Pakistan may ban cybercafes
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CYBERCAFES are favourite hangouts for Pakistanis young and old to play games, chat, email, surf the web... or send terror emails and watch hard porn. But soon the internet cafes' dual use as pseudo blue cinemas and terrorist mailing points could be a thing of the past. Concern at the cafes' seamier side has prompted the government to draft a law to regulate their activities.
The use of cybercafes by terrorists in Pakistan came to light when US reporter Daniel Pearl was kidnapped and killed in early 2002, while investigating Islamic militancy in Pakistan for The Wall Street Journal. Photos of Pearl with his hands bound in chains and a hand gun pointed at his head were emailed by his captors from a cybercafe in the southern port city of Karachi. The state-run Pakistan Telecommunication Authority last year prepared a consultation paper on regulations for cybercafes. It requires all internet cafes to register with PTA, bans under-15s unless they are accompanied by their parents, and bars under-18s from viewing porn websites and playing violent video games. It cites national security as a key concern, according to a copy of the draft, and cafes where internet activity is deemed a security risk will lose their registration automatically.
The manager of one of the scores of internet cafes in Islamabad said it would be impossible to control what sites his clients browse and view. "The blocking of porn sites is impossible as there are millions of such web pages on the internet," he told AFP, preferring not to be named. "We, with small computer networks cannot block all porn sites, it will kill (slow down) our system." Just four years ago internet access was available in only a few big cities in Pakistan, but since the adoption of a new information technology policy by the government in 2000, the web can be accessed from most towns. "The exact number of cybercafes in Pakistan is not yet known as no survey has been conducted so far," Omer Khan of the private Pakistan Computer Society told AFP. Absorbed in a screen at one of the Islamabad cafes, retired banker Ahmad Ali said they gave him a cheap way to stay in touch with his son. "It is a good and affordable facility for checking my email and chatting with my son who is studying in the United States," Ali told AFP. For a mere 15 US cents an hour, the use of an internet computer was not a bad deal. "I have come to email a college assignment to my schoolmate, so I do not have to go to his home which is far away from my place," said high school student Furqan Ahmed. Most of the cafes provide screened-off cubicles around their computer terminals, giving users total privacy. "We provide privacy to customers because people come here and write personal emails to their friends and relatives and nobody wants to show others when he or she is writing a letter," the manager said. "In the cabin or behind the partition, who does what is not our business."