

## 8 Pak troops killed in clashes with militants

AFP, Miranshah

Militants ambushed a convoy of Pakistani troops yesterday, killing seven and wounding 22 in the deadliest attack for months in a restive tribal region bordering Afghanistan, officials said.

Separately, a suspected foreign insurgent and another paramilitary soldier died in a gunbattle at a checkpoint in the rugged and largely lawless area, they said.

The deaths came amid increasingly intensive efforts by key US ally Pakistan to flush out al-Qaeda and Taliban insurgents and their supporters and restore control in the region.

The soldiers who died in the ambush had been securing the convoy's route in Sarobi village 20km north of Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan, chief military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan said.

"This happened when security forces were moving and mounting routine security positions. The attackers used nearby heights and attacked the security forces," Sultan

told AFP. "There are seven martyred and 22 injured."

Helicopter gunships and soldiers hunted the rebels after the attack, killing up to six militants whose bodies were removed by their comrades, a security official said on condition of anonymity.

Sultan said troops were responding to the attack and had secured the area but did not confirm the militant death toll.

An AFP correspondent said firing had stopped but soldiers were barring all vehicles from the area.

Meanwhile a shootout erupted on Thursday when a suspected foreign militant refused to get out of a car at a checkpoint near Khar, the main town in Bajaur, which is another of Pakistan's seven tribal regions, Sultan said.

"He started firing at the paramilitary forces. One was killed and the suspect was also killed," he said. The suspect's body was undergoing tests to establish his identity.



Nepalese armed policemen run towards pro-democracy protesters at Kalanki in Kathmandu yesterday. Police shot dead three people and wounded scores more as tens of thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators defied shoot-on-sight curfew orders in Kathmandu.

INDIAN ENVOY SAYS

## Nepal king may make announcement soon to quell protests

AFP, New Delhi

India's special envoy to Nepal said yesterday he is hopeful King Gyanendra will soon make an announcement to quell two weeks of bloody mass protests against the monarchy.

"I am optimistic. I am hopeful that the king will make an announcement shortly," Karan Singh told reporters on his return to New Delhi after talks with Gyanendra in Kathmandu. "The ball is in the king's court."

The Indian envoy said his meeting with the king earlier Thursday was "positive" and the monarch's "attitude was good."

Singh carried a message from Indian Prime Minister Manmohan

Singh, who has called on Nepal's royal government to defuse the violence.

During his two-day stay, Singh also held talks with leaders of political groups who have allied with Maoist rebels to pressure the king to restore democracy after he assumed absolute power 14 months ago.

"We are deeply concerned over the difficulties of the people of Nepal that have seen economic difficulties and political difficulties and a general breakdown of law and order," envoy Singh said.

Police shot dead three people and wounded scores more Thursday as tens of thousands of pro-democracy demonstrators defied shoot-on-sight curfew orders

in the Nepalese capital.

"The Special Envoy has stressed the need for genuine dialogue between the constitutional forces in Nepal, with the objective of urgently restoring multi-party democracy," the Indian embassy in Kathmandu said in a statement earlier.

This would "overcome the crisis that Nepal is faced with."

Karan Singh "conveyed India's readiness to support all efforts towards this end while emphasising that a lasting solution to the problems of Nepal has to be found by the people of Nepal through a peaceful political process," the statement said.

The crisis has caused "deep concern" in neighbouring India, it added.

## Russia rebuffs US call to halt Iran nuke plant

Tehran dismisses talk of attack

AFP, REUTERS, Moscow/Baku

The Russian foreign ministry rejected yesterday a US demand for Moscow to halt construction of a nuclear power station in Iran.

"Obviously every country has the right to decide itself with whom and how it cooperates with other countries," ministry spokesman Mikhail Kamynin said in a statement.

He said that construction of the atomic power station in Bushehr -- the first in Iran -- was taking place under full supervision and "strictly in accordance with our international obligations."

The foreign ministry was replying to a demand on Wednesday by US Under Secretary of State Nicholas Burns for "countries to stop cooperation with Iran on nuclear issues, even on civilian nuclear issues like the Bushehr facility."

