THE WORLD

Annan urges India, Pakistan to do more to defuse tension

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan will meet Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf here Thursday after calling on Islamabad and New Delhi to

With the nuclear neighbours poised for war after India blamed two Pakistan-based militant groups for the deadly December 13 attack on its parliament. Annan said he had been in touch with both sides about the need to

He arrived in Islamabad Wednesday night for talks which will also aim to shore up regional support for rebuilding Afghanistan. When he flies to Kabul Friday, he will become the first UN secretary general to visit the war-torn nation since 1959.

On arrival in Islamabad, Annan said Musharraf's landmark address to the nation earlier this month, in which he announced a crackdown on extremist groups, was a good start to defusing tensions with India.

"I think it is a step in the right direction, and we need to build up on that," he was quoted by the official Associated Press of Pakistan as saying.

Annan told CNN ahead of his arrival there was no alternative to a political and diplomatic solution to the stand-off between the two nations, which has seen an estimated 800,000 troops amassed on their border

"I believe that the two will have to find a way to resolve their differences politically and diplomatically," Annan said.

Annan had wanted to visit New Delhi as part of his regional tour but said Wednesday night "we couldn't coordinate our calendars"

Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar and UN officials in the Pakistani capital.

A Pakistani foreign ministry official said Thursday he expected Annan to receive a Kashmiri women's delegation which would "apprise him of the human rights situation in Indian-occupied Kashmir".

Pakistan has said it would welcome UN engagement in helping to settle the

dispute over the divided state of Kashmir, which has been the cause of two of the three wars between the nuclear neighbours. But India has ruled out a role Afghanistan is the major focus of the UN leader's visit to the region, follow-

ing the Tokyo conference of donor countries earlier this week which pledged 4.5 billion dollars for Afghan reconstruction over five years

"Now we have to get down to business and begin the process of reconstruction," he said on arrival in Islamabad.

One immediate concern is the threat of lawlessness and factional fighting as the interim administration attempts to unify the ethnically diverse nation. "During his visit to the region the secretary general will be urging neighbours to work more closely together to keep the security situation in Afghanistan stable, arguing that it is in their common interest," a UN statement

The southern city of Kandahar was not secure, there was tension in Kabul and factional fighting in the north, the UN spokeswoman in Islamabad, Stephanie Bunker, said Wednesday.

Annan will visit Iran, another of Afghanistan's neighbours, following his trip



Kolkata's US Consul General Christopher Sandrolini (R) lays down flowers in front of the American Centre in Kolkata on Thursday in memory of the four 'Kolkata Police' personnel killed in the Tuesday's bloody attack on the cen-

Nepal sees no early end to state of emergency

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepal today ruled out an early end to its state of emergency and said military operations against Maoist rebels would continue until they were disarmed or they surrendered.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell, visiting the Himalayan kingdom last week, supported government action against the querillas but hoped the emergency would be for a "limited duration" with a focus on protecting human rights.

Nepal's King Gyanendra imposed emergency rule in November and ordered the army to flush out the insurgents, who have resumed violent efforts to set up a one-party communist republic after peace talks collapsed last year.

"The task is yet to be completely accomplished. Therefore, the military operation and the emergency rule will continue," the Minister for Information and Communications, Jayprakash

Under Nepal's constitution, the emergency must be approved by a two-thirds majority of the 205member parliament within three months of imposition, which falls on February 23.

Nepal. home of the world's highest peak Mount Everest, has been through a turbulent year with the murder of popular monarch, King Birendra, and most other royal family members last June by the crown prince who later killed him-

Soldiers had destroyed several rebel training camps and were searching for others in the remote foothills of the Himalayas, Gupta

The government said on Tuesday that 10 Maoist rebels were killed in a firefight this week, bringing the death toll to nearly 500 since the breaking of a truce almost two months ago.

Britney's royal catch

Pop princess Britney Spears has admitted exchanging e-mails with Britain's Prince William about setting up a date, the British press said Thursday.

An audience member on The Frank Skinner television show told The Sun daily that Spears said they had talked about going for a meal but nothing came of it.

