

17,000 Iraqis killed in second half of 2006

AFP, Washington

More than 17,000 Iraqi civilians and police officers died violently in the second half of 2006 in what constitutes a sharp increase from the beginning of the year, The Washington Post reported Monday.

Citing confidential Iraqi health ministry statistics obtained through an unnamed official, the newspaper said that in the first six months of last year, 5,640 Iraqi civilians and police officers were killed.

But that number more than tripled to 17,310 in the latter half of the year, according to data provided by a health ministry official with direct knowledge of the statistics, the report said.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to release the information, said those numbers remained incomplete, suggesting the final tally of violent deaths could be higher, The Post said.

Diana, Dodi death inquest resumes

AFP, London

The next stage in the long-awaited inquest into the death of Britain's Princess Diana got under way Monday, with the presiding judge favouring a joint inquest for Diana and her boyfriend Dodi Fayed.

Just weeks after a British police probe into conspiracy theories surrounding the princess's death concluded the 1997 Paris car crash was a "tragic accident", proceedings were resumed at the Royal Courts of Justice.

The hearings Monday and Tuesday were expected to be "relatively informal", the coroner, retired former High Court judge Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, told the court in her opening statement.

It would consider legal issues of "jurisdiction and procedure", with no evidence called and no speeches on the facts allowed, she added.

"I hope to deal with several issues, among which are: who are the interested persons?"

Talks offer unlikely to stop rebel killing in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

A fresh offer by the Indian government to hold talks with separatist rebels in northeast Assam state is unlikely to bring a halt to a wave of ethnic killings in the state, analysts said Monday.

Police have blamed the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa), which is fighting for an independent homeland in the remote state of 26 million people, for the weekend killing of 67 people -- mainly Hindi-speaking migrant workers.

"The overall death toll in a series of attacks since Friday has risen to 67, of which 57 are Hindi-speaking people, two militants, five policeman, and two government officials," an Assam government spokesman told journalists.

The national government last year held several rounds of negoti-

ations with Ulfa representatives, and on Sunday India's junior home minister Sripakash Jaiswal offered to hold direct talks with Ulfa rebels.

But political analyst Atanu Bhuyan said there was "nothing new in the fresh offer for talks."

"The Ulfa wants the release of five of their jailed leaders before starting talks. If the minister had said something on that line, maybe things would have been different," he said.

Hours after the minister's offer Sunday, militants killed seven more people near Sivasagar, 400km east of Assam's main Guwahati city.

On Monday, four more deaths on Sunday were reported from the area, state officials said. Two militants were also killed nearby in a gunbattle with security forces, police said.

Sunday was the third consecutive day of violence, during

which police said unskilled migrant workers from the eastern state of Bihar had been singled out.

Experts said targeting the migrants -- who come from a large Hindi-speaking belt that includes New Delhi -- was a calculated rebel ploy to get attention, as the killings of people from the Hindi heartland would have rattled the government.

"Hindi-speaking migrants were targeted as the outfit wanted to make a violent statement (to) New Delhi: either you accept our pre-conditions for talks or such gruesome attacks continue," former state police chief Hare Krishna Deka told AFP.

In 2000, the rebels killed at least 100 Hindi speakers in well-planned attacks after vowing to rid the state of all "non-Assamese workers", who they blame for taking local jobs.

"The Ulfa knew that targeting Hindi speakers would draw the attention of New Delhi immediately. They have succeeded with reactions coming in from all quarters," said Prasanta Jyoti Baruah, editor of Assam Tribune daily.

Noni Gopal Mahanta, head of Guwahati University's Peace and Conflict Studies department, told the Hindustan Times that Ulfa sees Hindi speakers in Assam as "symbolic" representations of the federal government.

Ulfa is one of several separatist groups operating in Assam, a state known for its oil reserves, timber and tea crops but where at least 20,000 people have died in rebel violence since 1979.

But support for Ulfa has dwindled in recent years after the outfit started setting off explosions in crowded places killing civilians.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists of The Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) (CPI-ML) wave placards and shout slogans during a protest in New Delhi yesterday against the death of villagers who were protesting against the Special Economic Zones (SEZ) in Nandigram in West Bengal.

11 die in West Bengal protests over land

AFP, Kolkata

The death toll in clashes over the proposed purchase of farmland to build special economic zones in India's Marxist-ruled West Bengal state has risen to 11, police said yesterday.

