

Moro rebels announce truce plan

AFP, Zamboanga

Moro separatists killed five civilians Thursday in raids on three southern Philippines villages, one day after announcing plans for a limited-duration ceasefire, the military said.

About 50 Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebels set fire to 10 houses and shot dead five residents in three villages near Carmen town at dawn, regional military spokesman Major Julio Ando said.

The guerrillas turned on the civilians after three nearby military detachments fought off simultaneous MILF raids, he told reporters.

No casualties were reported on both sides during the fighting. MILF spokesmen were unavailable for comment.

The raids came a day after the 12,500-member guerrilla group declared a 10-day unilateral ceasefire from next week to give peace talks a chance to resume in the troubled south.

Vajpayee deplores double standards on terror

PTI, Berlin

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has deprecated the "double standards" adopted by countries to deal with terrorism in different places and urged India's "friends and partners" to bring their influence on Pakistan to end cross-border terrorism and dismantle the infrastructure of support to it.

He said countries should not negotiate with terrorism or differentiate between its various constituent elements.

Without referring to any country by name, he told German Parliamentarians at a meeting here on Wednesday night that India has suffered both from terrorism and from the consequences of the double standards applied by countries to deal with terrorism in different places.

"But, even while we continue to

deal with our specific problem of cross-border terrorism, I have extended a hand of friendship to Pakistan in the hope that it may initiate a process leading to peace, friendship and cooperation between our two countries.

"I hope my political initiative will inspire action to end cross-border terrorism and to dismantle the infrastructure of support to it. We encourage our friends and partners also to bring to bear their influence to make this happen," he told the German MPs.

Vajpayee said history has shown time and again that democratic societies were those, which seek peace, protect freedoms, permit dissent and value consensus.

"These are precisely the attributes which make such societies the main targets of international terrorism. September 11 and its aftermath taught us two principal lessons. One is that the global reach

of terrorism requires a global and comprehensive effort to counter it.

"The second is that we cannot, and should not, negotiate with terrorism or differentiate between its various constituent elements. As partners in the international coalition against terrorism, India and Germany should recognise that our success against terrorism will depend on how well we have learnt this lesson," he said.

Apparently referring to the recent Iraq war, the Prime Minister said recent global developments have yet again emphasised the importance of evolving a cooperative multi-polar world order, which would promote the ethic of pluralism and consensus, protecting the legitimate interests and aspirations of its constituent elements.

"We are happy that the United Nations Security Council has reached the unanimous agreement on the manner of moving forward

in Iraq, with an important role for UN and its organisations. I believe that the recent events have again underlined that the United Nations and its organisations need to be made more reflective of modern political realities. Both India and Germany have definite views on this and legitimate interests," he said.

Referring to the significance of Parliamentary Democracy, Vajpayee said India and Germany are pluralist secular democracies. The evolution of parliamentary democracy in India is a fascinating story. It was less than six decades ago that India achieved independence and many doubted at that time that a democracy based on adult franchise could succeed or survive in a poor country with high literacy, where most people had never voted before.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami (R) meets with Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khursheed Mehmood Kasuri in Tehran on Thursday. The second session of the four-day meeting of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) is taking place in Tehran. The OIC, based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, has repeatedly called on the US-led forces that overthrew Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein to leave Iraq as soon as possible.



PHOTO: AFP

Sir Edmund Hillary (2nd from L) is introduced at the inauguration ceremony of symposium on Mountaineering and Development while Crown Prince Paras (far R) claps in Kathmandu on Thursday during the Mt Everest golden jubilee celebrations. Sir Edmund Hillary, the beekeeper from New Zealand who conquered the 8,848-meter (29,002-foot) peak with the late Tenzing Norgay Sherpa on May 29, 1953 after the failure of at least 10 earlier expeditions, is the guest of honour.

Hillary feted on 50 years of Everest conquest

AFP, Kathmandu

Year-long Golden Jubilee celebrations marking the conquest of Mount Everest were climaxing Thursday with street festivals, music and processions around the Nepalese capital.

Organisers expect between 400 and 500 of the more than 1,300 climbers who have reached the highest point of the planet to attend the festivities, which Nepal is hoping will shake off the effects of a seven-year Maoist insurgency that has scared away tourists.

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He was presented a medal Thursday at a ceremony in a luxury hotel by Nepal's Crown Prince Paras, who also handed out decorations to Junko Tabei of Japan, the

first woman to conquer Everest, and Reinhold Messner of Italy, the first to climb the peak without bottled oxygen.