The 21-year-old starlet came clean during a recorded interview with comedian Skinner last week.

Rumours of a cyber romance between Spears and William have been rife for many months but have always been denied by Buckingham

told The Sun that Skinner asked how she and the 19-year-old prince contacted each other.

The onlooker said: "Britney said implied they e-mailed each other a



Britney Spears

A member of the studio audience lot. She then said they were mean to go for a meal but nothing had

"Frank (Skinner) then suggested she would do better going out with it was all done on e-mail. She Prince Harry instead because he is

Indian telecom satellite placed into orbit

An Ariane-42L rocket placed Insat-3C, a large Indian telecommunications satellite, in orbit after takeoff from Europe's space centre in Kourou, French Guiana, the marketing company Arianespace said here Thursday.

The launch, entailing a version of the Ariane-4 workhorse equipped with two liquid-fuelled boosters to provide added thrust, took place at 2346 GMT Wednesday and the satellite was placed in orbit 21 minutes later.

minutes for technical checks on communications between the rocket and ground control. Insat-3C is built and operated by

Takeoff was held up for several

the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) in Bangalore. With a launch weight of 2.75

tonnes, it is designed to provide communications and television broadcasts across India, with an operational life of 12 years, positioned at 74-degree east longitude over the Indian Ocean

India's first satellite, Apple, was launched in June 1981. Ariane, which is built by the European Space Agency (ESA) and operated by its marketing arm, Arianespace, has launched eight satellites for ISRO. The last one, Insat-3B, was launched in March 2000.

Despite its efforts, India still lacks a rocket capable of carrying large payloads. Its most powerful rocket, the GSLV (Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle), which carried out its first flight on April 18 last year, can place a maximum of two tonnes in geostationary orbit.

Tripura rebels kidnap 9 rly employees

AFP, Guwahati

Tribal separatists have kidnapped at least nine railway employees in India's troubled northeastern state of Tripura, officials said Thursday.

A police spokesman said heavily armed militants belonging to the outlawed National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) abducted the workers on Wednesday, near Atharomura village in West Tripura district, 120 kilometres from the state capital Agartala.

"At least 20 NLFT militants came and kidnapped the workers at gunpoint,"a police official told AFP by telephone.

"The abductions could be part of an extortion drive by the militants, he said.

Police and paramilitary soldiers have since launched a combing

Formal Lankan truce to be in place within a month

AFP, Colombo

A formal truce between the Sri Lankan government and Tamil Tiger rebels could be in place within a month, a senior minister said Thursday.

Both sides are observing a ceasefire which began on Christmas Day and was this week extended until February 24. Constitutional affairs minister

G.L. Peiris said the government was keen to have a formal truce in place before the current cessation of hostilities expired. Norway is acting as peace facili-

tator and is trying to broker a formal truce to end decades of ethnic bloodshed which has claimed more than 60.000 lives.

Norwegians are conducting talks ... the main thrust is finalising the ceasefire between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)," Peiris told reporters here. He did not give details of a memo-

before the truce goes into effect, but said that the government was keen to identify potential flash points. "Nowhere in the world can you have a perfect ceasefire where

randum of understanding that the

two sides are expected to sign

there won't be violations. "What we are trying to do is identify the potential flash points and have arrangements to address those issues without allowing a

situation to aggravate," Peiris said. He reiterated that the government had not taken a final decision on lifting a ban on the LTTE, which is fighting for an independent homeland in the north and east of the island. The lifting of the ban is a key demand of the rebels before they enter peace negotiations.

"We have made no final decision we have not shut our eyes to the issue. There can be several legal options, but they remain options, Peiris said when asked if the government would suspend the ban rather than lift it outright.

"There is no black and white solution, there can be several shades of grey," Peiris said.

On Tuesday Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe in his first major policy statement since coming to power in December, hinted that the government may lift the ban on the LTTE to open peace talks.

US jets found Iraqi artillery site

REUTERS. Washington

Coalition aircraft enforcing a no-fly zone struck an anti-aircraft artillery site in southern Iraq on Wednesday in an action unrelated to the US-led war on terror, the US Central Command said.

