

Bhutan ends crackdown on Indian insurgents

AFP, Samdrup Jhonkar

Bhutan's government said yesterday that the military offensive to expel Northeast insurgents had been completed, with soldiers now clearing the jungles to recover weapons left behind by the ultras.

"The military operation as such is over but soldiers of the Royal Bhutan Army are looking for arms and ammunition left behind by militants in three different pockets," Bhutanese Foreign Ministry spokesman Kinga Singye said from Thimphu.

The official said troops were carrying out search operations between Samdrup Jhonkar and Diapham, the Manas Game Sanctuary, and between the Sankosh river and Sarbang in the south of the Himalayan kingdom.

Singye, however, did not say if all the ultras belonging to ULFA, NDFB and KLO had left the country following the crackdown, which began on December 15.

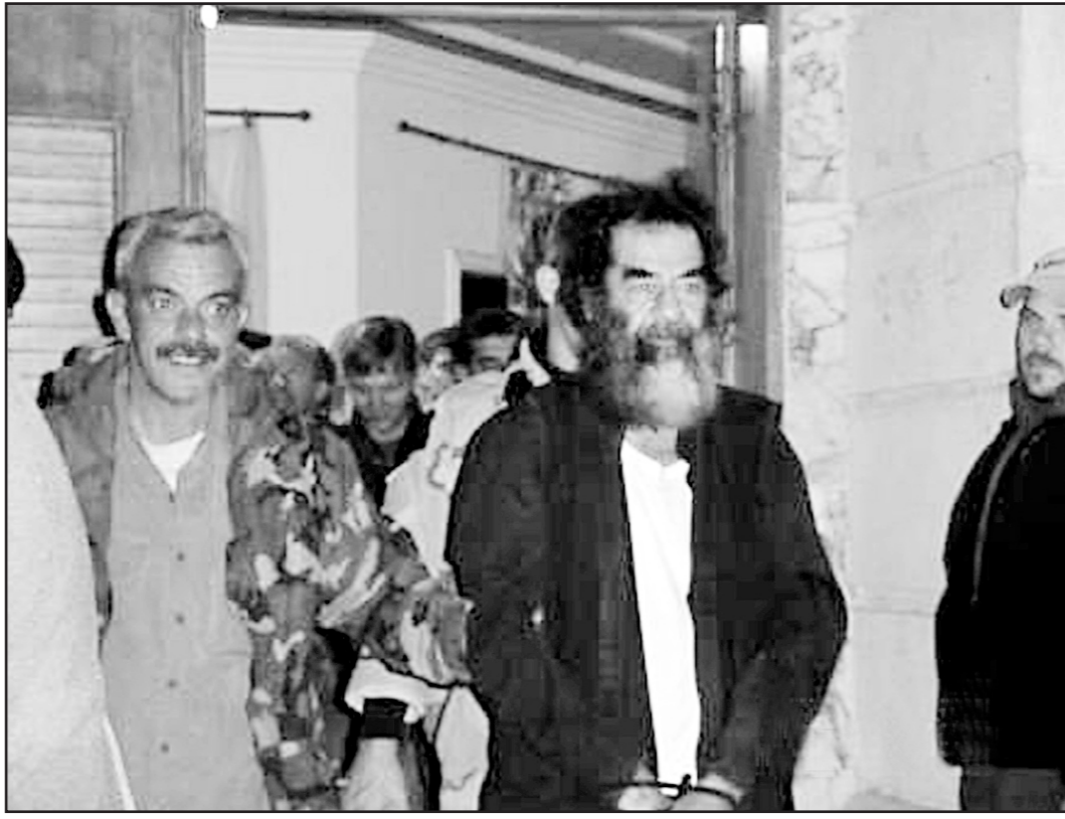


PHOTO: AFP

This unsorted picture allegedly shows Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein with his hands tied escorted by a member of an Iraqi security force at an unknown location in Iraq following his capture by US troops on December 13, 2003 from an underground hole at a farm in the village of ad-Dawr, near his hometown of Tikrit in northern Iraq. The picture is one of a series of images of the deposed dictator unauthorised for release by the US Army that has been circulating in recent days on the Internet.

Israel to resume targeted killings of Hamas leaders

Yassin tops hit list

AP, Jerusalem

Israel is set to resume targeted killings of top Hamas militants and leveled a blunt warning to the group's elderly spiritual leader that he tops the list of those to be hunted and put to death.

The threat comes after a Palestinian suicide attacker blew himself up this week at a crossing point between Israel and the Gaza Strip, killing four Israelis.

Deputy Defence Minister Zeev Boim said Hamas founder Sheikh Ahmed Yassin topped the list of those the military is stalking.

