

India evicts Myanmar rebels from Mizoram

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Aizawl

India has evicted hundreds of Myanmar guerrillas from well-entrenched bases in Mizoram in a weeklong military operation, officials said yesterday.

A Mizoram police spokesman said paramilitary commandos launched Operation Hailstorm on the main base of the Chin National Army (CNA) near Mohre village, about 400 km south of the state capital Aizawl. The operation began June 17.

"The moment the operation was launched, CNA militants began fleeing to Myanmar in batches and by the time our troops zeroed in on their regular camp, we found all of them escaping to the other side of the border," Mizoram police chief Lalngthata told IANS.

"We believe there were about 200 rebels sheltered in that camp."

The CNA is the armed wing of the Chin National Force (CNF) founded in 1988 against the military-run Myanmar government and for

more autonomy for various ethnic minority groups in that country.

Many young Chin tribal youths from Myanmar entered India during the height of the pro-democracy uprising and later joined the CNF.

"The CNA rebels were involved in collecting tax from local people in Mizoram although they did not indulge in killings or kidnappings," the police chief said.

The area leading to the camp is heavily mined, with explosive experts and landmine sweepers now engaged in clearing the location.

"We believe up to 2,500 landmines planted all over their camp which they called Victoria," Lalngthata said. Police and intelligence officials say the Myanmar rebels had set up the camp at least a year ago and were taking advantage of the fact that the area was remote and unguarded and close to the international border.

India and Myanmar share a 1,640-km long unfenced border, of which 350 km lies along Mizoram.

"We have intensified security patrol in the border areas to prevent militants from Myanmar from entering the state once again," the police chief said.

In December, an army captain was killed in a raid inside Mizoram by Myanmar guerrillas belonging to the newly formed Chin International Army (CIA).

Several ethnic rebel groups from Myanmar have in the past made forays into parts of Mizoram for either carrying out extortion or for trafficking drugs, taking advantage of the rugged mountainous terrain along the border.

"We suspect groups like the CIA could be involved in drug trafficking as well," another police official said.

At least five frontline anti-India rebel armies operating in the country's northeast have bases in northern Myanmar from where they carry out their hit-and-run guerrilla strikes on troops in the region.

India's porous and mountainous northeastern frontiers, bordering Myanmar and Bangladesh, have

become one of the world's busiest small arms' bazaars, feeding insurgencies and rebellions across South Asia.

"The unfenced border area has always been a hot favourite with gunrunners. Illegal arms consignments reach the northeast via Bangladesh and Myanmar at frequent intervals," Mizoram Chief Minister Zoramthanga said.

"The only way to check the flow of illegal arms reaching the hands of underground outfits is to fence the international borders and intensify security in the area."

The chief minister was himself a top militant leader of the outlawed Mizo National Front before the outfit surrendered in 1986 and entered the political mainstream.

Most of the weapons, including AK-47 and AK-56 assault rifles, mortars, 40 mm rocket launchers, pistols, revolvers and grenades, come via the Arakans - a mountainous area in Myanmar - from parts of Thailand and Cambodia.



PHOTO: AFP
Iranian hardliner Mahmood Ahmadinejad surrounded by bodyguards waves to supporters as he enters a polling station in Tehran Friday. Ahmadinejad won an easy victory in Iran's presidential election, scoring 61.69 percent against moderate rival Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's 35.92 percent, according to final figures released yesterday.

Ahmadinejad victory deals final blow to reformers

AFP, Tehran

Hardliners have grabbed an unchallenged stranglehold on Iran with Mahmood Ahmadinejad's election victory, completing a long-running rout of reformers who are squeezed out of every position of power.

As the ultra-conservative Tehran mayor prepares for office, the landslide election victory of outgoing reformist President Mohammad Khatami in 1997 that spawned hopes of radical reform is but a misty and very remote memory.

In the halcyon early years of Khatami's eight-year term in office, reformers were able to pack key ministries, municipalities, parliament and provincial governments, boldly declaring they could forge major change in the Islamic republic.

But they were working against major barriers. Hardliners have always had firm control of the unelected institutions that act as the first defences of the Islamic republic, such as the powerful Guardians Council, the courts, the Revolutionary Guards and state media.

At the top of the pyramid stands

supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, whose overwhelming powers the religious right-wing has protected.

In 2004, conservatives won back control of the previously reformist parliament in legislative elections that saw a record low turnout, after the Guardians Council disqualified thousands of liberal candidates in pre-vote vetting.

And now they have seized the one prize that still eluded them -- Iran's presidency.

