

Top US military commander in India

AFP, New Delhi

The head of the United States' armed forces arrived in India Sunday and promptly declared warming military ties between the two nations as vital in the fight against global terrorism.

"A solid military partnership is important for the nations' common goal of defeating terrorism," the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, General Richard Myers, said in a statement released soon after landing in the Indian capital of New Delhi.

Militants gun down 8 in Kashmir

AFP, Jammu

Suspected Islamic militants shot dead eight people and injured six others in an overnight attack in Indian administered Kashmir, an official spokesman said Sunday.

"A group of militants came and gunned down six women and two men late Saturday," Subhash Raina, a senior police official said.

"Six people - four women and two men - were injured when the militants fired indiscriminately at them," Raina added.

The victims and the injured were Hindus and belonged to Bambalnarla village in the border district of Rajouri, 150 km from of Kashmir's winter capital Jammu.

News of the attack only filtered through on Sunday as the village was in a remote, heavily forested area of Muslim dominated Kashmir, the police official said.

One of the villagers waited until day-break to come down and inform the police at the nearest post, he said.

Clashes kill 200 in Congo

REUTERS, Kampala

Up to 200 people have been killed in ethnic clashes in northeast Congo in the past two days, tribal sources and the Ugandan army said on Saturday.

A spokesman for the Hema community in Bukavu told Reuters that an attack on Friday morning by Lendu militiamen on the Hema village of Kpanganza, around 25 km north of the Congolese town of Bunia, had left 200 people dead.

"It's the same business that has been going on for the past three years," Jean Baptiste Dhetchuvi said. Fighting between the Lendu and Hema communities in the Democratic Republic of Congo has killed thousands to people in recent years.

KSA sends 4 planes to Kabul

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi Arabia is to send four planes to Kabul to transport Afghan pilgrims to the kingdom for the annual Muslim Hajj pilgrimage, the Okaz newspaper reported Sunday.

The four planes are expected in Kabul on either Sunday or Monday, Okaz said, quoting Saudi ambassador to Islamabad Ali bin Awadh Assyri.

Assyri will also head a Saudi delegation due in Kabul Sunday to reopen the kingdom's embassy there, the paper said, following its closure in the wake of last September's terror attacks in the United States.

US 'trainers' deployed in Philippines

AFP, Isabela

Two CH-17 Chinook helicopters landed Sunday in the southern Philippine island of Basilan and delivered a group of US Special Forces "trainers" who will help their Filipino counterparts in their efforts to crush Muslim militants.

Security was tight following bomb explosions blamed on Abu Sayyaf rebels on Saturday in nearby Jolo island and the city of Zamboanga which left three people dead and 53 others wounded.

At least two Simba armoured patrol carriers were sent to the army base's landing pad while an advance party of US soldiers formed a perimeter security.

Unique way to expose corruption

AFP, Guwahati

A local photographer in India's northeastern state of Manipur has earned public praise and some quick money for the novel way he chose to expose corruption rampant among politicians in the state.

The photographer, who preferred to remain anonymous, printed hundreds of calendars for the year 2002 with 24 photographs of sprawling private residences, built by ministers, legislators, parliamentarians and other politicians, during their tenure in public office.

While some of the constructions were in violation of several laws set for building houses in the state, pictures of others had found a place on the calendar for their opulence.

'Pakistan to charge US \$ 60 m per month for war support'

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan will begin charging the United States about 60 million dollars a month for logistical support it has provided to the war on terrorism, the finance minister said after a trip to Washington.

Shaukat Aziz said late Saturday that Pakistan was "in the process" of billing Washington 300 million dollars for support through the end of January. After that, Pakistan will issue monthly bills that will average 60 million dollars, Aziz said.

"We will bill them monthly for certain things under the acquisition and cross-services agreement," Aziz said. Pakistan will charge for fuel, food, water, transportation, medical services, repairs and other services provided to US forces, who have been engaged in neighboring Afghanistan since early October.

Pakistan broke ranks with Afghanistan's Taliban and sided with the United States after the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, blamed on Afghan-based Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

Aziz also said that during his trip to Washington with President Pervez Musharraf, George W. Bush's administration pledged to write off one billion dollars of Pakistan's 2.8 billion-dollar loan debt to the United States.

The United States has since September 11 promised Pakistan an aid package worth more than one billion dollars, 600 million dollars of which has

already been delivered.

Meanwhile, President Pervez Musharraf said Saturday he won understanding for Pakistan's positions during a trip to the United States, including "unanimity" among members of Congress.

