

US takes anti-terror war to Philippines

AFP, Zamboanga

Hundreds of US troops began a joint military operation in the southern Philippines Thursday against Muslim Abu Sayyaf guerrillas linked to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network.

Up to 600 troops will train with their Filipino counterparts in Muslim guerrilla redoubts for six months, fully armed for self-defence but unexpected to do the actual fighting, officials said.

"To those of you that wish the Philippine nation ill and would

51 killed in Nigerian petrol tanker inferno

AFP, Lagos

Fifty-one people were killed in central Nigeria when a petrol tanker veered off a road, exploded into flames, and crashed into a busy cattle market, a newspaper reported Thursday.

Thirty people died on the spot Sunday and 21 others died in hospital from their injuries after the accident at a cattle market near Okene in Kogi State, the Guardian said.

Many cattle were also killed in the accident, whose cause was not known, the paper said.

State Governor Abubakar Audu visited the scene and promised government assistance to the victims, the newspaper reported.

The news of the accident emerged only four days after the event because the area is remote and local media attention was focused on Lagos where more than 700 people were killed in a stampede fleeing the explosion of a military armoury.

terrorise its people, I can assure you that this exercise will develop the skills and maintain the determination of the Philippine armed forces to eliminate you," US Charge d'Affaires Robert Fitts said in a speech.

He said the operation was part of US President George W. Bush's "war on terrorism on every front with our allies", and would include cooperation in law-enforcement, intelligence, security and diplomatic efforts.

"Let no one in the Philippines and American society doubt we are here to train, advise and assist our allies and our friends," Fitts said.

The Philippine armed forces chief formally declared the operations open at a heavily secured military camp in this southern port city, which would host the bulk of the

foreign military advisers.

Fitts said the US forces would "launch a round of exercises and training ... to help the armed forces of the Philippines to hone its skills to eliminate the Abu Sayyaf scourge."

The campaign will see one of the biggest deployments of American troops since the United States began its campaign in Afghanistan to wipe out the al-Qaida terror network of bin Laden, blamed for the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

The United States has linked the Abu Sayyaf group to al-Qaida and has condemned it for being a "terrorist" organisation.

Philippine Defence Secretary Angelo Reyes said that the operation "brings hope (to local residents) that they will forever be rid of the terror that has stalked their lives and

caused much suffering."

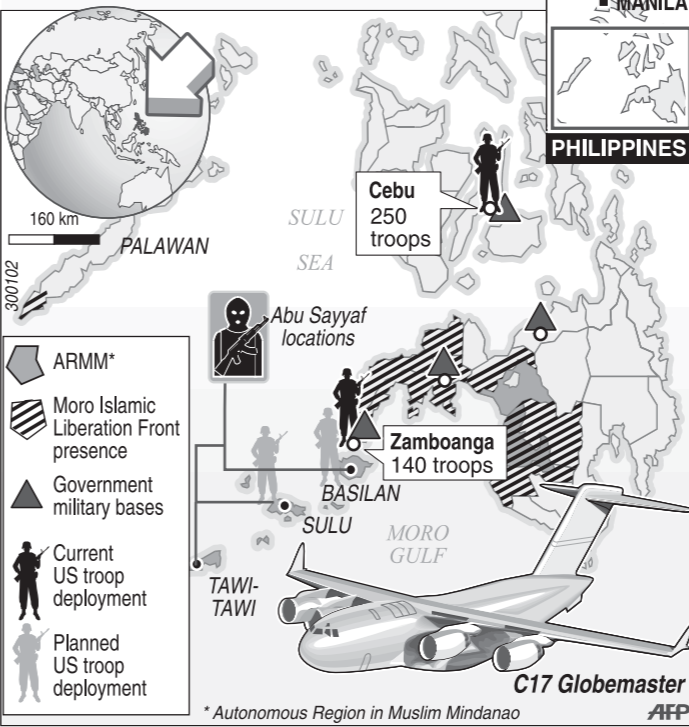
Abu Sayyaf guerrillas have attacked both Christians and foreigners in the south in recent years. They still hold a US missionary couple and a Filipina hostage in nearby Basilan, the remaining hostages from their latest kidnaping spree last May.

