

60 killed in Colombian drive against rebels

REUTERS, Bogota

Colombia's army clashed with leftist rebels and far-right paramilitary gunmen in separate battles over the weekend that left 60 dead, one of the highest body counts in months, the army said on Sunday.

The most heated combat took place in a cattle ranching region of Casanare province, about 185 miles northeast of Bogota, where the army intercepted a paramilitary caravan. Soldiers killed 21 paramilitary outlaws and captured three others, the army said in a statement.

Ten Colombian soldiers were killed in that offensive, while other fighting across the country left 28 rebels and another paramilitary fighter dead.

Since taking office in August 2002, President Alvaro Uribe has put more troops on the ground, reduced the number of kidnappings and pushed the rebels into a tactical retreat.

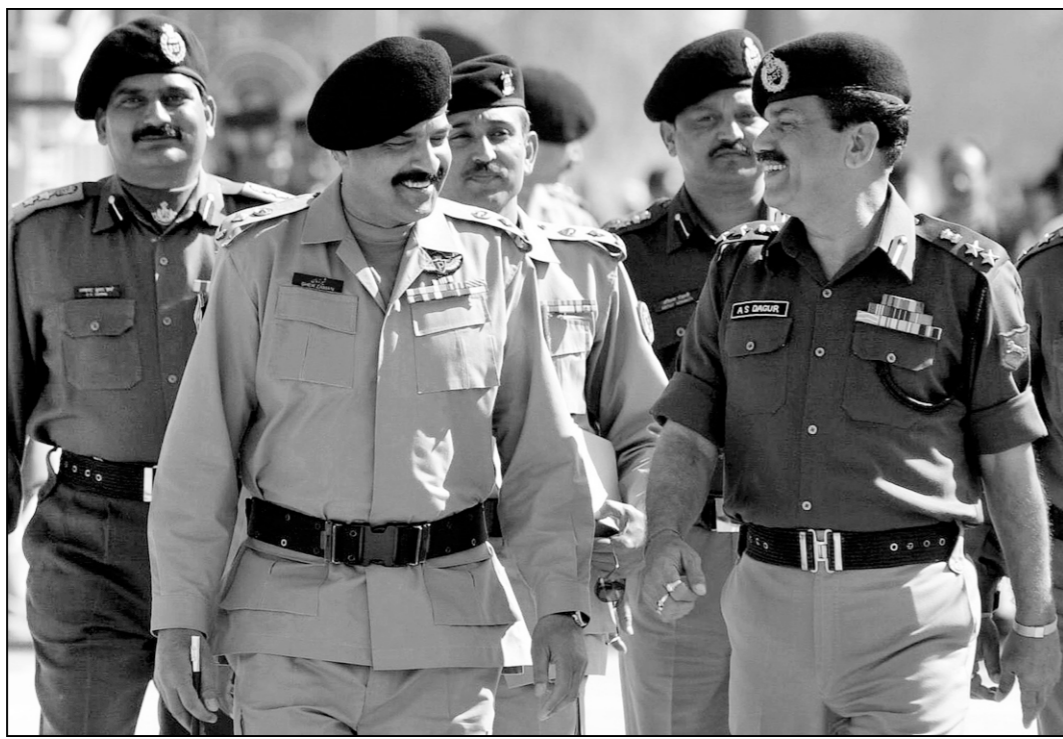


PHOTO: AFP
Indian Border Security Force Colonel A.S. Dagur (front R) and Pakistani Rangers Colonel Sherzaman (front L) shares a light moment before a monthly meeting at the Wagah border post yesterday. Border security officers of both sides discussed joint patrolling and other border issues.

ICJ starts hearing on Israeli barrier

Tel Aviv declares state of alert amid attack fears

AP, The Hague

The world court opened a hearing into the legality of Israel's West Bank separation barrier yesterday, a case that brings Israeli policies for the first time before an international tribunal.

The 15 judges in black robes filed into the court to begin the three days of hearings. But much of the action will be outside the historic Peace Palace, where thousands of pro-Israel and pro-Palestinian activists planned to demonstrate.

Raising tensions ahead of the hearing, a Palestinian suicide bomber killed eight passengers on a

crowded Jerusalem bus on Sunday. Israeli officials said it was proof of why the fence is needed.

The Palestinians were scheduled to open the case Monday, arguing against the barrier and in favor of the court's authority to render an opinion on its legality. Israel is challenging the court's jurisdiction and not participating in the hearings.

The Palestinians have set high expectations for the case. They hope a ruling against Israel will lead to the removal of the barrier.

