

I-DAY THREATS
Security tightened across India

AFP, Mumbai

Security was tightened across India yesterday ahead of Independence Day celebrations, amid fears of attacks by Islamic militants blamed in deadly July train bombings in Mumbai and a warning by the US of possible strikes by al-Qaeda.

The tightest controls were expected in the capital New Delhi on Tuesday when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh addresses the nation from the historic Red Fort to mark the 59th anniversary of Indian independence from British colonial rule.

Officials have declared a no-fly zone over the capital and air defences have been bolstered to guard against possible attacks from unmanned drones or microlights, the Press Trust of India said.

Temples, roads, bridges, nuclear facilities and the rail network were all guarded by troops and police ahead of India's most significant national day, that is always accompanied by tighter security.

Israel won't let Hezbollah return to south Lebanon

UN aid convoys heading to Tyre

AFP, AP, Jerusalem/ Beirut

Israeli Defence Minister Amir Peretz vowed yesterday that the Israeli army would not allow the Hezbollah militia to return to south Lebanon.

"We will operate with the utmost determination against a regrouping of Hezbollah in south Lebanon," Peretz told members of his Labour party before a parliament meeting.

"Aside from localised incidents, the ceasefire that entered into effect this morning is being respected," he said, warning that Israel would react to any violations of the truce by Hezbollah.

He spoke after the Israeli military said that its forces had killed two Hezbollah fighters in separate incidents near the strategic Litani River after the ceasefire took effect.

"If Hezbollah violates the ceasefire and the established rules, we will act with determination," Peretz said.

Peretz said that Israel would not reoccupy south Lebanon, from which it withdrew six years ago after 18 years of war and occupation.

"We have no intention of getting bogged down in the Lebanese quagmire," Peretz said.

He also defended the war effort, saying it would result in greater security for the Jewish state.

"The successes scored by the Israeli soldiers and the manner in which the principles of the UN Security Council resolution were fixed, will without a doubt contribute to a change in the situation on the northern border," he said.

"The fact that south Lebanon will be

demilitarized, the fact that Hezbollah will be forced to leave from the important zones that it controlled, all this will contribute to a return of calm to our northern border.

"We have begun making contacts with Unifil to start the transfer of control on the ground," he said, referring to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon.

"He also said the war could have a positive effect on the region.

"The fact that extremist elements have been considerably weakened reinforce moderate elements in the region," he said.

"I hope that this process will enable negotiations with the Lebanese government and will reestablish dialogue with the Palestinians," he said.

Meanwhile, two UN aid convoys

were heading to the southern port city of Tyre yesterday after Israel halted its attacks on Lebanon, the first such delivery of aid southwards for several days.

Two convoys of 24 trucks were carrying medical supplies, sanitary goods, food and water for the city, which has been virtually cut off from the rest of the country by Israeli bombardments, the United Nations said in Beirut.

The convoy, organised by the UN World Food Programme (WFP), left from the city of Sidon further north just minutes after the cessation of hostilities came into effect at 0500 GMT, it said.



Lebanese refugees carry their belongings in Jedeidet Yabus, 40 km west of Damascus as they return from Syria to Lebanon yesterday. Hundreds of Lebanese refugees braved a bombed-out road as they returned home in their cars or on foot following UN-brokered truce that took effect yesterday.



Sri Lankan army soldiers keep guard near the bombed security vehicle of Pakistan High Commissioner Bashir Wali Mohamed in Colombo yesterday. Sri Lanka was rocked by a wave of violence as a bomb targeted Pak envoy's convoy in Colombo and killed seven people, but the envoy escaped narrowly.

India suspends military drive against Ulfa

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

In a goodwill gesture, India has decided to suspend military operations "for a few days" against the banned insurgent outfit United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa) in Assam to bring the group back to negotiation table.

"We have decided to stop operations against Ulfa for a few days," said Home Secretary VK Duggal. But he quickly added that "this does not mean that forces won't respond to Ulfa's violence. Appropriate actions will be taken if they indulge in violence", he said.

The Ulfa is engaged in peace talks through intermediaries who are called People's Consultative Group comprising writers, lawyers and professionals from Assam.

The PCG was constituted by Ulfa in October last year to initiate exploratory talks with the Indian government.

