

Border battles strain Pak-Afghan ties

15 suspected Taliban killed

AP, AFP, Islamabad

Raging violence along the rugged Pakistan-Afghan border has sent relations between the two countries to new lows and underscored US difficulties in containing a troubled region crucial to winning the war on terror.

The tensions are placing increasing pressure on Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, a US counterterror ally who has been forced to stem his government against claims by Afghan President Hamid Karzai that Pakistan hasn't been doing enough to stem the flow of militants into Afghanistan.

"If the violence in Afghanistan escalates in the spring, then I think we are going to see this relationship become even more tense," said Samina Ahmed, an Islamabad-based expert with the International Crisis Group. "And Pakistanis are really concerned about how this affects their relations with the Americans."

In fresh violence Wednesday, Afghan troops killed 15 suspected

Taliban insurgents who crossed the mountainous border from neighbouring Pakistan, a senior army officer said.

Two Taliban commanders named as Shin Noorzai and Mullah Atta Jan were among the rebels who died in the gunbattle with soldiers late Tuesday in Shiro Obay, a village near the southern frontier town of Spin Boldak, border commander Abdul Razaq told AFP.

Five other militants retreated back across the rugged frontier and the Afghan forces suffered no casualties, Razaq said. The bodies of the guerrillas were still at the scene of the clash.

"Last night at around 10 or 11 pm a 20-member group of Taliban who had just crossed the border from Pakistan faced one of our patrols," he said.

"During the fighting which erupted afterwards 15 Taliban were killed."

Separately on Wednesday a civilian passenger was killed when gunmen opened fire on a taxi on a key road linking the capital to the

southern city of Kandahar, a police official said.

The battle came less than a week after the Taliban's fugitive leader Mullah Mohammad Omar vowed to launch a new springtime offensive that would turn Afghanistan into a "flaming oven".

Marine Gen. Peter Pace, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, met Pakistani officials in Islamabad on Monday and Tuesday and discussed terrorist incursions into Afghanistan, a senior US defence official said on condition of anonymity because the talks were private. His visit followed one earlier in the month by Gen. John Abizaid, chief of the US Central Command.

More than four years after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, an intensifying campaign of bombings, including 30 suicide attacks since the fall, have targeted foreign troops, Afghan security forces and local authorities. Afghan officials claim the attackers operate out of Pakistan.

In addition, insecurity only appears to be growing along the

mountainous border, where Osama bin Laden and other al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders are believed to be hiding. In the past month, Pakistani forces have fought several battles with pro-Taliban militants in the tribal region of North Waziristan, leaving scores of soldiers and many more suspected militants dead.

On Tuesday, Afghan security forces killed at least 15 suspected Taliban rebels after they crossed the border from neighboring Pakistan, said Abdul Razaq, the Afghan frontier security commander. Among them was a midlevel Taliban commander, Mullah Shien, whose followers regularly attacked foreign and Afghan troops and bomb trucks hauling gasoline for the US-led coalition, Razaq said.

But Pakistani Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed denied the militants came from Pakistan. "It's nonsense: just another allegation. We have our security forces there who are guarding the border," he said.

UK COURT RULES

Muslim girl must wear school uniform

AFP, London

Britain's highest court yesterday upheld a school's decision to require a Muslim pupil to change out of her Islamic gown into the school uniform, reversing a lower court decision.

The Court of Appeal in March last year ruled that Shabina Begum was unlawfully excluded from Denbigh High School in Luton, north of London, after she refused to change out of the head-to-toe jilbab.

The school then appealed to the panel of five judges at the House of Lords, Britain's de facto supreme court, which ruled Wednesday that the school was fully justified in acting as it did.

"It had taken immense pains to devise a uniform policy which respected Muslim beliefs but did so in an inclusive, unthreatening and uncompetitive way," Lord Thomas Bingham ruled.

"The rules laid down were as far from being mindless as uniform rules could ever be. The school had enjoyed a period of harmony and success to which the uniform policy was thought to contribute."



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of the main Belarus opposition presidential candidate Alexander Milinkevich warm themselves during their protest in downtown Minsk yesterday. Belarus opposition protesters were buoyant after spending a second freezing night on the main square of Minsk, yet their protest showed no sign of shaking authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko.

