

Anti-terror campaign not over yet: Blair

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair hailed the global anti-terror campaign in his New Year's message Sunday but warned that "the job is not yet done" with thousands of extremists still at large.

He said "huge progress" had been made since the September 11 attacks in the United States, with chief suspect Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network hit hard and Afghanistan's Taliban regime brought down.

Victory in Afghanistan should open the way for "a concerted effort" to end the conflict in the Middle East which lay at the root of much terror.

US preparing return of Zinni to Middle East

AFP, Jerusalem

The United States is preparing for the return of its Middle East envoy Anthony Zinni, who was recalled in mid-December amid a massive flare-up of violence in the region, Israeli public radio said Sunday.

The radio said US officials had stepped up contacts with both Israel and the Palestinians with a view to launching a new round of shuttle diplomacy between the two sides in the new year.

Zinni's arrival in the region on November 26 coincided with a spate of suicide bombings by Palestinian radicals and fierce Israeli counter-attacks on symbols of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's authority.

New Afghan govt to restore Bamiyan Buddhas

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's new government will restore the Bamiyan Buddhas, an emblem of culture destroyed by the Taliban regime, Minister of Culture and Information Raheem Makhdoom said Sunday.

The two giant statues, which date back some 1,800 years, were blown up by the Taliban in March by a 20-day barrage of dynamite, rockets and tank shells that sparked international outrage.

"The restoration of the Buddhas is one of our top priorities," along with the revival of the media and broadcasting sector, the minister told AFP.

Makhdoom, a specialist in Afghan culture and Sufi poetry, said the new administration would hold a seminar focusing on the statues and the restoration of the national museum, which was also sacked by the Taliban.

Local and international experts would be invited to attend and help map out a plan to tackle the ambitious rebuilding projects, he said, without elaborating on how the statues might be restored.

Weather helps Australia to keep blaze at bay

AFP, Sydney

Australian firefighters breathed a sigh of relief Sunday as the predicted fierce weather failed to materialise, dramatically reducing the threat to homes along a 600-kilometre (370-mile) arc of fire around Sydney.

Rising humidity levels helped keep the blazes that have threatened Sydney's outskirts for a week at bay but fire chiefs said the 15,000 firefighters placed at battle stations would remain on high alert over the next 72 hours.

"Moist, southerly winds have quite dramatically diminished the immediacy of the threat," New South Wales Rural Fire Service Commissioner Phil Koperberg told reporters.

Militants kill 4 in Kashmir

AFP, New Delhi

Suspected Muslim militants killed four Hindu people including a woman in Indian-controlled Kashmir's northwest Rajouri district on Sunday morning, police said.

They said a group of suspected rebels barged into a house in Kanthol village and dragged out the family members before shooting them.

The suspected militants also burnt two houses in the same village. Indian troops have rushed to the spot to launch a massive combing operation, but have been unable to arrest any of the culprits.

Nearly 35,000 people have died in an armed insurgency by separatist Muslim militants in Kashmir since 1989.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) presides over an all party meeting on the worsening relations with Pakistan on Sunday as Indian Minister for Parliamentary Affairs Pramod Mahajan (C) and Congress (I) president and leader of the opposition, Sonia Gandhi (L), looks on in New Delhi. Vajpayee said he was confident that growing international pressure on Pakistan would force it to take action against militant groups operating from its territory.

India's real fight is with terrorism, not Pakistan, says Advani

AFP, New Delhi

India is interested in fighting terrorism, not Pakistan, Home Minister L.K. Advani said Sunday, calling on Islamabad to move against extremist groups operating from its soil.

"Our real fight is not with Pakistan but with terrorism and those who support it," Advani said on state-run television.

As India continued to move troops to the western border with its perennial rival, Advani said the threat of their dispute escalating beyond diplomatic sanctions to armed conflict was dependent on Pakistan's willingness to clamp down on extremist groups.

"So far, steps have been taken at the diplomatic level only... Any step at the non-diplomatic level can be taken only because our neighbour

continues to support terrorism," Advani said.

Tensions between India and Pakistan have soared since a bloody December 13 assault on India's parliament, which New Delhi accuses Pakistan's military intelligence of masterminding. Islamabad denies the allegation.

