

Four die in latest Kashmir violence

AFP, Srinagar

Two Islamic militants, a policeman and a Muslim contractor have been killed in the latest bout of separatist violence in revolt-hit Indian Kashmir, police said Thursday.

The militants were killed in the district of Pulwama, south of the summer capital Srinagar, late Wednesday during a clash with Indian troops, a police spokesman said.

He said suspected rebels shot dead a contractor, Ghulam Bhat, in the same district around the same time.

"Police are ascertaining why he was targeted," the spokesman said. None of the one dozen rebel groups fighting to end Indian rule in Kashmir has claimed responsibility for the killing.

Rebels often target people they suspect of working for Indian troops or pro-India political parties.

Musharraf faces test in local elections

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani voters went to the polls Thursday for local elections that are being seen as a test of President Pervez Musharraf's fight against Islamic hardliners and his commitment to women's rights.

Security was high with tens of thousands of troops and police guarding polling stations across the country to guard against violence between rival supporters in the first elections here in almost three years.

Islamists, who traditionally have won only a small share of the vote, are trying to seize seats at the expense of the pro-Musharraf ruling party, the Pakistan Muslim League Quaid, and the two main secular opposition parties.

Hardliners have been enraged by military ruler Musharraf's crackdown on Islamic extremism and

madrassas, or religious schools, in the wake of the July 7 London bombings.

Musharraf, a key US ally, appealed to Pakistanis to reject "retrogressive elements politically and socially" in a speech to mark the country's Independence Day on Sunday.

The polls -- split into two rounds, with the next on August 25 -- are part of a reform plan devised by Musharraf to give more power to the grassroots after he took office in a bloodless coup in 1999.

Meanwhile female candidates and voters are set to defy efforts by an alliance of Islamic parties that rule ultra-conservative North West Frontier Province to ban them from taking part in the elections.

After an outcry by rights groups, Pakistan's electoral commission has said it will annul any results in

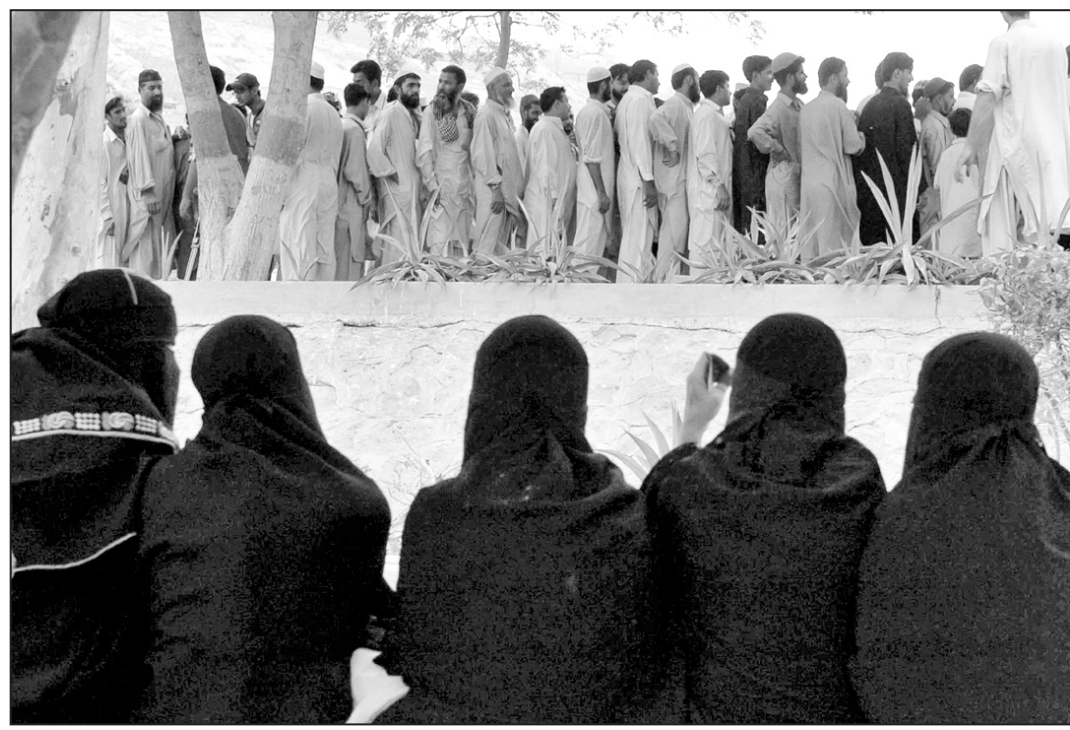
districts where women have been barred from contesting their ballots.