"The reformists have lost the initiative. They now have to adjust their moves according to conservatives, who have proven to be extremely hard on criticism," said reformist journalist Omid Memarian.

"The conservatives will restrict the press and critics just as they do now but they will become more assertive, stronger and more obvious," he added.

Ministers holding key portfolios such as oil, interior and culture will be on their way out. The long faces of the interior ministry officials glumly reading out results to journalists early Saturday morning told their own story.

Kashmiri rebels ready to resume talks with Delhi

High alert in valley after car bombing

REUTERS, AFP, Srinagar

Kashmiri separatist leaders, freshly returned from talks in Pakistan, said yesterday they wanted to resume suspended discussions with New Delhi.

They urged the government to set up the talks, aimed at deciding the future of Kashmir as part of a peace process between India and Pakistan after near-war in 2002.

"We talked to leaders in Pakistan and Azad (Pakistani) Kashmir and we want now talks between Kashmir and New Delhi and, if possible, with Indian opposition parties too," said Maulana Abbas Ansari.

Ansari is a moderate leader of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, which groups political, religious and community organisations, each variously pushing for independ-

ence, merger with Pakistan or a vote to choose between India and Pakistan.

Nine leaders of Hurriyat's moderate faction crossed to Pakistani Kashmir this month on a new bus run reuniting families divided by almost 60 years of war and rebellion, one of the most tangible signs of progress in the peace move.

Despite India's concerns, they also travelled on to Islamabad, where they met President Pervez Musharraf.

A dialogue between the Indian government and Kashmiri moderates broke down in August, 2004, after New Delhi insisted the talks be founded by the constitution, which says Kashmir is an integral part of India.

But when Musharraf made a groundbreaking visit to New Delhi in

April, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said he wanted to meet Hurriyat leaders.

"The peace process is on and laying conditions for talks has no place," Ansari said. "The entire world lives on hope, and we too hope, the Kashmir dispute can be resolved in near future."

Meanwhile, India's army went on high alert yesterday, to prevent more rebel attacks in revolt-hit Indian Kashmir's main city, a day after a car bomb killed nine Indian soldiers and injured 17 people.

Troops used sniffer dogs to check for landmines, searched vehicles, and checked identity papers in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir where a deadly Islamic revolt against New Delhi's rule has raged since 1989.

Descendant of Mughal emperors stakes claim to Taj Mahal

AFP, New Delhi

A descendant of India's Mughal emperors has staked a claim to ownership of the world's most famous monument to love, the Taj Mahal, amid a row between Hindus and Muslims over its custody, a report said yesterday.

Prince Yaqub Habeebuddin Tacy, whose family traces its lineage to the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan who built the white marble tomb, staked the claim saying he wanted "to protect the monument from falling into the wrong hands," the Asian Age daily said.

The magnificent 17th-century Taj Mahal built by the emperor as a tomb for his beloved queen, Mumtaz Mahal, is owned and managed by the Archaeological Survey of India as a national monument.

However, the Muslim community's Sunni Waqf Board recently claimed ownership of the monument, saying since it housed Muslim graves, the Taj belonged to it.

Lankan Muslims boycott tsunami aid deal

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main Muslim party said yesterday it will boycott a landmark tsunami aid-sharing deal between the government and rebels that is seen as a prelude to resuming stalled peace negotiations.

The announcement compounded worries for the shaky minority government.

The Norwegian-brokered deal signed Friday between Colombo and the Tamil Tigers has been widely hailed as a prelude to restarting peace talks between the two sides.

But Muslims said they feared it would make them more marginalised.

The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) party said they had been ignored in the deal clinched in secret despite Muslims being a "principle stakeholder" in embattled regions.

"We want a review of the joint mechanism and if not we will not

participate in it," SLMC leader Rauf Hakeem told reporters here. "We must have some mechanism (to deliver tsunami aid), but this is not the way to go about it."

Hakeem said their demands went beyond mere representation in the three-tier mechanism set up Friday and they wanted to be recognised as a key stakeholder.

"We have been relegated to a secondary minority community, but everyone knows without our cooperation this cannot work."

Under the deal, the government and the Tigers will jointly handle millions of dollars in foreign aid for survivors of the December 26 tsunami, which killed at least 31,000 people and displaced one million in the country.

Hakeem said the party will use "non-cooperation" as a political tool to force the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and government to review the deal.

Muslims are Sri Lanka's second-largest minority after Tamils and account for about 7.5 percent of the country's 19.5 million population. The majority Sinhalese represent 70 percent while the rest are ethnic Tamils.