"Even today it can give a firm assurance to us and the world community that it will stop aiding and abetting terrorism," Advani said, while describing the measures already announced by Pakistan as "a joke".

"We are not going to be taken by this kind of deceptive cosmetics, but must make terrorism our prime target," he said, comparing the government in Pakistan to the deposed Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

New Argentine govt offers to resign

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Argentina's new Cabinet offered to quit on Saturday after new protests at the government's inability to end a long recession sparked clashes with police outside the presidential palace and looting of Congress.

Barely a week after deadly riots forced out a previous president, a dozen police were injured after using tear gas to break up what had been a peaceful protest by thousands against hated banking curbs and politicians widely seen as corrupt.

Thirty-three people were arrested as broad frustration over interim President Adolfo Rodriguez Saa's week-old government boiled over. Some protesters pounded on the doors of the presidential palace, while others broke into Congress, where they dragged out furniture and set small fires that were quickly put out as the frenzy waned shortly

US asks Pak govt to snub militants

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan Sunday faced fresh US pressure to round up Islamic extremists accused of targeting India as its top military brass planned its response to any Indian attack across their tense border.

US President George W. Bush has called on Pakistan to "eliminate extremists" implicated in an attack on India's parliament and urged leaders of the South Asian nuclear rivals to defuse their escalating dispute.

In separate phone calls from his Texas ranch to Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf Saturday, Bush "urged both leaders to work to reduce tensions in the region", the White House said.

But he specifically called on Musharraf to act decisively against groups seeking to "harm India, undermine Pakistan, and provoke a war between India and Pakistan and destabilise the coalition against terrorism", according to a spokesman.

Musharraf said Friday that he was aware of India's demands and what had to be done to defuse the tensions.

"We are to crack down and we do understand that," he said. But badly rattled by further troop movements within India, which it said had only occurred during previous wars, the government's tone changed Sunday.

"We have done all that we should have or could have done. We have taken action against suspected terrorists," a government spokesman told

after dawn Saturday. "These gangsters have got to go!" yelled one woman as she and thousands of others beat pots and pans in front of the palace in anger at a brutal recession in its fourth year and unemployment soaring over 18 per cent.

Just days after being sworn in, all the ministers in Rodriguez Saa's caretaker government offered to quit following the violent protests, a government spokesman said. It was not known if their resignations had been accepted.

Hoping to cool popular anger, Rodriguez Saa said Saturday evening that he had asked the banks to open for longer hours on Monday to allow some savers access to cash.

"(I am) very concerned about what is happening in Argentina," Rodriguez Saa told reporters at the presidential residence on the outskirts of Buenos Aires.



PHOTO: AFP

Miss France Elodie Gossuin (C), winner of the title Miss Europe, poses with first runnerup Miss Poland Adriana Gerczew (L) and third runnerup Miss Croatia Karta Milinovic in Beirut on Saturday.

Lanka asks Norway to keep India updated on peace bid

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's new prime minister has asked peace broker Norway to keep India and the opposition updated on attempts to bring Tamil Tiger rebels to the negotiating table, his office said Sunday.

The office also said Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe had written to Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik to follow up a call formally asking Oslo to revive its moribund peace efforts on the island.

The Tamil separatist conflict is of concern to India given its proximity and the close cultural and religious links between Sri Lanka's two million Tamil minority and the 60 million Tamils in South India.

Officials quoted Wickremesinghe as saying in his letter on Friday: "It is understood that the Royal Norwegian government will keep India and other relevant parties informed of the developments on a need-to-know basis."

The prime minister also asked Norway to keep Sri Lanka's main opposition informed of the peace process by briefing an opposition figure nominated by President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

Norway was invited to be a third party facilitator by Kumaratunga's former government in 1999, but the initiative was put on hold in June when Colombo objected to Oslo's peace envoy Erik Solheim. Kumaratunga's People's

Alliance lost the December 5 parliamentary elections to Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP).

However, she is allowed to remain as president until December 2005 while the UNP runs the government.

Wickremesinghe was also awaiting a response from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) on the logistics of taking messages between the government and the Tamil rebels.

ICRC spokesman Harasha Gunawardena confirmed that they had been approached by the government.

"We are in the process of discussing with the relevant authorities on this matter," Gunawardena said.