The violence is the latest in a series of nationwide protests, mainly by poor villagers, against the government buying farmland for private investment projects.

"The death toll from Sunday's clashes has risen with seven people succumbing to their bullet injuries in the hospital today," state transport minister Subhas Chakravarty told reporters in the capital Kolkata.

Several people were also injured when a group of armed men raided the village of Nandigram, about 120km south of the state capital Kolkata in a land dispute on Sunday, police said.

The officers fired at villagers keeping watch to block government officials from giving notice of the takeover of the land, police said.

West Bengal's Marxist administration has announced plans to buy 14,500 acres (5,867 hectares) of land for Indonesia's Salim group to set up a chemical hub under an agreement clinched in July.

The purchase is part of the state government's plans to take some 36,000 acres of land to set up "special economic zones" -- privately-run enclaves with world-class infrastructure and tax breaks.

Tension in Nandigram has simmered since Wednesday, when angry villagers fought pitched battles with police and attacked government offices following rumours that the government had formally taken over the land.

The unrest prompted Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, chief minister of West Bengal, to issue a

statement saying the land has not yet been bought by the state government.

Last month, Indian President Abdul Kalam and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh intervened to persuade a West Bengal opposition leader to call off a 25-day hunger strike against a car factory to be built on farmland by the country's India's Tata group.

On Monday, more than a dozen policemen and scores of protesters were hurt in clashes during a state-wide strike called by opposition parties.

Protestors set buses on fire, transport was disrupted and schools and colleges were closed during the strike.

Similar protests erupted last year in eastern Orissa state against the proposed multi billion dollar projects by steel giants Arcelor-Mittal and Korea's POSCO which would be sited on farm land.

UN voices fears for Lankan civilians as attacks escalate

Army shells kill 3 in east

AFP, REUTERS, Colombo

The United Nations yesterday condemned weekend bomb attacks on bus passengers in Sri Lanka and called on the combatants in the island's ethnic conflict to ensure civilian safety in battle zones.

"The United Nations calls for the protection of all civilians throughout the island," the statement said.

The bus bombings that killed 21 people and left another 120 wounded over the weekend have been seen as tit-for-tat attacks by the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who face a Sri Lankan army push into the rebel-held town of Vakarai, where civil-

ians are unable to escape the fighting.

"The situation in Vakarai in the east is grave and demands an urgent response," the UN statement said.

"According to government estimates, 15,000 people are isolated without access to food or basic supplies, as stocks are decimated."

The UN said it was ready to assist those still trapped in Vakarai.

"These persons are the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. We must always recall that it is the most weak who remain behind -- the elderly, the sick and the disabled," the UN said.

"They are still without access to food, emergency medical services and shelter, and continue to be caught in the middle of relentless fighting."

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan army shells hit a hospital complex in the island's restive northeast district of Trincomalee on Monday, killing three civilians and wounding 11, the Tamil Tigers said.

The military was not immediately available for comment on the incident in the town of Vakarai, which lies in a pocket of rebel-held coastal territory around 150 miles northeast of Colombo which the army has surrounded and vowed to take control of.

Musharraf seeks popular support for terror fight

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan's president has called for popular support in combating terrorism and stopping foreign militants from using the country to recruit Muslim suicide bombers for attacks across the globe, state-run television reported Sunday.

Meeting criticism that his government is doing too little to stop Taliban and al-Qaeda guerrillas from crossing into Afghanistan and other countries, President Gen. Pervez Musharraf said militants from as far as Uzbekistan, Yemen and Libya are being trained in Pakistan for terrorist attacks.

"The suicide attacks are happening in the entire world and are happening in Pakistan," Musharraf said Saturday at a gathering of hundreds of people in Dera Ismail Khan, a city in the conservative North West

Frontier Province neighbouring Afghanistan, according to Pakistan TV.

"These foreign people are sitting (here), they are giving money, they are recruiting people to carry out" the attacks, he said at the gathering of mostly Musharraf loyalists in the tribal region where Pakistani security forces have battled foreign militants in recent years.

"You should show solidarity and point them out so that we can deal with them," Musharraf said.

Afghan and Western officials say militants increasingly cross the border to launch attacks against Afghan and US-led troops operating in the country. Violence rose sharply in Afghanistan in 2006, killing an estimated 4,000 people in the deadliest year since the US-led coalition swept the Taliban from power in 2001.



