

PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani policemen inspect the site of a bomb blast in Multan yesterday. The car bomb ripped through a gathering of Sunni Muslim radicals in the central Pakistani city of Multan yesterday killing at least 40 people and wounding over 100 others, police said.

Pak sectarian attacks may be backlash to al-Qaeda crackdown

AFP, Islamabad

A fresh explosion of sectarian violence in Pakistan is a fight-back by hardcore Islamic militants, many trained by al-Qaeda, as security forces capture and kill more of their leaders, investigators and analysts said yesterday.

"It's difficult to say what will follow now, but things are going from bad to worse," said Farooq Awan, senior police investigator in southern port city Karachi, which has been riven by sectarian violence since the 1980s.

Fanatics among Shias, a 20 percent minority in Pakistan where over 95 percent of the 150 million people are Muslims, and Sunnis are locked in a cycle of revenge and counter-revenge attacks just a week before the start of the holy Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

A massive car bomb attack before dawn Thursday on a prayer

gathering of an outlawed Sunni extremist group in Multan, Pakistan's ancient "city of saints," was the second slaughter of Muslim worshippers in less than a week.

It brings to six the number of sectarian massacres this year, and the death toll to 163. Last Friday 30 Shia worshippers were killed as they prayed in eastern city Sialkot.

Police saw a chain of revenge originating in the high-profile killing by paramilitaries last month of top Sunni militant Amjad Farooqi, who was considered Al-Qaeda's key recruiter and operator in Pakistan and the mastermind of two attempts to assassinate President Pervez Musharraf.

"The Sialkot blast was a reaction to Amjad Farooqi's killing, and the Multan blast could be the reaction of the killing of Shias in Sialkot," Awan said.

Delhi rushes in troops to violence-hit northeast

Four rebels killed

AFP, Guwahati

Four rebels were killed and three arrested in India's violent northeast, as an extra 2,500 paramilitary troopers backed by helicopters rushed to the region, officials said yesterday.

Police said troops gunned down the four militants of the outlawed United National Liberation Front (UNLF) in a clash in Manipur's Bishnupur district on Wednesday.

"The rebels were on a mission to create terror and they were intercepted and neutralised by troops in an encounter," a police official said.

The UNLF is a frontline rebel group fighting for an independent homeland for the majority Meitei community in Manipur state.

In the region's largest state Assam, troops arrested three militants from the banned United Liberation Front of Assam (Ulfa) who were allegedly plotting attacks

on the state's main city of Guwahati, a police official said.

"We are likely to get vital clues from these three ULFA rebels about the ongoing terror strikes carried out by the group in the state over the weekend," he added.

Assam and neighbouring Nagaland witnessed at least 21 incidents of bombings and shootings during and since the weekend in which 81 people were killed and 217 wounded.

Some 2,500 paramilitary soldiers, backed by helicopters, were due to arrive in Assam after New Delhi Wednesday approved a request by the state government for additional troops to battle the explosion of violence.

"Now with more troops arriving and New Delhi's new plans for tackling insurgency in the region in a coordinated manner, we expect to deal more effectively with the rebel violence," said Assam Chief

Minister Tarun Gogoi.

Indian home ministry officials decided to send air force helicopters to strafe rebel hideouts and help search operations in the densely-forested region.

Indian border security guards in the northeastern region have already been put on high alert and have stepped up patrolling to prevent infiltration of militants from across the border with Bangladesh, an official said.

"The operation is aimed at checking trans-border infiltration of militants in view of the recent violence in Assam and Nagaland," the Border Security Force official said.

India and Bangladesh share a 4,095-kilometre-long (2,559 mile) border. Much is unfenced and Indian intelligence officials say this allows easy movement of separatist rebels.

HR bodies put pressure on Tigers to stop killing

AFP, Colombo

Three international human rights organisations yesterday stepped up pressure on Sri Lanka's Tiger rebels to halt political killings and resume peace talks.

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) said they had asked a Tamil Tiger delegation in Geneva earlier this week to end the murders and the recruitment of child soldiers.

A strongly-worded joint statement by the three organisations came as Sri Lanka's peace broker Norway called on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to stop the killings and warned that they undermined a fragile truce.

Norway's deputy foreign minister Vidar Helgesen has expressed Oslo's "growing concern" over political assassinations blamed on the Tiger rebels.

The Tigers have denied involve-

ment in the assassinations.

The three rights groups said they told the Tiger's political wing leader S. P. Thamilselvan that the rebel group must demonstrate how they will respect international human rights laws in Sri Lanka.

"We appealed to the senior LTTE leaders to show the world that they are both willing and capable of respecting the lives and rights of all Sri Lankans," International Commission of Jurists secretary-general Nicholas Howen said in a statement.

"We look to them to make a clear public commitment to international humanitarian and human rights standards and practical ways of putting them into effect," he added.

There was no immediate reaction from the Tigers, but the joint statement quoted Thamilselvan as saying that the rebels denied responsibility, but would consider the "development of confidence building measures to end killings

that are threatening the peace process."

