

2 militants die in gunbattle near Kashmir's main city

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops Wednesday shot dead two Islamic militants during a gunbattle near revolt-hit Kashmir's main city of Srinagar, the army said.

The fighting broke out early Wednesday when troops closed in on a house in which the rebels were hiding, said army spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Vijay Batra.

"Our boys have killed two militants so far. The fighting is going on in the area," he said.

The gunbattle was taking place at Gandherbal, about four kilometers from the revered Hindu shrine of Kheer Bhawani where thousands of Hindus have gathered for an annual festival.

In another incident, the body of a man was found in the southern town of Pulwama late Tuesday minus his arms, police said.

"The deceased had been kidnapped by militants and later brutally killed," a police statement said.



PHOTO: AP

Kashmiri students hold placards during a peace march in Srinagar yesterday. Hundreds of school children took part in the march organised by the Army in Srinagar to protest the recent bomb blast in Pulwama in which 15 people including three children were killed.

Karadzic will never surrender, says his brother

AFP, Banja Luka

The UN war crimes tribunal top fugitive Radovan Karadzic, charged for genocide during Bosnia's 1992-95 war, will never turn himself in, his brother told a local paper Wednesday.

"Everybody who knows Radovan knows that from the first day he decided not to surrender and he has the same attitude now," Luka Karadzic told the Nezavisne Novine daily.

"I do not know whether general (Ratko) Mladic is negotiating to surrender, but I know that my brother will not turn himself in since he does not recognize The Hague," court, he added.

He was referring to media reports that Serbia's authorities were in talks with Mladic, Karadzic's army chief wanted by the UN court over the same charges, about his possible surrender. However, the Belgrade authorities have denied such reports.

OIL FOR FOOD SCANDAL Annan in new probe

REUTERS, United Nations

A newly disclosed memo appeared to cast doubt on UN Secretary-General

Kofi Annan's insistence he was unaware of a bid by a Swiss firm that employed his son for a lucrative contract under the scandal-tainted UN oil-for-food program.

UN-appointed investigators were "urgently reviewing" the memo, Michael Holtzman, a spokesman for the Independent Inquiry Committee led by former US.

Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volcker, said on Tuesday.

The memo described a late-November 1998 Paris meeting of Annan with officials of Cotecna Inspection Services, just weeks before the Geneva-based company won the contract.

The contract has become a focus of Annan's critics, including several US Republican lawmakers who have accused him of mismanagement and called for his resignation.

Chief UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said Annan had no recollection of any such meeting during the trip to Paris, for a summit of French-speaking world leaders.

Annan's son, Kojo Annan, was a Cotecna consultant at the time of the encounter described in the memo, but it was unclear whether Kojo was present at the encounter. The document was written by Michael Wilson, a family friend of the Annans who was at the time a senior Cotecna executive.

The one-page Dec. 4, 1998, e-mail, a copy of which was obtained by Reuters, was addressed to top Cotecna executives and devoted just two sentences to the UN contract matter.

It stated: "We had brief discussions with the SG and his entourage. Their collective advise (sic) was that we should respond as best as we could to the Q&A session of the (sic) 1-12-98 and that we could count on their support."

The memo was first disclosed by the New York Times.

VHP wants Advani to go, BJP rejects

PTI, Chennai

The main opposition in India, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on Wednesday rejected the VHP's demand that LK Advani should quit politics and asked the Sangh Parivar outfit to "mind its own business."

"The BJP decides who should be its President and the VHP need not take any pains in this regard. We are a democratic and nationalist political party. We are capable of conducting our affairs," BJP Vice-President M Venkaiah Naidu said.

"VHP's suggestions or demands are not acceptable to us," he said.

"Advani was the man who set an agenda for a debate on the true meaning of secularism by tearing apart pseudo secular policies practiced by the parties with an eye on vote bank," he said.

Advani had agreed to take back his resignation from the presidency of the party only at the request of the entire partymen and hence there was no question of Advani accepting the VHP's demand, Naidu said.

17 killed in Iraqi army canteen attack

Australian hostage rescued

AFP, Baquba, Sydney

At least 17 soldiers were killed Wednesday when a man dressed in Iraqi army uniform blew himself up at a canteen on a military base northeast of Baghdad, security and hospital sources said.

