

'Wars, instability worsen rights abuses in Asia'

AFP, Bangkok

Key countries across Asia suffered serious setbacks in human rights last year, with the most worrying abuses due to wars and political instability, a US-based watchdog said in its annual report.

Human Rights Watch (HRW) warned abuses were taking place amid conflicts and political unrest in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand, while giants China and India also suffered violations.

HRW said in its report Thursday that Afghanistan was on the "precipice of again becoming a haven" for human rights abusers, criminals and militant extremists.

Last year the Taliban-led insurgency "escalated into open warfare," while rebels carried out more than 80 suicide bombings.

There were also hundreds of attacks on students, teachers and

schools during 2006, a sharp rise on previous years.

Much of last year's violence was driven by opium poppy production, which exceeded 2005's crop by 60 percent and generated nearly half of the country's income and 92 percent of the world's supply of heroin, the group said.

Abuses were exacerbated by poor governance and corruption of the government of President Hamid Karzai, it added.

In Sri Lanka, an upsurge in fighting between government troops and the Tamil Tigers has "resulted in a dramatic increase in serious violations of international humanitarian and human rights law."

Military-ruled Myanmar came in for criticism over its continued detention of democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as for gross abuses in its battle against ethnic minorities.

"In the conflict areas, human

rights violations such as forced labour for Burmese army units, rape of women and girls, and summary executions continue," the report said.

A military coup in neighbouring Thailand avoided any violence, but HRW said the erosion of liberties that began under ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra had worsened since the takeover.

The group also accused both the government and Islamic separatists in southern Thailand of killings and other abuses in a conflict that has killed 1,800 over three years.

Amid political instability in Bangladesh, HRW said the country's "already poor human rights record worsened, as security forces continued to commit numerous abuses, including extrajudicial killings, excessive use of force, and custodial torture."

India, widely hailed as the world's largest democracy with a

vibrant press and civil society, also came in for stiff criticism over officials and security services that abuse their power, especially in areas of conflict such as Kashmir.

In China, the group said that human rights had "deteriorated significantly" last year as the government reacted to rising social discontent with even tighter controls.

China focused particularly on silencing a loosely organised network of lawyers, journalists and activists seeking justice for victims of official abuses, it said.

One cause for cheer was in Nepal, where Maoist rebels declared an end to a decade-long insurgency and signed a peace deal with the government.

"The human rights situation improved markedly" due to the peace deal, HRW said, while accusing both sides of failing to hold their forces accountable for past violations.



Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (R) shakes hands with US Assistant Secretary of State for Central and South Asia Richard Boucher prior to their meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Boucher arrived in Islamabad to hold talks with Pakistani leaders.

Indo-Pak friendship treaty possible after resolution of Kashmir row: Kasuri

AFP, New Delhi

Pakistan Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri said yesterday that a peace and friendship treaty suggested by India's prime minister was possible only after a dispute over Kashmir was resolved.

"I hope that what the (Indian) Prime Minister (Manmohan Singh) says in terms of a peace and friendship treaty does materialise," Kasuri told the English news channel Times Now in an interview telecast Friday.

"But then he would know more than anybody else that we need to resolve all our conflicts before that. I am sure that he must have been mindful of that fact," Kasuri said.

On Monday, Singh said that he "earnestly" hoped ties between the two estranged neighbours would improve enough to generate trust and both can agree to "a treaty of peace, security and friendship."

Kasuri's remarks also come just a day before his Indian counterpart Pranab Mukherjee is to arrive in Islamabad to review progress

made in three rounds of peace talks launched in 2004 and extend an invite for a regional summit in New Delhi this April.

The South Asian rivals have been at loggerheads over the Himalayan territory of Kashmir, the trigger for two of their three wars since independence from Britain in 1947.

New Delhi accuses Islamabad of arming and training Islamic militants battling its rule in Muslim-majority Indian Kashmir and sponsoring attacks elsewhere in the country.

More than 44,000 people have been killed since the 1989 outbreak of a separatist insurgency against Indian rule.

Indian government sources have told AFP that "back-channel discussions" between New Delhi and Islamabad on Kashmir have been going "rather well."

Kasuri said Singh may have made his comments against the backdrop of progress made in the "back-channel" talks.



Bomb squad officers collect evidence at a construction site from where a rocket was launched against the US Embassy in Athens yesterday. Fired from across a busy Athens avenue around dawn, the rocket smashed through a window and exploded inside the building, causing minor damage but no injuries.

16 civilians, 13 Taliban killed in Afghan strike

AFP, Kandahar

Nato warplanes attacked and destroyed a key Taliban headquarters in southern Afghanistan, the British military said yesterday, as police reported 16 civilians and 13 rebels were killed.

The strike, in the province of Helmand early Thursday, also left five civilians wounded and several houses damaged, provincial police chief Mohammad Nabi Mullakhai told AFP.

The British military serving under the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force said it had "no indications" civilians were killed.

A "significant number" of Taliban were believed to have been killed, Major Mike Geldard, who coordinated the operation, said in a statement.

"At the moment (information) suggests all casualties were Taliban," British military press officer Robert Mead told AFP.

News of the attack comes one day after ISAF announced its forces, working with the Afghan army, had killed up to 150 insurgents in the

eastern province of Paktia, after they were tracked infiltrating from Pakistan.

The toll, which could not be independently verified, was one of the highest in weeks.

In the latest attack, Mullah Khail said the Taliban had been holding the civilians as captives in the compound in the remote southernmost district of Garmser.

