

# Moro rebels attack town: 22 killed, 13 kidnapped

REUTERS, Zamboanga

At least 22 people were killed in the southern Philippines yesterday as security forces fought a band of about 70 suspected Moro guerrillas who stormed a remote town, officials said.

The military was able to recover most of the 13 civilians taken hostage by the secessionists in an early Sunday morning raid, including the town mayor's wife and son.

Initial reports indicated at least 20 were kidnapped, but the number was later revised down to 13.

Fleeing pursuing troops, the rebels withdrew into the forest taking four captives with them, officials said.

Lieutenant General Daniel Lucero, chief public information officer of the Armed Forces of the

Philippines, said the town of Sococo on Mindanao island, about 500 miles south of Manila, was now under the control of government forces.

Lucero told reporters in Manila there were eight soldiers and 15 civilians wounded. Two soldiers, six policemen, eight civilians and six guerrillas were among the 22 killed.

"There were many civilian casualties because it was the time of the fiesta," a senior military official who asked not to be named told reporters in the southern city of Zamboanga.

The rebels attacked a town hall, a public market and a hospital around 2 a.m. local time on Sunday.

Lucero said the office of the mayor was hit by a rocket-

propelled grenade; the public market was partially damaged; and three houses were torched in the attack.

"Every one of us ducked while bullets were fired everywhere. Then suddenly, a mortar landed near where we were hiding. It hit us including my poor grandson," said 67-year-old Herminihilda Cudoy, as she soothed the boy, grimacing in pain.

Cudoy and her one-year-old grandson were airlifted by a military helicopter to a hospital in Zamboanga for treatment.

The military said it believed the guerrillas included men from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the biggest of several Muslim rebel groups in the south; the Abu Sayyaf which is listed as a foreign terrorist group by

Washington with suspected links to the al Qaeda network; and some other renegades.

The Abu Sayyaf claims to be fighting for a separate Islamic state in the south of the largely Roman Catholic country, but pursues kidnap-for-ransom as its main activity.

Despite efforts to start peace talks with the MILF, clashes between the rebels and the soldiers have intensified since troops overran a key guerrilla stronghold in February.

The MILF has been implicated by police and the military in an April 2 attack in Davao city that killed 16 people and a bombing at the city's airport a month earlier that killed 22 people. The rebels denied involvement.

## Housewife strangled at Badda

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

A housewife was strangled at her Badda residence on Saturday night.

Police believe Fulmala Begum was killed by her husband who fled home after the incident.

The owner of the house found the 35-year-old woman lying on the floor at around 11:00pm, as she went there to see her.

Police said a towel was thrust deep in her mouth for killing and her throat bore injuries.

Police recovered the body the same night and sent it to Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) for an autopsy yesterday.

The body was kept at the DMCH morgue, as no-one turned up to receive it. A murder case was filed with Badda Police Station.

Early yesterday, a trader died unnaturally at Khilkhet.

Relatives took Monjurul Ahsan Barkat, 45, to the DMCH at 2:45am and left immediately after doctors declared him dead. The inquest report recorded bloodstain in his nose.

Police quoted the brother-in-law of Barkat as saying he was rushed to hospital after he fell sick.

An unnatural death case was filed with Badda police.

# Armitage to 'nurture hopes' of an Indo-Pak dialogue

AFP, Washington

Senior US envoy Richard Armitage heads to South Asia today for 'nurturing hopes' of dialogue between India and Pakistan.

Deputy Secretary of State Armitage will visit New Delhi, Kabul and Afghanistan between May 5 and 11, on a mission also designed to further the US anti-terrorism campaign and highlight Washington's commitment to Afghanistan.

Unlike previous US missions to South Asia, including those by Armitage, Secretary of State Colin Powell and other senior officials, Armitage's sojourn begins at a time of rare optimism in India-Pakistan relations.

In a surprising move, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said Friday that New Delhi would restore civil aviation and diplomatic links with Pakistan, which were severed as tensions boiled dangerously close to war 17 months ago.

Pakistan welcomed the move as "a gesture of hope," resolved to return the favour and its Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali invited Vajpayee to hold talks.

The developments delighted the United States, which has in recent years mounted desperate measures to head off the prospect of a disastrous war between two nuclear-armed rivals on hair trigger alert.

