

Sectarian 'war' in Pak Punjab continues

LAHORE, Pak, May 7: The Pakistan authorities have been unable to halt an increasingly murderous religious battle between rival Muslim groups in Punjab province, reports AFP.

Ashraf Marth, chief of police in Punjab and brother-in-law of Interior Minister Shujaat Hussain, was the latest victim, shot dead Tuesday by unidentified gunmen.

His killing at Gujranwala 40 kilometres north of Lahore, was blamed on the sectarian "war" between the extremist groups, the *Sunni Sipah-i-Sahaba* (army of the followers of the Prophet, SSP) and the *Shia Sipah-i-Mohammed* (army of Mohammed, SMP).

On Monday, two leaders of the Shia group *Tehrik-i-Jafria*, from Lahore and Faisalabad, were killed.

Azim Tariq, head of the SSP, was arrested late Tuesday in Lahore by a police anti-terrorism unit. Police confirmed the arrest was linked to Marth's killing.

This violence across Punjab, the country's most populated province, shortly before the Shiite holy month of *Moharram*, has sparked serious concern amongst politicians.

As a result the government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, head of the Pakistan Muslim League, said recently it will take action against extremist groups.

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has offered the government its support against these groups, who have until now enjoyed considerable impunity.

According to human rights organisations the religious groups enjoy high-level political and administrative protection.

"Those who want to act are afraid of being eliminated by those groups who back away from no one," an official from a human rights group said.

The army is considered the only source of stability in a country which has had a chaotic political life since its creation in 1947.

Nepalese Maoist rebels step up terror attacks

KATHMANDU, May 7: Nepalese Maoist guerrillas have stepped up terror attacks which have scared off candidates for local elections this month, reports AFP.

One candidate was hacked to death on Tuesday and following threats from the Nepal Communist Party-Maoist (NCP-M) group all have withdrawn in around 46 villages.

More than 110 people, including 70 extreme left-wing militants, have been killed since the NCP-M launched a "people's war" last February in 11 remote northern and western districts.

Dhruva Kumar Pradhan, the Inspector General of Police, said there were an estimated 5,000 extremists, "with at least 100 hardcore activists in each of the villages in the affected districts."

The NCP-M is now targeting local council elections to be held this month throughout the Himalayan Kingdom.

The latest victim was Bal Bahadur Pun, a Nepali Congress (NC) candidate running for the Vice-Chairmanship in Pokhara village in Rukum district, 375 kilometres (234 miles) west of Kathmandu.

The Home Ministry said Pun was "hacked to death... to scare the voters."

Guerrillas have distributed leaflets threatening "severe" action against anyone who contests the election.



Israeli President Ezer Weizman (L) talks to reporters while Palestinian President Yasser Arafat smiles during their meeting at the Erez checkpoint north of the Gaza Strip on Tuesday. Weizman and Arafat met to discuss the stalled peace process between Palestinians and Israelis. Arafat announced that his Palestinian Authority would resume security cooperation with Israel after a two-month break. — AFP/UNB photo

Arafat, Weizman pledge to restore security contacts

BRAZ CROSSING, May 7: Israeli President Ezer Weizman and PLO leader Yasser Arafat pledged on Tuesday to restore security contacts but their meeting failed to jolt the ailing peace process out of seven weeks of crisis, reports Reuter.

The meeting, only the second high level Israeli-PLO contact in nearly two months of deadlock, came as Israel's closest Arab peace partner Jordan snubbed Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a dispute over water.

Weizman, whose post is largely ceremonial, said after meeting Arafat at the Israel-Gaza border the Palestinian president had agreed "to bring about a resumption of talks between security chiefs of the Palestinian Authority and our security chiefs."

"This point was agreed upon hope that it will begin operating within a few days," Weizman told reporters.

But PLO leaders said the

meeting had done nothing to resolve the crisis sparked by Israel starting work on a Jewish settlement in Arab east Jerusalem in March, adding that security talks would only be held with US officials present.

"None of the basic issues were resolved during the meeting, we clarified and insisted... that resumption of negotiations will not take place before full cessation of settlement activities," senior PLO negotiator Yasser Abed Rabbo told Reuters.

"Weizman insisted on restoring coordination. We have agreed on meetings at the security level that will be attended by the Americans," he said.

