



A Pakistani police official pushes a lawyer back during an anti-referendum protest rally on Thursday in Karachi. Over a thousand lawyers took to the rally to denounce a referendum plan of President Pervez Musharraf.

# US troops hunting down al-Qaida, Taliban fighters in Pakistan

## Islamabad denies joint operations with American agents

AFP, Washington

Covert US military units have been hunting down al-Qaida and Taliban fighters in Pakistan in recent weeks, using aerial support and four Pakistani bases, The Washington Post said Thursday.

The operation which Islamabad has asked Washington to keep as secret as possible is part of a new US strategy in the war against terrorism, US military officials told the daily.

US Special Forces and covert soldiers from the US Army's Delta force are operating against al-Qaida fighters who are now operating in groups of 15 or smaller both in Afghanistan and across the border in tribal areas in Pakistan where the Pakistani government has limited authority, the officials said.

A spokesman for the Pakistani government told the daily he had no knowledge of US military operations inside his country, and a spokesman for the US military's Central Command refused to comment on "current or future operations."

The officials said that due to the enemy's small units and advanced strategy, US troops were having to deliberately expose themselves to attack to draw out the pockets of al-

Qaida and Taliban fighters.

One official said the tactic was frustrating because the al-Qaida "has the offensive," adding that frequently they attack from within bystanders on village streets and towns, making the decision to counterattack difficult.

"The decision to shoot or not shoot is one of the toughest decisions," said one source.

The sources said the al-Qaida fighters have impressed US troops with their military skills, especially the ability to observe and adjust to US combat techniques.

The enemy continues to execute well-coordinated operations, including in one instance a synchronised multipronged attack within a 10-minute period, the officials said.

Meanwhile, Islamabad on Thursday denied reports that US special forces or military advisers were accompanying Pakistani troops into sensitive tribal areas to search for Taliban and al-Qaida fighters.

"This is not true, there is no new development," a foreign ministry official said after the Washington Post reported that US commandos were believed to be secretly operating on Pakistani territory.

"We agreed to intelligence sharing with US authorities but that does not mean Pakistani agencies would operate under the guidance of any foreign advisers," the spokesman said.

The Post on Thursday reported that covert US military units using aerial support and four Pakistani bases had been hunting down al-Qaida and Taliban fighters along the Pakistani frontier in recent weeks.

The paper said Islamabad had asked Washington to keep the mission, involving US Special Forces and Delta force operatives, a secret.

The New York Times on Wednesday said Washington had struck an agreement with Islamabad to send US "advisers" into the tribal areas with Pakistani troops.

It said the agreement followed the discovery of documents in the Pakistani city of Faisalabad, where senior al-Qaida leader Abu Zubaydah was arrested in a joint US-Pakistani raid in March.

Information seized in the raid indicated extremist fighters were regrouping along the Afghan-Pakistani border, using semi-autonomous tribal areas as a haven, the daily said, quoting unnamed Pakistani officials.

# Palestinians reject Sharon's offer to send Arafat to Gaza

## PA court jails killers of Israeli minister Zeevi

AFP, Gaza City

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat on Thursday rejected Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's proposal to let Yasser Arafat leave his besieged headquarters in Ramallah for the Gaza Strip.

"We reject this proposal. It goes against all agreements, which say the Gaza Strip and the West Bank are one area," Erakat told AFP.

"Arafat wants to be near Jerusalem and the West Bank," Erakat said.

Sharon told The New York Times on Wednesday that he was willing to release the Palestinian leader from his house arrest in Ramallah to the Gaza Strip provided the Palestinian leader showed he was willing to end Palestinian violence.

"We are ready to consider that," Sharon said.

The New York Times said Sharon left no doubt in his interview that he expected Arafat to fail in stopping Palestinian violence, saying that "with Arafat, no one will be able to make peace."

But Erakat dismissed Sharon's comments, saying that the Israeli prime minister had "revealed his resolve to occupy all of the Palestinian territories and continue with the settlements."

Erakat further appealed to the international community "to stop the Israeli government's plans to destroy the Palestinian Authority, and re-occupy the West Bank, and to transform the Gaza Strip into a jail."

