

Israel kills five Palestinians in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

The Israeli army killed five Palestinians, including a civilian, in Gaza yesterday as it kept up a two-month offensive in the coastal strip, hospital officials said.

Sabet Edwan, 22, was killed by Israeli tank fire near the southern city of Rafah, they said.

Earlier in the day, four Palestinians, including two Hamas militants and two members of president Mahmud Abbas's presidential guard, were killed in Gaza City's eastern Shejaya neighborhood.

Palestinian security officials said the four were killed by an Israeli drone. The Israeli army said two were killed in exchange of fire with troops and two in an air strike.

Medics discovered the body of another Palestinian, Fathi Abu al-Qumbarz, 50, at his home in Shejaya.

Abu al-Qumbarz had been wounded by automatic gunfire while inside his home during Israeli operations in the area on Saturday, hospital officials said.



PHOTO: AFP

A wounded Sri Lankan soldier is rushed to a hospital in the northern Sri Lankan town of Vavuniya yesterday after a suspected Tamil Tiger gunman opened fire on soldiers in the main town. The attack in Vavuniya came as at least 11 Sri Lankan soldiers were killed and another 79 wounded in heavy exchanges of artillery and mortar fire yesterday in the strategic port district of Trincomalee.

Lanka launches ground offensive to secure port

11 soldiers, 20 civilians killed in fighting

AFP, Colombo

At least 11 Sri Lankan troops and 20 civilians were killed during a ground and air offensive yesterday to push back guerrilla artillery threatening a strategic naval port, officials and hospital sources said.

Troops backed by multi-barrel rocket launchers and artillery guns moved towards the rebel-held town of Sampur at the southern edge of the Koddiyar bay where the main naval port of Trincomalee is located, officials said.

"A ground offensive was launched this morning and troops are moving towards Sampur," a military source said. "Troops are expecting close quarter fighting, but the casualties so far had been due to artillery and mortar bombs."

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said 20 civilians

were killed and another 26 wounded in air and artillery attacks.

"Twenty civilians have died so far and 26 have been injured," the LTTE said in a statement. It did not say if the Tigers suffered casualties in the latest fighting.

The military casualties were taken to three hospitals in Trincomalee district as well as neighbouring Polonnaruwa district, doctors said, adding that most of the victims had shrapnel wounds.

Military sources said 79 soldiers were being treated in two of the hospitals.

Government forces pounded Tiger gun positions at Sampur, at the southern edge of the Koddiyar bay where the Trincomalee port is located. Officials said the Tigers were firing back with artillery and mortars.

"The Sri Lanka army has

launched a two-pronged offensive towards LTTE-controlled Sampur with the support of heavy artillery fire since Monday early morning," the Tamilnet reported. It gave no details of casualties.

The defence ministry said the offensive was launched Monday after the Tigers fired mortar bombs and small arms at security forces.

Three civilians were killed elsewhere in Trincomalee following a land mine explosion, which was probably meant for soldiers, a local official said.

Another soldier was shot dead by suspected Tiger rebels in the northern town of Vavuniya Monday, the defence ministry said.

The Vavuniya shooting came as troops mounted the attack against Sampur, a highly strategic location used by the LTTE to hit the Trincomalee naval port and the

nearby military airport.

A military official in Trincomalee, 260km northeast of the capital, said the latest offensive was part of a move to secure local military facilities against long-range attacks by the Tigers.

Trincomalee, which was a staging post for Allied forces during the two world wars, has an oil storage facility that provides energy security to the nation of 19.5 million people.

The oil tank farm is also within striking distance from Sampur, less than 10km from the Trincomalee naval facility across the Koddiyar bay. The port was hit by Tiger artillery this month.

The Tigers launched a major offensive against military camps in and around the Muslim-majority town of Muttur, southeast of Sampur earlier this month.

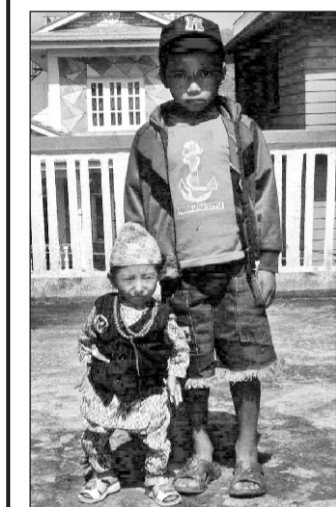


PHOTO: AFP

Undated handout picture released by the Khagendra Foundation shows fourteen-year-old Nepali boy Khagendra Thapa Magar (L) standing with another boy at his home in the Banglung district in northwest Nepal. A 14-year-old Nepali boy who is only 50 centimetres (20 inches) tall has been put forward for a Guinness world record as the world's smallest person. He weighs only 4.5 kilograms and will be taken on tour round Nepal to raise money for his upkeep.