UK to honour Harrison with knighthood

AFP, London

Former Beatle George Harrison, who died last month, is to be knighted posthumously by Britain's Queen Elizabeth, the News of the World reported on Sunday.

It said his death on November 29 had come too late for him to be added to the queen's traditional New Year honours list due to be published this week, and would instead feature on her birthday honours list in June.

The paper quoted a senior government source as confirming the knighthood, which if true would be the first to be awarded posthumously.

7 rebels killed, 40 detained in Nepal

XINHUA, Kathmandu

At least seven Nepali ultra-leftist guerrillas were killed and 40 others arrested on Saturday by the government security forces in various districts of the country, The Kathmandu Post, an independent English daily, said Sunday.

The security forces gunned down four guerrillas in Gorkha district, 75 kilometers west of Kathmandu and three guerrillas were killed on the spot in other districts when they exchanged fire with the security forces, the daily said, quoting a press release issued Saturday night by Nepali Defence Ministry.

The security forces also arrested a total of 40 guerrillas and recovered a large cache of arms from various districts under the "search and destroy" operations carried out by the government forces, the release said.

Over 100 security personnel and more than 500 guerrillas were killed in Nepal since the government imposed the state of emergency on November 26 following a series of attacks by the guerrillas on security forces after they broke a four-month-long ceasefire talks with the government on November 23.

Pak secret service aiding Laden: Afghan minister

AFP, Kabul

A top Afghan minister has accused Pakistan's secret service of helping Osama bin Laden elude his pursuers -- the latest in a series of claims by Kabul that the suspected terrorist mastermind has fled across the rugged border.

"We think that when Osama travels to Pakistan, it does not mean that his activities are not monitored by the ISI (Inter Services Intelligence)," Interior Minister Yunus Qanooni said Saturday in an interview with Iranian television.

"Undoubtedly they knew what was going on. The fact that there has not been any reaction and that (bin Laden) has not been arrested indicates that he is somehow being supported by the Pakistani ISI."

Qanooni quickly added that the attitude of Pakistan's leadership was "distinct to that of the ISI". Bin Laden, he said, is successfully "playing his own game" to avoid a huge US-led manhunt by staying on the move between the two countries.

He and his followers "are mainly in Pakistan and

possibly in Afghanistan", the interior minister said.

Also Saturday, an Afghan defence ministry source said the world's most wanted man was using the Pakistani city of Peshawar as a base but was constantly on the move.

On Thursday defence ministry spokesman Mohammad Habel said bin Laden crossed from the Tora Bora region of eastern Afghanistan into Pakistan about a week earlier, after the defeat of the Taliban regime which sheltered him.

Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar said Saturday in Islamabad he had "no information whatsoever that Osama bin Laden has come to Pakistan".

The Afghan defence ministry has also urged the United States to consider halting its bombing in the country, saying the last few al-Qaida fighters have almost been wiped out at Tora Bora.

Washington has insisted that its military operations to capture or kill Bin Laden and his top al-Qaida and Taliban allies will continue as long as necessary. There was a new report Saturday of US bombing.

World focus shifts from Afghan war to Indo-Pak conflict

AFP, Washington

Rising tensions along the Pakistan-Indian border threatened Sunday to undermine Islamabad's role as a key ally in the US-led war on terrorism, as Washington called on both countries to exercise restraint.

With Pakistani troops massing at the shared border with India, US officials feared fewer troops would be available to police the border with Afghanistan to find Osama bin Laden and top leaders in the al-Qaida terrorist network.

Efforts to prevent war on the India-Pakistan border also diverted Washington's single-minded focus on the war against terrorism Saturday, with the US president placing phone calls to the leaders of both countries urging restraint.

President George W. Bush, who relies on Pakistan to police its Afghan border to catch fleeing al-Qaida fighters, said he was pleased that Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf had arrested 50 "extreme terrorists."

"I hope India takes note of that,

that the president is responding forcefully and actively to bring those who would harm others to justice," a vacationing Bush said during impromptu remarks to a handful of reporters at his ranch in Crawford, Texas.

But Bush also called on Musharraf "to take additional strong and decisive measures to eliminate the extremists who seek to harm India, undermine Pakistan, and provoke a war between India and Pakistan and destabilise the coalition against terrorism," said White House spokesman Scott McClellan.

