



Anti-coup protesters hold placards denouncing the government's recent crackdown on some 3,000 community radio stations after three Bangkok stations broadcast calls from ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra, during a demonstration in Bangkok yesterday. Some 1,000 people turned out to protest in Bangkok against Thailand's military-backed government, which came to power after a September 2006 coup that ousted Thaksin.

## 24 die as Lebanese troops battle militants

AFP, Tripoli

Fierce gunbattles erupted in Lebanon on Sunday between soldiers and shadowy Islamic extremist fighters accused of links to al-Qaida, leaving 24 dead in the bloodiest such clashes in years.

Lebanese troops staged a broad daylight assault on a building in Tripoli where militants from Fatah al-Islam were holed up after a morning of deadly shootouts in the northern port city and a nearby Palestinian refugee camp.

The army said 13 soldiers lost their lives in the deadliest fighting with Islamists for seven years, while eight gunmen were killed along with a civilian who was caught in the crossfire when troops attacked the building in Tripoli.

Lebanon sent in troop reinforcements to contain the battles involving anti-tank rockets and canons which erupted at dawn in Tripoli and around the nearby Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr al-Bared, a Fatah al-Islam stronghold.

The sound of gunfire rattled through the streets of Tripoli throughout the morning, where soldiers in jeeps and at least one tank were seen rolling through the streets and plumes of smoke billowing into the sky.

"We warn the army against continuing its provocations against our mujahedeen (Islamic fighters) or risk us opening fire against it and all of Lebanon," according to a statement said to have been issued by Fatah al-Islam.

A convoy of about 100 troop carriers, jeeps and ambulances estimated to contain between 800 and 1,000 men was seen moving north on the road between Beirut and Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city.

By longstanding convention, the army said three militants were killed in the assault on the building in the residential district of Miteyn, along with a civilian and an army captain, while dozens had been arrested, but that gunmen were still hiding out in other parts of Tripoli.

The army said the fighting was triggered when the militants staged an attack on a military post outside Nahr al-Bared, home to about 22,000 refugees.

In the deadliest attack, seven soldiers were killed when their patrol was ambushed in Qalamun south of Tripoli.

Syria, the former power broker in Lebanon, announced it had closed two border posts into its smaller neighbour because of the violence.

Russia expressed deep concern, saying: "Such an upsurge of violence in an already tense situation in Lebanon gives rise to deep anxiety."

## 'US pays Pakistan \$1b a yr to hunt down terror suspects'

AFP, Washington

The United States pays Pakistan about one billion dollars a year for its participation in counterterrorism operations along the border with Afghanistan, The New York Times reported on its website Saturday.

The newspaper said the payments continue even though Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf had decided eight months ago to slash patrols through the area where al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters are most active.

The monthly payments, called coalition support funds, are not widely advertised, the report said.

Buried in public budget numbers, the payments are intended to reimburse Pakistan's military for the cost of the operations.

So far, Pakistan has received more than 5.6 billion dollars under the programme over five years, more than half of the total aid the United States has sent to the country since the September 11, 2001, attacks, the paper said.

## Pak cops released in exchange for extremists

AFP, Islamabad

Hardline clerics said yesterday that they had released two Pakistani policemen held hostage at a mosque here, after a deal was struck with authorities to free four extremists.

The clerics said two other policemen still captive will only be released when a total of 11 men detained by the Pakistani government are freed.

Dozens of students from a madrasa, or seminary, attached to the Red Mosque in Islamabad, seized the four policemen on Friday evening, triggering a tense stand-off at the mosque between armed police and the radical students.

"We released two policemen late Saturday as a goodwill gesture," the mosque's deputy leader Abdul Rashid Ghazi told AFP. "None of our 11 students have returned yet, but we hope to get back four of them shortly in the first phase and rest afterwards as agreed by the authorities," he said.

The government has not commented on the trade-off, which was greeted in local press with the headlines "Government bows to Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) mullahs" and "Lal Masjid gets its own way."

The apparent concession came despite President Pervez Musharraf recently vowing to tackle what he said was rising militancy in Pakistan.

## 600 killed in Lanka battles in 4 months

AFP, Colombo

Nearly 600 combatants have been killed in military operations against separatist Tamil rebels in Sri Lanka's restive north in the past four months, the military said yesterday.

At least 541 insurgents and 44 soldiers have been killed in battles in Mannar and Vavuniya districts, military spokesman Brig. Prasad Samarasinghe said.

He said the aim of the operation is to destroy Tamil Tiger mortar positions and to free thousands of civilians held as "human shields" in the rebel-held territory.

Rebel officials could not be

immediately reached for comment.

The two districts lie at the edge of a vast rebel-held area where the Tigers claim to run a de-facto state with their own police and judiciary.

Also the military said on Sunday that soldiers pre-empted an attempt by Tamil Tiger rebels to infiltrate a defence line elsewhere in the north, killing three guerrillas.

Troops manning the defence line in Muhamalai on the northern Jaffna peninsula, 185 miles north of the capital Colombo, killed the rebels Saturday evening, an official from the Defence Ministry's information centre said on customary condition of anonymity in line with policy.