An aide to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dismissed the PLO agreement to hold security meetings with a US presence as "cosmetic".

"Saying a crackdown on 'terror'. Not meetings was needed to put peace moves back on track.

"We are not talking about the kind of business that can be conducted in a set of meetings, with or without the Americans... they need to crack down, Netanyahu's communications aide David Bar-Illan told Reuters.

"Perhaps this is merely a face-saving way of saying they will return to cooperation," he said.

Palestinians have turned to Weizman in the past to press the right-wing Netanyahu to show flexibility. Weizman, an architect of Israel's 1979 peace treaty with Egypt, has no formal power.

A PLO official said Arafat rebuffed a request by Weizman to meet with Netanyahu.

In an earlier snub of the Israeli leader, Jordan said it called off a meeting between crown Prince Hassan and Netanyahu after a spat over water supplies that Israel promised Jordan.



Top model Caprice wears a design by Emma Bassnett recycled from denim jeans bleached and dyed orange, and matching platform shoes, covered in denim, inspired by detailing on denim jeans Tuesday in the Recycled Fashion Show to aid cancer research at the American College in London. — AFP/UNB photo

US defence secy will press Congress to close more bases

WASHINGTON, May 7: Defence Secretary William Cohen will press Congress to close more domestic military bases and approve up to 2 billion dollars in extra funds for missile defence in a major defence strategy report this month, the Pentagon said on Tuesday, reports Reuter.

"He will seek additional base closures," Pentagon spokesman Ken Bacon told reporters following warnings from Cohen that more base closures were needed to catch up with US troop cuts made since the end of the cold war.

Other defence officials told Reuters privately that Cohen will seek two new rounds of politically painful base closings in 1999 and 2001 and would propose a minimal cut of 60,000 troops in the 1.4 million-member US armed forces.

Defence officials confirmed a Washington post report that Cohen had decided to recommend some reduction in numbers in planned jet fighter programmes for the air forces and navy, but gave no details of the cuts.

The newspaper also said Cohen would propose shrinking the navy's fleet.

Unprecedented growth of minority populations in China

Suman Guha Mozumder writes from New York

A little known demographic fact about China is the unprecedented growth of its minority populations, including Muslims, in the last decade, according to a leading Chinese scholar.

Dr. Dru Gladney, a senior research fellow at the East West Centre and associate professor of Asian Studies at the University of Hawaii, said the population of minorities recognised by the Chinese government rose from 70 million in 1980 to 91 million in 1990.

"This 35 per cent growth of minorities, against 10 per cent of the majority population, in the last 10 to 12 years has been made possible due to preferential treatment given to minorities, like enhanced opportunities for political office, exemption from the one-child norm and various other government policies," he said.

Delivering a lecture at the Asia Society here, Dr Gladney said that while talking about Chinese nationalities, one often forgot how diverse China was.

"There are 56 nationalities and 20 million Muslims spread across the country," he said.

Seeking to dispel media perceptions of Chinese Muslims as separatists and instigators of violence, he said "One hears about Muslim separatism in China these days, but it is not altogether true."

He explained that there were three kinds of Muslims in China - the Hui, the largest group that is widely dispersed; the Uyghur, who are concentrated only in the northwestern region, and the Kazakh, who are basically nomads.

The Huis, who have a hybrid past and identity, have no language of their own and speak Chinese. "They have to learn the Koran through Chinese," Dr Gladney noted.

For over 1,200 years, he said, much religious and cultural interaction has taken place among the Huis and majority Chinese.

For example, he said, they have married Chinese women and their mosques have a Tibetan-style structure and prayer halls.

"Huis, like other Muslims, are deeply embedded in Chinese culture," he continued. "Their hybridity reflects in their art and architecture."

— *India Abroad News Service*

Anti-Taliban soldiers launch massive attack

JEBUL SIRAJ, May 7: Anti-Taliban soldiers launched a massive pre-dawn offensive Tuesday outside this deserted town at the mouth of the strategic Salang Highway that links Kabul to northern Afghanistan, reports AP.

Opposition troops made some initial gains, according to the Taliban Islamic militia, but were later driven back into the surrounding mountains.