"At a time when we should be moving back to peace talks the LTTE seems to have dramatically escalated the killing of perceived Tamil opponents and is still recruiting child soldiers," said Loubna Freih, the Geneva Director for Human Rights Watch.

The New York-based group noted that victims of killings included activists from Tamil political parties not aligned with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, members of a rival faction in the east, and alleged Sri Lankan military informants.

The Sri Lankan government has accused Tiger fighters of killing more than 250 rivals during the ceasefire that was put in place by Norway in February 2002.

The Tigers suspended their participation in Oslo-brokered peace talks in April last year after accusing Colombo of trying to sideline them in attracting foreign aid to rebuild war-ravaged regions.

Diplomatic efforts since have failed to get the two parties back to the negotiating table to resolve a conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.

Maoists bomb forestry office in Nepal

4 soldiers killed, HR Watch asks rebels to stop killing

AFP, Kathmandu

Suspected Maoists killed four security force members in two incidents in remote areas of Nepal and bombed a forestry office on the outskirts of Kathmandu, police said yesterday.

Two security force members were shot dead by the rebels on Wednesday after they had been kidnapped a day earlier while on patrol near Phulkali village in south-eastern Saptari district, a police spokesman said.

In another incident, two security workers died Wednesday evening in the far-western district of Dadeldhura when they detonated a landmine planted by rebels, he said.

The forestry office bombing caused extensive damage but no casualties, the spokesman added.

"Three suspected rebels entered the compound of the Lalitpur Forestry District Office at Khumaltar (southern Kathmandu), overpowered four securitymen guarding the building and set off a pressure-cooker bomb," he said.

"The Maoist rebels fled the scene after exploding the bomb," the spokesman added.

The rebels have been fighting for a communist republic in Nepal since 1996 and the insurgency has

claimed more than 10,000 lives.

Meanwhile, the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) yesterday urged both Nepalese soldiers and Maoist rebels to stop killing civilians caught up in their bloody conflict.

"In Nepal's escalating civil war, civilians in contested areas are executed, abducted and tortured both by government forces and Maoist rebels," HRW said in a 102-page report.

"Military aid providers and donor countries must insist that both sides end attacks on civilians, conclude a human rights accord allowing independent monitoring, and cooperate with the work of the National Human Rights Commission.

"Refusal to provide shelter to the rebels puts villagers at risk from Maoists who are ruthless in their punishments, while providing such support leaves them vulnerable to reprisal attacks from state security forces," it said.

"Neither the government nor the Maoists appear particularly concerned with the protection of civilians while they fight this dirty war," said Brad Adams, HRW executive director for Asia.

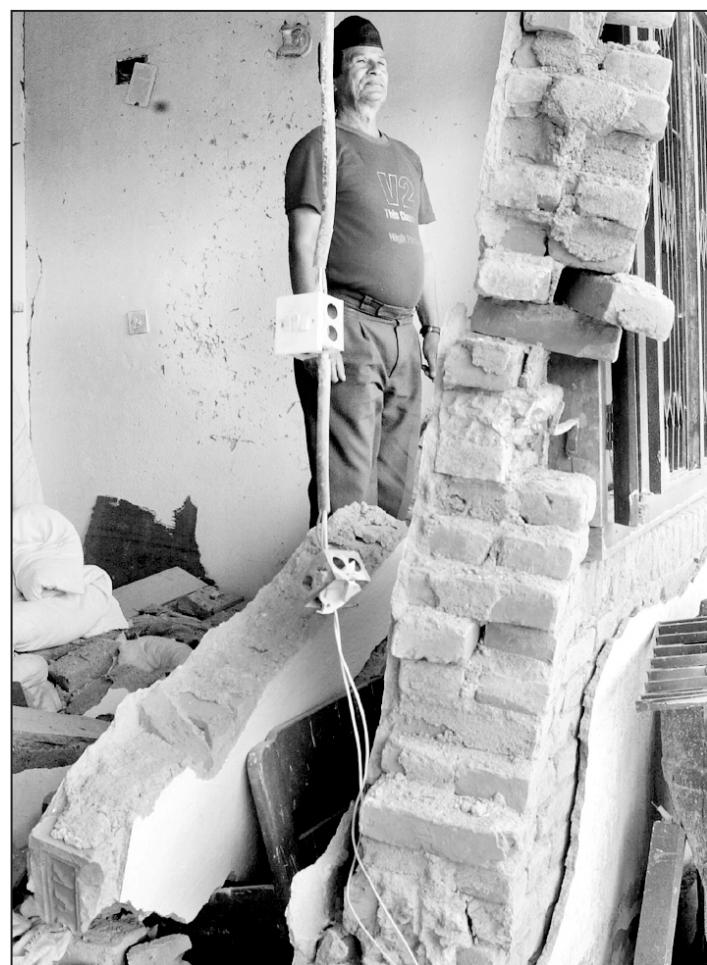


PHOTO: AFP

An employee of a forestry office on the outskirts of Kathmandu stands next to a destroyed wall of the office following a blast yesterday. Suspected Maoists killed four security force members in separate incidents in remote areas of Nepal and bombed a forestry office on the outskirts of Kathmandu, police said.

