

'Zawahiri may not be dead in US attack'

AFP, Washington

It is not yet clear whether the deadly air strike aimed at Al-Qaeda's deputy leader, which killed 18 people, hit its target. The Washington Post reported on Sunday.

In Pakistan, officials said earlier indications from US intelligence sources that a key lieutenant of Osama bin Laden, possibly his number two Ayman al-Zawahiri, may have died in Friday's missile raid were "not true".

Yet "in Washington, US intelligence sources said it was too early to know whether the strike had killed Zawahiri, 54, an Egyptian physician who is al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden's stop-aid," the Post said.

The paper quoted an unidentified source as saying, "The outcome of this doesn't seem decided."

In addition "US officials defended the strike, saying it was the right course of action based on timely intelligence about Zawahiri's whereabouts early on Friday. Zawahiri had been under surveillance by the CIA for two weeks, security sources said," according to the Post.

Arundhati Roy rejects Indian literary award

AFP, New Delhi

Novelist Arundhati Roy has turned down a national award from India's academy of letters because she opposes the government's policies, the Press Trust of India reported.

The novelist sent the institution a one-page fax saying she did not want to accept a prize from a body linked to the government, an academy official told PTI.

"We are trying to persuade her to reconsider her decision. We are telling her that the (Sahitya) Akademi is intellectually and culturally purely autonomous although it is funded by the government," said K. Sachidanandan.

"There have been many occasions when we opposed government policies ourselves," said the academy official.

Roy, who won the 1997 Booker prize for her first novel "The God of Small Things", is known in India as a strong critic of the government and in particular for her opposition to 1998 nuclear tests and big dam projects.

INDO-PAK MEET

New ideas, terror to figure in talks

PTI, New Delhi

India and Pakistan will discuss "new ideas" on promoting bilateral ties when Foreign Secretaries of the two countries meet here on Tuesday to kick off the third round of Composite Dialogue amid New Delhi's serious concerns over continued cross-border terrorism.

During the two-day talks between Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran and his Pakistani counterpart Riaz Mohammad Khan, the two sides will review the progress of ongoing peace initiatives and confidence-building measures (CBMs) with an aim to ensure their early implementation.

"There are new ideas which will be discussed at the meeting," official sources said on Sunday without divulging specifics as it may pre-empt the talks.

The Indian side is expected to make some fresh proposals with regard to enhancement of people-to-people contacts, like launch of transportation links and tourism exchanges.

The two countries will also review the progress on proposals already made like the launch of bus service between Kargil in Jammu and Kashmir and Skardu in Northern Areas of the state under Pakistani occupation.

Work with regard to launch of the truck service on Srinagar-Muzaffarabad road and start of Munnabao-Khokrapar train service will also be reviewed.

Taking place in the backdrop of terror attacks in Delhi and Bangalore in which Pak-based Lashker-e-Taiba (LeT) have been found involved, the meeting will discuss terrorism which is of much importance to India, the sources said.

Nepal on high alert after rebel raids

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepali troops were on high alert on Sunday after attacks around Kathmandu by Maoist rebels killed 12 policemen, an army officer said.

On Saturday, heavily-armed guerrillas stormed a police post at Thankot, 10 km from Kathmandu, tossed a bomb and sprayed bullets from automatic rifles, killing 11 policemen.

In the second attack near the temple town of Bhaktapur, also close to Kathmandu, one policeman was killed and at least eight wounded. Other blasts around the city caused no injuries.

The attacks were the first near the high-security capital, home to 1.5 million people, since Maoist rebels ended their truce on January 2 after the government refused to match it.

The upsurge in violence follows four months of relative calm and comes as King Gyanendra, who dismissed the government and took power last year, prepares to hold civic polls next month which have been opposed by the Maoists

and political parties.

At Thankot, witnesses said dozens of rebels in plain clothes arrived in a bus followed by armed guerrillas in another bus. They swiftly carried out the raid and escaped in nearby forests.

Unexploded bombs, and bullets left after the raid littered the police post on a highway linking the hill-ringed capital with the southern plains.

