



Iraqis stand in front of a building yesterday that was the scene of a heavy fighting between US soldiers and Iraqi militants in central Baghdad on Friday.

US now to rely more on Iraqi forces for security: Powell

AP, Washington

With American troops under constant fire in Iraq, Secretary of State Colin Powell said Thursday the US-led military coalition may want to "stand back a little" and rely more on local forces to maintain security in the country.

"Iraqis have started to create security forces that will protect installations, so that you don't need a coalition military organization protecting that installation," Powell said.

"We have to be nimble, flexible, call audibles as the situation changes," he said at a news conference, using the football term for making last-minute plan changes.

At the same time, Powell said the United States intends to use whatever techniques are appropriate against Saddam Hussein's followers and other anti-American fight-

ers, some of whom have crossed into the country.

Two US soldiers were wounded in a fierce gunbattle Thursday in central Baghdad. On Wednesday night, two American soldiers were killed in a firefight in the Al Rashid section of the capital.

The deaths brought to 55 the number of US troops killed in combat since May 1, when President Bush declared major fighting over.

At the Pentagon, an official said the United States was not changing its security role in Iraq. Iraqis have been trained from the beginning in police and security functions so they could provide safety and security for the Iraqi people, the official said. Outside the Jordanian Embassy on Thursday a powerful car bomb exploded, hurling vehicles in the air and killing at least 11 people. Many more people were wounded.

Powell said he had telephoned Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher of Jordan to express his regrets over the loss of Jordanians and innocent Iraqis who happened to be on the street.

Powell said, "The terrorists need to know we will not be deterred."

"We intend to not stay any longer than we have to, but we will stay long enough to make sure that we allow the Iraqi people ... to put in place a representative form of government," he said.

At the Pentagon, spokesman Lawrence Di Rita said there were probably 40,000 or more armed Iraqis "protecting things in a variety of different ways."

"It's going to take time to get to the really robust numbers that Iraq needs, but it's going in the right direction," he said.

Storm kills 26 workers near Indian resort

AP, Amritsar

A fierce thunderstorm near a Himalayan resort washed away the tents of workers building a mountain tunnel, killing at least 26 people, police said Friday.

At least 20 others were injured by the sudden flood in the Solang Valley of northern Himachal Pradesh state, officer Shadi Lal told The Associated Press by telephone from the local police station.

The site is located on the outskirts of Manali, one of India's most popular mountain resorts.

Police and rescue teams sifting through debris Friday found at least 16 bodies. The other eight bodies were found scattered nearby or washed downstream by the Beas River that flows through the region, said R.D. Nazim, an aide to the area's administrator.

Monsoon rains annually cause landslides in Himachal Pradesh, a Himalayan state bordering China.

Hundreds of thousands of tourists visit the Solang Valley each year, drawn by its ski resorts. The area is near a revered Hindu temple and is the favorite summer retreat of Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

Hamas threatens to end truce to avenge killing

Israeli aircraft bomb S Lebanon

AFP, Nabulus

The Palestinian group Hamas threatened to avenge Israel's killing of a militant yesterday, as Lebanese police said Israeli aircraft bombed Hezbollah posts in south Lebanon, in the most turbulent day in the region for months.

The body of a second Palestinian man was found in the rubble of a house destroyed by the army after the raid in the West Bank town of Nabulus, an AFP photographer at the scene reported.

Israel also warned the Palestinian Authority (PA) that time was running out for it to crack down on radical groups -- or else its forces would do the job themselves.

A Hamas spokesman said the killing of one of its followers, named as Khamis Abu Salam, a member of

the radical group's armed wing, in a building at Nabulus' Askar refugee camp was a "flagrant violation of the truce by the Zionist enemy."

"Hamas will discuss this aggression but we cannot be silent about this violation and aggression," Ismail Abu Shanab told AFP.

Palestinian government officials also expressed fears that the truce announced by militant groups on June 29, and any possible extension, may have been compromised by the killing.

"We had a lot of meetings last week and we reached a very positive position from factions," culture minister Ziad Abu Amr told AFP.

"But I see the Israeli army are trying to prevent us from reaching any positive agreement with the factions."

The truce came attached with a raft of conditions, including "an immediate halt to all types of Zionist aggressions".

Violence has drastically diminished in the past few weeks but Israel says the truce is unilateral and that the Jewish state is not bound by its terms.

The AFP photographer near Askar camp reported seeing a first dead body covered by a blanket near the building where the militants and Israeli troops had been engaged in violent clashes.