"I am very pleased with developments on the subcontinent over the last several weeks," Powell said at a press conference during a brief

visit to Albania on Friday.

"All this is very, very promising at a time when people were beginning to wonder whether or not they were going back to the potential for conflict," Powell said.

The United States has been applying firm pressure for months to bring India and Pakistan back to the brink of confrontation and is now happy to see action from the parties.

"Prime Minister Vajpayee has shown extra statesmanship in taking these bold steps, and we applaud India and Pakistan for continuing to move forward away from confrontation," said State Department deputy spokesman Philip Reeker.

Powell has been burning up the telephone lines in frequent calls to his counterparts in the two countries and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

The United States is in a unique position to intervene between the two rivals as both prize their relationship with Washington as the centerpiece of their foreign policy.

Pakistan emerged as a key US ally after the September 11, 2001 attacks and sided with Washington as it routed the Taliban and its guest-al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

It is basking in President George W Bush's latest volley of praise, after its authorities snared prominent al-Qaeda suspects in Karachi last week.

India, which sees itself as a natural US ally through its common democratic heritage with Washington, has been developing

a close economic and hi-tech relationship with US companies, and its diaspora is emerging is gaining influence in domestic US politics.

But though tensions seem to have dimmed in South Asia, the core issue remains unresolved -- the fate of the Muslim-majority Himalayan state of Kashmir, split between Pakistan and India and claimed in full by both.

During a visit to Pakistan last June, Armitage secured a promise from Musharraf to halt infiltrations of Islamic rebels across the Line of Control from the Pakistani zone into the Indian zone to fight Indian rule.

The pledge was pivotal in cooling tensions and ultimately led to both sides withdrawing troops from their international border.

India accuses Musharraf of breaking that pledge, alleging infiltration resumed after a brief lull. Pakistan says it is powerless to completely halt all infiltration, and says India's estimated 700,000 troops in Kashmir should prevent the rebels coming in.

Another senior State Department official Richard Haass said last month that Washington was "disappointed" and "frustrated" that infiltration had not ceased.

Armitage will start his South Asian diplomacy in Europe, holding a meeting in London with Indian National Security Advisor Brajesh Mishra, as he heads on to Washington for his own high level visit.

## BNP leader murder in Chandpur: One arrested

BSS, Chandpur

Police yesterday arrested one Mohammad Siddique in connection with the killing of BNP vice-president of Kachua upazila Delwar Hossain.

Local officials told BSS over telephone that Delwar Hossain was killed in front of his house while returning home from a local bazaar Saturday night. The miscreants attacked the BNP leader with sharp weapons and dumped his body in a nearby ditch after killing him.

People came to know about the murder after his wife found his bloodstained sandals.

Meanwhile, the local member of Parliament and State Minister for Education Ehsanul Huq Milon visited the place of occurrence and directed the authorities to find and give exemplary punishment to those responsible for the murder.

## 3 murdered

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village Mithakhali within upazila Mathbaria under Pirozpur district was shot to death by dacoits around midnight Saturday.

Sensitizing dacoits in the house, Hemayet woke up and tried to resist. He was shot at a close range and died on the spot.

Three separate cases have been lodged.

## Potato

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"But we have successfully developed it. We dry the potatoes sufficiently after harvest, we use net bags instead of gunny bags for packaging and stack them inside the containers leaving room for ventilation."

Sheikh Abdul Kader, proprietor of Agri-Concern, said after exporting 100 tonnes in 2001 and 2002 together, his company has set a target of 300 tonnes for 2003.

The exporters noted that unlike other vegetables, potato has some added advantage. Instead of air lifting, potatoes can be sent by ship, which keeps freight charge low.

## Funding

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from over 14 donors including the WB, the European Commission, the government of the Netherlands, the Swedish International Development Corporation Agency and the UK Department for International Development.

Designed on extensive consultations between the government, the civil society and development partners, the HPSB has succeeded in increasing the annual health budget to essential services and has enabled the health ministry to assume direct responsibility for management of health budget.