Pak court orders release of LeT founder Saeed

REUTERS, Islamabad

The detention of a former leader of a banned Islamist militant group was declared illegal by a Pakistan court yesterday and his release ordered, the court and his lawyer said.

Hafiz Mohammad Saeed, the founder and former leader of the Lashkar-e-Taiba militant group, was placed under house arrest in the eastern city of Lahore on Aug. 10.

Authorities said he was detained because of fears his activities could disrupt law and order.

The decision to hold him had nothing to do with an investigation into a plot foiled in London this month to blow up airliners over the Atlantic, Pakistan said.

The Lahore high court said on Monday the government had failed to produce evidence to justify Saeed's detention, his lawyer, Nazir Ahmed Ghazi, told Reuters.

"The court found his detention illegal and ordered the authorities to immediately release him," Ghazi said.

A court official confirmed the ruling.

Saeed resigned almost five years ago from Lashkar-e-Taiba, a group active in fighting Indian security forces in India's part of the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir.

Iran rejects US warning as nuke deadline nears

AFP, Tehran

Iran yesterday angrily rejected a US threat to impose sanctions over its contested nuclear programme outside the United Nations as the clock ticked down to a crunch UN deadline for Tehran to suspend sensitive atomic work.

With arch-enemy Israel warning that Iran's uranium enrichment must be stopped for the sake of "world peace", a Thursday deadline neared for Iran to suspend the controversial nuclear activity or face possible sanctions.

US ambassador to the UN John Bolton said that while Washington was confident of securing a UN consensus over Iran, it was prepared to act unilaterally if a resolution against Tehran was not accepted by Beijing and Moscow.

"Such statements are a blatant insult to the United Nations and the Security Council. They stem from bullying and a lack of principles," government spokesman Gholam Hossein Elham told reporters.

Bolton told the Los Angeles Times newspaper late last week that "everybody's been on board" on the Security Council over Iran but in case Russia and China did not accept any resolution, the United States was working on a parallel diplomatic track.

"You don't need Security Council authority to impose sanctions, just as we have," Bolton said,

referring to the raft of economic sanctions the United States imposed on Tehran in the wake of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

Elham scoffed that the comments showed "such people do not deserve to be a member to this council and the organization should reconsider to save its reputation and show it is not an instrument in their hands."

"The ones who sacrifice international law for their greed, dominance and unilateralism better be worried," he said.

The UN Security Council has given Iran an August 31 deadline to suspend all uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities and an impasse looms with Iran insisting it has no intention of abandoning such work.

The Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is to issue a report on that date after verifying whether Tehran has complied with the deadline.

But Iran has also made clear it remains keen to hold talks with all the key players over its nuclear ambitions, including even its foe the United States.

"Iran is ready to hold discussions with the foreign ministers of the five permanent Security Council members and Germany, wherever and whenever," chief nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani said late Sunday.

Suicide blast in Afghan bazaar kills 17

Taliban kill 5, kidnap 4 others

AFP, Kandahar/ Herat

A suicide blast tore through a crowded bazaar in a town in southern Afghanistan yesterday, killing 17 people, a provincial government spokesman said.

Witnesses in the Helmand province town of Lashkar Gah told AFP a man with bombs strapped to his body had grabbed hold of a prominent businessman who was also a former police chief and detonated the explosives.

The businessman, Khan Mohammad, was among those killed, they said.

"A suicide bomber detonated inside a crowded market in Lashkar Gah," Helmand government spokesman Haji Muhaidin Khan told AFP.

"As a result 17 people were martyred, 47 were wounded. Fifteen among the wounded are kids," he said.

Khan blamed the attack on the "enemies of Afghanistan", a term Afghan officials usually use to refer to fighters with the extremist Taliban movement that is waging an insurgency that sees regular suicide bombings.

Khan Mohammad was the Helmand police chief during communist rule in the 1980s.

"He had no personal feud with anyone and he was not a political figure now. He was just busy in his

business, but the enemies of Afghanistan killed him," the government spokesman said.

The Nato-led force that commands international troops in southern Afghanistan, which has a base in Lashkar Gah, confirmed there was a blast but had no details.

