

Pak troops clash with militants in tribal belt

20 rebels killed near Afghan border

AFP, Miranshah

Pakistani troops and helicopter gunships killed up to 20 militants near the Afghan border yesterday, officials said, hours after President Pervez Musharraf warned foreign rebels to leave the area or die.

The fighting erupted overnight after rebels killed a soldier at a security post in Datakhel village, near Miranshah, the main town in the restive North Waziristan tribal zone and the scene of fierce clashes earlier this month.

"Up to 20 militants were killed when security forces responded to the rocket and small arms attack on the checkpoint, in which one soldier was killed," top military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan told AFP.

"The militants while running away left behind a few weapons also."

Pakistan, a key ally in the US-led "war on terror", has deployed 80,000 troops along the border since 2003 to flush out Al-Qaeda and Taliban militants who sneaked across from Afghanistan after the ouster of the Taliban regime in late 2001.

Sultan had no details but local and army officials said a number of foreign militants were among those who died in Friday's fighting, which started at around 2:45 am and lasted for some two hours.

"Around 20 militants, including some foreigners, were killed when security forces struck their hideout with gunship helicopters and artillery after the attack on a security post which killed one soldier and injured two others," a military official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

A local official said seven of the dead were foreign. The official

added that two injured attackers were arrested.

Tribal militants linked to the Taliban briefly took control of Miranshah in the first week of March during a visit to Islamabad by US President George W. Bush - in revenge for an earlier raid on a suspected al-Qaeda training camp.

Fierce clashes erupted when Pakistani forces tried to retake the town, leaving around 170 militants and five soldiers dead and forcing thousands of civilians to flee the area.

Musharraf late Thursday promised a crackdown on foreign militants, amid tensions between Afghanistan and Pakistan over allegations that Islamabad is failing to tackle Islamic militants launching cross-border raids from its territory.

"We will never tolerate foreign terrorists and extremists" hiding in

the tribal region, Musharraf told a rally in the eastern city of Lahore.

"These foreign militants are indulging in acts of terrorism not only in Pakistan but elsewhere in the world also," he said. "I warn them to leave Pakistan, failing which we will eliminate them."

Meanwhile Pakistan on Thursday lodged a "strong protest" with Afghanistan over the killing by Afghan troops this week of 16 people who it says were civilians heading to a festival.

Kabul says it is investigating the incident, which happened across the border from Pakistan's southwestern province of Baluchistan, but an Afghan army officer has said the dead men were Taliban insurgents.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani paramilitary soldiers stand guard with machine guns in Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan yesterday. Pakistani forces using helicopter gunships killed up to 20 pro-Taliban militants near the Afghan border after an attack on a security post left one soldier dead.

Protests in Nepal over politician's detention

REUTERS, Kathmandu

About 150 protesters burned tyres and stopped traffic in the Nepali capital on Friday, demanding the release of a top opposition leader who has been detained by police, witnesses said.

Officials said Madhav Kumar Nepal, general secretary of the Communist Party of Nepal-UML, will be held in custody for three months under the Public Security Act.

He was taken on Thursday from his home, where he had been under house arrest for two months, to a police base at Kakani, about 30 kms outside the capital.

"Free our leader, down with autocracy," chanted Nepal's angry supporters, disrupting rush-hour traffic for an hour on a central street in the temple-studded city.

Riot police stood guard but did not intervene.

Nestled in the scenic Himalayas, Nepal has witnessed almost daily street protests against King Gyanendra, calling for the restoration of democracy and of some civil liberties that had been suspended.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh flags off a new bus link connecting India's Sikh holy city of Amritsar with the Pakistani pilgrimage town of Nankana Sahib, in Amritsar yesterday as Chief Minister of the Indian state of Punjab Amrinder Singh (2L) and Deputy Chief Minister Rajinder Kaur Bhattal (3L) look on. The bus service is the latest step in an attempt to normalise relations between the South Asian rivals. Singh called for a friendship treaty with Pakistan to help resolve the bitter issues that have bedevilled relations for almost six decades.

