



Smoke rises from the area controlled by Pakistan, close to the international border with India, 65 km from the border town of Jammu, India Saturday. Troops from both sides of the nuclear rivals exchanged heavy fire, forcing migration of border villagers to safer areas.

Violence rages in Kashmir amid Indo-Pak crossfire

AFP, New Delhi

Artillery duels between Pakistani and Indian troops raged in disputed Kashmir on Sunday, while Islamic rebels launched a fresh attack that left four Indian military personnel dead and put further strain on relations between New Delhi and Islamabad.

The clashes came a day after India on Saturday gave Pakistan's high commissioner to New Delhi seven days to get out of the country and ahead of a meeting later in the day called by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee of his security committee.

Military sources said a separatist militant was killed in the early-

morning attack by Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba militants on the Chasana army camp at Reasi, near Udhampur, north-east of Indian-administered Kashmir's winter capital Jammu. A group of three militants barged into the camp, throwing grenades and firing indiscriminately, the sources said. Four army personnel were killed while one militant was shot dead in retaliatory fire. The other two escaped.

Troop reinforcements had been sent to the area to flush out the attackers, the sources added. In another incident, an Indian soldier was killed when rebels attacked a mine protection vehicle on the highway linking Jammu and the northern city of Srinagar, near the

town of Nowgam, a senior security officer said.

"With these incidents, the Muslim rebels are trying to divert the attention of Indian troops who are right now busy in border skirmishes," the officer added. Each side accuses the other of starting the fighting. A police officer in Muzaffarabad, state capital of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, said Indian troops had shelled the Cham area in Chakothi sector, killing five soldiers. "Pakistan troops had to retaliate to force them to stop fire," deputy commissioner of Muzaffarabad, Mahmood-ul-Hassan Raja, told AFP.



Congress (I) Party President Sonia Gandhi (L) sits with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (C) and Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani during a meeting at his residence in New Delhi on Sunday. Vajpayee discussed last week's bloody attack in Kashmir with Sonia Gandhi, and also held a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) in the evening, amidst heightened tension with Pakistan due to the attack.

Maoists bomb school in western Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoists bombed a destitute children's home at Kalagaun in Birendra Nagar, far west of the capital, a home ministry official said on Sunday, although no one was hurt.

"A group of Maoist terrorists on Friday night bombed the SOS Balgram and Hermann Gmeiner school in Kalagaun in Birendranagar, and then set fire to the 46 beds of the orphan children at the SOS Balgram hostel," the official said.

The school is 480 kilometres west of Kathmandu.

"However, none of the children was hurt or killed though the incident" said the official.

The rebels used a pressure-cooker bomb which damaged a part of the SOS Balgram (Children's Village).

The terrorists also attacked the principal and staff quarters and guest house built in the same premises, and set fire to furniture, software and other educational materials.

"This inhuman, cruel act...has gravely affected 474 children," said the director of the school, Vijaya Jung Rana, expressing shock.

Al-Qaida may target US apartment buildings: FBI

AFP, Washington

Militants from the al-Qaida network, blamed for September 11 suicide attacks in the United States, may now be targeting US apartment buildings, an FBI official said.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has received information al-Qaida leaders had discussed a possible plan to rent apartment units in the United States and plant explosives there, FBI spokeswoman Debra Weierman told AFP on Saturday.

"We have no indication that this proposed plan went beyond the discussion stage," Weierman said. "But in an abundance of caution we notified our field offices and the Joint Terrorism Task Force last week."

Weierman described the reports about al-Qaida's possible plans to attack apartment complexes as unsubstantiated and uncorroborated and said they gave no clue where the targeted buildings were located.

US officials and experts denied yesterday that the administration of US President George W Bush planned to raise the national security alert level, which currently remains at "yellow," or elevated.

"There are serious threats that remain," White House spokeswoman Anne Womack told AFP. "We doing our best to collect the information."

She said she could not comment on specific intelligence information from the Central Intelligence Agency about activities of the al-Qaida militant network.

