

Pakistan seals offices of banned militant groups

Pak police round up more militants

REUTERS, Karachi

Pakistani police sealed the offices of banned sectarian and Kashmiri militant groups overnight and on Sunday, detaining scores of group leaders and activists, police said.

Police in southern Sindh and southwestern Baluchistan provinces launched the operation against the groups after military ruler General Pervez Musharraf said in a key speech on Saturday evening he had banned five militant or radical Islamic groups.

"We have sealed most of the offices of Sipah-e-Sahaba and Tehrik-e-Jafria in Sindh province ... like elsewhere in the country," said a Sindh police spokesman.

He said police met no resistance. The latest crackdown followed mass detentions earlier on Saturday, when at least 350 Islamic militant and radical sympathisers were taken into custody in a bid to pre-empt possible violent reaction to Musharraf's speech.

A senior police official in Hyderabad, 160 km (100 miles) northeast of the volatile port city of Karachi, said police had detained at least 70 activists of the Sunni Muslim Sipah-e-Sahaba and its Shi'ite rival Tehrik-e-Jafria Party (TJP) in night raids in various cities across Sindh.

The two groups have been blamed for waves of sectarian killings, bombings and shooting in Pakistan in recent years. Musharraf, in his speech said

in the past year 400 people had been killed due to sectarian violence and the situation had to end.

AFP adds: Some 600 alleged religious militants have been rounded up across Pakistan under a crack-down announced by President Pervez Musharraf, police said Sunday.

Police said around 100 religious activists were taken into custody Sunday morning, bringing to more than 600 the number arrested across the country over the past 24 hours.

Musharraf banned five Islamic militant groups in a landmark speech to the nation on Saturday, as his country stands at the brink of war with nuclear neighbour India over its support for Islamic rebels in the disputed Himalayan state of Kashmir.

Two of the banned groups -- the Lashkar-e-Taiba and the Jaish-e-Mohammad -- are among the most headline Islamic militant groups fighting against Indian rule in Kashmir.

New Delhi accuses them of orchestrating a surprise attack on the Indian parliament last month, which left 14 people dead and sparked a massive troop buildup on both sides of the Indo-Pakistan border.

The other three banned groups include two sectarian extremist outfits and a radical Islamic party opposed to Pakistan's alignment with the US-led war against Afghanistan's Taliban militia and terror suspect Osama bin Laden.



Pakistani paramilitary troops guard as activists of a sectarian group, Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), remove a logo from the office gate in Karachi on Sunday. Police have closed nine offices of militant groups banned by Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf in a televised national address on Saturday.

Indian troops kill 2 Dutch militants in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian security forces claimed to have killed two suspected separatist militants, both of them from the Netherlands, after they attacked a patrol Sunday in Indian-administered Kashmir, officials said.

The two were shot dead near a camp housed in a hotel in the Konikhan area of Srinagar, Kashmir's summer capital, a spokesman for India's Border Security Force (BSF) said.

"Armed with knives the two attacked a BSF patrol party, injuring two of our men," the spokesman said.

"Alert BSF personnel guarding the gate of the hotel shot the two dead," he said.



Prince Harry addicted!

AFP, London

Britain's 17-year-old Prince Harry was sent to a drugs rehabilitation clinic after he admitted to regularly smoking cannabis and drinking alcohol, British Sunday papers reported.

Harry, the youngest son of Prince Charles, the heir to the British throne, has admitted to smoking cannabis, the News of the World said.

The Prince of Wales arranged for his younger son to visit Featherstone Lodge rehabilitation centre in south London to give him "a shock" after he discovered Harry had been drinking and smoking cannabis, the weekly News of the World reported.

Chinese PM in India

AFP, Agra

Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji arrived Sunday in the Taj Mahal city of Agra at the start of a five-day visit to India.

The trip, the highest-ranking visit by a Chinese leader to India in a decade, comes amid a tense stand-off between India and Beijing's close ally Pakistan.

Zhu will travel on to New Delhi for talks Monday with top Indian officials including Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, although he is not expected to mediate between India and Pakistan.

The trip comes two days ahead of the start of a South Asia tour by US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who has expressed concern about the military and diplomatic tensions in the region since a December 13 attack on the Indian parliament blamed on Pakistan-based militants.