However, the programme also envisaged unification of the health and family planning wings of the health and family welfare ministry, decentralisation of management to district and upazila levels, hospital autonomy, adoption of a pro-poor health agenda, development of a national essential drugs strategy and development of health insurance, among others.

Only limited progress has been made on the reforms agreed upon, and unification has now been reversed, says the press release.

Without an alternative, Bangladesh will not achieve sustained improvement in family planning and population control, nor will it ensure any significant improvement in the health of women and the poor.

## Gas: Roundtable

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Salek Sufi said presently the country is consuming 1,220 million cubic feet per day (mmcf/d) gas against a similar production level. And the demand is rising sharply as there are new gas-based power plants and industries in the pipeline, which would need committed gas supplies for at least the next 20 years.

International oil companies were reluctant to invest further as they wanted a committed gas market, while the government had not invested here on the ground that there were fund shortages, Sufi added.

Former secretary Azim Uddin Ahmed, Badrul Imam, professor of geology, Prof Nurul Islam, USAID Energy Adviser Bruce McMullen, businessman Abdul Matlub Ahmed, Jatiya Party leader GM Kader and others also addressed the roundtable.

## PM: Navy

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government's plan to procure hydrographic-oceanographic survey and research vessel considering the steadily growing working area of the naval force.

She said steps have also been taken to build warships at the country's own shipyard.

Describing various steps and training courses for the naval force, the prime minister hoped that the navy would carry out its duty more sincerely in ensuring security in sea, stopping arms smuggling, preventing sea pollution and protecting sea resources.

She thanked the UK government and the British Royal Navy for their continuing assistance and cooperation in development and modernisation of Bangladesh Navy.

## Suicide

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Abdus Satter, 40, son of Nakib Mondal of Dharampur village under Mohadevpur upazila in Naogaon district, was yesterday rushed to the RMCH in an unconscious state where he died.

Four separate cases of unnatural death were filed with Rajpara police.

## Donors

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float exchange rate to make it market oriented. On the other hand, the WB has handed a nationalised commercial bank (NCB) reform matrix to the government.

According to this matrix, the government will have to privatise one of the four NCBs and transfer management of another to private hands by 2003. By 2004, another NCB will have to be privatised and another's management changed. Simultaneously, the banks will have to go for a 30 per cent retrenchment.

A code of conduct will have to be formulated for government officials and members of the parliament.

The government looks to be in a comfortable position regarding the conditions as it has already agreed to implement them. An understanding in this regard was achieved during the wrap-up meeting with the IMF last month. The government may formally write the IMF about its intentions to execute the reforms.

## China cancels trade fair for SARS fear

AFP, Beijing

The continuing outbreak of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in China Sunday forced authorities to cancel an international trade fair due to be held in the south-western province of Sichuan, state news reported.

West China's fourth international trade fair was due to be held in the city of Chengdu from May 25 to 28, according to Xinhua news agency. It has been postponed until September.

Organiser and vice-governor of Sichuan province, Huang Xiaoxiang, said Sunday the decision was made based on medical advice, Xinhua said. He said the postponement was necessary and appropriate.

More than 1,000 people from some 20 countries were expected to attend the fair.

Meanwhile, in another initiative aimed at boosting trade, China's Ministry of Commerce issued a circular Sunday urging local authorities to assist foreign-funded firms fight SARS.

## SARS

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Referring to the dengue outbreak in the country in 1999-2000, Professor Quazi Quamruzzaman, chairman of the DCH Trust said, "When dengue first appeared in the country we took it very casually. In fact, health officials initially ignored it. But eventually we experienced one of the worst outbreaks of dengue."

"SARS is even more threatening as it is an airborne disease. So it is time we prepared ourselves well in advance to interrupt any suspected case promptly, not only at Zia International Airport but at all entry points," added Prof Zaman.

Professor Mahmudur Rahman, coordinator of DCH, said, "We should prepare an official protocol for case management of SARS. All doctors, nurses and paramedics should know how to diagnose SARS and treat it."

"According to experts, the virus is a corona virus and is not found in nature. So the question arises whether any country had been developing it for bio-terrorism purposes," said Farhad Mazhar, managing director of UBINIG.

Farida Akhter, executive director of UBINIG, Prof. Mamunur Rashid of Institute of Public Health and Nutrition and others also took part in the hour-long discussion.