Pak press warns of war with India

AFP, Islamabad

Warnings of war with India dominated Pakistani newspapers Sunday after the expulsion of Islamabad's envoy by New Delhi and intense cross-border shelling in the disputed state of Kashmir.

Pakistan "would hit back with full force should India embark upon any adventure" against it, a foreign office spokesman told editors in a special briefing, the Daily Times reported.

Army spokesman Major-General Rashid Qureshi said that while he did not rule out a full-scale war he felt there was more danger of an Indian attack on Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, the Dawn newspaper reported.

"We are prepared to meet any threat," he said.

The nuclear-armed neighbours already have around a million troops massed on both sides of their border since an attack on the Indian parliament in December, which New Delhi blamed on Islamabad.

In a front-page news analysis, The Nation warned that India "is moving towards a position where the next step would be an armed conflict".

India would not attempt to conquer Pakistan-controlled Kashmir because that might provoke a general war and the risk of nuclear conflict between the two neighbours, the paper said.

However, "it might aspire to limited territorial gains" in an

attempt to produce a more defensible Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir.

Kashmir, divided between India and Pakistan and claimed by both, has caused two of their three wars since independence from Britain in 1947.

Cross-border shelling along the tense LoC has intensified since an attack last Tuesday on a passenger bus and army base in Indian-controlled Jammu, which killed 35 people.

India blamed Pakistani militants for the massacre and on Saturday ordered Pakistan to withdraw its high commissioner in New Delhi, a move that has heightened tensions between the nuclear-armed rivals.

Iraqi press slams new sanctions as unjust

AFP, Baghdad

The official Iraqi press on Saturday criticised the new UN sanctions regime as unjust and demanded an end to the embargo imposed in 1990 for invading Kuwait.

UN Security Council Resolution 1409 is "a new formula for what they (US) used to call 'smart sanctions' and betrays the continued injustice against Iraq," charged the ruling Baath party daily Ath-Thawra.

Russia prevented a US and British bid to push so-called "smart sanctions" through the Security Council in the summer of 2001.

Resolution 1409 "is a US-British

decision. And since the United States and Britain are hostile to Iraq ... the resolution cannot be in the interests of this country and its people," the newspaper said.

Iraq's government announced Thursday it grudgingly accepted the resolution, which was passed unanimously on May 14 and seeks to free up the delivery of humanitarian supplies while maintaining a strict arms embargo.

A goods review list has been drawn up to replace a cumbersome vetting procedure under the UN's oil-for-food lifeline and will come into force from May 30.

'Palestinian polls impossible under Israeli apartheid'

AFP, Ramallah

Promised Palestinian polls can not be held while Israel enforces an "apartheid" system in the West Bank, curbing the movement of voters and candidates, a senior Palestinian minister said Sunday.

But information minister Yasser Abed Rabbo said that despite the Israeli restrictions, internal reforms of the Palestinian Authority should begin within two weeks.

"It is impossible to hold elections in this situation, with candidates unable to move around because of the military checkpoints," Abed

Rabbo told reporters.

"The situation on the ground confirms Israel has imposed an apartheid system on the Palestinian people," he said, adding that people wanting to move between towns in the West Bank had to apply individually to the Israelis for passes that were only valid up until 9:00 pm.

He said Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's long-term plan was not for an independent Palestinian state, which the right-wing premier has said in the past he could cautiously endorse, but for the creation of eight cantons in the region.

The cantons would be areas

currently under nominal Palestinian control, but which were invaded by Israeli forces last month and have since been the target of frequent raids by the army.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who called for new elections last week, was to meet members of his electoral committee later Sunday to discuss the hurdles facing the organisation of polls.

Abed Rabbo said the committee would probably need six months to arrange elections, in line with an announcement last week that the elections could take place early 2003.

EU strikes deal on 13 exiled Palestinian militants

REUTERS, Madrid

EU president Spain has brokered a deal in which six European member states will take 12 of the 13 exiled Palestinian militants freed from the Church of the Nativity, Spanish state radio said early on Sunday.