Earlier, the head of Russia's Rosatom nuclear agency, Sergei Kiriyenko, also defended the Bushehr project, saying it "does not threaten the non-proliferation regime."

Kiriyenko also said the interna-

tional crisis over Iran's push for a nuclear power capability -- suspected in the West to be masking a nuclear weapons programme -- could be resolved peacefully.

"We are convinced that a solution can be reached through diplomacy," Kiriyenko told journalists in the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek.

Burns said during a visit to Moscow on Wednesday that Iran should be denied any technology that could help its nuclear programme.

"A number of countries are continuing to permit the export of dual-use materials that could be used, and we think in some cases are being used, to help the growth of Iran's nuclear industry," Burns said.

"It is the view of my government that it would be appropriate now for those individual governments to stop that practice and no longer permit it."

Meanwhile, the prospect of the United States using force to halt Iran's nuclear programme is empty talk, Iranian Defence Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar said yesterday.

President Bush says he is using diplomacy to curb Iran's atomic ambitions, but has not ruled out military options, even including a nuclear strike, to prevent the Islamic Republic from acquiring nuclear weapons.

"The United States has been threatening Iran for 27 years and this is not new for us. Therefore we are never afraid of U.S. threats," Najjar told reporters during a visit to neighbouring Azerbaijan.

"If you take into account the fact that they are not doing anything, this shows it is just talk," he said.

"We are ready to resolve all issues through negotiations (but) if we are confronted with something, we are ready to deal with it," the minister added.

Iran says its nuclear program is solely to generate electricity. The United States and other major powers suspect that Tehran's efforts to enrich uranium could allow it to divert material for clandestine bomb-making.

## Flash floods, landslide kill 23 in Indonesia

AFP, Jakarta

Overnight flash flooding and landslides triggered by monsoon rains in Indonesia's densely populated East Java have killed at least 23 people, the state Antara news agency said yesterday.

"Until noon (0500 GMT) we have registered 23 dead victims, with most killed in Bendungan sub-district," the top government official in Trenggalek district, Soeharto, was quoted as saying.

In hilly Bendungan, 13 people were killed in a landslide that hit three hamlets there after two days of heavy rain, he said, according to the report.

Hermanto, who heads operations at the East Java search and rescue agency, told AFP his agency did not yet have a toll but had dispatched a team to Trenggalek.

"We are also readying teams from the surrounding districts to help efforts in Trenggalek," Hermanto said.

Flows of water, mud, rocks and other debris swept through Trenggalek district early Thursday and cut off the main road linking it to the nearby town of Ponorogo, district spokesman Joko Setiono said, according to Antara.



An Afghan Parliament member casts his vote to elect the new cabinet members of Afghan President Hamid Karzai's government at the parliament in Kabul yesterday. MPs cast their secret votes in 25 ballot boxes each designated to one minister.

## Pentagon releases extensive list of Guantanamo detainees

REUTERS, Washington

The Pentagon has released its most extensive list of foreign terrorism suspects held at Guantanamo Bay, providing the names and nationalities of 558 detainees who went through a hearing process there.

The US Defence Department posted the 11-page list on its Web site late on Wednesday in response to a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit by the Associated Press.

The largest number of detainees on the list came from Saudi Arabia, with 132, followed by Afghanistan with 125 and Yemen with 107. The prisoners came from 40 countries and the West Bank.

Only 10 of the detainees at the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, have been charged and not one of the trials has been completed. Most of the detainees were captured in Afghanistan and the Pentagon accused many of complicity with al-Qaeda or the Taliban.

The Pentagon had designated the detainees as "enemy combatants," denying them the rights accorded to prisoners of war under international agreements.

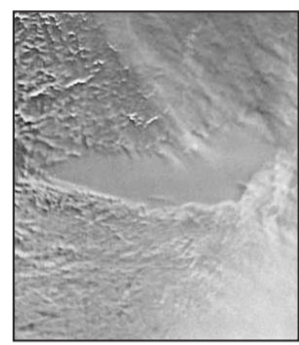


PHOTO: REUTERS

An undated satellite image of Antarctica's Lake Vostok. Rivers as big as the Thames in England that may connect sub-glacial lakes have been found deep under the Antarctic ice, scientists said on Wednesday.

