



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistan army officer Lieutenant Colonel Iftakhar Khan, commandant of Chakothi sector close to line of Control, de facto border between Pakistan and India, shows Indian shelling affected areas on map during a press briefing at the frontline post, some 56 km south east Muzaffarabad on Tuesday.

'Terrorists will inevitably get arms of mass destruction'

AFP, Washington

Warning that terrorists will inevitably get their hands on weapons of mass destruction, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said Tuesday that the United States was living in a period of "limited or no warning" of attack.

Rumsfeld highlighted the threat of weapons of mass destruction in responding to questions by senators about recent warnings by top administration officials that another major terrorist attack against the United States was a near certainty.

"We have to recognise the fact that terrorist networks have relations with terrorist states that have

weapons of mass destruction, and that they inevitably are going to get their hands on them, and they would not hesitate one minute in using them," Rumsfeld said.

"We are going to be living in a period of limited or no warning because of the asymmetrical advantages of the attacker as opposed to the defender," he told the Senate Appropriations Committee.

"The only thing to be surprised about is that we're surprised when we're surprised," he said.

Secretary of State Colin Powell, releasing the State Department's annual "Patterns of Global Terrorism" report, echoed

Rumsfeld's comments.

"Terrorists are trying every way they can to get their hands on weapons of mass destruction, whether radiological, chemical, biological or nuclear," he told reporters.

Asked by lawmakers whether he had seen specific warnings of terrorist attacks, Rumsfeld said that his daily intelligence briefings invariably contained reports on a series of threats:

"Specific in a few cases, general in other cases, not specific as to time, not always specific as to location, rarely as to location," he said. "If you add them all up, they end up in the hundreds."



PHOTO: AFP
Thai Buddhist monk Pramaha Sayanjerasutho, 37, holds an AK-47 rifle while he answers questions from the press at the security office of the Parliament House in Bangkok on Wednesday.

Buddhist monk in hostage drama at Thai parliament

AFP, Bangkok

A monk brandishing an AK 47 assault rifle Wednesday stormed into an office at the Thai parliament and took 20 staff hostage in the latest in a series of incidents which have tarnished the image of the country's Buddhist clergy.

The monk, Pramaha Sayanjerasutho, 37, held the staff for 40 minutes before being overpowered by plain clothes police and arrested.

He was immediately defrocked, a procedure required before police could lay charges. Pramaha

Sayanjerasutho then reverted to his layname, Sayan Saowiang, as required under Buddhist practice.

Police charged Sayan with illegal possession of a war weapon and ammunition, illegally firing a weapon in a public place and trespassing, and then set bail at 100,000 baht (2,350 dollars). He faces up to 20 years in jail.

Sayan had entered the parliament's security office at around 8:30 am (0130 GMT) and pulled out the rifle he had hidden in his robes.

11 people killed in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

At least 11 people, including a family of four, have been killed and six critically wounded in India's insurgency-hit northeastern state of Assam, officials said Wednesday.

Six people were killed by tribal militants of the United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) group in a raid on the village of Romgipibasti, in Assam's eastern Karbi Anglong district.

A police spokesman said a group of heavily armed UPDS militants attacked Romgipibasti, 320 kilometres (198 miles) from the state capital Guwahati, early Tuesday.

"The militants dragged out four members of a family, including an infant and a woman, and shot them dead from close range," the spokesman said.

Top Kashmiri militant leader Lone shot dead

AFP, Srinagar

Indian police have launched an investigation into the murder of a senior Muslim separatist leader in Indian-administered Kashmir, with officials suspecting the hand of pro-Pakistan Islamic rebels.

Abdul Gani Lone, a senior leader of Kashmir's main separatist alliance, was shot dead along with his security guard at a function in Srinagar, the summer capital, on Tuesday.

The shooting left another of Lone's guards and six civilians injured.

Senior police officers in Srinagar city have been assigned to probe Lone's murder, Kashmir valley police chief K. Rajinder Kumar told AFP.

"We are trying to ascertain who is behind the killing," Kumar said.

