

Pak police probe into killing of Christians

AFP, Karachi

Pakistani authorities said Thursday they were probing possible links between this week's execution-style slaying of seven Christian charity workers and the murders of three other Christians, saying the group behind them intended to create a climate of fear.

Police referred to the possibility of a group of Islamic militants roaming Pakistan's violence-wracked port city of Karachi, where the murders have taken place, intent only on killing Christians.

"We are investigating whether there is an anti-Christian gang operating in Karachi, made up of jihadis (Islamic fighters)," chief investigator Manzoor Mughal told AFP.

Karachi police chief Tariq Jamil described the killers as "terrorists" trying to create panic in Karachi.

US praises Pakistan for aiding war on terror

AFP, Islamabad

Senior Pakistani and US defence officials held their first full day of talks on Thursday on improving military cooperation, with Washington praising Islamabad's help in the war on terror.

The meeting of the Pakistan-US defence consultative group is the first since the US cut economic and military ties in 1998 over Pakistan's nuclear tests.

It is seen as a reward for Pakistan's key support in the US-led war against al-Qaida and Taliban elements in neighbouring Afghanistan.

US pressure on Pakistan not working: Vajpayee

PTI, New Delhi

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Thursday said that US pressure on Pakistan to abandon support to terrorism appeared not to be working and asserted that India would have to fight its own battle against the menace.

"It seems so," Vajpayee said when asked whether pressure from the US and India's own effort was not working on Pakistan to change its stand towards supporting terrorism.

He was talking to reporters after speaking at the Diamond Jubilee celebrations of the CSIR here.

Asked how India would frustrate terrorists attack like the one on the Swaminarayan temple in Gandhinagar, he said: "By being bold, vigilant."

Pak forces discover secret arms dump

AFP, Peshawar

Pakistani paramilitary forces have found 200 artillery shells and two rocket launchers in a secret dump in the northwestern tribal belt bordering Afghanistan, officials said Thursday.

The arms were found in a cave at the town of Pinashigah in the mountainous Khurram tribal area, a local official said.

The area was once a stronghold of forces of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar which were fighting the 1979-89 Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

Hekmatyar, a former prime minister who went into hiding after he was expelled from Iran this year, has called for a holy war against coalition forces which are tracking the remnants of the Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan.

4 militants gunned down in Kashmir

AFP, Jammu

Indian troops Thursday gunned down four militants in Kashmir identified as members of a Pakistan-based group, officials said.

Four rebels from the pan-Islamic movement Lashkar-e-Taiba were killed in a three-hour gunbattle with the army at Loran in the border district of Poonch, some 240 kilometers (148 miles) west of Kashmir's winter capital Jammu, defence spokesman Colonel Bhamwar Singh Rathore told AFP.

"The encounter erupted after the army raided a hideout in Loran based on an intelligence tip-off," Rathore said.

"We have recovered a large quantity of arms, ammunition and automatic rifles from the hideout,"



Protestors gather in Place de la Republique in Paris on Wednesday to protest against the Israeli siege of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah. Banner reads "Jenin [refugee camp] will not be a detail in history".

Troops on street after temple bloodbath

India points finger to Pakistan, 2 people stabbed

AFP, Ahmedabad

Troops were on alert across the volatile state of Gujarat Thursday to prevent revenge attacks on Muslims after a massacre at a Hindu temple, as India warned its patience with Pakistan was wearing thin.

At least two people were stabbed in the western state, where police and troops flooded the streets of the main cities fearing trouble during a nationwide protest strike called by

Hindu hardliners.

Suspected Islamic militants Tuesday gunned down 31 people at the Akshardham temple in Gandhinagar, the capital of Gujarat, where hundreds died earlier this year in India's worst communal unrest in a decade.

India's junior home minister I.D. Swamy said the militants were carrying letters claiming they belonged to a hitherto unknown group called Tehreek-e-Kisaas, or

the Movement for Revenge.

Moreover, at least two people, one a Muslim man, were stabbed Thursday in the Indian state of Gujarat amid a strike called by Hindu hardliners to protest a temple massacre, police said.

The Muslim, travelling in an autorickshaw in the town of Surat, was stabbed by a group of Hindus in the Muslim-dominated Falahatpura area, city police commissioner V.K. Gupta told AFP.

PML blames Musharraf for pre-polls rigging

REUTERS, Islamabad

The leader of one of Pakistan's main political parties said Thursday military President Pervez Musharraf was rigging October's elections to ensure a compliant parliament.