Electoral chief Abdul Hameed Dogar also ordered a probe into reports that one candidate offered to marry off his three-year-old daughter to a rival politician.

Women candidates, who make up nearly a fifth of the 114,000 people standing in the elections across the country, have expressed fears they will still be threatened and have called for extra police protection.

Around half of Pakistan's 63 million electorate is taking part in the first round of voting for new councillors and mayors. The rest will vote in the second round.

In Karachi, Pakistan's violence-plagued largest city, around 55,000 army troops, paramilitary rangers and police have been deployed, police said Thursday.



Pakistani women wait before casting their vote as men stand in a queue outside a polling station in Karachi yesterday. Pakistani voters went to the polls for local elections that are being seen as a test of President Pervez Musharraf's fight against Islamic hardliners and of his commitment to women's rights.

Business-savvy Ulfa outsources terror

HTIMES, Guwahati

Outsourcing makes a lot of business sense these days. Even for terror merchants in the Northeast of India.

Having corporatised its structure some time back, the outlawed Ulfa is increasingly outsourcing its subversive operations to strike terror without putting its cadres' lives at risk or exposing its dwindling firepower.

Apparently inspired by global corporate giants, the Ulfa has been hiring agents to trigger IED blasts, lob grenades or even gun down certain people. According to intelligence officials, such agents do anything for money, charging Rs 5,000-10,000 for an assignment.

Such strikes, however, have their "disadvantages". They can misfire like the Tuesday morning IED blast at Digboi parade ground that was meant for the Independence Day programme the previous day. They can also result in "overkill" like the August 11 explosion at Boko that killed four persons instead of just "scaring the authorities".

"Compared to previous years, there is a qualitative change in the Ulfa attacks now," said Union Home Secretary V.K. Duggal here. "The number of incidents has gone up, but there are less casualties today."



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah (R) shakes hands with Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer (L) as they unveil a plaque to open the new Afghan embassy in Canberra yesterday.

Sri Lanka extends state of emergency

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's parliament Thursday extended the state of emergency imposed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga shortly after the assassination of the foreign minister by suspected Tamil Tiger rebels.

The assembly voted 124 for and 21 against extending the tough emergency laws being used by police probing Friday's killing of Lakshman Kadirgamar, who had been a tough critic of the rebel group.

"We need the emergency to investigate the assassination," Public Security Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake said. "Tigers continue to violate the ceasefire and that is why we need the emergency laws to continue."

Earlier Sri Lanka's parliament began debating the issue of emergency imposed by President Chandrika Kumaratunga shortly after the assassination of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar.

The assembly, where Kumaratunga's government is a minority, began a special session to discuss the emergency that grants sweeping powers to police and troops to arrest suspects without warrants.

"We will have a six-hour debate

to discuss the emergency," government spokesman Nimal Siripala de Silva had said. "We are hopeful it will be approved overwhelmingly."

The main opposition United National Party said it would provide conditional support to ratify the emergency.

"We support the emergency on the basis it will be used only for this investigation and not against political opponents," a party spokesman said.

Kumaratunga used emergency powers for the first time in 46 months to give more powers to security forces to arrest suspects in connection with Kadirgamar's assassination last Friday.

