

Nepal Maoists storm police post: 6 killed

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels fighting to overthrow Nepal's constitutional monarchy stormed a police post and killed six policemen, a government official said on Thursday.

An unknown number of guerrillas, campaigning for a one-party communist republic, attacked the post at Koilabas in the Dang district, 400 km west of the capital Kathmandu late on Wednesday, they said.

Six policemen have been killed and arms looted after the attack, Dang district official Dilip Bista said.

The attack on the police post is the third since the Maoist rebels said early this month they would stop attacking power stations, roads and bridges and killing rival political activists in a bid to coax the government to peace talks.

The government says it is ready for talks but the rebels must make a formal written proposal for a meeting.

More than 7,200 people have been killed since the revolt began in early 1996.

Pakistan has reopened terrorist camps: India

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

India on Wednesday charged Pakistan with reopening many terrorist training camps in areas close to the Line of Control (LoC) and the border in Jammu and Kashmir with the intention of launching terror strikes in this country.

Defence Minister George Fernandes said camps for launching terrorist incursions along the 742-km LoC, "which had been shut down temporarily, have also been activated to ensure maximum infiltration of militants into Jammu and Kashmir before the onset of winter".

Indian military officials had said in recent months that terrorist training camps based in Pakistan-administered Kashmir were shifted or temporarily closed during the 10-month-long border standoff between the South Asian rivals that ended in October.

India and Pakistan had arrayed nearly a million troops along their border during the face-off, and Indian military officials have said Islamabad's military regime directed militants in Pakistan-administered Kashmir to lie low, largely due to US pressure.

In a written reply to a question in the Rajya Sabha, Fernandes said "it has been reported that Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence has resumed its assistance

to the militants and many of the militant camps or training centres, which were closed or relocated to interior areas during July-August 2002, have been reopened".

The defence minister said India had taken "adequate military measures" to prevent infiltration across the LoC.

"In addition, information regarding terrorist infrastructure in Pakistan and (Pakistan-administered Kashmir), for support to terrorism, is appropriately shared with other countries as part of diplomatic efforts against international terrorism.

"As a result, most countries have called upon Pakistan to fulfil its commitment to end cross-border infiltration and terrorism."

In reply to another question, Fernandes said India had taken up the issue of ISI "misusing Nepalese territory and the open India-Nepal border" with the government in Kathmandu.

India and Nepal, he said, had agreed not to allow their territories to be used for activities "inimical to the interests of either country".

The Special Service Bureau, an anti-insurgency force, had been deployed along the border with Nepal to strengthen security, he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Thousands of Indian slum dwellers shout anti-government slogans during a mass protest in New Delhi on Thursday. The Delhi slum dwellers were protesting against a decision by the Supreme Court to remove all shanty dwellers who have settled after 1990. The decision could affect millions of the city's poor who have swelled the population of Delhi in search of jobs.

Mother Teresa's beatification decree today

PTI, Kolkata

Mother Teresa will move another step towards sainthood on Friday when the Pope approves the decree of her beatification. The recent controversy that sent shockwaves across the world after two doctors in West Bengal challenged a miracle attributed to her.

"We have received information that the Holy Father will sign the decree of Mother's beatification on Friday," Church sources said here requesting anonymity.

They said the decree on Mother's heroic life and virtues would be read out to the Pope by a Cardinal belonging to the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, the department within the Vatican that examines sainthood claims.

Missionaries of Charity superior-general Sister Nirmala is already in Rome with Mother's close aides Sisters Gertrude and Lutitia to attend the ceremony.

HR abuses spiralling in Nepal: Amnesty

AFP, Kathmandu

Rights group Amnesty International said Thursday that human rights abuses have spiralled in Nepal since the breakdown of talks between Maoists and the government in November 2001.

Of the 4,366 people killed since that date, half of were innocent civilians, Amnesty said in a new report.

The civilians killed were targeted by government forces for their real or perceived support to the Maoists, while others among the dead were Maoists deliberately killed after they were taken prisoner, or killed instead of being arrested, the report said.

Amnesty said that at least 66 people were reported to have "disappeared" in the past year after being taken into custody by the security forces, which were given extra powers in November 2001.

"Human rights abuses have reached unprecedented levels since the army was called out and the security forces given new pow-

ers," Amnesty said.

"It is clear that the authorities in Nepal lack the willingness to remedy the situation and tackle the endemic impunity in the country."

It said there was an "urgent need" for international assistance to provide increased human rights protection in the Himalayan state.

There was also a need, Amnesty said, to "create a law enforcement system capable of addressing reports of human rights violations with greater transparency and accountability."

In the report -- to be submitted to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva -- Amnesty called for the establishment in Nepal of an office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The office should include international human rights monitors and assist the Nepalese government in strengthening systems for the investigation and indictment of perpetrators of human rights violations.