"Sheik Yassin is marked for death, and he should hide himself deep underground where he won't know the difference between day and night," Boim told Army Radio on Thursday night. "And we will

find him in the tunnels, and we will eliminate him."

Yassin already dodged one Israeli attempt to kill him in September. A warplane dropped a 550-pound bomb on a building where he and the rest of the top Hamas leadership were meeting in a single room, but Yassin escaped with just a small wound to his hand. After several other high-profile but ineffective attacks against Palestinian leaders in the summer, Israel scaled back its efforts in concert with a significant drop in Hamas bombings.

There was never evidence of even an unspoken agreement between the two enemies. Israel insisted that the downturn was attributable to its own security forces, claiming that they arrested as many as 30 potential suicide bombers.

For their part, Hamas leaders, though often in hiding to avoid Israeli strikes, kept up their militant pronouncements and rebuffed efforts by Palestinian Prime Minister Ahmed Qoreia and Egyptian mediators to declare a halt to attacks against Israelis.

The suicide bombing on Wednesday put an end to the "so-called quiet period," said the Israeli air force commander, Maj. Gen. Dan Halutz.

The attack at the Erez crossing was the first time the Islamic militant Hamas dispatched a woman suicide bomber. An Israeli security official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Yassin issued a religious edict permitting women to carry out bombings, something Hamas resisted in the past, and that Yassin personally approved the attack.

Halutz denied that the reduction in Israel's targeted killings was linked to a slowdown in Palestinian attacks.

"Since it is a preventive measure, it has nothing to do with the number of casualties that we have," he told a meeting Thursday of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs. Air force helicopters launching missiles have been used in most of the targeted killings, which Palestinians denounce as assassination of their leaders.

Without giving details, Halutz said the air force and military intelligence have developed "pin-point" methods to "hit only those who deserve it." However, dozens of bystanders have been killed in airstrikes in towns, cities and refugee camps.

US helped avert possible S Asian nuke war: Powell

ANI, Washington

Chances of India and Pakistan engaging themselves in an almost certain nuclear firefight in 2002 was averted by a cooperative trilateral axis involving the US, and some countries in Europe and Asia, claims Secretary of State Colin Powell.

"We have since been trying to turn our parallel improvement of relations with India and Pakistan into a triangle of conflict resolution."

"We do not impose ourselves as a mediator. But we do try to use the trust we have established with both sides to urge them toward conciliation by peaceful means."

"What the United States has done in South Asia is an example of turning adversity into opportunity," the Daily Times quotes Powell as saying in an article in the current issue of the Foreign Affairs.

He further goes on to say, "We

want to help India overcome these challenges and we want to help ourselves through a closer association with one of the world's venerable cultures. We have therefore worked to deepen our relationship with India."

Simultaneously every effort has also been made not to ignore Pakistan as it continues to be seen as a strategic ally of Washington, Powell adds.

Meanwhile, the United States on Thursday hailed the restoration of rail ties between nuclear rivals India and Pakistan, saying it was one of several positive steps to build a base for broader rapprochement.

The State Department said the resumption in train service between the countries, along with the decision this week to increase staff at their respective embassies, were "remarkable developments" and evidence of "political courage" by the leaders of both countries.

Three top commanders of Hizbul killed

AFP, Srinagar

Three top commanders of the hardline Kashmiri rebel group, Hizbul Mujahedin, have been killed in two separate clashes with Indian security forces, officials said yesterday.

The Indian army shot dead Ghulam Rasool Dar alias Gazi Naseer-u-din, the top commander of the region's dominant militant group Hizbul Mujahedin during an encounter at Zainakote, on the outskirts of summer capital Srinagar, an army spokesman said.

Dar was Hizbul's topmost commander in Kashmir after Pakistan-based supremo Syed Salahuddin.

He was active in the region for the last 14 years, and was heading the security force list of "most wanted" militants.

"Dar was killed along with Hizbul's financial chief Fayaz Ahmed during a 30-minute long

encounter," the spokesman said.

He had been evading security forces in the past, and is regarded as closer to Salahuddin.

The spokesman said the exchange of fire was continuing.

Earlier on Thursday another Muslim militant, Abbas Malik alias Abbas Rahi, died in a shootout with security forces on the outskirts of Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir, Tirtha Acharya, spokesman for India's Border Security Force, told AFP.

But Acharya said the body was only identified later as that of the pro-Pakistan group's second-in-command in Muslim-majority Kashmir valley.

Local media reports said security forces had arrested Malik and killed him in a "fake encounter." No comment was immediately available from Hizbul, which wants Indian Kashmir to be folded into nuclear rival Pakistan.