## Indian panel to study river systems ahead of plan to link waterways

AFP, New Delhi

A government panel tasked with assessing an ambitious multi-billion dollar scheme to interlink India's rivers to reduce water shortages said yesterday it would soon start examining the country's waterways.

The eight-member panel headed by former power minister Suresh Prabhu also decided to hold talks with all states that suffer either from drought or flooding, and study selected river systems to prepare a detailed project report, the Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency reported.

"The main objective of the programme is to ensure the country against water stress and create a greener India," said a statement released by the panel and quoted by PTI.

The river linkage would happen only after an examination of the project's ecological and financial viability, the statement said.

The panel was set up by the government last year after a drought hit many states.

According to India's Ministry of Water Resources, the project report is expected to be completed by 2006, with the linkage possibly finished by 2016.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee last month warned that water was likely to become very expensive in the future in the absence of conservation efforts.

"Conservation of water was so essential that if steps were not taken to do so now the day was not far off when people would fight over it," he said.

## Lynching

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sengers and crew of a Chapainawabganj-bound night coach.

On the same night robbers put up barricade at Daudkandi bazaar and looted several shops and a bank at Comilla.

On April 29, robbers looted a branch of Grameen Bank and killed two night guards at Kosba in Brahmanbaria.

On April 17, a villager was killed in a gunfight between two groups of dacoits at Gouripur upazila in Mymensingh.

A villager was killed and 25 others were injured when a gang of 40 dacoits attacked houses in Talabo of Kachina, Bhaluka in Mymensingh on April 8.

# HC: Judges' non-appointment

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constituted a larger bench with three members -- justices Hamidul Haque, Syed Amirul Islam and MM Ruhul Amin. The bench heard the petitions yesterday.

On behalf of a petitioner, Dr Kamal Hossain cited examples of India and Pakistan where judges were appointed on the basis of the chief justice's recommendations as a constitutional convention. He read out verdicts of different cases of the countries relating to appointment and confirmation of judges.

Ignoring the chief justice's recommendations is tantamount to disgracing the Supreme Court, he argued, adding, if it was allowed, the independence of the judiciary would cease to exist.

It also contradicts the eighth amendment to the constitution that says 'independence of the judiciary is the fundamental pillar of the constitution'.

Referring to the Appellate Division verdict on the Masdar Hossain Case of 1999, Dr Kamal argued that the independence could not be compromised by any kind of contrary practice.

An additional judge is to satisfy

the chief justice through performing his functions for becoming a judge. He does not require satisfying some 'invisible forces' outside the judiciary to get his job confirmed, he said.

Defending the government, Attorney General AF Hasan Arif said as per the fourth amendment to the constitution, the government is not bound to consult the chief justice over appointment of judges.

None other than the president and the chief justice really knew about the recommendations of the chief justice for confirmation of service, he argued.

On behalf of other petitioners, advocates Azmalul Hossain and Idrisur Rahman also presented their arguments.

Dr Kamal was assisted by Barrister Tanjibul Alam, while the attorney general was aided by additional attorneys general Mohammad Ali, Fida M Kamal and Abdur Razzak Khan.

Discontent brew in the judiciary over the appointments of judges when the government declined to confirm the service of six additional judges on February 20.

It is alleged that the chief justice recommended for confirmation of their service, but the government ignored the suggestions in a break with constitutional convention.

These judges were appointed for two years at the fag end of the past Awami League government.

## Vajpayee

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pipeline from Iran passing through Pakistan on security grounds.

Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry estimates a huge potential of India-Pakistan bilateral trade. Indo-Pak official trade in 2001-2 stood at 204 million dollars and unofficially the figure is put five to six times more than that. India has granted Most Favoured Nation (MFN) status to Pakistan but Islamabad has not reciprocated.

India has indicated that resumption of bilateral dialogue will be easier if Pakistan takes concrete steps towards trade liberalisation under South Asian Preferential Trading Arrangement (SAPTA) and economic cooperation with India

# Power-clipped Petrobangla

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ing that being a government organisation and a statutory body, Petrobangla should be allowed to continue its assignments. The government should, in the fitness of things, rely on Petrobangla for data inputs, its assessment and evaluation without creating another organisation.