260 m live below poverty line in India

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

India has some 260 million poor people but the numbers have reduced over the past decade even as the population has multiplied, the Lok Sabha was told Tuesday.

Minister of Urban Development and Poverty Alleviation Ananth Kumar said some 260.25 million people lived below the poverty line -- which means they earned less than one dollar a day and could not even afford two square meals a day.

But it is a marked decrease from 1993-94, when 320 million people were below the poverty line. The figure had been in the vicinity since 1973, from which time the government has the data of poor.

Uttar Pradesh, the most populous and politically charged state, remains home to most number of poor people -- nearly 53 million -- and its top position among 32 states and union territories has not changed in 30 years.

PM invites allies to dinner to allay Hindutva fears

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has called his coalition allies to dinner on Thursday to allay their fears that his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) would vigorously pursue the Hindutva line in the wake of its huge victory in the Gujarat assembly polls.

In doing so, Vajpayee will be attempting a balancing act as the coalition partners apprehend the two-thirds majority with which the BJP retained power in Gujarat may prompt it to jettison the manifesto of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in favour of a policy of Hindu nationalism in the run up to assembly elections in 10 states next year and the parliamentary poll in 2004.

The BJP had agreed in the NDA manifesto that Hindutva would be placed on the backburner.

Although the BJP establishment has been maintaining that it would neither dump the allies or the NDA

manifesto, the party's euphoria post-Gujarat has made the partners nervous.

Most of the allies, who are clearly on the defensive, appear willing not to press their views beyond a point. The reasons for this are varied.

Some parties like the Samata Party of Defence Minister George Fernandes and the Janata Dal (United) do not want to lose their ministerial posts.

The DMK feels that if it steps out of the NDA, its arch rival AIADMK of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayaram Jayalalitha may fill in the space.

The Trinamool Congress of former railway minister Mamata Banerjee is still angling to return to the NDA fold, which she had quit on the issue of bifurcating a key railway zone.

The Telugu Desam Party (TDP), whose 29 MPs are crucial for the stability of the Vajpayee government, had been critical of Gujarat

Chief Minister Narendra Modi after the February-May communal carnage. The TDP had also criticised the BJP move for a snap poll soon after the carnage, fearing that polling would not be fair in a highly charged and polarised scenario.

Political analysts say Vajpayee is clearly attempting a balancing act.

On the one hand, he wants to keep high the morale of the BJP in the wake of the Gujarat win. At the same time, he wants to signal the allies that there was no cause for worry.

When asked at a meeting of the BJP parliamentary party meeting on Tuesday whether "Gujarat would be repeated elsewhere" Vajpayee countered: "Would Godhra be repeated?"

On Sunday, as the Gujarat results began coming in, BJP president M Venkaiah Naidu had said "there is no need for the BJP to be apologetic about Hindutva".

