

Pre-polls violence claims 134 lives in Indonesia

JAKARTA, May 25: Indonesia has been shaken by some of the worst election campaign violence seen during President Suharto's 30-year rule and nerves are on edge as the nation prepares to vote in national and local elections this week, reports Reuter.

The violence reached a peak with the deaths of at least 134 people in the south Kalimantan provincial capital of Banjarmasin, most of them in a blazing shopping complex during a riot on the final day of campaigning on Friday.

Much of the violence during the campaign was confined to Java Island, home to 60 per cent of the nation's 200 million people.

The confrontations were primarily between supporters of the ruling Golkar and the Muslim-oriented United Development Party (PPP), which has spearheaded criticism of corruption and collusion in the government.

But financial markets remained relatively stable during the final week of the campaign despite violence in Jakarta itself.

I think the impact on the market will not be significant because violence in the run-up to the election has been factored in," Pardi Kandy, treasury head of PT Bank Buana Indonesia, told Reuters today.

Operators would be more scared if it (the Banjarmasin riot) had happened in Jakarta. We see the market here on Friday was relatively stable despite the widespread violence," he said.

Independent political commentator Arief Budiman said the street demonstrations that drew hundreds of thousands of PPP supporters in Jakarta and

central Java were a vehicle for the poor to show they could not be ignored.

"In Indonesia, people don't believe in the justice system. For the poor people, it is an opportunity to show the government they have power, people are frustrated by poverty and unemployment," he said.

Residents in Banjarmasin attributed the violence there to dangerous mix of envy and political tensions.

Social and economic tensions have led to intermittent violence in other parts of the country over the past year.

But analysts noted that by comparison with unrest with other Asian countries, the election violence was contained.

Clinton to address Blair's cabinet during London trip

LONDON, May 25: US President Bill Clinton will address new British Prime Minister Tony Blair's cabinet during a visit to London next week, the Sunday Times reported, says Reuter.

Clinton is to have lunch on Thursday with Blair, who swept to power in a landslide election victory on May 1.

The Sunday Times said the US President's visit to the Prime Minister's official residence, 10, Downing Street, would be timed to coincide with the closing minutes of a regular cabinet meeting.

"The president is expected to address ministers for about five minutes, although some diplomats fear he may carry on for longer," the newspaper said.

There were no reported instances of political partisans using guns on each other, for example.

"The level of violence is quite different from campaigns in, for example, the Philippines, India or Pakistan," Dewi Fortuna Anwar of the Centre for Information and Development Studies (CIDES) told Reuters.

Political analysts said there had also been a lack of substance in the 27-day campaign, which gave way to a five-day cooling off period from Saturday.

The only party legally entitled to contest the poll, other than Golkar and the PPP, is the Christian-Nationalist Indonesian Democratic Party (POI), which was badly split by a leadership struggle last year and was virtually sidelined through the campaign.

Anwar said because the government restricted political activity to a month every five years for elections to the House of Representatives, people saw it as the only period in which they could make their political feelings openly known.

"We really can't blame the people because they really haven't had much political experience. It is a reflection of our state of political maturity," she said.

Golkar, undefeated under Suharto, says it is aiming for just over 70 per cent backing from the 125 million eligible voters, compared to the 68 per cent it won in the last poll in 1992.

Some analysts have expressed apprehension that if the Golkar vote is too large, PPP supporters may not accept the election outcome and fresh violence could occur.

Voting begins in France

PARIS, May 25: France votes today in the first round of parliamentary elections that will either renew support for conservative President Jacques Chirac or condemn him to rule in awkward tandem with left-wingers, reports Reuter.

Calling the snap poll, Chirac said France needed a "new élan" to join a single European currency from a position of strength and opinion polls before a blackout last weekend suggested his centre-right allies were likely to retain power for the next five years.

The Paris bourse, where secret polls are a factor driving prices, ended only 0.77 per cent lower last week. Most investors apparently bet that Chirac's gamble would work and he would not be forced into an uneasy "cohabitation" with the socialist led left.

