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Sharif to end exile before poll deadline

By Farhan Bokhari in Islamabad and George Parker in, Kampala

Nawaz Sharif, Pakistan's former prime minister, will return home in the next few days, opposition leaders and Pakistani officials said last night. The move comes as General Pervez Musharraf, the country's military ruler, faces mounting international pressure to lift the state of emergency and restore democracy.

Mr Sharif is expected to return before Monday - the last day to file nominations for elections due on January 8 - which will enable him to run for parliament and will be a boost for Gen Musharraf's opponents.

News of Mr Sharif's return follows the decision, late on Thursday, by the 53-member Commonwealth to suspend Pakistan's membership pending the restoration of democracy and the rule of law in the country.

The Commonwealth became the first international body to suspend Pakistan since Gen Musharraf imposed a state of emergency on November 3, prompting opposition within the country and abroad.

The Pakistani government, in its official response to the Commonwealth's action, yesterday said it regretted the decision and cited a number of steps already under way to address international -concerns.

However, the foreign ministry, in a statement, said: "The pace of progress towards normalcy will be determined by ground realities and legal requirements in Pakistan rather than unrealistic demands from outside."

Commonwealth leaders, meeting at a summit in Kampala, yesterday defended their decision to suspend Pakistan, arguing that it was in line with their rules on democracy and the rule of law.

"Every country that has been suspended will say we didn't understand the circumstances prevailing in the country at the time," said Don McKinnon, Commonwealth secretary-general. "We think we did. This wasn't a desire to heap retribution on Pakistan, this was a determination to live up to our principles."

Ghazi Salahuddin, a political commentator said: "These developments [suspension from Commonwealth and Nawaz Sharif's return] are significant. In part, [they] signify Musharraf's growing weakness."

Mr Sharif's brother Shehbaz Sharif said in a television interview last night: "We will return before November 26."

A senior leader of Mr Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League - Nawaz (PML-N) - said the former prime minister was making a farewell call on King Abdullah of Saudi -Arabia in Riyadh, the Saudi capital, last night.

A senior Pakistani government official said that "arrangements for former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's return are now in their final stages".

Mr Sharif's return follows his deportation from Pakistan to Saudi Arabia in -September hours after he returned from London, ending seven years in exile.

Gen Musharraf's government then insisted that Mr Sharif had left for exile to Saudi Arabia in 2000, promising to remain out of the country for 10 years.

Gen Musharraf on Tuesday unexpectedly travelled to Saudi Arabia, prompting speculation that he was going there to meet Mr Sharif to discuss the terms of the former prime minister's return. Both sides strongly refuted the reports.

A western diplomat said last night that Mr Sharif's return could not have been possible without at least an indirect understanding between the former prime minister and Gen Musharraf, facilitated by the Saudi government. "The Saudis may have realised that allowing Nawaz Sharif to return to their country in September was not such a good idea, as they were widely criticised in Pakistan," said one. "The Saudis may also have pressed General Musharraf to allow Nawaz Sharif to return, as he [Musharraf] has now won another five year term." * Human rights demonstrators were beaten by Ugandan police in Kampala yesterday during a Commonwealth summit dominated by talk of upholding civil liberties and democracy **write George Parker and Michael Holman in Kampala** . Demonstrators were carried away with head wounds after over 100 police blocked a march on Kampala city centre and charged with batons. Witnesses said one police officer also suffered a head injury.

The quelling of the protests against Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni is an embarrassment for the Commonwealth after it suspended Pakistan for curtailing civil rights.

"This is nothing new. This is what we have been living through all this time," said Kizza Besigye, an opposition leader. He says the country's elections are not fair.

David Miliband, Britain's foreign minister, promised to raise concerns about Uganda's

human rights in Kampala, but governments ignored opposition calls for a summit boycott.

Meanwhile, a senior Commonwealth minister yesterday urged Gordon Brown to reconsider his decision to boycott next month's EUAfrica summit should Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe attend.

Ojo Maduekwe, Nigeria's foreign minister, said: "We will miss the British in Lisbon - we wish the British prime minister was there."

President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa is expected to brief Commonwealth leaders on progress towards free elections in Zimbabwe. Mr Mbeki stopped at Harare, the Zimbabwean capital, en route to the summit for talks with Mr Mugabe and with the main opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai.

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