ABBAS SAYS Peace deal with Israel possible within a yr

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas threw a wild card into the Israeli election campaign yesterday with a claim that a negotiated peace agreement could be achieved with Israel in less than a year.

But Acting Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, whose governing Kadima party is projected to emerge triumphant from Tuesday's pivotal election, insisted he could not base his policies on overtures from the moderate Palestinian Authority (PA) president with a Hamas-led cabinet set to take power.

"I am convinced that within less than a year, we will be able to sign an agreement," Abbas was quoted as saying in an interview with the liberal Haaretz newspaper.

As head of the Palestine Liberation Organisation he said he would conduct the talks with the Israelis, bypassing the Hamas government set to be rubber-

stamped by parliament on Monday after its upset January election win.

Abbas said he had already discussed with Washington and former Israeli premier Shimon Peres, number two on centrist Kadima's slate, the idea of opening secret talks that would effectively bypass Hamas.

He and Peres met in Jordan earlier this month, when the Palestinian leader emphasised his desire for a resumption of stalled peace negotiations.

His offer was snubbed by Israel and is likely to receive little interest from the sponsors of the stalled Middle East roadmap peace plan following the rise to power of a group blacklisted as a terrorist organisation by the West.

"I know him and we were very friendly, but I cannot base my attitude toward the PA on the sympathy I may have for a certain individual," Olmert said in an interview with the web edition of Israel's biggest-selling daily Yediot Aharonot.

Both troops & Tigers rearm despite talks

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's military and Tamil Tiger rebels are both re-arming even as they prepare for a new round of talks in Switzerland, the army chief said on Friday, saying the 2002 ceasefire has too many loopholes.

Violence in Sri Lanka's minority Tamil-dominated north and east pushed the island to the brink of war in January but has fallen off sharply since the two sides agreed to hold their first direct talks since 2003. But Lieutenant General Sarath Fonseka said both sides were continuing to prepare for battle.

"I know they are building up the capacity of their military," he said of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

"I don't know that they can build up their forces and be serious about peace. We also are building our forces. But building up a legiti-

mate army is very different from building up a terrorist force."

Both sides repeatedly say they want to avoid a return to Sri Lanka's two-decade civil war, which killed more than 64,000 people and shaved an estimated 1-2 percentage points a year off economic growth before the 2002 truce.

But the rebels have warned that unless concessions are made, war may return.

A strike gripped Sri Lanka's restive northeast yesterday as Tamil Tiger rebels and the Colombo government traded allegations of renegeing on their latest pledges to uphold a troubled truce.

Shops and offices shut in the district of Trincomalee in response to the one-day strike called by a Tamil Tiger rebel front organisation, local residents and officials said.

They said the Pongu Tamil organisation which ordered the strike to protest alleged truce

violations by security forces is a front of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

Tension has been rising in the troubled region, with the guerrillas accusing the military of building new bunkers in violation of their four-year-old truce.

At the launch of a new army Web site in part aimed at highlighting rebel ceasefire breaches, Fonseka told reporters the Tigers had increased recruitment of children. UN children's agency Unicef says there is no evidence child recruitment is up.

Fonseka said the rebels are firing at the army to try and provoke them, but the Tigers were not "misbehaving" as seriously as before the talks were agreed. It is now over a month since a suspected rebel attack injured a soldier.

EU to slap sanctions on Belarus for detentions

AFP, Brussels/Minsk

European Union leaders yesterday slapped new sanctions on Belarus and its authoritarian President Alexander Lukashenko and called on his regime to release hundreds of protesters arrested overnight.

Ratcheting up their stance on Belarus - which they called "a sad exception" to democracy in Europe - the leaders agreed to widen restrictions beyond the six visa bans now in place on Belarus officials.

