

5 Nepalese soldiers killed in mine attack

AFP, Kathmandu

Five soldiers were killed Saturday when a mine accidentally exploded inside an army barracks in Nepal, a military official said.

"It was an accidental explosion due to a mine we had on the perimeter of the barracks," said the spokesman on condition of anonymity.

It was not immediately clear what set off the mine, the official said. The incident happened at a base in the district of Gulmi, some 250km west of the capital Kathmandu.

The army has been fighting a Maoist rebellion in Nepal, which started in 1996 and has left more than 12,500 people dead.

The Maoists said Thursday they were calling a ceasefire to encourage politicians to curtail King Gyanendra's power. Weeks of street protests forced him to relinquish his absolute powers and restore parliament.

Tigers, army exchange fire amid war fears

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers and the military exchanged fire across front lines yesterday, overshadowing efforts to return to long-delayed peace talks amid fears the country could slip into a renewed civil war.

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels fired shots across a northern checkpoint with government territory in the early hours of the morning, drawing small arms fire from government forces, the army said.

"We have retaliated and they have drawn back," said a military spokesman. "There were no casualties."

The exchange caps a week of the worst violence since the government and Tigers signed a Norwegian-brokered ceasefire in

2002 after two decades of fighting that killed 64,000 people.

A suicide bomb attack in the capital that killed 11 and wounded the army commander was followed by military air and artillery strikes on rebel positions in the north and east, leading many to fear the war over a homeland for minority Tamils would resume.

At a meeting of Sri Lanka's main aid donors in Oslo on Friday, mediator Norway said that despite the violence both sides remained committed to peace talks meant to take place in Geneva earlier this month.

The Tigers pulled out of the negotiations citing a dispute over transport of rebel commanders to their northern headquarters for pre-talks consultations, but the government was hopeful they might accept

a new offer of a sea plane for the transport.

"So far the reaction we have through Norway has been positive," Palitha Kohona, head of the government's peace secretariat, told Reuters.

The Tigers said they were giving the offer some thought.

"Our leadership is considering it but we have to discuss many practical things with the Norwegians," said Tiger media co-ordinator Daya Master.

The new sticking point appears to be whether the plane would land in government or rebel-controlled territory.

Even if transport arrangements can be made, analysts say the real issue is the Tigers' anger the government has not reined in a group of breakaway rebels, who truce moni-

tors say have been operating from government territory and attacking the LTTE.

The military has held off air strikes since Wednesday, the day after the suicide bombing in Colombo, and life in the north and east was returning to normal, but continuing violence was also overshadowing efforts to get back to the negotiating table.

LTTE sniper fire in the northwest region of Mannar killed an unarmed soldier late on Friday as he was bathing in a lake, the army said.

The pro-rebel Tamilnet Web site reported the army shot dead a former Tiger member in the eastern district of Batticaloa and said two cadres were killed in a claymore mine attack it blamed on the army in an LTTE-controlled part of the east.



Sri Lankan Tamil women play at the Bharti School in Trincomalee yesterday where Tamil people took refuge after their houses were burnt by Sinhalese people in an upsurge of communal violence triggered by a bomb blast at a Sinhalese market on April 12 at Selvanyagampura.

Taliban holding hostage ask Indians to leave

AFP, Kabul

Taliban militants threatened to kill an Indian engineer they were holding hostage unless all Indian nationals and companies leave Afghanistan.

A Taliban spokesman made the demand in a telephone call to AFP from an undisclosed location following the abduction of Surya Narain, who was working as a contractor for Afghan mobile phone network Roshan.

"Taliban leading council has decided that if all Indian companies, engineers and workers in Afghanistan do not get ready to leave the country in the next 24 hours, starting 18:00 pm (1330 GMT) today we will kill this Indian engineer," spokesman Yousuf Ahmadi said.

The purported spokesman also said Taliban council concluded that

the Indian engineer was spying for the Americans.

Earlier, the insurgents said the hostage was in good health.

New Delhi's ambassador to Afghanistan, Rakesh Sood, said the mission had not received any demands from the abductors.

"I think this is to be condemned. This innocent engineer is working for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. The people who make those threats and those demands are enemies of Afghanistan," Sood told AFP.

Narain was abducted in Sharjoi district of troubled southern Zabol province on the main highway linking the capital Kabul to the southern city of Kandahar, birthplace of the Taliban movement, officials said.