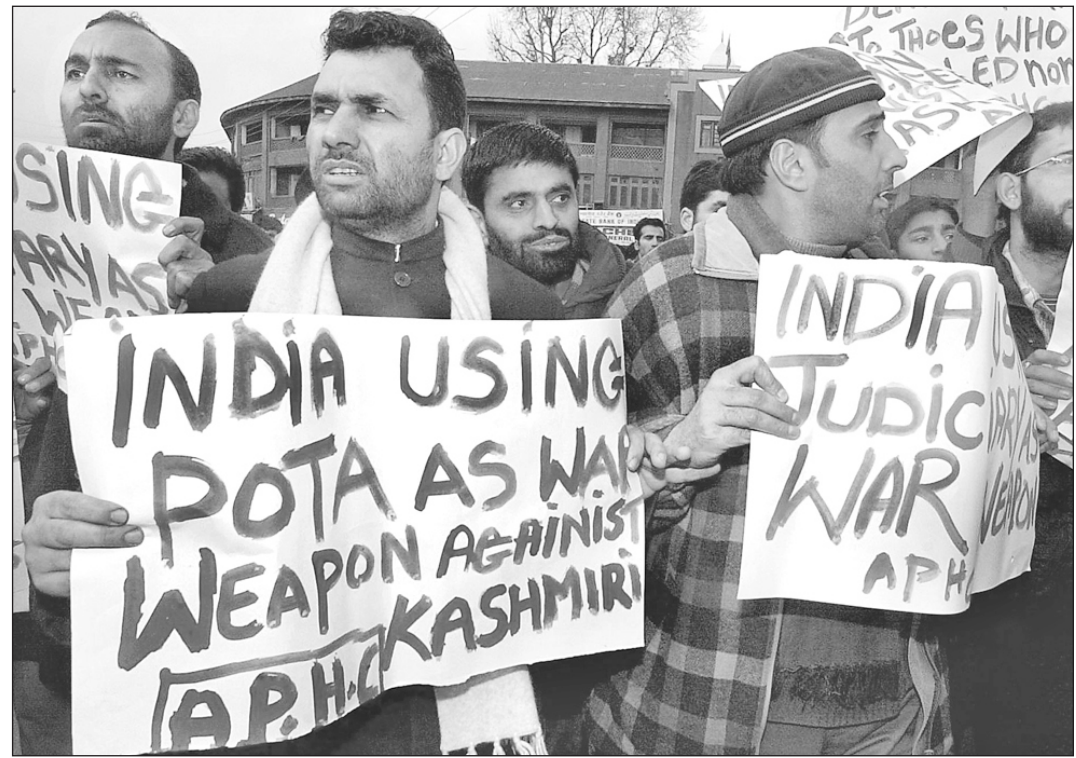


PHOTO: AFP

Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) vice chairman Javed Mir (2nd from L) shouts slogans along with supporters during a demonstration in Srinagar on Thursday. Scores of protestors were arrested in the Kashmir summer capital Srinagar as they were protesting the death sentence to three Kashmiris by a court in New Delhi. The three were sentenced to death by a special court in New Delhi on December 18 after it found them guilty of helping five militants prepare for the December 13, 2001 attack on India's parliament.

Modern men prefer skinny women

AFP, Paris

Men's taste in women has changed dramatically over the last half-century, shifting away from girls with curves and big breasts and towards rivals who are androgynous and skinny, a study says.

The assertion comes from two psychoanalysts who pored over every "Playboy" from December 1953 onwards -- probably one of the most coveted jobs ever allotted in scientific research -- and calculated the body mass index of every centrefold.

Over 577 issues, the models became taller and their waists increased, while their hips became narrower and their bust became smaller.

If "Playboy" is any guide, the needle on the male sexual compass has switched from Marilyn Monroe to Eva Herzigova, the scientists say.

The body of evidence is a slap to evolutionary biologists who contend that men have always preferred women with big curves because of the association of breasts and hips with health and fertility.

The evolutionists' argument is that males are attracted to women who offer the best prospect for passing on their genes.

"These temporal trends are at odds with claims that centrefolds' body shapes are still more 'hour-glasses' than 'stick insects' and that the maximally sexually attractive female waist:hip ratio is stable," the authors of the new study say.

The research, conducted by Martin Voracek of the University of Vienna Medical School and Maryanne Fisher of York University, Toronto, is published in next Saturday's British Medical Journal (BMJ).

Pak cinema owners struggling to survive

AFP, Peshawar

Cinema owners in northwest Pakistan are struggling to survive as a new Islamist provincial government pushes ahead with a campaign to remove sex -- or any hint of sex -- from the screen. In Peshawar, the capital of North West Frontier Province (NWFP), almost all theatres obeyed a Wednesday police deadline to take down "vulgar and obscene" advertisements, part of a larger crackdown that includes shuttering moviehouses showing explicit films.

Cinemas took the hint and removed all billboards picturing actresses. Most of the new advertisements simply give the name of the current film offerings or, for a few pushing the envelope, kept up only those posters that showed no women.

From a business perspective, the impact has been devastating.

"Only 60 people came all day," said Murad, a ticket seller at the Capital cinema. "There were 150 people a day before the ban."

"We've obeyed the orders, but this could force cinema houses to close down in a short span of time," said Sanobar (eds: one name), a cinema owner.

"The majority of our filmgoers are illiterate and they used to come here after looking at the signboards and posters outside the cinema."

Shafi Khan, the Capital cinema's manager, pointed to his empty screening hall: "Look how many people there are."

"Nobody is coming. The cinema looks just like a house or some other building," Khan said.

"The entire film and cinema industry could face collapse," said another cinema owner, Rab Nawaz.

NWFP saw a dramatic takeover in October 10 elections by the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), an alliance of Islamic parties that includes supporters of Afghanistan's ousted Taliban.

The MMA campaigned on promises to enforce Islamic Sharia law and in support of the withdrawal of US forces based in Pakistan in the campaign against international terrorism.

Hindutva halts Congress' winning streak

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

For India's main opposition Congress Party headed by Sonia Gandhi, the defeat in Gujarat assembly polls has ended a streak of electoral success in similar exercises in several states since 1998.

Ever since BJP grabbed power at the Centre in 1998, Congress has been voted to power in 15 states, three of them as coalition partners. But the Congress' winning run has been halted in Gujarat.

While the setback in Gujarat was perhaps not entirely unexpected for Congress, what has come as a shock for the party is the scale of defeat.

Congress Working Committee, the highest policy-making forum of the party, is yet to undertake any formal introspection about the result in Gujarat, but the top leadership is already busy making informal analysis of the reasons for it.

