

# 9 die in fresh Kashmir fighting ahead of I-Day

## Militants reject truce call

AFP, Srinagar

Nine people have died in fresh fighting in Indian Kashmir, police said yesterday, as troops intensified search operations on the eve of India's Independence Day which separatists observe as a "black day".

Three Islamic militants and two soldiers died in a fierce clash in northern Baramulla district late Saturday, a police official said, and another militant died in a clash in southern Poonch district.

Police also accused militants of killing two Muslim civilians and a village defence committee member in southern Doda district late Saturday.

Rebels opposed to Indian rule in divided Kashmir mostly target people they suspect of working for Indian troops or for pro-India political parties.

The fresh violence comes ahead of Monday's celebrations marking the day in 1947 when Britain granted independence to India.

A day before India's independence, Pakistan won its freedom from Britain. Many rebels and separatists want Indian Kashmir to merge with Pakistan. Others want total independence from the two countries, who each hold part of the region but claim it in full.

Security is strengthened every year on August 15. Rebels have disrupted official celebrations in the past by hurling grenades and firing rockets and assault rifles at venues.

Residents said more troops and police have been deployed in the summer capital Srinagar, the urban hub of a 16-year Islamic insurgency against Indian rule.

The main function is slated for Srinagar's Bakshi Stadium, where the region's Chief Minister Mufti

Mohammed Sayeed and other top pro-India politicians and bureaucrats will be in attendance.

The popular soccer stadium has been targeted in the past.

"We have intensified search operations to keep militants at bay," a paramilitary officer near the stadium told AFP, asking not to be named.

Earlier two Kashmiri militant groups in India have rejected a call by the region's top woman politician for a truce, saying their "Jihad" or holy war would continue until the region was wrested from India.

The Himalayan region's top woman politician appealed to Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf Thursday to help bring peace to the revolt-hit region by persuading Islamic militants to declare a ceasefire.

# Iran warns Bush against attack

AFP, REUTERS, Tehran

Iran warned US President George W. Bush yesterday that he would be making a mistake to use force against the Islamic republic over its nuclear programme.

"Bush should know that our capabilities are much greater than those of the United States," foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi told reporters.

"We don't think that the United States will make such a mistake."

The US president on Friday refused to rule out the use of force against Iran over its resumption of nuclear activities, saying "all options are on the table."

Bush said he could consider using force as a last resort to press Iran to give up its nuclear programme.

Bush told Israeli television: "The use of force is the last option for any president. You know we have used force in the recent past to secure our country," he said in a clear reference to Iraq, which the United States invaded in March 2003.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani girls applaud during a ceremony to celebrate the country's Independence Day in Karachi yesterday.

# Iraq races to meet charter deadline

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq was racing against time to wrap up its new constitution but the ousted Sunni Arab elite played hard over federalism, raising concerns the new charter may not be ready ahead of today's deadline.

Iraqi leaders claimed they were under tremendous US pressure to draft the constitution by Monday, while Sunni Arab members of the draft panel said they would reject a federal structure for Iraq.

"We will not accept federal system in the constitution," Saleh al-Motlag, a Sunni panel member, told AFP.

"It will be left to the people of Iraq to decide the administrative and political system they want after the next elections. This is a red line for us as it concerns the unity of Iraq and we will not bargain on this."

Parliament speaker Hajim Al-Hasani said leaders were still discussing the contentious issues and had not reached any solution.



PHOTO: AFP

A donkey cart passes near a Palestinian security post in the refugee camp of Khan Yunes yesterday. Israeli and Palestinian security forces were gearing up to play their parts in the historic Gaza Strip pullout as the clock ticked towards a midnight deadline for settlers to leave the territory voluntarily.

# Israel, Palestinians on alert for Gaza pullout

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli and Palestinian forces prepared to move into position yesterday to secure the evacuation of Jewish settlements in occupied Gaza with tension rising over the threat of disruption.

In a pre-dawn "friendly fire" incident, Palestinian militants fired on the settlement of Kfar Darom and an Israeli tank shot back, hitting a Palestinian gunman and wounding five soldiers also responding to the attack, the army said.

"From Sunday morning, Israeli police are going to be on their highest alert," national police commissioner Moshe Karadi said, announcing a series of roadblocks in southern Israel to block opponents of the pullout from slipping into Gaza settlements.

The army said 3,000-4,000 ultra-rightists had already made it into the Gush Katif bloc of settlements despite a month-old ban on new residents, reinforcing the estimated third to half of the 8,500 inhabitants

expected to resist evacuation.

Aside from some 50,000 Israeli troops and police assigned to pull-out tasks, a 5,000-strong Palestinian force was to deploy near the Jewish enclaves to prevent any bid by militants to disrupt the evacuation due to begin on Wednesday.

Palestinian Interior Minister Nasser Youssef ordered his forces to raise their "level of readiness" to 100 percent.

Thousands of army officers plan on Monday to fan through all 21 Gaza settlements and four of 120 in the West Bank due to be uprooted, knocking on doors to tell settlers they had until midnight Tuesday to leave on their own or be forcibly ejected.

Israeli media said the Gaza settler council had decided the enclaves would lock their entry gates to soldiers coming to carry out Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's plan to "disengage" from occupied territories he deems to have no security value.

# New anti-hijack policy allows India to gun down planes

AFP, New Delhi

India has finalised a policy to deal with the hijacking of airliners that rules out negotiations with hijackers and allows the shooting down of aircraft deemed to have been turned into "missiles", media reported yesterday.

The policy, approved by the security cabinet last week, states that any attempt to hijack an aircraft will be deemed an act of aggression against the country and prompt a response "fit for an aggressor", the Indian Express said.

According to the policy, an airborne hijacked aircraft will be escorted by air force fighter jets at all times when it is within Indian airspace.

If an Indian-registered aircraft is hijacked, the strategy will be to get it to land at an Indian airport. Once on the ground, airport personnel will take steps to ensure it does not take off again.

# PAKISTAN MARKS I-DAY Musharraf vows to fight extremists

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf yesterday urged people to reject extremists who want "to drag Pakistan into darkness" as the nation celebrated its 58th independence day amid high security.

"I appeal to the nation to reject the retrogressive elements politically and socially as they are opposed to progress," said Musharraf, who has launched a campaign against religious militancy and terrorism.

"The nation should reject elements who want to drag Pakistan into darkness," he said in a message on state television.

Security was tightened across the country for fear of a backlash over a recent crackdown against suspected militants.

Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz unfurled the national flag in Islamabad's main Convention Centre rather than the usual outdoor

venue outside parliament.

"Security has been beefed up in all four provinces to thwart any untoward situation during Independence Day celebrations," a security official told AFP.

"There is no specific threat in the country and the security forces are already on high alert following a crackdown against extremist elements."

Police set up checkpoints and vehicles were checked at key intersections while hospitals, firefighters and emergency services were put on alert.

Musharraf, a key ally in the US-led "war on terror", last month ordered a crackdown against extremists and security forces netted more than 800 suspected militants in raids across the country.

He has also promised to expel some 1,400 foreign students from madrasas (Islamic seminaries), sparking widespread anger.