

Indian troops kill 2 militants hiding in Kashmir mosque

AFP, Srinagar

Two militants who were hiding in a mosque in Kashmir were Tuesday shot dead by Indian troops after a 12-hour siege, officials said.

The militants had barricaded themselves inside the shrine late Monday after security forces cordoned off an area in the northern Kashmiri district of Baramulla, 55 kilometres (34 miles) from Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, following a tip-off.

"There was an exchange of fire last evening, but it was calm throughout the night," a police spokesman said.

An attempt by a group of village elders to persuade the militants to surrender had failed and they were shot dead Tuesday, the spokesman said.

Indian troops kill 8 rebels in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

At least eight separatist militants were killed in encounters with security personnel in India's restive northeastern state of Assam, officials said Tuesday.

A police spokesman said a joint patrol of army and Assam police on Monday raided a house at Akhara village, 70 km west of Assam's capital Guwahati, and shot dead four top leaders of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).

"On specific information, the joint security team surrounded the house where the ULFA militants were taking shelter," Sarat Phukan, police chief of Nalbari district said.

The militants opened indiscriminate fire on the security personnel who retaliated killing the four, he said.

In a separate incident in west Assam's Dhubri district, three ULFA militants were shot dead in an encounter with police, while another rebel of the banned National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) was killed in Kokrajhar district, a police spokesman said.

Myanmar junta admits UN envoy's trip postponed due to coup bid

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's military regime admitted Tuesday that UN envoy Razali Ismail's planned visit this week was postponed due to the attempted coup earlier this month.

"The Myanmar authorities concerned are quite preoccupied with issues that need immediate attention after the recent coup attempt," a government spokesman said.

"The UN envoy Mr. Razali Ismail has been informed and kindly requested to postpone his visit to Myanmar at a date convenient to both sides in the near future," he said in a statement.

The military government announced on March 7 that it had scuttled a coup plot mounted by the family of former dictator Ne Win who ruled the country until 1988.

Asia's largest volcano erupts in Russia's far east

AFP, Vladivostok

The largest volcano in Europe and Asia began erupting Tuesday in Russia's far eastern Kamchatka peninsula, volcanologists told AFP.

Over 30 small earthquakes were registered Tuesday beneath the 4850-metre Klyuchevsky volcano, marking a beginning of seismological activity, according to local officials.

Klyuchevsky is one of the world's most active volcanoes and had erupted more than 50 times over the past two centuries. It had last erupted in 1987.

5 Indonesian officers blamed for ignoring Timor massacre

AFP, Jakarta

Five middle-ranking Indonesian officers went on trial Tuesday for failing to prevent a massacre in an East Timor church in 1999 as top officers of the powerful military packed the court in a show of support for the defendants.

Prosecutors at Indonesia's newly formed human rights court accused the five of ignoring warnings or news of the militia massacre of 27 civilians -- including 10 women and three Catholic priests -- at the Hail Mary church in Suai in September 1999.

