

India extends Kashmir truce

Militants, Pakistan shrug off extension for 3 more months

AFP, New Delhi

India Thursday extended its ceasefire against Muslim separatist militants in Kashmir for three months, but warned it would take firm action against any group that continued with violence.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee told Parliament the ceasefire, which had been due to expire on Monday, would now be extended until the end of May.

"Having examined all aspects of the question in its totality the government has decided to further extend the period up till the end of May," said Vajpayee.

It is the third time India has renewed its suspension of counter-insurgency operations against militants in the region since the truce came into force on November 27.

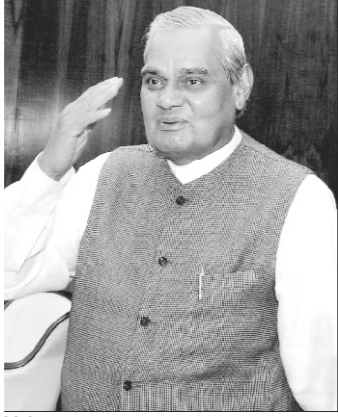
But it is the first time the truce has been extended for more than a month.

Vajpayee said the extension was opportunity for all parties involved in the conflict in the divided state to work for peace, but he warned that India's patience was not "infinite".

"I wish to make it abundantly clear that the peace process is only

for those who wish to benefit from it. We will not let this process be derailed, diluted or misused," said Vajpayee.

The prime minister also spelled out an uncompromising message to militant groups who have rejected his government's ceasefire and continued with attacks across



Vajpayee

Indian-held Kashmir over the past three months.

Vajpayee said any group that attacked Indian citizens in Kashmir or anywhere else would face tough

action from the security services.

"Law and order shall be maintained. Those who think that our security forces are less determined today to put an end to terrorism are only deluding themselves," he said.

The ceasefire has always been dismissed by the Muslim militant groups as a propaganda ploy and there have been a series of high-profile attacks during the truce period.

Pakistan, which controls the northern third of Kashmir, has dismissed the ceasefire extension as a measure to fool world opinion.

Vajpayee appealed to Pakistan to respond to the new ceasefire.

"It is my hope that Pakistan will act even now and abjure violence, give up their continuation of hostile propaganda against India, stop promoting and aiding cross-border terrorism," he said.

Kashmir is divided into Indian and Pakistani zones, and is claimed by both countries. At least 34,000 people have been killed since Muslim militants launched a rebellion in the Indian-controlled zone in 1989.

Meanwhile, militant separatists across Kashmir Thursday joined

Pakistan in dismissing India's ceasefire extension in the disputed Himalayan state as a propaganda stunt.

In Islamabad, Pakistani military spokesman Major-General Rashid Qureshi Thursday called on the United States to use its influence to get India to hold talks with Pakistan on the Kashmir issue, saying the latest ceasefire extension changed nothing on the ground.

His remarks came a day after President George W. Bush wrote to Pakistani leader General Pervez Musharraf Wednesday and underlined the value of dialogue.

Pakistan denies the allegation and insists the uprising is a legitimate and indigenous struggle for the Kashmiris' right to self-determination as mandated in United Nations resolutions.

Salahuddin, who is also chief of the Muttahida (United) Jihad Council (MJC), an alliance of 18 separatist groups, said the situation in Indian-held Kashmir was worse now than it was without the so-called ceasefire.

Dayak tribesmen expel migrants from Borneo

Sectarian clashes claim over 100

AFP, Jakarta

Indonesian police said Thursday they had found more bodies from brutal clashes between Dayak tribesmen and Madurese settlers in Sampit city on Borneo island, as one report said the death toll topped 100.

While police in the city said 30 people had died, police officers outside the city put the toll at 57 and the state-run Antara news agency quoting unidentified sources as saying more than 100 had died since Sunday.

Mobs from a "certain ethnic group" were parading bloodied heads around Sampit streets in convoys overnight, Antara reported in a clear reference to the Dayaks. Corpses were scattered in the streets, it added.

Sampit's newly-installed police chief Adjutant Commissioner Petrus Hardono told AFP five more bodies were found overnight, raising the total killed since clashes broke out Sunday between indigenous Dayaks and Madurese to 30.

"Dayaks armed with machetes and axes are wandering the streets searching for Madurese. When they find them (Madurese) they hand them over to security forces to be evacuated," Hardono said.

But police in Palangka Raya, the Central Kalimantan capital some

220 km to the northeast, said 28 bodies were found overnight, and the death toll was now 57.

"All 28 bodies were those of Madurese ethnics," an inspector, Kurniawan, told AFP by phone from Palangka Raya.

Reports from Sampit, a commercial and industrial hub, suggested the Dayaks were ridding the town of Madurese settlers, thousands of whom had already fled.

"More than 1,000 but less than 15,000," had abandoned their homes and spent the night huddled in Sampit's local parliament, while another 1,000 had already fled to Palangka Raya, Hardono said.

A Navy boat was due to travel up the Sampit river to evacuate the refugees.

