

ATTEMPT ON PAK PM-DESIGNATE
al-Qaeda may be
behind attack

AP, Islamabad

Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network may have been behind the failed attempt to assassinate the country's prime minister-designate, a senior Cabinet minister said yesterday, though investigators are still pouring over the evidence.

The death toll from the suicide bomb attack Friday against Shaukat Aziz, meanwhile, rose to eight, with about three dozen injured, Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said. Among those killed was Aziz's driver, who had not yet closed the bulletproof door on the car when a man approached and detonated a bomb.

Pakistani television showed gruesome video of the bombing, with the camera capturing an image of the suicide attacker approaching the

driver's door, raising his hand and then blowing up. It was not clear if he was signaling to someone.

The attacker, whose head was found not far from the blast site, appeared to be a Pakistani man in his early 20s, said Capt. Zubair Ahmad, a local police official. But government officials were quick to point the finger at international terrorism, which has worked with homegrown Pakistani extremists in the past.

"al-Qaeda may be behind it," Ahmed told The Associated Press, before adding that there is no hard evidence linking the group to the attack.

President Gen. Pervez Musharraf has said he believes al-Qaeda was involved in two attempts to kill him in December, the last of which killed 17 people. He was unharmed.

MOVE TO STOP ROCKET ATTACKS

Israel allows army
to act 'at will'

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz has given "carte blanche" to the army to prevent Palestinian rocket attacks on Israeli territory from the Gaza Strip, Israeli military radio said yesterday.

Mofaz took the decision in talks with army officials following attacks Friday on the southern Israeli city of Sderot, across the border from Gaza.

The reported decision has not been officially confirmed.

Four rockets struck in the Sderot on Friday, with no reports of casualties. Early Saturday another rocket fired from northern Gaza exploded in a field near Sderot, Israeli military sources said.

The Palestinian militant group Hamas claimed responsibility for the first two rocket strikes, saying attacks would continue until the Israeli army ended its occupation of the town of Beit Hanun.

Israel took over Beit Hanun on June 29 in a bid to prevent militants from firing rockets into southern Israel after a strike killed two people in Sderot.

The Palestinian Authority has declared Beit Hanun a "disaster area" and the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) has organised food deliveries to the besieged community.

At least 60 makeshift Qassam rockets have been fired from northern Gaza since the start of the Israeli operation in Beit Hanun, 42 of them exploding in

Israeli territory, military radio said.

Meanwhile, an Israeli helicopter destroyed a metal workshop belonging to the father of a suicide bomber in Gaza City late Friday, slightly wounding two people, a Palestinian security source said.

The source said the workshop belonging to Saleh Al-Riyashi was located in the city's eastern Zeitun district.

The helicopter hit it with at least one missile.

An Israeli military official said the raid targetted a workshop Hamas used to produce its makeshift Qassam rockets.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian women hold up their national flag during a demonstration at the entrance of the northern Gaza Strip town of Beit Hanun yesterday against the Israeli army occupation of the town. Israel took over Beit Hanun on June 29 in a bid to prevent militants from firing rockets into southern Israel after a strike killed two people in Sderot settlement.

'Italy priority target
for extremists'

AFP, Rome

Italy and its people have become a prime target of Islamic extremists, who are trying to get a hold of chemical weapons, according to a report by Italian security services made available yesterday.

The greatest risk was to the Italian contingent serving in Iraq with US-led multinational forces, said the document, which has been submitted to Parliament in Rome.

It said Islamic extremists were trying to obtain non-conventional weapons to spread maximum terror, warning: "We remain concerned about the possibility of...toxins."

The document also stressed the recruitment role played by certain Islamic mosques in Italy including ones in Milan and Cremona, which have already been placed under surveillance.

India calls for common
front against terror

PTI, Bangkok

The first ever BIMST-EC summit opened yesterday with India stressing the need to forge a common front against terrorism, gun-running and narcotics trafficking.

"The scourge of terrorism is unfortunately one with which we all must grapple -- as a global phenomenon and as an everyday reality. The areas of conflict are coming closer to us," Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said at the inauguration of the summit.

He warned intolerance bred by religious extremism could divide societies and people and "we neglect it at our peril."

The mutual confidence among BIMSTE-EC countries would be greatly enhanced "if we were to forge a common front against terrorism, gun-running, narcotics trafficking, which in varying degrees affect us all," Singh said.