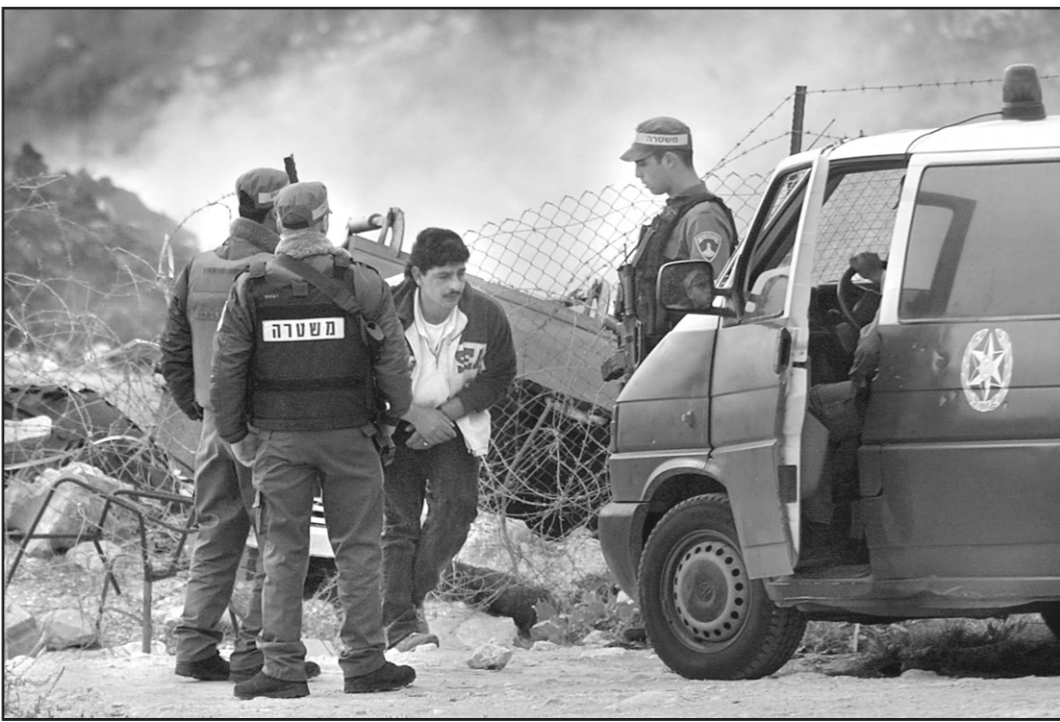


PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian man covers himself after he was hit in the groin by an Israeli border policeman at the Beit Jala checkpoint in the West Bank on Tuesday. Israel said it had completed its withdrawal from autonomous Palestinian areas in the Bethlehem sector of the West Bank and the north of the Gaza Strip. But a Palestinian security official told AFP that the Israeli army had still not pulled out of areas in the northern Gaza Strip in spite of the Israeli announcement.

Annan accuses Sharon of inciting all-out war

REUTERS, United Nations

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan told Prime Minister Ariel Sharon that Israel's recent offensive resembled "all-out conventional warfare," resulting in illegitimate attacks on civilians, ambulances and schools, according to a letter obtained on Monday.

The blunt letter, unusual for Annan, was sent to Sharon on March 12 during a week of increasing world criticism of Israel's use of heavy weaponry against Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza that Israel occupied after the 1967 war.

"Judging from the means and methods employed by the Israel Defense Force -- F-16 fighter bombers, helicopter and naval gunships,

missiles and bombs of heavy tonnage -- the fighting has come to resemble all-out conventional warfare," he said.

"Israel is fully entitled to defend itself against terror," Annan wrote. "But this right does not discharge it of its obligation to respect the fundamental principles and rules of international law."

Specifically, Annan pointed to the killing and injuring of civilians and the firing at hospitals and schools, in one case shooting to death a UN guard who was escorting a wounded man to a hospital. All these actions violated the principle of protecting civilians.

Annan requested Sharon initiate a "full investigation" into Israeli soldiers firing at ambulances and

medical personnel "and that you take immediate steps to ensure that they are not repeated in the future."

He called "unfounded and unsubstantiated" statements by Israeli government officials that ambulances may have been used to smuggle Palestinian militants and weapons.

"These allegations can only result in further danger to medical workers and further impede their vital mission," Annan said in the letter.

Israeli diplomats said Sharon's office had not responded to the letter. One envoy, speaking on condition of anonymity, said it was regrettable that the letter was leaked to the media. This would not enhance a dialogue between Israel and the United Nations, he said.

Lok Sabha gives nod to anti-terror law

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

A controversial anti-terrorism law was approved by the Lok Sabha, the lower house of Indian Parliament, last night amidst walkout by the Opposition which termed the legislation as "draconian" despite Home Minister L K Advani's assurance that it would not be misused.

The Prevention of Terrorism Bill, 2002, replacing an ordinance, was endorsed by 261 votes for and 137 against after the opposition pressed for a division.

Interestingly, nine members of Lok Sabha belonging to Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress, which is a constituent of India's ruling BJP-led alliance, opposed the law staying away from the House.

Leader of the Opposition Sonia

Gandhi and members belonging to her Congress party joined the walk-out.

In his brief reply to the debate over the bill, Advani said the new law would not be used against political opponents in the manner now-defunct Terrorist and Disruptive Activities' Act had been in the past.

CPI (M) leader Somnath Chatterjee said it was a "dark day" in the annals of Parliament and the country was going to encounter another onslaught on the people's rights.

The bill now needs to be approved by the upper house, Rajya Sabha, but the problem of the government is that it does not have a majority there. With the opposition determined to defeat the bill in the upper house, the ruling BJP is planning to convene a joint sitting of both

houses of Parliament to try and get parliamentary approval for the legislation.

In the joint sitting of Parliament, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) alliance an overall lead over non-NDA camp.