"This is the first time since February the opposition alliance launched an offensive," said Hassan Gul, a Taliban soldier at Jebul Siraj, about 85 kilometres (50 miles) north of the beleaguered Afghan capital.

"But our forces succeeded in pushing them back to the mountains around the town," he said.

Jebul Siraj was the headquarters of Kabul's former military chief Ahmed Shah Massoud, until Taliban troops drove him into the Panjshir Valley several months ago.

The town's 20,000 residents were forced to relocate to Kabul by Taliban troops who feared they may still be loyal to Massoud. The 300 shops along the town's dusty main street were closed, except for a lone cigarette vendor who scurried for cover when the fighting began Tuesday.

The Taliban militia, which controls two-thirds of Afghanistan, is battling a northern-based coalition led by Uzbek warlord Rashid Dostum and Massoud.

Massoud's forces swept out of the Panjshir Valley to Jebul Siraj, some 60 kilometres (36 miles) away. Scrambling over nearby mountains to wage their offensive on Jebul Siraj, Massoud's troops fired medium range rockets and missiles on the town below.

For much of Tuesday morning both sides exchanged heavy artillery and long range rocket fire.

Gul said the Taliban captured 12 of Massoud's soldiers, but he couldn't give casualty figures for either side.

Off the Record

Too much punctual

NICOSIA: A Cypriot airline pilot with 153 passengers aboard landed at the wrong airport rather than fly on an extra 10 minutes because it was the end of his shift, an airline spokesman said here, reports AFP.

The Cyprus Airways spokesman said that pilot Heraclis Phoullis had stuck by union regulations to apply strictly the working hours laid down in an agreement with management.

Phoullis, flying in from Zurich on Monday evening, landed at Paphos in eastern Cyprus rather than do the extra 150 kilometres (90 miles) to Laraca in the south because his shift was at an end.

The passengers were taken on by bus, said spokesman Tassos Anghelis, adding that an inquiry had been opened because the union to which Phoullis belonged calculated working hours differently than laid down in international standards.

Letter collector mailman!

MANILA: Authorities have discovered about 10,000 opened pieces of mail, including love letters and Christmas and birthday cards from overseas, in the former home of a mailman, an official said Tuesday, reports AP.

"This is the greatest crime a mailman can commit. It's very, very inhuman," said Carlos Caabay, the National Bureau of Investigation's regional director in eastern Camarines Sur province.

Caabay said a tip led to the discovery of the letters, hidden in a large plastic container in a house in Naga City, the provincial capital, formerly rented by mail carrier Ronillo Caubang.

He said Caubang is a son of a former provincial postmaster and has been a mail carrier for eight years.

The mail, taken over a five-year period, had been opened and valuables inside apparently had been removed, Caabay said.

Mail theft is frequent in the Philippines. Mail from overseas is a particular target, and often arrives partially open.

But the latest find, weighing about 120 kilograms (265 pounds), is thought to be the biggest in the Philippines in recent years.

About 2,000 of the items were registered letters from Filipinos in the United States, Japan and the Middle East containing pictures, taped messages and songs, greeting cards and probably money for families and friends, Caabay said.

He said the signatures of addresses were falsified on post office log books to make it appear that the mail had been delivered.

Doctor for help assist suicide!

DETROIT: Dr Jack Kevoorkian kept up his campaign for doctor-assisted suicide, helping a woman with multiple sclerosis kill herself. She was his third suicide in eighth days, reports AP.

Patricia Smith, a 40-year-old nurse from Lee's summit, Missouri, suffered from "rapidly progressing multiple sclerosis," said Kevoorkian's lawyer, Geoffrey Fieger.

Her husband, police officer David Smith, and her father, James Poland, also were there when she died.

Fieger said, although Kevoorkian was alone when he wheeled her body into Pontiac Osteopathic Hospital.

Her death on Thursday came two days after the lethal injection of Louise Siebens, 76, of McKinney, Texas, who suffered from Lou Gehrig's disease.

BRIEFLY

Taiwanese PM offers resignation:

Taiwanese premier Lien Chan has offered to resign over deteriorating social order but was asked yesterday by President Lee Teng-hui to stay on, the state-funded Central News Agency (CNA) reported, AFP says from Taipei.