Hakeem, who is a member of parliament and has six legislators with him in the 225-member national assembly where President Chandrika Kumaratunga's government is a minority, said he was asking other Muslims to unite with him.

Most of the tsunami destruction was in the embattled north and east, much of which is dominated by the Tigers.

But Muslims say more than half the victims were from their community and therefore they should have a greater voice in aid distribution.

Hakeem said Friday's deal would have serious implications for the Muslim community in a future peace deal between the government and the Tamil Tigers. The Muslims fear such an agreement would ignore their aspirations.

Tsunami aid 'went to the richest'

BBC ONLINE

Six months after the Asian tsunami, a leading international charity says the poorest victims have benefited the least from the massive relief effort.

A survey by Oxfam found that aid had tended to go to businesses and landowners, exacerbating the divide between rich and poor.

The poor were likely to spend much longer in refugee camps where it is harder to find work or rebuild lives.

Oxfam has called for aid to go to the poorest and most marginalised.

They must not be left out of reconstruction efforts, the charity said.

The tsunami in the Indian Ocean on 26 December killed at least 200,000 people in countries as far apart as Indonesia, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Somalia.

David Loyn, the BBC's developing world correspondent, says it is perhaps not surprising that the poorest suffered the most from the disaster itself.



PHOTO: AFP
A prisoner is crucified by his fellow inmates during a protest demanding the reduction of sentences at the courtyard of Number III Prison Friday in Quito. Ecuador's inmates have taken control of the interiors of seven of Ecuador's 34 prisons, which house some 11,650 inmates, though they were built to house only 6,500.

Bush acknowledges 'grim' images of daily Iraq violence

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush yesterday acknowledged the "grim" daily images of violence in Iraq but again insisted that US efforts to stabilise the troubled country are working.

As part of a campaign to overcome growing public disquiet about the US presence in Iraq, Bush set out his "two-track strategy" to overcome insurgents and establish democracy.

"The military track of our strategy is to defeat the terrorists and continue helping Iraqis take greater responsibility for defending their freedom," he said in his weekly radio address.

"The images we see on television are a grim reminder that the enemies of freedom in Iraq are ruthless killers with no regard for human life."

Bush said "the terrorists' objective is to break the will of America and of the Iraqi people before democracy can take root."

The bitter insurgency and the mounting toll on US forces in recent months have severely dented support for the Iraq campaign among the public and lawmakers.

But Bush highlighted how the US-nominated Iraqi Governing Council had kept working through insurgent threats and the transfer of sovereignty one year ago went ahead as did the country's elections in January.

"Now the terrorists are trying to undermine the new government and intimidate Iraqis from joining the growing Iraqi security forces. Yet democracy is moving forward, and more and more Iraqis are defying the terrorists by joining the democratic process."



PHOTO: AFP
Firemen and social workers search for residents trapped under the rubble of the three-storey 'Pushpanjali' residential building that collapsed at Khar in Mumbai Friday. The four decades old building was occupied by five families. Four people died and three were pulled out from under the debris, while three people are still feared to be trapped.

Israeli settler killing hits ME truce hard

REUTERS, Hebron

Palestinian gunmen killed a Jewish settler and wounded several more in a West Bank drive-by shooting on Friday in a new blow to a faltering Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire.

The attack, the second killing of a settler in four days, followed Israel's detention of 63 suspected Islamic Jihad militants in the West Bank and resumption of a policy of assassinating the group's leaders.

The ceasefire agreed in February has been fraying for weeks in Gaza, raising the spectre of disruption to Israel's planned pullout from the territory later this year.

Several other settlers were wounded when militants fired from a passing car at a hitch-hiking post near the West Bank city of Hebron and shortly afterwards at a vehicle near a settlement, the Israeli army said.

The militants fled the area in the southern West Bank and Israeli troops launched a search backed up by helicopter gunships, witnesses said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack. On Monday, Islamic Jihad militants shot dead a settler in a drive-by attack in the northern West Bank.

The resurgence of violence marred a summit between Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas on Tuesday, and on Wednesday Israel reactivated its "targeted killing" policy against Islamic Jihad leaders.

Sharon's adviser, Raanan Gissin, told Reuters that, if Abbas did not act to stop gunmen, Israel would "take all the necessary steps to bring perpetrators to justice. We will pursue them."

The Israeli prime minister has accused Abbas of not living up to pledges to disarm militant groups, a precondition for US-backed "road map" peace talks aimed at giving the Palestinians a state in the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza.

