

Pakistani police round up 21 Islamic militants

AFP, Peshawar

Pakistani police said they had arrested 21 Islamic militants allegedly trying to revive the outlawed Harkatul Mujahedin, listed by Washington as a terrorist group.

"They belong to the Harkatul Mujahedin group," Abid Saeed, deputy inspector general of police in North West Frontier Province, told AFP.

Saeed said police were informed that the group had opened an office under a new name in Dera Ismail Khan, 300 kilometers (186 miles) southwest of the capital Islamabad and 150 kilometers (93 miles) east from the Afghan border.

Police raided the office, seized weapons and ammunition, and took the men into custody.

The United States included Harkatul Mujahedin, whose followers fought Indian rule in the Muslim majority Himalayan state of Kashmir, on its list of terrorist outfits published in late 2001.

Pakistan subsequently closed its offices and froze its bank accounts.

The men have been detained under the Maintenance of Public Order act under which suspects can be held for 12 months without trial.

"We are interrogating them and some of them appear to have travelled to Afghanistan for jihad (holy war). They were regrouping under the name of Jamiatul Ansar," Saeed said.

Sharon sweeps back in power, Left collapses

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's Likud party romped to re-election in Israel on a wave of support for his tough line with Palestinians, humiliating leftist parties that had pursued Middle East peace deals.

Greeted by flag-waving supporters who burst into song, Sharon claimed victory early yesterday and urged parties to join him in a broad coalition to meet the twin challenges of a possible Gulf war and what he called terrorism.

Labour Party leader Amram Mitzna conceded defeat in a telephone call to Sharon after voting ended Tuesday. Results showed Likud storming back into power, replacing Labour as the biggest party in parliament, as Israel swung to the right.

Labour endured its worst defeat in 54 years of Israeli history. It fell to 19 seats from 25 in the 120-member parliament, reflecting Israelis' fury at the party having put its faith in Palestinian President Yasser Arafat to make peace.

Labour's former partner in peace moves, the leftist Meretz party, was shown winning six seats, down from 10, while Likud soared to 37, up said.

from 19 in the current Knesset.

"The victory and the crash" read the front-page headline in the mass-circulation newspaper Maariv Wednesday.

Further underscoring divisions, the upstart Shinui party swept into third place, with 15 seats, up from six, on a pledge to deny ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties their historical role as political power brokers able to demand state cash and benefits.

Although Sharon did not deliver the peace and security he promised when elected in February 2001 -- and few expected him to do so now -- he flaunted his credentials as a veteran general and experienced politician to convince Israelis he was the best person to lead them through such troubled times.

"This is a heavy blow to a peaceful settlement. The Israelis have committed a historic mistake which they and the Palestinians will regret," Palestinian Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo said.

Sharon's campaign aide Lior Horev told Reuters that the 74-year-old prime minister would within three weeks forge a government of right-wing, religious and centrist parties that could give him up to 68

seats, a narrow majority, in parliament.

Flag-waving Likud supporters burst into song and screamed "Ariel, Ariel" at the party's headquarters. Downcast Labour supporters gasped in dismay as television projections were shown on a big screen at their headquarters.

"It is time to come together," Sharon said.

Turnout among the 4.7 million registered voters was the lowest for an Israeli general election -- 68.5 percent compared with an average of 78 to 80 percent. Israelis, having gone to the polls three times in four years, voiced weariness.

AFP adds, Israel's new third party, the centre-right Shinui, relaxed its conditions for joining a coalition with hawkish Prime Minister Ariel Sharon after his resounding election victory.

Shinui leader Tommy Lapid said the party was prepared to give ground on its staunchly secular principles and sit with its arch-foes from the ultra-Orthodox Shas party in a national emergency cabinet, at least temporarily.

"If a cabinet of national emergency is formed, Shinui could join it for a limited period," Lapid told

public radio.

Shinui's spectacular rise stems from its ability to attract most of the protest vote but also from its long-time opposition to the ultra-Orthodox parties' hold on Israeli social and political life.

During the campaign, Lapid had categorically refused to join a coalition including religious parties.

According to official results published Wednesday, Shinui will have 15 seats in the next parliament, a massive increase on the six it won in the 1999 parliamentary elections.

