

Militants' boycott call keeps most voters at home in Kashmir

BARAMULLA, India, Sept 18: A Muslim separatist boycott kept most voters at home in the single Kashmir constituency going to the polls Saturday, amid scattered violence which left six people dead, reports AFP.

Several polling stations across the Muslim-majority constituency of Baramulla bordering Pakistan recorded zero or poor voting in response to the boycott call by militants fighting Indian rule in Kashmir.

Armed Muslim guerrillas stormed two polling stations, killing three civilians and two paramilitary personnel and wounding three others in two separate attacks.

The first attack took place at Shilwat, north of the Kashmir summer capital Srinagar, where the civilians were slain. Two members of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police -- which is controlled by New Delhi -- were shot dead in Ajaz district.

Officials told AFP that only 10 of 2,179 voters had cast their ballots by noon in five heavily-guarded polling centres in rural Baramulla.

There are no polling agents of political parties here, nobody is coming here to vote and there is no security for us," said G.M. Sofi, a polling official in Chanderseer village.

The government has not even provided us with tea and food."

At Higam, 35 km north of Srinagar, hundreds of angry Muslims blocked traffic on a highway to protest against the alleged killing of a young man by Indian troops.

Residents said soldiers arrived at the village early Saturday and ordered men and women to vote. The victim, Altar Mir, was reportedly shot when he argued that he was not a registered voter.

"He was shot in cold blood," alleged Abdul Rashid, a school teacher.

The protesters shouted slogans against India and the current staggered parliamentary elections.



A paramilitary officer watches over a queue of voters Saturday during the third round in the month-long staggered parliamentary elections. Voting in five states covered some of the most violence-prone and militancy-affected regions of the country. — AFP photo

Baramulla is one of Kashmir's six parliamentary constituencies. Low voting marred elections earlier this month in four of them. The sixth one will go to the polls on October 4.

Muslim separatists waging a separatist campaign in the Himalayan state have called for a boycott of the elections, arguing India has no right to rule the divided province.

Six bomb blasts were also reported across Baramulla on Saturday. One of them damaged a police station in the town, leaving a civilian injured.

At Khargam village north of Srinagar, where all 410 voters remained inside their homes, a middle-aged Muslim woman, Begum Zeenat, said she saw no point in voting.

Forty-five houses in the village were destroyed in a fire following a gunbattle between Muslim separatists and Indian security forces in July.

"Why should we vote when nobody has even come here to give compensation for our houses," Zeenat said, sitting outside her gutted house.

An election boycott appeared to be in place in neighbouring villages too.

At nearby Khamiya village, only three of 390 voters had exercised their franchise by midday. Of the 380-strong electorate at Chanderseer, only two men had voted.

At Tilgam, barely five votes were cast. At Dholipura, another village, all 499 voters boycotted the election.

Moderate polling was reported only at Uri, near the Pakistan border where a local Muslim politician enjoys widespread support.

In the earlier round of elections in Kashmir, only 12 per cent voted in Srinagar although the Buddhist-dominated Ladakh constituency recorded a high turnout of 70 per cent.

Two others -- Jammu and Udhampur, where Hindus live in large numbers -- recorded 40-45 per cent turnouts.

Kashmir is ruled by the Muslim-dominated National Conference party which is allied with the Hindu nationalists in national government. The main contest in Baramulla is between the National Conference and a newly floated party.

First SAARC film festival opens in Colombo

COLOMBO, Sept 18: The first SAARC film festival, featuring some of the best films from the region, was inaugurated yesterday by group chairperson and Sri Lankan president Chandrika Kumaratunga at a colourful function at the Bandaranaike Memorial International Conference Hall here, reports PTL.

Eminent film personalities and artists from the subcontinent took part in the function which featured several Sri Lankan folk dances.

LTTE massacres 52 Sinhalese villagers in a revenge attack

COLOMBO, Sept 18: Tamil Tiger guerrillas led by women fighters Saturday massacred an entire Sinhalese village in eastern Sri Lanka, killing at least 52 people in what appeared to be a revenge attack, police said, reports AFP.

Guerrillas of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) went on the rampage in the district of Ampara, butchering the villagers with knives and swords, officials said.

"The victims were asleep when the attack started," a local policeman in Ampara, 350 km east of here, said.

"The Tigers seem to have chopped up the people because firing would have alerted security posts."

Police reinforcements sent to the village of Panchisigiriya after the attack recovered the bodies of seven children, 17 women and 23 men, officials said. Five women escaped with serious injuries.

