having prevented the 9/11 attacks and providing false information on the situation over weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

■ **JUNE 28, IRAQ** -- After 14 months occupying and ruling Iraq, the US-led coalition transfers power to the interim Iraqi government led by Prime Minister Iyad Allawi two days ahead of schedule for fear of terrorist attacks on the specified date.

■ **JULY 9, ISRAEL** -- The International Court of Justice rules that Israel's controversial separation fence around the Palestinian territories in the West Bank is illegal and should be torn down. Israel rejects the ruling.

■ **AUGUST 15, VENEZUELA** -- President Hugo Chavez is victorious in a referendum called by the opposition and will thus remain in power until the end of his mandate in 2006.

■ **SEPTEMBER 1-3, RUSSIA** -- Several hundred children and their mothers are held hostage in a school gymnasium in Beslan, North Ossetia, by armed Chechen rebels. More than 340 people are killed, along with the 31 hostage-takers, when Russian troops storm the school building. The attack is later claimed by radical Chechen separatist leader Shamil Bassayev.

■ **SEPTEMBER 20, INDONESIA** -- Former general Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono wins a landslide victory in the presidential election against outgoing head of state Megawati Sukarnoputri.

■ **OCTOBER 7-8, NOBEL PRIZES** -- Two women are named as Nobel laureates: Kenyan ecologist and government minister Wangari Maathai becomes the first African woman to win the Peace Prize, and controversial Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek is the winner of the Literature prize.

■ **NOVEMBER 2, UNITED STATES** -- George W. Bush is reelected President as his Democrat opponent John Kerry concedes defeat in the face of a mass mobilization of conservative religious voters in Bush's favor. Secretary of State Colin Powell resigns on November 15 to be replaced by national security adviser, Condoleezza Rice.

■ **NOVEMBER 11, FRANCE** -- Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat dies in Paris, where he has been treated in hospital since October 29.

■ **NOVEMBER 30, UNITED NATIONS** -- The UN announces a series of 101 reforms, including expanding the Security Council from 15 to 24 members.

■ **DECEMBER 7, AFGHANISTAN** -- Hamid Karzai is sworn in the first democratic president, three years after the fall of the Taliban regime.

■ **DECEMBER 10, ITALY** -- Charges against Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi of bribing judges are dropped due to the statute of limitations have expired. Berlusconi vows to clear his name.

Call for Restraint In Ukraine

MOSCOW, Dec. 31--The Russian foreign ministry on Friday called for all sides of politics in the former Soviet republic of Ukraine to show "restraint" following elections on the weekend won by pro-West opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko, Reuters reported.

Ministry spokesman Alexander Yakovenko said Russia "proceeds from the principles of neighborliness and strategic partnership and has been jointly settling all questions, including disputed ones, on this basis," according to Interfax news agency.

resolve disputed matters lawfully on the basis of the constitution and acting legislation.

Russia openly backed defeated pro-Moscow candidate Viktor Yanukovich in the presidential race, which has aggravated divisions between the mainly Russian-speaking east of the country and the Ukrainian-speaking west.

Yanukovich claimed victory in a runoff in November only to have the result annulled due to massive ballot-rigging.

He has challenged the result of Sunday's rematch in the courts and with the electoral commission.

Egypt Persuades Libya, S. Arabia To Ease Off

CAIRO, Egypt, Dec. 31--Egypt has persuaded Saudi Arabia and Libya to stop attacking each other in the media to try to end recent tension between the two Arab countries, Egyptian state-run Middle East News Agency (MENA) reported on Thursday.

"The agency has learnt that Egypt has succeeded in getting an agreement between the two brothers (Saudi Arabia and Libya) to end from today the trading of media attacks," MENA reported.

Authorities in Libya and Saudi Arabia could not be

immediately reached for confirmation.

Two Saudi newspapers called Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi "rash" and "mad" last week, a day after Riyadh recalled its ambassador to Tripoli over what it said was a Libyan plot to kill the kingdom's de facto ruler Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz.

In October, a US court sentenced prominent US Muslim activist Abdurahman Al-Amoudi to 23 years in jail for illegal financial dealings with Libya and for his role in the alleged assassination plot.

The US investigation into the plot began as Washington and London were welcoming Gaddafi back into the international community after he decided to dismantle his weapons of mass destruction programs.