They did not spell out the nature of the measures.

The leaders, meeting at a summit in Brussels, "decided to take restrictive measures against those responsible for violations of international electoral standards, including President Lukashenko," Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik said.

Belarus riot police earlier Friday quashed an unprecedented protest against the veteran president, smashing a tent camp in central Minsk and arresting hundreds of young opposition activists.

The opposition protests began after Lukashenko was swept back into power in Sunday's presidential

election - a vote widely accepted as unfair and slammed by the European Union earlier this week.

"We urge the Belarus authorities to respect the freedom of assembly and to release the prisoners," said Plassnik, whose country currently holds the EU presidency.

The Belgian presidency of the leading Western election-monitoring body, the OSCE, also called on Minsk to halt the "persecution" of opposition activists and release those arrested.

"The authorities must immediately end the persecution of their opponents," the head of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht, said in a statement.

EU leaders, as they arrived for the second day of their summit here, widely condemned the crackdown and said that Belarus's giant neighbour and ally Russia had to be engaged.

"We need to be more firm... and demonstrate that we are united inside the European Union about how we look at the relations with Belarus but also with Russia," said Swedish Prime Minister Goeran Persson.

Maoists kill 6 in India

REUTERS, Raipur

Maoist rebels slit the throats of four members of an anti-Maoist group and shot dead two policemen in separate attacks in two states, police said yesterday, in rising violence by the leftist radicals.

In Chhattisgarh, Maoists rebels attacked tribal members of the Salwa Judum (March for Peace), a government-backed anti-rebel group.

"This triggered panic among the local tribal population in the area," S.K. Paswan, a senior police officer, said.

The killings took place overnight in the Bastar region of the state, more than 300 km south of Raipur, the state capital.

Maoist rebels, who claim to fight for the landless labourers and poor peasants including impoverished tribes, have been striking frequently in the past year, killing government sympathisers as well as policemen.

Over 50 members of Salwa Judum were killed when rebels set off a landmine under a truck in Chhattisgarh on Feb. 28.

In the neighbouring state of Orissa on Friday, dozens of Maoist rebels stormed a police station and a bank, killing two policemen after a brief firefight and kidnapping two others, as well as a revenue official.

Sonia regains moral high ground

AFP, New Delhi

A decision by India's ruling Congress party leader Sonia Gandhi to quit her parliamentary seat to avoid a conflict of interest has seen her regain the moral high ground but her party remains tarnished, analysts said yesterday.

Sonia resigned from parliament Thursday after the opposition charged she had wrongfully held another salaried public post.

"She's signalling that she is not interested in power and in Indian politics that makes her influence and capability actually go up," said political analyst Mahesh Rangarajan. "She is now sitting pretty."

Sonia cited her "inner conscience" when she stepped down in a move that echoed her decision not to become prime minister after leading the Congress party to an upset victory in the 2004 election.

"Following the principles of probity and my inner conscience I am resigning my post in the parliament," Sonia said Thursday, adding however she would run again for the

seat in India's elected lower house.

The 59-year-old Sonia said she would also quit as chairwoman of the National Advisory Council (NAC), set up to implement her government's electoral pledges.

Right-wing opponents had charged that Italian-born Sonia was breaking regulations by holding both posts and that the Congress adjourned parliament so it could push through a cabinet ordinance to save her.

Rangarajan said the unexpected resignation had put the opposition in a bind.

"They banked their strategy on her holding on," said Rangarajan. "Now all that goes out of the window."

India's main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) responded by pouring scorn on Sonia's gesture.

"She has become a victim of her own conspiracy and by resigning she is trying to save face," said BJP spokesman Arun Jaitley. "This grandstanding will not pay any dividend."



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of India's ruling Congress Party chief and chairperson of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government Sonia Gandhi shout anti-BJP slogans in front of her residence in New Delhi yesterday, a day after Sonia resigned from parliament following opposition allegations that she wrongfully held another salaried public post.



