

5 more killed as violence rocks Kashmir

Five people including two Indian soldiers were killed Saturday and more than 37 others were injured in a string of grenade attacks and shoot-outs in Indian Kashmir, police said.

In a fierce four-hour gun duel at Kokernag, 70 km south of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, two army troops and two Muslim rebels were killed Saturday and another soldier injured, police said.

Authorities identified the slain militants as members of the Pakistan-based, pan-Islamic movement Lashkar-e-Taiba, one of two groups India blamed for a December 13 attack on its parliament that sent tensions soaring with arch-rival Pakistan.

Islamabad has since banned Lashkar-e-Taiba, but the nuclear-armed powers have deployed one million troops to their borders since the attack.

India has ruled out any pullback until at least October, when Kashmir, in the throes of an armed separatist insurgency, is due to hold a state election which rebels have vowed to disrupt.

Pak cops intensify manhunt for gang-rapists

Police teams stepped up a hectic hunt Saturday for three men accused of gang-raping a teenager on the orders of a tribal council and arrested one of their own officers over a cover up.

Police said initially they were looking for four men, but one identified as Abdul Khaliq was arrested overnight from Lasbala in southwestern Baluchistan province.

The hunt by special teams of police was intensified Saturday for the other three men. The case has outraged this Islamic country.

Pakistani stoned to death for blasphemy

A Pakistan man accused of blasphemy was stoned to death by hundreds of villagers after a local religious leader called for him to be executed, police said Saturday as a probe began.

Zahid Mahmood Akhtar, 48, was dragged out of his home on Thursday night, beaten and then marched to a village square near the town of Chak Jhumra, in central Punjab province, and stoned, police said.

Disgruntled teacher sets fire to dormitory: 8 killed in China

Eight Chinese students, one of them as young as six, were killed when their own teacher set fire to their dormitory over a grudge he held against the school, state media said Saturday.

The fire broke out shortly before midnight on June 9 at the dormitory, attached to a village primary school in Xundian county in southwestern China's Yunnan province, Xinhua news agency reported.

The teacher, identified as 25-year-old Li Wenfu, was initially greeted as a hero, as he was the first to sound the alarm after the blaze erupted, according to the agency. But through investigation over the past month shows that Li in fact started the fire to get revenge after he had been criticized by the school's headmaster, Xinhua said.

Wellington's evening paper says goodbye after 137 yrs

Wellington's Evening Post newspaper was farewell at a gathering tinged with sadness in the city's Civic Square Saturday.

The capital city's 137-year-old paper is to merge with the morning daily the Dominion to become the Dominion Post on Monday, with the loss of about 90 jobs.

At midday Saturday, a coffin containing copies of the last Evening Post edition were carried into the square on a Harley Davidson motorcycle side-car, flanked by a band playing a dirge, and papers were distributed amongst the 200-strong crowd.

Evening Post cartoonist Tom Scott compared the Post's demise to the death of the Queen Mother. "It was always going to happen, but it's still a shock."



Member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) carrying a placard showing assassinated PFLP head Abu Ali Mustafa (L) and jailed current leader Ahmad Saadat chant slogans during a demonstration calling for the release of Palestinians held in Israeli jails in Gaza City on Saturday. Saadat is held by the Palestinian Authority in Jericho under international supervision for his group's alleged role in the assassination of an Israeli minister last year in revenge for the killing of his predecessor by Israeli forces.

Israel keeps up clampdown Palestinian mother, toddler among 3 killed in WB

Three Palestinians were reported killed by Israeli fire in the Gaza Strip Saturday as French Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin called for the international community to mobilize for Middle East peace.

A Palestinian woman, Randa al-Hindi, 40, and her two-year-old daughter Nour were killed near Gaza City on Saturday when Israeli troops opened fire on their car, Palestinian medical sources said.

However an Israeli military spokesman denied there had been any shooting in the area near the Netzarim junction.

Earlier, Palestinian medical and security sources told AFP a Palestinian man was killed in his

home when Israeli troops opened fire on houses in the southern Gaza Strip.

Khamees Shurab, 45, died after being hit in the head, chest and leg when Israeli troops fired heavy machine-guns on a group of houses in the eastern outskirts of Khan Yunis, they said.