The army had dynamited and destroyed the building, apparently leading to both deaths. After the operation, troops placed the area under curfew and barred access to ambulances.

Meanwhile, Israeli warplanes

bombed the fringes of villages in south Lebanon on Friday after Hezbollah militiamen attacked Israeli army posts in the disputed Shebaa Farms border region, said Lebanese police.

Fighter bombers swooped four times to fire missiles at targets on the outskirts of Kfarshuba, Hebbariyeh, Slamiyeh and Kfarhamam near the Shebaa Farms, they said.

At the same time, militiamen of the Shiite fundamentalist movement Hezbollah traded artillery fire with Israeli troops.

The guerrilla attack, the first in the Shebaa Farms for seven months, followed a car-bomb explosion which killed a Hezbollah member in southern Beirut on August 2 that the group blamed on Israel.

US equipment for India's navy, special forces

IANs, Washington

In a major development, the US has agreed to supply India with equipment for its special forces and a submarine rescue system for the navy.

The US will also put in place a system to clear the backlog of export licences for military hardware.

Indian defence secretary Ajay Prasad said this at a press conference here on Thursday night after a two-day meeting of the India-US Defence Policy Group (DPG).

"The nascent procurement relationship has begun to move smoothly," he said.

He said the US would make available "very shortly" the equipment required for India's special forces and a team of American experts would visit New Delhi "shortly" to assess the kind of kit that

would be needed to fit in the country's existing submarines. "The US has agreed to provide us with that rescue kit," Prasad said.

A US team will travel to India in September to discuss the details of a possible sale of P-3 maritime patrol aircraft, said a joint statement issued at the end of the meeting.

Prasad also signed with Under Secretary of Defence for Policy Douglas Feith, who led the US delegation, a Master Information Exchange Agreement (MIEA) to facilitate information exchange on research and development.

The two sides developed a "special programme" of military-to-military cooperation, working out the details of joint exercises and the level of participation.

It includes specialised training programmes and joint exercises, including air combat.



Indian Legendary flautist Bismillah Khan (R) gestures as Indian President A. P. J. Abdul Kalam (3rd from L), Finance Minister Jaswant Singh (2nd L) and Congress President Sonia Gandhi (L) looks on before a concert at the Parliament House in New Delhi on Friday. Bismillah Khan presented a duet with his vocalist daughter Soma Ghosh to Indian President Abdul Kalam and various politicians, who hours ago fought a verbal battle in parliament.

'Militants form 4 suicide squads for Independence Day attacks in Kashmir'

AFP, Srinagar

Two headline militant groups have formed four suicide squads to disrupt India's Independence Day celebrations next week in Indian-administered Kashmir, police said.

K. Rajinder Kumar, police chief of the Muslim-dominated Kashmir valley, named the groups as Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed, the two outfits India accuses of being behind an attack on its parliament in New Delhi in December 2001 which left 15 people dead, including five attackers.

He told reporters here late Thursday that according to intelligence inputs, each squad consists of three members.

"Militants have made plans to carry out fidayeen (suicide) strikes on Independence Day," he said, adding that the squads were "probably hiding somewhere on the outskirts of Srinagar."

Kumar's comments came hours after Islamic militants Thursday grenade bombed a security vehicle in Srinagar -- the first such attack in more than three months -- killing two Indian border guards and injuring

Hubble spies big Galaxy gobbling little one

REUTERS, Washington

A big galaxy is gobbling a tiny one, just as astronomers have long suspected, and for the first time there is photographic evidence of this kind of galactic cannibalism, snapped by the Hubble Space Telescope.

The orbiting telescope captured the image of the gorging galaxy as part of a much larger picture of a long-tailed galaxy that has become known as the Tadpole. This photo was one of the first to be released last year after a new advanced camera was installed aboard Hubble.

The Tadpole dominates the image, but the second-brightest object is a massive spiral galaxy seen in the lower left corner, with an apparent companion nearby that is seemingly linked to the bigger galaxy.

US and Australian astronomers were intrigued by this mismatched pair of cosmic objects, but the Hubble image alone was not enough to confirm that this was a case of a dominant galaxy feeding on a much smaller dwarf galaxy.

Megawati says Asian cooperation on terrorism inadequate

REUTERS, Jakarta

The bombing of a luxury hotel in Jakarta showed Southeast Asia's cooperation in the war on terror was inadequate, Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri said on Friday in her first public comments on Tuesday's attack.

Addressing diplomats from the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) at a public lecture, Megawati said no nation or group of countries could ever overcome the threat of international terrorism alone.

