

Pak tribals in talks to quell sectarian violence

40 people killed in clashes

AFP, Peshawar

Authorities have launched negotiations with tribal elders to end the fighting, he said and added that troops could be used in some outlying areas if needed.

"So far we have received reports that 40 people have been killed in clashes in two days of fighting between two religious groups in Parachinar," said Arif Habib, a top official dealing with security in tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.

Local officials said that around 100 people were also injured in the fighting and that fighting had spread to nearby villages.

Gunship helicopters hovered in the sky as troops patrolled Parachinar on Sunday where authorities have placed a curfew since Friday. The soldiers have been given shoot-on-sight orders to

clashes so far," Anees said.

"We have started negotiations with tribal elders to end the fighting," he said and added that troops could be used in some outlying areas if needed.

"So far we have received reports that 40 people have been killed in clashes in two days of fighting between two religious groups in Parachinar," said Arif Habib, a top official dealing with security in tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.

Local officials said that around 100 people were also injured in the fighting and that fighting had spread to nearby villages.

Gunship helicopters hovered in the sky as troops patrolled Parachinar on Sunday where authorities have placed a curfew since Friday. The soldiers have been given shoot-on-sight orders to

curb the violence in the town, which has a population of around 70,000.

Clashes between the two communities over a shrine last year left around 20 people dead.

Anees said trouble erupted after members of the Shia community staged a demonstration Friday outside their mosque against local Sunnis who allegedly chanted anti-Shia slogans during a religious rally last week.

Parachinar, a tribal town close to the Afghan border in Pakistan's North West Frontier Province, has a history of sectarian violence between Sunni and Shia communities.

The town was placed under curfew on Friday after fighting erupted between the rival groups and troops were deployed to restore order.

Officials said the soldiers had been given shoot-on-sight orders to curb the violence.

Parachinar administration official Sahibzada Anees said army troops backed up by gunship helicopters were patrolling the streets of the town, which has a population of around 70,000.

Officials said 14 deaths occurred when rockets crashed into a house of a resident early Saturday. Among those killed were two women and four children.

Shias, who account for about 20 per cent of Pakistan's 160 million Sunni-dominated population, are in the majority in Parachinar.

Sectarian violence involving Sunni and Shia militants has claimed more than 4,000 lives since the late 1980s.



Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee is carried on a stretcher from an army helicopter to a waiting plane at the Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose International Airport in Kolkata yesterday. Mukherjee was flown to New Delhi by a special plane for further treatment after suffering a head injury in a car accident in which he was travelling at Murshidabad some 110km north of Kolkata late Saturday.

British troops may stay in Iraq until 2012

AFP, London

British troops could be serving in Iraq until as late as 2012, the Sunday Telegraph reported, quoting a confidential planning document.

The information comes from the Operational Tour Plot, a confidential planning document drawn up by defence chiefs and circulated last month, which lists which units are to be sent on operations when, the paper said.

The report contradicts the impression given by Prime Minister Tony Blair when he announced Britain's first major troop reduction in Iraq in February.

Blair announced that numbers of British troops -- the United States' main ally in the 2003 invasion -- would be cut from 7,100 to 5,500 by the middle of the year.

He added that British forces would remain in Basra "into 2008, for as long as we are wanted and have a job to do," but the report suggests that the deployment may be considerably longer than that.



Chief Justice of India KG Balakrishnan (R) shakes hands with West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee (C) as Kerala Chief Minister VS Achuthanandan (L) looks on during the inauguration of the Chief Ministers and Chief Justice of High Courts conference in New Delhi yesterday.

Hundreds of ethnic Karen flee Myanmar amid fighting

AFP, Bangkok

Fresh outbreaks of fighting between Myanmar's ethnic rebels and armed forces loyal to the country's junta have led to more than 200 ethnic Karen fleeing to Thailand, Thai border officials said Sunday.

The fighting began Saturday between a pro-junta militia and the rebel Karen National Union (KNU), forcing the civilians to cross the border into the western Tak province, said Thawal Pattanacharoen, regional border police chief.

"The fighting went on all day long until early Sunday morning, and has forced more than 200 Karen to seek refuge in Thailand," Thawal said.

Most of the ethnic minority Karen civilians had now returned home, he added, with only 60 left in Thailand, most of whom were women and children.

He denied local media reports that up to 30 rebels from both sides had died in the fighting, which has pitted Myanmar's pro-government Democratic Karen Buddhist Army against the KNU.

The KNU is the largest rebel group fighting Myanmar's armed forces and one of the few remaining ethnic insurgent groups yet to sign a peace deal with the junta.

Myanmar, under military rule since 1962, has signed ceasefires with 17 other ethnic armed groups.

Up to 150,000 Karen refugees already live in camps along Thailand's border with Myanmar. Many of them have been there for more than 20 years.

Myanmar began a bloody offensive against the Karen a year ago. Human rights groups say the crackdown has forced thousands of civilians to abandon their villages and flee into the jungles.

Indian PM flies to restive northeast

One killed in blast

AFP, Guwahati

A powerful blast killed at least one person in the northeastern city of Guwahati yesterday just as Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh arrived here to attend a function, police said.