## Scientists find rivers under Antarctic ice

REUTERS, London

Rivers as big as the Thames in England that may connect sub-glacial lakes have been found deep under the Antarctic ice, scientists said on Wednesday.

British researchers who discovered the plumbing system that moves water hundreds of miles said it challenges the notion that the lakes under the Antarctic ice evolved independently and could support ancient life.

"Previously, it was thought water moves underneath the ice by very slow seepage," said Professor Duncan Wingham of University College London (UCL) who headed the research team.

"But this new data shows that, every so often, the lakes beneath the ice pop off like champagne corks, releasing floods that travel very long distances."

Scientists had plans to drill through the ice to take samples from the lakes but were worried about contaminating them with new microbes.

"We had thought of these lakes as isolated biological laboratories. Now we are going to have to think again," Wingham added in a statement.

The research, which is reported in the journal Nature, also means that water from the Antarctic lakes, which were first discovered in the 1960s, could have flowed into the ocean in the past and that it could happen again.

About 150 sub glacial lakes have been discovered in Antarctica but researchers believe there could be thousands. Lake Vostok, at 15-20 million years old, is thought to be the most ancient.



PHOTO: AFP

President of India's Congress Party Sonia Gandhi (L) greets the crowds during an election rally in Baduria, some 70km north of Kolkata yesterday while local party leader Margaret Alva looks on. Five phases of voting in 294 state assembly constituencies have started under tight security in India's Marxist bastion of West Bengal, where leftist parties are expected to win big and gain strength on the national scene.

AMNESTY SAYS

## China, Iran, Saudi & US main executioners

REUTERS, London

More than 2,000 people were known to have been executed around the world last year, the vast majority of them in China, followed by Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States, Amnesty International said on Thursday.

In its annual report on executions, the rights group said about 1,770 executions were reported to have been carried out in China in 2005, but added the real figure was undoubtedly much higher, noting a Chinese legal expert had been quoted as saying the true figure was about 8,000.

More than 20,000 people were on death row around the world, said the report, which repeated a call for the worldwide abolition of the death penalty.

Amnesty said at least 2,148 people were executed in 2005 in 22

countries -- 94 percent of them in China, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United States. That's down from 3,797 executions in 2004, but up from 1,146 in 2003.

"The death penalty is the ultimate, irreversible denial of human rights, because it contravenes the essence of human values, it is often applied in a discriminatory manner, follows unfair trials or is applied for political reasons," Amnesty International Secretary-General Irene Khan said in a statement.

At least 94 people were executed in Iran, 86 in Saudi Arabia and 60 in the United States.

"As the world continues to turn away from the use of the death penalty, it is a glaring anomaly that China, Saudi Arabia, Iran and the US stand out for their extreme use of this form of punishment," Khan said.

## Spectre of failed state looms over Hamas

AFP, Ramallah

A massive fiscal squeeze on the Hamas-led government has led to warnings that the Palestinian people could become residents of a failed state even before they achieve independence.

The Palestinian Authority is debt-ridden. The European Union and United States have frozen direct aid. The government can no longer pay salaries, affecting the incomes of one million people or a quarter of the population.

Teachers have begun to stay away from school. Hospitals have reported that nurses have been also absent. Masked gunmen frequently storm public buildings to protest against non-payment of salaries.

The extent of the crisis was underlined in new UN report into the impact of a freeze in direct US aid and EU receipts of 607 million dollars a year, which said the

Palestinian Authority could end up a "failed state".

With Israel already having frozen payments of customs duties it once collected for the Palestinian Authority (PA), the United Nations said there would now be a shortfall in the monthly budget of 90 million dollars.

"Unless this shortfall is made up on some other way, a functioning state apparatus risks being seriously undermined," said the report.

"Over 152,000 people are employed by the PA, their salaries support approximately one million people or 25 percent of the Palestinian population."

Although the government has received pledges from other Muslim countries, the cash has yet to materialise and represents a fraction of the sums required.