Regional military chief Lieutenant General Roy Cimatu conceded that the Philippine military's failure to crush the Abu Sayyaf "expose(s) our capability and feebleness in facing the challenges ... feebleness in terms of modern weaponry."

But he defended the military's record against the armed group, saying they had recovered most of the hostages and decimated the Abu Sayyaf's ranks even before the Americans arrived.

US military in the Philippines

More than 600 US troops are expected to bolster government forces



Israeli generals propose invasion of territories

AFP, Jerusalem

A group of senior Israeli generals have drafted a security plan envisaging a re-occupation of the Palestinian territories in a move to destroy the Palestinian Authority, the daily Haaretz reported on Thursday.

The "security-political plan," proposed by a group of senior defence officials and former reserve generals, proposes a massive invasion of Palestinian towns in a bid to cleanse them of "terrorists and weapons".

Recommendations laid down in the plan also envisage the destruction of the Palestinian Authority, and possibly the assassination of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat,

the paper said.

The proponents of the plan, which predicts that uncompromising military action could change the strategic situation within "a week", said they had support for their proposals at the highest echelons of the army, the daily said.

Brigadier General Efi Eitam, who heads the group, said Israel faced an "elusive threat" which, unlike a direct invasion by a foreign state, was able to destroy by stealth.

"Israel is now like a person for whom cancer, not a bullet, is threatening his life," he said.

"This is a first attempt by the right to present a political-security plan that doesn't make do only with blocking Palestinian intentions but proposes solutions to the situation."

Pakistan claims Indian link to kidnapping of US reporter

Kidnappers threaten to kill journalist

AFP, Islamabad

The Pakistani government on Thursday claimed the Indian government may be linked to the kidnapping of an American journalist by alleged Islamic extremists.

"What I can say at this stage is that there is an Indian link in this. It's very unfortunate," military spokesman Major General Rashid Qureshi told a press conference.

Meanwhile, the United States has re-issued a travel warning for Pakistan as fears grew over the fate of kidnapped Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl, only hours before a deadline set by his captors to kill him.

The latest e-mail from a little known militant group in Pakistan threatening to kill Pearl within 24 hours was sent Wednesday at 1135 GMT, The New York Times said.

Pearl's wife, Marianne, said she was not desperate about her husband's plight despite the latest e-mail, received by various Western and Pakistani media outlets, that said other American journalists in Pakistan could be targeted.

"I haven't slept for six days but I have hope," Marianne Pearl told CNN from Karachi. "I'm not desperate because if I stop believing in creating this dialogue then I stop believing in everything else. I can't do that."

The e-mail accused Pearl, 38, of working for the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad, according to a report in the Journal, which vigorously denied Pearl was an intelligence operative for any nation.

In a previous electronic message, Pearl was accused of working for the CIA, a charge the US intelligence agency also denied publicly.

Bush's speech sparks protests in Mideast

AFP, Tehran

US President George W. Bush's State of the Union address provoked a chorus of condemnation and contempt from Muslim countries around the Middle East yesterday.

The loudest protests came from Iran and Iraq, both of which Bush has singled out for their alleged support of terrorism and efforts to develop banned weapons of mass destruction.

"Bush's tone is that of a man thirsty for human blood," Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei fired back to Tuesday's speech.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran is proud to be the target of the rage and hatred of the world's greatest Satan," Khamenei said, using Iran's

favoured term to depict the United States.

Iran's reformist President Mohammad Khatami already on Wednesday condemned what he called the "bellicose, insulting and anti-Iranian" comments of Bush.

In protest at Bush's speech, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi has called off a planned visit to New York next week to take part in the World Economic Forum.

Iraq joined in the backlash for a second straight day, branding Bush stupid, arrogant and irresponsible.

"One year after George W. Bush took office the whole world has come to know his superficiality, his lack of experience, his irresponsibility and his arrogant policies," the ruling Baath party newspaper Ath-thawra charged.

Bush said in his address to Congress that Iraq and Iran as well as North Korea could become targets in the war on terrorism if they remained a threat to the United States or others.