Tenzing was represented by his son Jamling Norgay who, following in the giant footsteps of his famous father, himself summited in 1996.

Nepal also marked the occasion by unveiling a special stamp showcasing Everest's first ascent.

But one day before the anniversary, celebrations were marred when a helicopter carrying porters to Everest Base Camp crashed 100 meters (yards) from its landing point, killing two Nepalese onboard and injuring seven others, including a German woman who was trekking below.

And while the Nepalese government secured a ceasefire in January with Maoist rebels, ensuring that the guerrillas would desist from disrupting the festivities, political parties opposed to Prime Minister Lokendra Bahadur Chand have taken advantage of the media spotlight to press their demands.

Lanka seeks urgent help for flood-hit children

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka is seeking urgent help to provide books, clothing and basic stationery for thousands of children who had lost their homes in recent floods, officials said Thursday.

The Social Services Ministry said it was looking for at least 3,000 foster parents to help children in dire economic circumstances in the flood-affected southern and south-central regions of the island.

"A foster parent needs to pay only 9,000 rupees (92 dollars) to ensure a steady monthly stipend to take care of the basic needs of a child," a spokeswoman for the ministry said.

She said clothing was an urgent need as many of the victims had only what they were wearing at the time when their homes and belongings were washed away.

A major relief operation is underway in Sri Lanka with international financial support, but more needed to be done as water levels slowly went down leaving a trail of destruction, officials said.

Indian army launches new anti-rebel drive in Kashmir: 17 killed

AFP, PTI, Srinagar

The Indian army killed 15 Kashmiri rebels Thursday when columns of troops poured into southern Kashmir, after a night of violence left a soldier and a civilian dead, officials said.

At least 15 militants were killed on Thursday in an encounter with security forces in Anantnag district in south Kashmir, defence sources here said.

The encounter began early Thursday morning following a tip off about presence of militants in Lacchipora village in Anantnag district, they said.

They said so far 15 militants, believed to be foreigners, have been killed and the encounter was still going on. The toll could go up as the exact number could not be ascertained yet since the operation was still continuing, the sources added.

The operation was launched overnight in Kashmir's southern Anantnag district after the Indian army received information about the movement of separatist rebels, an army officer told AFP.

He said firing began in the early morning in the village of Danav Kanimarg and the ensuing "fierce gunbattle" left three rebels dead.

"We are ascertaining the identity of the three," he said.

Troops have moved into the mountains of Pir Panjal range in the Damhal Hanjipora area of the district to arrest or eliminate militants hiding in the higher reaches, the officer said.

The Indian channel NDTV said more than a dozen rebels had died during the mountain battle. Army officials in Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar said they had no such reports but that information was still coming in from the ongoing clash.

It is up to India, Pakistan to carry forward ties: US

Washington 'encouraged' by Indo-Pak shift

PTI, Washington

The US is "encouraged" by recent peace initiatives between India and Pakistan and it is now up to the two neighbours to carry forward the relationship, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice said ahead of President George W Bush's visit to Evian in France, where Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee will also be present.

Asked by reporters on Wednesday about Bush's recent meetings with officials from the two countries, Rice said: "We are, in fact, encouraged by recent trends in the relationship between India and Pakistan. I think that everybody in the G-8 is encouraged by those recent trends. I do believe that the core here, the key here, is that is that India and Pakistan

themselves move the relationship forward.

"It is not something that can be moved forth by the will of the G-8. But, but I know that members of the G-8 are welcoming what is happening with the Indians and the Pakistanis," she said.

Vajpayee has been specially invited by French President Jacques Chirac for a "broader dialogue" on June one ahead of the G-8 summit in the French alpine town of Evian on the Franco-Swiss border.

The Prime Minister will also have meetings with various Heads of State and Government present there but Rice made it clear that there will be no "bilaterals" between Bush and Vajpayee.

Bush will hold one-to-one meetings only with Chinese

President Hu Jintao and Chirac, she said.

AFP adds: The United States is "encouraged" by a recent shift in ties between India and Pakistan that has seen the nuclear rivals come closer than ever to normalizing relations, a top US official said Wednesday.

"It's not that there isn't more to be done, there is more to be done," said Condoleezza Rice, US President George W. Bush's national security adviser, but "we're in fact encouraged by recent trends in the relationship."

Earlier, Islamabad named its first ambassador to New Delhi in 12 months, career diplomat and foreign ministry spokesman Aziz Ahmed Khan, a move that followed by a fortnight India's naming of its envoy to Pakistan.