Police said another five people in two more villages were killed by the guerrillas during the pre-dawn massacre, the worst in over four years.

In May 1995, the LTTE was accused of butchering 45 Sinhalese civilians at the fishing

village of Kallarawa in the north-eastern Trincomalee district after gunning down a leading Buddhist monk in the area.

In the latest massacre, officials believed the motive appeared to be revenge.

"This appears to be a retaliatory attack," a local police official said referring to Wednesday's airforce bombing raid in north-eastern Sri Lanka, in which 21 Tamil civilians were killed and 35 wounded.

Local officials said a group of rebels led by women fighters stormed Panchisigiriya village attacking civilians with knives and swords.

Bin Laden declares Jihad against India

ISLAMABAD, Sept 18: Saudi dissident Osama Bin Laden, wanted by Washington in connection with embassy bombings in Africa, has now declared Jihad (holy war) against India along with the US and asked militant groups in Pakistan to join hands to "target" them, reports PTL.

Laden in a statement from Afghan town Jalalabad declared "our biggest enemies are the US and India and we should target them using the best of our efforts".

All the Jihad groups in Pakistan should combine their efforts to declare war against these two countries.

Laden had earlier declared Jihad against the US after Washington listed him among

the ten most wanted terrorists in the world with a prize of five million dollars on his head for his alleged involvement in the US Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in August last year.

The statement alleged India is staging a "drama of election" in Kashmir and added that "Laden is always ready to help the Kashmiri Mujahideens".

Most of the hardliner religious groups in Pakistan who run militant training camps for sending militants into Kashmir, strongly support Laden.

Recently a number of religious groups have threatened Americans living in Pakistan of dire consequences if any action was launched against Laden.

US moves toward normalising relations with North Korea

WASHINGTON, Sept 18: The United States has announced the first step toward normalising relations with North Korea in a move officials said could lift the "dark cloud" over the Korean Peninsula, reports AFP.

The US administration said Friday it was easing 50-year-old US sanctions against Pyongyang in response to Pyongyang's pledge to end long-range missile tests.

The actions "start us down a new and more hopeful road," Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said.

"It is a road that holds out the possibility of long-term stability and even eventual reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula. It's a road America and its allies want to walk down with the North, but it is not a one-way street."

"If circumstances warrant that we go back to square one, we can do so without damage to our interests," Albright said.

"If circumstances require that we go down a different road altogether, we will do so to de-

fend our interests."

President Bill Clinton's special envoy to North Korea, William Perry, said "a dark cloud" was lifting from the divided Korean peninsula.

"For more than 40 years a threat of another war in the Korean peninsula has hung over our heads like a dark cloud," Perry told journalists. "Today that cloud is beginning to drift away."

The easing of the sanctions allows trade in most consumer goods between the two countries, relaxes travel restrictions and permits individual and business money transfers, said White House spokesman Joe Lockhart.

The move "is in US interests ... and also in the interests of regional security," Lockhart said. But Washington will maintain its counter-terrorism and non-proliferation controls on North Korea, banning exports of military and sensitive items and most types of US assistance, Lockhart said.

Security clampdown in China

BEIJING, Sept 18: China has launched a nationwide security clampdown in the run-up to the 50th anniversary of Communist rule, ordering Beijing police to clamp down on weapons, explosives, Falungong practitioners and the mentally ill, while arresting two dissidents on subversion charges, sources said Saturday, reports AFP.

"Departments at every level must ensure that no incidents threatening state security are allowed to occur during the anniversary period," the China Daily newspaper quoted Minister of Public Security Jia Chunwang as saying.

Police nationwide should be alert for "illegal gatherings by members of the (banned mystical sect) Falungong, especially those coming to Beijing to make complaints, dangerous persons, regular petitioners, or people with mental illness coming to Beijing to make trouble," Jia told a nationwide teleconference on security for the anniversary.

"Not a single gun, bullet or any form of explosive must be allowed to enter Beijing, nor

any large gatherings of people, nor any major security disasters or incidents, so that the security of the anniversary may be guaranteed," he said.

Elsewhere, police in northern China detained a man who assisted prominent jailed activist Xu Wenli in setting up a branch of the banned opposition China Democracy Party (CDP), a Hong Kong-based rights group said.

Liu Shizun was the manager of the CDP Tianjin office. He was taken from his home by Dalian police on Friday," the Information Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China said in a statement.

Just two days before, Liaoning-based CDP member Wang Wenjiang was also charged with subversion, and the authorities had begun processing his case for trial.