The wounded, who included women and children, were taken to a hospital in the provincial capital Lashkar Gah for treatment, the police chief said.

The compound "was considered to be one of the main headquarters for Taliban forces in the south of the province" and between 60 and 100 Taliban fighters were inside at the time of the strike, the British statement said.

"More than 100 men closed in on the compound in the early hours of (Thursday) morning, supported by Apache attack helicopters and Nato aircraft," the statement said.

The first of two compounds was targeted by snipers before the building was attacked from the air

and destroyed. The second building was then also destroyed by an air attack, it said.

"Both aerial attacks were direct hits and first reports suggest there was no collateral damage to other buildings or civilians," it said.

There were also no casualties among the troops in the nearly four-hour operation.

"This was probably the biggest action in Helmand we have conducted to date in terms of a pre-planned operation," Geldard said.

"We have been building up information about this target up for about two weeks."

Garmser district saw a number of clashes between rebels and the military last year, with insurgents capturing briefly the district centre at least twice.

Most of the British deployment of about 5,200 troops in Afghanistan in the early hours of (Thursday) morning, supported by Apache attack helicopters and Nato aircraft," the statement said.

"The motive behind the attack seems to be an old election rivalry," he said.

Bhinder, who won a local government election two years ago, had survived a murder attempt last year.

Gunmen kill seven in Pak political rivalry

AFP, Lahore

A senior judicial official and six others and an attacker were killed yesterday when gunmen opened fire on his car in the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore, police said.

Four attackers sprayed bullets at the car of Anwar Bhinder near the Lahore High Court building, killing the official, his brother, three guards and a nine-year-old nephew, senior police officer Aamir Zulfiqar said.

Bhinder, who was a state attorney for the Punjab provincial government, had been driving to school to drop off his nephew before heading to his office.

One of the attackers also died when his guards returned fire, Zulfiqar said, adding that the others fled in a waiting car.

"The motive behind the attack seems to be an old election rivalry," he said.

Bhinder, who won a local government election two years ago, had survived a murder attempt last year.

US softens Myanmar resolution

AP, United Nations

The United States softened a UN resolution urging Myanmar's military government to release all political prisoners and take speedy steps toward democracy ahead of an expected Security Council vote yesterday.

Washington faces an uphill struggle to win council approval of the draft because of opposition from China and Russia, both veto-wielding council members. The council decided to put Myanmar on its agenda on Sept. 15 over objections from Beijing and Moscow. China's UN Ambassador Wang Guangya and Russia's UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin both contend that the Security Council is not the proper place to discuss Myanmar because the Southeast Asian country does not pose a threat to international peace and security.

A revised text circulated by the United States late Thursday dropped a statement in its initial draft that would have the Security Council express "its gravest concern that the overall situation in Myanmar has deteriorated and poses serious risks to peace and security in the region."



Sri Lankan Army troops stand guard outside a school in Colombo yesterday as part of tight security against possible Tamil rebel bomb attacks. Security has been stepped up following bomb attacks against public transport as troops and Tamil Tiger rebels escalate attacks against each other in the island's embattled north and east.

Lanka military offers amnesty to deserters

Commandos capture 8 LTTE bases

REUTERS, AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's army has offered nearly 17,000 deserters an amnesty to return to ranks amid a new chapter of civil war against Tamil Tiger rebels, officials said yesterday.

Around 50,000 soldiers have deserted the Sri Lankan military since the war began in 1983, but the military's offer only stands for those who have gone absent without leave since the end of 2003 in the belief that they are fit for retraining.

Sri Lanka's army is 125,000-strong, and around 630 soldiers have been killed in the past year in a series of land battles with the Tigers and rebel ambuses.

"We have given a general amnesty from Jan. 20-31 for them to rejoin the army, as it is easy for us to refresh their training rather than giving full training to new recruits," said military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe.

The military says several hundred deserters have been caught over the years, and punishments vary from a pay cut and demotion to jail time.

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan commandos have taken at least eight bases used by Tamil Tiger guerrillas to launch attacks in the country's east following an operation lasting several days, military officials said Friday.

The elite Special Task Force commandos took the eighth base in the district of Ampara early Friday after a three-day operation against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a local official said by telephone.

Four LTTE members were killed in one clash on Thursday, while in other confrontations the guerrillas withdrew after token resistance, officials said. There was no immediate reaction from the guerrillas.

In other violence, police said at least two constables were killed in a Claymore bomb attack in northern Sri Lanka on Friday.

The LTTE set off the roadside bomb in the district of Vavuniya as police were on a routine patrol, a police spokesman said.

He said another policeman was killed on Thursday evening in a confrontation with Tiger rebels in the same area.

More than 60,000 people have been killed in Sri Lanka's Tamil separatist conflict in the past 35 years and diplomatic attempts to end the conflict politically have ended in failure.

Government troops and Tamil Tiger guerrillas have been trading attacks across the island's embattled northern and eastern regions, with more than 3,800 people killed in the past year despite a truce in place since February 2002.



US Human Rights activist Cindy Sheehan (R), British national of Pakistani origin Asif Iqbal (L), a former prisoner at the US detention camp in Guantanamo Bay, the mother and brother of detainee Omar Deghayes, Zohra Zewawi (C) and Taher Deghayes (2-R), shout slogans on their way to the Guantanamo Bay US naval base in Cuba Thursday. Five years after the first "war on terror" detainees arrived at the Guantanamo Bay US naval base, a former inmate and relatives of another issued emotional pleas here for the closure of the prison.

PHOTO: AFP