The strikes were the second in three days.

The strikes, using precisionguided weapons, "Were executed as self-defense measures in response to Iraqi hostile threats and acts against Coalition air crews and their aircraft and are not related to the President's campaign against terror," a statement said.

"If Iraq were to cease its threatening actions, Coalition strikes would also cease," said the Tampa, Florida-based command, which is also running the US-led war in

No details were released on the nature of the alleged Iraqi threat or on which aircraft -- US, British or both -- participated in the strikes.

Until Monday, there had been no US strikes against an Iraqi antiartillery site in the southern no-fly zone since Nov. 27, the command

Iraq has fired anti-aircraft artillery and surface-to-air missiles than 1,060 occasions since December 1998. Iraqi aircraft violated the southern no-fly zone more than 160 times during the same period, the command reported.

Coalition forces have patrolled "no-fly" zones over northern and southern Iraq since the 1991 Gulf



Border Security Force personnel arrive at India Gate to be deployed for the forthcoming Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi on Thursday.

Delhi at all-time high security

APHC calls for strike on Republic Day

Security in New Delhi was at an all-time high in the runup to India's 53rd Republic Day celebrations on Saturday with nearly 50,000 police and paramilitary personnel on duty, police said.

Mukesh Kumar Meena, Deputy Commissioner of the Delhi Police, said Thursday that India's National Security Guards and police personnel had fanned out across the Indian capital to prevent militants from targetting key government buildings as well as federal ministers.

'The Delhi Police, elite Black Cat commandoes, intelligence and crime

branch officials have their eyes open," said Meena. "Close monitoring has been mounted on the city's nine entry and exit points. Surprise checks are being carried out at notels and guest nouses in areas where militants could possibly take shelter," he added.

"The airport and railway stations are also marked." Police warned the public on loudhailers at railways stations and bus terminals to report any suspicious or unattended baggage and constantly spoke of the threat of bombs concealed in luggage or vehicles.

India's federal home ministry has assigned 6,000 additional paramilitary troops to Republic Day duties to augment the efforts of the Delhi police.

Rows of police lined the arterial roads of the city, prompting criticism in some quarters. But Meena said the city was "not under siege" and stressed

the security arrangements were a necessary evil. Similar precautions were taken across the country but were especially

rigorous in militancy-ridden provinces such as the Himalayan state of Kashmir and India's northeast In New Delhi, where the main celebrations on Saturday include a mas-

sive parade showcasing the country's military muscle and cultural diversity, roads leading to the venue -- a majestic avenue leading to a British-built memorial modelled on the Arc de Triomphe in Paris -- were sealed off. Meanwhile, Kashmir's main separatist alliance called for a general strike

here on India's Republic Day, which falls on Saturday. "We appeal to Kashmiris to observe a general strike on India's Republic

Day," the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) said in a statement I hursdav "The day should also be observed as a black day," it added.

Since its formation in 1993, the 23-party separatist conglomerate has called for a general strike each year on January 26. "On the one hand the Indian government is celebrating the Republic Day, and on the other its forces have let loose a reign of terror in Kashmir," the

The separatist alliance has accused New Delhi of "torturing and harassing" Kashmiris ahead of the Republic Day "on the pretext of security operations linked to the day.'

India to help Nepal fight **Maoist rebels**

AFP, Kathmandu

Kathmandu

India is prepared to help Nepal by all possible means in its fight against a Maoist rebellion, the Indian ambassador to Nepal said Wednesday.

"We have been helping Nepal in all possible ways. Whatever help Nepal asks us for we are prepared to extend it to control Maoist terrorism," I.P. Singh told reporters in

The leftist guerrillas have been

November they broke a four-month ceasefire and launched attacks on police and army posts Two days later the government

fighting for a republic since 1996. In

declared emergency rule and deployed the army for the first time against the rebels, whom it has branded as terrorists. India has already supplied two

helicopters and arms for the Royal Nepalese Army. But Singh ruled out the Indian army entering Nepal to help crush the rebels.

"No Indian army would come to Nepal to quell the Maoist terrorists," he said.