Shas, an ultra-Orthodox party which draws its support from less privileged Jews of Middle Eastern origin, lost ground on its 17 seats in the outgoing parliament.

But it still managed 11 seats, leaving it a key factor in Sharon's efforts to form a new governing coalition.

The hardline premier appealed to centrist parties to join him in government in a sombre victory speech late Tuesday, as he sought to avoid being corralled in a narrow coalition with the far-right.

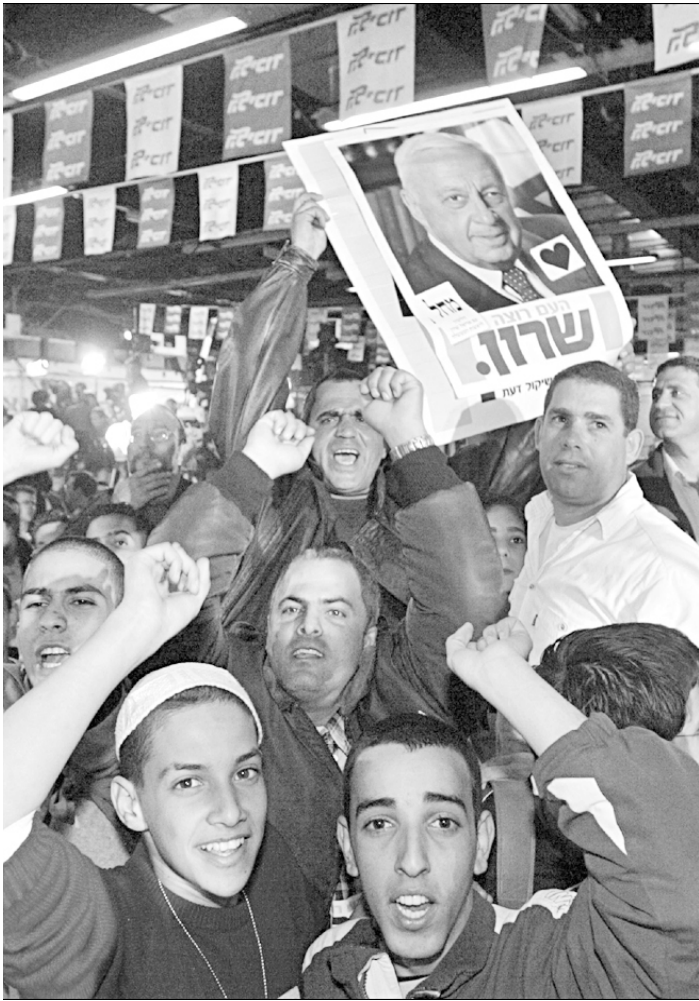


PHOTO:AFP

Israeli Likud party supporters chant as they hold a portrait of outgoing Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in Tel Aviv. Likud is set to become the biggest party in the Knesset. Twenty-seven parties and formations were vying for seats but only around 15 are likely to cross the 1.5 percent threshold required to elect two deputies and enter the Knesset for a four-year term.

Spiritual leader Bashir to be probed in Bali bombing

AFP, Jakarta

The reputed spiritual leader of the Jemaah Islamiyah regional terror network will be investigated as a suspect in the October 12 Bali bombings, Indonesian police said Wednesday.

Abu Bakar Bashir is not currently a suspect "but things will definitely head in that direction," Zainuri Lubis, spokesman for the Bali bombing investigative team, told AFP.

National police chief General Da'i Bachtiar told legislators Tuesday that Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) was behind the Bali attack and that Bashir had earlier given his blessing to a jihad (holy war) in Indonesia and Singapore against the United States and its allies.

Malaysia and Singapore say Bashir, 64, is the spiritual leader of JI.

Police arrested the elderly Muslim cleric a week after the Bali blast, accusing him of links to earlier acts of terrorism. Wednesday was the first time they have described him as a likely suspect in the bombings on the resort island that killed more than 190 people, most of them foreign

tourists.

Police have previously said that Mukhlas, one of 30 suspects in custody for the bombing, is JI's operations chief and was also involved in meetings to plan the Bali attack. Ten others, including three Malaysians, remain on a wanted list.

