

Indian troops kill 7 more in drive against Bhutan-based rebels

AFP, Guwahati

Indian troops yesterday shot dead seven suspected rebels fleeing a military offensive in the neighbouring kingdom of Bhutan, the army said.

Five militants were killed when they tried to sneak into the revolt-ridden Indian state of Assam from Bhutan in the thickly forested Darrangamela area, an army spokesman said.

He said soldiers shot dead two more rebels near the border in Assam's western Darrang district.

The incidents raise to 141 the number of rebels killed by Indian or Bhutanese troops since the kingdom launched a drive to evict the militants December 15 with the support of its giant neighbour, according to Indian army figures.

The Indian military has also reported the deaths of eight Bhutanese troops and logistical personnel.

Bhutan has not released casualty figures.

The rebels deny any substantial losses.

Musharraf to give up uniform by end of '04

Move to shed powers may smooth ties with Pak Islamists

REUTERS, AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf agreed Wednesday to step down as Chief of Army Staff by the end of 2004, resolving a row with an opposition Islamic alliance that had virtually paralysed parliament.

Musharraf called his decision "difficult."

"I realise that it's time. I have decided that I will give up my uniform by December 2004 and will step down as Chief of Army Staff," he said on state television.

Speaking in Urdu and wearing military dress, Musharraf added: "These are all historic decisions. Nobody has won or lost because of these decisions. Democracy has won and the victory is Pakistan's."

Musharraf made the decision as part of a deal with the opposition Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) - an alliance of six Islamic opposition parties -- which have promised

to abstain in a vote of confidence in the government expected early next year.

The agreement is likely to see the general's term in office extended until 2007, although any weakening of his links to the military could undermine his position.

Although he does not come away from the deal empty-handed, Musharraf's concessions could raise eyebrows in the West.

A key ally in the US "war on terror," Musharraf has been hailed as instrumental to Pakistan's economic recovery and its crackdown on Islamic militancy, both domestic and international.

The move answers a key demand by the Commonwealth for suspended Pakistan to be readmitted. It comes after months of wrangling with the MMA religious bloc over constitutional changes giving the president sweeping powers.

The package of amendments,

called the Legal Framework Order (LFO), gave Musharraf the power to dissolve parliament and sack the prime minister.

The religious coalition, which counts supporters of Afghanistan's ousted Taliban regime among its leaders, has virtually paralyzed parliamentary proceedings with stormy protests and organized popular rallies against the president.

"It (the deal) will improve Pakistan's image abroad and give the world the impression that Pakistan is moving toward democracy," said Fazal-ur-Rehman, a prominent MMA leader.

The political deadlock has embarrassed Musharraf, raising questions over his commitment to democracy.

The general called elections in October 2002 to end military rule after his bloodless coup in 1999, but he has remained in ultimate control of the country while the government has run its day-to-day

affairs.

AFP adds: President Pervez Musharraf's decision to step down as armed forces chief next year and shed some powers could end a bitter row with Islamists and hasten Pakistan's return to the Commonwealth, politicians said yesterday.

Musharraf announced Wednesday he would quit as military chief by December next year and seek a vote of confidence on his presidency, in order to end a bitter constitutional crisis in the country.

"This is first time in the history of the country that a general is willing to relinquish his army uniform," said Mushahid Hussain, who was information minister in the government of deposed prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

"This is one of the most significant political compromises in the history of the country," Hussain told AFP.



PHOTO: AFP

Maulana Fazlur Rehman (R) Leader of Pakistan's six party Islamic alliance the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) and the President of Pakistan Muslim League (PML) Chaudhary Shujaat Hussain (L) shake hands after the signing of the accord between two political parties as Prime Minister Zafarullah Khan Jamali (C) looks on during a ceremony in Islamabad Wednesday. President Pervez Musharraf will quit the post of army chief next year but remain president under the long awaited accord.



PHOTO: AFP

A United Nations security officer (C) gestures as he talks to Afghan policemen in front of the wall of a United Nations compound destroyed by a bomb in Kabul yesterday. The bomb exploded near the wall of the compound, which is close to the presidential palace and International Security Assistance Force headquarters in central Kabul, causing no casualties. The Afghan capital has been hit by several rockets attacks claimed by Taliban militants since the start of the convention debates-the loya jirga-on Afghanistan's new constitution.

