

Pak forces kill 40 rebels in tribal belt fighting

AFP, Miranshah

Pakistani troops have killed up to 40 Islamic militants, about half of them foreigners, during recent clashes in a lawless tribal area bordering Afghanistan, the military said yesterday.

Soldiers launched a major offensive in the rugged North Waziristan region on Thursday against insurgents with alleged links to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

It is part of a wider operation to clear all Pakistan's wild-west style tribal badlands of guerrilla fighters who crossed from Afghanistan after the fall of the hardline Taliban regime in late 2001.

"Our estimate is between 30 to 40 miscreants have died and out of

these at least 15 to 20 are foreigners, mostly of Central Asian origin," chief military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan told AFP.

"No one has gone there and counted their bodies but intelligence intercepts indicate about 30 to 40 militants have died."

Last week local officials also said at least 30 insurgents had died in the crackdown near the remote village of Khatay Killay but the military did not confirm the figure at the time.

Seven Pakistani soldiers were also killed in the recent offensive, during which military gunship helicopters pounded suspected rebel hideouts, Sultan added.

Women and children were temporarily ordered to leave the village

during the assault, while tribal leaders on Monday called on the government to stop the attacks during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan.

In the most recent violence, local officials said Tuesday that nine officials and soldiers were wounded by a bomb at the Khwaja Khar checkpoint in North Waziristan.

The blast badly damaged two vehicles and the wounded men included an army major and a captain, an official said on condition of anonymity, adding that their injuries were not life-threatening.

Six militants were killed on Sunday in a clash at a checkpoint, while a key aide to a leading Uzbek militant and confidant of Bin Laden was report-

edly killed during last week's attacks.

Last year Pakistani forces fought pitched battles against insurgents in neighbouring tribal areas, killing hundreds of rebels but losing more than 250 soldiers.

US, Pakistani and Afghan officials have repeatedly said they think Bin Laden himself is hiding somewhere along the rugged Pakistan-Afghanistan border, perhaps sheltered by the local tribes.

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf told Time magazine last month that intelligence services had a rough idea where he was a year ago, but added that he would "prefer that he's captured somewhere outside Pakistan".



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh (R) shakes hands with his Pakistani counterpart Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri ahead of a meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan and India held a meeting of a joint economic body for the first time in 16 years, marking a further thaw between the South Asian rivals.

Floodwaters sweep away 59 Chinese cops

AP, Beijing

Raging floodwaters spawned by a typhoon along China's coast swept away 59 paramilitary police officers and washed away two buildings at a military training school, state media reported yesterday.

At least 15 people were confirmed killed after the typhoon slammed into China's southeast coast late Sunday night, the provincial emergency operations centre said. At its height, the storm had winds of 74 mph, but it was downgraded Monday afternoon to a tropical storm.

The typhoon also killed at least one person on Taiwan.

The 59 paramilitary police officers, members of China's armed forces in charge of domestic security, were in a training school barracks in Fujian province when the violent floods hit Sunday night, state media said. Two buildings at the school were washed away, the reports said.

President Hu Jintao ordered that no efforts be spared to search for them, state newspapers reported.

EU opens membership talks with Turkey

AP, Luxembourg

The European Union overcame last-minute doubts and opened membership talks Tuesday with Turkey - a historic move to include a predominantly Muslim nation that both sides said would benefit all of Europe.

"We have just made history," British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said after chairing the opening of the momentous talks. He added that the future for the union is "an EU based on values, not just history. Turkey has always been a European country."

Turkish Foreign Minister Abdullah Gul, who flew to Luxembourg late Monday to attend the brief, middle-of-the-night ceremony to formally open the negotiations, said both Europe and Turkey stood to gain.

"Our relations with Europe began in 1963, a period of more than 40 years. We have arrived today at a historic stage," he said. "It is not just Turkey that will win, but also the European Union will win."

It took last-minute wrangling among EU foreign ministers during arduous Sunday-Monday talks to secure a joint position on opening the negotiations with Ankara.

Hindus, Muslims unite in Bali amid warning of fresh attacks

AFP, AP, Jimbaran

Hindus and Muslims yesterday came together in Bali to denounce the latest bombings as Australia warned terrorists may be preparing to strike again on the Indonesian resort island.

As Indonesian police intensified their search for the masterminds of Saturday's blasts, which left at least 19 people dead, security at tourist spots across Southeast Asia was beefed up.