The firing came from an area close to the Jewish settlement of Morag, they said, adding that a number of other houses in the area were lightly damaged.

The army said it was not aware of any such incidents in the area.

In the West Bank Palestinian sources said Israeli armored vehicles on Saturday surrounded the hospital in Jenin in a search for two Palestinian militants who had attacked their forces.

Army officers told the hospital's deputy director Nader Arshed that they would track down the fighters in the hospital, which neighbors the refugee camp where bloody battles took place in April, hospital officials told AFP.

The deputy director replied that no fighters were inside.

Witnesses reported that at least some of the estimated ten armored vehicles had opened fire in the area with heavy machine guns. There were no immediate reports of casualties.

Witnesses said the manhunt was launched after the two militants had fired an explosive at an Israeli patrol from a building under construction near the hospital.

'Musharraf isolated in Pakistan'

NEW YORK TIMES, Islamabad

The man chosen to provide the local muscle in the US's campaign against terrorism is finding himself with hardly a friend at home.

Pervez Musharraf, who bet his future on a post-September 11 alliance with the West, has lost considerable support as he has forced a series of dramatic changes at the behest of his foreign allies, according to interviews with dozens of Pakistanis.

Musharraf is now isolated --

increasingly a figure of ridicule and the focus of a growing anti-Western fury shared by Islamic militants and the middle class alike.

The decline in Musharraf's fortunes is a turnaround since last autumn, when he was hailed at home as a reform-minded Muslim leader.

Musharraf's hold over the army and at least the upper echelons of Pakistan's intelligence is not in doubt, for now, and there appears to be no immediate threat to his power. But at no time since

September 11 has he appeared as isolated or vulnerable.

Musharraf's dutiful carrying out of Washington's demands is galvanizing a widespread feeling here that he has traded away Pakistan's sovereignty to the US and Pakistan's new policy towards Kashmir is the latest in a series of humiliations he has endured at the US's hand.

FBI agents joining raids of suspected hideouts of the Al-Qaida and the Taliban, the anti-US sentiment has reached a peak.



Controversial US black Muslim leader Louis Farrakhan (R), head of the Nation of Islam, walks past an Iraqi soldier upon his arrival at Baghdad's Saddam International Airport late Friday for a two-day visit, which he says is aimed at preventing a possible US military strike on the sanctions-hit country.

Benazir-Sharif polls alliance in the offing

PTI, Islamabad

Speculation is rife here that former Prime Ministers Benazir Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif will bury the hatchet to form an alliance against President Pervez Musharraf following a recent visit to Jeddah by Benazir Bhutto.

Media reports in Islamabad speculate that Benazir, who went to Mecca on Wednesday to offer prayers, also went to Jeddah, where Sharif is living in exile under an agreement between the Musharraf government and the Saudi Royal family.

Benazir's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) spokesman has denied that any such meeting took place, as Sharif is under obligation not to undertake any

political activity while in exile, a report published in the The News said on Friday.

The paper, however, quoted a family friend saying that Sharif and Benazir were in regular touch with each other and frequently discussed the country's fast-changing political scenario.

"They have buried the hatchet and vowed to counter the military-backed king's (Musharraf) parties in the polls through a joint strategy," the paper quoted the friend.

The News said if a meeting had taken place between the two politicians, "it could add a new dimension to the political scenario and would send positive signals to the cadres of both the parties."

Bombing raid may have killed 48 Afghans: US

AFP, Kabul

The US general leading the coalition campaign in Afghanistan said Saturday nearly 50 people may have been killed in a bombing raid on a wedding party, but that American investigators had been unable to determine how many people died.

Lieutenant-General Dan McNeill, commander of the coalition forces in Afghanistan, said that a more thorough investigation was needed into Sunday's bombing in Uruzgan province as the US investigators were not shown any graves during a fact-finding mission.

"I believe there's 48 dead and 117 wounded," McNeill told a joint press conference with Afghan Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah while emphasizing that the figures were those of Afghan investigators.

"I believe that a more formal

Bhutan warns ULFA rebels to leave or face military action

AFP, Guwahati

Bhutan said Saturday it would hold a final round of talks with an Indian separatist group to tell the rebels to leave the Himalayan kingdom or face a military crackdown.

