

International

Indian troops clear militants from key battle zone

MUSHKOH VALLEY, India, July 10: After two months of heavy ground fighting, Indian forces pushed Pakistan-based Islamic guerrillas back across the ceasefire line in a key battle zone in Kashmir, but suffered heavy losses in another sector, reports AFP.

Fierce fighting raged Saturday morning and Friday night in Mushkoh Valley, where India lost 48 soldiers in two days — even as Pakistan was asking Muslim insurgents to help "re-solve the crisis" in an apparent call to withdraw.

Indian troops cleared most intruders from Batalik, the easternmost of four battle sectors in the Himalayan mountains of Kashmir, and from a second sector, Dras, military spokesman Col. Bikram Singh said Friday.

Indian claims of spectacular victories in Batalik — capturing eight mountaintop positions in less than 24 hours without losing a soldier — came as Pakistan Cabinet's Defence Committee was meeting in Islamabad to ask insurgents for help resolving the crisis.

It was unclear whether the rebels retreated from Batalik in response to political and diplomatic efforts, or whether their positions crumbled under the pressure of Indian fire.

On Friday, top Pakistani commanders met the leaders of 11 militant groups fighting in Kashmir to discuss a withdrawal, a government official said on condition of anonymity.

Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is expected to brief his Cabinet Saturday on the outcome of his visit to Washington, where he promised President Bill Clinton he would take "concrete steps" to end the fighting.

Sharif is scheduled to make a statement in Parliament on Monday.

In Mushkoh Valley, thousands of paratrooper commandos milled about an army base Saturday. The commandos have experience in high-altitude warfare and many of them were from the nearby Siachen Glacier, where temperatures routinely plunge to minus 60 Celsius.

An atmosphere of gloom prevailed in Mushkoh Valley as 79 wounded soldiers were brought down the mountains on horses, stretchers and helicopters Friday and Saturday.

One of them, Narendra Singh, hobbled down snow-capped hill for five hours, supported by two soldiers before he reached a field medical unit with a doctor.

"We destroyed three bunkers" on Point 4875 — known after its height in meters — in the Mushkoh Valley, Singh told a reporter.

"I climbed on a boulder and shot three people. Suddenly 10 to 12 people emerged from behind a rock and fired a machine gun at us. I jumped down 20 feet and was badly hurt," he said.

Other soldiers said they saw shell-proof bunkers on the top of the mountains. One of them, covered in aluminum sheets decorated with crescent, was used as a mosque by the Islamic intruders.

Overnight, 155mm Bofors howitzers fired directly on a mountain called Rocky Knob where many intruders were

concentrated. Plumes of smoke rose from the mountain. "Excellent hit," an army commander told a colleague on a field phone.

India has divided the 180-km-wide battlefield into the operational sectors of Mushkoh Valley, Dras, Kaksar and Batalik.

It was the first time the Indians had claimed to reach the ceasefire line.

"It's now only a matter of a few days before the last of the Pakistani intruders are flushed out — dead or alive," India's Defence Minister George Fernandes said in a statement.

India says Pakistani troops are leading 700 to 800 fighters in Kashmir, a region divided between the two countries and claimed in its entirety by both.

But Islamabad says the fighters are Kashmiri insurgents who receive only moral support from Pakistan.

Spokesman Singh said 639 Pakistani soldiers and more than 150 Islamic guerrillas have been killed in the fighting since early May, while 321 Indian soldiers have died.

Laden's latest tricks

KUWAIT CITY, July 10: Border police have arrested an Arab serving as a courier to deliver forged Kuwaiti citizenship papers to suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden, newspapers said Saturday, reports AFP.

Police grew suspicious of the exit stamp in the man's passport as he tried to cross the western border post of Salmi into Saudi Arabia on July 3, the Arab Times said.

The government of the United Arab Emirates has told us that the Dubai emirate government has taken steps to clean up the bank, the Dubai Islamic Bank, and to restore its reputation," a State Department spokesman said.

A US delegation visited the UAE to voice concern over the dealings.

He was found carrying forged citizenship papers with bin Laden's photograph.

The Arab expatriate, whose nationality was not disclosed, had been charged with delivering the papers to 41-year-old bin Laden, who has been stripped of Saudi nationality.

The interior ministry on Saturday declined to comment on the reports.

Washington suspects the Afghanistan-based Islamic militant of plotting the August 7, 1998 bomb attacks on its embassies in Nairobi and Dar es

Salaam, which killed a total of 224 people.

