

Pak troops search homes for militants

'High-value al-Qaeda target remains encircled'

AB, Wana

Pakistani forces were searching homes amid a lull in fierce fighting against suspected al-Qaeda holdouts near the Afghan border yesterday, while tribal villagers cursed the army for the deaths of civilians during its biggest counterterrorism drive yet.

The military believes a "high-value" target is hunkered down in the besieged area in South

Waziristan, but say its uncertain if it is Osama bin Laden's Egyptian deputy, Ayman al-Zawahri, or another suspected terrorist.

Troops searched for suspects and bodies, and faced no resistance on the sixth day of the operation, involving 5,000-6,000 Pakistani forces. On Saturday, the regional military commander vowed to eliminate some 400-500 foreign militants and local tribesmen sympathisers who remained

in the area.

"There is hardly any resistance from the terrorists," said an intelligence official in the main town in the region, Wana, about three miles from the fighting. He added that it could be part of a battle strategy. "Maybe they want our people to go close to them," he said.

Artillery that has been pounding the militants at night had fallen silent since midnight, but

there was an occasional exchange of gunfire still going on, he said. Army spokesman Maj. Gen. Shaukat Sultan said Sunday in the capital Islamabad that the "operation is continuing."

The military has arrested more than 100 suspects so far, sending some of them to the provincial capital, Peshawar, for interrogation. It displayed about 40 of them at a military base in Wana on Saturday, but did not identify them.

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Congress behind the ruling Hindu

nationalists ahead of parliamentary

elections due in five phases beginning April 20.

Security officials said prisoners included Pakistanis, Arabs, Chechens, Uzbeks and ethnic Uighurs from China's predominantly Muslim Xinjiang province, but say it is difficult to distinguish the foreigners from locals, as they have often lived in the region for a long time and speak the local Pashto language.

The operation is the largest by Pakistan in its lawless tribal regions bordering Afghanistan since it threw its support behind the US-led war on terrorism after the Sept. 11 attacks on America.

Thousands of tribespeople have fled their homes, and on Sunday at the hospital in Wana, berated the army for civilian casualties in the fighting.

According to local government officials in Wana and intelligence officials, about two dozen local people were killed in firing on five vehicles on Saturday.

Army spokesman Sultan said the vehicles were fired because they were trying to escape a military cordon around the target area.