France's 39 million electors vote between 8 am (0600 GMT) and 8 pm (1800 GMT) for the 577-seat national assembly.

Run-off contests will be held on June 1 in those constituencies where no candidate wins an absolute majority.

A total of 6,389 candidates, including a record 1,469 women

on a day coinciding with mothers' day in France, were standing.

Weather was forecast to be sunny in the north with partly cloudy skies in the south and some scattered rain.

Earlier AFP said, voters in the French Pacific territories of Wallis and Futuna as well as New Caledonia were the first to exercise their franchise Sunday in the French general elections.

Some 39 million French voters are called upon to go to the polls in the first round of general elections with surveys showing a narrowing lead for President Jacques Chirac's risky gamble to clinch a fresh conservative majority in parliament until the year 2002.

In the single-constituency Wallis and Futuna, the farthest removed from metropolitan France and with 7,700 voters, voting began at 8:00 am (2000 GMT Saturday).

New Caledonia, which has two constituencies, saw start of voting an hour later.

Meanwhile, French Polynesians held the exercise a week ago, in view of the distances between the islands.



Five members of the Space Shuttle Atlantis' seven-person crew (L to R) French Jean-Francois Clervoy, Pilot Eileen Collins from the US, US Commander Charles Precourt, Russian Elena Kondakova and US Carlos Noriega wave to the media Saturday at Kennedy Space Centre's Shuttle Landing Facility. The Atlantis and her crew landed in Florida completing a ten-day mission to the Russian Space Station Mir. — AFP/UNB photo

Myanmar junta detains 250 NLD members

FANGKOK, May 25: Myanmar's military junta has detained at least 250 supporters of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi and is pushing ahead with a crackdown on her party, a senior party official said today, reports AFP.

The National League for Democracy (NLD) had documented names and details of 193 NLD supporters who have been detained. But said reports filtering in from the provinces indicated that more than 250 had been rounded up, he said.

Once they have all been documented "I think it will come up to ... more than 250," he said from Yangon.

2 more deputies of Tansu Ciller's party resign

ANKARA, May 25: Two more deputies of Turkey's pro-secular True Path Party led by Foreign Minister Tansu Ciller resigned Saturday, bringing to four those who have quit its ranks in the past two days, reports AFP.

The resignations of Cefi Kamhi and Ihan Akuzum will put further pressure on the party to terminate its coalition with the pro-Islamic Welfare Party of Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan.

Kamhi said in his letter of resignation that the coalition "could no longer respond to Turkey's needs."

Iran heads toward uncertain era following presidential election

TEHRAN, May 25: Iran headed today into a new and uncertain political era after the shock victory of a moderate candidate over the standard-bearer of the country's ruling conservative Islamic clergy, reports AFP.

Former culture minister Mohammad Khatami won a crushing victory over parliamentary Speaker Ali Akbar Nategh-Nuri, garnering 69 per cent of the almost 30 million votes cast in Friday's election.

Khatami, who has promised greater freedom and tolerance, is set to take office in a month from outgoing President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and has received the blessing of Iran's paramount leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

"A shining turning point has appeared in our history," said Khamenei, the Islamic republic's ultimate political and religious authority.

Khatami, the radical left's candidate, may face a tough challenge from the conservative majority in the Iranian parliament and also the hard-line Khamenei, who can overrule any executive order.

But Khatami's large mandate could put him in a strong position to push through his moderate and reform-minded agenda, analysts here said.

Khatami won 20,078,187 votes (69 per cent) against 7,242,859 (25 per cent) for Nategh-Nuri out of the total 29,767,000 cast.

It was the largest turnout ever in an Iranian presidential election with 88 per cent participation, the Interior Ministry said.

Khatami and Nategh-Nuri, both 54 and clerics, had been locked in a vicious battle over the past two months in the most tightly-contested election in Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution toppled the US-backed Shah.