For now, however, BJP is trying to convince the opposition that since a joint sitting of Parliament will see the law through, it made "little sense" for resisting it in Rajya Sabha. But Congress, the main opposition, seems in no mood to relent.

"We will try to defeat in Rajya Sabha and even in joint sitting of Parliament," said Congress spokesman S Jaipal Reddy adding in the event of Parliament passing the new law the party would see to it that it is not misused. Ends

Global warming blamed for Antarctic ice shelf collapse

AFP, Auckland

In what is being touted as the biggest event of its kind in 30 years, an Antarctic ice shelf has collapsed and broken up into thousands of icebergs, US experts said Tuesday in a new alarm over global warming.

An area of 3,250 square kilometres (1,300 square miles) of the Larsen B ice shelf, off the Antarctic Peninsula's eastern coast, has shattered over a 35-day period, the US National Snow and Ice Data Center said.

And with continued warm summers, other ice shelves are on the brink of collapse, the NSIDC warned.

That would portend increased flows of glacial ice from Antarctica and a rise in global sea levels, endangering low-lying land areas.

On its website (www.nsidc.org), the University of Colorado-based center said the Larsen B, a 720-billion-ton block of ice which could be as old as 12,000 years, began to disintegrate on January 31.

"The shattered ice formed a plume of thousands of icebergs adrift in the Weddell Sea," the NSIDC said.

"This is the largest single event in a series of retreats by ice shelves in the Peninsula over the last 30 years. The retreats are attributed to a strong climate warming in the

region."

The centre said the rate of warming was around 0.5 degrees Celsius (32.9 Fahrenheit) per decade, and the trend could be observed back at least to the late 1940s.

NSIDC researcher Ted Scambos said the ice disintegrated because of the presence of ponded meltwater on the surface in late summer as the climate warms. Meltwater fills smaller cracks in the shelf and its weight fractures the ice mass.

In an earlier study, Scambos and others writing in the Journal of Glaciology said they believed other ice shelves may be closer to breaking point than previously thought.

Lost Inca city found in Peru

AFP, Lima

The US National Geographic Society (NGS) has shown for the first time photos and site plans of the lost Inca city of Coriuhayrachina, tucked away in the lofty forests of southeastern Peru.

The city, which the Incas may have taken over from other tribes, was built around an ancient silver mine which was exploited by locals until the 1970s. Its ruins are now used as grazing land by two families, the society told reporters here Monday.

Discovered in June 2001 by an NGS expedition led by archaeologist Peter Frost, from Britain, and Scott Gorschuch, from the United States, Coriuhayrachina is billed as the greatest archaeological discovery in Peru in 38 years.



PHOTO: AFP

This recent undated photo released by the National Geographic Society show pieces of ancient pottery at the site of an extensive Inca settlement discovered in southeastern Peru's Vilcabamba region by an expedition sponsored by the National Geographic Society.

World is 'a safer place' after Operation Anaconda: US

AFP, Bagram Air Base

The last US and Canadian troops have been pulled out of a key valley in eastern Afghanistan, marking the end of Operation Anaconda and leaving the world "a safer place," the commander of the US-led offensive said Tuesday.

But there was still danger from remaining Taliban and al-Qaida extremists, US Major General Frank Hagenbeck warned.

"It ended last night and this morning when we exfiltrated the remaining Canadian and US forces," he said in declaring the 17-day Operation Anaconda against the last known Taliban and al-Qaida stronghold "over."

"The world is a safer place than on the second of March when we inserted several thousand coalition forces," he told reporters at this US military base north of the capital Kabul.

The offensive focussed on the Shahi Kot valley and Arma mountains some 30 km south of the Paktia provincial capital Gardez, where the hardcore fighters had been holed up in a labyrinthine network of caves stocked with arms, food and documents.

"We destroyed hundreds of al-Qaida's most experienced fighters and trainers. We destroyed this base for terrorist operations and eliminated their sanctuary," Hagenbeck said.

"We destroyed critical terrorist equipment and we reduced the terrorists' ability to launch large attacks from the Gardez region."

The offensive involved local Afghan soldiers allied to the coalition and 1,000 Afghan troops, mainly ethnic Tajiks from the anti-Taliban Northern

Alliance, sent by the Kabul defence ministry.

However "thousands" of Taliban and al-Qaida extremists were still at large, Hagenbeck warned.

"Even if you do the math, there are thousands of enemies that remain out there," the general said.

"We took (out) only a troop that we consider somewhere between 800 and 1,000. That told us there are lots of more folks out there."