Both men were charged with subversion, a charge commonly levelled at pro-democracy activists, and which carries a prison sentence of at least 10 years.

"Neither Liu nor Wang had engaged in any activities recently. The reason they were arrested is because they are core members of the CDP," the Information Centre said.

China has continued a crackdown on political dissent which began with the sentencing in December of Xu and two other prominent dissidents to hefty jail terms for subversion.

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Muslim-Christian unrest claims 25 in Maluku islands

JAKARTA, Sept 18: Some 25 people were killed and three villages were razed in the latest eruption of Muslim-Christian violence in the eastern Indonesian Maluku islands, reports reaching here said Saturday, reports AFP.

A mob from several villages launched a sea-borne assault before dawn Thursday on the town of Kairatu on Seram island, attacking and killing 25 people, the Media Indonesia daily said.

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South Korean mountaineer Oh Dong Jin, 31, explains what happened at the Teaching Hospital in Kathmandu Saturday when his two colleagues were swept away by an avalanche. — AFP photo

Two S Korean mountaineers killed in Nepal

KATHMANDU, Sept 18: Two South Korean mountaineers were killed and another seriously injured this week in an avalanche on the world's third highest peak, Kangchenjunga, Nepalese officials said Saturday, reports AFP.

The two climbers, identified as Hyung Myeong-Keun, 31, and Han Do-Kyu, 36, died Tuesday when they were swept away as they neared the summit of the 8,586-metre (28,170-foot) Himalayan mountain, the officials said.

Their bodies were flown to South Korea on Saturday accompanied by family members who arrived in Kathmandu on Thursday.

Expedition leader Oh Dong-Jin, 31, was airlifted to Kathmandu on Wednesday and is expected to be discharged from hospital next week, an official said.

Two South Korean teams comprising eight and seven members each have been trying to conquer Mount Kangchenjunga via the north-east face, which is prone to avalanches in the post-monsoon season which began this month.

Over 300 Kurdish rebels apply for amnesty

ANKARA, Sept 18: Over 300 Kurdish rebels have applied to the Turkish interior ministry so far to benefit from a recent clemency law that conditionally allows militants of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) out of jail, a Turkish newspaper reported Saturday, says AFP.

The centre-left daily Cumhuriyet said that 342 PKK rebels in jail in the south-eastern Turkish provinces of Diyarbakir and Mardin had already submitted their petitions and officials were expecting more applications in the coming months.

Among those that applied were Semir Sakir, a former aide to PKK leader, Abdullah Ocalan, and his brother Arif, the paper said. Both of them were sentenced to death in May on treason and are awaiting an appeals court decision on the ruling.

