

Militants attack Pak military base

Four killed in blasts

AP, AFP, Miran Shah/Quetta

Suspected militants attacked a military base in a tribal region in northwestern Pakistan, killing one soldier and injuring four others, an intelligence official said yesterday.

Troops retaliated with artillery fire after the rocket attack Saturday night on their base in Dattakhel, a village in North Waziristan tribal region, which borders Afghanistan, the official said on condition of anonymity because of the secretive nature of his job.

It was not known whether there were any casualties among the militants, who have kept up a stream of the assaults against security forces in the region in recent weeks.

Two children, a 3-year-old girl and her brother, 6, were injured when a stray artillery shell struck

their home in Manzarkhel, a village just over a mile west of the military base, during a brief exchange of fire between security forces and the militants, he said.

Meanwhile, two soldiers and two policemen were killed and 18 injured in separate bomb blasts yesterday in the restive southwestern Pakistani province of Baluchistan, officials said.

Two paramilitary soldiers were killed and ten injured in two back-to-back bomb explosions at a farm in the town of Kohlu, 300km east of Quetta, a security official told AFP.

The farm is owned and run by the paramilitary Frontier Corps.

"Two soldiers were killed, while 10 were injured, two of them critically," the official said, requesting anonymity.

Lankan ruling party may call snap polls

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's ruling party may call snap elections after its success in local polls gave it a chance to break away from hardline allies opposed to a peace process with Tamil rebels, analysts say.

President Mahinda Rajapakse could call parliamentary polls four years ahead of schedule if his two key nationalist allies try to block efforts for a political settlement to the festering ethnic conflict, they say.

"The president will try to get the nationalists on board but if that fails, he may go for a quick election," said Sunanda Deshapriya, director at the Centre for Policy Alternatives think tank.

Deshapriya said the poor performance by the nationalist Marxist JVP, or the People's Liberation Front, and the all monks party of JHU showed that Rajapakse no

longer needed their support to win elections.

Official results of Thursday's poll showed that Rajapakse's People's Alliance won 225 of the 266 local councils. The JVP barely managed to retain one council and the JHU failed to win anything.

The two parties supported Rajapakse in his successful run for the presidency in November in return for a pledge to review a Norwegian-backed peace process in place since 2002.

However, since the election, Rajapakse has moved to shore up a fragile ceasefire and return to talks with the rebels amid intense international pressure to avoid a return to war.

More than 60,000 people have been killed in the ethnic conflict since 1972.

"A snap election is a very high probability. It will be a case of winner-takes-it-all. His party can expect

to do well," said Tamil politician Dharmalingam Sidhathan, a former Tamil militant who now leads the Democratic People's Liberation Front.

Newspaper editorials also suggested that an early election was a possibility.

"No doubt this augurs well for the future and the peace process," the state-run Daily News said in an editorial on Saturday, underscoring the government's jubilation at the drubbing the hardliners received.

"It is quite obvious that those political parties seen as espousing the interests of specific cultural groups have been rejected."

The JVP and JHU contested the local elections independently in an apparent effort to test popular support for their stance on the peace process, analysts said. Both want to end Norway's involvement.



Political activists ride on motorbikes during a protest rally yesterday in Kathmandu demanding restoration of democracy in Nepal. The activists of seven alliance political parties called for a 4-day strike from April 6-9 and the restoration of democracy in the country. King Gyanendra of Nepal sacked the government in February 2005 and assumed absolute power after blaming politicians for failing to stem a Maoist insurgency.

Russia supplies uranium for Indian power plant

AFP, New Delhi

India has received an initial shipment of enriched uranium fuel from Russia for a nuclear power plant in the western state of Maharashtra, a report said yesterday.

The first consignment of 20 to 25 tonnes of uranium has arrived in the country and will be delivered to the Tarapur nuclear power station soon, the Press Trust of India news

agency reported.

Another consignment of 45 to 40 tonnes was expected soon, it said.

"With Russian supply of 60 metric tonnes of uranium, the plants will have fuel for the next five years and (will) run smoothly," S. Thakur, an officer with the Nuclear Power Corporation of India which runs the Tarapur plant, told the news agency.



PHOTO: AFP

Miliki Baruah, mother of Paresh Baruah, the chief of the outlawed militant group United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulf), talks to the media yesterday about her willingness to cast her vote in the coming Assam Assembly elections in Jeraigaon in the Dibrugarh district of Assam. The Ulf is one of the strongest militant outfits in northeast India and are demanding an independent Assam.

Congress faces tough polls test in Assam

REUTERS, New Delhi

Voting begins in restive Assam today, kicking off polls in five states being seen as the biggest electoral test of the Congress party-led federal alliance since it won power in May 2004.

In Assam, a Congress government is fighting for re-election against a regional opposition party and the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Both opposition parties are highlighting the illegal immigration of Muslim migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh.

The two-phase vote in Assam will be followed by polling throughout April in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and the tiny federal enclave of Pondicherry besides West Bengal in the east of the world's largest democracy.

More than 130 million voters, more than the total registered electorate in Russia, are eligible to cast ballots.

Political analysts say the Congress and its allies must win at

least one of the four larger states if the coalition is to maintain its cohesion -- and keep sometimes fractious communist parties who support it from outside off its back.

A victory in any two states would boost the alliance, which is presiding over a booming economy and India's rising stature in world affairs, they said.

"Though local issues will be at the fore, national issues like the overall economy and foreign policy will also be factors," said Kuldip Nayar, independent political commentator.

"A win in two states will be a major psychological boost."

But analysts also said that a poor showing could make the coalition's communist allies, which provide it with a parliamentary majority but have refused to join the government, more aggressive as they seek to curb cautious economic reforms being pursued by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's administration.

Hizbul derides Indo-Pak peace process

REUTERS, Islamabad

The largest Kashmiri militant group fighting Indian rule on Saturday derided a peace process between India and Pakistan and said separatists talking with the two governments were gaining nothing.

"The fact is that the ongoing dialogue process between India and Pakistan is useless, futile and a waste of time," Hizbul Mujahideen said in a statement.

"Those Kashmiri politicians who have joined this process are not going to get anything except breakfast, tours and media coverage, because India is not sincere in resolving this issue," the group's spokesman, Saleem Hashmi, said in the statement.

On Thursday, a local news agency published an interview with Sayed Salahuddin, leader of Hizbul Mujahideen, saying that the group could consider a truce only if India recognised Kashmir as disputed territory and Kashmiris were given a place at the table in peace negotiations.

India considers Kashmir an integral part of the country.

In early 2004, two years after almost going to war for a fourth time, Pakistan and India began a formal peace process, though there has been little progress over Kashmir.

Although violence has declined markedly, gunbattles between security forces and militants remain frequent in Indian Kashmir, where India has faced a revolt against its rule since 1989.

Hizbul Mujahideen, which is based in Pakistani Kashmir, has suffered losses in recent months, and the militants complain Pakistan is no longer supporting their armed struggle.

"For the last two or three years, they (the Pakistan government) have withdrawn all sorts of support from us and recently, we received messages that there should be no cross border movement," a senior Hizbul Mujahideen official told Reuters.