

Kashmir cops foil rebel raid

5 militants killed

AFP, Srinagar

Kashmiri rebels yesterday shot dead two policemen at point-blank range in Indian Kashmir's main city while a soldier and two rebels died in gunbattles, police said.

The violence came as Kashmir chief minister Ghulam Nabi Azad held a high-level meeting to review security in the revolt-hit state where peace talks are scheduled at the end of the month.

The policemen were killed while on patrol in the summer capital Srinagar.

"Militants fired at them from point-blank range, killing them on the spot," a police spokesman said. "The militants also snatched two rifles from them before fleeing from the scene."

A little-known rebel group, al Mansurain, claimed responsibility for the early-morning attack in a telephone call to local news agency Current News Service.

A soldier and two militants were killed in two gunbattles in the southern districts of Rajouri and Doda late Wednesday and Thursday, a police spokesman said.

A lone militant, meanwhile, tried to fight his way into a high-security interrogation centre in the southern town of Anantnag Thursday but police overpowered him, the spokesman said.

"He is a local militant and is being interrogated," he said, adding the man managed to fire only one shot.

Tigers sink two navy gunboats: Monitors

Lanka retaliates with air strikes, 45 killed in fighting

AFP, REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels sank two navy gunboats in separate incidents yesterday and were firing at a ferry transporting some 700 troops, a spokesman for the Scandinavian truce monitors said.

At least 15 Sri Lankan sailors and 30 Tamil Tiger rebels were killed in the fierce sea battle off the island's north, a Sri Lankan navy spokesman told AFP.

Sri Lanka's military Thursday called in aircraft to attack suspected Tamil Tiger positions after the rebels sank two navy gunboats, military sources said.

Jets were brought in after rebels sank the two gunboats in separate incidents.

The Tigers were also firing at a ferry transporting some 700 troops from the northeastern port of Trincomalee to the northern peninsula of Jaffna, official sources said.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) sank a fast attack craft escorting the MV Pearl Cruiser, which is carrying 700 soldiers off the island's north, and another gunboat at Point Pedro, Helen Olafsdottir told AFP.

"They are now attacking Pearl Cruiser and are putting the lives of our monitors in danger," Olafsdottir said, adding that members of the Scandinavian Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) had three close calls Thursday.

It was not known how many monitors were travelling aboard the ferry transporting troops.

The navy and the Tigers were also engaged in a sea-to-ground battle at Muttur where SLMM monitors had a narrow shave, Olafsdottir said, adding they were awaiting details of casualties on both sides.

"The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have committed gross violations of the ceasefire agreement in recent days by moving at sea with the aim of provoking the Sri Lankan navy," the SLMM said in a statement.

It said the "offensive operations" against the navy had placed SLMM monitors in grave danger.

"The sea surrounding Sri Lanka is a government-controlled area. This has been ruled so by the Head of the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission in line with international law.

"Non-state actors cannot rule open sea waters or airspace. The

LTTE has therefore no rights at sea," the monitors said.

They said the LTTE had also threatened SLMM monitors, warning them not to take part in patrols in navy vessels.

"The SLMM takes these threats very seriously and would like to remind the LTTE of its responsibility as an equal partner to the ceasefire agreement to do everything in its power not to jeopardise the monitors' safety.

"We therefore demand that the LTTE immediately ceases all activities and operations at sea as they are a serious violation of the ceasefire," the statement said.

"This sort of reckless behaviour can only lead to a dangerous escalation resulting in growing hostilities and jeopardising any possibility for future peace talks."

The monitors urged the government not to be pushed by these "provocative acts" and to show as much restraint as possible.

Earlier the truce monitors said they believe Sri Lankan troops are involved in killing ethnic Tamil civilians in the island's north, contrary to government denials.

The unarmed Nordic monitors

said probable Tamil Tiger rebel attacks on the military have been followed by disappearances and open killings of ethnic Tamil civilians.

"We have very strong indications that at least part of the government troops have been involved in these killings," Jouni Suninen, the Finnish ex-army officer who heads the monitors' northern Vavuniya office, told Reuters.

"The pattern is clear," he added. In one case, a civilian was killed 60 metres from an army checkpoint. The soldiers told the monitors they heard nothing.

Suninen said at least 40 people have been killed in the last month by suspected rebels, soldiers or associated groups around Vavuniya, just beyond the southern border of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) territory.

The government denies any involvement in civilian killings, which come amid fears a low intensity conflict raging despite a 2002 truce could escalate into an all out return to a two-decade civil war that killed over 64,000 people.



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) wave flags and dance outside CPI(M) headquarters in New Delhi yesterday as they celebrate their party's victory in West Bengal and Kerala state assembly elections.

Lefts to mount pressure on UPA: CPI(M)

PTI, New Delhi

Upbeat over its poll successes in West Bengal and Kerala, an aggressive CPI(M) on Thursday said it will increase pressure on the ruling UPA coalition at the Centre, which it supports from outside, to implement the policies mentioned in the Common Minimum Programme.