Musharraf, who took power in a bloodless coup in 1999, has already awarded himself five more years as president after a controversial referendum in April. He has since amended the constitution to give himself sweeping new powers.

Now, according to Raja Zafar-ul-Haq, chairman of Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League or PML(N), Musharraf is doing his utmost to tilt the playing field in his favour for October 10.

"The outside world doesn't understand how far they can go," Haq told Reuters in an interview. "They think elections are fair if people are allowed to cast their vote but the fact is there is more pre-polls rigging than on the day of the elections."

At the national level, political parties have been hobbled by the exclusion of two popular former prime ministers, Benazir Bhutto of the Pakistan People's Party and Nawaz Sharif, the man Musharraf deposed in the 1999 coup.

Benazir has been threatened with jail if she returns to Pakistan. Sharif, in exile in Saudi Arabia, has withdrawn from the race and his relatives have been barred.

At the local level, Haq alleges that a massive official effort has been made to force politicians to abandon parties like PML(N) and stand instead for what has become known as the "King's Party," a faction of the Muslim League loyal to Musharraf.

A key tool, he says, is the National Accountability Bureau, a body supposed to punish corrupt politicians whose role, he says, has itself been corrupted for political ends.

Politicians with cases or accusations against them have been promised they would be spared prosecution if they joined the King's Party, PML(QA).

Sharon terms Arafat aides terrorists

5 more killed in ME violence

AP, Jerusalem

Defending Israel's weeklong siege of Yasser Arafat's compound, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said in an interview published Thursday that some of the wanted men holed up inside are "the biggest terrorists that exist."

Israel has drawn intense international criticism, including from the United States, for the assault on Arafat's headquarters, launched in response to a Tel Aviv bus bombing that killed six people.

In Israel, the operation has also been challenged, with critics saying it has frozen Palestinian reform efforts and boosted Arafat's standing at a time when his Fatah movement was trying to force him to share power.

About 200 aides and members of the security forces are with Arafat in the largely demolished compound. They are confined to a few rooms on two floors of a wing of the main office building. Arafat has said he would not turn anyone over.

In an interview with The Jerusalem Post daily, Sharon said that "a great deal of thought" went into the assault. An apparent response to reports that senior military officials expressed reservations about the operation to Sharon before it was launched. Israel TV quoted the officers as saying that Sharon wanted quick action.

Sharon said in the interview that those with Arafat are "a group of murderers, the biggest terrorists that exist."

Israel never provided a list of names, but said the most wanted man inside was Tawfik Tirawi, the Palestinian intelligence chief in the West Bank.

The military has said Tirawi helped fund militias and was involved in several shooting attacks.

Tirawi has denied the allegations. Israeli commentators noted that only a few months ago, Tirawi participated in talks with Israeli security chiefs.

Sharon brushed aside the growing US criticism as a disagreement among friends. He said Palestinian militants were trying to step up attacks on Israelis ahead of a possible US attack on Iraq.

"Their operating assumption is that the closer we come to a US attack on Iraq, the more difficult it will be for Israel to respond to terrorism," Sharon said. "They understand that Israel does not want to cause difficulties for the United States."

AFP adds: Five people, including a Palestinian baby girl and an Israeli army officer, were killed in scattered violence across the Palestinian territories on Thursday, as the Palestinian uprising neared its second anniversary.

Fourteen-month-old Gharam al-Tel died from tear gas inhalation as violent scuffles erupted between Palestinian residents of Hebron and Israeli troops trying to impose a lockdown on the Palestinian part of the southern West Bank city, reoccupied like most of the West Bank since June.

The Palestinian parts of Hebron have been under an even tighter curfew in recent days, as Israelis headed to the small Jewish settlement at the heart of the city of 120,000 Palestinians to celebrate the Feast of the Tabernacles, which ends at the weekend.

16 killed as train derails in Pakistan

AP, Quetta

A passenger train derailed in south-western Pakistan on Thursday as it crossed a weakened bridge, killing 16 people and injuring 70 others, officials and state-run media said.

Eight cars of the Quetta Express went off the tracks as the train was crossing a bridge near the city of Sibi, about 100 miles east of Quetta, said Jaill Ahmad, chief controller at Pakistan Railways.

The 12-car express train had departed from Rawalpindi, near the capital Islamabad, and was bound for Quetta, Ahmad said.