Zimbabwe moves to ease EU concerns

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe says it has moved to ease EU concerns on civil liberties and electoral openness, despite more strong rhetoric from President Robert Mugabe, who launched an attack on British leader Tony Blair.

A Zimbabwean delegation to talks in Brussels said Saturday that Harare had "pledged a full investigation of alleged political violence and the promotion of a code of conduct for political parties before the presidential election campaign".

The election is due on March 9 and 10. However President Mugabe, who was in Malawi on Sunday for a regional summit, earlier shrugged off international criticism, unleashing a new broadside against Blair and saying God was on Zimbabwe's side.

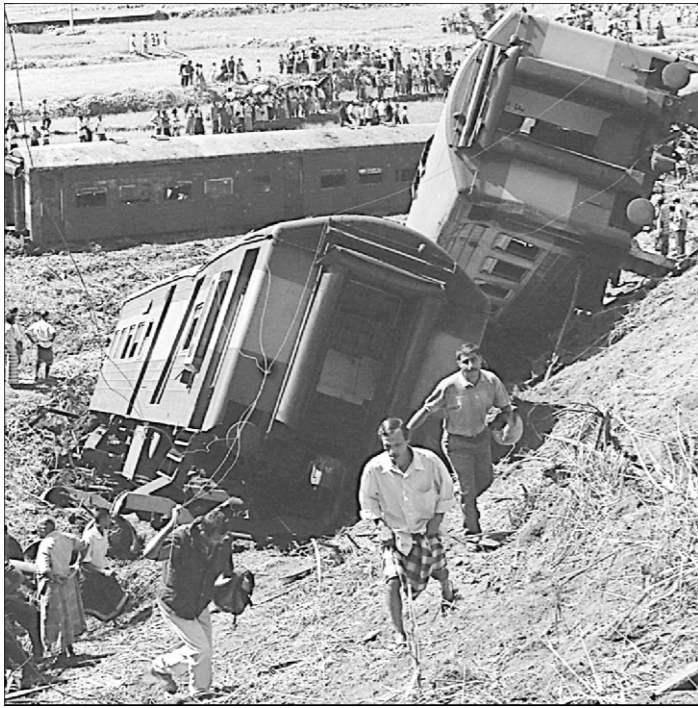
Maoists kill 6 in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist insurgents have killed six people while one rebel died in fighting in Nepal, officials and witnesses said Sunday.

At least 35 armed Maoists surrounded a house late Friday in the village of Hangdeva in the far eastern district of Taplejung, killing the chief district officer and two others in the house with him.

Another two people were injured in the incident and flown to the capital Kathmandu for treatment, a resident said.



Residents walk away from the wreckage of an express train that derailed on Sunday near the central Sri Lankan town of Rambukkana, killing at least 13 passengers and wounding nearly 100 others. Police launched an investigation into this year's worst train accident in Sri Lanka.

Lanka train accident kills 13

AFP, Colombo

At least 13 passengers were killed and nearly 100 injured when an express train derailed in central Sri Lanka Sunday, officials said.

The Colombo-bound train ran off the rails near Rambukkana, 80 kilometres (50 miles) northeast of the Sri Lankan capital, officials said.

They said the victims were taken to three hospitals in the area while six of the more seriously wounded passengers were brought to the capital for treatment.

Four British nationals were treated for minor injuries and discharged from hospital, a doctor at the Rambukkana hospital said. There were no other foreigners among the casualties.

Police said the cause of the derailment was under investigation.

Ex-US secy of state Cyrus Vance dead

AFP, New York

Former US secretary of state Cyrus Vance, who once jolted the Washington establishment by tendering his resignation over the hostage crisis in Iran, died Saturday at the age of 84, a hospital official said.

"He did pass away today at 4:15 pm (2115 GMT)," the official at New York's Mount Sinai Medical Center told AFP, declining to provide any further details.

The cause of his death was not immediately known, but Vance has been reported to be suffering from Alzheimer's disease.

Israeli FM, press slam razing of Gaza homes

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and another Labour cabinet member attacked Sunday the wholesale razing of houses in the Gaza Strip by the army which left hundreds of Palestinians homeless.

