

3 GIs killed in Iraq

Insurgents kill 6 Iraqis

AP, AFP, Baghdad

The US military said yesterday that three American troops were killed, including a soldier whose patrol was struck by a roadside bomb in Baghdad.

The Multi-National Division Baghdad soldier died and another was wounded when an improvised explosive device struck their patrol in a northern section of the capital, according to the statement.

Insurgents killed six people, including an Iraqi army colonel and an engineer for state radio, Saturday in a spate of attacks around the country, security sources said.

Colonel Nazar Hamid was killed in a bombing in the main northern city of Mosul that also wounded two soldiers, police said.

Mohammed Fawzi, an engineer for Mosul's state-run provincial radio station, was shot dead in an ambush on his way to work in the city, they added.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Kashmir Prime Minister Sardar Atiq (2L) hold talks with the leaders of Indian Kashmir's main separatist alliance the All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) Mirwaiz Umar Farooq (L) Abdul Ghani Bhatt (R) and Bilal Ghani Loan (2R) during their meeting in Islamabad on Friday.

Kashmiri rebels call for end to armed struggle

AP, PTI, Islamabad

A separatist leader from India's portion of Kashmir called for giving up the armed struggle in the disputed Himalayan region to pave the way for a negotiated settlement, a news report said yesterday.

The remarks by Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, chairman of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference were likely to draw criticism from his political opponents and Islamic militants at home and in this Islamic nation.

Mirwaiz, who is heading a three-member Hurriyat delegation to Pakistan, said, "The dialogue process to resolve the Kashmir issue should be given a chance as efforts through military means have not achieved any results except creating more graveyards."

"We have already seen the results of our fight on the political and military fronts, which have not

achieved anything other than creating more graveyards," it quoted him as saying Friday at a dinner in his honour the Pakistani capital Islamabad.

With the new strategy, Hurriyat would convince India to arrive at a more agreeable settlement, he said on Friday night at a dinner hosted by Pakistan-occupied Kashmir Prime Minister Attique Khan. The delegation also met with President Pervez Musharraf.

Observing that peaceful negotiations were the only way out, he criticised the hardline Hurriyat faction led by Syed Ali Shah Geelani, which is opposed to the dialogue process.

"Some people involved in the struggle could still have some reservations, but as far as the All Parties Hurriyat Conference is concerned, we are not prepared to sacrifice any more of our loved

ones," he said.

"We have already seen the results of our fight on the political, diplomatic and military fronts, which have not achieved anything other than creating more graveyards," he was quoted by local daily Dawn as saying on Saturday.

The Pakistan president had during Friday night's meeting with the Hurriyat delegation said "elements" hostile to the peace process, who attempted to create misunderstandings on Pakistan's stand should be "strongly countered and rejected."

APHC is an alliance of 23 separatist groups based in Indian Kashmir, and Farooq's visit touched off a protest by some 3,000 relatives and friends of militants who are opposed to abandoning their fight.

Mostly Muslim Kashmir is divided between Pakistan and India but

claimed in its entirety by both.

More than a dozen militant groups most based in Pakistan have been fighting in India's part the territory, seeking independence for Kashmir or its merger with predominantly Islamic Pakistan.

The insurgency, which began in 1989, has killed more than 68,000 people, mostly civilians.

Earlier Friday, Farooq met with President Gen. Pervez Musharraf, who shared his views about ongoing talks with India to resolve the Kashmir conflict.

The two nuclear-armed nations have fought two of three wars over Kashmir since 1947 when they gained independence from Britain. New Delhi accuses Islamabad of backing Islamic militants operating in Kashmir. Pakistan denies the charge saying it extends only moral, diplomatic and political support.

New signs of Indo-Pak atomic arms race

REUTERS, Vienna

India and Pakistan may both be on the verge of expanding atomic fuel production work that could heighten a nuclear arms race between the historical foes, a prominent non-proliferation think tank said.

Fresh satellite imagery indicates Pakistan may intend to activate a new reprocessing plant "capable of separating weapons-grade plutonium out of spent reactor fuel" at its Chashma nuclear industrial park, the Institute for Science and International Security said in one of two matching studies.