Even before all votes were counted, newspapers represent-

ing both conservative and moderate factions in Iran's Islamic establishment called for political change and democratic reforms.

"In the absence of political parties, the groups functioning as political parties do not feel that they are really accountable to the nation," the conservative English-language Tehran Times said.

The centrist Iran News also backed the creation of political parties, saying "The people's massive participation also demonstrated that we are heading toward a dynamic political

society."

Iranians across the country voiced a strong desire for change, listing the country's stagnating economy and more social freedom as priority issues, and Khatami appeared to be riding that wave.

Groups of young people celebrated Khatami's victory in Tehran streets, but there were no large gatherings as the capital was under tight security.

However, police arrested dozens of young men and women in northern Tehran, many in cars who turned out their lights in a show of joy.

BRIEFLY

Road mishap claims 10 in Pakistan: At least 10 people were killed and 18 others injured on Saturday when a passenger bus and an oil tanker collided head-on in southern Sindh province, police and hospital sources said, AFP reports from Karachi.

The crash occurred near Nawabshah City some 260 kilometres (161 miles) northeast of here. They said, adding that victims included women and children. Volunteers said they rescued the trapped passengers who shouted and screamed for help as bus was badly damaged.

US to watch aftermath of Iran's polls: The United States said on Saturday it would closely watch the aftermath of Iran's presidential election which moderate former culture minister Mohammad Khatami swept in a landslide, Reuter reports from Washington.

"We are watching the election and its aftermath closely," a State Department official said, adding that the United States was waiting to see if there were real changes in the country's behaviour.

As we have said before, we are not against the Iranian people or an Islamic government, we are concerned about Iranian behaviour," the official said.

UNESCO chief opens office in Gaza: UNESCO Director General Federico Mayor, on his first official visit to the Palestinian territories, announced Saturday the opening of a permanent office for the UN cultural agency in Gaza, AFP reports from Gaza City.

After meeting with Palestinian President Yasser Arafat, Mayor also announced the implementation of 17 new projects, but did not give any details.

Mayor's visit is aimed at determining aid from the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation to create institutions and develop "a culture of peace," a UNESCO statement said Friday.

Ali Khamenei hails Khatami: Iran's paramount leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei congratulated on Saturday moderate former culture minister Mohammad Khatami for his surprise victory in the country's presidential election, AFP reports from Tehran.

"The participation of the Muslim nation was an historic event which ensured the Islamic republic against foreign plots and temptations," Khamenei said in a statement read on state television.

China to host children's film festival: The fifth China International Children's Film Festival is to be hosted in Beijing from May 28 to June 1, on the International Children's day, Xinhua reports from Beijing.

The festival is aimed to promote exchanges between children film artists worldwide, and provide children more opportunities to see good Chinese and foreign children's films, said an official from the Chinese Children's Film Studio.

Kuwaiti Emir hails Khatami: The Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah, has sent a congratulatory telegram to Mohammad Khatami on his election as president of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the official KUNA agency said, AFP reports from Kuwait.

The Emir congratulated Khatami on "the trust of the Iranian people that he enjoys" and expressed his desire to "strengthen the cordial relations and cooperation between the two friendly countries."

Khatami, the moderate former culture minister, was elected with 69 per cent of the vote, according to the final official tally from Friday's polls while his conservative rival, former parliamentary Speaker Ali Akbar Nategh-Nuri scored 25 per cent.

Israeli troops kill Hezbollah rebel: Israeli troops killed a guerrilla from the Iranian-backed Hezbollah and wounded three others in an incursion outside the Israeli-occupied zone in south Lebanon on Saturday, security officials said, AFP reports from Tyre.

The two sides fought with automatic weapons and rockets near Zibqine on the edge of the western part of the occupied border strip, the officials said. Three more Hezbollah guerrillas were seriously injured by two air-to-surface missiles fired by Israeli helicopters after the dawn clash, they said.