Police have linked Bashir to the Bali bombing through a meeting held at his home in the Central Javanese city of Solo with several key suspects already in custody, Kompas newspaper's online edition reported Wednesday.

"They held that meeting to ask Bashir's blessing. This is something newly obtained to bring Abu Bakar Bashir into the Bali case," it quoted the head of the bombing investigation, Inspector General I Made Mangku Pastika, as saying.

Pastika could not be reached for confirmation.

One of Bashir's lawyers, Muhammad Assegaf, called police allegations that Bashir was behind the Bali bombing both startling and strange.

"Because during the interrogation of all the suspects in the Bali case, according to information from police themselves, there is not

even one witness who has connected Abu Bakar Bashir... to the Bali bomb blast," Assegaf said on local radio.

Last week detectives submitted evidence files on Bashir to prosecutors and said they want him to face charges of treason and of staging a series of bomb attacks in Indonesia on Christmas Eve 2000.

The treason charge is based on an alleged plot to kill Megawati Sukarnoputri when she was still vice president.

Lubis said that because of the treason and Christmas bombing investigations already underway in Jakarta, police have not yet been able to question Bashir about the Bali bombings.

Questioning will come "after the process in Jakarta is finished," Lubis said.

Last May Vice President Hamzah Haz paid a controversial visit to the Al-Mukmin Muslim boarding school founded by the cleric and met with Bashir.

The elderly cleric has denied claims he has links to terrorism but has described al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden as "a true Muslim fighter."



PHOTO:AFP

A man pushes his car after a hail storm lashed the capital city of Islamabad Tuesday night.

Heavy hailstorm shrouds Pakistani capital in ice

AFP, Islamabad

Residents of the Pakistani capital awoke to a blanket of soft ice for the first time ever yesterday morning after a freak hailstorm pounded the city overnight.

A layer of hailstones as deep as 10 centimeters (four inches) covered streets and parks, drawing schoolchildren out of class to toss snowballs and play in the soft ice, an unprecedented sight in the 40-year old city.

"This is the first time Islamabad looked like this," said a security guard surveying the carpets of white

ice balls shrouding the grounds of parliament house.

The 20 minute long hailstorm late Tuesday was the heaviest to hit Islamabad in six years, weather experts at the Meteorology Office said.

Heavy snow falls were reported in the hill resort station of Murree, some 40 kilometers (26 miles) north-east of the capital in the Himalayan foothills.

Dozens of motorists were stranded in the thick slush created by the hailstones Tuesday night. City council workers shoveled the ice to clear roads Wednesday.

4 ministers resign before major cabinet shake-up in India

AFP, New Delhi

At least four Indian government ministers quit yesterday as Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee planned a cabinet revamp to bolster his ruling Hindu nationalist party ahead of crucial elections.

India's high-flying ministers Pramod Mahajan and Uma Bharati quit their posts, followed by junior-ranking ministers Vasundhara Raje Scindia and Nikhil Choudhury, officials said.

Mahajan, who held the high-profile portfolios of information technology and communications, after stepping down insisted the move had nothing to do to his name being linked to a female reporter's murder in 1999.

Political sources said Mahajan is tipped to be named as general secretary of Vajpayee's ruling BJP to revive the party's sagging morale and tighten its administration ahead of the make-or-break general elec-

tions.

The politician, too, had been dabbled with the brush of scandal, implicated in the murder four years ago of newspaper reporter Shivani Bhatnagar by the wife of a police officer arrested in the case.

Sources from Vajpayee's office said Uma Bharti quit her post as India's coal minister and added that she too could find a berth in the BJP machine.

Bharti, a firebrand Hindu nationalist leader, is accused of goading a mob of Hindu zealots who tore down the Babri mosque in 1992, sparking nationwide communal rioting.

Scindia quit India's small-scale industries ministry and Choudhury walked off his independent portfolio, amid reports that Scindia was likely to be tapped to head a provincial chapter of the BJP, the United News of India said.

France to evacuate citizens from Ivory Coast

REUTERS, Paris

France is ready to evacuate its citizens from Ivory Coast "at any time" and face up to any security challenges posed by the unrest there, Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin said yesterday.