The three states formed an "axis of evil", he charged.

Iraq's Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan late Wednesday rejected Bush's charges as "stupid and indecent" and stood firm against the White House's demand to allow the return of UN arms inspectors.

Lebanon also joined the fray, with Foreign Minister Mahmoud Hammud rejecting Bush's terrorism accusations against the Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah movement and insisting the group was a resistance movement fighting Israeli occupation.

Militant infiltration, violence decline in Kashmir: BSF

AFP, Srinagar

A top Indian border security official said Thursday that militant infiltration from Pakistan across the disputed Kashmir border had declined since Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf ordered a crackdown on extremist groups.

"Only one group has infiltrated into the Kashmir valley since Musharraf vowed to crush terrorist groups," said Rajinder Bhullar, deputy inspector general of India's Border Security Force (BSF).

The group comprised of seven armed militants and their guide," Bhullar, who heads the BSF's intelligence wing, told AFP.

Musharraf banned the Pakistan-based militant outfits Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed during a speech to the nation on January 12, after New Delhi accused the two of carrying out December's attack on the Indian parliament.

"I must agree there is a visible decline in infiltration," Bhullar said, while adding that heavy snowfall along the Kashmir border was a major factor.

Bhullar said there had also been a reduction in overall militancy-related incidents in Kashmir since Musharraf's speech.

"There have been only 30 encounters since January 12 leading to the elimination of 63 separatist militants,"

he said.

The Muslim insurgency against Indian rule in Kashmir has claimed at least 35,000 lives since 1989 and the number of encounters between separatist militants and the security forces average more than 40 per week.

Bhullar said there had been no decline in drive-by grenade attacks by militants, which have claimed a number of civilian as well as security casualties.

India and Pakistan have come to the brink of their fourth war since New Delhi accused Pakistan-based Islamic militants of carrying out an attack on its parliament on December 13.

In his landmark speech, Musharraf launched a crackdown on Islamic extremism and outlawed five radical groups, including the Lashkar and Jaish. Since then 2,000 alleged militants have been arrested.

But New Delhi has refused to enter into talks with Islamabad, insisting further visible steps should be taken to eliminate "terrorism" before dialogue can begin.

"We have seized the initiative from the militants over the past four months by maintaining tremendous pressure on them," Bhullar said.

"We will keep up that pressure as militants on the ground are confused and demoralised following the banning of two groups by Pakistan."

Jakarta floods subsiding

AFP, Jakarta

Floods which have swamped the Indonesian capital Jakarta for the past two days, and killed at least 29 people nationwide, began subsiding on Thursday but officials warned worst may be yet to come.

Some 195,000 residents whose homes were swamped by up to three meters (10 feet) of muddy brown water are being sheltered in schools, mosques, and government offices throughout the capital, officials at the flood relief centre said.

"Overflowed rivers have subsided. Water levels in several areas have also decreased," said Rozikin, one official.

But he said the weather forecast is for continued and increasingly heavy rain over the next month in parts of the country, including the main island of Java.

"God forbid, it looks like it's not over yet," he said.

Police and marines in inflatable boats joined the rescue efforts across the coastal capital of some eight million people and its satellite

towns as an inquiry began into the cause of the disaster.

Some residents said the floods, which swamped thousands of buildings and snarled up major highways, were worse than the last major inundation in 1996.

Jakarta governor Sutiyoso argued that the floods, following heavy rain which began on Saturday, were the result of weather and climate abnormalities that occurred every five years.

But environmentalist pointed out that rainfall in the current rainy season had been no heavier than normal.

"They blamed the floods on years of bad city planning and corruption that had allowed green areas to be built on, causing more rain to run into the city's numerous rivers rather than soak into the soil.

Rubbish-clogged or broken drains also played a part.

City councillor Sayogo Hendrosutroto, quoted by the Jakarta Post, said the city had spent only 40 percent of its budget for flood control projects last year due to poor fiscal management.



Two Indonesian men sit on their makeshift raft at their flooded village as they try to escape in South Jakarta on Thursday. Floods, which have swamped the Indonesian capital Jakarta for the past two days, and killed at least 29 people nationwide, began subsiding but officials warned the worst may be yet to come.

