

Pakistan may extradite militants to India

Indo-Pak troops exchange mortar, machine gun fire

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan will consider using a regional convention to extradite up to 20 alleged terrorists on an Indian "wanted list" but New Delhi must first take all necessary legal steps, a report said Wednesday.

Despite continuing cross-border shelling, the threat of war between the neighbours appears to have abated after Pakistan arrested some 100 members of Kashmiri militant groups accused by India of mounting an attack on its parliament.

But Pakistan insists that without evidence, it cannot take action against the alleged militants on the list which New Delhi delivered to Islamabad through diplomatic channels.

Hopes of an early diplomatic solution to the standoff between the nuclear-armed rivals have faded, with both sides saying there are no plans yet for bilateral talks at a regional summit in Kathmandu.

Pakistan Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar was quoted by The Nation newspaper as saying Islamabad would consider the extraditions under

the SAARC Anti-Terrorism Convention if India takes steps such as indicting the suspects.

The Nation said he was speaking to Pakistani journalists Tuesday night in the Nepalese capital before a meeting of foreign ministers from the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Meanwhile, Indian and Pakistani troops exchanged heavy machine gun and mortar fire overnight in Kashmir, despite diplomatic efforts to ease escalating tensions between the two nuclear powers.

The troops traded mortar fire in the southern Kashmiri region of Nowshera, while in nearby Hiranagar there was an intense exchange of machine gun fire, a defence ministry official said Wednesday.

However, there were no reports of any casualties.

India and Pakistan have moved tens of thousands of their troops to their border in recent weeks, following an increase in tension after the December 13 attack on India's parliament building in New Delhi.

India blamed the attack on two Pakistan-based Islamic militant groups who are battling New Delhi's rule in Indian administered Kashmir.

Greece intercepts boat with 200 migrants

AFP, Athens

Greek authorities intercepted a ship carrying around 230 suspected illegal immigrants off the southern island of Crete early Wednesday after the boat suffered a mechanical breakdown overnight, naval authorities said.

A Greek navy warship and helicopter were escorting the vessel, a 40-metre (130-foot) ship bearing no name and flying no flag, into one of Crete's southern ports where it was expected to arrive later in the day.

The merchant navy ministry did not say what measures it was intending to take against the ship's passengers, whose nationality has not been revealed.

Turkish authorities located the vessel overnight off the southern coast of Crete, saying the ship was sinking and triggering a vast rescue operation.



Firefighters tackle a bush fire at West Pymble on Wednesday. Firefighters and homeowners struggled side-by-side to prevent bushfires, which police said were started by serial arsonists spreading through a densely-populated Sydney suburb.

ULFA, Bhutanese officials to talk closure of rebel camps

AFP, Guwahati

Indian separatists and Bhutanese government officials are expected to hold talks soon to pave the way for closure of all rebel camps located inside the tiny Himalayan kingdom, officials said Wednesday.

"Four out of nine camps of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA) have already been closed," Thinley Penjor, a Bhutanese diplomat in New Delhi, said.

"Discussions between the rebel leadership and the government will take place soon for the closure of the remaining bases," Penjor told

AFP.

"We don't know which way the ULFA cadres have gone after leaving Bhutan."

Indian police say some 2,000 ULFA guerrillas have been using well-entrenched bases in southern Bhutan over the past four years to launch hit-and-run operations in the northeastern Indian state of Assam, where the group is fighting for an independent homeland.

The relocation of ULFA bases follows an agreement between the outfit's top leaders and Bhutan Home Minister Thinley Gyamthso signed in June 2000 in Thimphu.

The ULFA had agreed to "completely shift" four camps by last Monday and had sought more time for the withdrawal of their entire operations from Bhutan.

Penjor said no firm dates had been fixed for the next round of talks. "But we hope it will take place soon."

The king of Bhutan, Jigme Singhye Wangchuk, last month had threatened a military crackdown if the ULFA rebels did not vacate their bases.

Indian intelligence officials say the ULFA are shifting their camps from Bhutan to Bangladesh.