At least 12 bodies were recovered from the wreckage and some 70 injured passengers were trans-

ported to local hospitals, Ahmad said.

The death toll climbed to 16 as residents and rescue workers pulled victims from the twisted, crumpled railway cars.

"At this stage we can't say what was the cause of this incident," Ahmad said.

But railroad officials said the bridge was believed to be weak and may have collapsed under the weight of the approaching train.

Army helicopters were airlifting the wounded and bringing emergency medical supplies to the accident site, state-run Associated Press of Pakistan reported.

Pak terrorism worsened after Agra Summit: Sinha

PTI, Kuala Lumpur

Pakistan sponsored cross-border terrorism had "become worse" after the failure of the Agra Summit, External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha said on Thursday.

Ever since the Agra Summit "India has been subject to the worst form of cross border terrorism," Sinha said, speaking at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) here.

"It has gone on and on and on, and we have continued to act with restraint," he said, adding that Pakistan had also failed in its commitment earlier this year to halt infiltration.

Referring to the terrorist attack on Swaminarayan temple in Gujarat

on Tuesday, he said India's "patience has been sorely tested" by the massacre and that it bore all the hallmarks of the earlier assaults carried on the Parliament and Jammu and Kashmir Assembly building.

The two terrorists who attacked the temple came with AK-47 rifles, lots of explosives, hand grenades, dry fruits and other eatables, so that they could dig in and stay there for some time. "This is exactly what the terrorists who had attacked parliament had done."

This is the style and tactics employed by the terrorists in all the previous attacks which have followed after the attack on parliament," Sinha said.



A Muslim baby sleeps on his mother's lap at the Shah Alam Madrasa in Ahmedabad on Thursday. Muslim families afraid for their lives have started trickling in to the Madrasa, which served as a makeshift relief camp during recent rioting in the city. The Hindu hardline Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP - World Hindu Council) called for a nation-wide strike to protest against the killing of Hindu worshippers at the Akshardham Temple in Gandhinagar by alleged Pakistan-based terrorists. The riot-torn state of Gujarat was tense following the raid on the temple that left over 31 people dead.

Delhi to start talks with all Kashmiri groups

PTI, Srinagar

Indicating holding of talks with Hurriyat Conference, Minister of State for Home ID Swami on Thursday said the Centre will start dialogue with all groups after the completion of assembly elections in Jammu and Kashmir.

"Dialogue will be started with all concerned, even with those who unfortunately did not participate in the elections and stood isolated and exposed before the people of the state today," Swami told reporters here.

Accusing Pakistan of supporting infiltration, Swami said "infiltration had come down sharply in May and June this year, but Islamabad started again once the Centre

made its mind clear on holding assembly elections in the state".

"There was enough encouragement from the Pakistan to these groups and it strengthened our belief that they were only strategically lying low," Swami said.

On Centre's plans for the state after the elections, Swami said it will further its talks with the representatives of the state for devolution of powers.

There would be devolution of powers to ensure that all the three regions of the state -- Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh -- were equally promoted, prosperity of the people of the state was ensured and cross border terrorism was defeated once and for all, Swami said.

Lanka seeks aid to boost peace bid

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka announced plans Thursday to seek unprecedented multilateral aid to rebuild the island's war-battered northeast and support a Norwegian-backed peace bid with Tamil rebels.

The government's chief peace negotiator, G. L. Peiris, said Sri Lanka was hoping to hold a meeting of potential aid donors to receive commitments of support to rebuild the embattled areas.

The government and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) will jointly identify areas where reconstruction and rebuilding work will commence, Peiris told reporters here.

"What is new this time is that the government and the LTTE together will work as partners in this process," Peiris added.

He said the government was planning to seek multilateral support for the huge rehabilitation effort rather than bilateral aid.

"We have decided the way to proceed is to seek multilateral aid from the donor community. We will in the next few months organise a conference where the donors will be able to pledge their support," Peiris said.

He said the government was keen to take advantage of the huge international support for the peace process and press ahead with rebuilding war-ravaged areas as well as the country's economy.



21-year-old Miss Pakistan Neelam Noorani (C) poses during a photo session in the Miss International Beauty Pageant press preview at a Tokyo hotel on Thursday. 51 beauties will compete for the Miss International crown on September 30 in Tokyo. At left is Christina Juwelle Cunanan from Northern Marianas.