The liberal daily Haaretz also called the operation early Thursday in the town of Rafah near the Egyptian border unwarranted and damaging for the image of the Jewish state.

Labour Science and Culture Minister Matan Vilnai, a former general who once commanded

Israeli forces in the region, told army radio, "They should have used some common sense, gone about it another way and given the families caravans to live in instead of the demolished houses."

He added, "I suppose that the army has good reasons to destroy houses which, situated close to the Egyptian border, provide shelter for arms smuggling, but Israeli cannot allow itself to strike blindly."

Vilnai also expressed concern at the damage to Israel's image by the worst destruction of Palestinian houses by the military in one day since the Palestinian uprising broke out more than 15 months ago.

Parts of Antarctica get cooler snubbing meltdown theory

AFP, Paris

Parts of Antarctica have cooled sharply in recent years, a finding which counters doomsday perceptions that the frozen continent faces imminent meltdown from global warming, according to a study published Sunday.

Measurements taken by weather stations in the McMurdo Dry Valleys, the largest ice-free area in Antarctica, show that this region cooled by 0.7 C (1.25 F) per decade between 1986 and 2000, it

said. The cooling was especially strong during the autumn and summer seasons, and had a destructive effect on the fragile local ecosystem, it said.

The research, published online by the British weekly science journal Nature, was led by Peter Doran of the department of Earth and environmental sciences at the University of Chicago.

In a phone interview with AFP, Doran said the findings did not at all

conflict with the mounting evidence that the world's overall average surface temperature is rising steadily as a result of burning fossil fuels.

"However, what people have not pointed out before is that Antarctica is the only continent on earth that by and large is cooling, whereas the other continents are warming," he said.

Why Antarctica should be the exception could be because of the complex interplay between ocean currents, he suggested.

Al-Qaida plotted to kill world leaders at a golf tournament

AFP, Sydney

A video released Sunday allegedly showed Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network training terrorists for a mass assassination of world leaders at a golf tournament.

The video tape, obtained by Australian Broadcasting Corporation TV, also showed militants rehearsing a hostage situation where they screamed their commands in English and shot one hostage dead.

ABC said Northern Alliance soldiers discovered the video at an al-Qaida training camp near Kabul in southern Afghanistan.

A United States special forces veteran advising the Afghan military said bullet holes at head level on the wall of an abandoned school, used as the training camp, suggested live hostages were killed during the soldiers' apprenticeship.

"They sprayed the room a couple of times and this tells me that at some point they put live hostages in here," the US veteran, who declined to be named, told ABC television.

He said the video tapes revealed the militants were planning for multiple attacks aimed at the western world. "We've seen limited situations but not in this wide range," he said.

"Not in a wide range that includes motorcades,

close quarter battle, integrated assaults, open air assaults ... a whole spectrum of terrorist activities."

The most frightening footage was the rehearsal for a mass murder of national leaders at a golf tournament. The attackers carried their weapons onto the course in golf bags and used a rocket-propelled grenade to kill officials.

The video also showed a Taliban defence ministry car being used for a mock kidnapping off the street.

In one scene, a child of one of the al-Qaida members was shown carrying a weapon.

The tapes, broadcast on ABC television Sunday, were believed to be the first comprehensive record of al-Qaida militant training.

More than six hours of amateur video tape showed Arab, Pakistani and African militants rehearsing the detailed scenarios for terrorist attacks, the ABC said.

A spokesman for the Australian Defence Force (ADF) said Australia was aware of the video and its existence had been officially noted.

"We obviously have a great interest in all aspects of the campaign and that would be one of them," he said.

"It's a thing that we would take note of. Anything to do with this particular operation is of interest to the department, obviously."

World hails Musharraf speech

AFP, Washington

The United States, European Union and the United Nations on Saturday welcomed Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's rejection of terrorism as a political tool and hailed his vision of a modern Pakistani state.

US President George W. Bush "welcomes President Musharraf's firm decision to stand against terrorism and extremism and his commitment to the principle that no person or organisation will be allowed to indulge in terror as a means to further its cause," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said in a statement.

The statement came after Musharraf, in a widely anticipated speech to the nation, announced a ban on Kashmiri militant groups

blamed by India for last month's attack on its parliament and announced a crackdown on sectarian extremists.