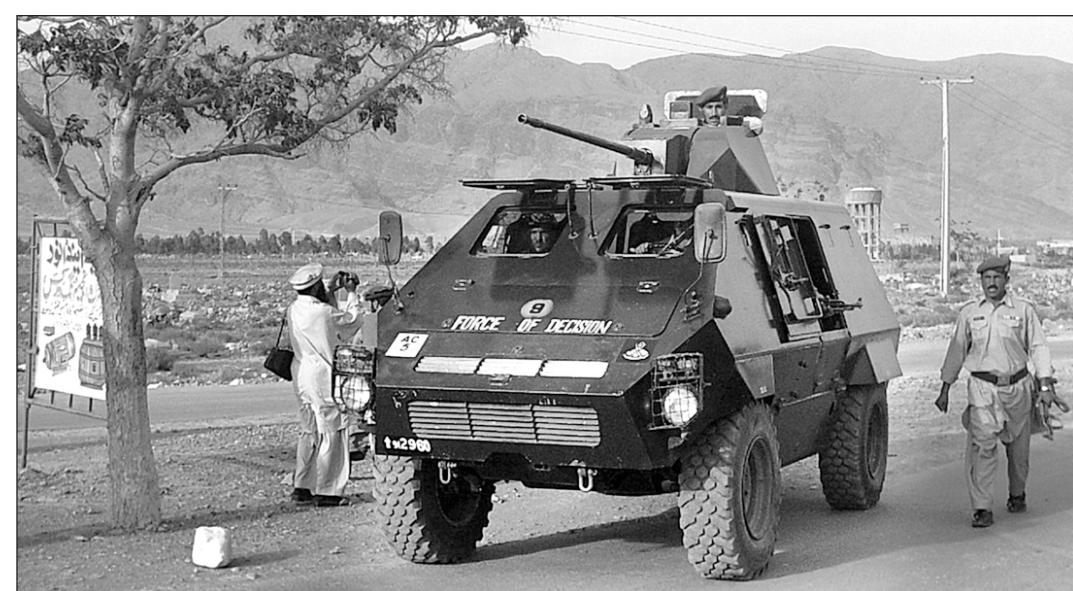
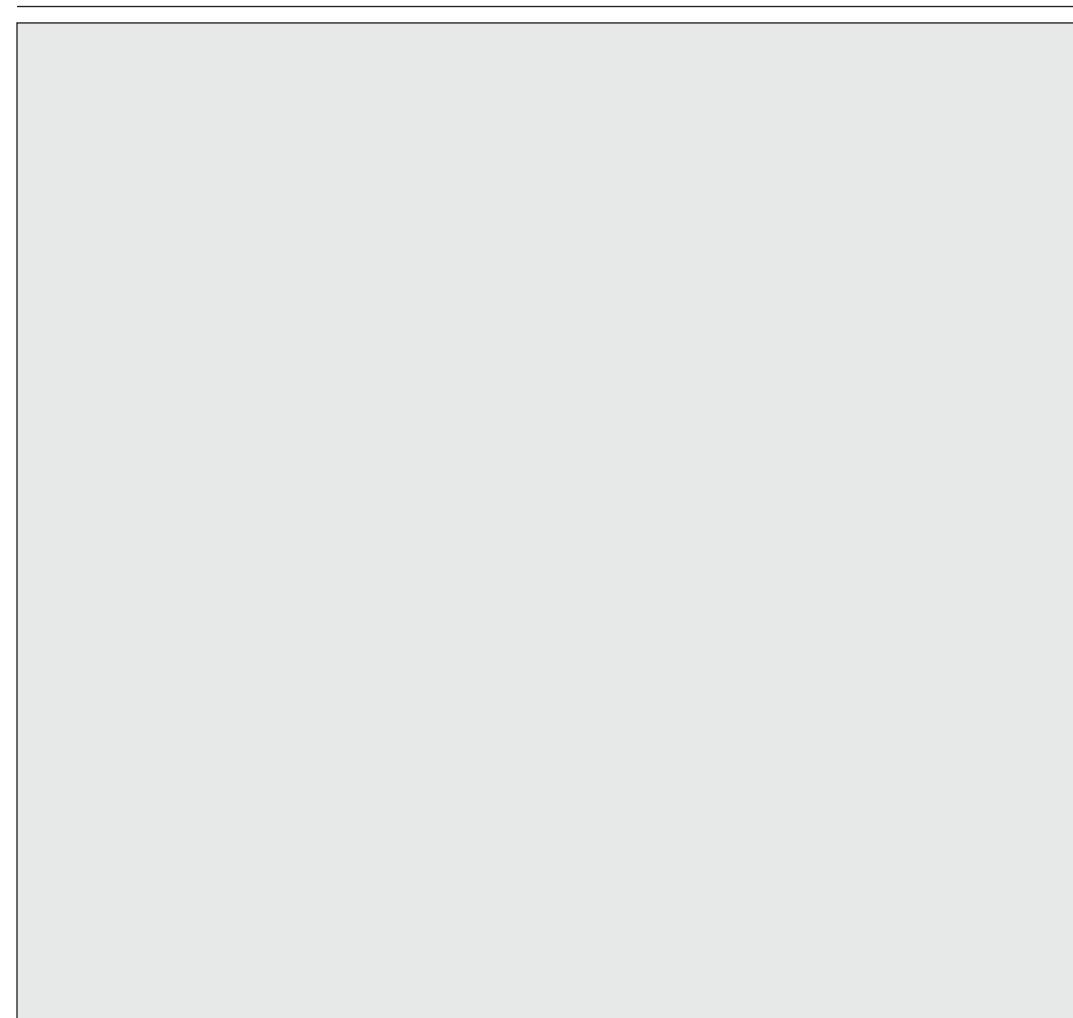


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani paramilitary soldiers keep vigil from an armoured vehicle as they secure an area in Wana, South Waziristan district, some 300km southwest of Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan interrogated over 100 foreign and local fighters arrested in its fiercest-ever battle with al-Qaeda suspects and their tribal supporters amid signs the "high value target" they were protecting may be a Central Asian militant leader.