Estrada says he was framed in graft case

AP, Manila

Former president Joseph Estrada sharply denied yesterday that he took huge kickbacks in office, defiantly telling an anti-graft court that he was framed.

With hundreds of his backers rallying outside, Estrada's testimony capped five years of court proceedings that he hopes will vindicate him after he was toppled in a 2001 "people power" revolt and put on trial for the capital offence of plunder and other charges.

"These are trumped-up charges, a frame-up," the 68-year-old Estrada said when questioned about the kickback allegations. "I've never asked for commissions. I don't have the conscience to steal money intended for farmers."

Prosecutors say Estrada amassed \$77 million in illegal gambling payoffs, tax kickbacks and commissions stashed in secret bank accounts under an alias. He also faces a minor charge of perjury for allegedly underreporting his assets in 1999.

Estrada's impeachment proceedings broke down in January 2001 when prosecutors were barred from presenting what they called a critical piece of evidence. Within hours, people began massing for protests that forced him to leave the presidential palace.

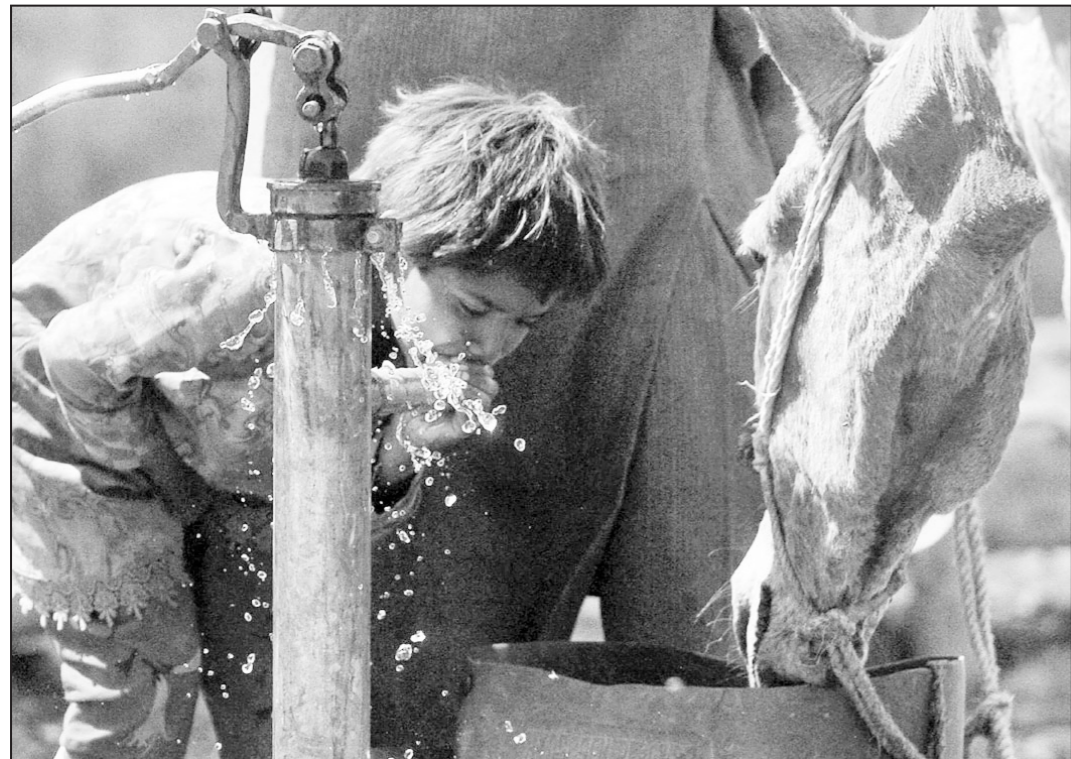


PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani girl and a donkey drink water from a hand pump in a slum area of Lahore yesterday on the World Water Day. The United Nations warned that trouble caused by the world's dwindling supply of fresh water goes far beyond perpetual thirst for billions around the globe.

