

Army to step up crackdown on Assam rebels

AFP, Guwahati

India's million-plus army warned yesterday that operations will be intensified against rebels blamed for a spate of ethnic attacks that killed 69 people in the northeastern state of Assam.

The warning came a day after Border Security Force (BSF), India's largest paramilitary agency, on Sunday accused neighbouring country of sheltering top commanders from the United Liberation Front of Assam (Ulfa) guerrillas.

Assam army commander Major General N.C. Marwah told the NDTV television network there would be no let-up in a bid to force the Ulfa to negotiate.

"We are going for very precise and very intensive operations against the Ulfa," Marwah said in Guwahati, Assam's largest city.

"There will be helicopters, airborne assaults, you name it and we will use it as we are going all out about it," he said.

"We feel that if they are militarily degraded and feel hurt then they will come in on their knees," Marwah said.

Some 20,000 combat soldiers and paramilitary personnel are involved in an ongoing operation, the largest against the Ulfa since 1991, in the jungles of Assam.

Troops have also set up camps in adjoining Arunachal Pradesh

state to cut off Ulfa rebels retreating into forests along the border with Myanmar.

The military says Ulfa guerrillas use Arunachal as a transit point to reach training bases in military-ruled Myanmar, which has a porous border with India's northeast.

The crackdown came after a large number of Hindi-speaking migrant workers from eastern Bihar state -- who had been a main target of the rebels -- fled after repeated Ulfa attacks earlier this month.

In 2000, Ulfa militants killed 100 Hindi-speaking people in Assam in a series of attacks after the rebel group vowed to free the state of all non-Assamese migrants.

Kuwait court jails 3 Arabs for plotting attacks on US troops

AFP, Kuwait City

Kuwait's criminal court jailed three stateless Arabs for 10 years yesterday after convicting them of manufacturing explosives and plotting attacks on US troops in the oil-rich emirate.

Security forces had detained the three last May after finding homemade explosives and materials used to make them.

Prosecutors charged Hmoud al-Enezi, 26, Ahmad Jaber, 33 and Hmoud Ashour, 28, with manufacturing explosives, training in the use of munitions, and plotting attacks on the estimated 15,000 US troops in the emirate, the main rear-base for the US-led coalition in Iraq.

The court ordered that the three be deported on completion of their sentences.

The judgement can still be challenged in the appeals and supreme courts.

The appeals court in November upheld death sentences against four men and jailed 22 others to various terms after convicting them of fighting bloody gunbattles with police and being members of a group with links to Al-Qaeda.

Iran eyes 3,000 centrifuges at nuclear plant

AFP, Tehran

Iran is aiming to install at least 3,000 centrifuges at a key nuclear plant, the government spokesman said yesterday, confirming Tehran would make a major announcement on its atomic programme next month.

"We are heading towards a production of nuclear fuel that needs 3,000 and even more centrifuges," spokesman Gholam Hossein Elham told reporters. "Our aim is to ensure our industrial needs."

"We are going in this direction. We are in the process of completing our programme and this will be announced shortly during the 10 days of Fajr," he said, referring to celebrations for the 28th anniversary of the Islamic revolution from February 1-11.

Iran has so far declared the installation of two cascades of 164 centrifuges at the plant in Natanz. The machinery is used to enrich uranium, a highly sensitive process that can be used both to make nuclear energy and a nuclear bomb.

Iran insists that its nuclear programme is entirely peaceful.



PHOTO: AFP
Foreign devotees take a ritual bath at Sangam, the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna and Saraswati rivers in Allahabad, Sunday, during the Ardh Kumbh Mela (Half Pitcher festival), on one of the festival's main bathing days, Makar Sankranti. Hundreds of thousands of Hindu devotees are taking part in the Mela (fair) which lasts 45 days and commemorates a mythical battle between gods and demons over a pitcher of the nectar of immortality at the confluence of the three rivers.

Saddam execution rushed to stop him 'having last word'

Ex-Russian PM Primakov says

AFP, Moscow



The execution of Saddam Hussein was rushed to prevent the former Iraqi leader from revealing facts that could compromise the United States, former Russian prime minister Yevgeny Primakov said Sunday.

Saddam was executed in an "unexpected" way so "he could not have the last word" and reveal compromising information on the relationship between the United States and his former regime, the veteran diplomat said on Rossiya television channel.

If Saddam Hussein "had said everything (he knew), the current US president (George W. Bush) would have been greatly embarrassed," said Primakov, a Middle East expert formerly on good terms with Saddam.

Primakov highlighted the mili-

tary cooperation between Washington and Baghdad during the 1980s when the United States was fighting the fundamentalist threat from Iran.

He also alleged that Saddam made a deal with Washington before the 2003 invasion of Iraq to allow the United States to occupy the country without meeting any opposition.

