

3 killed in heavy Indian shelling in Pak Kashmir

Two young girls and an elderly woman were killed Thursday in heavy cross-border shelling by Indian forces on the Pakistani side of disputed Kashmir, officials said.

The heavy Indian firing, after a day of relative calm, coincided with the arrival of US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage in Islamabad on a mission to defuse the dangerous military stand-off between India and Pakistan.

"Heavy shelling began in Abbaspur sector in the southern Poonch district at 9:00 am (0300 GMT)," police officer Raja Ghulam Sarwar told AFP.

Two cousins, aged two years and 18 months, died when a shell landed on their home in Taroti village in Abbaspur sector, and another three-year-old girl received serious injuries, said Poonch deputy commissioner Liaquat Hussain.

A 60-year-old woman was killed and four other people including two children were injured in Khuriratta sector in the southern Kotli district where shelling intensified mid-morning.



US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage (extreme left) holds talks with Pakistani Foreign Secretary Inam-ul-Haq (2nd from right) at the Foreign Office in Islamabad on Thursday. Armitage is on a mission to defuse tensions between nuclear armed Pakistan and India over the disputed Kashmir state.

Armitage 'heartened' after talks with Musharraf

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage said Thursday he was "very heartened" after talks with President Pervez Musharraf on the Kashmir crisis and the "war on terror".

Armitage, who is due in New Delhi on Friday, said he was encouraged by Musharraf's stand on the Kashmir problem, which has brought Pakistan close to war with India.

"Clearly the situation is quite complicated and quite volatile but I'm very heartened to hear of President Musharraf's desire to have war avoidance," Armitage told reporters here.

"That is the same case in India and I think we need to do our best,

the international community, to bring down the temperature."

Armitage said Musharraf had given assurances that militants were not infiltrating Indian-administered Kashmir from Pakistan.

"He made it clear that nothing is happening across the Line of Control," he said, referring to Kashmir's de facto border.

But Armitage could give no assurances of any immediate calming of tensions between the South Asian rivals.

"Time will tell and I defer to whatever President Musharraf would like to say on that. I'm just a working man trying to do a job," he said.

Tensions between Pakistan and India have been sky-high in recent

weeks over alleged armed incursions across the Line of Control into India's part of the disputed state.

Armitage also said he had been buoyed by Musharraf's comments that Pakistan was still committed to the US-led war on terrorism, specifically the crackdown on Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

"He expressed his absolute determination to continue to prosecute the war on al-Qaeda and he also articulated his aspirations for the people of Pakistan -- he was really pointing to the future," Armitage said.

"I look forward to continuing these discussions here at some future date but also going to India tomorrow for some private discussions with the Indian leadership and exchanging views."

'US to propose int'l monitoring force for Kashmir'

India rejects plan for international patrols

The United States is to propose a US-British military monitoring force for Kashmir in a bid to defuse the threat of nuclear conflict between India and Pakistan over the disputed territory, a newspaper here reported Thursday.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld will put forward plans to send helicopter-borne troops as a "verification force" when he visits the subcontinent next week, said The Independent, citing defence and diplomatic sources.

Around 500 troops would make up the force, working alongside Indian and Pakistani security forces, said the sources.

Rumsfeld on Wednesday said nuclear powers India and Pakistan "may well be looking for ways to tamp things down" in a regional crisis which has led to fears of all-out war.

He was speaking in London after meeting British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon for talks on the situation.

However, Britain and the United States on Wednesday advised their citizens to leave India and Pakistan, in a new sign of increasing concern.

Rumsfeld is on an extended overseas tour to include stops in several

European and Gulf countries as well as visits to India and Pakistan.

Firm dates on Rumsfeld's visit to New Delhi and Islamabad have yet to be revealed, but he plans to travel to the countries on the heels of a visit this week by US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage.

Meanwhile, India opposes a plan for US and UN troops to patrol the powderke province of Kashmir, favouring joint patrols by Indian and Pakistani troops, India's National Security Advisor Brajesh Chandra Mishra said Thursday.

"This terrain is a very difficult one, and only India and Pakistan know it inch by inch. Therefore it is more important that India and Pakistan monitor this territory inch by inch on their own," Mishra told a press conference in Moscow.

Moreover, the tense situation embroiling India and Pakistan is "marginally better," Secretary of State Colin Powell said Wednesday, calling the standoff between the nuclear-armed neighbours a "bit better" than in the last day or so.

"I'm hearing different kinds of rhetoric in the last day or so, and I think things are a bit better," he told reporters after exiting a Congressional hearing. "I think the situation is marginally better."