Drunken man kills 4 in Russia: A drunken shepherd went on rampage in a village in southeastern Siberia, shooting to death four and wounding six people before killing himself, a news agency said Sunday, AP reports from Irkutsk.

The shepherd, from the village of Balagansk in the Irkutsk region, first fired his hunting rifle at a group of people with whom he quarrelled. Then he rode his horse through the village, shooting at random, ITAR-Tass said. Four people were killed and six were wounded and taken to hospital in the shooting Saturday, the news agency reported.

3 Czech ministers resign: Three ministers in the Czech government resigned Saturday ahead of a cabinet reshuffle expected early next week, AFP reports from Prague.

Ministers of Finance and Interior, Ivan Kocarnik and Jan Ruml — both from Prime Minister Vaclav Klaus's Civic Democratic Party (ODS) — resigned their portfolios as the executive committees of the three main parties in the centre-right majority met.



Alliance soldiers loyal to self-proclaimed president Laurent Kabila watch over a pro-Kabila demonstration in Kinshasa Saturday. Elsewhere in the city, more than 200 anti-Kabila demonstrators protesting Kabila's new government were arrested. — AFP/UNB photo

Dostam is not in Uzbekistan US calls for immediate ceasefire in Afghanistan

WASHINGTON, May 25: The United States on Saturday called for an immediate ceasefire as Taliban fighters entered Mazar-i-Sharif, the main centre of northern warlord General Abdul Rashid Dostam, reports AFP.

"We are aware of reports of a collapse" of the city, a State Department spokesman said.

"We're watching events closely but it is difficult to tell exactly what is happening since there are no US officials currently inside Afghanistan."

"The US has long called for an end to the fighting and we continue to urge for the acceptance of a ceasefire immediately," said the official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"Peace and stability can come to Afghanistan only through negotiations to establish a broadly representative

government."

Meanwhile Pakistan said late Saturday the developments in northern Afghanistan were an internal matter of that country.

"It is an internal matter," a foreign office spokesman, quoted by the official Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) newsagency, said.

The spokesman, commenting on the takeover of key cities of Sheberghan and Mazar-i-Sharif by the Taliban militia and allied troops, said Pakistan wanted "peace and stability" in Afghanistan.

Another AFP report says: Northern Afghan warlord Abdul Rashid Dostam who reportedly fled Afghanistan Saturday is not in Uzbekistan, Russian NTV television cited Uzbek Deputy Foreign Minister Ismatulla Yergashev as saying.

Kabila expects to hold polls after 2 years

KINSHASA, May 25: New Congo's self-proclaimed President Laurent Kabila said on Saturday he expected to hold elections in his vast country after two years, reports Reuter.

He told CNN television he believed his government, dominated by members of his alliance of democratic forces for the Liberation of Congo, was broad-based, despite criticism of the exclusion of veteran opposition leader Etienne Tshisekedi.

"Democratic election after two years transitional period," Kabila said during a visit to a Kinshasa hospital. "We must prepare to have elections."

Troops in Kinshasa fired in the air on Saturday to break up a march by about 1,000 students protesting against Kabila's government.

"It is a broad-based government," Kabila said of the cabinet, nine of whose 13 ministers are AFDL members.

South African Deputy President Thabo Mbeki, who played a key role in attempts to ensure a peaceful transition, said on Friday Congo could not afford to rush into elections and it would be difficult to achieve a fair poll soon after taking power.

NATO to boost talks with 6 Mediterranean countries

BRUSSELS, May 25: Having closed a landmark deal with Russia, NATO now is looking to substantially boost its dialogue with six countries in the volatile Mediterranean region, a NATO official told AFP.

But NATO will stop short of creating a new version of the partnership for peace programme that improved relations between the US-led alliance and its erstwhile foes in the former Soviet bloc, the official said.

The Mediterranean effort is to be announced at the end of next week in Sintra, Portugal, near Lisbon, during a semi-annual meeting of NATO foreign ministers, the source said on condition of anonymity.

Washington and Paris meanwhile have yet to sort out their differences over control of NATO's southern command.