Bomb blast damages UN compound near Afghan palace

AFP, Kabul

A bomb blast destroyed the wall of a United Nations compound close to the presidential palace in Kabul early yesterday but there were no casualties, the Afghan security service and international peacekeepers said.

"A bomb exploded at around 4:50 am (0020 GMT) this morning," intelligence officer Tajuddin told AFP from the site.

"It did not cause any casualties but destroyed the wall of a UN compound in first street, Shashdarak district," said Tajuddin.

Windows were also shattered in the explosion.

The bomb had been placed near the wall of the compound, which is

close to the presidential palace and International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters in central Kabul.

"We don't know yet who planted it," Tajuddin said.

ISAF also said there were no casualties in the explosion which occurred in a residential street 500 metres (yards) from its headquarters.

"No casualties have been reported and ISAF troops are on the scene investigating," the international peacekeeping force said in a statement.

"Neither the CLJ site, government buildings nor ISAF installations were affected," it said, referring to the site of the constitutional loya jirga ("grand assembly") in west Kabul.

Indian CEC Lyngdoh calls politicians a 'cancer'

PTI, New Delhi

The tough and plain-speaking Chief Election Commissioner JM Lyngdoh has once again attacked politicians calling them a "cancer" for which there was "no cure at the moment".

He also said that there was no politician in the country who was committed to democracy and welfare of the people. He declared he would refuse any post-retirement job, even if offered.

The CEC, who is to demit office in less than two months, said his parting message was to build pressure to incorporate free and fair elections as part of the fundamental rights of the Constitution.

In an interview to Karan Thapar on the "Hard Talk India"

programme in BBC World, he reiterated that if people were "exposed" to too much of politicians they might get "cancer". In fact, he added, the politicians themselves are the cancer.

When told it was a stinging indictment of Indian democracy, Lyngdoh said it was because democracy meant a whole lot of other things.

"It's not merely going through the motions of an election. Democracy means basically individual freedom and that you respect individual freedom to the utter most extent. I can't think of anybody around now."

To a query whether it meant today the country was ruled by people who really were not fit to rule, he replied in the affirmative.

Europe's Mars lander fails to phone home

AFP, Darmstadt

Europe's quest to seek signs of life on Mars was jarred yesterday after a miniaturised scientific lab failed to call Earth after its scheduled landing on the Red Planet.

Scientists insisted, though, it was still entirely possible that the tiny lander, Beagle 2, had survived and noted the bigger part of the 260-million-euro (325-million-dollar) mission had been placed right on track.

"I'm afraid it's a bit disappointing but it's not the end of the world," Beagle 2's chief scientist, Colin Pillinger, told the press in London.

"Please don't go away from here believing we've lost the spacecraft."

Just earlier, Beagle's mothership, Mars Express, had been steered into orbit at the end of

a 400-million-kilometer (250-million-mile) odyssey lasting more than six months, causing jubilation at the European Space Agency's mission headquarters here.

"We now have an operational Mars mission. This is the most extraordinary Christmas present I've ever heard," ESA Director General Jean-Jacques Dordain said.

German Research and Education Minister Edelgard Bulmahn, noting it was the first time ESA had ever sent a solo mission to another planet, declared: "It's a great day for Europe."

Mars Express and Beagle 2 are Europe's champions in a friendly and undeclared joust with the United States to confirm whether water exists on the planet touted by futurists as a potential home for humans.

A fragile marvel packed with hi-

tech instruments, Beagle 2 was to have landed near the Martian equator at 0254 GMT at a flat basin called Isidis Planitia and dispatch a radio call home, relayed by the US orbiter Mars Odyssey, to say all was well.

But at 0630 GMT, when Mars Odyssey was in position to hand on any message, the ether was agonisingly empty.

"I'm sorry to say there's no signal yet," said ESA's director of science, David Southwood.

"It's not the end of the story... we are sure Beagle is on the surface, we just need to hear from him."

Experts had always sketched the landing as the mission's most daunting challenge, for Mars is notorious for throwing up high winds, fierce dust storms and jagged rocky surfaces to deter earthly invaders.