The latest violence came as the moderate wing of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference separatist group readied for unprecedented peace talks next week with New Delhi about ending the separatist revolt racking the Muslim-majority region since 1989 that has left tens of thousands dead.

Rebels and hardline separatists are opposed to the talks. Police said they found an AK-56 rifle, a mobile phone and 1.2 million rupees (26,400 dollars) at the scene of the clash with Malik.

In other violence, police said suspected militants shot dead two Muslims in two villages overnight near the town of Bandipora, 60 kilometers (37 miles) north of Srinagar. The motive for the killings were not known, police said.

Some dozen rebel groups are battling Indian rule in the Himalayan territory divided mainly between India and Pakistan and claimed in full by both.



PHOTO: AFP

South Korean activists Han Jae-Kak (L) and Lim Young-Sin (R) holds anti-US President George Bush pamphlet at the 2004 World Social Forum (WSF), in Mumbai yesterday. More than 78,000 people were registered to take part in the hundreds of panels and protests at the WSF, billed as an annual strategy session of civil society.

Animals play Sars role, says WHO

AP, Guangzhou

World Health Organisation investigators have found "very good evidence" to suggest that animals play a role in Sars, uncovering traces of the virus in the restaurant where a suspected patient worked and civet cats were served, the team's leader said yesterday.

But Dr. Robert Breiman also said that Sars should not be considered an immediate public health threat in China a reassurance pivotal in its timing, days before hundreds of millions of people begin traveling around the country for the Chinese New Year.

In samples from the Guangzhou restaurant that employed a 20-year-old waitress suspected to have Sars, "Tests revealed on each cage the Sars coronavirus," Breiman said.

"Not only were there civet cats there, but at some point civet cats that were carrying the Sars coronavirus," he said at a news conference. He said traces were also found on swabs taken from the city's largest live-animal market.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian President A.P. J. Abdul Kalam addresses students and faculty members of the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore yesterday. Kalam said the Project for Urban Amenities in Rural Areas, which aims to improve the quality of life for rural people in India's attempt to become a developed nation by 2020, could be replicated in other parts of the world.

Bush booed at Martin Luther King gravesite

REUTERS, Atlanta

In a sign of the difficulty President Bush faces as he tries to win black support for his reelection, several hundred protesters loudly booed him on Thursday as he laid a wreath at the grave of civil rights leader Martin Luther King.

"Bush go home" and "peace not war" the predominantly black crowd of protesters shouted from behind a barrier of buses, as Bush paid tribute to King on the 75th anniversary of his birth.

Bush wants to improve his standing among black voters this reelection year, after winning less than 10 percent of the African-American vote in 2000.

The president was accompanied by King's widow Coretta Scott King, and sister, Christine King Farris. He placed the wreath, bowed his head for a few moments, and departed without speaking or facing the protesters as the boos from the crowd increased.

The protesters carried signs with slogans like "Money for jobs and housing, not war" and "It's not a photo-op George."

A White House spokesman defended Bush's visit to the grave of the assassinated civil rights icon.

"This is about paying tribute to someone who had a tremendously positive influence in shaping the world that we live in today... it's a solemn moment, a nice way to honor Dr. King," spokesman Scott McClellan told reporters.

Bush was in Atlanta as part of a two-state swing during which he also raised \$2.3 million in campaign funds, trumpeted a reelection endorsement from Georgia Democratic Sen. Zell Miller, and promoted government aid for religious charities.

King's birthday is commemorated by a national holiday on Monday, recognizing his non-violent leadership of the black civil rights struggle in the 1950s and 1960s.

"Today, all Americans benefit from Dr. King's work and his legacy of courage, dignity, and moral clarity," Bush said in a written statement proclaiming the annual holiday.

Bush faces a stiff challenge in wooing black voters.

India will not lower guard despite thaw: Advani

Kashmir first then talk trade: Pak minister

PTI, ANI, New Delhi/Karachi

Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani yesterday declared that India will not lower its guard despite thaw in relations with Pakistan and hoped that Hurriyat Conference leaders would make "sincere" efforts to end the era of violence in Jammu and Kashmir.

"While cross-border terrorism and infiltration of terrorists into India has continued over the years, the level of infiltration and the number of violent incidents in Jammu and Kashmir have perceptibly come down in recent months," he said while inaugurating a two-day meeting of Chief Secretaries and Directors General of Police on Internal Security in New Delhi.

Describing as a "historic" and a "major breakthrough" the India-Pakistan Joint Statement reached in Islamabad on January 6, Advani, however, cautioned the country's top security brass against lowering its guard and said that "vigil must be continued".