Some 200 Hindu and Muslim Balinese banged drums, recited prayers and threw flowers into the sea in an interfaith procession to the blast sites on the predominantly Hindu island, which was rocked by bombings three years ago.

The mourners -- who were joined by Catholics, Protestants and Buddhists -- pledged not to let the weekend attacks spark religious division in the world's largest Muslim-populated nation.

"This attack is savage. We condemn the action. We are here to show solidarity among the various faiths in Indonesia," said K.S. Arsana, chairman of the Jakarta-based Hindu Youth

Association.

Authorities said Saturday's carnage bore the hallmarks of a group linked to al-Qaeda, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), that has waged a bloody campaign against Western interests since 1999.

Officials said similarities with the 2002 Bali nightclub attacks that killed 202 people pointed to the handiwork of Azahari Husin, an expert bomb-maker from Malaysia known as the "Demolition Man".

Azahari and another Malaysian fugitive, Noordin Mohammad Top, are two of Asia's most wanted men and are said to be the masterminds behind JI, which wants to carve out an Islamic state across Southeast Asia.

Ali Imron, one of the convicted bombers from the 2002 Bali attacks, believes the weekend blasts were Azahari's work, the Indo Pos newspaper reported.

Imron, who has been sentenced to life but escaped a death sentence because he collaborated with police, said in an interview with the paper: "Who else if not the group of Dr. Azahari?"

US troops keep up big al-Qaeda hunt in Iraq

3 GIs die in attacks, blast inside Baghdad Green Zone kills 3

REUTERS, AP, Baghdad

US forces launched their biggest offensive so far this year against al-Qaeda guerrillas in western Iraq when 2,500 troops moved yesterday against militants around Haditha, the military said in a statement.

Two US soldiers and a Marine were killed in western Iraq, the military said yesterday.

A Marine with the 2nd Regimental Combat Team, 2nd Marine Division, II Marine Expeditionary Force was killed by a roadside bomb Monday in the town of Karabilah, near the Syrian border, the first announced US death in Operation Iron Fist, a major sweep of the area that began over the weekend.

A soldier assigned to 2nd Regimental Combat Team, 2nd Marine Division, II Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward), was killed by a roadside bomb Monday while conducting combat operations in Haqlaniyah, the military said.

Two months after a previous bid to push Islamist fighters out of the area, Operation River Gate was intended to stop al-Qaeda operating in the city and two nearby towns, Haqlaniya and Barwana, and to "free the local citizens from the terrorists' campaign of murder and intimidation," it added.

The towns are among several in the Euphrates valley where local people have said fighters have taken control and imposed Taliban-style Islamic rule, despite frequent offensives by US forces.

During Operation Sword in August, about 1,000 US troops fought militants in Haditha and its neighbouring towns, 200 km northwest of Baghdad.

Some 2,500 US troops with some Iraqi soldiers were taking part in the latest crackdown, making it the biggest of the year in Anbar, the sprawling desert province of western Iraq, the military said in its statement. Separately, about 1,000 troops have

been fighting al-Qaeda militants near Qaim on the Syrian border, a further 120 km to the west, since Saturday in Operation Iron Fist.

"There are now two major operations going on simultaneously," a US military spokesman in Baghdad said.

In its statement on Haditha, the military said: "The operation's goal is to deny al-Qaeda in Iraq the ability to operate in the three Euphrates River Valley cities and to free the local citizens from the terrorists' campaign of murder and intimidation of innocent women, children and men."

Meanwhile, a suicide car bomber drove into Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone complex with a convoy of other vehicles on Tuesday and blew up, killing three people and wounding six, Iraqi police said.

The vehicle entered the Green Zone, which houses the US and British embassies and the Iraqi government, by an entrance used by Iraqi employees, journalists and others to enter the complex.

Bomb blast at Afghan security post kills 3

5 Taliban shot dead

AFP, Kandahar

Three people were killed when a bomb exploded at an Afghan security post on the border with Pakistan yesterday while security forces shot dead five suspected Taliban militants in separate encounters, officials said.

The blast was at the Spin Boldak border post in the restive southern province of Kandahar, one of the areas hardest hit by a Taliban insurgency launched after the fundamentalist regime was removed from power in late 2001.

"The explosion seemed to have been fairly big," Spin Boldak police chief Abdul Wasay told AFP after visiting the site of the blast. "Twenty people have been wounded. Two children and a woman have been killed," he said.

Flames surrounded the blast site and the border was closed, said an AFP reporter in the Pakistani town of

Chaman just across the border.