The Saudi millionaire has also been implicated in the bombings of New York's World Trade Center in 1993 and of a US military housing complex in Saudi Arabia in 1996.

On Thursday, the United States said a bank in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) had laundered money for bin Laden.

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The United States has placed a five million dollar bounty on bin Laden's head and earlier this week imposed sanctions against Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia which controls the area where bin Laden is staying.

According to the New York Times, the foreign minister of another Gulf state, Qatar, in 1996 tipped off a suspected aide of World Trade Centre bomber Ramzi Ahmed Yousef that an FBI team was on its way to arrest him.

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strators.

Law enforcement forces had endured repeated "instigations by a number of opportunist and adventurous elements," the commanders said in statement carried by the state-run news agency IRNA.

President Mohammad Khatami convened an emergency meeting of national security chiefs to handle the crisis, sparked by a day of violence Friday when student protests over a clampdown on press freedom ended in bloodshed.

Fresh demonstrations erupted Saturday morning as thousands of students took to the streets, waving a blood-stained shirt and chanting "Students stand up, your brother was killed." "Shame on the police," and "End this despotism."

The Tehran police, whom witnesses said have closed down large sections of the capital, insisted they had only been carrying out their "legal duty" by cracking down on the "illegal gathering" of student demon-

strators.

The police knocked in the doors where we were sleeping and attacked us with tear gas, he said.

Television pictures showed dorm rooms that had been burned, with windows smashed and furniture upturned.

Higher Education Minister Mostafa Moin, politically close to the moderate Khatami, ten-



An Iranian student demonstrates in the centre of Tehran during fresh protests Saturday following overnight fierce clashes on the campus of Tehran University. Iranian papers said three people were killed and two wounded during clashes between police and students over the closure of leftist daily Salam.

— AFP photo

Minister resigns protesting police action

3 Tehran University students killed

TEHRAN, July 10: Iran's higher education minister resigned Saturday after three Tehran University students were reported dead following bloody clashes with security forces that plunged the nation into political turmoil, reports AFP.

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The repeated calls by the commanders of law enforcement forces and the officials present at the scene inviting the demonstrators to stop their illegal actions failed and the insurgents, insulting the law enforcement forces personnel, entered into clashes with them," said.

But one student who asked not to be named told AFP the police had "beaten us like lunatics."

The police knocked in the doors where we were sleeping and attacked us with tear gas, he said.

Television pictures showed dorm rooms that had been burned, with windows smashed and furniture upturned.

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5 bodies found so far: KFOR

PRISTINA, Yugoslavia, July 10: A spokesman for the Kosovo peacekeeping force said Saturday only five bodies had been found so far in what is suspected to be a mass grave near Ljubinje, south of the western town of Pec, reports AFP.

Dutch Major Jan Joosten said that three people had been found in a village and two others had been found in a nearby well, adding that investigators continued to search the area where Italian KFOR troops have indicated as many as 350 bodies might be buried.

The village, said to be located at an altitude of around 1,300 meters (4,300 feet), is in mountainous and mined terrain near the border with Albania.

Joosten said the investigators were hampered by the difficult conditions.

Officials from the UN's International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), which is in charge of investigating suspected mass grave sites, could not be reached for comment on the number of victims discovered by its forensic experts.

A mass grave, as defined by former US senator Robert Dole, who is chairman of the International Commission for Missing Persons, contains 12 or more bodies.

Elton John has heart pacemaker fitted

LONDON, July 10: Singer Elton John had surgery Friday to fit a heart pacemaker after keeling over on a plane en route to the marriage last weekend of David Beckham and Victoria "Posh Spice" Adams, the Sun reported Saturday, reports AFP.

In its Saturday edition, the paper said John had flown into London from his home in southern France for surgery after tests disclosed he had an irregular heartbeat.

The problem was detected when he collapsed on a plane as he flew to Dublin to sing at Beckham's wedding to Adams on Sunday, the daily added.

The tabloid, which normally has impeccable showbiz sources, reported that he was "anxious but calm" as he was driven to a hospital in north London.

John has reportedly told friends he is hoping to be back on the road soon and intends to be on stage by August.

Earlier Friday, he pulled out of two more concerts for health reasons, and it was thought he was suffering from a viral ear infection.

Civil rights pioneer Farmer dies in US

WASHINGTON, July 10: James Farmer, who founded a civil rights organisation and led a demonstration for desegregation in 1961, died in a Virginia hospital Friday, CNN said, reports AFP.