The court, the United Nations' highest judicial body, was asked by the General Assembly to issue an

advisory opinion on the barrier. Although the court's decision is nonbinding, its rulings are influential.

Israel has submitted written arguments claiming the court has no authority over the matter. It says the dispute should be resolved through negotiations, and that taking the matter to court will undermine the internationally backed "road map" peace plan. Israel also says the barrier is a response to Palestinian violence, pointing to Sunday's suicide bombing in Jerusalem as proof of the need for the structure.

The Palestinians oppose the route of the barrier, which dips deep

into the West Bank at points. They say that when completed, the barrier will make it impossible for the Palestinians to establish an independent state.

AFP adds: Israeli police and security services were placed on general alert early yesterday amid fears of fresh attacks following a suicide bus bombing in Jerusalem which killed eight people the previous day, police sources said.

Police increased patrols in the towns and surveillance at bus stations while deploying extra staff at road blocks and entries to the towns in a bid to prevent infiltration by Palestinian militants.

Power transfer to Iraqis Rumsfeld meets with top commanders

AFP, Baghdad

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld met yesterday with military commanders here on plans to rapidly expand and deploy Iraqi security forces as the United States moves to return sovereignty to Iraq.

"The success of Iraq is in your hands," Rumsfeld told a class training for the US-created Iraqi Civil Defence Corps at a base on the outskirts of Baghdad.

Rumsfeld arrived unannounced earlier in the day on a military aircraft for his fourth visit to Iraq since US-led forces toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein last year.

Paul Bremer, the chief of the US-led coalition authority, met Rumsfeld at the Baghdad International Airport and then flew by helicopter with him to a forward

operating base of the 2nd Light Cavalry Regiment on the east side of the city.

He was briefed on plans to reduce the US military presence in Baghdad, shrinking the number of troops inside the city from 36,000 to 24,000 by May 15, and the number of bases in the capital from 48 to eight.

Replacing them will be 12,000 Iraqi police and seven battalions of the civil defence corps, Brigadier General Martin Dempsey told Rumsfeld.

"The threat is moving away from former regime (elements) and into international influence, international terrorism," Dempsey said.

The Iraqis "are far more adept at identifying that than we are," he said. "This is all coming together in a pretty good way for us."

Temple not an election issue, says Vajpayee

Delhi sees atmosphere right for talks

PTI, Lucknow

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee yesterday said construction of Ram Temple in Ayodhya would not be an election issue and hoped that efforts made in resolving it would succeed.

"Ram Temple is not an election issue. It is linked to people's emotion. We should resolve it. I hope efforts in this direction will succeed," Vajpayee said at a press conference in Lucknow.

Asked if temple construction would form part of the BJP manifesto, Vajpayee, flanked by former Uttar Pradesh chief minister Kalyan Singh and Agriculture Minister Rajnath Singh, said, "When the manifesto comes out, it will be before you."

On how much BJP has gained with the return of Kalyan Singh to the party fold, Vajpayee said, "It has definitely helped and the party will make full use of it."

The Prime Minister parried a question on the remarks of VHP leader Ashok Singhal that the "feel good" factor was restricted to English-speaking people and had not benefited commoners. "I have nothing to say on it," he said.

AFP adds: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said Sunday the atmosphere was conducive for talks with rival Pakistan following the announcement of a timetable for peace dialogue.

"There is a conducive atmosphere for holding a dialogue with Pakistan," Vajpayee said in the northern Indian town of Lucknow.

The foreign secretaries of India and Pakistan on Wednesday agreed a schedule for resuming their stalled dialogue, beginning with high-level talks on Kashmir in May or June.

Talks on seven other issues will follow in July, with another meeting between the foreign secretaries in August.

Vajpayee also dismissed the possibility that forthcoming cricket matches between Indian and Pakistani teams, the first in four years, could be marred by ugly incidents because of the intense traditional rivalry between the nations.

"On Pakistan's invitation, the Indian cricketers are going there to play cricket and not to wage war," Vajpayee said.