PHOTO: AFP

People of the opposition Thai democrats try to protect themselves from the sun during a rally in Bangkok yesterday. Thailand's king met his top advisers to discuss the growing calls to appoint a new prime minister and end the country's political stand-off, sources close to the meeting said.

Thai king meets advisers on appeals for new PM

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's king met his top advisers to discuss the growing calls to appoint a new prime minister and end the country's political stand-off, sources close to the meeting said yesterday.

King Bhumibol Adulyadej held a rare meeting late Thursday with the Privy Council, which presented him with appeals to replace embattled Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, they said.

"The king was briefed on the current political crisis and presented with royal appeals to appoint a neutral person as the new prime minister," one source close to the council said.

The royal palace keeps a tight lid on most information about the king's activities, and people involved in the talks were not allowed to speak on the record as a matter of protocol.

Opposition leaders, academics, doctors, lawyers and others have urged the king to invoke a never-used article of the Thai constitution that allows him to name an interim prime minister in times of crisis.

Thaksin has been battling weeks

of demonstrations calling for him to resign since his family pocketed almost two billion dollars in a tax-free stock sale.

Tens of thousands of people have taken to the streets in near daily protests with another mass demonstration planned for the weekend.

If the king was to appoint a prime minister, that person would act as a caretaker until new elections can be held.

Thaksin called elections for April 2, three years early, in hopes of breaking the deadlock but the opposition has boycotted the polls, casting doubt on whether the vote will produce a new parliament.

On Friday, Thaksin declined to comment on the royal meeting but insisted that elections were the best way to solve the political crisis.

"People should go out to vote - people who don't agree with government as well as those who support the government," he told reporters before leaving Bangkok to campaign in northeastern Thailand.

ETA seeks support for peace process after ceasefire

AFP, Madrid

A "permanent ceasefire" by armed Basque separatist group ETA came into force yesterday after the group said it wanted to end a four-decade conflict, which has cost more than 800 lives.

The ceasefire officially began at midnight (2300 GMT Thursday) hours after the group urged government and locals to support peace in the wake of Wednesday's announcement it was putting an end to its violent campaign for an independent state in the northern region and parts of southwestern France.

ETA's statement urged all parts of Basque society to "move from words to action" by getting involved in the process but Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero warned there was a "long road" to resolving the four-decade conflict.

Zapatero was attending an EU summit in Brussels as the ceasefire came into force.

US urges suppliers to back Indian nuke deal

REUTERS, Vienna

Washington on Thursday lobbied the world's top suppliers of nuclear technology to back a US-India civilian nuclear energy deal that critics say threatens the global arms control regime, diplomats said.

The deal would enable India, long treated as a nuclear pariah, to receive American atomic technology and fuel, even though it has not signed the benchmark arms control pact, the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and has atomic bombs.

The pact has coincided with an escalation of American and international efforts to limit the nuclear activities of Iran, an NPT signatory, to ensure it does not develop nuclear weapons.

Signed earlier this month, the agreement must still win the approval of the US Congress and the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), 45 countries that possess the most advanced nuclear technology and who met in Vienna on Thursday.

"We are confident that it's not the death knell of the NPT," Stephen Rademaker, acting US assistant secretary for arms control, told reporters. "To the contrary, we think bringing India into the international non-proliferation regime will strengthen the regime."

The United States is also keen to promote India's civilian nuclear programme in the hope of reducing its dependence on fossil fuels, thereby easing pressure on oil prices.

Under the agreement, India has pledged to separate its civilian and nuclear facilities and to sign up to UN nuclear supervision of the civilian sites. It would also tighten controls on exports of nuclear equipment.

Washington argues that such a move would be a valuable improvement. Critics say it is not enough as the deal does not oblige India to take any steps towards dismantling its nuclear arsenal, a key requirement for NPT signatories.