

35 militants sign peace deal with Pakistan

AFP, Miranshah

Thirty-five tribal militants with alleged links to al-Qaeda signed a peace deal with Pakistani authorities, pledging not to harbour foreign militants, officials said yesterday.

The agreement, brokered by local religious leaders and tribal elders, came two months after a bloody operation by Pakistani troops in the North Waziristan region on the Afghan border, a senior official said.

The 35 rebels, who had gone underground, appeared before the local administration at a ceremony held in the region's main town Miranshah on Monday, local administration chief Zaheer-ull-Islam said.

"They gave an undertaking that they would not shelter any foreign militants in the area," he told reporters. The tribal and religious chiefs guaranteed to hand over the rebels if they violated the accord, he added.

"We are happy that they agreed to live in peace and shun anti-state activities," Islam added.

Pakistan, a key ally in the US "war on terror", has launched several offensives against insurgents with alleged links to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network.

Delhi failing to stem Maoist violence: Patil

BJP lawmaker, 7 others shot dead in UP

AFP, New Delhi Lucknow

The Indian government said yesterday it has been unable to stem growing Maoist insurgencies in parts of the country while gunmen shot dead an opposition Hindu nationalist legislator and seven others in northern India.

"We've been quite successful in controlling terrorism in states like Kashmir and in the northeast but as far as Naxalism (Maoist violence) is concerned, we have not achieved similar results," Home Minister Shivraj Patil said.

Patil's statement to parliament came two weeks after hundreds of armed Maoist guerrillas freed prisoners, including many of their comrades, from a prison in the lawless state of Bihar, which is racked by poverty.

New Delhi has deployed 26,000 federal security personnel to strife-torn states and offered 30 billion rupees (697 million dollars) to state administrations to modernise their police forces, the home minister said.

"There's a need for a concerted

approach and joint action with neighbouring states to combat violence," Patil told MPs from various states including regions torn by conflict.

India's Maoists have big popular bases in southern Andhra Pradesh state, home to many multinational companies, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa and several other of the country's 29 states.

"The Indian government is also working on political, security and development fronts and providing assistance to the affected states to enhance their capabilities to deal with the problem," he said.

The outlawed rebels say they are fighting for greater economic and social rights for tribes and landless farmers in rural areas.

Some analysts say India has underestimated the threat to its stability from ultra-leftists and that strong economic growth has left behind many in urban and rural India.

New Delhi has long feared that Maoist violence in the neighbouring kingdom of Nepal could spill into parts

of India.

Besides the Maoists, Islamist guerrillas are fighting New Delhi's rule in Indian Kashmir while tribal rebels are active in six of India's seven north-eastern states.

More than 44,000 people have died in Indian Kashmir since the launch of the revolt in 1989 while tens of thousands of others have perished in the restive northeast since the country's 1947 independence from Britain.

Meanwhile, gunmen shot dead an opposition Hindu nationalist legislator and seven others yesterday in northern India, a senior state official said.

Krishnanand Rai was on his way to a wedding when attackers ambushed his jeep and sprayed it with bullets, Alok Sinha, principal home secretary of Uttar Pradesh state, said.

Rai and seven others -- including supporters and security guards -- were killed near Ballia town, 350 kilometres (220 miles) southeast of the state capital Lucknow, Sinha said.

Nepali opposition gears up for protests

AFP, Kathmandu

Leaders of seven opposition parties in Nepal are planning a series of protests to coincide with local elections, due to be held in mid-December, politicians said yesterday.

"Our party has already launched a month-long political campaign across the country to protest against the autocratic regime," Pradeep Nepal, spokesman for the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-ML) told AFP.

"A joint movement with the seven-party alliance will also be organised side-by-side."

The first major protest is timed to coincide with the return on December 2 of King Gyanendra from three-weeks of overseas official visits.

Protests and strikes have been on the rise in the restive country since the king dismissed the government in February and placed politicians under house arrest.

In a move that raised howls of international protest, the king sacked the government in what he described as an effort to quell a Maoist insurgency that has claimed more than 12,000 lives since 1996.