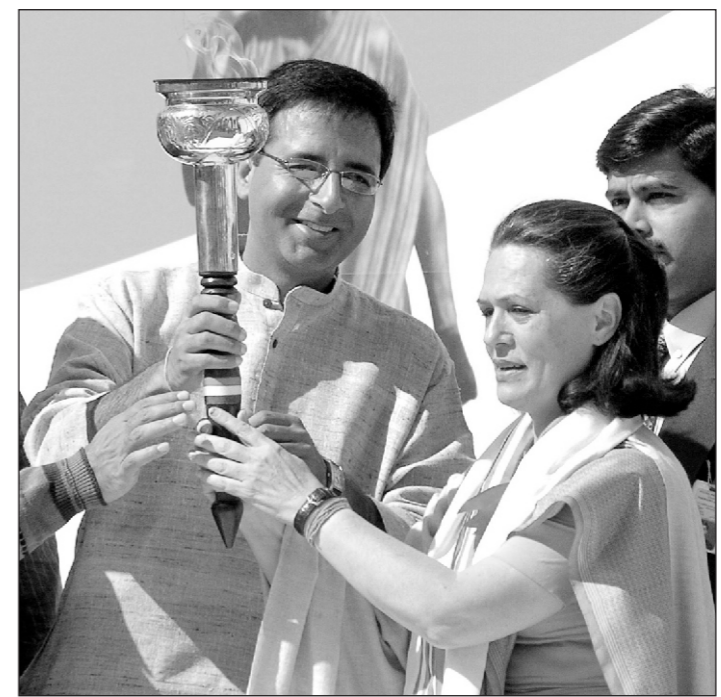


PHOTO: AFP
Indian opposition leader and Congress Party president, Sonia Gandhi (R), hands over a torch to Indian Youth Congress (IYC) president, Randeep Singh Surjewala (L), in New Delhi yesterday. Sonia Gandhi administered an oath and handed over a torch symbolising India's philosophy and traditions to IYC young leaders from all over India.

'North Korea ready to abandon nukes'

AFP, Tokyo

North Korea has told China that it was ready to promise the abolition of its nuclear development programmes at the upcoming six-party talks, Japanese media reports said yesterday.

Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi mentioned North Korea's intention in a meeting with visiting Senior Vice Foreign Minister Ichiro Aisawa, public network Japan Broadcasting Corp. and Jiji Press news agency said without citing sources.

Wang said North Korea had told China it was "ready to promise a total abolition of nuclear development," the reports said.

North Korea also reportedly said the first stage of that abolition would be freezing its programmes.

The foreign ministry's press secretary Hatsuhsisa Takashima said he had received no such information.

Rebels plan to attack Haitian capital

Cap-Haitien captured

AP, Cap-Haitien

Rebels overran Haiti's second-largest city in their biggest victory of a bloody uprising and said soon they will attack the capital in their campaign to oust President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

As thousands of looters rampaged through Cap-Haitien Sunday, rebel leader Guy Philippe predicted a quick victory over Aristide's partisans, who sought to block any advance by erecting flaming barricades on the highway into the capital, Port-au-Prince, from the north.

"I think that in less than 15 days we will control all of Haiti," Philippe

said at a Cap-Haitien hotel as he swigged from a bottle of beer.

Sources close to the government said several Cabinet ministers in Port-au-Prince were asking friends for places to hide in case the capital is attacked.

After rebels drove government troops from Cap-Haitien, a city of some 500,000 on Haiti's north coast, thousands of people went on a looting spree.

The takeover of Cap-Haitien by some 200 fighters was the most significant advance by Aristide opponents since the uprising began on Feb 5. At least 15 people died in Sunday's fighting.

Lanka marks truce anniversary

AFP, COLOMBO

Sri Lanka's warring parties yesterday marked the second anniversary of their truce, but celebrations remained subdued because of fears the country could be on the verge of slipping back to war.

Military officials said there were no festivities marking the ceasefire in the island's embattled northern and eastern regions unlike last year when there was a mood of celebration among civilians.

The official websites of Tamil Tigers and the government handling the peace process barely made a mention of the anniversary of the Norwegian-brokered ceasefire that has been in place since February 23, 2002.

'Barrier a serious HR violation'

AFP, Jerusalem

International pressure group Human Rights Watch yesterday slammed Israel's West Bank barrier as a "serious violation" of the Jewish state's obligations under the Geneva Conventions and a blatant attempt to consolidate illegal Jewish settlement in the territories.

The barrier "entails serious violations of human rights and international humanitarian law," the group said in a briefing paper released just hours before the International Court of Justice (ICJ) begins debating the legality of the vast enterprise. "Israel's separation barrier seriously impedes Palestinian access to essentials of civilian life, such as work, education and medical care," said Joe Stork,

acting head of the group's Middle East and North Africa division.

By confining more than 100,000 civilians inside enclaves which are regulated by a highly-complex regime of permits, the barrier will "institutionalise a system in which all movement for large numbers of people is sharply curtailed," thereby endangering access to basic services, the group said.

Israel claims its "counter-terror fence" is purely to prevent the infiltration of militants -- justifying it by Sunday's suicide bombing which killed seven people aboard a Jerusalem bus -- but the Palestinians see it as little more than a land-grab and a bid to pre-empt the borders of a future Palestinian state.