Lien, who is also vice president, offered to quit as premier Sunday following a mass demonstration by over 50,000 people demanding that he step down over a recent wave of unsolved murders including that of a teenage girl, the CNA said.

93 Kurdish guerillas killed:

The army killed 68 Kurdish guerillas trying to infiltrate Turkey from northern Iraq, regional officials said Tuesday, AP reports from Diyarbakir, Turkey.

Another 25 Kurdish rebels were killed near the town of Silvan in southeastern Diyarbakir province, according to the regional governor's office. A total of 12 soldiers were reportedly killed in the two clashes, which took place Monday.

DPRK postpones missile talks with US:

Citing "technical reasons," North Korea has called off talks scheduled for next week that were to deal with American concerns the Pyongyang government is providing missile technology to Iran and Syria, AP reports from Washington.

Also on the agenda where reports North Korea is preparing to deploy long-range Rodong I missiles that may be capable of hitting South Korea and much of Japan.

Blast kills 4 in Algiers:

A powerful car bomb exploded Tuesday near two schools in an Algiers neighborhood, killing four people and wounding 25, including children, officials said, AP reports from Algiers.

It was not immediately known how many of the victims were children or whether children were among the dead. The car was packed with explosives and pieces of metal, security forces said. The explosion, just before noon, blew out windows in buildings up to 300 meters away.

NATO-Russia talks end

LUXEMBOURG, May 7: NATO and Russia ended talks on Tuesday on a new post-cold war relationship without an accord, but saying "some progress had been made," NATO said in a statement, reports Reuter.

The statement said the two sides, represented by alliance secretary-general Javier Solana and Russian Foreign Secretary Yevgeny Primakov, had agreed to "intensify negotiations in order to reach agreement at the earliest possible date."

The bland statement, agreed by both Primakov and Solana, made no mention of a new meeting ahead of a planned NATO-Russia summit to adopt the agreement in Paris on May 27. It also did not say in what areas the progress had been made.

Russia has been demanding strict curbs on any military activities in any new member states likely to be admitted to the alliance from former communist Europe, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic are the favourites to be admitted at a special enlargement summit in Madrid next July.

The Western allies want a charter or "document" which gives Moscow a permanent consultative role with its old cold war enemy, to form the centre-piece of a new security order in Europe for the 21st century.

NATO says such demands are out of the question because such issues are a matter of sovereignty.



(L-R) Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and Dutch Foreign Affairs Minister Hans van Mierlo share a funny moment prior to the first session of the State Parties of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), Tuesday in The Hague. — AFP/UNB photo

Annan opens conference on chemical weapons ban

THE HAGUE, May 7: Countries who signed the new chemical arms treaty now in effect began the painstaking task Tuesday of hammering out ways to enforce the ban on killer poisons, reports AP.

"One of the most monstrous tools of warfare has been ruled intolerable. You have been summoned by history and you have answered its call," UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan told delegates from many of the 88 nations that have ratified the Chemical Weapons Convention.

"It is not merely a gray step in the cause of disarmament and nonproliferation. It is not merely a signal of restraint and discipline in war," Annan said. "It is much more. It is a momentous act of peace."

The goal of the three-week conference, the first gathering of all treaty members: Find ways to make sure the treaty meets its goal of forever eliminating the threat of deadly chemical warfare.

Although 165 countries have signed the treaty, which took effect last month, only 88 have ratified it. The United States, which signed on in 1993, ratified it just two weeks ago.

Having the treaty as "a landmark agreement," Annan on Tuesday called on all other nations that haven't signed to do so.

"While the ratification process worldwide has gained new momentum, I urge that all the signatories — indeed all 185 members of the United Nations — finish the job that has begun and join the community of ratifying states," he said.

"To all I say: Be patient and stay determined."

The international convention prohibits the use, production, stockpiling and transfer of chemical weapons.

Five in 100,000 worldwide die due to firearms misuse: Survey

R Senthilnathan writes from Vienna

A 15-year-old Austrian school boy demonstrated easily what an international expert team had tried to prove just hours earlier in a more complicated fashion - that almost every country has a problem with firearms.

Experts at the ongoing U.N. Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice here said governments have to improve their existing record-keeping, firearm issuing and storage systems to tackle the problem of widespread misuse ending in several suicides and murders.

