

# Pak troops search homes for militants

## 'High-value al-Qaeda target remains encircled'

AP, 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.

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.

## Rahul Gandhi to contest polls

AFP, 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 Ambika Soni told a news conference.

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

Opinion polls have placed Congress behind the ruling Hindu nationalists ahead of parliamentary elections due in five phases beginning April 20.

## ETA ready for talks with new Spanish govt

AFP, Madrid

Armed Basque separatist group ETA said yesterday it was ready for dialogue with the new Spanish government to end the violence which has plagued the Basque Country for the last 36 years.

In a statement released through Basque newspaper Gara, the group called on Spanish prime-minister elect Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero to make "strong and courageous" gestures for peace.

ETA said it was "disposed (to) pursuing a solution through dialogue" with the Socialist-led government which won a general election a week ago. But the separatist movement renewed its commitment to "continue the struggle" for Basques independence.

# 5 Palestinians killed in Israeli raid

## Sharon lobbies support for Gaza pullout

AFP, 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.

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 Dalal 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,

although only three remained in hospital for treatment and their condition was not thought to be life-threatening.

A statement from the Palestinian national security directorate said that Qdeih's father and several of his brothers had been arrested during the operation.

Three houses were also been destroyed, and the water and electricity supplies and phone lines had all been severed during the raid.

An Israeli military source said that the operation had been carried out to arrest Qdeih and to target a workshop used to manufacture rockets and mortar shells.

Relatives said that he had long been on the Israeli military's list of wanted militants and had only just returned to the family home after a lengthy period on the run.

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

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 sources in the prime minister's office would only say they were expected to leave shortly.



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

AFP, 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

charge the military denies.

One of the separatists who met Advani, Fazal Haque Qureshi, has pulled out of the talks citing "growing human rights violations" by Indian troops.

Hardliner separatists have formed a splinter faction in the Hurriyat and reject any talks with New Delhi, saying discussions must focus on the final status of Kashmir which has been divided between India and Pakistan since 1947.

Separately, Farooq said the moderates would attend a function March 23 for Pakistan's national day at the Pakistani embassy in New Delhi.

The moderates stayed away from the function last year after Pakistan showed support for hardliners in the Hurriyat.

India's efforts to engage moderate separatists come amid a normalisation drive with Pakistan. The two countries last month resumed bilateral talks after a hiatus of two and a half years.

But violence has continued in Indian Kashmir, with four rebels and a soldier killed in a six-hour gunbattle overnight in the forests of northern Baramulla district, according to a police spokesman.

## Taiwan court steps into polls row

BBC ONLINE

Taiwan's High Court has ordered all ballot boxes sealed amid opposition calls for a recount following disputed presidential election results.

Protests have erupted across the country after incumbent President Chen Shui-bian narrowly beat Lien Chan.

Chen was re-elected by just 30,000 votes, a day after surviving an apparent assassination attempt.

Lien said the shooting had unfairly influenced the election and demanded that the results be annulled.

Chen won by a margin of less

than 1 percent of the votes cast - so slim that Lien's nationalist Kuomintang Party has asked the courts to force the central election committee to hold a recount.

About 330,000 ballots were rejected during the count - 11 times the size of Chen's winning majority.

The High Court ordered all ballot boxes sealed to preserve evidence following a request by Kuomintang lawyers.

Despite President Chen's victory, a referendum on relations with China failed to muster enough support.

Hours after the results were announced, protests erupted across the island.

## Blair lays low during Iraq war anniversary

AFP, London

While US President George W. Bush used the anniversary of the Iraq war to drum up electoral support, his closest ally in the conflict, Tony Blair, has looked very much like someone who wishes the whole thing would just go away.

The British prime minister has been conspicuous by his absence from any event marking the beginning of the conflict to remove Saddam Hussein one year ago, a war he tried unflinchingly to sell to a sceptical British public.

While tens of thousands took to the streets of London to protest at the occupation of Iraq on Saturday, Blair laid low.

This was in stark contrast to Bush, who told cheering crowds in Florida during his first official campaign rally that the United States was "proud to lead the armies of liberation".

Such has been the political damage meted out to Blair over Iraq that British newspapers were on Sunday openly debating when -- not if -- he could find himself ejected from power.

## US charges 6 officers with abusing Iraqis

AP, Baghdad

The US military charged six soldiers Saturday with abusing inmates at Abu Ghraib prison on the western outskirts of Baghdad.

The soldiers, members of a military police unit, were charged with a range of crimes, including conspiracy, dereliction of duty, cruelty and maltreatment, assault and indecent acts with another person. The military said about 20 detainees were involved.

It's "the kind of cancer that you have to cut out quickly. You've got to address it very, very quickly," said Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt, the US military's deputy director of operations.

The alleged offenses were committed in November and December and came to the attention of military authorities in January. The names of the soldiers were not released.

The six are among 17 US troops including a battalion commander and a company commander suspended from duties last month for allegedly abusing Iraqi prisoners.



PHOTO: AFP

Fin (R), age 5, and her brother Charlie (L), age 3, of Ann Arbor, Michigan, attend an anti-war protest with their father on Saturday in Ann Arbor, Michigan. The protest was one of many held around the world marking the first anniversary of the Iraq invasion.

## Congress manifesto identifies 'core' issues

PTI, New Delhi

Determined to wrest power at the Centre from BJP-led NDA, Congress manifesto, which would be released today, has identified a number of "core" issues, including an employment guarantee scheme for youths, reservation for socially and educationally backward minorities and empowerment of women, as its promises.

Being released by Congress chief Sonia Gandhi, the manifesto (2004-09) articulated the party's vision of a politically united, economically strong, socially just and culturally harmonious India with

international standing among the comity of nations, party sources said.

Keeping in view of the importance of a large electorate belonging to youth, minorities, women and farmers and rural populace, Congress manifesto would be promising an employment guarantee scheme, reservation for socially and educationally backward minorities and women's reservations Bill.

The manifesto would be coming out with a comprehensive schemes for farmers which included steps to speed up momentum of public investment in agriculture, a viable

crop insurance scheme, measures to increase profitability of farmers and to ensure fair and remunerative prices for their produce.

Speaking to reporters after a Congress Working Committee meeting last week, Sonia had said unemployment and problems of farmers were among the major issues to be taken up by the party in the coming Lok Sabha elections.

The CWC had also adopted a "political statement" declaring to "thwart NDA's pursuit of power for parochial and personal ends" by seeking to forge a "solid phalanx of secular political forces" in the polls.