Indo-Pak leaders asked to defuse tension

US President George W. Bush personally asked India and Pakistan's leaders to reduce the risk of war, but Americans were strongly urged to leave a region stalked by fears of nuclear conflict.

Bush telephoned Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to urge them to use diplomacy to navigate out of a crisis that has seen up to a million soldiers massed on their borders.

His intervention Wednesday came hours before US envoy Richard Armitage was due in Pakistan to launch a peace mission, and a day after the two leaders failed to hold face-to-face talks at a South Asian security summit.

Bush urged both leaders "to take steps that will ease tensions in the



A village girl and family members migrate to safer ground from a village near Palanwala on Thursday. Palanwala, some 3 km from the international border, is one of the villages badly affected by Pakistani shelling.



American actress Marisa Tomei smiles during a press conference for the promotion of her movie "In the Bedroom" at a Tokyo hotel on Thursday. Tomei arrived in Tokyo on May 29 for her first visit to Japan.

13 Maoists shot dead in Nepal

Nepal's security forces have shot dead 13 Maoist rebels in clashes around the kingdom, the defence ministry said Thursday.

"The security forces have shot dead 13 terrorists in separate incidents between Monday and Tuesday night and recovered a huge cache of arms and foodstuff from their hideouts," the ministry said in a statement.

Six of the rebels were gunned down in the Karmule area of Daddeldhura district and three at Kolti in Bajura, both in the west of the kingdom.

Security forces also recovered cash, arms and explosives from the battle sites, the ministry said.

The rebels have been fighting since 1996 to establish a communist republic in an insurgency that has claimed more than 4,200 lives, according to the official count.

US clips wings of visitors to keep track of terrors

Attorney General John Ashcroft on Wednesday launched a new federal registration system, boosting surveillance of visitors to the United States -- particularly those who spark an "elevated national security concern."

The three-prong National Security Entry/Exit Registration System is the response from the US Justice Department to a mandate issued by Congress to track "virtually all" of the 35 million foreign visitors who land in the United States annually before 2005, Ashcroft told reporters here.

"This system will expand substantially America's scrutiny of those foreign visitors who may pose a

national security concern and enter our country, and it will provide a vital line of defence in the war against terrorism," he said, noting laws supporting the system were already contained in federal statutes.

"This system which we speak of today will track approximately 100,000 visitors in the first year," Ashcroft said.

Individual visitors deemed to "fall into categories of elevated national security concern" if they seem to present a "risk of involvement in terrorist activity" will be required to submit to a three-part immigration exercise, or risk arrest.

Such visitors will be fingerprinted and photographed at the border, be required to register "periodically" if they stay in the United States for 30

days or longer, and be subjected to exit controls to "help the Immigration and Naturalisation Service remove those aliens who overstay their visas," he said.

Ashcroft reiterated a number of times that such a registration system was commonplace in other countries, particularly in Europe.

The new regulations further cement control of immigration matters in federal hands, though local and state law enforcement will have access to the National Crime Information Center, where thousands of photographs, fingerprints and information about visitors' immigration violations will be stored, he said.

'4 m trapped in global slave trade'

The United States said Wednesday that up to four million people had been bought and sold in the 21st century slave trade in the last year, and accused 19 countries of doing little to stamp it out.

In its annual "Trafficking in Persons" report, the State Department added Afghanistan, Armenia, Cambodia, Tajikistan, Iran and the Kyrgyz Republic to a black-list of states it blames for making insufficient efforts to combat the scourge. The list also includes Russia and Saudi Arabia.

"Every year an estimated 700,000 to four million people around the world are victimised by traffickers through fraud, coercion and outright kidnapping," said Secretary of State Colin Powell.

"The overwhelming majority of

victims are women and children.

"Traffickers often force them into pornography and prostitution, subjecting them to terrible mental and physical abuse and putting them at risk from devastating diseases, such as HIV-AIDS."

The report, which includes input from various US government agencies, NGOs and embassies overseas, said that some people are trafficked to supply the international sex trade in prostitution and sex tourism.

Others find themselves working in appalling conditions for low pay in sweatshops, construction or agriculture.

Most of the countries deemed to not be doing enough to combat trafficking are in east and central Asia, southern and eastern Europe and the Middle East.

Talks in Andhra to end Maoist rebellion

Southern India's Andhra Pradesh state government has opened talks with Maoist rebels to end a violent three-decade struggle in which about 10,000 people have died.

Vijay Ramarao, a minister in Andhra Pradesh government, late on Tuesday said the initial round of discussions had been "extremely cordial" and went beyond the scheduled one-hour period to last for three hours.

The two sides will meet again on June 9 to discuss the core issue of redistribution of land to help landless labourers and indigenous tribals.