The US president also "reiterated his outrage over the December 13 attack" on India's parliament, which New Delhi accuses the ISI of masterminding.

In his call to Vajpayee, Bush said that the United States "is determined to cooperate with India in the fight against terrorism," McClellan said.

The decades-old Cold War simmering between the rival neighbours heated up after a deadly December 13 attack on the parlia-

ment in New Delhi, which India blames on Kashmir-based Muslim extremists backed by Islamabad intelligence services, strong supporters of Afghanistan's now-defunct Taliban regime.

In New Delhi, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee warned his country to "be prepared" as he massed more men and material on the Pakistani border.

"No means will be spared, although we shall do our utmost to avoid war with Pakistan," he said.

"At the same time, I would like one and all to know that, if necessary, India shall fight this battle on its own."

In Islamabad meanwhile, Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar warned that "the situation is growing dangerously tense."

"Army and air force formations have been moved from peacetime locations in India to operational areas," Sattar said, deploring "threatening rhetoric" from Indian leaders.

'India enjoys advantage over Pak military might'

AFP, Washington

India enjoys a strong numerical advantage over Pakistan in both conventional and nuclear weapons, giving it an edge in its current confrontation with its perennial foe, according to data released by a leading US think tank.

But a prominent US expert on South Asia also warned Saturday that the roughly two-to-one military advantage of the Indian armed forces makes it more likely that a cornered Islamabad could lash out with a nuclear strike.

"If you had a full war between India and Pakistan, not just skirmishes on the border... India would start winning," said former US ambassador Dennis Kux, who has served in both India and Pakistan.

"And at a certain point Pakistan, rather than going under, would push the button," he said, appearing on CNN's "The Capital Gang" show.

According to a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, India, whose population exceeds one

billion, has more than 1.2 million soldiers on active duty compared to Pakistan's 620,000.

A similar advantage is observed in practically all major conventional weapons category, the survey showed.

New Delhi's arsenal includes 3,414 main battle tanks and 1,540 light tanks, while Islamabad's heavy armour is limited to a total of 2,300 pieces.

At a time when the US military campaign in Afghanistan has demonstrated the new strength of air power, India appears better positioned to achieve superiority in the sky, if its current tensions with Pakistan were ever to boil over into a shooting war. Its air bases house a total of 738 combat aircraft while Pakistan's house just 353, according to CSIS.

New Delhi also has nearly a five-fold advantage in transport aircraft and a six-fold one in combat helicopters, which, as events in Afghanistan have shown, can inflict devastating damage on ground troops.

In addition, India has 37 Naval aircraft compared to Pakistan's five, the report indicated.

Islamabad has an advantage only in self-propelled artillery, being able to field 240 pieces compared to India's 180.

But it loses out in towed artillery where New Delhi has a 4,175-to-1,467 advantage, the data showed.

Kux said geography also favoured India because an armoured blitz across arid Punjab province toward the Afghan border could cut off Islamabad, the capital, from Sindh, the country's economic powerhouse and its main port of Karachi.

"India could just cut across the middle of Pakistan," said the former diplomat. "In the desert, it should be fairly easy to do."

On Saturday, Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar made clear Islamabad did not favour any kind of war with India but refused to rule out a nuclear option.

"If war is imposed, then contingencies can arise, and I would hate to think of those contingencies," he said. But US experts believe that even in an exchange of nuclear strikes, India, while suffering tremendous losses, could have an advantage.

Indian troops on alert along Bhutan border

AFP, Kolkata

Indian security forces have been placed on alert on the border with Bhutan, ahead of a deadline for separatist groups fighting in north-east India to vacate their bases in the Himalayan kingdom, army officials said Sunday.

Bhutan has ordered separatist outfits such as the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) to leave by December 31 or face military action by the Royal Bhutan Army.

"The Indian army, which has already taken over the security of

the Indo-Bhutan border, has issued shoot-at-sight orders for those trying to cross into Indian territory," said a brigadier from the army's Eastern Command in Calcutta.

The rebels have operated out of Bhutan for around three years, staging hit-and-run guerrilla strikes in Assam. India puts their number at 4,000.

Earlier this year, ULFA leaders and top Bhutanese government officials held talks in Thimphu where the rebels agreed to shift their bases by December end.