

Kashmir mosque siege ends: Five dead

SRINAGAR, India, Mar 27: Indian army troops pulled out of a village in Indian Kashmir today after a two-day siege of Muslim militants holed up in a mosque ended with the killing of all three separatists, reports AFP.

Two soldiers, including a major, were also killed in the operation, police said.

The army pulled out after the third militant was killed late Sunday night at Dodhpora village, near Handwara town, 90 kilometres north of the Kashmiri summer capital Srinagar.

The other two militants had been killed when they jumped out of the mosque and tried to escape after setting off an explosion as a diversion.

The 50-hour siege began when the three militants sought refuge in the mosque after troops sealed Dodhpora on Saturday to conduct a house-to-house search.

More than 25,000 people have died in Kashmir since 1989 in violence linked to a Muslim separatist drive. India accuses Pakistan, which administers part of the disputed Himalayan province, of fuelling insurgency in its territory.

Islamabad denies the charge but extends moral and diplomatic support to the unrest.

Clinton back in US after Asia trip

WASHINGTON, Mar 27: President Bill Clinton returned to Washington late on Sunday night after a nine-day trip that took him to India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, and included talks with Syrian President Hafez al-Assad in Geneva, reports Reuters.

Clinton's summit with Assad failed to produce an immediate resumption of negotiations between Syria and Israel, but Washington pledged to keep working for a deal.

Islamabad ready for talks with Delhi

Musharraf begins 4-nation Asia tour

play.

He said Clinton had visited our region at a time when it is passing through a critical period. We both share the concern that tensions in south Asia are high and need to be defused. It is widely recognised that Kashmir is the root cause of tensions in the region.

On cross-border terrorism, Musharraf said, we are not involved in sending people across the Line of Control into Kashmir.

We deeply appreciate the interest expressed by President Clinton in the resolution of the Kashmir dispute and reduction of tension between Pakistan and India.

Asked if the visit of the US President had given legitimacy to his government, he said, "I think my legitimacy comes from the people of Pakistan. Legitimacy comes from the people's support too. I do not need a certificate from anybody."

My discussions with the US President also covered all issues including nuclear matters and terrorism, the military ruler said.

He said he had given an open formula on resumption of dialogue and it was up to President Clinton what role he would

play. The need for restraint, General Musharraf said, adding we reaffirmed our policy of restraint and responsibility on nuclear matters.

AFP adds: General Pervez Musharraf left Islamabad today for Malaysia at the start of a tour of four Southeast Asian countries aimed at boosting trade and economic links, officials said.

The tour, which will also take him to Singapore, Indonesia and Brunel, was in pursuit of "Pakistan's Look-East" policy, the foreign office statement said.

In Malaysia, his first stop, Musharraf will have talks with Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and meet Malaysian investors and businessmen.

In Singapore, he will hold talks with Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and in Indonesia two memorandums of understanding on enhancing bilateral cooperation will be signed.

Since seizing power in a military coup in October, Musharraf has visited Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Turkey, Bahrain, Iran and China.

Pakistan's military regime faces a tough task to revive the country's economy.

an early solution to the dispute between Pakistan and India over Kashmir, the official statement said.

Musharraf's tour "is in pursuit of Pakistan's Look-East Policy which is meant to enhance bilateral, economic, trade and investment relations," the foreign office statement said.

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Putin has a tougher task to shoulder

MOSCOW, Mar 27: For Vladimir Putin, winning presidential elections was the easy bit.

As he returns to the Kremlin on Monday to start a four-year term as Russia's new president, the 47-year-old ex-spouse knew that an overladen and neglected in-tray of intractable social, economic and political problems lay in wait, reports AFP.

Crushing inequality, social deprivation, corruption, economic muddle and habitual political anarchy: the tasks ahead of Russia's youngest leader since Nicholas II are no less formidable than those faced by the last tsar himself.

"We are a rich country of poor people," Putin remarked recently, as he vowed to tackle Russia's greatest misery and predecessor Boris Yeltsin's most damning legacy: poverty.

Yet as even he admitted, poverty will not just go away without a sharp improvement in the country's fundamental economic indicators -- growth, foreign investment, price stability.

Economists say that these in turn can only be achieved by undertaking the kind of sweeping reform -- structural, fiscal and legal -- that still has never really been launched in Russia.

But if Putin has learned one thing from Yeltsin's era, it is that under Russia's current chaotic political system it has proven all but impossible to devise, implement and enforce reform.

And analysts suggest that this is where the new Kremlin chief will start.

"Economic reforms will be useless if there is no reform in the political system," said

economist Alexei Zabotkin. "You need to strengthen the political system so that decisions are enforced."

"Currently this is not happening. Whether Putin can do this will be decisive for his presidency."

The situation during Yeltsin's era was not independence: it was anarchy," he said. "What Putin needs to do is to transform it into normal political system."

Pressing though the economic agenda is, analysts thus expect Putin to start by consolidating power, bringing Russia's robustly independent governors to heel, placing his own men in the strategic posts in the government White House, the Kremlin's presidential administration, the law enforcement bodies...

"Putin will probably tackle

the political problems first, attack the bureaucracy and regional authorities and the oligarchs in his effort to centralise power," said Roland Nash, economist with the Renaissance Capital financial group.

Added Yury Korgunyuk, political analyst with the Indemnity tank: "His first assignment will be to run an inventory of the government."

"He has to install his own people into power, and win control over all the rest," Korgunyuk said. "Before Putin, everyone who tried to stay in power and implement reform found that the two are mutually exclusive."

Putin's one great advantage over his predecessor is that the broad economic numbers are more positive than at any point since the debt and devaluation debacle of August 1998.

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