Immediately after Gujarat results were announced last Sunday, the party officially ascribed its defeat to a "silent wave of Hindutva" which stream-rolled every other factor. This was how Congress general secretary Kamal Nath assessed it. The Congress did make some

gains from BJP in Saurashtra region of Gujarat but that was not enough to stop the victory of BJP which made almost a clean sweep in other parts of the state which were considered Congress strong-holds.

A section of the Congress privately admits that the party might have erred in not responding aggressively to BJP's use of Hindutva agenda in Gujarat. The party, the section feels, should have taken heed on BJP's agenda.

Sonia Gandhi kicked off her electioneering in Gujarat after offering prayers at a temple in Gujarat, and Congress failed to counter BJP's projection of terrorism issue by citing that BJP governments at the Centre and in Gujarat "failed" to effectively tackle the problem, party sources said.

Questions are also being raised in some quarters in Congress whether it was politically correct to induct Shankersingh Vaghela, a former BJP chief minister of Gujarat and RSS man, into the party and make him in charge of the party's Gujarat unit to lead it in the election.

However, when Vaghela was brought into the Congress in June this year, the party leadership had argued that he was the best person to lead Congress in Gujarat

because he would know the inside out of BJP strategy.

But what has worried Congress more than Gujarat result is its defeat in three by-elections in the party-ruled state of Rajasthan. Here too, the BJP was the beneficiary.

The Rajasthan by-election result is particularly worrying for Congress as it faces fresh assembly elections in ten states next year and in seven of them the party is in power. It will be a different kind of challenge for Congress in the coming months. So far, the party has been used to battle it out as the opposition party in most cases but now it will have to fight anti-incumbency factor.

The question in Congress circles is that: can the party go on depending on anti-incumbency factor to win or does it need to come out with a positive plank to woo those disenchanted with BJP and ward off the anti-incumbency wind in states where the party is in power?

Meanwhile, the Gujarat election outcome is not going to impact on BJP's ties with its federal level allies, which do not share the party's core ideology. In fact, the allies are quietly happy that Congress' streak of electoral victory has come to an end in Gujarat.

S Koreans vote after ruling alliance splits

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korea voted to choose a new president Thursday with the main opposition candidate enjoying a late boost in an election that has become a referendum on how to handle its unpredictable communist neighbour to the north.

Governing party candidate Roh Moo-hyun and his older and more hawkish conservative rival, Lee Hoi-chang, were neck and neck after a campaign dominated by North Korea's nuclear weapons program and the status of U.S. forces in the South.

But South Korea's popular soccer chief caused a late flutter by withdrawing his support from Roh, the flag bearer for the Millennium Democratic Party of outgoing President Kim Dae-jung and his "sunshine policy" of engagement with the North.

Chung Mong-joon, a vice-president of world soccer body FIFA, issued a statement Wednesday suggesting Roh had advocated greater neutrality and a stepping back from an alliance dating back to the Korean War in the 1950s. "The United States is our ally,"

said Chung, a son of the founder of the Hyundai conglomerate and a man tipped as a possible presidential contender in the next election in 2007.

Roh, who has tapped into anti-American protests that snowballed after a U.S. military vehicle ran over and killed two schoolgirls, said Wednesday South Korea could intervene to stop any conflict between the United States and the North.

"I do not understand why it suddenly became a problem a few hours before the election is beginning," he told a news conference Thursday, adding that he had said nothing new.

Many Roh supporters have called for a withdrawal of the 37,000 U.S. troops helping protect the South and Roh himself has made ambivalent statements about the troops in the past.

Washington says the North has admitted resuming a nuclear weapons program. U.S. intelligence experts say the North may already have two nuclear bombs.

Roh, 56, favours engagement with the North, saying it can be weaned from its militaristic tendencies with economic exchanges.

South Korea to vote for president

Relations with hostile northern neighbour set to dominate ballot December 19

Roh Moo-Hyun
Millennium Democratic Party candidate

Lee Hoi-Chang
Grand National Party candidate

Key campaign issues

- Tensions with North Korea
- Relations with the US
- Role of government in the economy
- Moving administrative capital from Seoul to Daejeon

Election Day

- Eligible voters: 34,990,000 (approx.)
- Expected turnout: 80 percent (est.)
- Polling stations: 13,471

Republic of Korea

- Population: 47.7 million (2001)
- Language: Korean
- Religion: Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, shamanism
- Political system: Presidential republic
- GDP growth: 5.7 percent (forecast)
- Economy: World's 12th largest by GDP
- Industry: Electronics, shipbuilding, steel, machinery
- Military: 686,000 active troops (4,500,000 reserves)
- US military: 37,140 troops

Land area: 99,391 km²

Source: AFP/GoVt/Military Balance
All figures 2002 unless indicated
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