"A massive explosion took place at about 1:00 pm (0900 GMT) inside a base in Khales and there are several dead and wounded," said Colonel Abdullah al-Shammari, an army spokesman.

An official at the Iraqi defense ministry confirmed the lunchtime attack and said all 17 dead were soldiers.

Most of the casualties were rushed to hospitals in Baquba, the provincial capital southeast of Khales.

An Iraqi soldier helping transport the casualties to Baquba said the attack

was carried out by a man dressed as an Iraqi soldier. The hospital said it only received 12 wounded so far.

In mid-April half a dozen Iraqis, most of them policemen were killed in a bomb attack against a restaurant in Baquba.

Meanwhile Australian Prime Minister John Howard announced Wednesday that Australian hostage Douglas Wood has been rescued from his captors in Iraq after a six-week ordeal.

Howard told parliament that Wood was in the hands of the Australian authorities in Baghdad and was undergoing medical checks, but was well.

"I am delighted to inform the house the Australian hostage in Iraq, Mr Douglas Wood, is safe from his captors," Howard said.

"I understand that he is well, he's undergoing medical checks at

the present time."

Howard did not detail how Wood was released but an Iraqi government spokesman in Baghdad said Iraqi soldiers had helped in the operation that freed the Australian.

Howard said the Australian had "suffered immensely" during his captivity.

Australia sent an emergency response team to Baghdad after Wood, 63, a US-based contractor, was seized in late April by a rebel group calling itself the Shura Council of the Mujahedeen of Iraq.

The group initially demanded Australia pull its troops out of Iraq in exchange for Wood's life, but the demand was rejected and was then apparently dropped by the militants.

'Laden alive and well'

REUTERS, Islamabad

Osama bin Laden is in good health, a Taliban commander said, dismissing speculation the fugitive al Qaeda leader was sick.

The commander, Mullah Akhtar Usmani, also said Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar was well and in direct command of Taliban forces in Afghanistan.

"All praise to Allah, he is all right," Usmani told Pakistan's GEO, a private television station, when asked about bin Laden in an interview broadcast on Wednesday.

Asked about reports bin Laden was sick, he said: "No, no, he is all right. There is no problem."

The private television station did not say where or when the interview was conducted. Usmani, who is on a 10-member Taliban leadership council and has been identified by the government as a top rebel commander, has in the past met reporters.

In the interview, his face was partly concealed by a black turban. An assault rifle was propped up at his side.

Blair, Chirac disagree over EU budget

AFP, Paris

British Prime Minister Tony Blair admitted Tuesday that this week's EU summit was unlikely to resolve the raging row over how the bloc is financed, citing "sharp disagreement" with French President Jacques Chirac over the massive farm budget.

Speaking after an hour of talks here with Chirac, Blair also said it was time for a "period of reflection" in Europe after the French and Dutch "no" votes on the EU constitution "so that we can give Europe the debate it needs and the direction it needs."

Blair was in Paris on the last leg of a four-nation tour originally focusing on issues such as global warming and African debt relief which will be on the agenda of the Group of Eight summit in Scotland next month.

But the trip was overshadowed by a bitter row over budget contributions to the EU, with Blair strenuously resisting French demands

that Britain's five billion euro (six billion dollar) annual rebate from European coffers be submitted for renegotiation.

In a press conference at the British embassy, Blair said that "obviously there is sharp disagreement (and) it is difficult to see these differences being bridged" when the 25 heads of state and government meet on Thursday and Friday.

He repeated the British line that the rebate -- which was won by Margaret Thatcher in 1984 -- can only be renegotiated as part of a broader rethink of European spending policy, including the 40 percent of the budget that currently goes on farm subsidies.

Chirac has refused to countenance any change to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of which France is by far the biggest beneficiary, and whose financing is assured up to 2013 under a deal worked out with Germany's help three years ago.



PHOTO: AFP

Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) and Sonia Gandhi, President of India's ruling Congress party arrive for talks in St. Petersburg yesterday. Sonia Gandhi arrived in Moscow for a four-day visit.