"It is premature to say anything about who is involved in the murder of Lone," he said. "We are optimistic we will solve the murder mystery soon."

Other security agencies have launched separate investigations into Lone's day-light murder.

"Lone's moderate views and his repeated calls to (Islamic) militants to end violence led to his death," a senior police officer said, adding that police privately believe the killing is the work of a pro-Pakistan militant group.

He said Lone had been the only leader in the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC), the main separatist alliance in Kashmir, to oppose the presence of foreign militants -- mainly Pakistanis -- in Kashmir and who had dared to criticise militant groups.

25pc of mammal species likely to disappear in three decades

UN report on global environment forecasts

AP, London

A quarter of the world's mammal species could face extinction within 30 years, the United Nations said yesterday in a comprehensive overview of the state of the global environment.

The Global Environment Outlook-3 report depicts an increasingly volatile world in which ever-more-severe natural disasters and environmental degradation will endanger millions of humans as well as plant and animal species.

The report, released by the United Nations Environment Programme in advance of this summer's UN World Summit on Sustainable Development, is based on contributions from more than 1,000 scientists at collaborating centers around the world, compiled by the Nairobi, Kenya-based UN agency.

It assesses environmental changes over the past 30 years and looks ahead to the next three decades.

The report says the world's biodiversity is under threat, with 1130 of the more than 4,000 mammal species and 1183 of the 10,000 birds regarded as globally threatened -- meaning they could become extinct but are not necessarily under

immediate threat of extinction.

Among the most critically threatened are the black rhinoceros of Africa, the Siberian tiger and the Amur leopard of Asia, according to the UN's World Conservation Monitoring Centre.

Much of the threat is man-made, with loss of habitat from industry, mining and farming and the introduction of non-native species in many parts of the world putting species in danger.

In addition, almost a third of the world's fish stocks are ranked as depleted, overexploited or recovering as a result of overfishing.

Dr Michael Novacek, provost of science at the American Museum of Natural History, said the UN figures are in line with projections that have been made on the basis of land loss and degradation of the oceans "that as much as 30 per cent of species diversity will be erased by the middle of this century."

Many of these animals are in endangered habitats, he said in a telephone interview from New York. "If those habitats are devastated or degraded appreciably, some of the larger animals are among the first that will go," he said.

"We don't know what the threshold is for total ecosystem chaos," he added. "We don't know how many species we can afford to lose before the whole ecosystem breaks down."

"We have a taste of this in marine ecosystems," he said, citing devastated coral reefs in Caribbean, loss of fisheries in the Mediterranean, and the "hugely threatened" South China Sea, which feeds so many people.

The UN report notes progress in some areas. Air and water quality have improved in the last 30 years in North America and Europe, and the amount of land protected as national parks and reserves has quadrupled since 1970.

But the bad news outweighs the good. The report notes that "generally there has been a steady decline in the environment, especially across large parts of the developing world." Weather-related hazards such as cyclones, droughts and floods appear to be increasing in strength and frequency and are affecting more people, 211 million a year in the 1990s compared with 147 million a year in the 1980s. Some attribute the increase to global warming.

Protests force Kyrgyz govt to resign

AFP, Bishkek

The entire government of Kyrgyzstan resigned Wednesday following a week of opposition protests in the south of the volatile former Soviet republic, a senior defense official reported.

The government's move followed President Askar Akayev's decision to request the dismissal of his Prime Minister Kurmanbek Bakiev during a closed-door security council meeting, the council's secretary Misir Ashirkulov said.

Sunni activist shot dead after Karachi riots

50 people detained

AFP, Karachi

An activist in an outlawed Sunni Muslim group was shot dead by an unknown gunman in Pakistan Wednesday, the day after one person was killed and two were injured in sectarian violence here.

Police said an assailant on a motorcycle fired from close range at Qari Muhammad Ibrahim of the Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP) group after he had dropped his two sons at school in Karachi's central district.

"Ibrahim, an activist of SSP, died on the spot," police officer Rehmat Khan said.

On Tuesday, minority Shiite and majority Sunni Muslims clashed in the centre of this volatile southern port city, leaving one man dead, two injured and 40 vehicles ablaze.