"It should dock at the river port tomorrow (Friday) morning," he said.

All markets and shops were closed, and Palangka Raya, where tensions have risen with rumours of impending attacks, had begun to resemble a "ghost town," Antara reported.

By Thursday more than 400 crack troops had been deployed to Sampit to beef up security, while an additional 230 soldiers had arrived on Monday.

In Jakarta chief security minister Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said an extra battalion or some 650 army

troops would be deployed.

"We have decided to deploy one more battalion to prevent new riots or fighting," Yudhoyono told reporters.

Yudhoyono also said Jakarta had prepared a navy ship to help "relocate the refugees from conflict sites to a safer ground."

The head of the Central Kalimantan Dayak Community Consultation League, M. Asop, was quoted by Antara as warning that settlers who failed to integrate would be expelled.

"If the migrants cannot adjust to local values...then it is better that they voluntarily leave," Usop said.

Thursday's edition of the Banjarmasin Post said "indigenous residents" in groups of 50 to 100 were conducting door-to-door sweeps of several sub-districts populated by settlers.

Kalimantan, the Indonesian part of Borneo island, has seen repeated outbreaks of ethnic violence.

Dayaks resent the commercial dominance of ethnic Madurese.

Last December at least four people died in several days of fighting between Dayaks and Madurese in Central Kalimantan, while 11 people were killed in the West Kalimantan capital of Pontianak in similar clashes in October.

Sri Lanka navy sinks two rebel craft off Jaffna

REUTERS, Colombo

The Sri Lanka navy sank two Tamil rebel boats in a pre-dawn skirmish Wednesday in waters off the country's northern Jaffna peninsula, military officials said.

They said a navy patrol ran into a cargo convoy of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) near Jaffna's Point Pedro harbour.

"Two of the boats blew up and sank when the navy opened fire, a clear indication that they were transporting explosives," military spokesman Brigadier Sanath Karunaratne told Reuters in Colombo.

Karunaratne said two other rebel craft were also badly damaged, but he could not confirm whether they had sunk.

He said the navy patrol had returned to port without any casualties or damage.

Yemen's ruling party accuses opposition of polls violence

AFP, Sanaa

Yemen's ruling General People's Congress (GPC) demanded an inquiry Thursday into "132 incidents" it said were provoked by the opposition to disrupt voting in the country's first local polls since 1990.

President Ali Abdullah Saleh's GPC called for the election commission to "set up an investigation into 132 incidents provoked by opposition parties to hold up voting in various polling stations on Tuesday."

The trouble was caused by "extremist elements" in the Islamic reform party Al-Islah, the Yemen Socialist Party and the Nasserite unionist party, "attacking numerous electoral committees, using weapons, physical violence and threats," the GPC charged.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar (2nd L) receives a US Congressional team headed by David E. Bonior (L-Democrat-MI) for talks in Islamabad on Thursday. The US team, which also includes Joseph R. Pitts (2nd R-Republican-PA) and Jim McDermott (R-Democrat-WA), arrived in Islamabad for the prospects for an easing of tensions between Pakistan and India over disputed Kashmir.

Pak military accused of HR abuse

AFP, Islamabad

In a stinging attack on Pakistan's military rulers, an independent rights commission Thursday accused the government of using torture and colluding with religious extremists to intimidate critics.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's report for 2000 said the military regime of General Pervez Musharraf was trampling on human rights while posturing as the protector of democracy and people's power.

It said the rights of children, women, workers, prisoners and political figures had gone backwards, while religious fundamentalists had risen to new heights of influence with the government's implicit backing.

"The vacuum created by the military regime's strategy of discrediting and sidelining political parties and their leaders was ideally suited to the orthodox clergy and its militant formations took little time to move into the space left behind," the commission said.

"The outpourings of vicious hatred from these clergymen (against religious minorities and rights workers), in direct violation of the law, not surprisingly resulted in numerous incidents of violence, harassment and even cold-blooded murder."

It said the government "stood by as silent spectators" and were "in fact colluding with the extremists."

The government, which grew from a bloodless coup in October 1999, had failed on almost every front despite its bold promises to improve women's rights, rein in the extremists and restore genuine democracy, it said.

"More women were murdered across the country than in the preceding year as a result of motives stem-

ming from perceived notions of 'honour', while crime of almost every kind remained on the rise," it said.

The Musharraf regime has made so-called "honour killings" -- where people, usually women, are killed by relatives for bringing shame on their families -- murder in the eyes of the law but new cases arise almost every day.

Musharraf has rounded up dozens of former political figures suspected of corruption. Many have been remanded in prison without charge or the possibility of bail, while anti-corruption investigators comb through their personal affairs looking for signs of wrongdoing.

"Conditions in which many detainees were held ... were frequently found to be inhumane and brutal. Reports of mistreatment in custody, torture and denial of basic human rights continued to come in," the commission said.

It said that a law introduced last year banning public gatherings had been used to "fiercely suppress" the right to assembly.