"I can assure you that the Indian

army will not leave their own coun-More than 2,300 people have died during the Maoist insurgency.

Lawmaker warns of lax | Indo-Pak standoff: US security at US N-labs

AFP, Washington

A senior member of the House Energy and Commerce committee on Wednesday warned of lax security conditions at three nuclear weapons facilities in the United

"Mock 'terrorists' were able to access the weapons grade uranium and plutonium in security tests at DOE (Department of Energy) facilities more than 50 percent of the time," Representative Ed Markey said in a statement.

"Experts have told me that a

group of suicidal terrorists could,

once inside the facility, quickly build

and detonate a dirty bomb or a homemade nuclear bomb," said Markey, who also is co-chair of the Bipartisan Task Force on Nonpr-

The Massachusetts Democrat

singled out the Los Alamos National

Laboratory, the Rocky Flats Environmental Technology Center and the California Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory. An aide in Markey's office said the security tests referred to had taken place before the September 11 terrorist attacks, but added such

force-on-force exercises were

conducted frequently.

general sees progress

AFP, Tashkent

The commander of the United States forces in Afghanistan, General Tommy Franks, said Thursday he hoped for progress to resolve the crisis between India and Pakistan over the disputed

territory of Kashmir. "I think that dialogue between India and Pakistan, the identification of extremists in Pakistan in cooperation with the leadership of India, makes me hope that that crisis can move forward positively," Franks told a news conference in the Uzbek capital Tashkent.

am hopeful that as a part of this dialogue between India and Pakistan that we can move something forward on the Kashmir issue

in the future," he added. Franks said the US was confident that Indian law enforcement agencies would conduct appropriate investigations into attacks

inside India. The US general had been asked to comment on an attack outside the American Center in Calcutta on Tuesday, which killed four policemen and injured around

Indian fishermen queue up at a Pakistani police station in southern Karachi on Thursday. Pakistani marine security guards arrested at least 47 Indian fishermen and eight boats, when they strayed into Pakistani territorial waters on

3 more Palestinians killed in Gaza, West Bank

Three Palestinians were killed in the Gaza Strip and West Bank early Thursday and a Jewish settler convoy was ambushed with anti-tank fire, as Washington said it would not dispatch its peace envoy until Yasser Arafat makes more effort to curb the violence.

In Beirut meanwhile a former Christian militia leader accused of the 1982 Sabra and Shatila refugee camp massacres for which Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was also blamed, was killed by a car bomb. Two Palestinians were killed in a blast in the south-

ern Gaza Strip, near the Jewish settlement of Kfar

Darom, Palestinian medical officials said. The source of the explosion was not immediately clear, although residents of the area said they heard an explosion followed by shooting early in the morning.

Hospital officials said the bodies -- one of them

at around 7:30 am (0530 GMT). In Ramallah, where Israeli tanks have taken over large part of the town and surrounded Arafat's headquarters, a 23-year-old member of the Palestinian security forces was shot and killed in an overnight

blown to pieces -- were handed over by the Israeli army

The latest deaths bring the toll of 16 months of the

Palestinian intifada, or uprising, to 1,160, including 888

Palestinians and 249 Israelis Hours later, a convoy of Israeli civilian vehicles escorted by the army was ambushed with anti-tank and rifle fire at the gates of the Jewish settlement of Netzarim in the central Gaza Stip, without causing any

injuries, an army spokesman said. When soldiers rushed out to pursue the attackers a bomb was set off in the area, although that also failed to cause any casualties or damage, the spokesman said, describing the initial fire on the convoy as "serious."

The burst of violence came amid Israeli warnings that the intifada was set to become much bloodier after the collapse of a period of relative calm following a ceasefire call by Arafat, trapped in Ramallah by Israel Israel has tightened security measures after a

Palestinian gunman killed two Israelis and injured

almost 40 in Jerusalem on Tuesday, just after Israeli

forces killed four senior members of the radical Islamic group Hamas in a raid on a bomb factory in Nablus. An army snatch squad also seized two Palestinians in the Palestinian-governed sector of Hebron in the southern West Bank early Thursday, Palestinian security sources said.