He died at the age of 79 years after fighting illnesses in recent years, including bouts of pneumonia and complications from diabetes.

Farmer founded the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1942 and directed its 1961 Freedom Ride, which was designed to push for desegregation on buses and in terminals.

Russia urges US not to scrap ABM treaty

MOSCOW, July 10: Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeyev said Friday that scrapping the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Defence Treaty (ABM) would derail the process of the reduction of strategic weapons, reports Xinhua.

"If the ABM treaty is repudiated, irretrievable damage will be done to the process of reducing the number of strategic offensive weapons," Sergeyev said.

He said Moscow has repeatedly warned that planned US national anti-missile defence system would in effect signify a US withdrawal from the treaty.

The minister said the ABM treaty underlines the entire system of strategic weapons reduction.

New Thai Cabinet lineup

BANGKOK, July 10: Thailand named six new ministers and eight deputies today in a Cabinet reshuffle forced by resignations and withdrawal of a party from the ruling coalition but not expected to affect stability or policies, reports Reuters.

The reshuffle involved changes in less influential ministries, and as expected, did not affect the key portfolios of Finance, Commerce, Transport & Communications, Interior, Industry and Defence currently held by Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai's majority Democrats.



Soldiers of the Indian Army pose for a picture with the Indian national flag after they captured back 'point 4825' from Muslim infiltrators in the Mushkoh Valley Friday in the Drass sector of Kashmir. India on Friday claimed the biggest breakthrough in its two-month-old military offensive in Kashmir as all eyes turned to Pakistan and a peace initiative by Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

— AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Kumaratunga ends Nepal visit: Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga left here Saturday for her country after a four-day visit to Nepal and a two-day trip to neighbouring Bhutan, state radio said, AFP reports from Kathmandu.

Nepal's King Birendra and Queen Aishwarya saw the president off at Kathmandu's airport.

Kumaratunga met with leaders of Nepal and Bhutan during her trip, discussing bilateral and regional issues, including the conflict between India and Pakistan over the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir.

Hostages released in Abkhazia: All 17 Georgian government officials and journalists held hostage early Friday were released in the breakaway republic of Abkhazia, the Interfax news agency reported, Xinhua says from Moscow.

The hostages, including Georgian Health Minister Avtandil Dzhorbenadze, Chairman of the Government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia Lender Tsav, were seized by masked gunmen in the Kodorskoye gorge, the only area of Abkhazia under Georgian control. They were released following successful negotiations between the authorities and the gunmen. Georgian Presidential Press Secretary Vakhtang Abashidze said.

2 die as jet crashes in Mexico: A Janker 125 jet plane crashed in Mexico City Friday near the Toluca International Airport, leaving at least two persons dead, the Civil Protection Direction of the State of Mexico said Friday. Xinhua reports from Mexico City.