Those at large were "going to ground," he added. "We have intelligence that tells us that. We will wait to see how this intelligence develops over time and we will go after those pockets (of resistance), whether they be large or small."

Afghan commanders reported finding only dozens of corpses, but Hagenbeck, sticking to a toll of "hundreds," said the scale of bombing raids meant a conventional body count was not possible.

He said aerial photographs by unmanned Predator drone aircraft, taken before and after bombing attacks, had provided evidence of large-scale killing.

Citing as example he said a Predator had "sighted from a distance an excess of 40 pairs of shoes, which were outside a mud hut."

"All we saw were a couple of bodies sticking out from a 15-foot mud heap."

On the heels of the US and Canadian soldiers will be up to 1,700 elite British troops, who will start deploying within days to root out al-Qaida and Taliban fighters, London announced Monday.

Laden is still alive, says half brother

AFP, Washington

Osama bin Laden's half brother told CNN on Monday that the world's most sought-after terrorist suspect is not only alive, but does not suffer from a kidney disease that would require dialysis.

Sheikh Ahmad also said his brother Osama was not behind the September 11 suicide attacks on the United States.

"He is my brother. I know him. I lived with him for years. I know how much he fears God," Sheikh Ahmad, who did not want his family name used, said in an interview with CNN.

Sheikh Ahmad and bin Laden have the same mother but different fathers. He said their mother learned through a telephone call three weeks ago that Osama was well, without revealing the source of the call.

4 Abu Sayyaf rebels killed in Philippines

AFP, Zamboanga

Four Muslim Abu Sayyaf rebels were killed and a Filipino soldier was wounded in a clash in the southern Philippine island of Basilan Tuesday, the military said.

Government forces, aided by unmanned US spy planes, caught up with Abu Sayyaf guerrillas on a river bed near the town of Lantawan before noon triggering a gunbattle, said military southern command spokesman Captain Noel Detoyato.

One soldier was wounded in the fighting and was immediately evacuated by US and Filipino medical personnel aboard a UH-1H helicopter, he said.

"Our reports indicate that four Abu Sayyaf rebels were killed. Pursuit operations are ongoing in the area," Detoyato said.

3 killed in sectarian violence in Pakistan

AFP, Lahore

Gunmen riding a motorcycle shot dead three people including a prominent Shiite leader and a Sunni professor in the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore early Tuesday, police said.

Police said the assailants gunned down Sunni scholar Professor Attaur Rahman and his driver as they arrived at an institute in the densely populated central district of Jain Mandar at around 8:15 am.

Rahman, who taught at the Sunni institute Minhajul Quran, and his driver died in the hail of bullets.

As they fled the attackers shot dead Shiite leader Syed Hassam Raza as he stood at a nearby bus stand.

Raza, who belonged to a prominent Shiite family, was one of the main organisers of the community's rituals to

Pakistan reviews security after fatal church attack

Bush, Musharraf pledge to hunt down church attackers

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf began a top-level meeting of provincial governors and police chiefs Tuesday to review the "security lapse" that allowed a deadly grenade attack on a church in the Pakistani capital's diplomatic quarter.

Five people died including US diplomat Milton Green's wife and teenage daughter, a Pakistani woman, an Afghan man and an unidentified man whom officials believe may have been the attacker. Another 46 worshippers were wounded.

Sunday prayers were under way at a church packed with diplomats' families and other expatriates in

Islamabad's diplomatic enclave when a man burst in and hurled several grenades into the congregation.

Late Monday General Musharraf echoed a chorus of domestic criticism of lax security at the church, located in the otherwise tightly guarded quarter.

"President Musharraf expressed his dismay at the recent lapse of security in Islamabad which resulted in the loss of innocent lives," an army press release stated.

"While our troops are fully awake to the threat by the enemy, we cannot lower our guard to the internal security which is also of paramount importance."

Meanwhile, US President

George W. Bush and Pakistan's Pervez Musharraf agreed Monday to work together to hunt down the authors of an attack on an Islamabad church which killed five people, including two Americans.

"We both talked about the need to continue fighting people that would kill for political purposes," Bush told reporters here. "He (Musharraf) doesn't know who it is yet. (But) when we find him, we'll bring him to justice."

An unidentified attacker on Sunday hurled up to eight grenades into the church in Islamabad's diplomatic quarter, killing a Pakistani woman, an Afghan man, one unidentified man, and the wife and 17-year-old daughter of American diplomat Milton Green.