"We have agreed to meet again to finalise the modalities and to discuss and solve the issue that have led to this movement,"

Ramarao told reporters.

Maoist rebels of the People's War Group said it was imperative that the government take steps to create a suitable atmosphere for the talks to go ahead.

"We have asked the government to lift its ban on the PWG and to hold off all police action against their members," Varavara Rao, a radical writer representing the rebels, told AFP.

He said the state police could jeopardise the peace process as there were fears that rebels in custody could be killed.

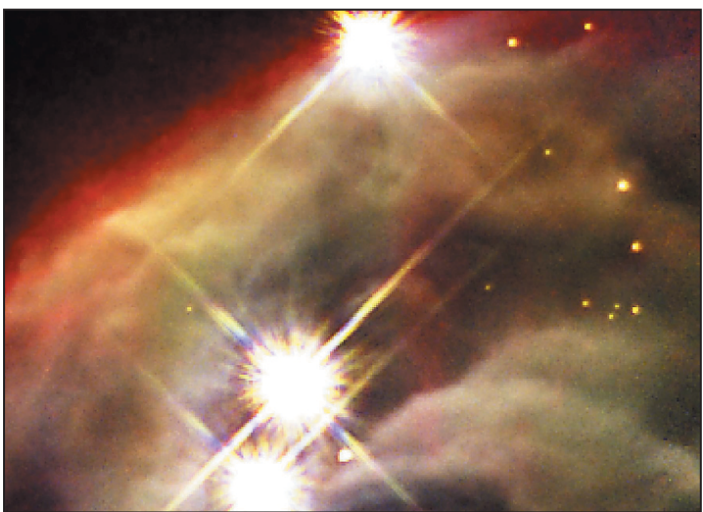
"The police wants to send a message that they are in charge no matter what their political bosses may say," said Rao, saying an incident had taken place when a rebel in custody had been killed just as the talks had opened.

Belfast elects first Sinn Fein mayor

The city of Belfast on Wednesday for the first time elected as its mayor a member of the republican Sinn Fein party, the political wing of the IRA, provoking fury among Protestant politicians.

"I am delighted to have made my party the largest party on this council," Sinn Fein's Alex Maskey said after his election by councillors in Belfast City Hall.

"But we are only one of a number of parties in Belfast City Hall and we want to work and have promised to work with all the parties," he added.



These images released on Wednesday by NASA captured by the revised Near Infrared Camera and Multi-Object Spectrometer (NICMOS) aboard NASA's Hubble Space Telescope shows a region called the Cone Nebula (NGC 2264), so named because, in ground-based images, it has a conical shape. Hubble's NICMOS is capable of penetrating layers of dust in a star-forming cloud to uncover a dense, craggy edifice of dust and gas. The image shows the tip of the nebula, about half a light-year long. The entire nebula is 7 light-years long. The Cone resides in a turbulent star-forming region, located 2,500 light-years away in the constellation Monoceros.

India completes 2nd test flight of fighter jet

India on Thursday successfully completed a second test of its ambitious homegrown fighter jet, the Light Combat Aircraft (LCA), in the southern city of Bangalore, officials said.

The aircraft was flown for about half-an-hour and its flight was witnessed by Defence Minister George Fernandes and LCA project director Kota Harinayana.

The LCA made its first test flight in January and was unveiled in public at an air show in Bangalore the following month.

India hopes the LCA -- which had been on the drawing board since 1983 -- will reduce dependency on imports for its technology-starved air force, the fourth largest in the world.

India's air force has been plagued by frequent crashes of its outmoded fleet, causing heavy losses of trained pilots as well as of equipment.

Lanka to lift ban on Tigers after PM's visit to India

Sri Lanka is set to lift a ban on Tamil Tiger rebels and start formal peace talks with them after Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's upcoming visit to neighbouring India, official sources said Thursday.

The government has already linked the de-proscription of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to an agreement on a timetable for formal negotiations expected in Thailand, the sources said.

Wickremesinghe is due to leave Saturday on a five-day visit to India where he will hold talks with his counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee and other officials.

Formal discussions between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government are due to take place some time later this month or early July at a naval facility in Thailand, official

sources said.

The sources said Wickremesinghe would brief Indian leaders about the progress of the Norwegian-sponsored peace process in Sri Lanka and the possibility of lifting the 1998 ban on the LTTE.

The Tiger rebels were outlawed by New Delhi after the group was held responsible for the May 1991 assassination of former Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi.

Sri Lanka has sought and won assurances from the United States, Britain, Australia and Canada that removing the ban on the LTTE at home would not automatically lead them to remove their own designations of the Tigers as a "terrorist" outfit.

