



PHOTO: AFP
Indian billboard artist Sri Raju, 26, gives the finishing touches to a cutout of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee as a cutout of India's Opposition Leader and Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi lies in the background at his studio in Bangalore yesterday. Slick computer-designed posters featuring politicians' photographs are putting artists like Raju who would paint garish, larger-than-life hoardings of candidates into a dying breed. Political parties are heading to firms offering vinyl printing to produce posters that will be pasted on every available wall, compound, tree trunk and lamppost.

No Sign of Surrender or Assault

Deadline for al-Qaeda surrender passes

AFP, Wana

Tension gripped this tribal town near the Afghan border yesterday as a Pakistani army deadline for the surrender of a group of heavily-armed militants linked to al-Qaeda passed.

Rebel tribesmen protecting hundreds of besieged al-Qaeda fighters had been threatened with "serious consequences" if they failed to surrender the gunmen and release 14 hostages by 10:00 am (0500 GMT).

As of 11:00 am there was still no sign of surrender, but authorities appeared resigned to giving more time for negotiations by a delegation of tribal elders to succeed.

"There is resentment among the tribes over the operation which may compel the government to go slow," a senior army official, who asked not to be named, told AFP.

"If the authorities are satisfied there is some positive development, the pause in the operation may be extended."

In a sign of widening tribal anger at the al-Qaeda hunt, there have been at least four deadly attacks on troops and police in the semi-autonomous tribal zone this week and the main northwest city of Peshawar came under rocket

attack - without casualties - on Tuesday night.

The official said the local administration in South Waziristan was expecting a report from the elders' delegation "some time Thursday."

Around 1,500 tribesmen and elders have gathered in the district capital Wana to await the outcome of at least three days of talks between elders and tribesmen locked in battle with Pakistani forces since March 16.

The delegation has been trying since Monday to persuade the Yargulkhel clan, a rebellious Pashtun sub-tribe, to lay down arms and hand over the militants.

Deadlines have been extended daily since then, and commanders have conceded that most of the al-Qaeda militants, including an unidentified "high value target", have probably escaped.

The offensive -- Pakistan's largest ever against al-Qaeda -- appears to have been a disaster for the army, with at least 49 troops dead or missing since the first raid on March 16. Western diplomats believe the real troops' toll could be as high as 100.

The assault by 7,500 army and paramilitary troops against an

estimated 500 fighters has resulted in the arrest of 123 local and foreign militants, and the deaths of 31 militants and the killing of 15 civilians.

The majority of the foreign detainees are Chechen or Uzbek, the military has said.

The troops began a fierce assault on March 18 against hundreds of heavily-armed fighters entrenched in mud-walled fortresses in two villages near Wana.

The suspected al-Qaeda militants and their tribal protectors have put up the strongest resistance encountered by Pakistani forces in their two year al-Qaeda hunt. The assault followed a botched paramilitary raid on March 16 in which 16 troops were killed in surprise attacks by scores of heavily armed fighters.

Some officials had believed the level of resistance indicated a "high value target," possibly as senior as al-Qaeda's number two Ayman al-Zawahiri, was being protected. But the Egyptian doctor, Osama bin Laden's deputy and personal physician, was never seen.

Army attack helicopters flew over Wana Thursday morning but residents said there was no sign of preparations for a major assault.

US relaxes Pak sanctions
Islamabad allowed 5 airbases, landing rights to America

AFP, PTI, Washington

The United States Wednesday relaxed its restrictions on exports to Pakistan, saying the action would ease democratic transition in Pakistan and contribute to the war on terrorism.

The restrictions target countries where a democratically elected government has been overturned by a coup.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf took power in a bloodless coup in October 1999, named himself president in June 2001 and was elected to a five-year term in a controversial election in April 2002.

The lifting of the restrictions on Pakistan "would facilitate the transition to democratic rule in Pakistan" and "is important to the United States efforts to respond to, deter or prevent acts of international terrorism," President George W. Bush said in a letter to Secretary of State Colin Powell.

"Accordingly, I hereby waive, with respect to Pakistan, any such provision," said the letter. "You are

authorized and directed to transmit this determination to the Congress."

Powell announced during a visit to Islamabad last week that Washington intended to designate Pakistan a major, non-NATO ally.

That official designation -- already accorded to Japan, Thailand, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan and Israel among others -- will allow the lifting of restrictions on weapons exports.

PTI adds: Pakistan, which the US has decided to designate as 'a major non-NATO ally', has provided five airbases to American forces and landing rights to their fighter aircraft anywhere in the country during emergency as part of its cooperation in the fight against Taliban and al-Qaeda.

Pakistan has also granted two-thirds of its airspace as air corridors to the US-led coalition forces.

"By doing so, Pakistan has had to reschedule or redirect many of the commercial flights", Pakistani daily 'The News' reported quoting a report of the US Central Command.

It said that Pakistan has been providing on an average, 0.4 million litres of fuel per day to the US forces and other services on the bases used by them.

"A total of 57,800 sorties have been generated from Pakistan's airspace".

Pakistan Navy has also provided landing facility to the coalition warships at Pasni, west of Karachi on the Arabian Sea coastline, while curtailing its own operations and training programmes in order to accommodate and facilitate these naval forces.

"The naval operations in Pasni were the largest operations in size, duration and depth that the US Marine Corps has conducted since the Korean War", the daily said.

The US Central Command Report also estimated a loss of over ten billion dollars since October 2001 to Pakistan due to its support to Operation Enduring Freedom, being carried out in Afghanistan.