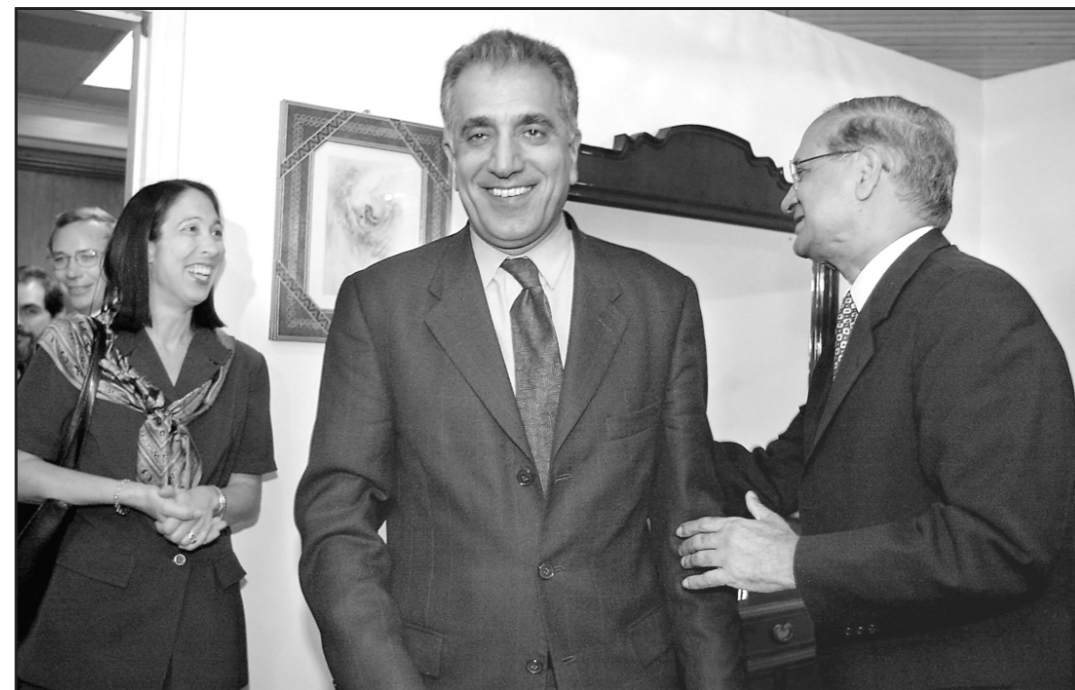


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar (R) receives US President George W Bush's special envoy to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad (C), and deputy head of US mission in Michele Sison (L) in his office in Islamabad on Tuesday. Khalilzad arrived here to hold talks with Pakistani officials on bilateral and regional issues.

mark the Muslim holy month of Moharram, which began Saturday.

"We are not yet clear whether the Shiite leader's murder was coincidental, but it does appear to be a sectarian killing," Lahore police officer Jamil Ahmed told AFP.

Violence by militants from the Sunni and Shiite sects has claimed hundreds of lives across Pakistan in recent years.

Drive-by shootings have escalated ahead of Moharram, a usually tense month which Shiites mark with processions to mourn the death of the seventh century Muslim saint Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad.

More than 30 Shiites and Sunnis have been killed in the past month, including 11 worshippers at a Shiite mosque in the northern city of Rawalpindi on February 26.

Delhi faces music over attack on Orissa House

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India's BJP-led coalition government came under attack in Parliament from within as well as the opposition parties for last Saturday's vandalism in the state legislature in the eastern state of Orissa by activists of Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal.

Participating in discussions in both houses of Parliament yesterday, a number of allies of BJP like Trinamool Congress, Janata Dal (U), Samata Party and Telugu Desam Party demanded tough action, including a ban, against VHP and Bajrang Dal for what they alleged their efforts to "divide the society along communal lines."

Prime Minister Atal Bihari

Vajpayee and his top aide and Home Minister L K Advani strongly condemned the vandalism in Orissa assembly.

In the Rajya Sabha (upper house), in the course of his reply to the debate on the motion of thanks to President K R Narayanan's address, Vajpayee regretted that the vandals were heard shouting "Atal Bihari Zindabad." He said "I would prefer to die rather than live to hear his name being invoked by vandals."

In the Lok Sabha, the lower house, it was Advani who denounced the vandalism in Orissa legislature. He said he was ashamed by the fact that some members belonging to an organisation affiliated to RSS were involved in vandalizing the legislature.