Villepin said France had reinforced security measures in the capital Abidjan as protests against a peace deal brokered by France last week spread. France has 2,500 troops in the West African country, the world's largest cocoa producer.

The minister insisted that the deal, which embattled President Laurent Gbagbo has played down and the Ivory Coast army has rejected, must remain the basis for any reconciliation between the government and rebel forces challenging it.

Villepin said the French in Abidjan were quite spread around the city and Paris must avoid any action that could be seen as a provocation. About 16,000 French citizens live in Ivory Coast.

"We are ready at any time to evacuate, our soldiers there are able to do it in a very short time," he said.

"We are watching the situation hour by hour and we will not hesitate to take this decision if the situation demands it."

He said French soldiers were on alert but added France had to "avoid any slip-up that could set off a fire."

"Up until now, we have avoided the worst in Ivory Coast and we will work to ensure that the path of peace and reconciliation can be the one that is taken."

The minister said the situation now depended on the courage of Ivory Coast's politicians, who agreed last week after nine days of closed-door talks outside Paris to share power between the Gbagbo government and the rebels.

"This political accord exists," he argued.

"Let me tell you one thing -- whatever happens, even if we go through difficult moments in the coming days, that political accord will remain the basis for reconciliation among Ivorians. It's a balanced accord."

Countering charges by protesters in Abidjan that the deal was imposed by the former colonial master France, Villepin said: "These are decisions taken by Ivorians, not by France."

MPs to campaign for Kohinoor's return

IANS, New Delhi

A group of Indian MPs is ready for a diplomatic pitch to reclaim the Kohinoor diamond, appropriated during the British Raj and rumoured to be soon gifted to the queen-in-waiting, Camilla Parker Bowles.

A motion signed by at least 150 MPs would be raised in the coming Parliament session, senior Rajya Sabha member Kuldip Nayar said. "The Kohinoor belongs to us. It must come back to us," he asserted.

Nayar, a persistent campaigner for the return of the Kohinoor to India, said the gem was not a property of British royals that could be passed around from head to head.

"The Kohinoor was usurped by the British during their colonial rule over India. It is not their personal property that can be passed on to the queen's daughter-in-law," he said. "I am bringing a motion for its return to India in the next session."

Last month, reports suggested

that the royal family had worked out a discreet plan to give the crown studded with the 108-carat diamond to Parker Bowles if her relationship with future king Prince Charles was formalised.

Nayar said that he had written to the ministry of external affairs asking it to take up the matter forcefully with the British government.

"Everybody here wants the Kohinoor back. It is our property that is lying in the Tower of London and being treated as the crown's personal possession," he added.

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had, during the centenary celebrations of Maharaja Ranjit Singh of Punjab, assured the organising committee that India would "create conditions that would embarrass the British government into surrendering the Kohinoor".

Nayar also stepped up his campaign after reports that British Prime Minister Tony Blair had set up a committee to consider the return of

the Elgin Marbles to Greece and Jewish relics to Israel.

Looking at the failure of past efforts, the MP knows he is fighting against odds. "(The campaign) may not have the desired effect because this government does not have a backbone even if it agrees that the Kohinoor should come back."

The Kohinoor crown belonged to the Queen Mother who died last year, leaving precise instructions for the future of the diamond with a long and intriguing past.

The Kohinoor, or 'mountain of light', is one of the brightest in the 3,000-odd crown jewels of the historic Tower of London, the former seat of power.

Brought from India in 1849, the gem was reduced in weight from 186-1/16 carats to 106-1/16 to fit into the state crown for the 1937 coronation of the Queen Mother, who rarely wore it in her lifetime but wanted it displayed on her coffin before her burial.

Pacifists up in arms against Gandhi cartoon

AFP, New Delhi

Pacifists and Asian-American groups have lodged protests with the US lifestyle magazine Maxim over a sarcastic cartoon that showed Mahatma Gandhi being punched, kicked and body-slammed.

In its latest issue Maxim, known for its irreverent humor and glossy shots of scantily-clad women featured a 21-scene sketch of a muscular man in a tank-top and shorts beating the frail Indian independence hero to a pulp, with instructions to "teach those pacifists a lesson about aggression."

Gandhi's torchbearers did not find it funny.