"We will have increased pressure and influence on the UPA alliance. Naturally, it is bound to increase after the elections results, but only for the better," Politburo member Sitaram Yechury told reporters in New Delhi.

He said the victory was a result of the faith of the people in the party and in its policies and principles.

Accusing the Election Commission for adopting "double standards" in West Bengal by ordering a five-phase poll, Yechury said, "the thumping victory was a befitting reply by the people."

"We will definitely take up the matter in Parliament," he said adding, "we cannot allow such a situation. Every other Election Commission feels that it alone can conduct free and fair polls in the country."

CPI(M) Rajya Sabha MP Brinda Karat said the poll authority cannot single out and target a particular state and then invent new rules and regulations without any basis, precedent or logic.

"EC should strengthen democratic process and not weaken it," she said.

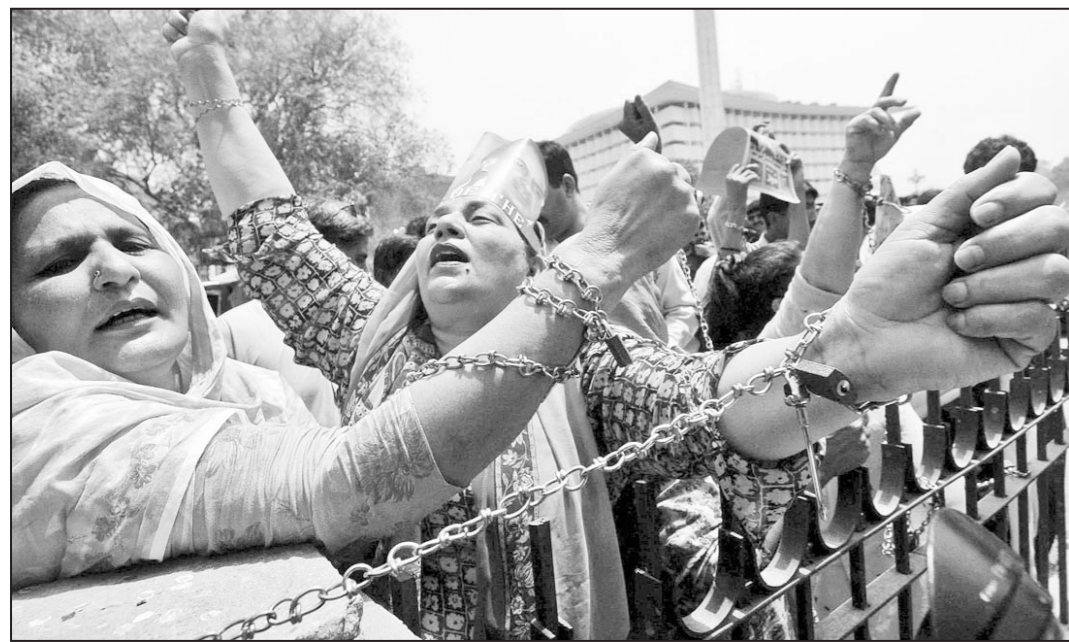


PHOTO: AFP

Arrested supporters of deposed Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif shout slogans during a protest in Lahore yesterday. They were observing the "Black Day" to denounce the deportation of Shahbaz Sharif, the opposition leader and brother of Nawaz Sharif, back to Saudi Arabia as he flew in Lahore on May 11, 2004.

Nepal sets free 2 Maoist leaders

AFP, Kathmandu

Two top rebel Maoist leaders in Nepal walked free from jail yesterday after the new government dropped murder charges against them, marking the administration's first major release of militants.

Matrika Yadhav and Suresh Ale Magar raised their fists in the air in a traditional communist salute and chanted Maoist slogans as they emerged from jail near the capital to be greeted by a crowd of around 150 supporters.

The men had wanted to await the freeing of all Maoists held in jail but came out of prison on the orders of Maoist leader Prachanda, Yadhav told reporters.

"We have come out of prison because our party chairman ordered us to do so. We wanted to

stay in jail until all the other cadres had been released," said Yadhav.

Magar praised recent moves by the new interim government but said the Maoists would continue their struggle to get rid of King Gyanendra, the world's sole Hindu monarch.

"The government moves are positive but our movement is still ongoing. The people's demands have not yet been fulfilled and the king is hatching another conspiracy," Magar told journalists waiting outside the prison gates.

Yadhav and Magar were arrested in Lucknow in northern India early in 2004 and deported to Nepal, where they were accused of the murder of a senior police officer.

They were awaiting trial at the time of their release.

Blasts kill 6 Pak cops

REUTERS, Quetta

At least six policemen were killed and 13 wounded on Thursday in five blasts at a police training school in Pakistan's troubled southwest, police and hospital sources said.

The explosions occurred in the firing range of the police training school on the outskirts of Quetta, capital of the restive

Baluchistan province.

There was still confusion over the nature of the explosive devices with some police saying they were remote-controlled bombs, while others said landmines caused the blasts.

A hospital official said six bodies and 13 wounded had been received at the hospital.