25 killed in Kashmir

Army breaks up hunt for militants

SRINAGAR, January 4 (AFP): Indian troops killed 25 people in Kashmir Friday as they broke up a hunt for militants in the Muslim-majority region, police said.

Police said the dead included 15 rebels and 10 civilians who were caught in the crossfire between the rebels and security forces.

The rebels had taken refuge in a house in the village of Kandi in the Rajouri district, about 150 kilometres (90 miles) south of the Kashmir valley, when the army began its operation early Friday morning, police said.

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Rebels have been fighting for independence for Kashmir or its merger with Pakistan since 1989 in a conflict that has left more than 68,000 people dead, according to rights groups.

Pak to arrange Musharraf-Bhutto talks: Chaudhry

ISLAMABAD, January 4 (AFP): Pakistan's ruling party will try to arrange talks between President Pervez Musharraf and his rival Benazir Bhutto, a senior party official said Friday.

"We will try to arrange a meeting between President Musharraf and Bhutto," said Tariq Azim Khan, a senior member of the ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid-e-Azam (PML-Q) party.

Bhutto, who was prime minister twice before she was ousted in 1996 on corruption charges, is the leader of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the biggest opposition party in the country.

Musharraf, who is also the army chief, imposed a state of emergency on November 3 and sacked the country's top judges, including the chief justice, who had been preparing to rule on the legality of his re-election.

Bhutto had been under house arrest for more than a week before she was released on Friday.

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Nepal's Maoist rebel leaders Prachanda (second from left) and Baburam Bhattarai (second from right) pose with their wives after the former rebels formally registered their political party with the election commission in Kathmandu on January 4. The Maoists, who have joined the country's interim government, are preparing for elections in April. PHOTO: AFP

Nepal govt, Maoists agree on ceasefire code for peace CA envoy

KATHMANDU, January 4: Nepal's government and Maoist former rebels have agreed on a ceasefire code of conduct ahead of elections in April, a peace envoy of the United Nations said Friday.

The code of conduct, which was signed by the two sides on Thursday, bans the use of weapons by political parties and their supporters during the election campaign, said Ian Martin, the UN envoy who helped broker the deal.

The code also bans the use of government resources for political purposes and prohibits the deployment of the army and armed police during the election campaign, he said.

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Manmohan embarks on US mission to boost ties

NEW DELHI, January 4 (AFP): Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh left for Washington Friday for talks with President George W Bush on boosting ties between the two countries.

Singh will also meet with US Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice during his three-day visit to the US capital, a spokesman said.

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Lankan court blow to aid deal dims early peace talks hope

COLOMBO, January 4 (AFP): A court ruling against a deal between the government and rebels to provide aid to tsunami victims has dimmed hopes for early peace talks between the two sides, analysts said Friday.

The Supreme Court on Thursday said the deal was illegal because it was made with the Tamil Tiger rebels who are proscribed as a terrorist group by the government.

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3 UK soldiers, 7 Iraqi cops killed in attacks

BASRA, January 4: Three British soldiers and seven Iraqi police were killed in attacks in southern Iraq, the British military said Friday.

The three soldiers were killed when their armoured vehicle was struck by a roadside bomb in the city of Basra, the military said in a statement.

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Blair lashes out at 'evil ideology' of extremism

LONDON, January 4 (AFP): Prime Minister Gordon Brown Friday said Britain was fighting an "evil ideology" of extremism and said it was important to defeat it in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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Harry Potter mania sweeps the planet

NEW YORK, January 4 (AFP): Harry Potter mania swept the planet Friday as the last book in the wizard series went on sale in a blitz of publicity and midnight parties.

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ME truce in tatters: Hamas, Israel clashes

GAZA, January 4 (AFP): Hamas and Israel clashed Friday in the Gaza Strip, ending a month-long truce between the Palestinian militant group and the Israeli military.

Hamas said it had fired rockets and mortars at Israel in retaliation for an Israeli raid on the Gaza Strip on Thursday that killed three Hamas militants.

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Musharraf rejects regard plans in Pak-US ties

ISLAMABAD, January 4 (AFP): President Pervez Musharraf Friday said he had rejected plans in the US to provide Pakistan with a "regard" in its relations with the US.

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