

Pakistan offers tribes help, warns on foreign militants

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has promised tribal areas along the Afghan border special help with development but said foreign militants had to be expelled, state-run media reported.

The semi-autonomous tribal lands are Pakistan's front line in its war on terrorism and fighting between security forces and militants there has killed more than 120 people since Saturday.

Musharraf met a delegation of tribal elders on Wednesday and held out the prospect of development of their long-neglected areas, but said action against militants would go on, the Associated Press

of Pakistan (APP) news agency said.

"The government would make available additional funds to set the tribal areas on the track of fast-paced development and bring them on a par with rest of the country," the news agency quoted Musharraf as telling the leaders.

"The president said that there is an elaborate reconstruction and development plan for the tribal region that envisages boosting agriculture, irrigation, livestock and industry."

Musharraf also proposed so-called reconstruction opportunity zones where companies would be exempt from export duty, it said.

The proposals came after US

President George W. Bush visited Pakistan last week and spoke of such zones in remote areas where manufactured goods would get duty-free US access. Bush said these would help defeat terrorism.

Musharraf stressed that foreign militants would have to be flushed out and local people helping them dealt with sternly, APP quoted the governor of North West Frontier Province, Khallilur Rehman, who attended the talks, as saying.

Many al-Qaeda militants fled to the rugged tribal areas after US and Afghan opposition forces ousted the Taliban in Afghanistan 2001.

They were given refuge by sympathisers among ethnic Pashtun clans and since 2004

hundreds of people have died in attempts by Pakistani security forces to dislodge them.

The tribal areas cover about 27,220 square km of mountainous territory and are home to about six million people, most of them Pashtuns. Few of Pakistan's federal laws apply and outside interference is deeply resented.

Many tribesmen sympathise with the Taliban and al-Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahri are believed to be hiding in the region.

On Thursday, security forces and militants traded sporadic fire around Miranshah, the main town in North Waziristan, for a sixth day, a political official said.

White House takes on critics of India nuclear deal

REUTERS, Washington

The White House on Wednesday fired back at critics of a landmark US-India nuclear agreement and insisted the deal will enhance efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons.

US President George W. Bush has come under strong criticism from some members of Congress and nonproliferation experts for signing an agreement with India that would allow New Delhi access to US nuclear technology and fuel for its growing energy needs.

"Greater use of nuclear reactors to produce energy for the Indian people will not undermine regional security or stability," White House spokesman Scott McClellan said in a point-by-point rejection of critics' arguments.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists of India's main opposition BJP shout slogans and hold placards during a protest in New Delhi yesterday to condemn a triple bombing in the holy Hindu city of Varanasi on March 7 in northern India.

Maoists blast Nepali checkpoint: 3 killed

REUTERS, AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels set off a bomb at a security checkpoint in west Nepal yesterday, killing three soldiers, the army said.

Another five soldiers and policemen were wounded in the explosion at Ghorahi town, 400km west of Kathmandu, the Himalayan kingdom's capital.

Local journalist Hem Raj Sharma said one civilian was also wounded in the blast.

"Three soldiers were killed when the Maoists exploded an improvised explosive device at around eight

Thursday morning," he said on condition of anonymity.

The soldiers died in Ghorahi, district headquarters of Dang, 380 kilometres (235 miles) west of the capital, said the official from army headquarters.

On Wednesday, two soldiers were killed in a rebel raid in Baratpur municipality 170 kilometres (105 miles) west of the capital, the army said in a statement.

"The rebels also opened fire at various government offices and civilian houses," the army said.

The latest attack came days ahead of a Maoist move to enforce

an indefinite blockade of hill-ringed Kathmandu and other major towns to bring their rebellion to the cities.

The Maoists' blockade, threatened from March 14, is seen as a move to increase pressure on King Gyanendra, who seized absolute power last year vowing to crush the rebels who want to topple the monarchy.

Nepal's rebel Maoists have been fighting a "people's war" in the impoverished Himalayan nation for the last decade.

Bhutan could become S Asia's powerhouse

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, thimpu

Bhutan may soon become South Asia's hydroelectric powerhouse and can export energy to the tune of nearly 5,000 MW to India over the next decade.

"By 2016 we hope to export about 5,000 MW of power to India with our government giving topmost priority to the energy sector," a senior Bhutanese government official told the agency by telephone from the capital Thimphu, requesting anonymity.