State media said Bhutan's council of ministers Friday recommended a "last meeting" with leaders of the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), which is fighting a separatist insurgency in the neighboring Indian state of Assam.

"If this meeting produced no positive and concrete result, the council of ministers decided that the only option left was military action," said a resolution by Bhutan's National Assembly, quoted Saturday by the state-owned newspaper Kuensel.

ULFA guerrillas operate out of well-entrenched bases in southern Bhutan, from where they launch hit-and-run attacks on security personnel inside India.

More than 10,000 people have lost their lives to insurgency in Assam during the past two decades.

Bhutan's Home Minister Lyonpo Thinley Gyamtsho told the Assembly

session, which was chaired by King Jigme Singhye Wangchuk, that the government had held six rounds of direct talks with the top ULFA leadership since 1998 on dismantling their camps inside the kingdom.

Community elders and village chiefs from 20 districts participated in the Assembly meeting pledged their support to the government if force was needed to uproot the militants, Kuensel said.

"If there was an armed conflict, the people from all 20 dzongkhags (districts) had pledged their full support in terms of funds, material contributions, and physical participation," the speaker of the National Assembly, Dasho Ugyen Dorji, was quoted saying.

The home minister said the ULFA had six camps in Bhutan, including its general headquarters and a training base.

Another tribal separatist outfit, the National Democratic Front of Bodoland, has seven camps inside Bhutan, while a rebel group fighting in the Indian state of West Bengal, the Kamatapur Liberation Organization, has set up two bases inside the tiny Buddhist kingdom, officials said.

Iraq says 'no' to arms inspection

REUTERS, AFP, Vienna

Iraq failed to reach an accord with the United Nations on Friday to resume weapons inspections after intensive talks involving Secretary-General Kofi Annan and Iraqi Foreign Minister Najib Sabri.

The impasse will favor those in the Bush administration who want the military to topple President Saddam Hussein while many European and Arab leaders want to find a diplomatic compromise.

The two-day meeting was the third high-level session on the arms inspectors this year.

"They didn't say yes," Annan told reporters after the talks, which he called constructive, ended on Friday. "I would have preferred more," he said, adding: "I cannot force a decision."

Bush turns 56

AFP, Kennebunkport

US President George W. Bush on Friday began a three-day weekend centred on golf, fishing, spending time with his parents -- and his 56th birthday.

"I imagine there will be some type of family celebration. I think a cake can be expected, some singing can be expected," Bush spokesman Ari Fleischer told reporters travelling with Bush to this Atlantic coast resort town.

Kalam asserts unflinching commitment to secularism

PTI, New Delhi

Coming out clearly against 'intolerance and violence' in the name of religion, India's presidential nominee A P J Abdul Kalam spoke of his unflinching commitment to secularism and the letter and spirit of the constitution and dismissed criticism that he was hawk on security issues.

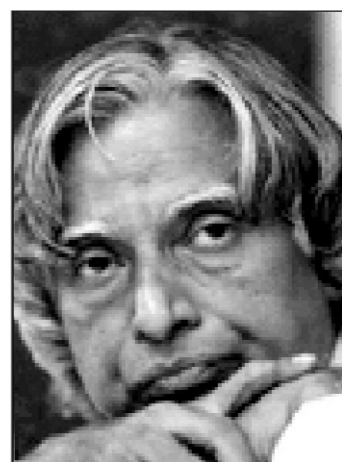
In the midst of his campaign, Kalam wrote a seven-page letter to his electoral college comprising MPs and MLAs outlining his vision for the Presidency saying the basic structure of the Constitution was unalterable.

He also expressed concern over cross-border terrorism pursued by Pakistan as a matter of state policy and said it aims for destabilisation and dismemberment of India "is doomed". Jammu and Kashmir "was, is, and shall always remain an inseparable part of India", he asserted.

In an apparent rebuttal of charges that he has been fielded by the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) to cover up for event in the western Indian state of Gujarat, Kalam said "secularism is the essence of Indianness."

"I also wish to reiterate unflinching commitment to the principle of secularism, which is the cornerstone of our nationhood."