In one of the latest incidents, a group of suspected Taliban fighters ambushed a convoy of US-led and Afghan forces in Kandahar's Shawali Kot district Tuesday, an official said.

Three of the militants, including a commander identified as Mullah Abdullah, were killed in the return fire, district chief Hayatullah Popalzay told AFP.

Another two suspected Taliban were killed in a swoop by security forces on Monday in neighbouring Zabul province, a provincial spokesman said.

A Taliban commander identified as Mullah Naser Mohammad was captured in the raid, said provincial spokesman Gulab Shah Alikhil.

More than 1,300 people, many of them militants, have been killed in almost daily attacks and clashes this year, up from 850 last year.

Storm kills 39 in Central America

AFP, San Salvador

Heavy rains and floods from Tropical Storm Stan hit Central America over the weekend, killing 31 in El Salvador, four in Guatemala, and four in Honduras, authorities said Monday.

In El Salvador, the driving rain sparked a number of mudslides which led the government to declare a national "red alert," Interior Minister Rene Figueroa said. Roads were cut and flooding was widespread.

"Thirty-one people have regretfully died," Figueroa said, adding "we continue to urge people to follow our advisories in order to avoid further tragedies."

In San Marcos, southeast of San Salvador, five members of the same family including three children, died, officials said. Eighteen deaths were reported in the villages of Chaparral, Ateos, and Lourdes, west of the capital.

El Salvador was also on alert for a possible follow-up eruption of its largest volcano, which rumbled to life early Saturday for the first time in more than a century, killing two.

Iran likely to defer nuke action until Nov

AFP, Vienna

Iran is likely to wait until November to decide whether to carry out threats to make nuclear fuel or take other measures that would sharply escalate confrontation with the West over its atomic programme, analysts and diplomats said Monday.

"Iran is likely to be cautious. They want to get through the November 24 board" of governors' meeting of the UN watchdog International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), non-proliferation expert Gary Samore told AFP.

In a resolution on September 24, the Vienna-based IAEA threatened to refer Tehran to the UN Security Council over its nuclear programme, which the United States claims is a cover for weapons development, but this is not expected to happen before the November board meeting.

The United States on Monday urged all countries to freeze nuclear cooperation with Iran but Russia, which has a lucrative contract to build the Islamic Republic's first nuclear

power plant, was not expected to heed this call.

The IAEA resolution, drafted by EU states Britain, France and Germany, cites Iran for having resumed nuclear fuel cycle work it had voluntarily suspended to show its nuclear intentions were peaceful.

The IAEA also accused Iran of hiding sensitive atomic activities in violation of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Iran's first reaction was a threat to move ahead on making enriched uranium, which can be fuel for nuclear power reactors or the explosive core of atom bombs. Tehran also warned it could withhold oil from a tight world market.

Diplomats said such measures would have forced the IAEA board to meet earlier than planned, possibly hastening a referral to the UN Security Council, which has the power to impose penalties on Iran.

But Iran held off from a precipitous move, saying it will only begin enrichment if it is actually referred to the world body.

US awaits 'change of Syrian behaviour'

AFP, Washington

The United States' government on Monday said it was awaiting a "change of behaviour" from Syria, which the administration of President George W. Bush has frequently criticised for allowing insurgents to cross its border into neighbouring Iraq.

"What we're interested in seeing is change of behaviour in Syria," US State Department spokesman Sean McCormack told reporters here.

The spokesman was quizzed after the Israeli newspaper Haaretz reported US officials have held talks with Israeli counterparts about the prospect of a regime change in Damascus and possible successors to President Bashar al-Assad.

Israeli government sources quoted by the Haaretz daily said senior American officials had expressed

interest in Israel's assessment of possible successors to Assad, asking them who they believed could maintain regional stability.

Asked about the reported contacts with Israel on Syria, McCormack replied: "No, I can't confirm any such discussions. Again, I have no information that there were any such discussions."

The Israelis had in turn indicated that they would prefer to see a weakened Assad in power, believing that the regime in Damascus would be greatly embarrassed by an upcoming UN report into the February assassination of the former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri, according to Haaretz.

There have been widespread allegations in Lebanon that Damascus had a hand in the killing.



PHOTO: AFP

A woman leaves her home wading through the flooded street on Monday in San Jose, 100km south of Guatemala City. Heavy rains and floods from Tropical Storm Stan hit Central America over the weekend, killing 30 in El Salvador, four in Guatemala, and four in Honduras, authorities said Monday.