But since then the energy ministry went ahead with the project without seriously addressing the duplication and wastage issues.

"The main issue here is that the Hydrocarbon Unit is directly under the energy ministry, whereas Petrobangla has the powers to exercise autonomy," observed an official. "In recent years Petrobangla has become an eyesore of some oil companies, donors, policymakers and high officials because it often stands in their way."

The government undertook with NORAD a "Mid Term Review of Strengthening of the Hydrocarbon Unit" last year. The review found serious contradictory

issues in the Unit's Technical Assistance Project Proforma (TAPP) of 2000 and its work plan prepared later. The review report pointed out that the TAPP saw the Unit as a legal and regulatory entity while the work plan looked at it as a full-fledged functioning permanent body under the ministry.

Describing Petrobangla as the sole organisation to recommend actions related to PSCs, formulation of plans and processing of projects for approval by the ministry, the review says, "When the IOCs (international oil companies) describe Petrobangla as a competitor for the private sector, the companies do not properly give a picture of the real situation."

"If Petrobangla as a state-owned enterprise cannot perform the regulating and monitoring job with experienced officials and other back-up services available from the companies (nine companies owned by Petrobangla), how can a small unit within the government serve the purpose?"

In February, a meeting on "Mid

Term Evaluation Report of the Strengthening of the Hydrocarbon Unit Project", chaired by Energy Secretary (in-charge) Khandaker Shahidul Islam, admitted that there were confusions and ambiguity regarding the responsibilities of Petrobangla and the Hydrocarbon Unit.

The meeting added that while Petrobangla continued to negotiate PSCs on behalf of the government, the unit would offer views, comments and recommendations on approving the PSCs if instructed by the ministry.

In monitoring PSC activities, the unit would participate in the Joint Management Committee and Joint Review Committee, which are typically formed with representatives from the oil companies and Petrobangla-- signatories of the PSCs.

The unit would have a "mini data bank" that would have the sector's cultural, production and resource assessment data, whereas Petrobangla would be responsible for seismic and other related data.

# Sharon, Palestinian PM edge closer to talks

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel and the Palestinians edged closer to resuming peace talks Sunday, with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon saying he will head negotiations personally and Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas saying he was ready to meet the Israeli right-winger.

Israeli Labour leader Amram Mitzna meanwhile announced he was quitting his ailing leftist party's leadership, Israel media said.

In Ramallah, Abbas said in his first interview since being sworn into office last week he was ready to meet Sharon and crack down on illegal weapons, but insisted that Israel must lift its de facto siege on Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Meanwhile violence flared anew, with a 13-year-old Palestinian boy shot dead and six injured in the West Bank city of Nablus when Israeli forces opened fire on stone-throwing youths. Three other people were injured by Israeli fire in the Gaza Strip.

Sharon told ministers at a weekly cabinet meeting of his intention to personally head negotiations which are set to resume with a new US-led peace initiative, Israeli public radio said.

The radio added that a meeting was imminent between Sharon and Abbas, whom Israel sees as a pragmatic moderate ready to demilitarise the bloody Palestinian intifada.

Abbas' new security chief,

Mohammed Dahlan, has already initiated contacts to enable the two leaders to meet, Palestinian sources said.

Sharon met Sunday with Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz at the weekly cabinet session to discuss security issues with the Palestinians.

The move toward resuming talks, which broke down around 18 months ago amid rising violence, came as US Middle East envoy William Burns arrived in Israel to meet officials from both Israel and the Palestinian administration ahead of a visit by US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

Powell is making visits to the region for a new peace push after the Iraq war.

## Cop murder

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time of interrogation.

Another report says that local people caught an extremist of an outlawed party and handed him over to the police at Singati village on the same day.

Mithu Mollah, 25, was caught red-handed while trying to extort Tk 50,000 from one Satyaranjan Banerjee.

Police later recovered a motorbike and a toy pistol from his possession. A case was filed.

# Dhaka for UN role

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said Bangladesh could join the rebuilding of Iraq under an international arrangement and the UN.

Asked about the disagreement of the global powers on the issue, he said, "It's a very complex and evolving situation... It's an unusual scene... It will take time for the situation to crystallise."