

Pak opposition activists held ahead of rally

AFP, Islamabad

More than two dozen Pakistani opposition party members have been arrested on the eve of a planned rally to mark the country's National Day in the eastern city of Lahore, police said Saturday.

"Around 25 people from the Alliance for the Restoration of Democracy (ARD) have been taken into preventive custody after their leaders refused to change the rally venue," city police chief Javed Noor told AFP by telephone from Lahore.

The multi-party ARD had planned a public rally to mark Pakistan National Day at Lahore's Motchi Gate on Saturday, but police denied permission to use the site and ordered them to move the rally to the city's historic Minar-e-Pakistan.

Hundreds of ex-Taliban fighters freed

REUTERS, Shibarghan

Hundreds of former Taliban fighters were freed in a goodwill gesture in this northern Afghan town on Friday, but thousands were still held in appalling conditions in one of Afghanistan's harshest prisons.

Heavy prison gates were flung open and most of the 258 released captives poured out in a chaotic and jubilant mass from the prison of Shibarghan where they had been kept for four months.

Groups of relatives, tears in their eyes, rushed to hug their emaciated but happy kinsmen, some of whom could not walk on their own and were supported or carried by their fellows.

Security stepped up in Delhi for civic polls

AFP, New Delhi

Security was stepped up in the Indian capital New Delhi Saturday as millions of people prepared to vote in civic elections.

Nearly 70,000 police were being deployed for Sunday's polls to elect 134 local councillors in the capital.

Several preventive arrests have been made, while special attention was being paid to 46 polling areas which the election commission has identified as "hypersensitive". Some 212 other polling areas were identified as "sensitive".

More than 9,000 polling stations will be open for the eight million electorate to vote, while eight centres have been selected to count votes from 25,000 ballot boxes.

4 Lashkar-e-Taiba men held near Delhi

AFP, New Delhi

Four suspected militants belonging to the pro-Pakistan Lashkar-e-Taiba group were arrested near the Indian capital, police said Saturday.

The four men, who have not yet been identified, were picked up from Hapur city, 60 km from New Delhi, late on Friday following an intelligence tip off.

Police said the four were on their way to the capital to carry out some kind of "operation".

"We have definite proof that they were in constant touch with Lashkar-e-Taiba leaders based in Pakistan," senior police official Prashant Kumar told India's Star News channel.

Lashkar, a militant group fighting Indian rule in Kashmir, is one of two organisations New Delhi blames for an attack on its parliament in New Delhi on December 13, which left 14 people dead.

The men were booked under the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (POTO) -- a controversial new anti-terrorism provision.

Pakistan unlikely to handover 20 wanted 'terrorists': Advani

AFP, New Delhi

Home Minister LK Advani on Saturday said Pakistan was not serious about handing over 20 "terrorists and criminals" wanted by New Delhi which could pave the way for easing of tensions between the two nuclear rivals.

"Their leader (Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf) made a very strong speech that he is against terrorism, that he will not allow terrorist activities, but there is no action on the ground," Advani told reporters.

India handed over the list of its most wanted men to Pakistan following the December 13 attack on the Parliament here which New Delhi blamed on two Pakistan-based Islamic guerrilla groups fighting in Kashmir.

Musharraf has refused to hand over any of the Pakistani nationals but has asked New Delhi to supply evidence against non-Pakistanis who are wanted here for various alleged acts of terrorism and criminal offences.

But Advani said: "We don't see any eagerness on their part to send us the 20 terrorists and it is good that yesterday (Friday) America has also talked about it."

On Friday, a top US official said in Washington that the United States had

asked Islamabad to hand over the 20 men wanted by New Delhi as it was an important step to reduce tensions.

"We have asked the Pakistanis to hand these terrorists over to India or even try them in their own country and convict them," said Harry Thomas, director in charge of South Asia in the US National Security Council.

"That is very important. That will lead to a reduction in tensions... we will work hard at it," Thomas added.

Since the parliament attack both countries have amassed hundreds of thousands of troops along their shared borders.

Meanwhile, two men, believed to be Muslim militants, were killed in a landmine explosion as they tried to cross Kashmir's disputed border, police sources said Saturday.

The two men, who had crossed over into the Indian side of Kashmir from the Pakistani zone of the divided Himalayan region, died when they stepped on a mine late Friday at Pallanwala, 350 km southwest of Srinagar, the Kashmiri summer capital.