Pak troops in operation to flush out al-Qaeda

Taliban sympathisers handed over to troops by tribesmen

PTI, AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's armed forces on Sunday launched a major operation in the tribal South Waziristan Agency bordering Afghanistan to crack down on the remnants of al-Qaeda and Taliban hiding there.

Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said military operations were launched after the end of the deadline given to the local population to surrender the foreign militants hiding there.

The operation followed an

amnesty offer by Musharraf to all the foreign militants willing to surrender. Musharraf had promised not to hand over the surrendered militants to any foreign powers.

This was the third operation launched by Pakistan Army in the recent months in the same area to apprehend foreign militants.

Rashid told reporters here that Pakistan forces have been sent to South Waziristan Tribal Area to apprehend the suspects. "This action is part of Pakistan's commitment with the international coalition," he said,

adding the operations would be conducted by Pakistan forces alone and not by any foreign forces.

"We will not enter into other's territory and will not allow others to violate our boundaries," Rashid said, when asked if US forces would take part in the operation.

AFP adds: Pakistani tribesmen in the rugged semi-autonomous region bordering Afghanistan have handed over dozens of people suspected of sheltering al-Qaeda militants, a government official said yesterday.

Iranian govt unrattled by record low turnout

AFP, Tehran

Iran's conservatives have regained control of almost all the main seats of power ahead of next year's presidential polls, despite a record low turnout in Friday's parliamentary elections.

The reformist-controlled interior ministry dashed the hopes of conservatives of a high turnout to add credibility to their sweeping victory when it announced on Sunday that only 50.57 percent of the electorate took part.

Before the election, the leading regime figures of the 25-year-old Islamic republic called for a strong turnout, playing on nationalist and religious sentiments.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said it was a "religious duty", while Ayatollah Ahmad Janati, head of the Guardians Council political vetting body, said "voting is as important as praying".

And although state television, on its six national channels, repeatedly backed up their calls, the turnout was still 17 percent lower than the last parliamentary elections in 2000.

The reformists had urged voters to stay away after nearly all pro-reform candidates were disqualified from even standing for the Majlis by the unelected Guardians Council.

The outcome was an "acceptable" turnout "which does not put into question the regime's legitimacy, even if the rejection of candidates raises questions over the regularity of the elections," said political journalist Said Leylaz.



PHOTO: AFP
Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri delivers a speech during the opening of International Conference of Islamic Scholars in Jakarta yesterday. The conference opened yesterday with bitter attacks from Megawati and a Muslim leader on the US-led military campaign in Iraq, describing the war as "exceptional injustice" against a Muslim country.

Megawati says at Islamic conference US, France unjust towards Muslims

THE NATION/ ANN, Jakarta

Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri yesterday took a jab at the United States and France over their foreign and domestic policies towards Muslim countries and communities, labelling their actions "exceptional injustice".

Although Megawati did not specifically name the two countries, it was clearly understood that the leader of the world's most populous Muslim country was unhappy with the US invasion of Iraq, which she described as an "act of violence undertaken unilaterally," and France's move to prohibit the wearing of religious symbols in public school, as well as the wearing of the jilbab, the traditional Islamic women's headscarf.

"It may be due to either coincidence or intention, but an exceptional injustice is apparent in the attitude and actions of big countries towards countries whose major population are Muslims," Megawati said in her inauguration speech at the opening of the International Conference of Islamic Scholars here yesterday.

Megawati called on Islamic scholars to "prove wrong the observation that the future world will be characterised by considerable shock of cultures, rooted in the adherence to different religions."

She urged them to formulate a

socioreligious conception that could accommodate the pluralism of today's world. "The history of the Islamic Ummah (the classical definition of Muslim community) has proven that this (pluralism) was once achieved, so there is no reason to believe why this could not be repeated again in this century, with the assistance and support of the other religious communities," Megawati said.

Megawati also touched on the civil wars in Indonesia, saying the burden for ending the violent disputes lay with the current generation.

She said that the diversity of Indonesia has always been a source of strength for the country and pointed out that Indonesia's constitution and state philosophy guaranteed religious freedom.

The three-day event, which brought together hundreds of scholars on Islamic studies and Muslim leaders world wide, was coorganised by the Indonesian Foreign Ministry and the Indonesiabased Nahdlatul Ulama (NU), the world's largest Muslim civic organisation with a membership of more than 40 million.

Indonesia's Foreign Minister Hassan Wirajuda told a press conference that the government and the NU shared the idea that all sectors of Indonesian society needed to work together to respond to new challenges imposed upon them by modernity and events in today's world.