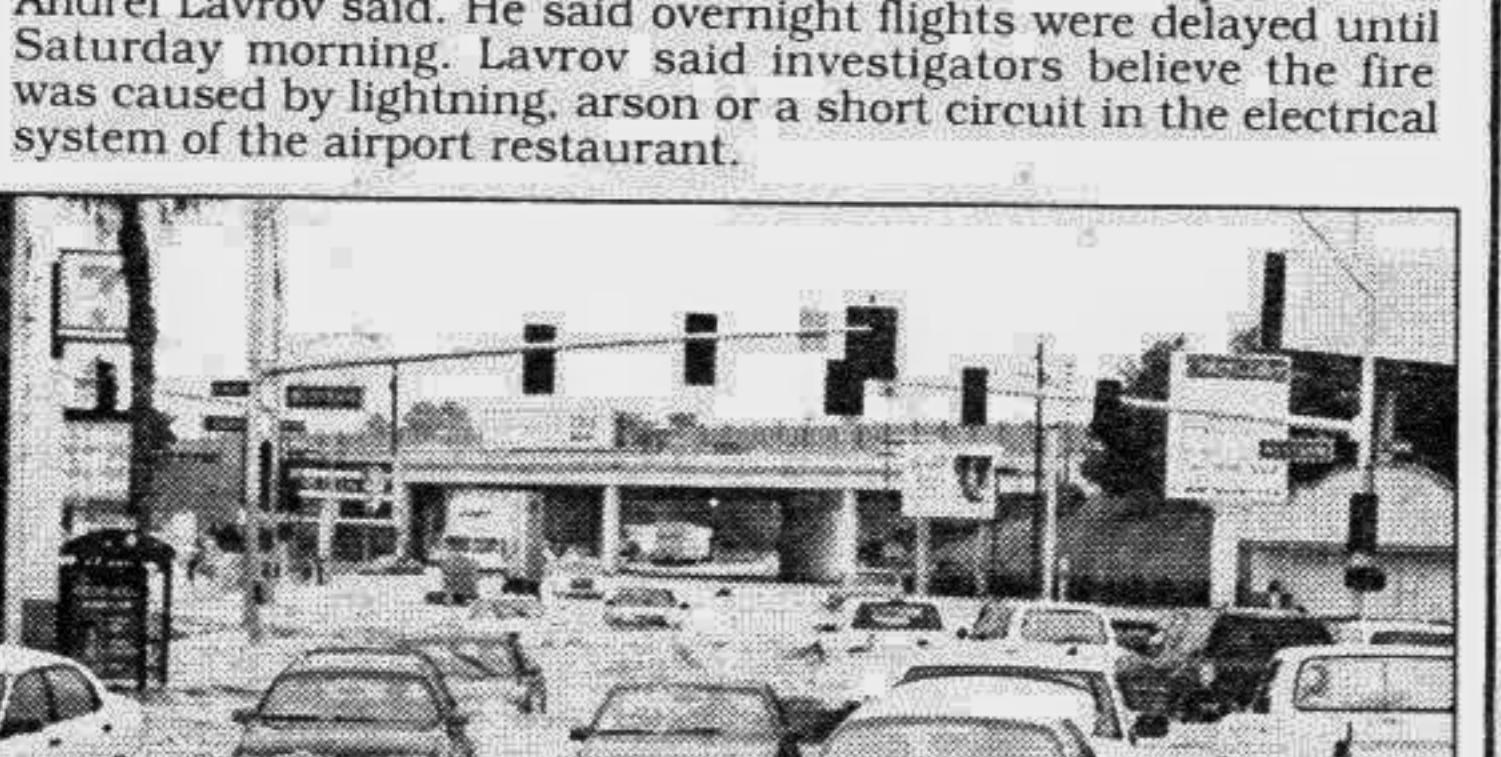
The state organisation said that the accident occurred at 05:30 local time, near the air strip No. 15 of the Toluca International Airport. The plane had made a flight of more than four hours from Los Mochis, in the northwestern state of Sinaloa.

Iranian leader in Cuba: Iran's first vice president arrived in La Habana Friday at the head of a delegation for an official visit aimed at strengthening relations between the two countries, AFP reports from La Habana.

Hassan Habibi was met at Jose Marti Airport by Cuban Vice President Carlos Lage, in charge of economic issues on the communist island. Habibi, 63, was invited to Cuba by Army Chief Raoul Castro, number two man in the island's government and brother of Cuban leader Fidel.

Fire damages Kazakhstan airport: The main building of Kazakhstan's central airport in the capital Almaty has been completely destroyed by fire, officials said Saturday, AP reports from Almaty.

The fire began at midnight Friday, and it took firefighters five hours to put out the blaze, fire department spokesman Andrei Lavrov said. He said overnight flights were delayed until Saturday morning. Lavrov said investigators believe the fire was caused by lightning, arson or a short circuit in the electrical system of the airport restaurant.



Motorists try to cross flood waters at the intersection of Western and Oakey Friday in the central area of Las Vegas, USA. Cars started floating and drivers were stranded in the rising waters after record rainfall in the desert area.

— AFP photo

40 Kurdish rebels killed

Turkish troops end Iraqi incursion

DIYARBAKIR, Turkey, July 10: Turkish forces killed 40 separatist Kurdish rebels in a week-long Turkish military operation in northern Iraq that ended on Saturday amid international criticism, local security sources in this southeastern Turkish province said, reports AFP.

The troops seized a significant amount of guns and ammunition and destroyed several hideouts belonging to Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) rebels during the incursion, he added.

Turkish forces started to withdraw as of Saturday morning, the sources said.

There was no announcement as to how many troops participated in the operation that was launched last Saturday.

Turkish press reports had said that some 10,000 Turkish soldiers had crossed into the Kurdish-held enclave in a drive against PKK rebels sheltering in the region.

The soldiers were supported by some 1,000 fighters of Masoud Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party, a close ally of Ankara which controls the northern Iraqi territory along Turkey's border.

The operation was not directed against the territorial integrity of Iraq, but against camps of the PKK. We respect the territorial integrity of Iraq," a spokesman for the Turkish foreign ministry said last week.