The Palestinian leader said Israel's slowness to ease burdens of occupation, such as closed borders

and roadblocks, left him little leverage to crack down on gunmen.

If the truce unravels, Israel's planned August evacuation of 21 settlements in Gaza and four of 120 in the West Bank could come into question, as Sharon has vowed no "retreat under fire."

Militants say Israel has provoked them by continuing raids for wanted comrades. Israel says militants have resumed shooting to force Abbas to share power with them and torpedo peacemaking.

On Friday, the official Palestinian news agency Wafa said Abbas intended to create a special security force to fill a potential power vacuum after the Israeli pullout.

"President Abbas has ordered the formation of a new special force to be trained and equipped to assume responsibility for protecting the areas Israel will vacate," Wafa said.

It condemned Israel's revival of its assassination policy as counter-productive to trust understandings but added: "(Militant) factions are called upon to show restraint."

China issues flood emergency

AFP, Beijing

China's president has ordered government bureaux to step up emergency flood control and relief efforts after torrential rains left 732 people dead or missing ahead of the traditional rainy season.

President Hu Jintao gave the order after the Civil Affairs Ministry announced 567 people had died and 165 were missing in flooding this year with economic losses estimated at 22.9 billion yuan (2.76 billion dollars).

"Faced with a serious fight against floods... we must quickly step up efforts at organising construction and inspections of major dykes, reservoirs and reserve flood areas," Hu told a meeting on flood prevention and control, according to Saturday's People's Daily newspaper.

"We must guarantee the safety of all major transport routes and mid-size and big cities."

"The life of the people must be the number one priority, people in endangered areas must be immediately evacuated and their living arrangements must be appropriately met."

Although relentless rains in

southern parts of the country were expected to ease, water levels on the Pearl river remained at record highs as they surged toward the regional capital of Guangzhou, officials said.

Huang Huahua, governor of the booming industrial Guangdong province, urged the government to fast-track relief efforts throughout the province, including the provincial capital, which was experiencing the worst rains in 90 years.

"July and August is the main flooding season in China, all major rivers and waterways may experience big floods at any time," Chen Jianlong, spokesman of the state anti-flood headquarters said in a daily briefing.

"The damages caused by flooding along the Pearl River and the Min River are still serious."

"The number of collapsed homes is very big and damage to farm lands, water resources, roads, railways and other infrastructure is very serious."

More than 44 million people have been affected by flooding in China this year, leading to the emergency evacuation of some 2.45 million, the civil affairs ministry said.

Bush admn asks Japan to extend Iraq mission

8 Iraqi policemen killed in attacks

AFP, REUTERS, Washington/Ramadi

The United States has reportedly asked Japan to extend its humanitarian mission in Iraq, while President George W. Bush's campaign to stir more support was undermined by a suicide bomber who killed at least two US marines.

Although Tokyo had not yet responded to the US request, a senior Japanese official was quoted by Kyodo News Saturday as saying an extension would be "inevitable" if US-led forces stayed in Iraq beyond December, when 600 Japanese troops were due to leave.

But it is Japan's first military deployment since 1945 to a country at war, and government spokesman Hiroyuki Hosoda said that in the end, Tokyo would make its own decision.

"Japan will not do things only because other countries ask us. We will make a decision independently,"

Hosoda told a political meeting Saturday.

An extension would boost Bush's public relations campaign to raise support for the US-led war in Iraq, which was hit by the attack against US troops near Fallujah, a volatile Sunni-dominated city west of Baghdad.

Meanwhile, visiting Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari late Friday sought to ease sectarian concerns about the shape of Iraq's future government and denounced those who continued to foment violence against it.

"There is a strong determination of the Iraqi people to succeed on this path," Jaafari said at a news conference.

Earlier, the prime minister, who arrived Thursday in Washington, met with President George W. Bush and US congressional leaders to discuss the process of drafting a

new Iraqi constitution, which must be finished by August 15.

Voters are expected to evaluate it in a referendum by October 15 and choose a new government in December.

Meanwhile, the bodies of eight Iraqi policemen, five Shia poultry vendors and a Shia Baghdad municipal official were found in three separate areas in and around the capital yesterday, said security sources and relatives.

Gunmen attacked a police station near the city of Ramadi, west of Baghdad, yesterday, killing eight police officers, a police chief said.

Around 20 insurgents attacked the police station on a highway outside Ramadi, which is the capital of Anbar province, Brigadier General Shakir Mohammed Salih, the chief of police in Anbar, said.

"Eight policemen were killed and one was wounded," he said.