NDA distances itself from VHP agenda

AFP, New Delhi



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (L) and Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani (R) attend a National Democratic Alliance (NDA) meeting at Vajpayee's residence in New Delhi on Friday.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Friday assured his political allies that his Hindu nationalist BJP party would not stray from the pledged secular agenda of India's coalition government.

The allies of his National Democratic Alliance (NDA) following the assurance also expressed their faith in Vajpayee, ending a looming political crisis facing the premier's multi-party administration in New Delhi.

"The NDA reaffirmed its faith in the common agenda to be implemented with greater vigor under the leadership of Vajpayee," Defence Minister George Fernandes said following a meeting late Friday of the coalition partners.

"The meeting reassured that this common agenda is the bulwark of democracy, secularism and political stability in the country," said Fernandes, NDA's convener.

Vajpayee cobbled together the NDA government on the basis of the secular common agenda in 1999, which vowed not to pursue headline Hindu policies of some of the partners of the BJP party.

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Israel, PA still at odds, prepare for more truce talks

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel and the Palestinians, still at odds Saturday over how to implement a truce both sides say they want, are preparing for more talks, as Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat remains under pressure to rein in militants amid continuing violence.

Senior Israeli and Palestinian security officials ended a US-hosted meeting on Friday without reaching a hoped-for truce, but agreed to talk again Sunday.

The talks have kept negotiations on track despite a wave of suicide bombings, the latest one on Friday.

And violence continued overnight, with three Palestinians dying in clashes with Israeli troops in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

All three parties to the ceasefire talks were mum Saturday about what had prevented a breakthrough from being achieved.

On Friday, Yarden Vatikai, an Israel defense ministry spokesman, said only that "we demanded above all that the Palestinian Authority makes all possible effort to stop the terrible wave of attacks."

That demand was echoed, yet again, by US President George W. Bush.

He has conditioned a meeting between Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Vice President Dick Cheney, in what would be the highest-level contact since Bush took

office, on Arafat bringing a halt to attacks on Israel.

Bush said such a meeting "could happen, if and when Chairman Arafat performs, does what he's supposed to do."

He said Cheney and US Secretary of State Colin Powell had made the conditions for such a meeting clear to Arafat, on whom the US leader has repeatedly called to make a "100-percent effort" to halt attacks.

Meanwhile, the Israeli army shot dead a Palestinian during an incursion early Saturday into the autonomous Palestinian city of Rafah, in the southern Gaza Strip, hospital sources said.

Eight tanks and two bulldozers rolled into the self-rule area late Friday and destroyed houses in the Israeli-controlled border area near Egypt, security sources said.

Reuters adds: The United States pressed forward on Saturday with a drive to end 18 months of Middle East violence, holding out the prospect of a high-level meeting with Yasser Arafat if Palestinian attacks against Israelis stopped.

Palestinian security sources said two Palestinians were killed and a factory and three homes destroyed early on Saturday in fresh violence in the Gaza Strip.

U.S. envoy Anthony Zinni was to resume his mediation of security talks between the sides as early as Sunday, after a session on Friday ended without concrete results.

Karen rebels raid Myanmar Army camp: 30 killed

REUTERS, Bangkok

Separatist ethnic Karen fighters launched one of their biggest attacks on the Myanmar army since the mid-1990s on Saturday morning, leaving about 30 dead, the Thai army said.

A Thai military source told Reuters about 100 fighters from the Karen National Union (KNU) raided the large military camp, opposite Thailand's Phop Phra district of Tak province, 420 km (260 miles) north-west of Bangkok.

The source did not say how many Myanmar troops were among the dead. He said the camp also sheltered soldiers of the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), which split away from the KNU in the mid-1990s to become allies of the Myanmar army.

Pak lawyers to defend Omar

AFP, Karachi

A team of senior Pakistani lawyers will defend British-born militant Sheikh Omar in his upcoming trial for the kidnapping and murder of US journalist Daniel Pearl, an advocate said Saturday.

Omar, the self-proclaimed mastermind of Pearl's abduction, and 10 accomplices were charged Friday with murder, kidnap for ransom and terrorism, and ordered to stand trial from March 29.

The charges carry the maximum penalty of death.

Omar's lawyer Saiful Malook said a team of senior lawyers, including relatives of the 29-year old militant, had been formed and were already examining the case.