At present Bhutan exports about 500 MW of power to India and the

supply is expected to reach 2,500 MW by October this year with a massive hydroelectric power plant in the Himalayan kingdom scheduled to become operational soon.

The Himalayan countries of Bhutan and Nepal have the highest share of hydroelectric power in South Asia. Bhutan's hydropower potential is estimated at 30,000 MW and is the primary source of the country's commercial energy.

"Proceeds of hydroelectricity exports to India account for about 45 percent of our government's revenue and is the mainstay of our economic growth," the official said.

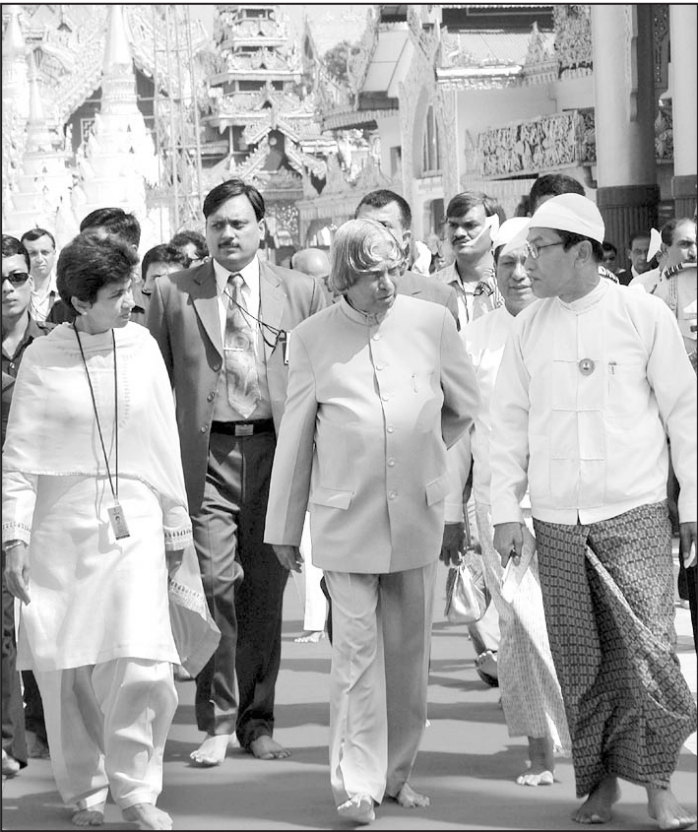


PHOTO: AFP

Indian President Abdul Kalam (C) visits the famous Shwedagon Pagoda Yangon yesterday. Kalam touring military ruled Myanmar on the first-ever visit by an Indian head of state aiming to improve ties between the two neighbours.

Unknown Kashmiri group claims Varanasi blasts

AFP, Varanasi

An unknown Kashmiri militant group claimed responsibility yesterday for blasts that killed 23 people in India's holiest Hindu city of Varanasi as grieving relatives cremated victims.

The group Lashkar-e-Kahar told a news agency in Indian Kashmir, where an Islamic revolt is raging against New Delhi's rule, that it staged Tuesday's blasts.

"We have carried out the attacks," a man identifying himself as Abdul Jabbar, the group's spokesman, told Current News Service in a telephone call.

He threatened more attacks if "India does not stop atrocities against Kashmiri Muslims."

Police in Indian Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar said they had

never heard of the group, whose name translates as "Army of the Imperious," but were taking the claim seriously and had begun an investigation.

The claim of responsibility came as relatives of people killed in the triple blasts in the temple town in northern Uttar Pradesh state cremated the dead on the banks of the sacred Ganges river.

Men and women sobbed and priests read from Hindu scriptures as mutilated corpses were piled on funeral pyres. Sixty-eight people were injured in the blasts.

The first bomb exploded at Varanasi's Sankat Mochan or Liberator of Troubles temple, an important Hindu shrine packed with 1,000 devotees. Two other blasts followed in quick succession at a

railway station.

Police released sketches Thursday of two male suspects in their twenties. They said the suspects were believed to be of Kashmiri origin and had planted a bomb at a store, which failed to explode.

"From eyewitness accounts, we think up to five people were behind the attacks and we're trying to ascertain the involvement of a woman terrorist," police chief Navneet Sikera said.

One Islamic militant suspect was shot dead Wednesday near the state capital Lucknow. Police identified him as the chief of the state wing of the pro-Pakistan Lashkar-e-Taiba or "Army of the Pious" guerrilla group.