'UK immigration law favours whites'

AP, London

The government wanted to make it more difficult in the 1970s for non-whites from Commonwealth nations in South Asia and Africa to settle in Britain, according to 30-year-old papers made public Tuesday.

At the same time, the then Conservative government of Prime Minister Edward Heath tried to ease the rules for immigrants from Commonwealth countries with large white populations, although government ministers acknowledged that this would be seen as discriminatory.

British government files, regu-

larly released through the Public Record Office after the passage of 30 years, this year contain a report of a Cabinet meeting Jan. 5, 1971 at which Home Secretary Reginald Maudling explained the thinking behind the Immigration Act of 1971, which still largely governs immigration to the United Kingdom.

He spoke of the "old" Commonwealth and the "new" Commonwealth, apparently differentiating between the original 1931 member nations including Canada, Australia and New Zealand and the countries that joined after World War II from the Indian subcontinent, many African members, and the Caribbean.

Firefighters in desperate battle to save Sydney

AFP, Sydney

Firefighters using bulldozers and helicopters fought to save homes in a densely-populated Sydney suburb from blazing bushfires on a hot, dusty day on Wednesday.

Bulldozers cleared a 250 metre (825 foot) long fire-break to hold back the fire burning dangerously close to houses in the North Epping and South Turramurra areas just 15 kilometres (nine miles) from the city centre.

"We're still concerned it will reach Lane Cove National Park and are putting significant resources

and helicopters into it," New South Wales (NSW) Rural Fire Service spokesman John Winter said.

More than 100 houses burnt down when fires reached Lane Cove in the 1994 bushfire disaster.

Helicopters were Wednesday deployed to put out spot fires jumping containment lines as hot and gusty conditions made conditions difficult for weary firefighters battling blazes for the 10th successive day.

"Today it's about as bad a picture as you can conjure up," said New South Wales Rural Fire Services Commissioner Phil Koperberg.

"We have somewhere in the

order of 2,000 kilometres (1,250 miles) of fire perimeter to deal with on a day which is not conducive to doing anything else but hopping in the swimming pool somewhere. The firefighters are feeling the strain."

Strong winds up to 60 kilometres (37 miles) an hour and summer temperatures of up to 35 degrees Celsius (95 degrees Fahrenheit) made conditions tough for the firefighters.

"These are the worst possible conditions for firefighting," Bureau of Meteorology director Kevin O'Loughlin said.

Search for Omar intensifies amid arrival of int'l force

AFP, Kabul

A final push was imminent to flush Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar out of his latest hideout, as military officers from 17 countries paved the way here for a 4,500-strong security force to shore up Afghanistan's fledgling government.

US Marines conducting an intelligence gathering mission at a suspected Taliban and al-Qaida compound in southern Helmand province, where Omar is thought to be hiding, returned to their base in Kandahar early Wednesday, CNN reported.

The advance party of some 20 to 30 officers and other personnel preparing for the arrival of the multinational peacekeepers arrived here early Wednesday, British officials said.

In Berlin, a German defence ministry spokesman said a group of 149 people from the countries contributing troops for the UN-mandated International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had left Britain for the Afghan capital.

Seventy British troops arrived in Kabul on Monday after an agreement was finally signed setting up the international force to help provide security, as the new government of interim leader Hamid Karzai tries to

rebuild the central Asian nation following the ouster of the hardline Taliban militia.

Britain will lead the force for the first three months of its six-month deployment in Afghanistan, and its troops will be joined by a large German contingent and forces from other contributor nations.

In an interview published Wednesday in the US daily The New York Times, Karzai welcomed the presence of peacekeepers in Kabul, but said he wanted them in other cities as well, adding that people from all over had asked him for peacekeepers.

US and Afghan forces prepared a massive push to capture Omar at his latest hideout in the south of the country, Afghan officials said.

Omar, on the run since the fall of Kandahar on December 7, has reportedly established a new base in Baghran in the remote mountains to the northwest of Kandahar, where he is guarded by supporters and al-Qaida loyalists.