"Omar will be defended by a strong team of lawyers," Malook said.

The 10 co-charged include three men who allegedly sent e-mails to Pearl's employers at the Wall Street Journal containing death threats and photos of him in captivity. Seven others remain at large.

Pearl was the Journal's South Asia correspondent when he was abducted in this volatile southern port city on January 23.

Over 2 m join Rome rally

AFP, Rome

More than two million people are taking part in a demonstration in Rome Saturday against planned government labour reforms by the right-wing government of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, the organising CGIL trade union said.

The giant Circus Maximus, the main rallying point, was already crowded with demonstrators at 11:30 (1030 GMT) even as six feeder marchers were bringing hundreds of thousands of banner-waving protesters from gathering points around Rome.

The ancient site of Rome's chariot races, the sunken, grassy circus is around half a mile long and around 150 metres wide, the only venue in the capital big enough to hold the one million people which the unions had been expecting.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf (R) discusses with Science and Technology Minister Attaur Rehman during the inaugural ceremony of the country's first Virtual University in information technology in Islamabad on Saturday. The government of Pakistan launched a web-based virtual university to provide computer education at home.

Pakistan marks Nat'l Day amid shadow of tension with India

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf Saturday delivered a stern warning to nuclear rival India against any aggressive moves as Pakistan marked its National Day without its customary military parade.

Musharraf said the military parade, normally the centrepiece of National Day celebrations, had been disposed of because all the armed forces were deployed along

the border with India.

"India has deployed all its troops along the Pakistan border and LoC (line of control separating Indian and Pakistani-held Kashmir). We want peace in the region but will never compromise on our dignity and sovereignty," Musharraf said in an address to the nation.

"If India has any aggressive designs, it should not remain under any sort of misconception. Pakistan today possesses a powerful military

might and can give a crushing reply to all types of aggression," he said.

"Anybody who poses a challenge to our security and integrity would be taught an unforgettable lesson."

Tensions between the South Asian nuclear rivals have been high since a December 13 attack on New Delhi's parliament, which India has blamed on Pakistan-based militant groups fighting Indian rule in Kashmir.

Andhra Pradesh extends olive branch to PWG

AFP, Hyderabad

Efforts have begun to end an insurgency in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, one of India's oldest and most violent, officials said Saturday.

The state government Friday invited the militant left-wing People's War Group (PWG), which is fighting for land reforms, for peace talks after the Maoist group had pressed for dialogue to end its 30-year-old insurgency which has claimed more than 10,000 lives.

The government announced it will appoint an official mediator to convey messages to the group's underground leaders and said it was willing to create an atmosphere conducive for peace talks.

"Both sides, the police and the rebels, must shun violence and show restraint to create a climate conducive for negotiations," Andhra Pradesh Home Minister

Devendra Goud told AFP.

The PWG's armed rebellion has been aimed at land reforms and greater social justice in Andhra Pradesh's tribal and underdeveloped regions.

They want large farm holdings to be broken up and redistributed among landless farmers.

In January this year, the PWG was banned by the federal government under its controversial new Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance, but Goud refused to confirm whether ban would now be lifted.

The government's move to begin negotiations with the rebels follows a recent spurt of violence, which has left at least a dozen people dead in the last week.

A section of the state's police force is bitterly opposed to any discussions with the PWG, insisting that the rebels are "flirting" with peace in order to buy time to regroup their forces.

End of Thatcher era

REUTERS, London

Britain marked the end of an era on Saturday after "Iron Lady" Margaret Thatcher followed her doctor's advice and retired from public speaking because of a series of minor strokes.

Tributes poured in to Britain's first woman prime minister, who forged a new brand of right-wing conservatism during her 11-year rule, though some old enemies reacted with relief.

The mass circulation tabloid The Sun, a traditional ally of the 76-year-old arch-Tory, said hers was the "voice that shook the world".

"Quite simply, she put the Great back into Great Britain."

The Times called Thatcher's effective retirement from public life "the end of an era."

It reported that her last speech was fittingly given at a tribute evening in Washington for her great ally Ronald Reagan, the ex-president



who is suffering from Alzheimer's disease. But there was blame as well as praise for the grocer's daughter from Grantham in central England, who crushed Britain's powerful unions soon after her rise to power and transformed the economy under the banner of "Thatcherism".