"Political activists were repeatedly taken into detention to deter them from peaceful assembly and even indoor gatherings were at times interfered with, although the law permitted these," it said.

The commission said Musharraf's so-called "revolutionary" devolution plan for village and district assemblies, designed to return democracy to the "grassroots," had failed in its objective.

It said the first round of village elections in December "appeared to usher back traditional power groups, comprising influential feudals and politicians."

Indo-Pak talks vital to resolve differences: Bush

AFP, Islamabad

US President George W. Bush in a letter to Pakistani leader General Pervez Musharraf has called for direct talks between India and Pakistan to resolve their outstanding issues, the Foreign Office said Wednesday.

President Bush emphasised that "dialogue is vital for resolving the differences between the two countries," the ministry said.

In his first official letter to Musharraf, which US ambassador William Milam delivered Wednesday, Bush "appreciated the long history of cooperation and goodwill between Pakistan and the United States."

The US president "underlined the shared interests of the two countries in a peaceful and stable South Asia."

China blasts Japan for bid to 'whitewash' history

AFP, Beijing

China Thursday accused Japan of trying to "whitewash" its "history of aggression" in proposed school textbooks, warning that approval of the books could hurt Sino-Japanese relations.

Foreign ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao said the history books, set for approval by Japan's education ministry, sought to deny Japanese attacks and abuses against Asian countries, including China, ever took place.

Chandrika to focus on SAARC revival on India trip

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga is to focus on reviving a South Asian grouping stalled by Indo-Pakistan bickering when she begins an official visit to India Thursday, officials said.

An early summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) could result in a meeting between Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf.

Kumaratunga is unable to pass on the rotating chairmanship of SAARC as India opposes the next meeting of SAARC.

Barak's exit eases Sharon's task of forming unity govt

AFP, Jerusalem

Defeated Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's abrupt decision to step away from political life -- and the job as Israel's next defence minister -- smoothed the path Wednesday for his hardline rival and successor, Ariel Sharon, to form a national unity government.

Israel public radio reported that Sharon, during a meeting with mayors, repeated his determination to go ahead with a multi-party government, even if it takes longer than expected.

Barak, who announced after his crushing defeat that he was resigning from parliament and taking a breather from politics, said late Tuesday he would not serve as defence minister in Sharon's government or continue as party leader, apparently bowing to fierce criticism of his about-face from within his Labour Party.

Israeli radio said Sharon offered the defence post to Peres, the internationally popular Nobel Peace laureate, although Sharon's office said it could not confirm the report.

A Sharon spokesman said Barak's resignation would boost Sharon's goal of forming a broad coalition including Labour and Sharon's right-wing Likud party to counter a nearly five-month-old Palestinian uprising.

U2, Steely Dan big winner at Grammy Awards

AFP, Los Angeles

Controversial rapper Eminem scooped up three Grammy awards but fell short of the big prizes of Album and Song of the Year, which went to Rock group Steely Dan and the Irish band U2 respectively, as the 43rd annual ceremony drew protesters against Eminem's lyrics.

U2 won both Record of the Year and Song of the Year Grammys for their song "Beautiful Day," from the "All That You Can't Leave Behind" album. In all, the popular band made off with three awards, including Best Rock Performance by a Duo or Group.

Rock group Steely Dan won the prestigious Album of the Year award for "Two Against Nature." It was chosen over Eminem's "The Marshall Mathers LP," as well as veteran performer Paul Simon's "You're the One," "Midnite Vultures" by Beck, and "Kid A" by Radiohead.

Eminem's controversial "The Marshall Mathers LP" won in the category of Best Rap Album of the Year -- fans describe it as poetic and personal, but detractors revile it as misogynist, anti-gay and violent.

The National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences earlier gave the foul-mouthed Eminem a Grammy for Best Rap Solo



Toni Braxton poses with her Grammy Award

Performance for his song, "The Real Slim Shady."

Eminem also won a Grammy in the Best Rap Performance by a Duo or a Group category for the song "Forgot About Dre," sung in collaboration with his musical 'godfather,' rapper Dr. Dre.

Dr. Dre also won a Grammy, for

Producer of the Year.

All three songs are from "The Marshall Mathers LP" album, an eight-million selling recording which also was nominated for Album of the Year.

Near the end of the show Eminem performed a duet of one of his songs with openly gay singer Elton John.

Eminem's songs include lyrics on gay bashing and violence against women and have been reviled as misogynist, homophobic and violent. But for the duet with Elton John he chose the song "Stan," which is about a deranged fan.

At the end of the duet Elton John -- dressed in a flashy yellow suit with giant orange polka dots -- approached Eminem and embraced him, to a standing audience ovation.

Eminem then turned to the tony audience -- and flipped them off.

The ceremony opened hours earlier with singer Madonna arriving on stage in a sparkling limousine, then dancing on the vehicle's roof as she belted out the opening song.

The event's host, comedian Jon Stewart, lost no time in talking about Eminem.