"On the diplomatic level, great understanding has been achieved (between the two countries)," Musharraf told state television after he returned from a three-day official visit to Washington.

"There is total unanimity of our understanding on Capitol Hill. This is a good beginning and good achievement."

He said the United States had pledged a "reasonable amount" of fiscal assistance and debt write-off, which will be announced shortly. Musharraf reversed Pakistani support for Afghanistan's Taliban regime after the September 11 attacks on the United States and made his country Washington's frontline ally in its "war on terrorism".

The United States has since granted Pakistan an aid package worth more than one billion dollars, 600 million dollars of which has already been delivered.

Pakistan's Finance Minister, Shaukat Aziz, said Saturday the Bush administration had promised to write off one billion dollars in Islamabad's 2.8 billion-dollar loan debt to Washington.

The write-off needs to be approved by Congress, said Aziz, quoted by the Associated Press of Pakistan.



Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf addresses a meeting of the Ministerial Standing Committee on Scientific and Technological Cooperation (COMSTECH) among the Muslim countries in Islamabad on Saturday. Musharraf called for pooling resources by Islamic world to make advancement in science and technological field for its economic and intellectual revival.



US President George W. Bush (R) is welcomed by Japanese Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi (L) upon his arrival at the Tokyo International Airport on Sunday. Bush arrived in Tokyo on the first leg of his East Asian tour to Japan, South Korea and China.

Bush begins Asia trip

AFP, Tokyo

US President George W. Bush arrived in Tokyo Sunday on the first leg of his East Asian tour to Japan, South Korea and China, officials said.

His presidential Air Force One plane landed at Haneda airport at around 3:50pm (0650 GMT) on the eve of his summit with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, the officials said.

Together with First Lady Laura Bush, he was driven to central Tokyo after they were greeted by Japan's new Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi at the airport in light rain.

Security was boosted in the capital with a total of 18,000 police deployed during his stay until Tuesday, the officials said.

In a meeting with Bush on Monday, Koizumi is expected to

present his plans for stabilising Japan's shaky financial system and reversing deflation, which has crippled corporate profits.

"I will explain (to Bush) about our solid measures designed to revive the economy," Koizumi said last week.

Koizumi has ordered his administration to adopt new measures by the end of February to combat deflation, which has attacked prices in Japan since the middle of the 1990s.

Heizo Takenaka, state minister in charge of economic and fiscal policy, said Sunday the government would soon carry out special inspections on banks to consider if public fund injection is necessary into the ailing banking sector.

"We need some action ... before the end of March," Takenaka told a television interview. "Japan has no

future if we leave things half-done. We want to put an end to the (bad loan) problem, now."

The Japanese economy is wallowing in recession for the third time in a decade, pressured by weak demand and persistent deflation. Japanese banks have been crippled by non-performing loans as companies go to the wall.

Bush is likely to express his support for Koizumi's effort to speed up reforms and revamp the world's second largest economy.

On the security front, Bush is expected to seek Japan's continued cooperation in his campaign to stamp out terrorism.

"I'm going to continue to work with the leaders of those countries in our mutual concerns, starting with fighting the war against terror," he said in a speech when he stopped over Alaska on his way to Tokyo.

Sharon vows to win 'war' with Palestinians

AFP, Jerusalem

"Israel has never lost a war and will win this one declared by the Palestinians," Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told a top security meeting Saturday night, after a deadly suicide bombing and renewed Palestinian missile attacks.

"The citizens of Israel have known in the past harder times than those we are living through today," he was quoted as saying in the media Sunday. "If we remain united we will attain our goal, we will triumph."

"At present, Israel will have to increase the strength of its military operations in the face of terrorism."

Sharon was holding consultations late Saturday and early Sunday with his security chiefs, including talks with Defence Minister Binyamin

Ben Eliezer.

An anonymous political source quoted in the daily Yediot Aharonot said "Israel will answer the Palestinian attacks with a progressive military response which will grow in the coming days."

Two Israeli teenagers were killed by a Palestinian suicide bomber in the West bank settlement of Karnei Shomron between the Palestinian self-rule towns of Qalqilya and Nablus late Saturday, as Palestinian radicals fired a home-made rocket at an Israeli army post in the Gaza Strip, causing no casualties.

Meanwhile, thousands of Israeli pacifists demonstrated in Tel Aviv late Sunday at a rally aimed at putting pressure on right-wing Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to end the occupation of the Palestinian territories.

'Pakistan compulsively hostile to Delhi: Jaswant

AFP, Madrid

Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh said on Sunday Pakistan was developing a "compulsively hostile policy" towards his country.