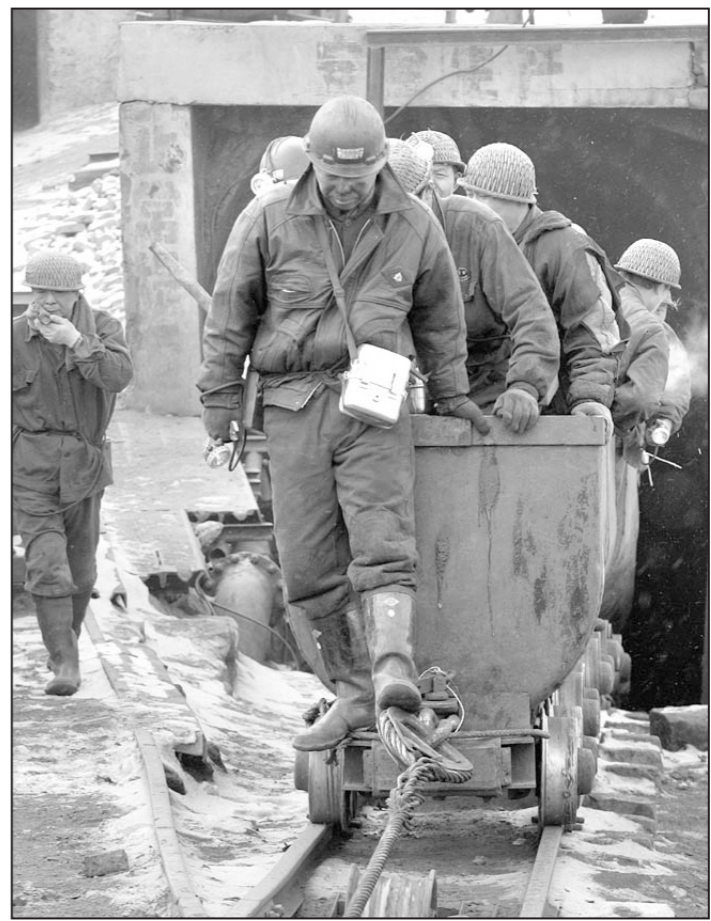


PHOTO: AFP
Rescued miners get out of a mine after repairing the channel and searching for the survivors at the Dongfeng Colliery in Qitaihe in the northeastern province of Heilongjiang yesterday, nearly two days after an explosion.

Relatives furious at China mine's management

Toll rises to 148

AFP, AP, Beijing

The death toll from one of China's biggest mining disasters in recent years rose to 148 yesterday, as angry relatives of the victims blamed the state-run mine's management for ignoring safety standards.

Nine miners were still listed as missing, more than 40 hours after the Sunday night cave-in at the state-run Dongfeng coal mine, near Qitaihe city in the northeast province of Heilongjiang, not far from the Russian border.

State press said six more bodies were pulled out of the rubble on Tuesday, bringing the death toll to 148. Another 72 miners had been rescued, the government's work safety watchdog said.

As rescue efforts continued for the nine still missing, the victims' relatives expressed anger and frustration at the Dongfeng mine's management for consistently ignoring safety concerns and exploiting the workers.

"They all knew there were safety problems but they wouldn't do anything about it," a woman surnamed Ge, who was waiting outside the mine on Monday night to hear news of two other relatives, told AFP.

'Lanka civil war could reverse tsunami recovery'

AFP, Colombo

The visiting UN envoy for tsunami recovery, Bill Clinton, warned Sri Lanka yesterday that a return to civil war in the island could undo efforts to rebuild after last year's devastating tsunami.

"Any recovery progress achieved this year will be quickly reversed if Sri Lanka returns to civil conflict," the former US president said.

The remarks were contained in a statement issued by Clinton's office in Colombo after talks with Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse.

The statement came a day after Rajapakse issued a fresh invitation to the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to enter talks and revive a moribund peace process after the guerrillas issued a year-end deadline.

The LTTE said it wanted Rajapakse to come up with a political deal to end discrimination against minority Tamils and if not they would "next year" resume their "freedom struggle" and seek to establish a separate homeland.



PHOTO: AFP
Sri Lankan President Mahinda Rajapakse (L) shares a light moment with former US president Bill Clinton in Colombo yesterday. Clinton is visiting the island as a UN special envoy for tsunami recovery.