The Pakistani leader said his country would never change its policy on Kashmir, but nevertheless would not allow any organisation to indulge in terrorism in the name of the disputed Himalayan region.

"The president applauds President Musharraf's vision of Pakistan as a progressive and modern state and his strong effort to promote education and a better economic future for his people," Fleischer stressed.

"President Musharraf unequivocally rejected terrorism, pledging to take action against any Pakistani organisation, group or individual involved in terrorism within or outside

Pakistan," the statement said.

"He clearly stated that a solution to Kashmir lies in peaceful means and dialogue," the White House spokesman pointed out.

Bush welcomed Musharraf's condemnation of the December 13 attack on the Indian parliament and two attacks on the Indian Kashmir state assembly in Srinagar as terrorist acts, as well as his calls for the perpetrators to be brought to justice, Fleischer said.

Earlier, US Secretary of State Colin Powell said that Musharraf had taken "a bold and principled stand to set Pakistan squarely against terrorism and extremism both in and outside of Pakistan."

"The United States applauds the banning of Jaish-e-Mohammed and Lashkar-e-Taiba and welcomes

President Musharraf's explicit statements against terrorism and particularly notes his pledge that Pakistan will not tolerate terrorism under any pretext, including Kashmir," Powell said.

Annan said through his spokesman that Musharraf's words were a gesture toward regional peace.

Meanwhile, Spain, speaking on behalf of the European Union, warmly welcomed on Saturday a speech by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf during which he condemned terrorism, the foreign ministry said.

Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Pique had contacted his Pakistani counterpart, Abdul Sattar, to express his approval.

Lanka to ease curbs on rebel-held areas

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka Sunday announced more "confidence building measures" to boost a Norwegian-sponsored bid to broker peace with Tamil Tiger rebels, as Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe warned of tough action against extremists.

The government said it was immediately easing restrictions on fishing in the island's embattled northern and eastern regions, bowing to a longstanding demand by civilians in the war-torn areas.

The move came ahead of the

official lifting Tuesday of an economic embargo on areas held by the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the northern Wanni region.

The measures are said to attempt to encourage better understanding between the government and the Tamil rebels, according to the Norwegian delegation which left Saturday after two days of talks on arranging a permanent truce.

The delegation headed by Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen said it was "cautiously optimistic" for the peace process in the island.

Afghan refugees returning homes

AFP, Anawa Camp

Five-year-old Mujtaba Qahar is too young to remember anything but a harsh life in a tent on the side of a mountain in Afghanistan's picturesque Panjshir Valley.

Yet for him "home" is a mound of rubble surrounded by minefields in the Shomali Plain, some 50 kilometres (30 miles) to the south -- a place he has never even seen.

"Next week I'm going home," he said as his family at the weekend excitedly began preparing to leave the rain-drenched valley, where they have scoured out a living for the past three years, for their traditional homestead at Qara Bagh, in the heart of the Shomali Plain, about 50 kilometres (30 miles) north of Kabul.

Mujtaba has no recollection of the day in 1998 when his father Abdul Qahar, then 52, bundled him into a blanket, tied him to his back, and, drawing a cartload of possessions behind him, headed off on foot with his family after the Taliban militia had rocketed their Qara Bagh home.

Neither can he remember the two-day journey that took them to the safety of the Panjshir, one of the few valleys in Afghanistan the Taliban were not able to penetrate -- thanks to the forces of famed Northern Alliance commander Ahmad Shah Masood.

He can, however, remember many days when he and his four brothers and two sisters went hungry, the summers when they wilted under a fierce sun and the winters when bitter winds swept off nearby mountains and chapped their cheeks and left their bare feet and hands blue.

He can also remember the funerals of other children who did not make it, and of the grown man who stepped on a landmine while scouting for wood near the snowline in the mountains.



Two Afghan refugee girls carry babies at the Anawa refugee camp in Afghanistan's Panjshir Valley on Saturday. About 200,000 villagers fled their homes to the Panjshir Valley between 1998 and 2000. Now, after the defeat of the Taliban regime, refugees from this camp can now return home to their villages in the Shomali plain about 50 kilometres north of Kabul.