The 13 men, currently in Cyprus, were trapped inside the Bethlehem church during a five-week standoff in which armed Palestinians took shelter in one of Christianity's holiest sites and were besieged by the Israeli army during its West Bank offensive.

Spain and Italy will each take

three of the militants, Greece and Ireland will take two each, Portugal and Finland one each, and one will remain in Cyprus, state radio said, citing Spanish diplomatic sources.

The first five of those European countries previously said they would take at least one militant each. Finland apparently emerged late in the process.

Spokesmen for the Spanish foreign ministry and European Union foreign policy chief Javier Solana could not immediately be reached for confirmation.

The radio said Spanish Foreign Minister Josep Pique closed the

deal late on Saturday after a series of telephone conversations with other European Union officials.

The EU played a major role in ending the siege at the church, built on the site Christians revere as the birthplace of Jesus, by mediating a bilateral deal between Israel and the Palestinians to free those inside.

Cyprus, a candidate for EU membership, agreed to take the 13 men on a temporary basis while negotiations on their final destination continued.

Loya Jirga gets enthusiastic seal of Afghans' approval

AFP, Jakhoree

Afghanistan's Loya Jirga process received an enthusiastic seal of approval from thousands of ethnic Hazaras here Sunday as they welcomed senior officials ahead of the final selection of local delegates to next month's grand assembly.

Women's Minister Sima Samar, who herself hails from this town in central Ghazni province, said they should choose delegates who could help rebuild and unite Afghanistan rather than just pander to factional interests.

"I am proud that after the darkness of the Taliban I can come back to you in an atmosphere of democracy. You should select candidates

who can address your problems. You should not just follow the views of groups," she said.

Ghazni was one of the many provinces occupied by the largely Pashtun Taliban and residents have long felt marginalised as one of Afghanistan's ethnic minorities.

Similar meetings ahead of the Loya Jirga have been held in other parts of the country, but observers said the response from locals in Ghazni was particularly enthusiastic.

Saeed Mashood, who is the local representative of the Loya Jirga commission, called on the Hazaras to "embrace the flag of freedom for the defence of your country and democracy."



East Timorese young girls hold candle lights during the country's independence celebration in Dili on Sunday while Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio (L) is greeted by East Timor's President-elect Xanana Gusmao after arriving at the Dili airport for the evening independence celebrations. The tiny new nation of East Timor will declare independence in the early hours of May 20 following centuries of Portuguese colonisation and more recently, 24 years of brutal Indonesian rule.

E Timorese pray for future as world awaits birth of a nation

REUTERS, Dili

Kneeling in the dirt, East Timorese prayed for a better future Sunday as they counted down to the birth of their nation after a long and bloody struggle for freedom from foreign occupation.

More than 1,000 Timorese flocked to the home of spiritual leader Bishop Carlos Belo for an early morning mass, held in his spacious yard near Dili's picturesque seafront.

A growing sense of excitement has enveloped the capital as workers scramble to get the normally sleepy city spruced up and U.N.

peacekeeping troops deploy to tighten security ahead of East Timor's declaration of independence at midnight following its 1999 vote to break from harsh Indonesian rule.

Hawkers were doing a brisk business selling caps and T-shirts emblazoned with Timor's striking national flag.

"The spirit within us has emerged, and with that spirit our country can shine and stand alone," Belo told the worshippers, a mix of Timorese from young girls in freshly scrubbed pink dresses to wizened old women wearing traditional sarongs.

Some knelt, others bowed their heads. But all were solemn with the memory of Indonesian control still fresh in their minds.

The first foreign leader to land for ceremonies was Australian Prime Minister John Howard. Draped with a Timorese weaving over his shoulder, he told reporters he would appeal to the international community not to forget East Timor after midnight.

Howard will be followed by other dignitaries including U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who will hand over power from the United Nations mission that has run East Timor since 1999.

Reelected Irish PM vows stable govt

AP, Dublin

Prime Minister Bertie Ahern vowed Saturday to form a strong, stable government for the next five years after his Fianna Fail party triumphed in a parliamentary election dominated by Ireland's long-thriving economy.