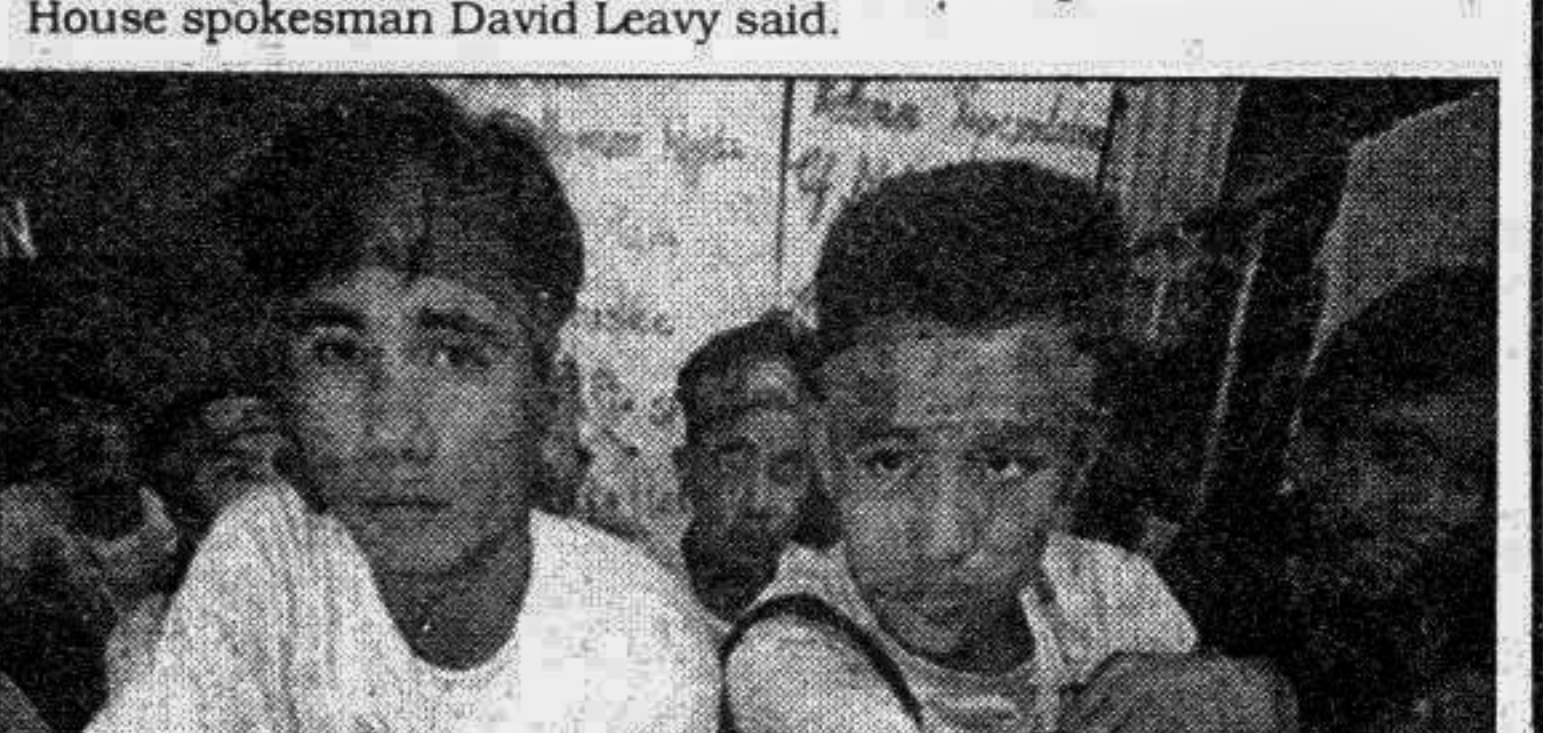
The clemency law, passed by parliament last month, allows PKK rebels who give themselves in to avoid jail terms on the condition that they did not take part in armed action against the state to receive amnesty.

The law also allows vital information that would help Turkey to crack down on the rebel group.

BRIEFLY

Arafat to meet Clinton: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat will meet with President Bill Clinton next week in Washington to discuss progress on the Middle East peace process, the White House said Friday, AFP reports from Washington.

Arafat is heading a large Palestinian delegation to the United States on September 21 for a four-day visit and will address the UN General Assembly at New York headquarters. Clinton will then meet with Arafat here Thursday for talks on bilateral issues and Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, White House spokesman David Leavy said.



Myanmar activists hold placard denouncing the military Junta in Yangon during a demonstration outside the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok Saturday to mark the 11th anniversary of the military coup. — AFP photo



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Russian jet pounds rebel bases in Chechnya

MOSCOW, Sept 18: The Russian Army said for the first time Saturday it had bombed Islamic "fighting bases" in Chechnya overnight. ITAR-TASS reported, quoting the Russian Federal Forces in Dagestan, says AFP.

Only the Chechen authorities had been announcing the bombings, which have occurred regularly since early September. They have said the bombings have claimed more than 200 civilian lives in the residential areas affected.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin on Friday said that the Russian bombardment of Islamic positions in Chechnya would be pursued as part of a major offensive.

Putin vigorously denied that the army was bombing Chechen civilians.

Overnight Friday, warplanes attacked concentrations of insurgents and their bases in Chechen territory to respond to a threat to attack the region of Kizlyar, on the Chechen border north of Dagestan.

Series of blasts in Corsica

AJACCIO, Sept 18: Corsica was hit by a series of explosions almost simultaneously in public buildings in Corsica early Saturday, in the capital and in four other towns, a police source here said. Nobody was injured in the blasts, reports AFP.

Five explosions occurred within a five-minute period between 02:25am and 02:30am (0025 GMT and 0030 GMT) in Ajaccio as well as Porto-Vecchio and Sartene in southern Corsica and Calvi and Corte in the north of the island.

In all cases, the explosives used were not very powerful and did not cause major damage.

The explosion in the mountainous Corte was the strongest. The device was fixed to a snow plough which was damaged along with another vehicle.

All five blasts went off in public service departments.

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Tel: 9129536-8

Chittagong Branch
Plot # 3, C.D.A. Avenue, Sholoshahor C/A,
Chittagong, Tel: 654671