

'Any Indo-Pak war may turn into nuclear conflict'

AFP, Chakothi

A senior Pakistani officer warned Thursday that any war with India could be in danger of escalating into a full-blown nuclear conflict.

"When you have got the armies deployed on the border and they are sitting eyeball-to-eyeball with full preparations, it is like a huge dump of explosives," said Brigadier Muhammad Yaqub Khan.

"Even a small ignition can explode everything," Yaqub told reporters visiting the Line of Control, the heavily fortified de facto border which separates Indian- and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir.

"In case, God forbid, there is a war then nobody would be able to control the events. And if it comes to the survival of any one country you cannot say they will not use nuclear weapons."

weapons."

The two nuclear-armed rivals have both rushed troops to their borders in the disputed Himalayan region amid rising tensions over the December 13 attack on the Indian parliament.

"It's high time the world community paid attention to the problems because there are grave threats of war... we believe this could be a big catastrophe for the entire world," Yaqub said.

"We have no intention to initiate war. All our measures are purely defensive."

Yaqub, who commands the First Azad (free) Kashmir Brigade numbering 3,500 troops, said this was "the most dangerous" period in relations with India since he had been stationed along the Line of Control.

"Presently the relationship between the two governments is at its lowest ebb," he said.

Yaqub said Pakistan had strengthened its positions along the line but had not moved any troops from its western border with Afghanistan, where thousands of soldiers are watching for fleeing al-Qaida fighters.

Pakistan has not moved any nuclear missiles into Kashmir, he added.

An hour into their visit, reporters heard no firing. Four Indian posts, sandbagged and equipped with mortars, rocket launchers and heavy machine guns, were visible 100 meters (yards) away.

About a dozen bunkers had been excavated in a hilltop.

India accuses Pakistan military intelligence of masterminding the

attack on its parliament which killed 14 people, including the five attackers. It has since withdrawn its ambassador to Pakistan and severed road and rail links.

New Delhi says the attack was carried out by two Pakistan-based Kashmiri militant groups, Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad. It demands that Pakistan curb their activities, freeze their assets and arrest their leaders.

Pakistan has already frozen the assets of the Lashkar-e-Taiba and arrested the head of Jaish-e-Mohammad, Maulana Masood Azhar.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell said Wednesday he had added the two groups to the State Department's terrorism blacklist.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Army troops man a bunker on Thursday in the Akhnoor sector some 65 km north of Jammu, at the de facto border that divides Kashmir between India and Pakistan. Indian and Pakistani troops have exchanged light arms and mortar fire in the Akhnoor sector, as tension between the two South Asian rivals continues to escalate.

19 Malaysian cult members found guilty of treason

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Nineteen members of an Islamic cult were Thursday found guilty of treason for planning a "holy war" to oust Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and could now face the death penalty.

Judge Zulkefli Ahmad Makinudin announced to a packed High Court that he was satisfied the prosecution had proven the guilt of the leader of the Al-Ma'unah cult, Mohamed Amin Mohamed Razali, and his 18 followers.

He rejected claims by the other 18 members during the 14-month trial that they were coerced by Mohamed Amin into participating in the plot.

"It is inconceivable that (Mohamed Amin) could have watched and controlled all the other defendants at all times to stop them from leaving."

Sinking of ship North Korea warns of steps against Japan

AFP, Seoul

North Korea on Thursday warned of countermeasures against Japan for "groundlessly" linking Pyongyang to a suspected spy ship, which sank after a firefight with the Japanese coast-guard.

A foreign ministry spokesman accused Tokyo of "an unpardonable smear campaign" against Pyongyang and denied any involvement in the weekend incident.

He told Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency monitored in Seoul that the "Japanese authorities used force of arms" to sink what remains an "unidentified ship."

"The DPRK (North Korea) is compelled to maintain the highest degree of vigilance against a series of plots hatched by the Japanese authorities to escalate their anti-DPRK campaign."

"The DPRK will take relevant countermeasures depending on the future attitude of Japan toward the incident," the spokesman added.

Australia set to expel over 1,000 East Timorese refugees

AFP, Sydney

Australia Thursday rejected claims by 1,600 East Timorese asylum seekers to stay in the country despite a call from the United Nations refugee agency to give them special consideration.

Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock dismissed requests from refugee lawyers that the East Timorese asylum seekers, some who arrived eight years ago, be allowed to stay in Australia.

He said refugee places in Australia's humanitarian programmes were scarce and should not be allocated to those whose homeland was now safe and secure.