Police, who fired warning shots to break up the riot which erupted during a religious procession of Shiite Muslims, said Wednesday they had arrested 50 people.

"We have arrested 50 people on charges of burning vehicles, arson," Deputy Inspector General of Police Tariq Jamil told AFP.

Police and paramilitary troops are patrolling the area and other parts of the city to prevent further violence, he said.



PHOTO: AFP
Angry Sunni Muslims chant slogans against minority Shi'ite Muslim during a sectarian clash on Tuesday in southern city of Karachi. Over two dozens of vehicles were set on fire in the central district of this turbulent city during a sectarian clash between minority Shi'ite and majority Sunni Muslims.

Israel cuts Gaza in half

AP, Jerusalem

Israel on Wednesday cut the Gaza Strip in half, barring Palestinians from moving between the southern and northern areas, while soldiers backed by tanks raided two West Bank villages in search of suspected militants.

Also in the West Bank, a Palestinian was killed by soldiers after he set off a bomb near an army patrol. The assailant wore a bomb belt, military officials said.

In Israel, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's ruling coalition hung in the balance Wednesday as his

parliament was to vote again on a budget cutback bill defeated just two days earlier, leading Sharon to fire representatives of two key parties. The dismissals erased Sharon's majority in the house.

And Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's popularity was at a new low, according to a Palestinian public opinion survey, as his people clamored for reforms in his corruption-ridden regime and expressed frustration that the violent Palestinian uprising, in progress for nearly 20 months, has not brought them closer to statehood.

The Israeli military said

Wednesday it has cut the Gaza Strip into half in response to repeated attacks by Palestinians on Jewish settlements, including with mortar shells. The new measure created more hardships for 1.1 million Palestinians living in the narrow strip on the Mediterranean.

Two dozen Palestinian taxis waited Wednesday morning at the main army checkpoint along the north-south road, which is now blocked. One passenger, Fatma Abu Maghaseb, 55, said she was trying to visit her daughter, who had given birth the day before.

Chance of life on Jupiter moon looks dimmer

AFP, Paris

Hopes that life may exist on the surface of Europa, a Jupiter moon whose icy crust is believed to mask a vast ocean, have been dealt a blow.

Instead of being a thin shell, the ice appears to be a slab 19 to 25 kilometers (12.5 miles to 15.6 miles) thick, Paul Schenk, of the US Lunar and Planetary Institute, writes in Thursday's issue of Nature, the weekly British science journal.

Schenk looked at images of craters on Europa and two other jovian ice satellites, Ganymede and Calisto, taken by the Voyager and

Galileo spacecraft, and compared them with craters on our Moon, which is roughly of the same size and gravity.

Small craters looked similar on all three bodies but wider craters were very different, he found.

On the rocky, dusty surface of the Moon, these big craters are typically deep, with high walls and a prominent central dome.

But on Ganymede and Callisto, the craters are poorly developed, while on Europa, they are smoothed out like a basin with gentle concentric rings, which indicates that a very thick cushion of ice lurks below the surface.

Sharon sees austerity package approved

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon had an economic austerity plan passed by parliament Wednesday, as opinion polls showed his popularity surging after he sacked ultra-Orthodox ministers who had earlier blocked the measures.

The belt-tightening plan sailed through the first reading by 56 votes to 26 with seven abstentions. The ultra-Orthodox Shas party, four of whose ministers were sacked for opposing it in a vote on Monday, were not present at the ballot.

Sharon aides quoted in the Israeli press publicly declared there would be no compromise with Shas, but there were reports of talks

underway behind the scenes to bring the Sephardic Jewish party back into the fold as its governing body of rabbis, the United Torah Sages, met to null their next step.

Analysts said that once the economic proposals passed through on Wednesday's reading, negotiations could resume with Shas and its fellow religious rebel party, the United Torah Judaism.

Sharon's firm stance appeared to have snatched victory from the jaws of defeat, with his popularity ratings high at his decisive action in the face of a government crisis, even though the measures themselves are largely unpopular, involving hiking taxes and cutting allowances.