Asserting that the global political environment fosters insecurity, making

our task even more complex and our endeavour more urgent, Singh said "we have to work for peace and for security and to create a new climate in which we can concentrate on our primary responsibility -- a better life for all our peoples."

The summit began with a speech by the Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra who described the first ever summit as "politically appropriate and economically timely"

Apart from India and Thailand, the other members of BIMSTEC are Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Nepal and Bhutan.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleeda Zia also referred to the growing menace of terrorism and said BIMST-EC should have an unequivocal stand to fight this global menace and take steps to deal with the root cause of terrorism.

Singh said the solutions to some of these problems lie with Governments. Equally, "we have to reach out beyond, to find imaginative answers to intracta-

ble issues.

"This is the way we have chosen in India. It is this perspective-- that the many dimensions of the challenges we face can only be solved by working together that brings us here today," he said.

A global order, which is better representative and more responsive to the needs of our times, must include, the reform of the United Nations and a restructuring of the security council, Singh said.

The Prime Minister also reaffirmed India's firm political commitment to regional partnership for mutual benefit, wholehearted support and cooperation with BIMST-EC partners so that "we succeed in our efforts to translate ideals into meaningful cooperation."

The Prime Minister said India sees BIMST-EC as a collective forum for giving full expression to the widely felt need to rediscover the coherence of our region based on the commonality of linkages around the Bay of Bengal.

Delhi names
envoy to talk
release of hostages

AFP, New Delhi

India has named top diplomat Talmiz Ahmad as its special envoy to negotiate the release of three Indian truck drivers taken hostage by insurgents in Iraq on July 21, a minister said yesterday.

"It has been decided to depute Talmiz Ahmad our ambassador in Muscat," Junior Foreign Minister E. Ahamed told reporters in New Delhi.

"He is ... an Arabic speaker and has served in the Gulf region," the minister said.

Ahmad will be assisted by an interpreter attached to India's Foreign Minister Zakir-ur-Rehman.

"We understand that Ambas-sador Ahmed is already on his way to Baghdad and expected to reach Baghdad either this evening or at latest by tomorrow morning," the minister said.

The announcement came as the abductors, who call themselves Holders of the Black Banners, extended by 24 hours their deadline for a raft of conditions to be met.

Nato members
reach deal on
Iraq mission

AFP, Brussels

Nato countries agreed Friday to send an advance party of officers to Iraq to "get right to work" preparing to train that country's security forces, Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer said.

The Atlantic alliance sidestepped a dispute between France and the United States about who should command the training mission, leaving this decision until after the advance party reports back in September.

De Hoop Scheffer said a team of 40 officers would be sent very quickly to Iraq, adding "it is the nucleus of the enlarged training mission."

He added, "the mission will get right to work."

"The allies have agreed to establish a Nato training implementation mission in Iraq," the official explanation.

De Hoop Scheffer brokered the compromise Friday that overcame days of deadlock between the United States and France.

A Nato official said earlier the main sticking point in the three days of talks here had been the issue of the unity of command, which France was opposing because of its "political significance", but which the United States wanted for military reasons.

9/11 panel urges
Congress to
reform spy
agencies

AP, Washington

US Senators promised swift consideration of proposals to revamp the nation's intelligence structure after leaders of the Sept. 11 commission warned that bureaucratic wrangling leaves America dangerously vulnerable to another terrorist attack.

At a rare hearing Friday during the Senate's typically quiet August recess, Senate Governmental Affairs Committee Chairwoman Susan Collins, R-Maine, urged fellow lawmakers to "be bold but not reckless" in considering a reorganisation that would amount to a "fundamental overhaul of our intelligence structure and a sea change in our thinking."

Added the committee's top Democrat, Joe Lieberman of Connecticut: "We're going to get this job done and get it done with unprecedented thoughtfulness and speed."

Rebels kill 5
in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Suspected Kashmiri rebels shot dead a Muslim couple and three former militants in Indian Kashmir after suspecting them of being police informers, police said yesterday.

Gunmen believed to be Islamic militants barged into the house of a Muslim villager in southern Poonch district late Friday and opened fire, killing the owner of the house and his wife, a police spokesman said.



PHOTO: AFP

Senior Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) leader Jyoti Basu (R) leads United Progressive Alliance (UPA) Chairperson and Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi as he leaves Gandhi's resident after a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. The leaders discussed the formation of a Coordination Committee for the smooth functioning of the Congress-led government and its allies.