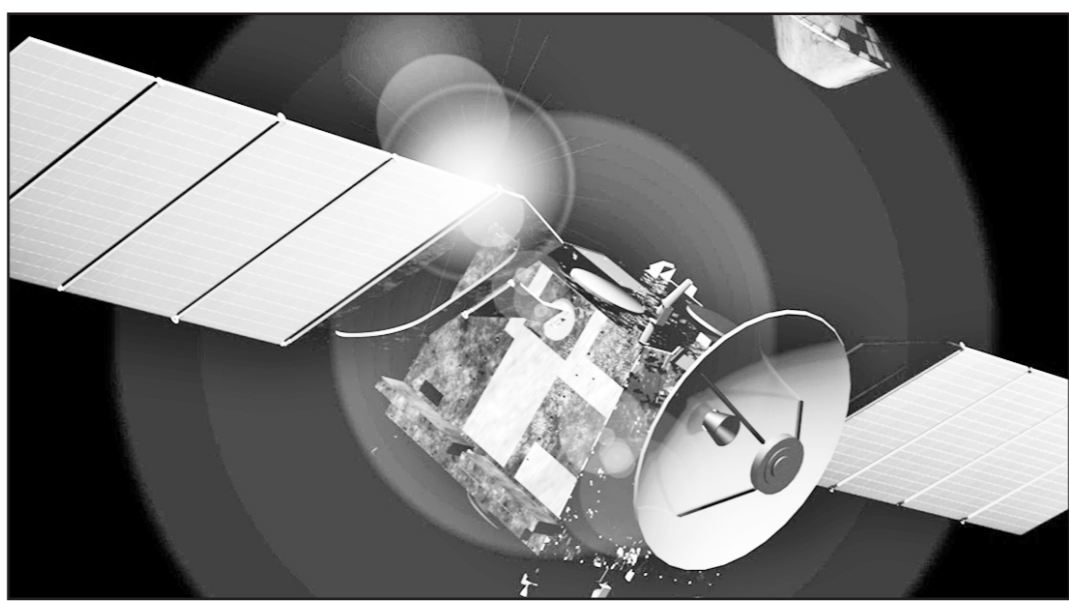


PHOTO: AFP

A computer illustration by the European Space Agency (ESA) of Beagle 2 leaving Mars Express and entering the Martian atmosphere. British scientists tried to restrain their frustration yesterday as the lander Beagle 2 remained obstinately silent, hours after it had been due to call home to signal its safe landing on Mars.

39 killed as blinding fog spikes air, road traffic in India

AFP, New Delhi

At least 39 people were killed, mostly in road accidents, as dense fog blanketed northern India and a cold wave further tightened its grip across the populous region of 300 million people, officials and reports said Wednesday.

The Press Trust of India said 19 motorists were killed in separate fog-related highway accidents in the state of Uttar Pradesh during the past 24 hours, adding that 11 people, mostly homeless and elderly, also died in the region due to the biting cold.

Poor visibility grounded Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam's helicopter in foggy New Delhi, forcing him to abandon plans to visit the Uttar Pradesh town of Etawah on Wednesday to attend a local festival, airport officials here said.

Meerut district police chief R. K. Tiwari ordered trucks and cars to move in orderly queues to prevent highway pile-ups.

The blinding fog has also claimed nine lives in road crashes in the northern state of Haryana since last Friday.

Islamabad summit may herald better Ino-Pak ties: Vajpayee BJP launches polls campaign

AFP, New Delhi

A seven-nation South Asian summit in Islamabad next month could result in a "good beginning" of closer ties between India and Pakistan, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said in an interview published yesterday.

India has said Vajpayee may meet Pakistani leaders but will not hold substantive bilateral talks with them on the sidelines of the January 4-6 summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc).

"The basic question is whether Pakistan is prepared to give up its attitude of enmity towards India. If yes, a good beginning can be made to improve our ties from the Saarc summit," Vajpayee told the Hindi-language Danik Jagran newspaper.

"Pakistan's conduct in the Saarc summit will show us whether it really wants better relations with India. We will only know in Islamabad whether there is any basic change in Pakistan's attitude," he said.

The Saarc summit in Islamabad

was due in January 2003 but postponed after India delayed confirmation of Vajpayee's attendance amid high tension between the rival neighbours.

India and Pakistan have moved since April to repair ties and on November 26 entered a border truce in Kashmir, the Himalayan province divided between the two countries and claimed in full by both.

Meanwhile, India's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) party yesterday used Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's 79th birthday to kick off its campaign for national elections due next year.

Hundreds of BJP supporters, undaunted by the winter chill, gathered outside Vajpayee's residence early Thursday as Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani and other senior colleagues entered with bouquets.

"He is the leader of the BJP party and will be the country's next prime minister so we are starting this election campaign on his birthday," BJP party leader Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi told reporters.