The president recalled parliament from its regular recess to approve the emergency. If she is unable to obtain parliament's approval within seven days of proclamation, it lapses after 10 days.

Parliament can approve an emergency only for a month at a time.

Police have rounded up scores of suspects but no arrests have been made. The government has accused the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of carrying out the murder.

However, the LTTE has denied involvement.

Muslim women must contest elections under veil

PTI, Muzaffarnagar

In yet another controversial fatwa, Islamic seminary Darul Uloom has ruled that Muslim women in India should not contest elections and if they have to do they must do it under veil, evoking sharp reactions from political parties.

"Muslim women are not allowed to appear before men without a veil and under the Islamic law pardanashin women are only allowed to contest elections," the Darool Uloom of Deoband said in the edict issued on Tuesday.

It said those who are contesting panchayat elections must cover their faces.

Various political parties have reacted sharply to the edict with Congress leader and Law Minister HR Bharadwaj saying edicts coming from the religious groups have no significance under the constitution and it is up to the people whether they want to abide by them or not.

Congress MP Rashid Alvi said if Muslim women do not contest elections entire community will lag behind. They have to progress if the country has to progress.

CPI(M) leader Sitaram Yechury condemned it by saying the Constitution has given women equal rights as their male counterpart and we will not let this right be infringed.

1984 SIKH CARNAGE Ex-minister says he is not guilty

AFP, New Delhi

A former Indian government minister accused of helping organise anti-Sikh riots in 1984 in which 4,000 people were killed denied in parliament Thursday any role in the carnage.

Tyler's statement came after an inquiry commission report tabled early last week in parliament said he "very probably" helped organise the riots that erupted in New Delhi after premier Indira Gandhi was slain by Sikh bodyguards.

Tyler, who quit as junior minister for expatriate Indians a week ago, said he was nowhere near the Indian capital when roving gangs dragged out Sikh families, killing men and boys and raping women.

"Surely, the falsehood repeated cannot become truth... The accusations are bizarre because the blood in my vein is from a Sikh family. My brother is married into a Sikh family..." Tyler said.

Meanwhile, the ruling Congress party, which also was in power at the time of the riots, Thursday removed billboards hailing Tyler as a national leader.

"Let's hope the Congress dumps Tyler as fast as we are tearing down his posters," said municipal worker Vikas Sangar, dragging a billboard with Tyler's photograph near city

police headquarters.

The Congress party now is led by the assassinated premier's daughter-in-law, Sonia Gandhi.

Last Thursday, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, himself a Sikh, apologised in parliament for the riots after the Nanavati Commission report said August 8 that some Congress leaders may have helped incite the riots.

In parliament's lower house Tyler said he had been unjustly accused.

"For reasons best known to the Nanavati Commission, it found it fit to drag in my name merely to give credence to baseless and vile allegations levelled by my adversaries," he said.

Tyler's statement came as London-based Amnesty International called for the guilty to be brought to justice.

"Twenty-one years after the violence against Sikhs in 1984, virtually no one has been held to account," the human rights group said in a statement.

"The organisation is concerned about further delays in the pursuit of justice for these victims and continuing impunity for its perpetrators," the Press Trust of India quoted the statement as saying.

Now 'healthy beer' in India

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian firm has launched a vitamin-rich beer which it says protects the body from the harmful effects of alcohol, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

Ladybird Bio Beer contains aloe-vera extracts as well as the normal ingredients of barley malt and hops, said its inventor B. Srinivas Amarnath.

He said research showed that it did not harm the liver or cause ulcers and gastric illness.

"The results of human clinical trials have shown aloe vera increases the bioavailability of vitamins like B1, B6, B12, C and E," said C.B. Jagannatha Rao, senior vice president of Khoday group of industries.

The beer was launched in the southern Indian state of Kerala Wednesday by Khoday in partnership with Amarnath's firm, Advaita Biotech.

Amarnath said consignments of the beer had been exported to Canada and customers from Malaysia and the United States had also expressed interest.