PHOTO: AFP

Malaysian former prime minister Mahathir Mohamad (L) smiles while listening to questions from journalists while his son, Mukhriz Mahathir (R) looks on at a press conference in Putrajaya yesterday.

Bush, Blair worse than Saddam, says Mahathir

REUTERS, Putrajaya

President Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair are war criminals with more Iraqi blood on their hands than Saddam Hussein, former Malaysian premier Mahathir Mohamad said on Monday.

Mahathir, one of the developing world's most strident and veteran critics of the West, launched a shrill attack on Bush and Blair, telling reporters that his Malaysian peace foundation that Bush should face the same "sham" justice as Saddam.

Saddam, ousted by US-led invasion in March 2003, was hanged nine days ago for crimes against humanity for killing Shias. Guards filmed and taunted Saddam on the gallows.

"He (Bush) should resign straight away and be tried by the same kangaroo court," Mahathir told a news conference called to promote a peace conference he is hosting in Malaysia next month.

The conference, "Expose War Crimes: Criminalise War," will be accompanied by an exhibition on Western war crimes, including atrocities in Iraq, the Palestinian territories, Vietnam and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, according to organisers.

It will also contain an interactive exhibit on torture in US custody at Abu Ghraib prison near Baghdad and the Guantanamo Bay interrogation camp at a US base in Cuba.

Mahathir also branded Blair a war criminal. Blair backed the 2003 invasion with thousands of British troops.

Leopard in the bathroom

AFP, New Delhi

A leopard loped into the bathroom of a home in western India, attracting thousands of curious onlookers for hours before it was captured by officials, a report said yesterday.

The leopard strolled around a neighbourhood in western Vadodara city for a few hours before settling down in the bathroom of the Sukhadia family, the Times of India said.

"As soon as the maid alerted us, we closed all doors and windows. But it entered the bathroom located at the back of our house," homeowner Dhiren Sukhadia was quoted as saying by the daily.



PHOTO: AFP

A tranquilised leopard looks out from a cage in Vadodara, some 100 km south of Ahmedabad Sunday after being captured inside a home in the city.

Bird flu, climate change Asia's top security threat

AFP, Singapore

Bird flu and climate change are not just health and environmental dangers but also security threats which Asia must marshal all available resources to fight, analysts said Monday at a conference.

Known as "non-traditional security" issues, the growing list of threats includes transnational crime. They cannot be ignored because they have the potential to undermine a country's security, the analysts said.

"It is our view that security in this day and age can no longer be ensured merely by military and operational tactics," said Barry Desker, dean of the forum's organ-

isers, the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies at Nanyang Technological University.

"Like climate change, other NTS (non-traditional security) challenges like pandemics and environmental degradation are complex and transnational in nature and could threaten our own security," he said.

The outbreak of avian flu -- which has killed more than 150 people worldwide -- and the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami that killed 220,000 people in Asia showed that no single country can hope to surmount major threats alone, the analysts said.

"All of those issues have become increasingly significant so

they are all creating new challenges for the way we think about security and non-traditional issues," said Andrew Watson, regional representative of The Ford Foundation, an independent non-profit group.

Former Thai foreign minister Surin Pitsuwan described these challenges as "being invisible, being diverse, being unpredictable."

He said they are difficult to prepare for.

Plans by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) to consider a draft charter that will see the 10-member grouping rely on a set of rules to govern itself is one effective way of dealing with these threats, Surin said.

Nepali House to okay constitution on Jan 15

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's parliament will approve an interim constitution on January 15, government and Maoists said yesterday, paving the way for the former rebels to join the political mainstream.

"The top leaders of the seven parties and the Maoists on Monday reached an understanding to pass the interim constitution on January 15," Pradeep Gyawali, minister for tourism and a government peace negotiator, told AFP.

Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala and Maoist chief Prachanda were present during the meeting Monday between negotia-

tors from both sides, he said.

Nepal's Maoists last week said the government had endangered a power-sharing pact and elections by not sending an interim constitution agreed almost a month ago for parliamentary approval.

The power-sharing pact followed mass protests in April 2006 that led King Gyanendra to return power to parliament after 14 months of direct rule.

The rebels and the new parliament subsequently agreed to a ceasefire, a political process leading to elections by June 2007 and a constituent assembly that will rewrite the constitution and decide the monarchy's fate.