Hurriyat to talk peace with Advani

APP, Srinagar

Kashmiri separatists said yesterday they have agreed to hold a second round of talks with the Indian government on March 27 and would press New Delhi to curb alleged human rights abuses.

Umar Farooq, founder of the main separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, said India had not honoured pledges made in January when the two sides held their first talks during the 15-year Kashmir insurgency.

"We will do some serious and straight talking in New Delhi," Farooq, who is Kashmir's chief Islamic cleric, told AFP.

"In the last meeting some promises were made to us which were never fulfilled. We will take up these issues forcefully again," he said.

Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani, who will lead the talks Saturday, had at the January 22 meeting assured Farooq and four other moderate separatists that India would respect human rights and review lists of prisoners.

But separatists say only a few prisoners have been released and accuse the army of killing five civilians in February by using them as civilian shields against rebels, a

Rahul Gandhi to contest polls

APP, New Delhi

Rahul Gandhi, son of assassinated former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, will contest in upcoming parliament elections, marking a new generation of political involvement for the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, a Congress party leader said Sunday.

Rahul Gandhi will contest in the Amethi parliamentary seat, which is currently held by his mother Sonia Gandhi who heads the main opposition Congress, senior party leader Ambica Soni told a news conference.

Sonia Gandhi will shift her seat to Rae Bareli, another traditional seat of the family's illustrious political family, Soni said.

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Bassem Qdeih, who was in his late 30s, was killed along with his wife Sanaa when they tried to evade arrest by Israeli forces during the pre-dawn incursion in Abasan, an eastern suburb of the town of Khan Yunis.

Three other people, including Qdeih's 21-year-old cousin, were also killed in subsequent exchanges of gunfire.

An Israeli military source said that Qdeih appeared to have died after he either blew himself up or an Israeli gunshot triggered an explosive device that he was carrying. His wife died from the impact of the blast, he added.

But a Palestinian doctor who examined the bodies said it appeared that they had been killed by the impact of a mortar or a rocket. Their bodies were riddled with bullets, he added.

"It's clear that they died as a result of an explosion but not one that was self-inflicted," Dr Mohammed Abu Dala told AFP.

Palestinian security officials said a total of six people were killed during the Israeli operation, although hospital sources said that they had only received five bodies.

Nine other people were injured,

5 Palestinians killed in Israeli raid

Sharon lobbies support for Gaza pullout

APP, Jerusalem

A local Hamas commander was among five Palestinians killed in an Israeli raid in southern Gaza yesterday as Prime Minister Ariel

Sharon tried to muster support of ministers from his Likud party for his plans to withdraw from the territory.

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interpreted his proposals as a sign of weakness.

Commentators said that Sharon does not yet have a cabinet majority in support of his project, the full details of which have still to be unveiled.

Agriculture Minister Israel Katz, who confirmed that Sharon would be holding talks with the Likud members of his right-wing coalition cabinet Sunday, said the plan was "a mistake and if there is a majority of the Likud ministers against this plan, then it cannot be applied."

Katz is one of a number of Likud ministers in Sharon's government who have publicly opposed his plan to evacuate all but a handful of the Gaza settlements as part of a wider "disengagement plan".

The prime minister has announced his intention to implement the package of unilateral measures, which will also see Israel strengthen control over settlements in the West Bank, within months in the absence of any progress in the bilateral peace process with the Palestinians.

But he has made clear that he will not proceed until he has support from the US administration which has asked for more details before giving its judgement.

Sharon's cabinet chief Dov Weisglass and his national security advisor Giora Eiland had been expected to leave later Sunday for Washington to hold talks with senior US officials on the project.

But he has made clear that he will not proceed until he has support from the US administration which has asked for more details before giving its judgement.

He had been involved in the manufacture of munitions, they added.

Witnesses and Palestinian security sources said that an Apache helicopter, tanks, jeeps and bulldozers had all taken part in the raid.

The Israeli security cabinet last week decided to increase operations against Hamas and its leadership in the wake of a double suicide attack in the southern port of Ashdod on March 14 that was jointly claimed by Hamas and Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades. Opponents of Sharon's plans for a pullout from Gaza have pointed to an upsurge in violence in the area as proof that the Palestinian militants have

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