Thai court ruling raises chances of fresh polls

AFP, Bangkok

A Thai court ruling has fuelled speculation of new nationwide polls after months of political turmoil led Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to step aside, experts said yesterday.

The Supreme Administrative Court on Friday suspended polling in southern provinces that were supposed to fill 14 seats left vacant after controversial snap elections held earlier this month.

The court ruled that the elections had been "unconstitutionally organised," which analysts said cast doubt on their validity.

"This is an early indication of the likely nullification of the April 2 general election," political analyst Thitinan Pongsudhirak said.

"We are looking at another election," he said.

Indian Maoists kill 15 civilians

AFP, Raipur

Fifteen people kidnapped by Maoist rebels have been found dead in a forest in a Maoist-hit region of central India, police said yesterday.

The guerrillas abducted around 60 people from Dandewada district, 450km from Raipur, capital of Chhattisgarh state Tuesday.

Two of the hostages were found dead two days later and on Saturday "we recovered 13 bodies from the deep forests near a village where they appeared to have been abducted," director-general of police O.P. Rathore told AFP.

The Maoists had released the remaining hostages, he said from the site of the mass slaying.

"So far we have the information that about 37 people have been freed but we are awaiting details

about their condition," he said.

"The released villagers are in a state of shock and are unable to narrate any of their experiences while in captivity," another official, who asked not to be named, said in Dandewada where the rebels run a parallel administration.

Another eight — three men and five women — had fled their captives and had alerted police about the kidnappings, the Press Trust of India reported.

The victims were part of a government-sponsored peace campaign whose members are facing increasing rebel attacks.

Police said the guerrillas, who claim to be fighting for the rights of neglected tribes and landless farmers, regularly kidnap people as a terror tactic.

US again lashes Iran as terror sponsor

AFP, Washington

The United States on Friday again branded Iran the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism and said this made it doubly important to keep Tehran from developing nuclear weapons.

In an annual report on terrorism released the same day as a new UN assessment of Iran's nuclear activities, the State Department portrayed Iran as a troublemaker on several Middle East fronts.

"Iran remained the most active

state sponsor," the department said, keeping it at the top of a blacklist of half a dozen countries that includes Cuba, Libya, North Korea, Sudan and Syria.

The report said the Iranians were backing Palestinian militants bent on the destruction of Israel, the radical Islamist movement Hezbollah and groups in Iraq responsible for sectarian violence.

"Iran is working directly with some of the Iraqi paramilitary forces (and) militias," Henry Crumpton, the department's coordinator on counter-terrorism, told a news conference.

"They provide support, financial and otherwise."

Crumpton said some of the more lethal improvised explosive devices used by Iraqi insurgents to attack US forces came from Iran, and "our assumption is that the Iranian government was involved."

The report was issued as the International Atomic Energy Agency, the UN nuclear watchdog, declared Iran in non-compliance with a Security Council injunction to halt its sensitive work on uranium enrichment.



A man walks among carcasses of Bottlenose dolphin on a beach in Zanzibar on Friday after several hundred dolphins washed ashore. Witnesses said that at least 300 carcasses were littered across four beaches of the semi-autonomous Zanzibar archipelago on Friday morning, some 50 kilometres from the Indian ocean island's capital.

Pak military vows full control in Taliban infested tribal belt

AFP, Miranshah

The Pakistani army is in full control in the troubled tribal region of Waziristan, where 324 militants have been killed in operations over the past nine months, officials said yesterday.

The military made the claim as they accompanied a team of foreign journalists to Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan near the border with Afghanistan.

Briefing journalists at a heavily fortified military headquarters in the town, top officials said 39 "major operations" had been conducted since July last year to flush out al-Qaeda linked foreign and local militants.

Miranshah was the scene of fierce battles between pro-Taliban militants and the army in March,

which killed 145 militants including 23 foreigners, chief military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan told reporters.

He said up to 1,500 militants had attacked Miranshah and described the March 4-8 clashes as the heaviest in the region, where hundreds of Taliban and al-Qaeda militants are known to have sought refuge after fleeing Afghanistan.

In April near Miranshah, the military said it had killed senior al-Qaeda operative and explosives expert Muhsin Musa Matwalli Atwah, also known as Abdul Rehman al-Muhajir, indicted in the United States over the 1998 twin embassy bombings in east Africa.

Sultan however acknowledged that the body of the suspect had never been found.

Thousands of families displaced in Iraq

AP, Baghdad

Sectarian violence has forced about 100,000 families across Iraq to flee their homes, a top Iraqi official said, as six more Iraqis were killed in scattered violence on Saturday.