According to the newspaper, Pakistan receives almost 100 million US dollars on account of logistic support it has been providing to

the American troops in the war against terrorism.

The Pakistani regime has also been charging 'normal billing' of fuel, water and communication, besides use of airbases and storages offered to the US troops along with communication, transport, training, repairs and maintenance services, it said.

In early 2002, the US and Pakistan had signed an acquisition and cross servicing agreement (ACSA) to facilitate reciprocal provision of logistics support between the two armed forces.

This was to be used primarily during joint exercises, training, deployment, operations or other cooperative efforts.

With the US-led war against al-Qaeda and Taliban going on in the tribal areas where Pakistani forces have joined the American troops to carry out operations in Waziristan, Miran Shah and Wana areas, the Pakistani regime has apprehended over 550 most wanted men including top figures like Khalid Sheikh Muhammad, Abu Zubaida and Ramzi bin al-Shibha, and handed them over to the US.

Pak envoy, diplomats striving to reunite APHC

ANI, New Delhi

Diplomats at the Pakistan High Commission in New Delhi are reported to have stepped up their efforts to reunite the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) ahead of its second round of talks with the Indian government tomorrow.

Informed diplomatic sources told the 'Daily Times', that Pakistan High Commissioner, Aziz Ahmed Khan, and other senior diplomats spent a considerable amount of time with the two factions of the APHC and other Kashmiri leaders on March 23 (Pakistan's National Day) sorting out their differences.

The 600-odd Kashmiri leaders had come to attend a dinner on that day.

"Khan held a long meeting with Ansari (Moulvi Abbas Ansari), while other Pakistani officials took Syed Ali Geelani to a separate room," the sources told the paper, adding that, "The meeting ended at midnight."

Bandh affects normal life in Assam

PTI, Guwahati

The toll in Wednesday's massacre of Karbis by militant Kuki National Army in Assam's Karbi Anglong district has risen to 34 with the recovery of five more bodies during the night, police said.

The district superintendent of police along with senior police officials were camping in the area to supervise rescue and relief operations and search for more bodies that could be strewn around in the hilly area, the police said.

Meanwhile, normal life was paralysed in Karbi Anglong district on Thursday with all offices, educational institutions, markets and financial institutions remaining closed in response to the 10-hour bandh called by the Autonomous State Demand Committee (ASDC) in protest against the ethnic violence.

Security measure was intensified in the district in view of the worst massacre in Karbi Anglong since Independence, in which eight others were injured, and the fleeing villagers were being provided succour in temporary shelters.

Most of world will live in cities by 2007: UN

AFP, United Nations

Urban areas are growing so quickly that for the first time in history, most of the world will be living in cities by 2007, a new UN study said Wednesday.

The changes are so rapid that by 2015, the list of the world's largest cities will be dramatically different -- but for the foreseeable future, Tokyo will remain the largest city in the world.

The study by the UN population division estimated that 48 percent of the world's population was living in urban areas in 2003.

"It is projected to exceed the 50 percent mark by 2007, thus marking the first time in history that the world had more urban residents than rural residents," the study said.

Most of that growth will not come in mega-cities like Tokyo, Mexico City and New York, however, but in smaller urban areas that currently have fewer than a half million residents.



PHOTO: AFP
Nepali female trade unionists shout slogans as they take part in an anti-government demonstration in Kathmandu yesterday. Some 3,000 demonstrators took part in the protest calling for an end to the insurgency in the Himalayan Kingdom.



PHOTO: AFP
Visiting Vietnamese President Tran Duc Luong (C), his Pakistani counterpart Pervez Musharraf (front L) and Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali (R) listen to national anthems in Islamabad Wednesday. Luong held talks with Musharraf on strengthening economic and commercial relations between the two countries.

Lack of vitamins eroding brainpower: UN

AP, United Nations

The brainpower of entire nations has diminished because of a shortage of the right vitamins, and slipping nutrients into people's food seems to be the only solution, a new UN survey says.

To fight the problem, the United Nations is prescribing a whole pantry of artificially fortified foods: soy sauce laced with zinc, "super salt" spiked with iron, cooking oil fortified with vitamin A.

Deficiencies in these vitamins are having alarming effects in developing countries, even ones where people generally have enough to eat, said the study, released Wednesday.

A lack of iron lowers children's IQs by an average five to seven points, the report said. A deficiency in iodine cuts it 13 more points, said Venkatesh Mannar, president of the Micronutrient Initiative, which produced the report along with the United Nations Children's Fund. Birth defects increase when mothers don't get enough folic acid, and a shortage of vitamin A makes children 25-30 percent more likely to die of disease.

"So ubiquitous is vitamin and mineral deficiency that it debilitates in some significant degree the energies, intellects, and economic prospects of nations," the study said.

It looked at 80 developing countries representing some 80 percent of the world's population. It found:

Iodine deficiency has lowered the intellectual capacity of almost all of the nations by as much as 10 to 15 percentage points. It causes 18 million children a year to be born mentally impaired.

Iron deficiency in adults is so widespread that it lowers the productivity of work forces cutting the Gross Domestic Product in the worst-affected countries by 2 percent.

Deficiencies in folic acid a nutrient needed for tissue growth, especially in pregnant women causes approximately 200,000 severe birth defects every year in the 80 countries.

About 40 percent of the developing world's people suffer from iron deficiency, 15 percent lack adequate iodine and as many as 40 percent do not get enough vitamin A.