Sinn Fein, the Irish Republican Army-linked party, won five seats as it remodels itself into a socialist voice. And Michael Noonan, shellshocked leader of the main opposition Fine Gael, resigned as his party absorbed the most grievous defeat in its 70-year history.

Noonan said most voters

rewarded Ahern for presiding over five years of unprecedented economic expansion in Ireland.

"It's a very, very bad day for Fine Gael. It was beyond our worst expectations and beyond our worst fears," said Noonan, 59, who took charge of Ireland's No. 2 party just 15 months ago.

Noonan said Fine Gael had suffered "a devastating blow in terms of numbers and the quality of the people we lost." While he retained his legislative seat in Limerick, most of Fine Gael's senior spokespeople lost their jobs, including the Dublin-based deputy leader, Jim Mitchell.

Airlines warned of Terror threats in 1991

AP, Washington

Five months before Sept. 11, the government warned airlines that Middle Eastern terrorists could try to hijack or blow up a U.S. plane and that carriers should "demonstrate a high degree of alertness."

The warning, obtained Saturday by The Associated Press, came out after the April 6, 2001, conviction of Ahmed Ressaam in connection with a failed plot to blow up Los Angeles International Airport during the millennium celebrations.

The memo from the Federal Aviation Administration, dated April 18, 2001, also noted that four al-Qaida members were on trial in New York, accused of being involved in the U.S. embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998.

The warning, which expired July 31, was one of 15 information circulars sent last year that warned of potential terrorist threats before Sept. 11.

Bush administration officials have said the threats were so vague that they did not require

tighter security. Nor did they envision a scenario similar to Sept. 11, when suicide terrorists turned four commercial airliners into missiles.

Also Saturday, Republicans defended President Bush against criticism that his administration ignored warning signs about the Sept. 11 attacks.

"Americans know that President Bush, when faced with credible information about a threat, would act swiftly and strongly," Republican Party Chairman Marc Racicot wrote in an e-mail to GOP supporters.

Muslims surrender arms in riot-torn Maluku

AFP, Ambon

Muslims in the riot-hit Indonesian province of Maluku on Sunday surrendered hundreds of weapons and explosives to the security authorities.

The Forum for Muslim Brotherhood of Maluku, which also includes members of the hardline Laskar Jihad Muslim militia, surrendered one cannon, 250 bombs, 100 petrol bombs, four army-issue firearms and 15 homemade guns, plus hundreds of rounds of ammunition, sabres and bayonets.

The weapons were handed over to Maluku military commander Brigadier General Mustopo (Eds: one name) by the Forum's chairman Muhammad Attamimi at a ceremony at a mosque in the Kebun Cengkeh Muslim quarter of Ambon.

"These weapons are only part of what we have, and the rest will be surrendered when the TNI (Indonesian armed forces) and the national police have met their promises to comprehensively investigate the RMS," Attamimi said, referring to the mainly Christian South Maluku Republic separatist movement.

New video sparks claims Laden is still alive

AFP, London

A video featuring al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden uncovered in Britain has sparked new claims that the suspected mastermind of the September 11 terrorist attacks is still alive.

It said the video was obtained by a British-based Islamic news agency, which claims that Pakistani intelligence officials who supplied the film said that part of the footage was filmed just eight weeks ago.

If that is true, the film would be the first hard evidence that the chief suspect for the attacks on New York

and Washington survived the US-led military assaults on the Tora Bora, eastern Afghanistan, the paper said.

The 40-minute film came to Britain on an encrypted CD-ROM and was decoded by the agency based in Birmingham, central England, last week, the British weekly said.

It said that the part of the video that is claimed to have been filmed in March shows bin Laden sitting outside under a tree on what appears to be a pleasant spring evening.

According to the paper, bin Laden appears thinner than in previous footage and his delivery lacks some of the zest of previous clips.

It quoted bin Laden as saying: "The war is between us and the Jews."

"Any country that steps into the same trench as the Jews has only herself to blame."

He adds that if he "specifically targeted Britain and America -- this war is not confined to them -- it served as an opportunity for other nations to revise their stance."