The bomb attack on the JW Marriott Hotel killed 10 people and wounded 150. Police have not named any suspects, but suspicion has fallen on Jemaah Islamiah, a Southeast Asian militant group blamed for last year's Bali bomb attacks and linked to al Qaeda.

"Regional plans of action to tackle such problems had long been established as part and parcel of ASEAN's functional cooperation, but suddenly these appeared to be inadequate in the face of the cataclysms like terror attacks in the

United States, Bali and a few days ago in the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta," Megawati said.

In keeping with her passive style, and as she did after the Bali bombings, Megawati has kept to the sidelines following the latest attack in the world's most populous Muslim nation and has left senior security officials to do the talking.

In her speech, she made no mention of the conviction and death sentence imposed on Thursday on the first of 38 Muslim militants on trial over Bali, which killed 202 people, mainly foreigners.

However, just days before the Marriott blast, she denounced what she called the "blind fanaticism" of the Bali bombers in some of her strongest comments yet on Islamic extremism.

"In Indonesia's view, which is shared by the rest of ASEAN members, it will take a global coalition involving all nations, all societies, religions and cultures to defeat this threat," Megawati said in her Friday address, speaking in English.

Jakarta cops name Marriott bomber

REUTERS, Jakarta

Two Indonesians detained for "terrorist" activities have said they recruited the suicide bomber who blew up a car at a luxury hotel in Jakarta, a senior police official said yesterday.

Initial investigations showed that Tuesday's blast, which killed 10 people at the US-run Marriott Hotel, could be linked to the shadowy Jemaah Islamiah (JI) militant group, the national police chief said.

"It is certainly heading in that direction," General Da'i Bachtiar told a news conference when asked if JI was responsible.

The breakthrough in identifying the perpetrators came as President Megawati Sukarnoputri, in her first public comments on the attack, said the blast showed Southeast Asia's cooperation in the war on terror was inadequate.

Russian chopper shot down in Chechnya

AFP, Moscow

A Russian Mi-8 military helicopter was shot down by a missile in Chechnya on Thursday, killing one crewmate and injuring two others, the Interfax news agency reported quoting military officials.

The helicopter was hit as it was landing troops in a wooded mountain area near the village of Dysnevdeno in the southeast of the breakaway republic, the spokesman for the federal army headquarters said.

Villagers kill 9 Maoists in Jharkhand

AFP, Ranchi

Farmers fed up with harassment at the hands of left-wing insurgents killed nine Maoist guerrillas when rebels tried to storm a village in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand, the police said yesterday.

State police chief R.R. Prasad said after getting wind of an impending attack by the Maoists residents of Longo village armed themselves and then shot dead nine rebels and left two other insurgents critically injured.

Prasad said the militants slain in the village in East Singhbhum district were members of eastern India's powerful People's War Group.

SC orders protection for Gujarat carnage witness

AFP, PTI, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court yesterday ordered the western state of Gujarat to provide protection for the star witness to the murder of 12 Muslims during communal riots last year.

The court issued the order ahead of a landmark hearing on a petition by India's human rights watchdog to reopen the trial of 21 people acquitted over the carnage in Gujarat.

The court ordered the Gujarat's Hindu nationalist-led government to extend protection to 17-year-old Zaheera Sheikh, who has fled the state as she seeks justice for her father and 11 workers in his bakery who died in the attack.

Sheikh appealed to the court for protection and on Friday filed a separate petition for a retrial.

Twenty-one men were acquitted last month by a court in Gujarat after Sheikh and 72 other witnesses retracted their incriminating testi-

mony. She said later that she lied in court after threats from local right-wing Hindu leaders.

The BJP party, which rules Gujarat and heads India's federal coalition, is roundly accused of turning a blind eye to the sectarian violence that raged for months and claimed the lives of some 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, in India's worst religious violence in a decade.

PTI adds: The Supreme Court on Friday issued notice to Gujarat government, in a petition filed by National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) seeking fresh trial outside Gujarat in five riot cases, including the Best Bakery case in which 21 accused were acquitted by the trial court.

The apex court directed the Gujarat government to provide protection to the victims and family members involved in the riot cases mentioned by the NHRC.



Chained Myanmar pro-democracy protesters holding a mob with pasted portraits of detained leader Aung San Suu Kyi in silent demonstration in front of the United Nations office in Bangkok yesterday to mark the 15th anniversary of a pro-democracy uprising which ended in a massacre by government troops in Myanmar. Protestors demanded immediate release of Aung San Suu Kyi and all other political prisoners around Myanmar unconditionally.