US to keep nuclear issue out of talks with Iran

AFP, AP, Brussels/ Tehran

The United States will not discuss Iran's nuclear ambitions in future talks with the Islamic Republic about the conflict in Iraq, a senior US diplomat said yesterday.

Washington has authorised its ambassador in Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, to reach out for Iranian help to stabilise the embattled country and Tehran has since said it would be willing to discuss the problem.

"The discussions that we are prepared to conduct with authorities from Iran and our ambassador Khalilzad from Baghdad are focused on Iraq, that's the only purpose of those," said Gregory Schulte, US ambassador to the UN

nuclear watchdog.

"We have no intention to open direct negotiations with Tehran on the nuclear issue," he told reporters in Brussels. "We support the European Union in their efforts to conduct negotiations."

Earlier Iran's Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said Tuesday that he approves of proposed talks between US and Iranian officials on Iraq, but warned that the United States must not try to "bully" Iran.

It was the first confirmation that Khamenei, who holds final say on all state matters in Iran, supports the talks. His comments appeared aimed at calming criticism by hard-liners over a major shift in policy by

the regime, which long shunned high-level contacts with a country Tehran brands "the Great Satan."

President Bush said Tuesday he favours the talks and that American officials would show Iran "what's right or wrong in their activities inside of Iraq."

Khamenei said that "if the Iranian officials can make the US understand some issues about Iraq, there is no problem with the negotiations."

"But if the talks mean opening a venue for bullying and imposition by the deceitful party (the Americans), then it will be forbidden," he said in a nationally televised speech in the holy Shia city of Mashhad in northeastern Iran.

Basque separatists announce truce

AP, Madrid

The Basque separatist group ETA yesterday announced a permanent cease-fire, bringing a dramatic end to a decades-long campaign of violence and closing the door on one of Western Europe's last active armed separatist movements.

In a statement sent to television and newspaper outlets, ETA said it "has decided to declare a permanent cease fire as of March 24, 2006."

"The aim of (the cease-fire) is to promote a democratic process in the Basque country and to build a new framework in which our rights as a people will be recognized," the statement said. "ETA also calls on the Spanish and French authorities to respond positively to this new situation, leaving their repressive ways behind."

ETA often uses local Basque media outlets to issue its pronouncements.

Speculation about an end to ETA's armed campaign has been

building for months, despite a recent wave of small-scale bombings against Basque businesses.

Last month, Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero said he was optimistic ETA would soon declare a truce. The group has not staged a fatal attack since May 2003, when a car bomb killed two policemen in the northern town of Sanguesa.

Many Spaniards believed that after the March 11, 2004, terror attacks in Madrid, carried out by Islamic extremists, ETA had effectively been stymied. The belief was that popular revulsion over terrorism made deadly violence politically unthinkable for the group.

Spain's Socialist government last May offered to open negotiations with ETA if it renounced violence, but the group kept up a campaign of relatively minor violence and made no mention of laying down arms in a recent statement.

India, Pakistan vow to fight crime together

REUTERS, New Delhi

India and Pakistan agreed yesterday to work together to turn up the heat on criminals trafficking humans, drugs and narcotics between the two countries.

Officials of the arch-rivals' crime-fighting agencies, meeting in New Delhi after a gap of 17 years, also discussed setting up a South Asian police agency on the lines of Europe's Europol.

They agreed to appoint special liaison officers between India's Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) and Pakistan's Federal Investigation Agency (FIA).

"We look forward to increasing cooperation in larger areas of mutual interest and ensuring criminals of the two countries do not have any kind of respite from the two

agencies," CBI Director Vijay Shanker said at a joint news conference with the FIA chief.

Human trafficking and the smuggling of goods, narcotics and counterfeit currency routinely take place along the India-Pakistan border which is already troubled by an Islamic insurgency in the disputed northern territory of Kashmir.

The issue of Dawood Ibrahim, India's most wanted criminal, against whom Interpol has issued a major alert notice and who is believed to be in Pakistan, was also discussed.

A joint statement issued after the talks said the two sides had decided that "all efforts will be made ... for expeditious disposal of pending Interpol references".