Host of CIA secret prisons to lose voting rights: EU

REUTERS, Berlin

Any European Union state that secretly hosted a CIA prison faces loss of its voting rights, and Washington should punish any violations that occurred, an EU commissioner said on Monday.

Franco Frattini, commissioner for Justice, Freedom and Security, said that under EU law, if reports of secret CIA jails were true, states would face "serious consequences, including the suspension of the right to vote in the Council."

Frattini told a news conference he would be obliged by EU treaties to recommend the suspension to the Council, which brings together ministers of the 25 member countries and is the bloc's main decision-making body.

The comments were his most explicit to date on the implications for any country found to have hosted a secret CIA facility for interrogating terrorism suspects.

Sharon's party willing to see Palestinian state

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's new party spelt out its willingness to see the creation of a Palestinian state as it celebrated yesterday the defection of a leading Labour MP to its ranks. Kadima, created by Sharon after he unceremoniously dumped his right-wing Likud party of three decades, will campaign for election in March on a platform of giving up land of greater Israel in exchange for a homogenous Jewish state.

Presenting party plans ahead of the March 28 parliamentary elections, Sharon confidante and Justice

Minister Tzippi Livni said the movement would seek a "demilitarised Palestinian state not involved in terrorism."

A draft manifesto under debate backs the creation of a demilitarised Palestinian state while seeking to maintain Israeli sovereignty over annexed east Jerusalem and the largest Jewish settlement blocs in the West Bank.

Despite no international recognition, Israel regards Jerusalem as its united and eternal capital, including the city's Arab eastern sector, occupied since 1967 and home to some 200,000 Palestinians.

Kadima also wants wildcat outposts all over the West Bank -- seen by Jews as the land of Israel -- dismantled at once. The West Bank is far more Biblically important than Gaza, from which Sharon withdrew Israeli troops and settlers in September.

"We have to give up part of the land of Israel to establish a Jewish and democratic state," the mass-selling Yediot Aharonot newspaper quoted the Kadima platform saying.

Sharon quit Likud having grown exasperated with right-wingers who refused to forgive him for pulling troops and settlers out of the Gaza Strip.

Pneumonia hits children in Pak quake zone

AFP, Muzaffarabad

Pneumonia is spreading amongst cold and hungry children who survived Pakistan's giant earthquake, killing two and affecting hundreds more as the Himalayan winter sweeps in, officials said yesterday.

The United Nations begged the international community for extra help as it traces against time to save millions of people threatened by disease and

hypothermia because of the sudden change in the weather.

Some snow fell in mountain villages overnight and temperatures fell below freezing throughout the disaster zone, threatening to bring about a second wave of deaths that aid agencies have long warned of.

"Pneumonia has spread among children, according to data received from different places," Sardar

Mahmood Khan, district health officer in Muzaffarabad, the ruined capital of Pakistani-administered Kashmir, told AFP.

"We are receiving hundreds of cases in different areas."

The October 8 quake killed more than 74,000 people in Pakistan and India but the biggest fears have been for the 3.5 million survivors left homeless by the disaster.

German woman, 6 Iranians kidnapped

US seeks talks with Iraqi rebels

AFP, Baghdad

A German woman and six Iranian Shia pilgrims, including two women, have been kidnapped in Iraq in the latest strike against foreigners in the war-torn country.

News of the hostage-taking emerged as the US ambassador to Iraq said Washington was seeking talks with some rebels and would reach out to Iran for help in quelling the insurgency that has raged since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

But in a further sign of the sectarian violence gripping the country, a senior Sunni Arab politician who urged his community to participate in next month's election was gunned down in Baghdad.

Germany's ARD public television reported that an unidentified German woman and her driver were seized on Friday, adding that it had obtained a video in which the kidnapers threatened to kill both unless the German government broke off all cooperation with the Iraqi government.

The woman, said to be an archaeologist in her 40s who had worked in Iraq for some time and who speaks Arabic, was seized a day before an American, two Canadians and a Briton were also taken hostage in Baghdad.

The German government was attempting "to bring the woman to safety as soon as possible" and has set up a special team to handle the affair, said spokesman Martin Jaeger.