Keep out of Iraq, Bush and Cheney warn Iran

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney Sunday issued new warnings to Iran, saying it must keep out of Iraq, but Iraq's foreign minister instead called for the release of five Iranians in US custody in his country.

Bush, in an interview on CBS's "60 Minutes," warned Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad: "If we catch your people inside (Iraq) harming US citizens or Iraqi citizens you know we will deal with them."

Asked if he agreed with US military officers that Iranian agents were killing US troops in Iraq, Bush said: "I think what they're saying ... is that the Iranians are providing equipment that is killing Americans, and therefore, either way it's unacceptable."

"We think it's very important that they keep their folks at home," Cheney said.

Cheney refused again to rule out military action against Iran due to its support for radical Islamists in Iraq and throughout the Middle East.

Zebari said Sunday his government has requested the release of the five Iranians US forces arrested Thursday from an Iranian "interests" office in the city of Arbil.

"We have communicated with the US Embassy and the command of the multinational forces seeking their release if they are found not guilty," Zebari told CNN's "Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer."

He stressed that Iraq was "not a party" to the investigation of the detainees by US forces, adding that the Iranians were working out of a "liaison office" that had been providing consular services and which Iraq and Kurdish regional authorities for many years had been aware of.

Zebari said Iraq had "recently ... asked the (Iranian) embassy to transfer this entity into the consulate so there would be a formal recognition of their status."

Bush also said his decision to "surge" US forces in Iraq by 21,500 troops was reached after consider-

ing other options like "doing nothing" and getting out of Iraq, both of which he ruled out because "we'd have a crisis on our hands in Iraq."

"Failure in Iraq, would empower Iran, which poses a significant threat to world peace," Bush told CBS.

Cheney, the US administration's leading hawk, expanded on the alleged Iranian threat saying it was "multi-dimensional" -- reaching beyond Iraq to menace US-allied moderates by supporting radical Islamist movements in Lebanon, the Palestinian areas and throughout the Middle East.

"They have begun to conduct themselves in ways that have created a great deal of tension throughout the region," he told Fox, adding that allies like Saudi Arabia and Jordan were worried by Iranian support for Islamist radicals and Tehran's suspected efforts to develop nuclear weapons.



A dancer in traditional dress of one of the Southeast Asian nations performs to welcome leaders to the East Asia Summit (EAS) gathering 10 Asean countries and their dialogue partners in Cebu, Philippines yesterday.

More grisly finds in India as serial murder toll rises

AFP, Noida

Federal detectives yesterday removed nine plastic bags filled with human bones found in a new search near a bungalow dubbed the "House of Horrors", and admitted there may now be more than 20 murder victims.

"It now looks (as though) the number of those killed may exceed 20," a detective for the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) told AFP in Noida.

The polythene bags were stashed in sewage drains that had not been searched previously, the CBI detective said on condition of anonymity.

Previously it had been confirmed at least 17 people, mostly children, were murdered in the past three years. Their remains were found last month.

"Today, we will search another drainage to the trunk (sewage) line here, the CBI detective said.

Excavators were being brought in for a second wave of searches around the house where the main suspect, a businessman and his domestic help, lived.

Noida police chief R.K.S. Rathore said he and his team had failed earlier to find the torsos or the bundles located on Sunday, as well as three skulls found on Saturday, due to "crowd trouble".

"We were distracted by crowd trouble but now things have calmed down a bit, said Rathore, who has been ordered to hand over the investigations to the CBI following national outrage.

The CBI, however, declined official comment.

"The investigations will take time. We have a policy of not making announcements before the probe is completed," CBI spokesman G. Mohanty said.

Residents of the village around the house say up to 38 children went missing over the past three years, but police ignored their complaints because they were poor.

Six policemen were sacked and three suspended for neglect.

Angry relatives and villagers have been holding protests, amid tight security and police barricades, outside the house since the skeletal remains were first found in late

December.

"I am here in desperation because so far no one has given us a hearing since my eight-year-old son went missing in May last year," said Shyam Kumar, a New Delhi builder.

"This is my last hope of finding my 32-year-old wife, who vanished two years ago from our home in south Delhi," added factory worker Satya Narayan Ghosh.

"Maybe both ended up in this monster's house," added Padmini Kumar, a Noida resident who said she was working around the clock to offer solace to parents of the killed Noida children.

CBI detectives said Saturday they had found three new skulls in the drain overnight, although it was not immediately known whether the remains belonged to new victims or the 17 discovered earlier.

Media reports say the domestic help admitted during interrogation that he raped children as young as three, had sex with the corpses of his victims and once tried to eat human organs, believing cannibalism cured impotency.

JAXA said in August last year it had set a goal of constructing a manned lunar base in 2030.