Adil Abdul-Mahdi, one of the country's two vice presidents, told reporters in the southern city of Najaf that 90 percent of the displaced were Shias like himself and the rest were Sunnis, the minority that held sway under former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Other estimates of the number of displaced families have been lower. Dr. Salah Abdul-Razzaq, spokesman of the Shia Endowment, a government body that runs Shia

religious institutions, put the number of displaced families at 13,750 nationwide, or about 90,000 people.

That includes 25,000 Iraqis who have fled their homes since the bombing of a Shia mosque in Samarra on Feb. 22 triggered a wave of attacks on Sunni mosques and clerics.

Earlier this week, US spokesman Maj. Gen. Rick Lynch told reporters that US forces had found no "wide-spread movement" of Shias and Sunnis away from religiously mixed areas, despite reports to the contrary by Iraqi officials.

In the Sunni-dominated town of Jurf al-Sakhar, 65km south of Baghdad and near the mostly Shia

city of Musayyib, gunmen kidnapped a Sunni policeman and his brother from their home early Saturday and shot them to death outside, said police Capt. Muthana Khalid.

Four Iraqis were killed in other violence.

In Ghazaliyah in west Baghdad, a roadside bomb targeting an Iraqi police patrol killed one policeman and wounded two, said police Lt. Mohammed Hanoun. Elsewhere in the capital, a drive-by shooting killed two Iraqi brothers who worked for a foreign contracting company and were walking through the eastern neighbourhood of New Baghdad, said police 1st Lt. Ali Abbas.

Pakistan test-fires missile

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan, keen to maintain the balance of power with nuclear rival India, yesterday test-fired a nuclear-capable, surface-to-surface ballistic missile with a range of 2,000 km.

Pakistan and India, which stunned the world with tit-for-tat nuclear tests in 1998, embarked on a peace process just over two years ago after going to the brink of a fourth war in mid-2002.

But Pakistan is concerned over recent US promises of high-tech aid for rival India, fearing it could help New Delhi build its defence capability.

"Pakistan today carried out a successful test fire of its long-range surface-to-surface ballistic missile Hatf VI (Shaheen II) with outstanding results," Pakistan's Inter-Services Public Relations said in a statement.



Picture shows a Pakistani nuclear-capable missile Hatf VI (Shaheen II) being test fired at an undisclosed location yesterday.

Zawahiri asks Pakistanis to remove Musharraf

AFP, Paris

al-Qaeda kept up its media offensive yesterday as its number two Ayman al-Zawahiri called on the people and army of Pakistan to fight the regime of President Pervez Musharraf.

"I call on the people of Pakistan to work to remove this traitor from power...and I call on every officer and soldier in the Pakistani army to disobey their commanders' orders to kill Muslims in Pakistan and Afghanistan," he said in a video released on a jihadi website.

In the third message from the organisation in a week Zawahiri said that "Musharraf was prepared to flee

abroad where he had bank accounts when the popular revolution breaks out."

According to the video the "message to the people of Pakistan" was recorded after the third anniversary of the fall of the regime of former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein on April 9, 2003.

It followed an audiotape broadcast on Al-Jazeera television last Sunday in which al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden called on Muslim fighters to go to Sudan to wage war against "crusader thieves" and slammed the international isolation of the Hamas-led Palestinian government.

11,000 attacks in '05

But US sees world safer

REUTERS, Washington

The US war on terrorism has made the world safer, the State Department's counterterrorism chief said on Friday, despite more than 11,000 terrorist attacks worldwide last year that killed 14,600 people.

The State Department said the numbers, listed in its annual Country Reports on Terrorism released on Friday, were based on a broader definition of terrorism and could not be compared to the

3,129 international attacks listed the previous year.

But the new 2005 figures, which showed attacks in Iraq jumped and accounted for about a third of the world's total, may fuel criticism of the Bush administration's assertion that it is winning the fight against terrorism.

Asked if the world was safer than the previous year, State Department Counterterrorism Coordinator Henry Crumpton told a news conference, "I think so. But I think that (if) you look at the ups

and downs of this battle, it's going to take us a long time to win this. You can't measure this month by month or year by year. It's going to take a lot longer."

The report said Iraq, which the US government calls a key battleground in the war on terrorism but critics call a source for violence, was not a terrorist safe haven. But it said militants such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq were working hard to make it a refuge for militants.