In Herat, Taliban fighters attacked a police post in western Afghanistan, killing two policemen and three civilians and abducting another four people, police said Monday.

The insurgents drove up to the post in a town in Farah province in six pick-up trucks on Sunday and attacked, provincial police chief Sayed Agha Saqib told AFP.

The attackers killed two police officers, two shopkeepers and a customs office employee, he said. Rebels also took away four civilians, two of them customs workers, Saqib said.

The attack was in the province's Jawand district on the border with the troubled Helmand province -- an area hard hit by a wave of violence by remnants of the Taliban regime toppled in late 2001 as well as opium runners.

The district also shares a long border with Afghanistan's western neighbour Iran.

The police chief could not say how many Taliban casualties there were in the clash.



PHOTO: AFP

An Indian soldier carries a child as flood victims disembark from a rescue boat in the village of Kawas in Barmer District, some 400kms from Jaipur Sunday. At least 150 people were killed and dozens more are missing in massive floods caused by monsoon rains that have swamped the normally drought-prone desert state of Rajasthan.

Floods turn Rajasthan desert area into 'sea'

REUTERS, AFP, Jaipur

Monsoon rains and flooding have killed at least 150 people in Rajasthan, officials said yesterday, with huge swathes of desert underwater.

Tens of thousands of people have been displaced in Barmer, a sprawling district that borders Pakistan and is known for its sand dunes and widely spread villages. Dozens of people are missing.

"The desert looks like a sea. There is no place where one can walk," Captain Saurabh Modi, an

army officer who is involved in relief operations in Barmer, told Reuters by telephone.

Hundreds of people marooned on sand dunes, surrounded by over 15 feet (5 metres) of water, were being rescued by military helicopters and motorised navy dinghies.

Most of the deaths in Rajasthan in the week-long flooding were caused by drowning and house collapses.

"Several bodies are being fished out from the swirling waters," Rajasthan Relief Secretary R.K. Meena said.

A layer of gypsum below the sandy surface is preventing brownish flood waters from seeping into the ground in the region, slowing down relief efforts. Gypsum is a mineral used in the building industry.

"If the flood water does not drain, we will have to puncture the gypsum layer," said a senior government official.

Hundreds of desperate villagers scrambled for food packets dropped by helicopters. Many whose homes have been flooded or collapsed are living huddled in tents of plastic sheets.