Twelve others were injured in the explosion that occurred at a crowded railway crossing in Guwahati, the largest city in the insurgency-racked Assam state, a police spokesman said.

He said the blast occurred 10 kilometres (six miles) away from a site where Singh was scheduled to lay the foundation of a new bridge.

Senior police officer Rajan Singh blamed the attack on the region's outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa) guerrilla group, which has been campaigning for decades for greater autonomy in Assam state.

Singh said a powerful bomb concealed in a parked motorcycle went off at the rail crossing in Guwahati city.

Israel has no plan to attack Syria: Olmert

AP, Washington

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert told a visiting group of US lawmakers to relay to Syria that Israel had no intention of attacking it, according to one of the participants on the trip, Rep Keith Ellison, D-Minnesota.

"He very clearly said he was worried that Syria might misinterpret some things that were happening in Israel, and he didn't want to end up in an accidental war with them," Ellison, the first Muslim member of Congress, said in a telephone interview Saturday. "So he told us to tell them that he was not planning to attack them."

Ellison said Olmert was concerned that if Syria believed that Israel was planning an attack, the Syrians would make preparations to defend against one, and then a conflict could be provoked if something unexpected happened at the

border.

The Israeli embassy in Washington had no immediate comment on Ellison's account. There was no answer at the Syrian embassy on Saturday.

Ellison said Olmert didn't specify what Syria might "misinterpret." He said the group relayed the message to Syrian President Bashar Assad.

The leader of the congressional delegation, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-California, said earlier this week that she had delivered a message from Olmert that Israel was ready for peace talks, and that Assad had replied that "he's ready to engage in negotiations for peace with Israel." But Olmert's office later issued a statement saying peace talks could take place only if Syria stopped assisting terror groups.

President Bush criticized Pelosi for meeting with Assad, because the administration considers Syria to be a state supporter of terrorism.

Ellison, who also met with Assad, rejected that criticism.

"If we want to change Syria's behaviour, we have to tell that to them," he said. "We have to make it clear to them. We have to engage. We have to talk to people."

The trip also included visits to Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. Ellison called Saudi King Abdullah a "visionary leader."

"Even being in the same country where Mecca and Medina are located was personally uplifting for me," he said. In Jerusalem, Ellison visited the Al Aqsa Mosque compound, Islam's third-holiest site after Mecca and Medina, which he called "personally moving for me."

Lankan fighting kills 7 more

Security stepped up

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan stepped up security yesterday over fears of bomb attacks ahead of the traditional New Year festivities this week while the military said six rebels and a soldier were killed in fresh fighting.

A government soldier was killed in a confrontation with Tamil Tiger rebels in the north of the island Saturday, the military said in a statement. It said three guerrillas were also killed.

In a similar skirmish in the eastern district of Batticaloa, three Tiger rebels were shot dead and their bodies were captured by the security forces, the military said in a statement.

The latest clashes came hours after suspected Tiger rebels set off a

powerful roadside bomb against a civilian bus in the island's north Saturday, killing eight people and wounding 25.

Sniffer dogs were deployed at main bus stations Sunday to guard against explosives being planted following a separate parcel bomb attack last week aboard a bus in which 17 people were killed and 25 wounded in the eastern district of Ampara.

The blasts come ahead of the April 14 New Year celebrations marked by the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils.

The government blamed both blasts on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who denied any involvement and in turn accused the military of staging the attacks to "discredit" them.

UK can help mend relations, says Iran

AP, London

Fifteen British sailors and marines freed from captivity in Tehran began two weeks' leave with their families Saturday, while Iran's ambassador to London urged Britain to help his nation mend relations with the international community.

Ambassador Rasoul Movahedian told the Financial Times newspaper in an article published Saturday that Iran had "showed our goodwill" by freeing the Britons.

"Now it is up to the British government to proceed in a positive way," he was quoted as saying. "We will welcome in general any steps that could defuse tensions in the region."

The British mariners, captured in the Persian Gulf on March 23, were freed Wednesday by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who called their release a gift to Britain.

Movahedian told the Financial

Times that the release of the British crew was not connected to the fate of five Iranians held by US forces in Iraq. US officials said last week that Iran would be granted access to the detainees, but denied the decision was linked to the fate of British crew. Britain also has denied a link.

But Movahedian indicated help from the British on the matter would be appreciated.

"If they want to be helpful and use their influence we will welcome that. ... We will welcome in general any steps that could defuse tensions in the region," he said.

Movahedian called on Britain to use the resolution of the crisis as a chance to "establish sensible lines of communication with Iran."

He said the key issue for Iran was recognition from the West of its right to a nuclear power programme.

"That's the prime issue for Iran and I think that could help set a new basis for our future relations with Western countries," he said.



Sri Lankan policewomen constables patrol a busy market area in Colombo yesterday as part of increased security ahead of the traditional New Year celebrations. The heightened alert comes in the wake of two bomb attacks against civilian busses. The government blame the Tamil Tigers for the bombings while the rebels denied involvement.