"Intolerance and violence in the name of religion is the worst form of irreligion. True religion is that Ocean of Spiritualism in which all faiths shine in brilliance. To people in politics and government, it teaches the message of leadership with compassion and



A P J Abdul Kalam

fairness," he said.

The 72-year-old expert in missile technology and a newcomer to politics said the broad and enthusiastic support he had received from all corners and communities of India was itself a resounding reminder that the country's secular ethos was alive and vibrant.

"I am truly overwhelmed at the whole-hearted endorsement I have received from a wide spectrum of the country's political establishment, cutting across the divide between the ruling and most of the opposition parties. I take this to be a symbol of the essential unity of our political establishment ...," Kalam said.

Maintaining that the basic structure of the Constitution was unalter-

able, he said it has stood the test of time and shown itself to be having the vigor, vitality and eternal freshness that made it capable of meeting any challenge that new circumstances might hurl at it.

Favouring the principle of "change with continuity", he said "my first and foremost task is to respect and uphold the Constitutional processes, in the best interest of our people and the nation".

Countering criticism by left parties that he was hawk on security matters, Kalam said national security has to be recognised by every Indian as a national priority.

"I am proud of my role in our country's space, nuclear and missile programmes, because I believe that these have greatly strengthened India's national security, enabled us to follow an independent foreign policy, and helped us to overcome challenges created by technological denial and economic sanctions by powerful countries," he said.

"Our national security is guided by defensive considerations. It poses no threat to any country in the world," the father of India's missile programme said.

Stressing that India's foreign policy has always stood on a strong edifice of national consensus, the Presidential candidate said he wished to develop and further strengthen ties of friendship and mutually beneficial cooperation with all countries in the world.

Motive of LA airport gunman murky

AFP, Los Angeles

An Arab gunman who went on a shooting rampage at Los Angeles airport had set out to kill, officials said Friday, as US and Israeli officials tussled over whether the attack was an act of terror.

The comments as investigators picked through the home of Egyptian immigrant Hesham Mohamed Hadeyat for clues as to why he opened fire at an El Al Israel Airlines ticketing counter Thursday, killing two people and injuring four before he was shot dead by Israeli security agents.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) said 41-year-old limousine driver Hadeyat had intended to murder people when he turned up at Los Angeles International airport on his birthday Thursday armed with two guns and

a knife.

But Special Agent Rich Garcia said his motives remained murky, despite the insistence of Israeli officials and US Jewish groups that the shooting was an anti-Israeli terror attack.

"It appears that he went there for the intention of killing people," Garcia told reporters. "Why he did that, is still undetermined. That's what we are trying to find out."

The agent declined to classify the shooting spree that took place as passengers queued for an El Al flight to Tel Aviv as a terrorist attack, saying it was too early to draw conclusions.

"We are not ruling out hate crimes, we are not ruling our terrorism completely and we are not ruling out that it may have been a random act of violence."

Rajoub loyalists refuse to cooperate with new Palestinian security chief

AFP, Jerusalem

Six hundred supporters of Jibril Rajoub, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's ousted security chief, decided Saturday "not to cooperate" with Rajoub's successor, one of the officers said. During a meeting in Beitunia, a village outside Ramallah, the group "decided not to cooperate with the new chief of preventive security appointed by President Arafat," Captain Sabri Tmezi told AFP.

A delegation of Rajoub loyalists were to meet with Arafat later Saturday in Ramallah, he added. "The decision to relieve Colonel Rajoub of his duties was not a good decision and will affect (the security) service," he said.

Arafat signed a decree Thursday replacing Rajoub with as part of the overhaul of Palestinian security organizations.

apparently putting to rest to two days of confusion stemming from Rajoub's complaints over how he had been dismissed.

The changes were part of overhaul of the Palestinian security structure, demanded by the United States and Israel, in the wake of many deadly Palestinian suicide bombings in Israel.

In a speech on June 24, US President George Bush not only called for an overhaul of the Palestinian Authority but also the ouster of Arafat as a condition for establishing a Palestinian state.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has long called for Arafat's ouster.

Manasrah, Arafat's new security chief who enjoys a reputation as a no-nonsense manager, told AFP Friday he would promote teamwork as part of the overhaul of Palestinian security organizations.