Contending that the government has always been open to resolution of all conflicts through dialogue and peaceful means, he said, "it was in this spirit that the invitation for talks has been extended to the Hurriyat leaders, who, I am confident, would make serious efforts to end the era of violence in the state."

On the Centre-Hurriyat talks scheduled for January 22, the Deputy Prime Minister said he was confident that the "outcome will be good. I have no doubt about it".

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee would address the meeting on Saturday and interact with chiefs of various security agencies.

ANI adds: Notwithstanding the recent thaw in Indo-Pak relations, the hawkish Pakistan Minister for Information and Broadcasting has said that trade and economic ties between the two countries would not improve until the Kashmir issue is resolved.

"Nobody should expect that free trade would be held without seeking a resolution of Kashmir

problem," Minister for Information and Broadcasting Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said in Sukkur on Thursday.

Ahmed was also quoted by The Nation as saying that Islamabad was not in a position to ignore the aspirations of Kashmiri people.

He also dispelled the possibility of accepting the Line of Control (LoC) in Jammu and Kashmir as an international border, adding that both countries had other options at their disposal to solve the Kashmir issue provided it was done with the spirit of "good intent and sincerity".

Ahmed also said the Pakistan Government believed that New Delhi would not allow the bilateral confidence-building measures that are already in place to be diluted in terms of their effectiveness.

He said, when the two countries reach near solution, Kashmiris on both sides of the divide would be taken into confidence.

Lankan president insists on extended term

AFP, Colombo

The party of Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga insisted yesterday her term of office would be a year longer than expected and challenged her rival, the prime minister, to settle the matter in court.

Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA) said she would leave office only at the end of 2006 although she was sworn in immediately after winning the December 1999 presidential election for a second and final six-year term.

PA spokesman Sarath Amunugama said there should be no controversy over her term although she was privately sworn in again some time in 2000 as claimed by Kumaratunga herself for the first time over national television Tuesday.

Amunugama and another senior Kumaratunga aide and former cabinet minister, Mangala

Samaraweera, said they could not immediately say when exactly the president had taken her second oath of office, but insisted it was done legally.

"The government is talking about this because they have no other issues," Amunugama told reporters. "What the prime minister must do is go before the Supreme Court."

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who lost to Kumaratunga in the 1999 presidential poll, went on to win the 2001 parliamentary election and the two leaders from rival parties have since been at loggerheads over almost everything.

The government has rejected Kumaratunga's extra year in office and insisted she must leave by December 2005.

"It is up to me to take a decision whether I am to continue in the office of president till 2006 or not," she told national television Tuesday.

Iraqi council defends power transfer plan

AFP, Baghdad

The Governing Council insisted yesterday the US-backed plan for a power transfer was on track despite a mounting Shiite campaign for direct elections, as an advance party of Japanese troops prepared to head for Iraq.

The US civilian overseer for Iraq, Paul Bremer, meanwhile, was to stop off at the White House before attending next week's UN talks with the interim Governing Council in New York.

Bremer may meet with President George W. Bush on Friday, but is certain to sit down with White House national security adviser Condoleezza Rice, according to a senior US administration official.

As a delegation of the US-sponsored Governing Council left for the UN talks, interim foreign

minister Hoshiyar Zebari insisted that the coalition plans for a power transfer in Iraq were still on track.

He said Monday's talks among UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, current Governing Council president Adnan Pachachi and Bremer would focus on the UN's return to Iraq.

"We are going to hear what the United Nations has to say more than anything else because the invitation is coming from them," Zebari said, shortly before departure from a US military facility at Baghdad's international airport.

"The starting point in my opinion is the return of the United Nations to Iraq and the reopening of its office."

Annan pulled non-Iraqi UN staff out of the country after attacks on aid agencies, including a bombing which killed the senior UN

official in Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello, and 21 others at the world body's Baghdad headquarters in August.

The UN talks come as the US-led administration appears on a collision course with Iraq's leading Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who has rallied thousands of supporters behind a call for direct elections in Iraq.

Sistani says a November 15 power transfer deal between Washington and Iraq, providing for regional caucuses to select a provisional leadership by mid-year, would give birth to an illegitimate government still in thrall to the coalition.

Thousands of supporters of Sistani, revered by Iraq's 15 million Shiite Muslim majority, demonstrated in the southern city of Basra on Thursday to back his call for early direct elections.



PHOTO: AFP

US soldiers from the 4th Infantry Division's 1st Battalion, 22nd Regiment inspect the ruins of a bus destroyed by a landmine in former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit, some 180 km north of Baghdad Thursday. At least three students including the driver of the Tikrit University bus were killed and one badly injured when a most probably a landmine went off, the commander of the 1st Battalion, 22nd Regiment - Colonel Steve Russell said.