Mass jail-break in NE India: 32 escaped

AFP, Guwahati

At least 32 prisoners escaped after overpowering their guards in India's northeastern state of Meghalaya, police officials said Thursday.

A police spokesman said the mass break-out took place Wednesday at the Williamnagar central prison, 310 km from Meghalaya's state capital Shillong.

"Two guards on duty came and asked the jail sentry to open the main gate to allow four prisoners to pass through for interrogation", police superintendent A.R. Mawthoh told AFP by telephone.

Japan hangs 2 multiple murderers

AFP, Tokyo

Japan on Thursday hanged two men convicted of multiple murders in the country's first executions for 13 months under a capital punishment system condemned as unnecessarily cruel.

"Executions were carried out today on two people whose death sentences had been finalised," the justice ministry said in a statement.

Hanging is the standard mode of carrying out the death penalty in Japan.

In line with ministry policy, officials declined to identify the men, but Jiji Press and Kyodo News agencies named them as Toshihiko Hasegawa, 51, and Kojiro Asakura, 66.

West accused of waging crusade against Islam

Al-Jazeera telecasts Laden's new video tape

AFP, Kabul

A defiant Osama bin Laden accused the West of waging a crusade and loathing Islam in a newly released tape, possibly filmed in early December at the height of a US bombing onslaught against his al-Qaida network.

Wearing combat fatigues and with an assault rifle propped at his side, bin Laden said he wanted to review "the fierce crusade against Islam, two months after it was launched," in the tape broadcast Wednesday by Qatar-based satellite network Al-Jazeera.

That statement suggested the tape was recorded around December 7, two months after the United States launched a punishing air campaign against Afghanistan's Taliban regime for harbouring the Saudi-born dissident.

Bin Laden is Washington's top suspect in terror attacks on the

United States on September 11 that killed 3,173 people, according to revised figures.

"The latest events have proved important truths. It has become clear that the West in general and America in particular have an unspeakable hatred for Islam," a distinctly more gaunt-looking bin Laden said on the tape.

Only four minutes' worth of extracts was transmitted from the 33-minute tape, received "a few days ago" from Pakistan, an official from the network said. The full recording is to be broadcast Thursday around 1830 GMT.

The White House bluntly dismissed the remarks by the Saudi-born dissident.

"This is nothing more than the same kind of terrorist propaganda we've heard before," a White House spokesman told reporters in Crawford, Texas, where US President George W. Bush is spend-

ing part of the holidays on his ranch.

In a Gallup poll carried out for CNN/USA Today, released Wednesday, 39 percent of Americans named Bush as the man they most admire -- a record.

While top administration officials have admitted they do not know where bin Laden is, some sources speculate he either escaped to Pakistan or was killed in US air strikes on his mountain hideouts in Afghanistan's Tora Bora region.

An estimated 2,000 al-Qaida troops are said to have fled toward Pakistan, while a group of some seven al-Qaida troops were resisting attempts to seize them at a Kandahar hospital, backed with weapons and grenades.

The new tape emerged as reports suggested that a Briton who allegedly attempted to blow up a US airliner en route from Paris to Miami was trained in Afghanistan at camps run by bin Laden's al-Qaida network.

Noted Tamil journalist stabbed

AP, Batticaloa

Sri Lanka's best know Tamil Internet journalist was stabbed and beaten by a group of men at his office, police and witnesses said Thursday.

The men, armed with clubs and knives, attacked Dharmaratnam Sivaram late Wednesday when he was filing his last report of the day for TamilNet Web site, said other journalists who were at the scene.

Sivaram was admitted to a hospital where he received six stitches on his head an arms, said Dr S Ilanko, who attended on him.

Police said they have detained three people, but would not say the motive behind the attack.

Police and local Tamil journalists spoke on condition that they should not be identified by name.

Stress reduction can help control diabetes

REUTERS, Washington

Stress reduction techniques such as a relaxation and breathing exercises can work as well as some drugs to control the effects of diabetes, researchers reported on Thursday.

Nearly one-third of diabetes patients who regularly practiced the techniques lowered their blood sugar levels by 1 per cent or more, a team at Duke University Medical Center reported.

"The stress management techniques, when added to standard care, helped reduce glucose levels," medical psychologist Richard Surwit of Duke, who led the study, said in a statement.

"The change is nearly as large as you would expect to see from some diabetes-control drugs," added Surwit, whose team's findings were reported in the January 2002 issue of the journal Diabetes Care.