"My first reaction is, 'How stupid.' My next reaction is, 'How sad,'" said Michelle Naef, administrator of the M.K Gandhi Institute in Tennessee, which was founded by the Mahatma's grandson Arun Gandhi.

"Mahatma Gandhi spent his life fasting and being tortured," Naef said in a statement. "Clearly, they have no clue who they're dealing with, to depict him this way."

Michael Matsuda, chair of the Asian Pacific Islander Community Alliance in southern California's Orange County, charged that Maxim was promoting racial violence.

"In today's context, after September 11 and with the anti-war movement, this article is telling people to beat the crap out of Asians and pacifists," Matsuda said in comments on the Tolerance.org website

Two Koreas agree to restore cross-border railway

'N Korea to consider advice to come clean on nukes '

AFP, REUTERS, Seoul

North and South Korea are to complete a highly symbolic project next month to link a cross-border railway line severed for half a century, a South Korean envoy said yesterday on his return from Pyongyang.

Lim Dong-Won, a top adviser to South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung, said the agreement to complete the Seoul-Sinuiju line by the end of February was reached in meetings with Kim Yong-Sun, secretary of the North's ruling Workers Party.

The two also agreed to start overland tours from South Korea to the North's scenic Mount Kumgang through a road link up the eastern side of the peninsula in early February, as well as run tours across an existing sea route to the popular resort, Lim said.

The transportation projects are historically significant as they will run through a buffer zone that has stood as a barrier between the capitalist South and the communist North since the 1950-53 Korean War.

The two Koreas have agreed to reconnect two sets of the railway and road links -- the Gyeongui line running to China up the west side of the peninsula and the Donghae line to Russia on the eastern side.

Under an inter-Korean accord in September, the Gyeongui railway should have been completed by the end of last year but has been delayed by a row over who controls

the transportation corridors.

North Korea made a key concession Monday by agreeing to recognize the authority of the US-led United Nations Command (UNC) over the transportation routes.

The North had previously demanded the corridors be controlled by South and North Korea alone, not by the UNC, which is led by the United States.

But since the armistice agreement signed in 1953 with North Korea, the UNC has supervised the tense, mine-strewn buffer zone known as the demilitarized zone (DMZ).

North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, accused by President Bush of blackmailing the world with a nuclear arms program, has agreed to consider Seoul's plea to end the crisis, a South Korean envoy said yesterday.

After a three-day visit in which the South's envoy was snubbed by the enigmatic Kim who failed to show up for expected talks in the capital, Pyongyang, Lim Dong-won said the communist leader had accepted a letter from South Korean President Kim Dae-jung.

The North's reclusive leader had relayed a verbal message through his officials promising to reply after considering the South's call to reverse moves that triggered the second Korean nuclear crisis since 1994, Lim told a news conference in Seoul shortly after returning from the North.

South Korea had hoped Lim's visit would open the way for a resolution of the three-month-old crisis, but Kim's snub of the envoy appeared to underscore the North's insistence it would talk only to the United States.

"North Korea repeated what it has said to the world: that it has not developed nuclear arms and has no intention to develop them. They said that if the US wants to conduct its own inspections, they are willing to accept that," Lim said.

Lim voiced disappointment at not meeting Kim Jong-il. But he said it was significant that the North's leader pledged to answer Kim Dae-jung's letter urging the North to give up its suspected uranium enrichment program and return to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

The nuclear crisis was sparked in October when Washington said Pyongyang had admitted to reviving a nuclear arms program it had previously agreed to shut down under a 1994 deal.

Pyongyang later expelled UN nuclear inspectors, removed seals from a mothballed reactor and pulled out of the treaty preventing the spread of nuclear arms.

Bush, who last year branded North Korea part of an "axis of evil" along with Iraq and Iran, used his State of the Union speech this year to accuse North Korea of deceit and blackmail, but said Washington would work with its allies for a peaceful resolution of the crisis.



PHOTO:AFP

A Thai woman talks on her mobile phone while walking past a poster of a goat to celebrate the Chinese New Year festival at a shopping center in Bangkok. Thai-Chinese will celebrate the coming Lunar New Year on February 01. Bangkok is home to a large and influential ethnic Chinese population.