Meanwhile, a Palestinian military

tribunal inside Yasser Arafat's besieged Ramallah headquarters on Thursday sentenced four militants involved in the killing of Israeli tourism minister Rehavam Zeevi to between one and 18 years in jail, an official in the building said.

The four men from the armed wing of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), including the group's head, were sentenced by a military court and their sentences ratified by Palestinian leader Arafat, who has been under Israeli siege in the building since March 29.

The three-man tribunal sentenced Hamdi Qoraa to 18 years in prison, Bassel al-Asmar to 12 years and Mejdi Rimawi (eds: correct) to eight years.



Picture released by the Palestinian Press Office (PPO) shows Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat (C) with the foreign ministers of Greece, George Papandreu (L), and Turkey, Ismail Cem (R), after a meeting at his besieged headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah on Thursday. The two officials met with Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres two days ago on the sidelines of the fifth Euro-Mediterranean Ministerial Conference in Valencia, Spain.

# Legitimacy questions hang over Pak referendum

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan has invited international observers to monitor next week's referendum on whether military President Pervez Musharraf should stay in power, but many people still fear the vote will not be fair.

"We welcome any observer to come in and see the process. It will be very good if the observers come," Information Minister Nisar Memon told Reuters.

The official APP news agency said a two-member Commonwealth team was to arrive on Thursday for a week-long visit "for monitoring developments" in Pakistan.

But with anyone over the age of

18 allowed to cast their ballot anywhere in the country in the April 30 referendum simply by showing a national identity card, critics say they are convinced the vote will be padded in Musharraf's favor.

"Anyone can vote any number of times anywhere. That is the biggest institutional rigging," said Najam Sethi, editor of Lahore's Friday Times.

About 70 million people -- half Pakistan's population -- are eligible to vote in the referendum.

An official at the government-controlled Election Commission said there would be more than 87,000 polling stations.

# Jordan decides not to host NAM summit

AFP, Amman

Jordan has cancelled plans to host the July 13 summit of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) nations, an official said on Thursday.

The decision was taken at a cabinet meeting on Tuesday night, the source said, without explaining why. Jordan had offered at the beginning of the year to host the meeting after Bangladesh backed out.

Jordanian officials quoted in the press said Amman's decision stemmed from the fact that the government needs to concentrate on the critical situation in the neighbouring Palestinian territories.

# UN envoy holds 'encouraging' talks with NLD

AFP, Yangon

UN envoy to Myanmar Razali Ismail on Thursday held what he called "useful and encouraging" talks with senior lieutenants of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD).

Razali, who met for two hours with the Nobel peace laureate Wednesday evening in the isolated military-ruled state, held talks Thursday at NLD headquarters with eight members of its Central Executive Committee.

# BJP set for alliance with BSP in Uttar Pradesh

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling BJP party and the BSP, a provincial party of Hindu "untouchables", on Thursday decided to join forces and form a government in the politically vital northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

"All the issues have been discussed and everything has been finalised," BSP leader Mayawati told reporters after holding discussions with BJP leaders in New Delhi.

BJP leader Lalji Tandon confirmed the decision.

Earlier in the day, Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani held talks on the issue with members of the BJP, a Hindu nationalist party whose

support comes largely from higher castes and the middle class.

Dalits, formerly called "untouchables", form the lowest Hindu caste and often occupy the most menial jobs in society.

The Uttar Pradesh state polls in February had no clear winner, with the then ruling BJP emerging as a distant third behind the BSP and the Samajwadi (Socialist) Party, which had the highest number of seats.

The BJP has been keen to stop the rival Samajwadi Party from forming the government in Uttar Pradesh, which boasts India's largest provincial legislature and returns 85 MPs to the 545-seat national parliament.

# Maoists bomb bus as most Nepalese oppose strike

AP, Katmandu

Maoist supporters bombed an empty bus outside the capital and set fire to a motorcycle Thursday as they tried to enforce a nationwide strike that many citizens openly opposed on its third day.

Police said there were no casualties from the two attacks.

