

US Army, Marine Corps units to move HQs to Kuwait

UN weapons inspectors can return next week: Iraq

AFP, Washington

Two key US military headquarters are preparing to move to Kuwait as the Pentagon quietly gathers strength in the Gulf, US defence officials said Friday.

The officials, speaking on condition of anonymity, said fewer than 1,000 troops would be moved with the US Army's 5th Corps headquarters in Europe and the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force headquarters in California.

But they would lay the foundation for a much larger combat force on the ground if President George W. Bush decides to launch a major military action against Iraq.

"The purpose is to get things into position to respond quickly if you're asked," a US defence official said. "We're not there yet."

The Pentagon had previously announced plans to move elements of the Central Command's headquarters from Tampa, Florida, to Qatar in November as part of an exercise that could form the nucleus of a permanent US command in the region.

The army moved its regional headquarters for the Gulf to Kuwait from the United States earlier this year.

CBS News first reported that the Pentagon had ordered the 5th Corps and the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force to relocate their headquarters to Kuwait.

In confirming the report, the officials would not say how soon they are expected to begin the move.

The Fifth Corps and the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force are frontline combat forces that saw action in the 1991 Gulf War and have been used since in military contingencies from Somalia to the Balkans.

Headquartered in Heidelberg, Germany, the Fifth Corps consists of the 1st Armoured Division and the 1st Infantry Division.

It is the only US Army corps headquartered outside the United States and it is the designated force for contingencies in Europe and the Gulf.

About 5,000 of the command's troops currently are training in Poland.

The 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, based at Camp

Pendleton, California, is built around air-ground task forces that can move swiftly to distant theatres of war.

The Pentagon in recent months has quietly moved armour, helicopters and other equipment from Europe and the United States to the Gulf region, as well as within the theatre.

Meanwhile, Iraq said Friday that it expected UN weapons inspectors to arrive next week as Russia again blocked US attempts for the United Nations to take a headline on President Saddam Hussein.

Fresh from winning Congress authorisation to order military action against Iraq if necessary, President George W. Bush is now turning his attention to the United Nations to step up pressure on Baghdad.

But a letter sent by the Iraq government to chief UN arms inspector Hans Blix said the Baghdad authorities were ready to welcome an advance team from October 19, diplomats at the UN said.



Foreign reporters walk in front of wrecked Iraqi military equipment during a tour organised for foreign reporters by the Iraqi official press centre to the al-Furat site, 25 km south of Baghdad on Saturday, used according to the Iraqi authorities as a radar and jamming communication laboratory. The site was visited by UNSCOM in July 2001 and said to be used as a centrifuge facility to produce weapons grade uranium, and Britain has singled out the former factory as a new potential weapons site from a satellite photo published on Friday.

EU urges Nepal to hold polls, talk with Maoists

AFP, Kathmandu

The European Union on Saturday urged Nepal to hold prompt elections and to open talks with Maoist rebels, after the king sacked the elected premier and appointed an interim government.

The EU said the new government, headed by monarchist Lokendra Bahadur Chand, needed to try to bring the Maoists into "the political process, leading to the conditions for free and fair elections."

"The EU looks forward to an improved condition for peaceful and democratic elections and urges the government to announce quickly new dates for local and general elections," said the statement by current EU president Denmark's embassy in Kathmandu.

King Gyanendra on October 4 sacked prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, calling him "incompetent," and assumed power until appointing Chand's nine-member cabinet Friday.

The government will remain in charge until new elections are held. Gyanendra suspended parliamentary polls due to open November 13 and has not announced new dates.

The Maoists withdrew from the democratic process in February 1996 and declared a "people's war" to topple the constitutional monarchy, which they contend only serves the impoverished kingdom's elite.

Some 5,000 people have since died, according to government estimates. More than two-thirds of the deaths have been reported since the Maoists broke a ceasefire in November 2001 after talks failed with Deuba's government.

The EU urged the Maoists "to immediately end their violent action and enter into negotiations with the government of Nepal."



European Union's Election Observation Mission to Pakistan chief John Cushman answers a question during a press conference in Islamabad on Saturday.

EU blasts Pakistan for 'serious flaws' in polls

AFP, Islamabad

EU observers on Saturday blasted Pakistan's general elections, saying they were "seriously flawed" and criticising state interference in the voting process.

"The actions taken by authorities led to serious flaws," the head of the European Union observers team John Cushman told a news conference.

He cited the unequal access to state resources and state media, the degree of freedom of candidates to organise, in particular due to a ban on political rallies and processions, and cast doubts on the independence of the election

commission.

Cushman made his comments upon the release of a preliminary statement assessing the October 10 elections, Pakistan's first since military ruler and President Pervez Musharraf took power in a coup three years ago.

Opposition and human rights groups had alleged widespread pre-election rigging in the run-up to the vote, charges the government denied.

The 88-strong observer team noted, however, a number of positive developments in the elections, in particular reducing the voting age from 21 to 18, and setting aside seats for women in the national and provincial assemblies.