Saudis pray for rain

AFP, Riyadh

Tens of thousands of Saudis prayed for rain Thursday for the fourth time in three months as the imam of Mecca's Grand Mosque said widespread sins and corruption caused the lack of winter rain.

The prayers were held in main mosques across the kingdom, home to Islam's holiest sites, in response to a call by King Fahd "in view of the country's and people's need for rain."

Sheikh Saleh bin Hameed, who led the morning prayers at the Grand Mosque, cautioned Muslims they must sincerely plead for God's forgiveness and implement Islamic Sharia law.

Saudis had already offered rain prayers on October 26 and November 15 and 29, with little success.

North Korea approves rare amnesty for prisoners

AFP, Seoul

Stalinist North Korea, internationally accused of human rights abuses, announced a rare amnesty for political prisoners Thursday as part of a drive by leader Kim Jong-Il to rebuild the country's tattered economy.

The amnesty will go into effect from January 1, ahead of the 90th birthday of late president Kim Il-Sung next year, the North's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said.

The founding father, who died in 1994, has been held up as the North's "eternal" president, and his birthday, which falls on April 15, is celebrated as one of its biggest national holidays.

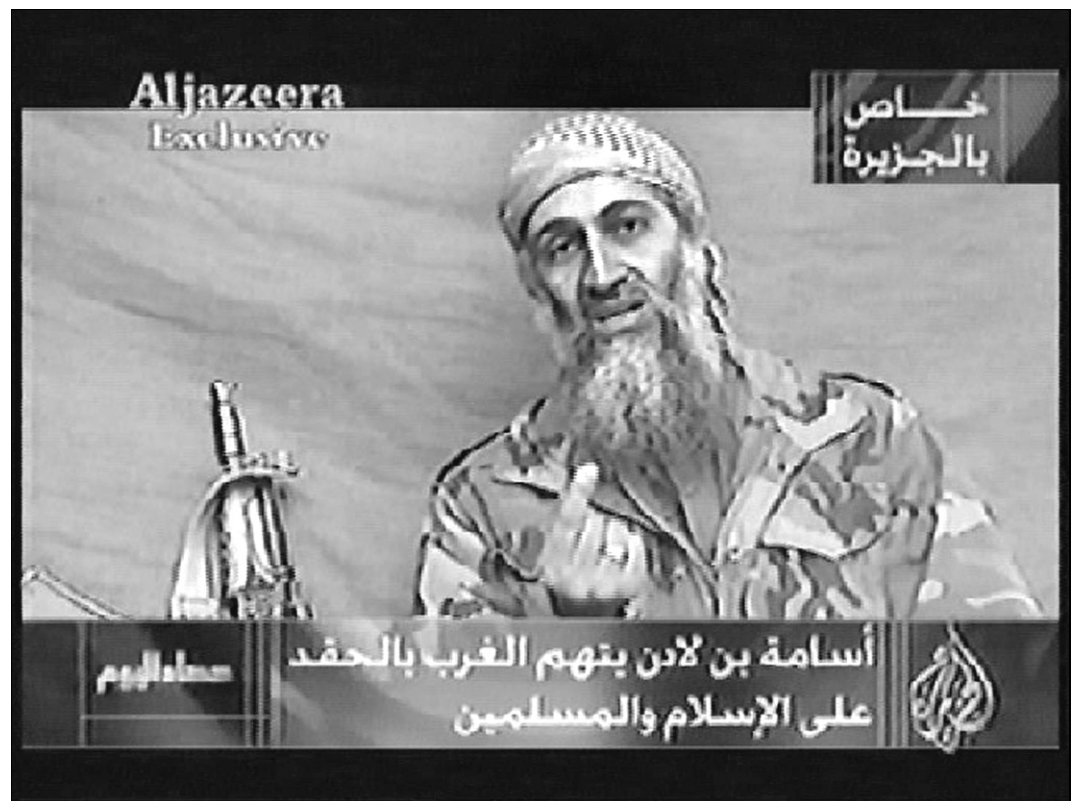


PHOTO: AFP

A TV grab taken from Qatar-based satellite television Al-Jazeera on Wednesday shows chief terror suspect Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden accused the West of "loathing Islam" in a new message broadcast by Al-Jazeera, which said it was recorded two weeks ago.

Indian war rhetoric may hamper Laden hunt

AFP, Islamabad

Indian military pressure on Pakistan's eastern border in Kashmir could force Islamabad to redeploy troops who are trying to catch Taliban and al-Qaida fighters fleeing from Afghanistan, analysts say.