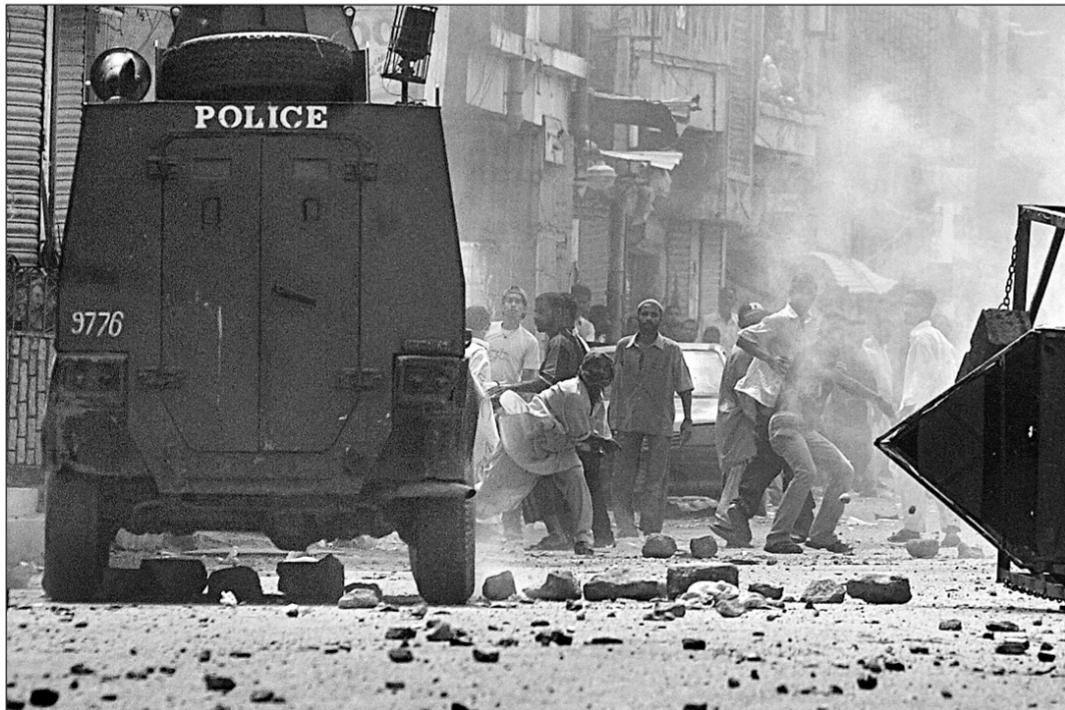


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani protesters throw stones towards the police during a protest in Karachi yesterday against the killing of tribal chief Nawab Akbar Bugti. Rioters in Pakistan went on the rampage for a second day, ransacking buildings to protest the killing of a tribal leader in a military assault.

48 dead as water tank collapses in India

AFP, Jaipur

At least 48 people were killed and dozens injured in western India on Sunday when a large water tank they climbed on to watch a village wrestling match gave way, police and officials said.

Senior police official Bhopinder Singh said the death toll was expected to rise with some of the 45 injured in serious condition.

Officials at Kama village, 400km from Jodhpur in Rajasthan had tried in vain to stop people climbing on the tank, he added.

Rajasthan state home minister Gulab Singh Kataria told AFP that about 200 people had clambered on to the tank to watch the wrestling match, which was part of a village fair.

"My officials tell me that 48 people have been killed in the accident," he said.

The Press Trust of India news agency said the incident triggered panic among the thousands of people who had gathered for the fair.

'Bugti killing to radicalise anti-Pakistan insurgency'

AFP, Islamabad

The killing of a prominent rebel chief in Pakistan's southwestern province of Baluchistan is a blunder that will likely radicalise the insurgency in the energy-rich region, analysts said yesterday.

Nawab Akbar Bugti, who had been leading a violent struggle against the central government over the region's natural resources, was killed in a military strike Saturday in the restive province.

The killing sparked deadly rioting in Baluchistan over the weekend, and analysts warned there could be more trouble on the horizon.

"It's a blunder and a disaster. It creates more problems than it solves," political analyst Talat

Masood told AFP.

"His death has turned him into a martyr and people will idolise him. Youths particularly may derive inspiration from him and turn rebellious," Masood, who is a retired military general, said.

"It will fuel Baluch nationalism and aggravate it."

The general said that there was no military solution to the problems of resource-rich Baluchistan, where a rebellion has simmered over the past two years.

"You have to address it politically and through the development of the Baluch people and integrate them into the national mainstream," he said.

Others analysts said any relief felt by President Pervez Musharraf over Bugti's elimination would likely

be short-lived.

"In the long run it is going to create more problems for President Musharraf," political analyst and a former professor of political science Hassan Askari told AFP.

"His (Musharraf's) problems have increased with this incident. There are already troubles with India and problems in Waziristan," Askari said.

Pakistan has fought three wars with nuclear-armed rival India and their two-year peace process is at stand-still, while 80,000 Pakistani troops are deployed in tribal areas bordering Afghanistan to combat pro-Taliban and al-Qaeda militants.

Askari said the already alienated people of Baluchistan could try to assert themselves and further radicalise the insurgency.

PAK TRIBAL LEADER'S KILLING Rioting goes on

AP, Quetta

Mobs burned shops, banks and buses in a second day of rioting over the killing of a top tribal chief by Pakistani troops, raising fears that a decades-old conflict in the country's volatile southwest could widen.

Former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif told Pakistani television that Nawab Akbar Bugti's death Saturday was "the darkest chapter in Pakistan's history."

Police arrested 450 people for rioting, but the violence spread from Baluchistan province into neighbouring Sindh province, where ethnic Baluchis burned tires in Pakistan's largest city, Karachi.

Political leaders and analysts feared the killing of Bugti, an urbane former interior minister who led a decades-long violent campaign for greater rights for ethnic Baluch

tribespeople, could influence more young Pakistanis to take up militancy.

Pakistani authorities accused Bugti, 79, of ordering attacks on vital government infrastructure to win more royalties for natural gas, oil and coal extracted from Pakistan's most impoverished region, Baluchistan.

Talaat Masood, a former army general, described Bugti's death as a "great tragedy" that will further divide ordinary Pakistanis from the military, led by President Gen. Pervez Musharraf, who has allied his government with Washington over strong opposition from many Pakistanis.

"It is very dangerous when we are already fighting (al-Qaeda) terrorists in Pakistan to bring about another reason for radicalising the youth," Masood said.