This hostile approach was Pakistan's "raison d'etre" as a nation and it was this, rather than the disputed territory of Kashmir, that was the principal problem between the two South Asian neighbours, Singh said in an interview with right-wing Spanish newspaper El Mundo.

Kashmir is divided between India and Pakistan and is claimed by both. It is the cause of two of the three wars the two nuclear powers have fought since the subcontinent's independence from British rule in 1947.

Singh said Pakistan had to

decide what kind of long-term relationship it wanted with India, which has ruled out any resumption of talks over Kashmir until Pakistan halts its alleged support for armed militants there.

He pointed out that the "wise men" in the West who said the current Pakistani president, General Pervez Musharraf, was the best choice had said the same thing about the five generals who preceded him.

Pakistan had to become a socially stable, economically viable country, he said. It was difficult to see how this could come about but the important thing was to ensure it happened in a peaceful manner, without fostering "terrorism", he stressed.

Ayodhya tense: Fresh move to build temple

AP, Ayodhya

Amid chanting of hymns, nearly 1,000 Hindu nationalists in saffron clothes washed chiseled images of Hindu deities yesterday as they prepare to build a temple at the disputed site of a demolished mosque.

The weeklong land purification ceremony ignored Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's plea to Hindus and Muslims to let a court settle their rival claims to land that both regard as holy.

Hindus have vowed to begin constructing the temple dedicated to their most revered deity, Rama, on March 15.

"No force on this earth can stop us from building the temple," said

Ram Chandra Parmhans, chairman of the Ram Janambhoomi Trust, which will oversee the construction work.

Thousands of policemen and paramilitary forces patrolled the northern Indian town of Ayodhya yesterday to prevent clashes between Muslims and Hindu extremists, who destroyed the Babri mosque in 1992.

Millions of Hindus believe that Ayodhya was the birthplace of Rama and claim a Hindu temple was destroyed centuries ago to build the mosque.

The mosque's destruction prompted fierce clashes between Hindus and Muslims that killed 2,000 people, mostly Muslims across India.

On Saturday, Vajpayee deferred a decision about which group has rights to the land to the Supreme Court, saying his efforts to resolve the dispute had failed.

Early Sunday, nearly 200 women walked up to a nearby river and fetched water in pails and earthen pots.

The devotees then washed the red sandstone images of Hindu gods and goddesses chiseled by 60 artisans over a period of 12 years in Ayodhya, 550 kilometers east of New Delhi.

The site is less than three kilometers from the location of the demolished mosque. Hindus will begin moving the red sandstone images and arches to the disputed property next month.

India to test indigenous ship-to-ship missile

AFP, New Delhi

India is planning more tests of its first homegrown ship-to-ship missile Dhanush which could allow the navy to strike land targets with nuclear or conventional warheads, a scientist said in a report Sunday.

"More tests of the Dhanush will be carried out in the next two months," the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency quoted a top scientist of India's Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) as saying.

"The tests are being speeded up as the missile is sorely needed by the navy," the unidentified defence scientist said.

The 8.56-metre (28.25-foot) medium-range Dhanush (Bow) missile, with a range of 150 kilometres (93 miles), was last tested in September.

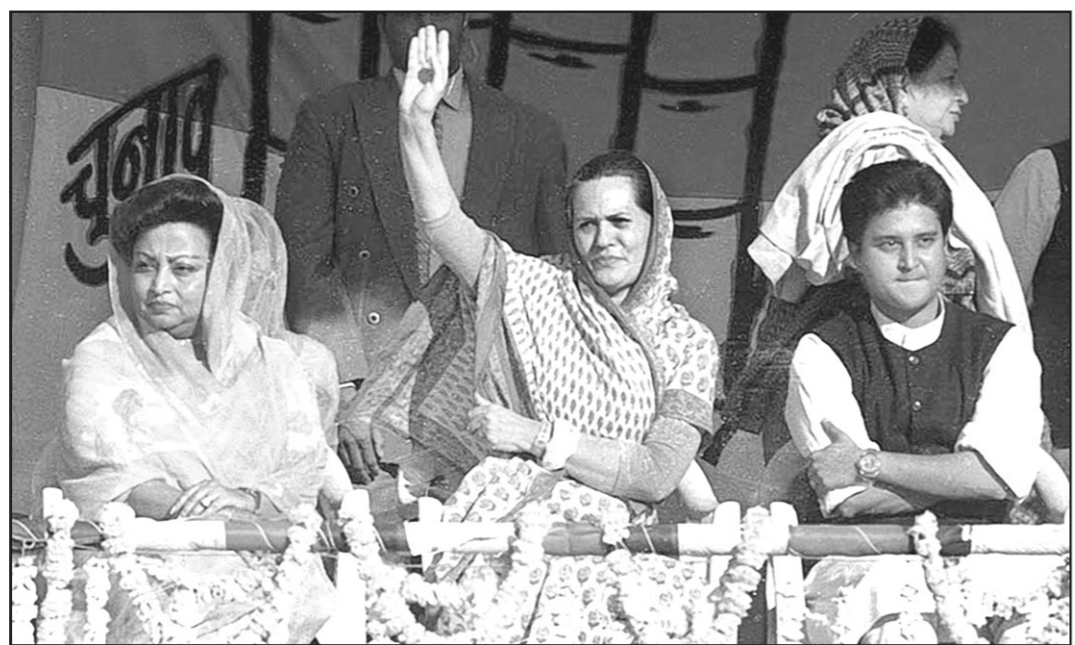
The missile had "the necessary design flexibility" to carry a variety of warheads including nuclear warheads, the PTI report quoted the scientist as saying.