Lankan PM asks Tigers to be 'more understanding'

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's prime minister warned Thursday that his country risked being relegated to the "backwaters of history" if peace talks failed and asked Tiger rebels to be "more understanding."

Ranil Wickremesinghe said the deadlock in Norwegian-backed peace talks between his administration and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) gave both parties a break to review their positions.

His remarks came as Norway tried to salvage the peace bid after the Tigers announced a boycott of peace negotiations on April 21, complaining that the government had failed to implement decisions taken at six rounds of talks.

The government, Norway and Japan are also trying to woo the Tigers to attend a major donors conference planned for next month in Tokyo.

Wickremesinghe said he could understand the frustrations of the

Tigers at the slow implementation of rehabilitation and reconstruction work in war-torn areas.

"Today we find ourselves in something of an impasse. What is being demanded is not what can be easily delivered," Wickremesinghe told a meeting of the Council for Asian Liberals and Democrats here.

"Frankly, the LTTE have to be a little more understanding of the issues involved. Demanding is one thing, delivering is never straightforward. As a responsible government we have to abide by the rules and laws of the land."

Wickremesinghe, a member of the majority Sinhalese community, came to power in December 2001 and revived the peace process which had been put on hold by the previous government.

The prime minister said the peace process had been moving forward at a steady pace over the past 16 months, but suddenly the government found itself with a discontented peace partner who wanted nothing more of talks.



PHOTO: AFP

Members of the women wing of Pakistan's Muslim League (N) hold torches during a rally in Rawalpindi on the fifth anniversary of Pakistan's nuclear test on Wednesday. Pakistan tests its nuclear bombs on 28 May, 1998 less than three weeks after its arch-rival India conducted similar tests.

Senegal recalls

India envoy after alleged killing

AFP, New Delhi

Senegal has recalled its ambassador to India after the envoy's son allegedly killed his driver, officials here said Thursday.

The decision was aimed at "not upsetting friendly ties" between the two countries, an Indian official said.

Senegal has been keen to build good relations with India, with President Abdoulaye Wade expected here on a state visit later this year, the official added.

Senegal's ambassador Ahmad El-Mansour Diop was the longest serving diplomat in India, having represented Dakar here for 17 years.

He was recalled after his son, Mansoor Ali, allegedly killed his Indian driver after a party Saturday.

Ali, 24, allegedly pushed the 32-year-old driver, Dilawar, during a fight over the car keys.

Dilawar fell and hit his head and was taken to hospital where he died of his injuries, police said.

A case of culpable homicide not amounting to murder was registered but Ali has not been arrested since he has diplomatic immunity, police said.

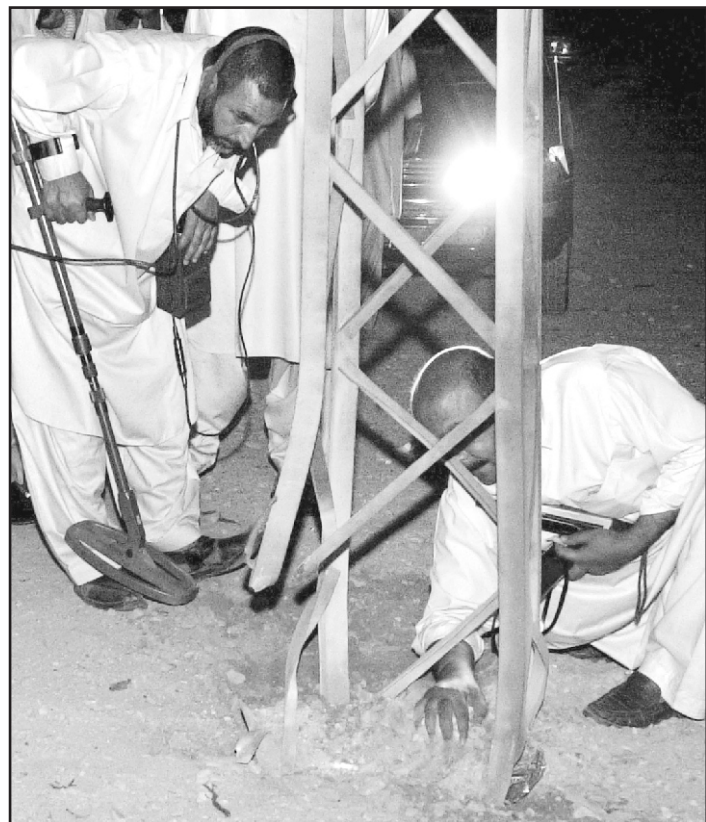


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani police and bomb disposal squad experts inspect a blast site near some high officials' residence in Quetta of Baluchistan province late Wednesday night. According to officials two time bombs were detonated near the chief minister's house and the other near the government officials' residence. No injury or casualty was reported.