## Nuclear issue off limits in US-Iraq talks: Iran

AFP, Tehran

Iran said yesterday its nuclear stand-off with the West will be strictly off the agenda when Iranian officials hold rare talks this month with US diplomats in Baghdad over Iraq.

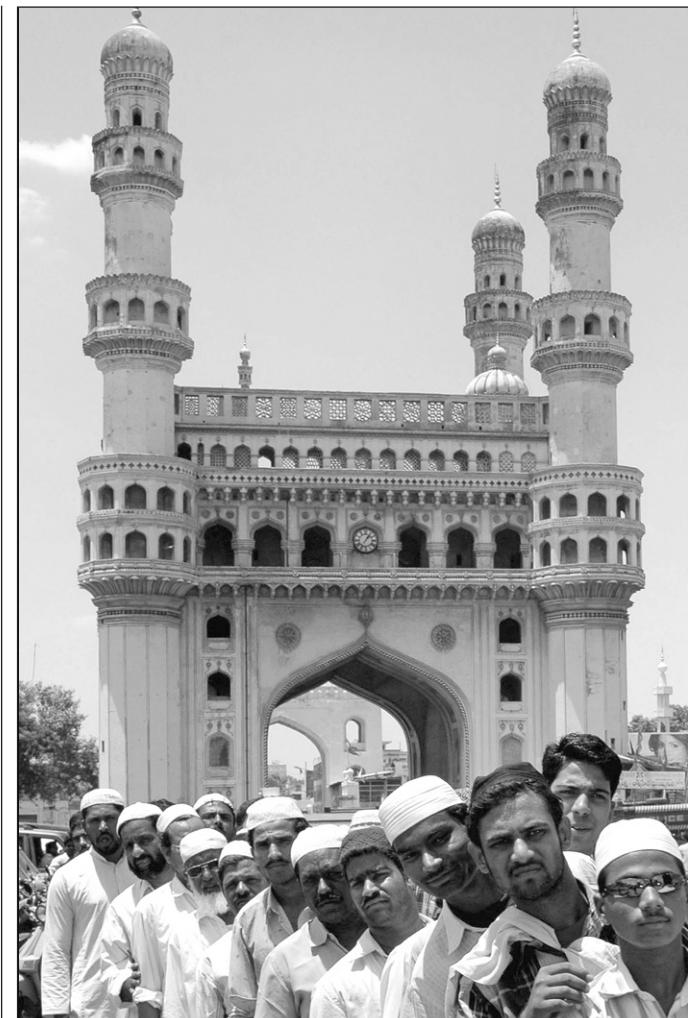
"We do not want there to be any connection between the nuclear talks and the discussions on Iraq," foreign ministry spokesman Mohammad Ali Hosseini told reporters.

"If there is someone who wants to connect the nuclear issue with Iraq then this is something that we do not

want," he added.

US and Iranian envoys are to meet in Baghdad on May 28 for talks on Iraqi security, three days ahead of the latest encounter between Iran's nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani and EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana to break the deadlock in the nuclear crisis.

Iran's leaders have repeatedly said they are ready for full negotiations with the United States, but only if Washington changes its position towards the Islamic republic, which it accuses of sponsoring terrorism.



Indian Muslim devotees line up before going through a police check before entering the Makkah Masjid (Mosque) for the afternoon prayers in the background of the Charminar Mosque in Hyderabad yesterday. Police sought clues to a "sophisticated" blast at a historic mosque that killed 16 people and triggered clashes in Hyderabad.

## US hunt for Laden yields no results

AFP, Washington

A major hunt for al-Qaeda founder Osama bin Laden launched by the US Central Intelligence Agency last year has produced no significant leads on his whereabouts, The Los Angeles Times reported on its website Saturday.

But citing unnamed senior US intelligence officials, the newspaper said it has helped detect an significant increase in the movement of al-Qaeda operatives and money from Iraq into Pakistan's tribal territories.

In the deadliest attack, seven soldiers were killed when their patrol was ambushed in Qalamun south of Tripoli.

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## Indian police seek clues into bombing

AP, Hyderabad

Calm returned to the southern Indian city of Hyderabad yesterday, with shops reopening and people flooding into the streets as fears of religious violence following the bombing of a 17th century mosque abated.

The bomb, hidden under a bench in the courtyard of the historic Mecca mosque, exploded during prayers Friday, killing 11 people. Another five were killed when clashes erupted between security officials and Muslim protesters after the blast and police opened fire on stone-throwing crowds.

## Thousands of secular Turks stage rally

AP, Samsun

Thousands of Turks demonstrated in this Black Sea port city yesterday against the Islamic-rooted government, which they fear is undermining Turkey's secular system.

The demonstration in Samsun, the latest in a series of protests nationwide, was significant, as the city was where Turkey's secular founder, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, launched the country's war of independence against occupying powers after World War I.

Massive demonstrations against the government recently have been held in Ankara, Istanbul and Izmir.