India, meanwhile, appeared close to adding at least 3,000 centrifuges, machines that enrich uranium into fuel for power plants or bombs, to roughly 2,000-3,000 existing centrifuges at its Rare Materials Project (RMP) enrichment plant, ISIS said.

"This would significantly expand India's ability to make HEU (highly enriched uranium) for its military nuclear programmes and enable it to add thermonuclear weapons to its arsenal at a rate of at least a few per year," it said in the emailed report.

There was no immediate comment from Indian and Pakistani officials.

President Bush last month signed legislation in a big step toward allowing Washington to sell civilian nuclear technology to India to improve strategic and business ties between the world's two largest democracies.

Critics say the deal undermines the three-decade-old nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty because India has never joined it and developed atomic bombs in secret. The NPT holds that only states that renounce nuclear arms qualify for civilian

nuclear aid.

Pakistan, India's nuclear rival and also outside the NPT, sought a similar deal with Washington but was refused. As a result Islamabad has mulled expanding nuclear ties with China.

"Noting India's recently intensified efforts to increase uranium enrichment capabilities at the RMP, the prospect of Pakistan dramatically increasing its own plutonium separation capability would raise the question of whether the two countries are already engaged in an expanded arms race..." ISIS said.

Alluding to criticism of the US-India accord and the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group, which controls atomic material exports to prevent proliferation of nuclear weapons in unstable regions, ISIS added:

India to urge Myanmar to crack down on rebels

REUTERS, Guwahati

India will urge Myanmar to help crack down on separatist rebels from the troubled northeast it says are hiding in camps across the border when its foreign minister started visiting the country later on Friday.

Security officials say around 200 rebels from Assam have fled into neighbouring Myanmar over the last week after India launched a military offensive against the insurgents.

Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee will discuss the presence of the rebels of the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) with Myanmar's military junta, a ministry spokesman said.

"I am sure that matters of regional security and the concerns regarding terrorism are likely to be discussed," said Navtej Sarna, foreign ministry spokesman.

Mukherjee's visit comes days after Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said he had urged Myanmar to crack down on ULFA, during a meeting with his counterpart Soe

Win in Manila on the sidelines of the East Asia summit this week.

The Indian Express newspaper, quoting sources, said New Delhi believes there are 14 ULFA camps in Myanmar and will suggest joint operations on both sides of the border to flush out the rebels.

India's northeast, joined to the rest of the country by a thin strip of land, is home to dozens of tribes and ethnic groups, and several major separatist rebellions.

A rebel faction in Assam's neighbouring state of Nagaland, which has numerous camps in northern Myanmar, has said it has given refuge to up to 1,500 ULFA militants.

"The area in northern Myanmar is controlled by us and we, as a revolutionary organisation, help other rebel groups during crisis," said Kughalu Mulatonu, a senior leader of National Socialist Council of Nagaland-Khaplang faction (NSCN-K).



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan army soldiers carry out a random search of a bus and its passengers at a check point in Colombo yesterday. Security has been beefed up in the Sri Lankan capital after government troops captured the strategic coastal town of Vakarai in northeast Batticaloa from Tamil Tigers.



PHOTO: AFP

Thousands of anti-globalisation activists march through the streets of Nairobi yesterday at the start of the World Social Forum, billed as one of the largest mass protests against global capitalism. Around 5,000 activists were taking part in the march, well down on predictions by organisers that it would attract tens of thousands from around the world.

Abbas in Syria for crisis talks with Hamas

AFP, Damascus

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas was in Damascus yesterday for talks with Syrian leaders and Palestinian militants aimed at ending a deadly battle for power with the rival Hamas party.

The moderate Abbas is expected to hold talks with President Bashar al-Assad during his trip and could also hold a highly-anticipated meeting with the exiled political supremo of Hamas, Khaled Meshal.

Asked about a possible meeting with Meshal, one of Israel's most wanted men, Abbas told reporters on his arrival in Damascus: "All the parties are present here. Those who want to meet will be welcome to."