But "any abuse of power ... should be addressed by firm and impartial application of the rule of law, not by unjustified interference with electoral arrangements and the democratic process," the statement said.

The EU comments come on the heels of a far more positive report by the Commonwealth released on Friday, which called the polls "for the most part transparent," while expressing doubts whether there had been a "truly level" playing field.

"Our particular concerns have been allegations of widespread use of government influence and resources to favour certain parties

and candidates and conversely to disadvantage others," a statement by Commonwealth delegation head Tan Sri Dato Musa bin Hitam said.

"This has raised doubts as to whether it can be said that the playing field was truly level," the former Malaysian deputy prime minister said.

In marked contrast to the sharp comments on Pakistan, the EU on Friday welcomed recent elections in disputed Kashmir and said it hoped the vote there would lead to renewed dialogue between Pakistan and India over the disputed Himalayan territory.

West Bengal on alert as Durga Puja begins

AFP, Kolkata

West Bengal state was thrown under a heavy security blanket on Saturday as festivities to mark the beginning of a four-day Hindu festival began amid fears of attack by Islamic militants.

"Thousands of police personnel have been deployed at Hindu temples and places of worship," West Bengal police inspector general Chayan Mukherjee told AFP, adding that devotees had been crowding temples since morning.

"We are taking all measures to ensure security of the temples and worshippers during the festival to stop any untoward incident all over

Kashmir parties haggle over forming govt

AFP, Srinagar

India's main opposition Congress Party and a Kashmiri ally continued to haggle Saturday over the makeup of a coalition government in Indian Kashmir, with the choice of who will lead the government still bedeviling negotiations, officials said.

Congress leaders went into a huddle at party headquarters in New Delhi, while their counterparts from the Peoples Democratic Party (PDP) met at their headquarters in Srinagar, Indian-administered Kashmir's summer capital.

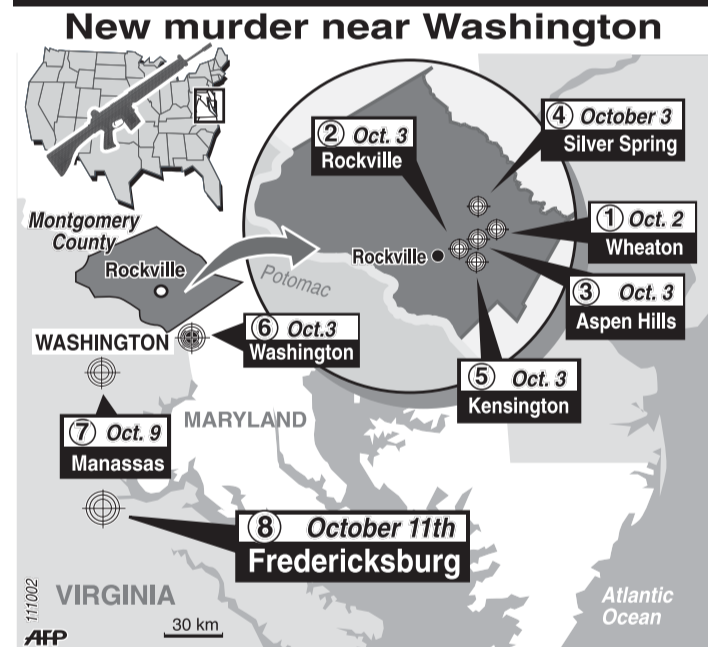
Congress and the three-year-old

PDP swept out the long-ruling National Conference (NC) in just-concluded four-phase polls in the disputed Himalayan state.

The NC emerged as the single largest party, grabbing 28 legislative seats -- short of the 44 needed to form a government and less than half the 57 it held in the outgoing assembly.

The Congress and PDP together notched up 36 seats in the 87 member assembly and have agreed to form a coalition, while trying to woo enough independents to give them a majority.

Following his party's drubbing,



Fear grips Washington as serial sniper killer still at large

AFP, Washington

Police Friday widened their dragnet for a brazen serial sniper who has killed seven and wounded two, after a man was shot dead at a gas station while a state trooper stood across the road.

Investigators said no positive link had yet been established between the 9:40 am (1340 GMT) fatal shooting of Kenneth Bridges of Philadelphia at an Exxon station in this town 80 km (50 miles) south of Washington and the nine other shootings.

Putin deals a blow to Blair

AFP, London

A number of British newspapers said Saturday British premier Tony Blair had suffered a humiliating setback on his visit to Russia during which he hoped to persuade President Vladimir Putin to back a tough UN resolution threatening force against Iraq.

The right-wing Daily Mail reported that Blair had suffered a "humiliating rebuff in his crusade against Saddam Hussein," adding that "his upbeat optimism that Moscow would back Britain and the US over action ... was embarrassingly dashed."

The tabloid said in an editorial:

Kashmir militants stick to plebiscite demand

AFP, Srinagar

Kashmir's main separatist alliance said Saturday that India's claims that recent assembly elections were a vote for New Delhi should be tested through a UN-held referendum.