They coincided with a citizens' rally against the five-day strike ordered by the rebels fighting for a communist state in this Himalayan kingdom.

Strike supporters threw petrol

bombs to burn an empty bus near Thankot, an exit point from the Katmandu Valley, a police officer said.

Minutes later, a motorcycle was set on fire a few yards from a downtown Katmandu market where 2,000 people had assembled to support shop owners who opened their businesses in defiance of the strike call.

Also, about 100 eminent citizens took a car rally through the streets of the capital, which were patrolled by armed police.

# Lankan navy intercepts Tigers' boats

AP, Colombo

The Sri Lankan navy seized three Tamil Tiger rebel boats transporting weapons to the Northeast and notified Norwegian cease-fire monitors, the Defense Ministry said Thursday.

A February 22 cease-fire agreement bars offensive military actions by the government and the guerrillas, but is vague on issues such as transportation of arms.

Under the agreement, which aims at peace talks to end the 18-year civil war, the government has retained the right to patrol its territo-

rial waters and stop infiltration of illegal arms.

"We have brought this to the notice of the Norwegian monitoring mission and are awaiting their ruling on the incident," Defense Ministry spokesman Brig. Sanath Karunaratne said of Wednesday's incident.

He said the rebels aboard the boats were released, but the vessels would remain under navy supervision until the monitors complete their investigation and confirm whether the incident amounted to a violation of the cease-fire, Karunaratne said.



The members of the international space crew Russian commander Yuri Gidzenko (top), Italian engineer Roberto Vittori (C) and South African space tourist Mark Shuttleworth (bottom) wave as they board the spaceship on Thursday. The Russian Soyuz shuttle, on its way to the International Space Station (ISS), reached orbit successfully on Thursday.

# Africa's first space tourist heads for ISS

AFP, Baikonur

South African Mark Shuttleworth became the first African in space Thursday as he lifted off for an eight-day stay at the International Space Station (ISS).

The Soyuz TM-34 shuttle carrying the 28-year-old space tourist, Russian flight commander Yuri Gidzenko and Italian cosmonaut Roberto Vittori blasted off from the Baikonur cosmodrome in Kazakhstan at 0626 GMT.

Nine minutes later, the rocket reached orbit successfully after leaving the Earth's atmosphere, Russian mission control (TSuP) outside Moscow told AFP.

Under a cloudless blue sky, the rocket tore into the upper atmosphere with a fiery burst of its booster, leaving a plume of greyish smoke on the desert-like Kazakh plains.

Relatives of the three men hugged each other and whooped with joy as the Soyuz rocket lifted off for the 10-day trip without any incidents.

# Milosevic's army chief surrenders to UN court

REUTERS, The Hague

Former Yugoslav army commander General Dragoljub Ojdanic surrendered to the Hague war crimes tribunal on Thursday to face charges of committing war crimes in Kosovo under the orders of Slobodan Milosevic.

Ojdanic, the first senior Serbian figure indicted by the court to give himself up, was taken into custody at the tribunal's detention center in the Hague after flying to the Netherlands from Belgrade, a tribunal spokesman said.

Ojdanic says he will prove his innocence. A further five indictees are preparing to follow him to The Hague, where ex-president Milosevic is already on trial.

The general, who served for 41 years, commanded the armed forces during the 1998-99 campaign against Kosovo Albanian insurgents. He says the army conducted itself there in accordance with the law, the constitution and all international war conventions

AFP adds: Former Yugoslav army chief of staff Dragoljub Ojdanic, wanted for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Kosovo, arrived in The Netherlands Thursday and was promptly jailed by the UN tribunal in The Hague.

A spokesman for the court said the former general arrived at Schiphol-Amsterdam airport on a regular flight from Belgrade before being put behind bars.

After former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, he is the second biggest catch so far for the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

Ojdanic, 60, was indicted in May 1999 along with Milosevic and three other high-ranking Serbian and Yugoslav officials for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

He was among 23 indicted war criminals given three days to voluntarily give themselves up by the Yugoslav government last Wednesday. Only six of the 23 agreed to turn themselves in.