Last year, Prince Abdullah and Gaddafi clashed at an Arab summit when the Libyan leader criticized the kingdom for hosting US forces before the Iraq war. The prince walked out after angrily pointing at Gaddafi and asking how he had come to power.

Buenos Aires Fire Claims 169 Lives

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina, Dec. 31--A blaze in a Buenos Aires nightclub packed with young revelers celebrating the New Year holidays killed at least 169 people and injured 375, as a stampeding crowd was trapped by locked exit doors, officials said on Friday, Reuters reported.

The blaze is thought to have been caused by a flare fired into the club's ceiling during a rock concert, sending burning debris onto the crowd of up to 4,000 people who desperately fought to flee the flames and suffocating smoke.



An injured man is helped by an Argentine policeman outside a nightclub in Buenos Aires, December 31. (Reuters Photo)

"The fire spread in a minute and we were a mountain of people trying to escape," said survivor Ariel Monges, 25, who lost a friend and a cousin in the fire and was searching for another friend at a city hospital.

The blaze, which officials called one of Argentina's worst disasters, may have claimed more victims because four of the club's six doors were tied shut with wire, according to Interior Minister Anibal

gritty, run-down neighborhood of Once warned the crowd not to shoot flares due to the fire hazard, the mayor said. But after the first song, an hour before midnight on Thursday, a group fired one into the highly flammable foam ceiling.

Flares and a whole array of fireworks are sold on streets all over Latin America for the New Year holiday festivities with little regulation.

Lists at hospitals showed that most of the victims were in their teens and 20s, but there were also children as young as 6 among the dead and injured.

City Hall set up an emergency center in the middle of the night for families to find out about victims.

"The city does not remember such a grave situation," city health secretary Alfredo Stern said.

Most of the victims are believed to have died from smoke inhalation.

The rock band playing at the Republica Cromagnon club in the

Pro-Moscow Leader: Chechnya Invasion a Mistake

MOSCOW, Dec. 31--Russia's decision to send troops into separatist Chechnya ten years ago was a mistake, the region's Moscow-backed leader was quoted as saying on Friday.

Alu Alkhanov, elected president of the southern province in August, said foreign spies aiming to weaken Russia had sucked the Kremlin into the attack, which only served to strengthen anti-Moscow rebels, Reuters reported.

Russian forces poured into Chechnya in early December 1994, but did not meet tough resistance until they entered the capital Grozny on New Year's Eve. Lightly armed rebels destroyed tank columns and killed dozens of soldiers.

Alkhanov said Chechnya's separatist government led by Dzhokhar Dudayev, who was elected amid the Soviet collapse, had been weak but the attack united Chechens behind him.

"This December military operation was a mistake.

Thanks to it Dudayev once again became a uniting figure for the Chechens," he said in an interview with the official Rossiiskaya Gazeta daily coinciding with the war's ten-year anniversary.

Although Russian forces killed Dudayev in 1996, Chechen rebels have kept fighting under successor Aslan Maskhadov--denounced as an international terrorist by Alkhanov.

The rebels in turn denounce Alkhanov as a Kremlin stooge, and pledge to keep fighting until Russia concedes defeat. Their regular offers of peace talks are rejected by the Kremlin.

Alkhanov said foreign fighters who had come to Chechnya had driven out the workers needed to rebuild the region.

These spies were to blame for the war in the first place, Alkhanov said, refusing to point the finger at Kremlin officials who analysts see as having blundered into the war without realizing its consequences.

World News In Brief

Kuwait Alert
KUWAIT CITY--Kuwait on Friday raised its state of alert almost to the maximum, boosting security around the country in the wake of Wednesday's attacks in neighboring Saudi Arabia.

Bus Toll

KARACHI--At least 31 people died and 10 were injured in a fireball when their bus rammmed into an oil tanker in southern Pakistan early Friday, police said.

Uganda Ceasefire

KITGUM--Intense negotiations got under way Friday between Uganda's government and Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels to agree on a ceasefire text to end 18 years of bloody conflict, officials said.

Nepal Clash

KATHMANDU--At least eight Maoist rebels and two civilians have been killed in three separate incidents in the ongoing bloody civil war in Nepal, police said Friday.