

Assam slows drive against rebels after truce

AFP, Guwahati

India's troubled northeastern state of Assam said yesterday it had scaled back operations against tribal separatists who had agreed to a ceasefire, pending New Delhi's own announcement of a truce.

The state government had ordered security forces to cut back operations against the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) after the group said last week it was ready to halt its two-decade insurgency, a minister said.

"After we got a written communique from the NDFB expressing their desire for a ceasefire, we on our part have decided to reciprocate the offer," said Health Minister Bhumidhar Barman, part of a government team

in talks with the rebels.

"We have communicated the details of the ceasefire offer to New Delhi and are expecting a positive response by Saturday, mentioning the modalities and other ground rules for the truce," Barman told AFP.

"We believe the NDFB's offer is genuine and hence it is natural that the security operations be limited until the ceasefire proposal gets a formal nod from the central government," he said.

Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi last month asked the NDFB and another rebel group, the United Liberation Front of Assam (Ulfa), to agree to a ceasefire by October 15 and then hold peace talks.

The NDFB accepted the offer, but the Ulfa rejected it.

The outlawed NDFB, which is fighting for an independent homeland for the Bodo tribe in Assam, carried out a spate of killings in Assam over the last fortnight before announcing its acceptance of the ceasefire offer.

Observers have said the attacks were aimed at strengthening the group's bargaining hand before it sits down for negotiations with the government.

The NDFB is one of the region's frontline rebel armies with an estimated 1,500 fighters, who largely carry out hit-and-run attacks.

The Bodos, a primitive tribe most of whom are now either Hindus or Christians, account for about 10 percent of Assam's 26 million people and settled mostly in western and northern part of the state.

Iran says 'no' to total cease of nuclear acts

AFP, Tehran

Iran will reject any European proposal for a complete cessation of its work on the nuclear fuel cycle, but is willing to consider further "confidence-building" measures and extending a suspension of uranium enrichment, a top Iranian official told AFP yesterday.

"We would be willing to consider any package that recognises the full right of Iran to enjoy peaceful nuclear technology within the framework of the NPT (nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty)," Hossein Mousavian, a senior national security official involved in the nuclear negotiations, said in an interview.

"But Iran is not prepared for cessation. Any package including a cessation of fuel cycle work would be rejected by Iran," he added.

Mousavian said Iran expected the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to recognise its right under the NPT to possess the full nuclear fuel cycle.

If this were the case, he said the Islamic republic was ready to con-

sider extending its suspension of uranium enrichment and discuss new initiatives that would provide long-term guarantees that the process would never be diverted to military purposes.

His comments came after Britain, France and Germany -- who have been spearheading negotiations with Iran -- told the United States they will in the coming days offer Iran incentives to persuade it to halt uranium enrichment activities.

The so-called "EU Three" will offer the package of inducements as a November 25 deadline looms for Iran to comply with IAEA demands to suspend uranium enrichment and come clean about its nuclear ambitions or be referred to the UN Security Council for possible sanctions.

Diplomats say the package would give Iran access to imported nuclear fuel and other perks in return for a total suspension of its own work on the nuclear fuel cycle.



PHOTO: AFP

Chief Minister of Delhi Sheila Dikshit (R) and victorious Delhi State Assembly candidate Rajesh Lilotia (C, with garlands) gestures as they join supporters of India's Congress Party celebrating the victory of their party candidates in state assembly elections in New Delhi yesterday. India's ruling Congress Party and regional allies emerged victorious in the western state of Maharashtra and in one of the two seats in the capital.



PHOTO: AFP

Bombs exploded near five churches around Baghdad last morning followed by a mortar attack near a sixth church, causing damage but no casualties. Iraq's tiny Christian community has been heavily targeted in the unrest that has swept the country following last year's US-led invasion.

US asks Britain to deploy troops in more volatile parts of Iraq

AFP, London

The United States has asked Britain for their thoughts on sending troops on a "particular operation", but this is a fairly frequent occurrence, a British military spokesman said yesterday.

The comments came after Britain's Channel Four television reported that Washington wants London to deploy soldiers in more volatile parts of Iraq, as a new offensive on insurgent-held Fallujah looms.

"It is correct that the Americans have asked what are our thoughts are for doing a particular operation," Major Charles Mayo, spokesman for the British-led Multi-National Division South East, told AFP by telephone from the southern Iraqi city of Basra.

"There is a constant discussion involving a range of activities," he

said, playing down the significance of the request.