The government has asked the LTTE to take up the question of establishing an interim administration for the island's embattled northern and eastern regions during the

preliminary talks in Thailand.

Constitutional Affairs Minister G. L. Peiris said last week there should be no haste in preparing an agenda for the proposed talks.

"We agree that there should be thorough and meticulous arrangements for the talks," he said, adding however "there must not be long and unexplained delays that diminish the momentum of the peace process."

Lifting of the ban on the LTTE had been the main hurdle for the Oslo-backed peace bid aimed at ending three decades of fighting that has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

LTTE supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran at a rare press conference in April demanded the Tigers be de-proscribed before formal talks with Colombo.

Britain's domestic intelligence service MI5 has drawn up a secret list of hundreds of potential terrorist targets including key government buildings and economically vital installations, a newspaper reported here Thursday.

The sites, including nuclear power stations, oil refineries and vital communications centres, have had their security profiles reassessed, because of the threat posed by the al-Qaeda terrorist network, said The Times.

More than 350 sites have been placed on a "critical national infrastructure" list, added the broadsheet.

MI5 agents have visited the sites -- including the country's 15 nuclear power stations and key defence companies -- to check that security measures have been stepped up since the September 11 terror attacks on the United States, blamed on al-Qaeda.

US Air Force veteran relieved of duty for criticising Bush

AUS Air Force officer, who wrote to a newspaper asserting that President George W. Bush knew in advance about the September 11 attacks and did nothing about it, has been relieved from his duties, an Air Force official confirmed Wednesday.

Lieutenant Colonel Steve Butler was serving as vice chancellor for student affairs at the Defence Language Institute in Monterey, California, when he wrote the letter published in The Monterey County Herald on May 26, according to Air Force spokeswoman Wendy Varhegyi.

US terms Arafat ineffective, untrustworthy

The United States said on Wednesday Palestinian President Yasser Arafat was ineffective and could not be trusted, and that US officials were actively reaching out to other Palestinian leaders in the search for a Middle East peace.

President George W. Bush condemned the latest suicide bombing in Israel, which killed 16 people, but a White House statement did not include the usual language urging Arafat in particular to stop the violence, instead referring in general terms to the Palestinian Authority.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said Bush has not given up on Arafat but that "in the presi-

dent's eyes Yasser Arafat has never played a role of someone who can be trusted and who is effective."

Fleischer, briefing reporters, said Bush was "less focused on any one individual, and more focused on actions and results."

"What the president is interested in is results, from whatever corner they may come from. If that's Chairman Arafat, that's fine with the president. If it's others, that's fine with the president," he said.

Early on Thursday, Israeli tanks stormed Arafat's compound in the West Bank City of Ramallah and fired on his offices.

In Washington, US officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the Bush administration had not given Israeli Prime Minister Ariel

Sharon a green light to launch the incursion.

US officials had been in contact with the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority and were closely monitoring developments, a State Department spokesman said.

Signaling that US Middle East policy was still a work in progress, senior Bush administration officials earlier played down expectations for a breakthrough during weekend talks at Camp David between Bush and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

Asked if there would be any significant announcements emerging from these talks, one official said: "No. We're still in the process of consulting people on the way forward."

Hearing goes on over pre-Sept 11 intelligence failings

A lead US lawmaker investigating intelligence agency failings prior to the September 11 terror strikes said Wednesday his committee had received additional relevant information from foreign intelligence operations.

Senator Bob Graham told reporters at the end of a second day of closed-door hearings that he had visited Poland, Germany and Russia the previous week and had been given information that could help clarify the pre-September terrorist picture.

The agents, he said, had given him information that would help the US joint House-Senate Intelligence committee connect the dots regarding emerging US intelligence data, or as they told him: "to identify your additional pieces of information available before September 11."

The data, they told him, "might have given you a pattern that would have led to the ability to disrupt" the

terrorist attacks.

Graham declined to say which country's intelligence service had been most informative. "It was one in particular, but I'm not going to identify which one," he said.

He added that the joint committee next was to travel to Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Israel during the July 4 holiday recess "to find out about terrorist groups beyond al-Qaeda."

The lawmaker added that with revelations of the FBI's failures to act on clues and warnings before the attacks that left some 3,000 dead in New York, Pennsylvania and the Pentagon, more data was coming in "from a variety of sources" within the United States.

This data, he said, "potentially might have been available to some component of the intelligence community before September 11, which in conjunction with the information we know was available could have given additional shape to this jigsaw puzzle."

"We are checking the veracity and relevance of this information."



The space shuttle Endeavour lifts off of pad 39 A after a six day delay on Wednesday. The STS-111 mission marks the 14th Shuttle flight to the International Space Station and the third Shuttle mission this year.