LTTE kills 20 troops, destroys 2 battle tanks

COLOMBO, May 25: Tamil rebels on Saturday claimed to have killed 20 Sri Lankan soldiers and destroyed two battle tanks and one armoured personnel carrier, even as troops overcame stiff resistance offered by the rebels to advance further on the strategic Jaffna Highway, reports PTI.

The clandestine LTTE radio, 'Voice of Tigers' monitored in the northern Vavuniya town said that its cadres damaged two more tanks. However, it did not give any further details of its own losses.

Army sources said here late in the evening that eleven soldiers were killed in today's fight, while over 18 others were injured.

Most of the injured sustained simple injuries, they said.

Earlier in the day, army columns, backed by tanks, armoured personnel carriers, artillery guns and helicopter gunships broke through LTTE defences around at 0600 hrs ad-

vancing over two and half km by the end of the day.

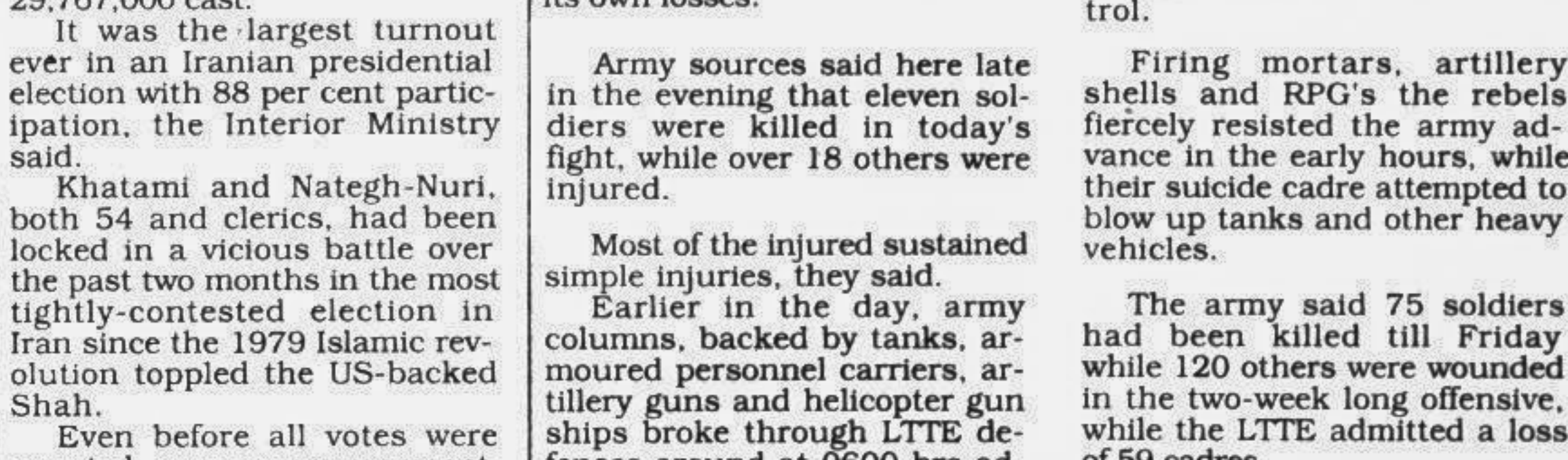
The rebels resisted the move almost immediately, with three LTTE cadre armed with rocket propelled grenades (RPGs) breaking through army defences and blowing up an armoured personnel carrier.

The three were later killed by the armed forces.

The army operations began on Saturday after troops consolidated their position during the past four days in the 15-km stretch of the 60 km road wrested from the LTTE's control.

Firing mortars, artillery shells and RPG's the rebels fiercely resisted the army advance in the early hours, while their suicide cadre attempted to blow up tanks and other heavy vehicles.

The army said 75 soldiers had been killed till Friday while 120 others were wounded in the two-week long offensive, while the LTTE admitted a loss of 59 cadres.