The US military has declined to confirm US media reports that some 200 US Marines have already joined the hunt for Omar, but local Afghan intelligence chief Hajj Gulalai said a major operation involving marines was in the offing.



British Royal Marines guard the entrance of the headquarters of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in northern Kabul on Wednesday.

2 postal workers hospitalised in anthrax scare in India

AFP, Bombay

Two Bombay postal workers, who handled an envelope containing powder and a photograph believed to be of terror suspect Osama bin Laden, were being monitored in hospital Wednesday for possible anthrax poisoning.

"The two were admitted in our hospital on Monday complaining of nausea after they opened an envelope containing some brown powder," a hospital nurse attending one of the patients in Bombay's Nair Hospital told AFP.

The envelope has been sent to the Bombay-based Haffkine Institute of Training for tests.

"Prima facie, it appears a prank to me," said the institute's director, S.M. Sapatnekar.

Lanka eases embargo on rebel-held areas

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka announced Wednesday a major relaxation of an economic embargo on rebel-held areas in the island's north, as part of moves to promote a dialogue with Tamil Tiger separatists.

A defence ministry statement said all categories of goods would now be allowed into areas under the control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) with the exception of 10 items, including firearms, ammunition and explosives.

"The government is fundamentally committed to doing all in its

power to improve the living conditions of people in every part of Sri Lanka," the statement said.

The easing of the embargo -- first imposed in the late 1980s -- was a key LTTE demand ahead of internationally-backed peace talks to end decades of fighting that has killed more than 60,000 people.

Fuel and cement will also remain on the restricted list, the ministry said.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's new government was elected to office last month on the pledge that it would initiate a peace process with the rebels.

Israel eases blockade on Palestinian territories

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel said Wednesday it has adopted a series of measures aimed at alleviating the closure of the Palestinian territories ahead of the return of US special envoy Anthony Zinni.

These measures were decided by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer and the Israeli army's chief of staff, General Shaul Mofaz, a statement from the prime minister's office said.

"The prime minister has ordered the immediate implementation of a series of measures to ease the current blockade with a view to

facilitating the daily life of civilians," the statement said.

Israeli public radio had previously reported the easing of the internal closure of Palestinian cities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the reduction of the number of Israeli army checkpoints to allow for the freer movement of Palestinian vehicles.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has arrested dozens of Palestinian militants, mainly Islamists, since a December 16 speech calling for an end to armed operations against Israel.

The main radical Islamic organisations eventually accepted Arafat's call for a truce.

Taiwan-India begin secret military cooperation?

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan and India are secretly developing military cooperation despite the lack of diplomatic ties, the United Daily News reported Wednesday.

The two countries have started exchanging military intelligence and Taipei has sent a military attaché to India, the Chinese-language daily said.

India's top air force officials visited the island some time ago to exchange views with Taiwan's Air Force Commander Chen Chao-min, the paper said quoting reliable sources.

Protests mark takeover of new Argentine president

AFP, Buenos Aires

As soon as Senator Eduardo Duhalde was voted Argentina's fifth president in 12 days, hundreds of people took to the streets banging pots and pans and calling on him to resign as just another corrupt politician.

"People don't want Duhalde because as (former president Carlos) Menem's vice-president he's part of the problem," 52-year-old Teobaldo Monserrat told AFP as he set some cardboard boxes on fire four blocks from Congress.

Only minutes earlier Congress

had voted for Duhalde, 60, to replace Adolfo Rodriguez Saa, who resigned on Sunday, as his predecessor Fernando de la Rúa did 10 days earlier, victims of violent popular unrest over Argentina's bankruptcy.

Two caretaker presidents were appointed for 48 hour periods while lawmakers decided who the next leader would be. The first one, Senate leader Ramon Puerta also stepped down leaving Chamber of Deputies leader Eduardo Camaño to take the helm.

"We're asking them to stop their wheeling and dealing once and for

all and start worrying about the people going hungry, without a job," said 27-year-old Pablo, who was wrapped in an Argentine flag.

"All these people should go. They're shameless, corrupt and trash," said Ana Maria, a 50-year-old teacher participating in another noisy protest in the residential Barrio Norte neighbourhood.