For the first time in the country's history Pakistan has sent troops to the western semi-autonomous tribal region, home to fiercely independent ethnic Pashtuns.

Defence ministry sources say around 50,000 Pakistani troops are currently deployed in the rugged border area to intercept members of suspected terrorist mastermind

Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida organisation and Taliban fighters.

Over the past week India and Pakistan have been massing troops and armour on their border since India accused Pakistan's military intelligence of masterminding an attack on its parliament.

India says Pakistan-based Kashmiri militants mounted the attack which left 14 people dead, including all five gunmen.

Pakistani analysts say Indian military strategists are taking advantage of the troop deployments along the Afghan border for a possible attack on the Pakistani zone of Kashmir.

"India is putting Pakistan in a

difficult situation because a large number of its troops are occupied in the western sector. It is therefore building pressure on our eastern border," said analyst Hassan Askari Rizvi.

He said India wants to undermine Pakistan's contribution to the international anti-terror coalition.

New Delhi also wanted the international community to legitimise its crackdown against "terrorists" in both Pakistan- and Indian-administered Kashmir.

Rizvi said that "if Pakistan withdrew its troops from the western border, its relations with the international coalition will be affected."

Thai refugee camp closed UN orders freeze of assets of Pak groups

AFP, Ban Maneeloy

Thai authorities on Thursday forcibly closed a major camp for Myanmar dissidents, the biggest step yet in its campaign to shut camps housing more than 120,000 people who have fled Myanmar's military government.

Troops and police watched as several hundred students and others were taken in trucks from the Maneeloy Holding Centre, about 100 kilometers (60 miles) west of Bangkok, an AFP reporter said.

Residents sang pro-democracy

songs as they left Maneeloy for the Tham Hin refugee camp, about 10 kilometers (six miles) from the Myanmar border.

Officials said there was no resistance from the estimated 500 people in Maneeloy, which opened in 1992 and has been closely linked to radical groups opposing the Myanmar military government.

Leaders of the Burmese Students Association (BSA), the main group for camp residents, said though that about 100 people had fled during the night to avoid the transfer and possible repatriation.

REUTERS, United Nations

The United Nation's 189 member-nations were ordered on Wednesday to freeze the finances of a charity group and three Pakistanis accused by the United States of offering to help Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida network make nuclear weapons.

The group Umamah Tameer-e-Nau and three of its directors were the latest additions to a growing list of organisations linked to Bin Laden and his al-Qaida network by the UN Security Council's sanctions committee on Afghanistan.

Seeking to punish the Taliban, Afghanistan's then rulers, for harbouring Bin Laden, the Security Council voted a year ago to require

Jaya wins another legal battle

AFP, Madras

Former actress Jayaram Jayalalitha -- who was ousted as chief minister of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu over corruption charges -- won a nother crucial legal battle Thursday when she was acquitted in a "coal import" scam.

Jayalalitha is now set to return as chief minister, just months after she had to step down under court orders. Earlier this month, she was acquitted in two other corruption cases.

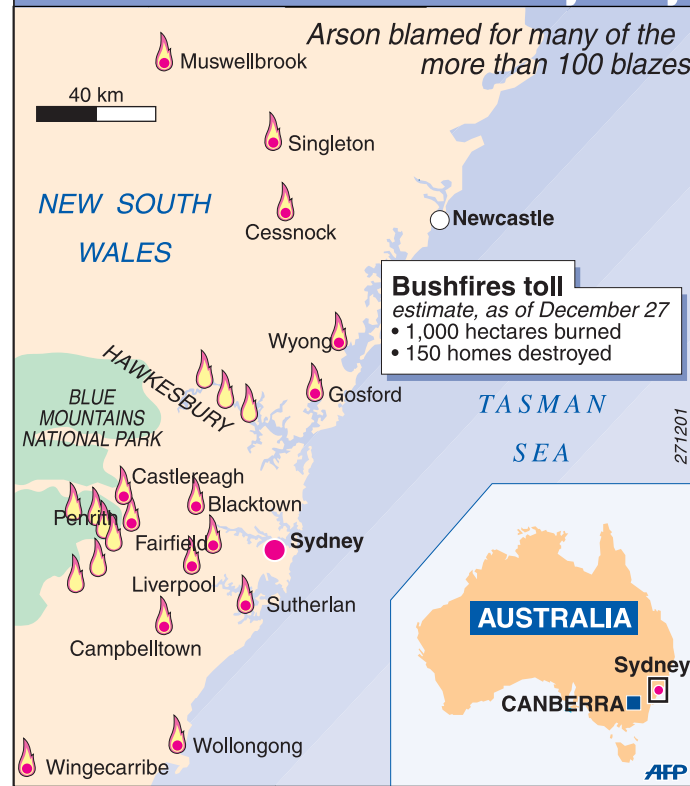
Acquitting her in the 65 million-rupee (1.38 million dollar) scam, judge S.S.P. Darwesh of the Madras High Court said there was no evidence to prove Jayalalitha and others accused in the case had caused the state government any loss.