His planned talks with Assad, the first since 2005, are also likely to focus on the bitter feud plaguing the rival branches of the Palestinian leadership.

Abbas's Fatah party and the ruling Hamas have tried for months to agree on a national unity government, in hopes of ending a crippling boycott by the United States and

the European Union and of presenting a united front toward Israel.

Washington and Brussels consider Hamas to be a terrorist group and suspended direct financial aid to the Palestinians because the Islamist movement which took office in March refuses to renounce violence or recognise Israel.

Tensions between the two factions, which had already claimed a number of lives, boiled over in the Gaza Strip in December, killing more than 30 people in that month alone.

Violence has tapered off in the past couple of weeks.

The clashes erupted after Abbas called for early elections as a way of resolving the standoff with Hamas, which has vehemently rejected the move as an attempted coup and warned it could set off civil war.

On Friday, Abbas received a boost when Israel released 100 million dollars in tax revenue collected on behalf of the Palestinians that had been withheld since Hamas took power after trouncing Fatah in January 2006 elections.

Lanka troops hunt rebels as refugees flood camps

REUTERS, Mankerni

Sri Lanka's army pursued fleeing Tamil Tiger fighters yesterday after the rebels abandoned their eastern stronghold following weeks of fierce fighting and thousands of refugees arrived at crowded camps.

Some refugees caught for weeks in the crossfire of deadly artillery battles told how the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had used them as cover and threatened to kill them unless they stayed put while the rebels made their retreat.

"The LTTE did not allow us to move. They threatened us," said 45-year-old paddy field labourer Thambdemuthu Kulasekaran, who with his seven children, wife and disabled mother were among more than 10,000 refugees who fled to government territory on Friday. There was so much shelling, so we moved to the south to here," he said at an army checkpoint in the town of Mankerni, near what used to be the front line in the

area between military and rebels. "I left all my belongings behind. The last meal I had was the day before yesterday."

Hundreds of refugees, many elderly or children, were packed into buses with the few belongings they had salvaged to be moved further south to camps near the town of Batticaloa as troops searched for landmines and booby-traps they say the Tigers left in their wake.

Around 20,000-25,000 refugees had already fled the rebel enclave in recent weeks, and they are now housed in rudimentary tent cities much like the ones many of them lived in after the 2004 tsunami washed away their homes.

The military, who are checking refugees from head to toe in their search for suspected Tiger infiltrators, said 10 youths had surrendered and one other had been arrested on suspicion of being a rebel as their sobbing parents, themselves refugees, protested.

Troops were still searching for withdrawing rebel fighters now

hemmed into a diminishing pocket of land by the coast in the eastern district of Trincomalee, where the army has driven the Tigers from terrain they controlled under the terms of a battered 2002 ceasefire, which now holds only on paper.

"They are fighting in small groups, with mortars and small arms fire," said military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe. "We are in the process of capturing them. We are checking the refugees to find any Tigers hiding among them."

Friday's capture of Vakarai -- a town around 240 km northeast of Colombo that belongs to the rebels under the terms of a tattered 2002 ceasefire -- followed weeks of fierce fighting between the Tigers and the military, who have vowed to evict them from the east altogether.

The area around Vakarai was one of several pockets of territory the Tigers control in the region, their last remaining direct access to the sea in the east, an important supply line.

Shilpa tormentor kicked off reality TV show

REUTERS, London

British television star Jade Goody, accused at home and abroad of being a racist bully for her treatment of Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty, was evicted from the "Celebrity Big Brother" show on Friday.

The 25-year-old was favourite to be kicked out by public vote after she was cast as the villain of a programme that triggered protests and dominated headlines in Britain and India, prompted a sponsor to pull out and now threatens Goody's career.

After leaving the Big Brother House, which is cut off from the outside world, Goody appeared embarrassed after watching footage from the series and from recent news bulletins.

"I can't dignify myself because that video footage of myself is nasty," she said. "I'm not going to sit here and try and justify myself. Yes, I said those things and they were nasty."

But she denied she was a racist or a bully.

"I am not a racist and I sincerely ... apologise to anybody I've offended out there."