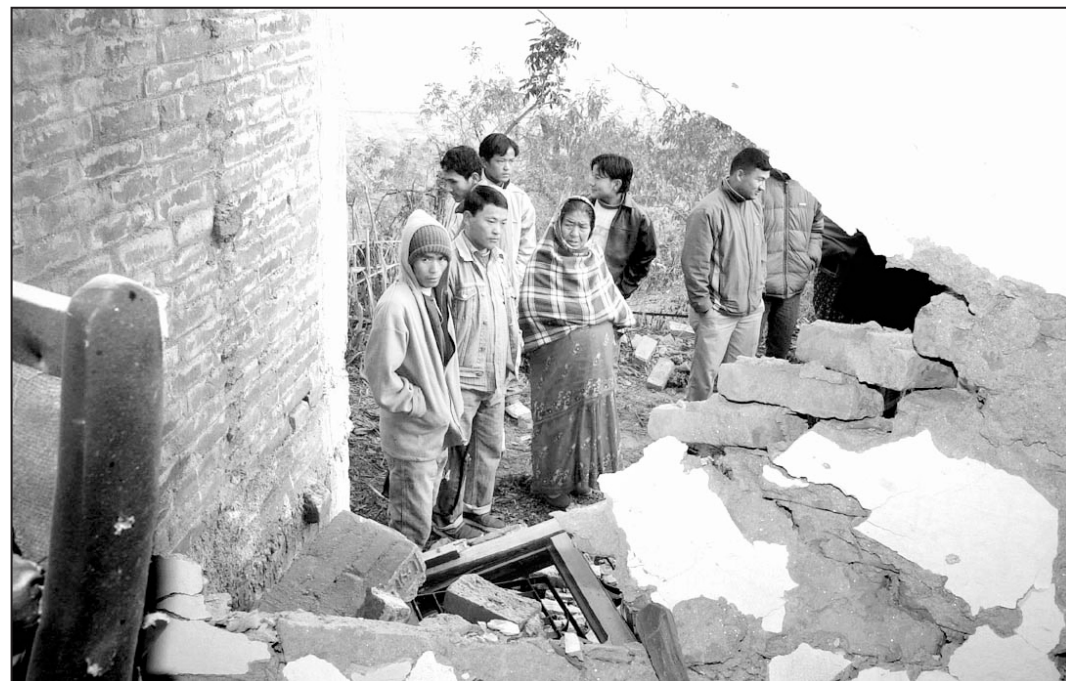
Life in the capital was normal despite the attacks but residents were dazed.

"We could not sleep the whole night because anything could have happened to us as well," school teacher Madhukar Khadga, 50, said as he stood outside the raided post near Bhaktapur.

Khadga was among a group of people gathered at the post, the walls of which had bullet marks. Soldiers stood guard nearby.

"Fear kept us awake," said Khadga, who had helped evacuate some of the eight injured to hospital.

The rebels have been fighting to overthrow the Hindu monarchy and set up a communist state in the Himalayan nation.



Local people look at the site of a bomb blast at a building of the municipal ward office at Patan, near Kathmandu, yesterday. Eleven police officers were killed when Maoist rebels attacked eight targets around the Nepalese capital over the weekend, state-run media said whilst privately-owned newspapers had reported that 12 police were killed.

Landslide kills 13 in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

At least 13 people have been killed in a landslide while heavy snow has left hundreds of thousands of others stranded in northern Afghanistan's mountainous villages, officials said Sunday.

Heavy rain and snow triggered the landslide in remote villages in northern Sar-i-Pul province killing residents including women and children late Friday, provincial governor Mohammad Iqbal Munib told AFP.

"Thirteen people, men, women and children were killed when part of a mountain fell over and destroyed five homes in Ghil Dara

district of Sar-i-Pul on Friday night," Munib said.

Meanwhile more than 300,000 residents faced "serious disaster" after heavy snow blocked roads leading to their mountainous villages in Badakhshan, also in northern Afghanistan, another official said.

"There are seven districts that have been cut off from the center due to heavy snowfalls in Badakhshan province," Abdul Razaq Zinda, provincial head of the natural disaster department, said.

"They're facing serious disaster including cold and hunger," he said.

Zinda said some three tons of

wheat stored in the region was almost finished with the poverty-stricken villages possibly facing food shortages in coming weeks.

He called on the government, the United Nations and aid organizations to quickly respond to the situation.

"If the government, the United Nations and other aid agencies would not respond quickly there will be a serious disaster, many will die," he told AFP.

The winter is harsh in Badakhshan and several neighbouring provinces along the Hindu Kush mountain ranges where decades of wars and conflict have eroded the basic infrastructure.



Pakistani children walk on a snow covered paths in Batian, yesterday. Pakistani authorities have decided to distribute kerosene oil stoves among earthquake survivors to save them from freezing temperatures despite fears of tent blazes that have claimed several lives, the United Nations said.

Rain, snow ground aid helicopters in quake-hit Kashmir

AFP, Muzaffarabad

Rain and snow in the quake-hit Himalayan Kashmir region on Sunday grounded relief helicopters, blocked roads and compounded the misery of survivors living in tents, officials said.

The UN said that bad weather prevented aid helicopters from flying into disaster-stricken areas of Pakistan, while in Indian-ruled Kashmir key roads and a main airport were closed by the season's second major snowfall.

"All relief helicopter flights have been cancelled due to poor weather," UN spokesman Ben Malor told AFP. "We will resume helicopter flights tomorrow (Monday) if the weather gets clear."

The second spell of rain and snow this month began late Saturday.

Snow has now enveloped the upper regions of Pakistan-administered Kashmir, including Peer Chanasi, Kai Manga, Leepa valley, Ganja Daka and Neelum valley, the meteorological service said.