Jayalalitha

"The charges that they had gained pecuniary advantage through illegal or corrupt means had not been proved beyond reasonable doubt," the court order said.

Australian fires encircle Sydney



700 killed in Nepali unrest

AFP, Kathmandu

Almost 700 people, mostly Maoists rebels, have been killed in weeks of violence since the guerrillas broke a ceasefire a month ago, a watchdog said Thursday.

"At least 698 people, including 523 Maoists and 97 security personnel and others were killed across the kingdom since the Maoists resumed their violence on November 23," the Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC), a Kathmandu-based non-governmental organisation said.

"In the one-month period between the breaking of truce on November 23 and December 24, the state was responsible for 80 percent of the deaths, while the rebels accounted for the rest," the

NGO report said, adding 901 people have been arrested so far.

The INSEC report added 3,386 people believed to be linked to the Maoists have surrendered to the local authorities since King Gyanendra declared a state of emergency on November 26.

Gyanendra approved the use of the army for the first time against the five-year-old Maoist insurgency after he assumed the throne in June, following the massacre of King Birendra and nine others by a drunken crown prince Dipendra.

The army was first fully deployed against the rebels last month, after the Maoists broke a four-month ceasefire with a spate of attacks on the army and police.

Israel, PA agree on basis for future peace talks

AFP, Gaza City

The head of the Palestinian legislative council, Ahmed Qorei, and Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres have reached an agreement on the basis of future peace talks, a Palestinian source said Wednesday.

A document setting out the agreement, of which AFP obtained a copy in Arabic, handles four points, including Israeli recognition of a Palestinian state, and is similar to that published on December 23 by the Israeli daily, Yedioth Aharonot.

The Palestinian leadership decided on Tuesday to maintain its high-level contacts with Israel, despite its decision to stop Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat from attending midnight mass in Bethlehem in the West Bank, and Israel confirmed that the contacts between Qorei and Peres had the agreement of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Peres was on a trip to the Ukraine Wednesday and reacted favourably to a suggestion from Kiev to host Israeli-Palestinian peace talks in Yalta, where the victorious allies from the second world war divided up the globe in 1945.

Herewith, the four points as described in the document.

"Reach a complete ceasefire within six weeks under the auspices of the United States and start implementing the Mitchell report (named after former US senator George Mitchell) to fight terrorism by: Collecting weapons, putting an end to the closure (of the Palestinian territories) and the blockade (of Palestinian towns), freezing settlement activities, putting an end to the assassination (of Palestinian militants by the Israeli army) and

regrouping the various Palestinian security services under one single command.

"Israel must recognise within eight weeks a Palestinian state in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip on the basis of UN Security Council resolutions 242 and 338 and Palestinians must recognise the State of Israel on the basis of the same resolutions.

"Negotiations are to be launched after eight weeks between the two states on the final status of the Palestinian territories. (The negotiations) must discuss a time frame for a gradual Israeli withdrawal from the Palestinian state's territory to recognised borders within 18 months (Palestinian position) and within 24 months (Israeli position). The negotiations on the issues of Palestinian refugees, Israeli settlements, security, the sharing of water resources and the relations (of the Palestinian state) with other states must be completed within nine months (Palestinian position) and 12 months (Israeli position).

"The regional and international contributions to the negotiations, including the peace-keeping force, the support to the Palestinian economy and regional cooperation and arbitration, are to be examined by the two parties."

Arafat has decided to despatch Qorei and Information Minister Yasser Abed Rabbo to brief the Egyptian and Jordanian leaders on the latest contacts with Israel, an official source said.

The Palestinians often consult Jordan and Egypt, the two Arab countries who have a peace treaty with the Jewish state and have acted as peace-broker in the bloody Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Meanwhile, the Israeli army