Last month, India tested a short-range version of its nuclear-capable Agni I missile, with a range of less than 700 kilometers (440 miles).

The test prompted angry condemnation from nuclear rival Pakistan despite New Delhi's insistence that it was "non-provocative."

Bilateral relations between the neighbours plunged to a new low after an attack on India's parliament in December, which New Delhi blamed on two Pakistan-based Islamic militant groups.

Both countries have massed about 800,000 troops on their common borders triggering international fears of a war between the two nuclear rivals.



Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi (C) waves at a campaign rally with the Congress' Guna constituency candidate Jyotiraditya Scindia (R) and his mother, Madhiverraja Scindia, in Guna on Saturday in Madhya Pradesh state. The Guna by-election will take place on February 22.

Karzai to call for change in ISAF mandate

AFP, Kabul

Afghan interim leader Hamid Karzai will call for a "stronger role" for the international security force in Kabul if violence continues to escalate, as the troops came under attack from gunmen for the first time since they were deployed.

Karzai said Sunday he would ask for a change in the mandate of the force if violence increases, following what he called the assassination of his aviation minister and tribal clashes in the east of the country.

The deterioration of the security situation in Kabul comes as US President George W. Bush touched down in Tokyo for a six-day tour of

Japan, South Korea and China.

Up to seven people, including two security officials, were killed or wounded in an armed clash between two Afghan tribes in Khost province, the Afghan Islamic Press reported.

Aviation Minister Abdul Rahman was killed at Kabul airport on Thursday. "If the security situation in Afghanistan does not improve further, we will make sure the international security forces are asked together with the Afghan forces to take a stronger role," he said, without going into detail.

"I will ask for every measure. I will use international forces, Afghan forces, to make life good for these people," he said.

Karzai was also to meet Sunday with a Saudi representative to ask for the extradition of Rahman's alleged assassins.

He said he would ask the Saudi diplomat for the extradition of three people he said were behind the killing, which he claimed was not politically motivated, and who flew to Saudi Arabia along with pilgrims to Mecca.

Colonel Richard Barrons, chief of staff of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), said soldiers of the 2nd Parachute Battalion returned fire after their post in Kabul came under attack Saturday and the gunmen fled in a car.

British intelligence foils al-Qaida plots: Press

AFP, London

British intelligence agents have prevented several attacks by Osama bin Laden including a ship-bomb in London's docklands area, a British Sunday paper said.

Intelligence chiefs have told ministers that Britain is under "sustained attack" by al-Qaida extremists and is also overdue an assault by the Real IRA, a militant splinter group of Northern Ireland's paramilitary Irish Republican Army, the Sunday Express said.

M16 working with the CIA had foiled at least two attacks on British assets in Africa, where bin Laden's terror group was blamed for destroying two US embassies in 1998, killing 250 people, it added.

"Al-Qaida terrorists are active. Only good intelligence, good for-

tune and the somewhat primitive nature of the preparations have prevented a major attack that would have resulted in substantial loss of life," a senior security source told the paper.

A tip-off before Christmas led to a raid on the MV Nisha cargo ship in the English Channel, and although the boat was later released, the security source did not think the threat had passed.

"The MV Nisha was not a false alarm. We have very good evidence that there are plans for a very big bang in Docklands (east London)."

Meanwhile, British Islamic extremists have been involved in weapons training with assault rifles at a mosque in London, a British Sunday paper said.