The Austrian boy, armed with his father's pistol, ran amok in his school near here, killing a teacher and seriously wounding a student. He was later arrested and police said the girl claimed he was angry that boys were not interested in him.

The expert team presented its conclusions and recommendations after analysing answers to a detailed questionnaire prepared by a group of international experts on behalf of the U.N. The questionnaire was prepared to conduct the first ever global survey on firearms.

Not all countries possess accurate information about deaths caused by firearms, but generally about five people per 100,000 fall victim to firearms - either through suicide or murder - every year, the survey found.

The results, which were presented at the convention, are preliminary and the final results, along with their recommendations are to be submitted at the end of this year, said Mr James Hayes, who is coordinating the project.

A total of 46 countries, representing 3.7 billion people or nearly two-thirds of the world population, have so far sent in their responses, said Mr Hayes, who is co-ordinator of the Firearm Control Task Force of the Canadian justice department. Seven countries in Asia - China, India, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam - have so far answered the questionnaire, he said.

Experts said the geographic distribution of the 46 countries means they are not truly representative for the world, but that they do nevertheless demonstrate the increasing problem of firearms.

The background for the survey was the Global Congress on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice held in Cairo two years ago. Towards the latter part of 1995, the first serious work on the survey was started by the U.N. office dealing with crime issues - the Vienna-based Division of Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice.

The two kinds of firearms were "long guns" and "hand-guns". The former includes rifles and shotguns while the latter is any firearm with a short stock that is designed to be held and fired by a single hand. Landmines and other armaments were excluded from the scope of the survey, which covered only civilian owned firearms.

It found that most countries allow ownership of firearms for hunting, target shooting, collection and protection of persons and property.

Luxembourg and Malaysia totally prohibit the possession, export and import of long guns and handguns. In the Czech Republic and Romania there are no restrictions at all while in India there are certain restrictions.

The survey found that the availability of firearms ranges from 0.1 per 1,000 people in Uganda to 411 per 1,000 in Finland, where half the households own at least one firearm. Just over 40 per cent of U.S. households possess firearms while in Malaysia it is less than one per cent. No figures are available for India.

If firearms regulations in any country are already weak, matters are made worse by the increasing illegal manufacture, import and export of guns, the survey found. Respondents indicated that illegal firearms manufacturing and transportation often covered two to three countries before the firearms were confiscated by law enforcing agencies.

Singapore reported it had no problem in the illegal firearms area while Brazil and Germany reported they have a serious problem here. India said it has problems with illegally imported firearms very often but none with illegal exports. It also reported problems with the illicit manufacture of firearms.

The experts' group expects work to be done in the coming years on a model agreement to combat illicit trafficking in firearms and extend the scope of the survey to include explosives. A number of regional meetings on the issue are scheduled and India has already offered to hold the Asian regional meet.

However, fighting firearms is not an easy battle. In many countries firearms manufacturers and users have strong lobbies. Organisations like the U.S. National Rifle Association (NRA), which holds a consultative status at the U.N. as a non-governmental organisation, are vehemently opposed to any sort of restriction on firearms.

— *India Abroad News Service*

World population will rise to 6.1 b by 2000

WASHINGTON, May 7: The world's population will swell to 6.1 billion by 2000 from its current 5.8 billion and jump to 6.8 billion by 2025, according to a report published today, reports AP.

Most of the population boom will occur in the poorest countries, the Population Reference Bureau said in its annual report.

In 1996, developing countries accounted for 4.7 billion of the world's 5.8 billion people and 98 per cent of the population growth that year, the bureau said.

Population in the developed countries was expected to remain flat, at 1.2 billion, until 2025, notably reflecting the extremely low birth rates in Europe and Japan, the report said.

The United States, which has 267 million inhabitants, continues to be the industrialized country with the highest population growth, adding 2.4 million residents annually, about a third of their immigrants.

The future size of world population will be determined by the large number of developing countries with high and moderately high birth rates," said Carl Haub, demographer for the Population Reference Bureau.

Birth rates in developing countries apart from China remain at twice the level needed to stabilize world population size at some point in the future.

Among the main concerns for the near future, according to the report, is that the decline in India's birth rate seems to have stopped. India, with a population of 969 million is second in population terms only to China with 1.23 billion people.