Lankan woman gives birth to quintuplets

AFP, Colombo

A 29-year-old Sri Lankan woman Wednesday gave birth to three girls and two boys in the island's first recorded quintuplet delivery, hospital officials said.

The woman, Chamila Weerasekara, and the five babies were doing well after Caesarian-section surgery that lasted just over an hour, said Castle Street maternity hospital director Dr. Wimal Karandagoda.

"This is very, very rare and the first case of quintuplets recorded in Sri Lanka," Karandagoda told AFP. "The five babies and the mother are doing very well."

The babies weighing between 1.1 kilograms (2.42 pounds) and 2.2 kg were immediately moved to the intensive care unit and placed in incubators. The babies were premature by about a month, he added.

"We were surprised when we saw the fifth baby because ultrasound scans had shown only four," Karandagoda said, adding all five incubators at his intensive care unit were now occupied by one family.

However the hospital made hasty arrangements for another premature baby by adding a sixth ventilator.

The father of the quintuplets, Nimal Piyatissa, 35, was proud but also a worried man. He said he would find it difficult to maintain the unexpectedly large family with his salary as a police sergeant.



PHOTO: AFP

President of India's Congress Party Sonia Gandhi (L) makes a welcome speech as German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder looks on prior to giving a lecture in New Delhi yesterday. Schroeder delivered the seventh Rajiv Gandhi Memorial Lecture on 'Stability and Peace in a Globalised World'.

Palestinian state shelved with US blessing: Israel

3 Palestinians killed

REUTERS, AFP, Jerusalem

Israel's plan to withdraw from some occupied territory aims to rule out a Palestinian state indefinitely, with full US approval, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's chief of staff said Wednesday.

Dov Weisglass's remarks on the move to give up the Gaza Strip next year while keeping large chunks of the West Bank surprised US diplomats, who said Washington remained dedicated to a "road map" peace plan for a Palestinian state.

Sharon, wary of alienating Israel's key ally, said later he still backed the "road map" which was effectively dismissed by Weisglass in an interview published in Haaretz newspaper. Palestinians, whose calls for road map talks have been spurned by Israel's ruling right,

condemned Weisglass's message.

"I believe he has revealed the true intentions of Sharon. We told the quartet (of US-led peace mediators) eight months ago that the Gaza plan was designed to undermine their road map," said Negotiations Minister Saeb Erekat said.

Secretary of State Colin Powell said Washington thought Sharon was still committed to the peace plan: "There was never any doubt in our minds that that represents the prime minister's position and the position of the government of Israel," he said.

Weisglass's message, coinciding with a big Israeli offensive in Gaza, could help Sharon win over far-right foes who oppose abandoning the territory and may challenge his grip on power.

"The significance of our disengagement plan is the freezing of the peace process. It supplies the formaldehyde necessary so there is no political process with Palestinians," Weisglass said.

Meanwhile, three Palestinians, including two children, were killed by Israeli fire in the Gaza Strip Thursday as troops pressed on with a massive nine-day-old incursion in the north, Palestinian medics and the Israeli army said.

Palestinian doctors identified the two slain children as Silman Abu Ful and Raed Abu Zeid, both 14, and said their bodies had been ripped apart by what appeared to be a tank shell.

The Israeli army insisted the two people fired on had been "preparing to fire an improvised rocket".

EU to tighten sanctions against Myanmar

AFP, Hanoi

The European Union said Thursday it would slap tougher sanctions on Myanmar after the military-run state failed to heed EU demands including the release of detained democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The 25-nation bloc had warned last month that it would bolster the sanctions unless Myanmar's junta met the demands ahead of an Asia-Europe (Asem) summit opening in Hanoi today.

Dutch Foreign Minister Bernard Bot, whose country holds the bloc's rotating presidency, said EU nations were reluctantly attending the Asem summit partly "to exert pressure directly on the regime".

"Secondly (to say) that we will impose a new set of sanctions and also make that crystal clear at the same meeting," he said in Hanoi.

Bot said the decision to impose

the tighter sanctions, on top of a visa blacklist already in place against Myanmar leaders, would be taken at a meeting of EU foreign ministers in Luxembourg on Monday.

"I think it is also very important not only to give a political signal to Myanmar itself but also to other countries participating in this Asem meeting that the European Union does not condone this behaviour," he added.

A Dutch diplomat in Brussels said that "we have no other choice" but to expand the sanctions, arguing it was "absolutely clear" that the junta had failed to budge.

The EU foreign ministers are expected Monday to lengthen the visa blacklist, ban EU companies from financing state-owned firms and oppose lending by international institutions such as the World Bank.