UP polls not a referendum for Vajpayee: BJP

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling Hindu nationalist BJP party said Thursday that coming state elections, particularly a key polls in Uttar Pradesh state, should not be seen as a referendum on the central government led by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

"If at all it is a referendum of the performance of any government, you can call it a referendum on the performance of chief minister Rajnath Singh," BJP president K. Jana Krishnamurthy said at a news conference.

Singh heads the BJP administration government in Uttar Pradesh, the most populous -- and among the

most politically volatile -- Indian states.

Uttar Pradesh is among four states going to the polls in February.

The BJP administration in Uttar Pradesh is facing a huge anti-establishment wave of discontent which is reflected in pre-election surveys that predict a defeat for the party.

Representing the "Hindu heartland," state elections are often seen as a referendum or acid test for the federal government of the day.

A popular saying in political and media circles here is: "One who rules UP (Uttar Pradesh), rules New Delhi."

However, Krishnamurthy made it

clear that the party does not view the coming polls as any kind of judgement on the performance of Prime Minister Vajpayee.

"I do agree that Uttar Pradesh is the largest state and that is why it is important," he said. "But elections there have nothing to do with the stability of the federal government or its performance."

Analysts, however, say the poll results will have a national impact.

"If the BJP does badly in Uttar Pradesh, it will create enormous pressures within the NDA," said political analyst Mahesh Rangarajan.

"And my feeling is that it is going to do badly."

Australia accused of running 'concentration camp' for asylum seekers

AFP, Sydney

Religious and human rights groups on Thursday accused the Australian government of running a "concentration camp" for asylum seekers and called for UN intervention in the country's immigration crisis.

The accusation, from a coalition of 20 groups, which included the Roman Catholic church, came as the government offered to pay Afghan migrants interned in controversial detention centres to return home.

The initiative was unveiled by Prime Minister John Howard during a visit to New York. It follows severe international and domestic criticism of his handling of a crisis that has festered since his government turned away a boatload of refugees

in August.

In a letter to UN High Commissioner for Refugees Mary Robinson, the religious and rights groups accused the government of systematic abuses of human rights.

The letter, which was made public, labelled the Woomera Detention Centre where more than 200 hunger strikers abandoned a two-week protest on Wednesday, "a concentration camp."

"The Australian government has systematically sought to undermine sympathy for refugees seeking asylum, demonising them, and representing them to the public as 'illegals' or as 'queue-jumpers'," the letter, signed by Catholic, United Church and Islamic welfare agency representatives, said.

Nepali ruling party MPs join campaign to oust PM

AFP, Kathmandu

Nearly half of Nepal's ruling party MPs have joined a campaign to oust Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba over his government's proposals to counter corruption and to extend emergency rule that was imposed to isolate Maoist rebels.

At least 50 of the Nepali Congress' 113 MPs have signed on to the campaign against Deuba, highly placed party sources said. The dissidents need the support of 57 MPs to remove the prime minister.

Deuba's opponents are rallying behind party president Girija Prasad Koirala, who resigned as premier in July and was replaced by Deuba after criticism that he had failed to take sufficient action against a growing Maoist rebellion.

Deuba's new government immediately reached a

truce with the leftists and began peace talks. But three rounds of negotiations yielded no breakthrough and the Maoists broke the ceasefire in late November.

In response the government deployed the army for the first time and, controversially, imposed a three-month state of emergency in the kingdom. Deuba has said the emergency is needed for at least another three months to bring the Maoists to their knees.

Asked about the campaign to bring a no-confidence vote against him, Deuba told AFP: "I don't know. I have no knowledge of it."

European diplomats here said Deuba's removal would seriously worsen the security situation in Nepal, where the key industry, tourism, was hit hard in 2001 because of the Maoist rebellion and a massacre of the royal family.



Bangladesh Ambassador to Lebanon, with residence in Tehran, Tufail K Haider made a farewell call on Lebanese President General Emile Lahoud at the Baabda Palace in Beirut recently.