PHOTO: PID
Bangladesh Foreign Minister M Morshed Khan called on US Secretary of State Colin Powell in Washington on Monday. They discussed bilateral issues during their talks.

FBI warns of possible terror threat in New York City

FBI chief's terror warning was speculation: Bush

AFP, Washington

New York City was on guard Tuesday after the Federal Bureau of Investigation warned of a possible terror threat here, as well-known landmarks such as the Statue of Liberty emerged as potential targets.

Meanwhile in Washington, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told a Senate panel that terrorists were sure to acquire weapons of mass destruction, the third dire prediction by a high-ranking US official of impending terror strikes.

"The New York City Police Department has received information from the FBI about general threats to New York City," NYPD Commissioner Raymond Kelly said in a statement.

"We are taking all necessary precautions and are communicating with the appropriate law enforcement agencies on both the state and federal levels."

Kelly did not detail the nature of the threats nor the NYPD's response to the information, saying publicising such information could "undermine our counter-terrorism and intelligence operations."

Television reports, however, have cited landmarks such as the Statue of Liberty and the large Brooklyn Bridge running between Manhattan and Brooklyn as possible targets.

Responding to the FBI warning, New York Governor George Pataki expressed confidence that city, state, and federal officials, along with an alert citizenry "are

capable of responding and preventing and making sure we don't give into the fear."

"We've had all types of threats in the last eight months and I suspect they will continue," he told reporters.

No increased police presence was visible in New York late Tuesday. As usual the streets were jammed with traffic, as numerous tourists filled the sidewalks and took picture of city landmarks.

Meanwhile, US President George W. Bush said Tuesday that FBI director Robert Mueller was "speculating" based on intelligence data when he warned of "inevitable" future terrorist strikes in the United States.

"He was speculating based upon a lot of intelligence that indicates that the al-Qaida is active, plotting, planning, you know, trying to hit us," Bush said, referring to Saudi-born extremist Osama bin Laden's network.

Bush said Mueller and Vice President Dick Cheney, who has offered his own grim warnings that a future September 11-style terror attack on the United States was "almost a certainty," knew of a general threat, not a specific one.

"What the vice president and the FBI director were reflecting was a general understanding of the desires and attitudes and methodology -- or potential methodology. Obviously if we knew the exact methodology they wouldn't be around," Bush told journalists from Germany, France, Italy, and Russia.

Norway's peace bid in Lanka picks up momentum

AFP, Colombo

Norway's attempts to broker peace in Sri Lanka gained momentum Wednesday after a surprise face-to-face meeting between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels and intense diplomatic manoeuvring.

An envoy from Oslo was due to meet with the London-based Tiger's chief negotiator Wednesday, a day after unannounced talks between the two warring sides in Sri Lanka, officials said.

They said Erik Solheim, a member of the Norwegian peace brokering team, was scheduled to hold talks in London with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)'s Anton Balasingham.

While Solheim holds discussions with Balasingham in London, Norway's deputy foreign minister Vidar Helgesen was expected in Sri Lanka over the weekend for talks with the Colombo government.

Meanwhile Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe is due to travel to London and Brussels this week on a previously arranged visit aimed at boosting foreign economic support for the embattled island's peace drive.

The hectic diplomatic moves

come after a government delegation travelled to the rebel-held Wanni region in the north of the island on Tuesday and had face-to-face talks on the implementation of a ceasefire brokered by Norway in February.

Sources close to the rebels said they had talks on restoring normalcy in embattled areas, the ongoing truce and transport along a key highway that runs through rebel-held areas.

"What's more important than the substance of their discussion is the fact they met," an Asian diplomat here said. "This could be a very important step in the road to building mutual confidence."

The initial face-to-face meeting had been due to take place at a neutral venue somewhere in Thailand next month and the Tigers had said there would be no talks unless a 1998 ban on them was lifted.

But official sources here confirmed the unexpected meeting had taken place in the rebel-held Kilinochchi area where the LTTE has its political headquarters.

Wickremesinghe was briefed on the developments, officials said.