Eminent Assamese writer Indira Goswami, who has been a mediator between Ulfa and the Indian government, welcomed the decision to suspend operations against Ulfa.

"We welcome this move. It's a good beginning and we hope this suspension of operations would be extended till such a time when the Ulfa leadership and the government would hold direct peace talks," she said.

The PCG and the government has so far held three rounds of talks aimed at paving the way for direct dialogue between Ulfa and the government. The first round was chaired by prime minister in Delhi on October 26.

The suspension of military operations against Ulfa meets a key demand of the insurgent group, which also wants release of five of its top leaders from Indian jail to facilitate peace talks.

The government indicated that Ulfa's demand for release of its five key leaders would be considered if the group signals its willingness for dialogue.

The government had recently warned Ulfa in the wake of some attacks on Indian security personnel in Assam allegedly by the militant group in the run up to the Indian Independence Day.

Seven die in Uzbek toilet accident

AFP, Tashkent

Seven people were killed in Uzbekistan when an effort to excavate a toilet went badly wrong, the press-uz.info Internet site said yesterday.

The accident in the southern rural province of Surkhondaryo occurred when a father and son were digging an overflow pit for an existing outdoor lavatory, the site said, citing the province's prosecutor.

As they were digging the seven-metre (23-foot) pit, the sides of the original toilet collapsed and its contents engulfed the two men.

Five neighbours then rushed to the men's aid, lowering themselves into the pit, but succumbed to poisoning caused by accumulated gas, said the pro-government Internet site.

Fresh fighting kills 17 in Afghanistan

AP, Kabul

Clashes between police and militants across southern Afghanistan killed 11 suspected Taliban and six policemen, while four Nato troops were wounded in one of two bombings Monday in the capital, Kabul.

A suicide bomber killed only himself but wounded six Afghan soldiers and a civilian in another attack in the southeast.

Afghanistan, particularly provinces near the Pakistani border, is under the grip of its deadliest spate of violence since US-led forces toppled the Taliban regime in late 2001 for harbouring Osama bin Laden.

In the mountains of southern Helmand province, a clash left 11 suspected Taliban and two policemen dead, said deputy provincial governor Amir Mohammed Akhuzanda.

One policeman was wounded in the attack while three militants were arrested, he said.

Insurgents killed four more police officers who were racing to help a local official ambushed by militants in the southeastern Ghazni province, said Abdul Ali Fakuri, spokesman for the provincial governor.

The militants stole one police vehicle and the weapons of the slain policemen during the clash in the Giro district, Fakuri said.

Other Afghan and US-led coalition forces rescued the district government chief, who was unharmed, Fakuri said.

In neighboring Paktika province, a suicide car bomber in a taxi targeted Afghan troops shopping in a bazaar, wounding six soldiers and one civilian, said Sayed Jamal, the provincial governor's spokesman. The bomber drove to within 40 yards of the soldiers in Barmal district before his vehicle exploded.

Britain, US lower terror threat level

Key suspects in custody, attack not imminent

AFP, London

Britain and the United States lowered alert levels a notch yesterday and lifted some restrictions for air passengers after British officials said they were holding the main suspects in an alleged al-Qaeda plot.

But the authorities here warned that the threat of an attack had not disappeared and admitted that there would be confusion at airports as officials there grappled with the new security measures.

The British government early Monday downgraded the alert level to "severe," the fourth highest of five levels, from an unprecedented "critical," where it had stood since it announced Thursday it had foiled a major plot.

Following the British decision, the US Department of Homeland Security announced it was downgrading the threat level for inbound

flights from Britain to "code orange" from "code red," its highest security risk alert.

On Thursday, British authorities arrested two dozen men suspected of plotting to smuggle volatile chemicals on to several passenger jets headed for the United States with the intent to set off explosions in mid-flight.

Britain's Home Secretary John Reid said that the threat of attack was no longer imminent as police "believe that the main suspects in the alleged plot were arrested last week."

But he warned that an attack remained "highly likely" as police investigated other suspected plots.

Transport Secretary Douglas Alexander said the new security picture meant that passengers would now be able to take aboard one item of hand luggage, though a ban on non-essential liquids and gels would remain in place.



Pakistani girls hold national flags as they sing national songs during the Independence Day celebrations in Islamabad yesterday.