Duhalde, who in his acceptance speech asked people to have patience while he tried to whip the government and the country's crumbling economy into place, ran against de la Rúa in the 1999.

The 'curse of SAARC summits'

AFP, Kathmandu

South Asian leaders are preparing for a summit here Friday amid tight security against assassination, but for some a threat may come from an unexpected quarter -- the 'curse of the summits.'

The seven-member regional grouping is becoming legendary for the bad luck that befalls heads of state and governments attending summits that have also proved a nightmare to organise.

South Asia -- which is home to a fifth of the world's humanity and plagued by poverty, civil strife and bitter border disputes -- has seen leaders rise and fall periodically but the summits may have added a new dimension.

Former Indian prime minister Inder Kumar Gujral fell from power in November 1997 after attending the summit in the Maldivian capital Male.

Gujral had been in the limelight only six months earlier with a historic meeting with then prime minister Nawaz Sharif of arch-

enemy Pakistan.

And to the superstitious, the fall of Nawaz Sharif shortly after attending the 10th summit in Colombo reinforced a theory the gatherings spell bad news for regional leaders.

Misfortune has afflicted at least one SAARC leader after every conference, with one going to jail and another being assassinated.

After then Bangladeshi President Hussain Muhammad Ershad attended the November 1990 summit in the Maldives, he fell from office and went straight to prison.

Five years later his successor Khaleda Zia was toppled after attending the eighth summit in New Delhi, but was luckier than Ershad in that she managed to avoid jail.

Pakistan's Sharif, who attended his fourth summit last time round, had his share of SAARC bad luck after the April 1993 summit in Dhaka when he was sacked by the president.

Similarly dismissed in 1996 was Sharif's arch rival, Benazir Bhutto.

Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa lived less than three weeks after attending the seventh SAARC summit in Bangladesh in 1993, killed by a suspected Tamil suicide bomber.

Nepal's former prime minister Girja Prasad Koirala made it to summits in 1991 and 1993 before being ousted, eventually bouncing back and attending his third summit in Colombo in 1998.

Insulated from the bad luck could be Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, in office since 1978, and Bhutan's King Jigme Singye Wangchuk. Both are founding members of SAARC.

The Bhutanese monarch, however, missed the SAARC summit for the first time in 1998 and sent his prime minister instead.

"I don't think any country looks at the summits from a superstitious point of view," said one Asian diplomat. "But, the bad luck befalling many leaders must make an interesting study."

Kashmiris caught in crossfire

AFP, Samba

A Pakistani tracer bullet ignited the full year's fodder stock of a Kashmir village on New Year's night, prompting a heavy exchange of mortar fire between Indian troops and their invisible adversaries across the border.

Kashmiris are used to being caught in the political and military crossfire between India and Pakistan, but the latest escalation

of tensions along the border of the disputed Himalayan region has had a stronger impact than usual.

The "crump" of impacting mortar shells and the whine of bullets sparked an exodus from Galar village to the Indian garrison town of Samba, a former home to Indian-born British author Rudyard Kipling.

"Over 95 percent of the population of all the villages have taken shelter beyond the range of Pakistani guns and those who are

left here are hemmed in by Indian landmines," Galar's Hindu priest Shivpal Sharma said.

Three other villages adjoining Galar have already been totally emptied of civilians and mined by the military to guard against a possible Pakistani incursion.

Sharma said he had witnessed a morning gun-duel between bunkered troops in Galar, 10 kilometres (six miles) from Samba and just 1.5 kilometres from the border.

"It will start again now. Often they spark off a fight and often we do," said Premechand Yadav, a trooper with India's Border Security Force deployed in Galar.

Sharma, who is also a member of the International Committee of the Red Cross, said only the old people were staying behind in villages like Galar, Ban and Suchetpur, while the other men, women and children were sheltering in Samba.

"We have to stay to tend to the livestock," said local vet Bansi Lal, while nursing a clutch of cows with shrapnel injuries. "But now we do not have a source of cattle feed as the fields are mined."