"If it was a vote for India, in this case India should organise a plebiscite in Jammu and Kashmir," Abdul Gani Bhat, the chairman of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, told

reporters in Indian Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar.

"If you are confident that people want to join you, go for a plebiscite and let the people decide what they want."

India has hailed the 46 percent voter turnout in the four-phase election as a victory in Kashmir, which is disputed with Pakistan and continues to be ravaged by a 13-year anti-India rebellion that has claimed at least 37,000 lives.

Pakistan welcomes calls for dialogue with India

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan on Saturday welcomed international calls for dialogue on Kashmir with India, but questioned the EU endorsement of recent polls held in Indian-controlled territory of the disputed Himalayan state.

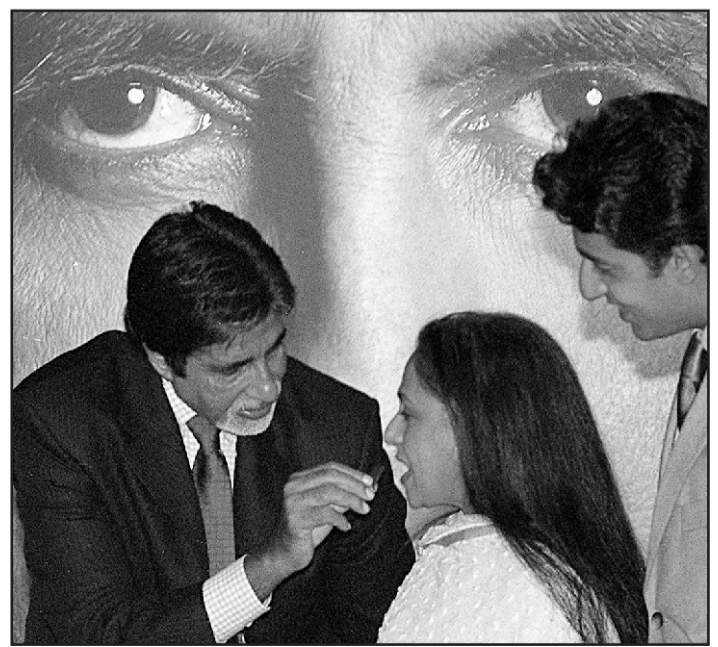
"The government of Pakistan welcomed the calls for an early resumption of a dialogue between Pakistan and India to resolve all outstanding issues including the

Kashmir dispute," a foreign ministry statement said.

The European Union on Friday expressed its support for the recent elections in Indian-controlled Kashmir and urged all parties to respect the results of the vote, marred by two months of intense violence.

"The EU welcomes the completion of Assembly elections ... (and) hopes that the elections will be a starting point for a forward-looking and inclusive dialogue," said a statement from the Danish EU presidency.

But the Pakistani foreign ministry called the polls "farcaical" which showed "widespread alienation of the Kashmiri people from the Indian colonial rule and their outright rejection of the Indian scheme to substitute polls for a free and impartial plebiscite ..."



Indian movie star Amitabh Bachchan gives a cake to his wife Jaya as they celebrated his 60th birthday with the release of a book "To Be Or Not To Be", in Mumbai on Friday while their son Abhishek (R) looks on. The book published by Jaya Bachchan, relates Bachchan's journey into the world of films.

Benazir, Islamists pour water on future of al-Qaida hunt

AFP, Karachi

The hunt for al-Qaida in Pakistan's western border areas and its largest city Karachi may be halted after the surprise election sweep by anti-US Islamic parties, Islamic leaders and ex-premier Benazir Bhutto said.

"Taliban and al-Qaida members are our brothers. Whether it is Osama bin Laden or Mullah Omar, we will not hand over anybody to the US without any proof," declared Munawar Hasan, a leader of the Muttahidda Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) alliance of six fundamentalist parties.

The MMA made stunning gains in Thursday's legislative elections, clinching 45 seats in the national assembly, mainly from the North West Frontier Province (NWFP). Running separately in 1997 elections they scored only four between

them.

In Thursday's polls, the first parliamentary vote since the 1999 military coup, the MMA also picked up 43 of 99 seats in NWFP's provincial legislature and the biggest chunk of south-west Baluchistan's 51-seat legislature with 14 seats.

With MMA's firm control in the two regions bordering Afghanistan, Pakistan's active role in flushing out fugitive al-Qaida and Taliban was in doubt.

"The Frontier is very critical because it's on the border of Afghanistan," Bhutto, banned from the polls, told AFP in an interview from London.

"Handing NWFP to the MMA is giving them (extremists) further control, in my view."

The MMA includes the Jamiat Ulema-i-Islam, which has extremely close links to the Taliban, the funda-



A worker adds final touches to effigies of the Hindu demon King Ravana in a New Delhi street on Saturday. The effigies are stuffed with crackers before they are set ablaze on October 15 in their hundreds across India to mark the festival signifying the triumph of good over evil.