British planners reviewed the activities of the country's 8,000-strong military contingent in Iraq every day, Mayo added.

"In this environment you get requests all the time from MNF-I (the US-led Multi-National Forces in Iraq)," said the spokesman.

On Friday, Channel Four cited sources at the Ministry of Defence saying the US military had lodged a formal request for British troops to cover forces which are to be re-deployed for a renewed offensive against insurgents in the rebel city of Fallujah.

"It's understood that the commanding officer of the reserve battalion of the Black Watch is looking at a request for some 650 personnel to provide cover for the Americans," it said on its website, www.channel4.com.

Palestinians pick up pieces after Israeli offensive

REUTERS, Jabalya Refugee Camp

Palestinians picked over the rubble of more than two weeks of fighting in a refugee camp on Saturday after Israeli tanks quit northern Gaza to end a crushing offensive.

A spokesman for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said the army would be back if rocket fire into Israel, which triggered its most powerful assault in the Gaza Strip in four years of Israeli-Palestinian violence, continued.

More than 100 Palestinians were killed in the Israeli offensive, Palestinian medics said.

Residents in Jabalya, a refugee camp of 100,000 and the scene of fierce fighting between soldiers and militants, said Israeli tanks and bulldozers that churned through its alleyways destroyed dozens of homes and tore up roads and water pipes.

2 US soldiers, 5 others killed in Afghanistan

AP, AFP, Kabul

A bomb attack in southern Afghanistan killed two American soldiers and wounded three others, the US military said yesterday.

The attack Thursday in Uruzgan province, northwest of Deh Rawood, where a US military base is located, occurred less than a week after Afghanistan held landmark elections which passed off largely peacefully despite threats of attacks by Taliban-led rebels who had vowed to sabotage the vote.

Earlier five Afghans including a policeman were killed after a remote-controlled bomb exploded in eastern Afghanistan late Friday near a truck supplying food to US bases, an official said.

"Two coalition soldiers were killed and three wounded when their patrol was struck by an improvised explosive device," Maj. Mark McCann, a US military spokesman in Kabul, said in a brief statement.



Swing voters hold the key

This US polls could be tightest race on record

AFP, Massillon, Ohio

Political strategists determined early on that this year's White House race would come down to a block of uncommitted or "swing" voters in a smattering of US states.

Voters like Dennis Wuske, who is still sitting on the fence less than three weeks from the November 2 election in one of the tightest presidential races on record.

The 36-year-old is concerned about job losses, and alarmed at the amount of money flowing to Iraq when so many home programs are crying out for funding. But he cannot commit to switch from Republican President George W. Bush to

Democratic opponent John Kerry.

"My problem right now is changing leaders in the middle of the situation in Iraq," the Ohio native explained. "You know what to expect with Bush, whether you agree with him or not."

With the nation polarised, analysts say the election will turn on the support of undecided voters like Wuske in about 10 states where neither the Republicans nor the Democrats have a clear majority.

And nowhere is the battle for those votes more intense than in Stark County, Ohio, where independent-minded Ohians often switch parties and have a track record of backing the winner.

The county and the state narrowly backed Bush in 2000, and Leslie Riley, while she counts herself a Democrat, is sticking with the president.

"I feel more safe with Bush running the country," said the 50-year-old waitress during a brief respite from work at an Italian diner on main street. "I don't think Kerry supports our military."

Gerry Stopak, 57, voted for Democrat Bill Clinton and against the elder George Bush in 1992, but he's supporting the younger Bush this time.

"He's been consistent all the way through," Stopak said. Kerry "is just an opportunist," he added dismissively.

Nepal govt sees positive signs in Maoist truce

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government said yesterday the announcement of a nine-day ceasefire by Maoist rebels for an important Hindu festival was a "positive" omen for efforts to end the deadly insurgency wracking the nation.

"It would indicate the Maoists are positive for a peace dialogue and such a move from their side should hopefully hold in the long run," Information Minister Mohammad Mohsin told reporters.

But he said the government would have to examine closely the Maoist statement issued Friday and ensure it was genuine before issuing an official response.

The rebels said the nine-day ceasefire would start next Wednesday for Nepal's biggest

Hindu festival, Dasain, which celebrates the worship of the Hindu goddess Durga who vanquished demons and saved humanity. It is the kingdom's most popular festival, bringing together family and friends.

Newspaper commentators, human rights activists and political leaders hailed the ceasefire announcement made on a Web site and released to the media.

"The Maoist declaration of a ceasefire, however brief it may be, provides much-needed relief to the people who are fed up with the conflict," the English-language daily, The Kathmandu Post, said in an editorial.