'Sharia law in NWFP will nurture extremism'

AFP, Islamabad

The enforcement of Islamic Sharia law by headline Islamic parties in Pakistan's conservative northwest could spawn militancy, analysts say.

"They are sowing the seeds of tension between extremists and moderates," political commentator Hasan Askari said after the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal religious party alliance submitted a bill on enforcing Sharia in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP).

If the bill is approved by the Islamit-ruled assembly, Sharia would become the supreme law governing provincial courts, interest would be eliminated from banking, there would be new curbs on obscenity and vagrancy, and a Department of Vice and Virtue would police Islamic behaviour.

The rest of the bill and mainly outlines the formation of commissions to recommend reforms in education, the judiciary and economy "to bring them in line with Islamic principles."

The enshrining of Sharia law has most alarmed analysts, who fear it will be open to extremist interpretation and give legal cover to ultra-orthodox leaders to enforce harsh

Taliban-style rules.

"Hardline leaders who nurture militancy may use the 'supremacy' of Sharia to create an environment in which militant Islamic groups can flourish," Askari told AFP.

Pakistani and Western security agencies fear fugitive top Taliban commanders and al-Qaeda fighters are being harboured in the province, which shares a porous border with Afghanistan and where sympathies for the extremists and anti-US sentiments run high.

Askari said firebrand religious leaders, many of whom sent thousands of village youths into Afghanistan to fight the US-led military assault on the Taliban in late 2001, would feel legitimised in trying to impose their own brand of Islamic morality on society, he warned.

"This aura of self-righteousness... eventually leads to more conflict and greater confusion by turning non-issues into issues and leaving real issues like underdevelopment, lack of education in the background."

The NWFP assembly is examining a bill demanding that all women wear head to toe veils in public.

US troops wrap up biggest Asian war games

AFP, Bangkok

US troops wrapped up their biggest Asian war games of the year on Thursday after two weeks of manoeuvres with Thai and Singaporean forces in central Thailand, the US embassy said.

The Cobra Gold exercises involving 13,000 troops at the Utaapao naval base, 200 km south-east of the Thai capital, were inspired partly by the US-led conflict in Iraq, an embassy spokesman said.

"Our militaries understand that they must train and equip forces to defend their nations' security from a range of threats -- from large-scale conventional attacks to peace enforcement operations and other 'military operations other than war,'" Deputy Chief of Mission Ravic Huso told the closing ceremony.

"As we have seen recently in Iraq, commanders must be prepared to cope with complex situations involving civilians and non-governmental actors," he said.

Huso said the exercises, involving navy, army and air force units, had also focused on dealing with terrorist threats.

BJP leaders meet to chalk out strategy for Lok Sabha polls

PTI, Hyderabad

A crucial brainstorming session of BJP is being held on Thursday to chalk out the contours of political strategy for the coming round of assembly polls and also draw up an action plan for the next Lok Sabha elections.

"We are going to focus on measures to expand our social and political base," BJP president M Venkaiah Naidu said before the commencement of the two-day meeting being attended by party's state unit presidents, secretaries and national general secretaries. Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani will inaugurate the meeting and address the gathering.

This is the first time that BJP has convened a meeting of presidents and secretaries of state units.

The meeting would draw up plans to gear up the cadre for the forthcoming elections in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Delhi and Mizoram.

Besides firming up the issues to be highlighted during poll cam-

paign, the party leadership is expected to deliberate on strategies to achieve its goal of capturing 300 Lok Sabha seats in the Parliament elections, scheduled next year.

Asked about speculation that the central leadership would use the occasion to elicit views of the state units on the pros and cons of advancing parliament polls, Naidu said, "We do not have this on the agenda. This meeting is mainly to review political situation and formulate strategy for strengthening the organisation."

On the issue of future alliances, Naidu said the discussion on the nature of alliances would be done only at the time of elections.

Reiterating that his party had set for itself a target of capturing 300 Lok Sabha seats in the next Lok Sabha polls, Naidu said the meeting would formulate action plans to achieve the goal.

Meanwhile, party sources said the meeting would deliberate on campaign issues for the key states going to polls later this year.