Two women are on stills as they take part at a rally called "the March For Life" in central Paris Saturday to appeal for solidarity for AIDS-infected patients. — AFP/UNB photo

Taliban assert authority after conquering northern bastion

MAZAR-E-SHARIF, Afghanistan, May 25: Taliban fighters moved swiftly Sunday to assert their authority over this northern stronghold, whose capture a day earlier nearly completed a three-year campaign to unite Afghanistan under the white flag of the radical Islamic army, reports AP.

From loudspeakers atop Mazar-e-Sharif's ancient mosque, former commanders in the army of northern warlord Rashid Dostum hailed the defeat of the general they betrayed, leading to the capture of his northern bastion on Saturday.

The fall of Mazar-e-Sharif brought virtually all of Afghanistan — barring a few pockets of resistance — under one regime for the first time since the Soviet army ended a 10-year occupation in 1989.

"Don't be afraid. Open your

shops. All is safe," said Majeed Rozi, one of the mutineers that deserted Dostum barely one week ago to join the Taliban army.

Despite some looting, the streets were calm and free of fighting.

"If anyone does you any harm, just come to us," Rozi shouted to hundreds of men and a few women clad in the all-enveloping burqa that the Taliban require all women to wear.

Jeeps packed with soldiers carrying rocket launchers and assault rifles roared through the streets of this northern desert city. Soldiers in tan woolen uniforms were being deployed by a turbaned commander in the traditional civilian dress worn by most Taliban fighters.

"We are here for the security of the city. You can go anywhere," said Commander Ghu-

lam Rasul, as he barked orders into a walkie talkie.

The Taliban victory was a boost to Pakistan, which had supported the group amid the chaos of feuding Afghan militias that followed the ouster of the Soviet-backed regime in 1992.

But Saturday's advance could bode ill for Central Asian republics to the north, which had backed Dostum in the hope that he would shield the Muslim populations from the Taliban's influence.

In a statement issued through the ITAR-Tass news agency, Russia pledged to intervene if fighting spread to former Soviet republics who belong to a loose federation known as the Commonwealth of Independent States.

"The Russian leadership states that if the CIS border is violated, the mechanism of the

CIS collective security treaty will be immediately activated," the statement said.

The Taliban foreign minister quickly sought to quell fears of further conquest, the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan reported.

"I assure the world and neighbouring countries that the Taliban government is strictly adhering to a policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries," Mullah Mohammed Ghous said in the Pakistani capital, Islamabad.

On Saturday, some armed men were seen running from the shops of money changers with pockets stuffed with wads of the nearly worthless local currency and with US dollars.

The United Nations guest house in the heart of the city was robbed by more than a dozen men. Aid workers and

foreign journalists said the intruders escaped with money, two-way radio's watches and television satellite receiver. No one was hurt.

Giant posters of Dostum that had dominated this city lay in tattered heaps on the ground outside the grand blue mosque that houses the tomb of one of Islam's greatest saints, Hazrat Ali.

In their place were pictures of Rasool Pahlawan, the brother of General Malik Pahlawan who led the mutiny against Dostum. After his assassination, Rasool Pahlawan, became a folk hero.

From the domed mosque that dominates the landscape of Mazar-e-Sharif, a cleric cried praises of the Taliban and its leader Mullah Mohammed Omar.

"Today God is with us and with the Taliban. Every prob-

lem we have will be solved. Communism is gone forever. Dostum is gone forever," rang the cleric's shrill voice over the loud speaker.

Outside the mosque people listened quietly.

"We are tired of fighting. We just want peace," said a gray-haired man who refused to give his name. "We just want to be left alone."

A Taliban commander said the religious army will soon head south toward the territory controlled by Ahmed Shah Massoud, the defense minister of the former government that was expelled from the capital, Kabul, last September by the Taliban.

"Now our troops are going to Takhar," said commander Abdul Had, speaking at Dostum's former headquarters at Qali-e-Jhangli.