"The respite will give all sides a chance to assess the ground reality and possibly help solve the problem through peaceful negotiations," it said.

5 nations win UNSC seats

AFP, United Nations

The United Nations Friday elected five new members of the UN Security Council for two-year terms starting on January 1 -- Argentina, Denmark, Greece, Japan and Tanzania.

Japan takes its seat amid a full-on campaign by Tokyo to get a permanent seat on an expanded council under a series of reforms that UN Secretary General Kofi Annan would like to see enacted next year.

The five will replace Angola, Chile, Germany, Pakistan and Spain among the council's 10 non-permanent members. The other five elected in 2003 have one year remaining: Algeria, Benin, Brazil, the Philippines and Romania.

With the departure of Pakistan at year's end, Algeria will be the only Muslim nation remaining on the council.

Military, families believe US sent too few troops into Iraq: Poll

AFP, Washington

US military staff and their families believe the United States sent too few troops into Iraq and put too great a burden on inexperienced National Guard and reserve forces, even though they support George W. Bush's overall handling of Iraq, a poll showed.

The Annenberg National Election Survey results came from polling of 655 adults who either had served on active duty between February and October, or who were family members of those who served; their results were contrasted with 2,436 adults polled nationwide from September 27-October 3.

"The military clearly likes President George W. Bush better than Senator John Kerry, and strongly believes in its mission in Iraq and his handling of it," said Adam Clymer, political director of the poll.

"But the military, without focusing on Bush himself, also has serious doubts about how the war has been managed," he added.

While 63 percent of the military sample approved of Bush handling of Iraq only 41 percent of the general public did, he said.

Sixty-two percent of the military sample said the US administration underestimated the number of troops needed in Iraq (58 percent of actual service members and 66 percent of family members).

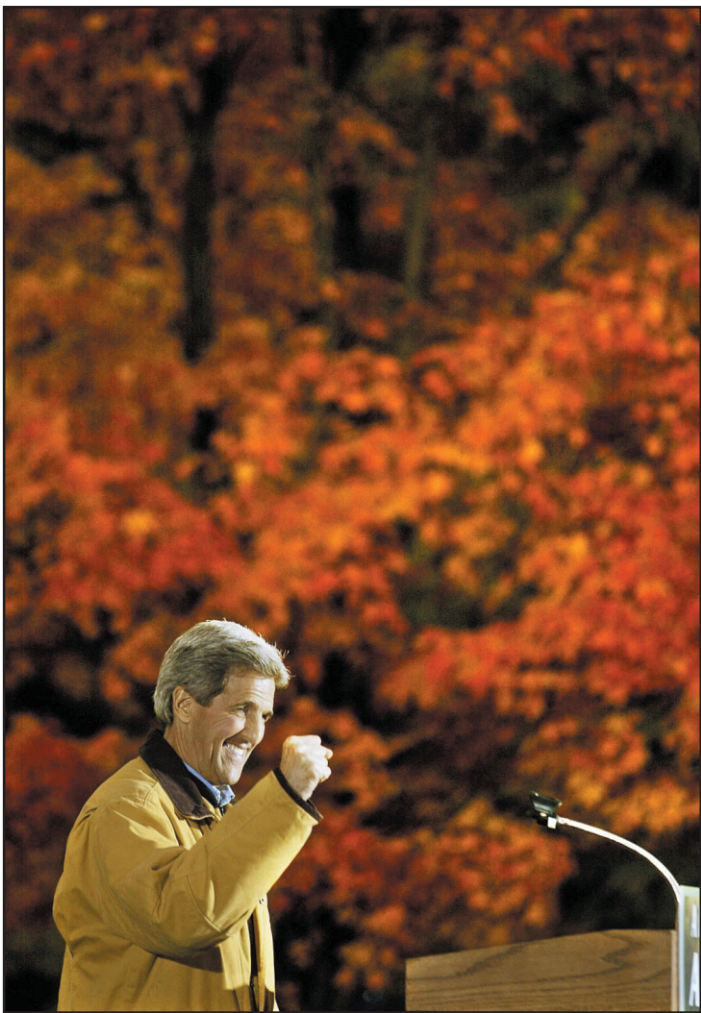


PHOTO: AFP

US Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry speaks at a campaign rally in Sheboygan, Wisconsin Friday. Kerry sharpened his populist tone in the US heartland, accusing President George W. Bush of bleeding the middle class while lining the pockets of the rich.