



Pakistani police commandos gather in a street of Rawalpindi yesterday from where shots were fired at President Pervez Musharraf's plane. Pakistani security forces arrested a man and seized an improvised anti-aircraft gun after shots were fired into the flightpath of Musharraf's plane, officials said.

Suicide attack kills 4 Pakistani soldiers

6 killed in Pak abduction attempt

AFP, Peshawar/ Miranshah

A suicide bomber rammed his explosives-laden car into a military convoy in northwestern Pakistan yesterday, killing four soldiers, police and officials said.

The attack took place while the convoy was driving from the town of Dir to the nearby hill resort of Swat, they said.

Two soldiers and two officers were killed, a police official said.

Swat is a stronghold of a banned extremist group linked to radical clerics at Islamabad's Red Mosque, which security forces have besieged after deadly clashes

between Islamist students and security forces.

A policeman and four civilians were killed in attacks on Wednesday in the same area.

Calls have been made on a private Islamist radio station in the area to launch "jihad" (holy war) against government officials in retaliation for the mosque confrontation.

The organisation, called Tehrik Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi, was banned in 2002 by President Pervez Musharraf after it sent thousands of volunteers to Afghanistan to battle US forces in support of the fundamentalist Taliban.

Meanwhile, six people were killed in a gunbattle in a Pakistani tribal area yesterday after masked assailants abducted an official from a military college, officials said.

Masked gunmen in the troubled tribal region of North Waziristan, bundled into their car Faisal Islam, an official from a military cadet college, security officials said.

The kidnapers sped away after the abduction in Razmak town but local tribesmen chased them and the ensuing gunbattle left six people dead, including four kidnapers and two tribesmen.

At least 11 others were injured.

Myanmar frees more NLD activists

AP, Yangon

Myanmar's military government has released four more activists who were detained last May after holding prayer vigils for the release of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, a spokesman for her party said yesterday.

Three members of the National League for Democracy and one former member of the party were released Thursday, along with a fifth protester who was arrested in April for demonstrating against economic hardship, the NLD's Nyan Win said in a telephone interview.

"With the release of five people on Thursday, five more who participated in prayer vigils, or who staged protests over economic hardship, remain under detention," Nyan Win said.

Political rallies are banned in Myanmar, which has been under military rule since 1962. The current military junta seized power after crushing pro-democracy protests in 1988.

'Global warming ravaging Mount Everest'

AFP, London

Global warming is radically changing the face of Mount Everest, the sons of the men who first reached its summit 54 years ago said in an interview published yesterday.

The sons of Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay told British newspaper The Independent that their fathers would no longer recognise the world's highest mountain, saying the base camp is now 40 metres (132 feet) lower than it was 53 years ago.

"Climate change is happening. This is a fact," Hillary's son Peter said. "Base camp used to sit at 5,320 metres. This year it was at 5,280 metres because the ice is melting from the top and side. Base camp is sinking each year," said Peter Hillary, who himself has twice reached Everest's summit.

"For Sherpas living on Mount Everest this is something they can see every day but they can't do anything about it on their own," he added.

Lanka jets bomb rebel positions

Six soldiers killed

AFP, Colombo

The Tamil Tiger rebels killed at least six soldiers and wounded another seven in eastern Sri Lanka yesterday as war planes bombed suspected guerrilla positions in the same region, officials said.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) killed the six men, including a senior officer, at Thoppigala, an area of jungle where the rebels maintain a stronghold, military officials said.

"Five men and their commanding officer were killed and seven escaped with injuries," a military official in the area said by telephone. "We don't have reports of Tiger casualties yet."

The killings came as the air

force carried out two bombing sorties in the same region to support ground troops.

The defence ministry said the air attacks were to back infantry trying to wrest control of Thoppigala. A third bombing sortie was in the northwest Mannar region.

There were no immediate reports of casualties and there was no comment from the rebels, who on Thursday marked their "Black Tiger" day -- the anniversary of their first suicide bombing staged 20 years ago.

The LTTE released pictures of its chief, Velupillai Prabhakaran, dressed in jungle camouflage military fatigues and offering a flower garland to the portrait of the first Black Tiger, a guerrilla

known as Captain Miller.

Miller drove a truck bomb into an army camp on the Jaffna peninsula on July 5, 1987, killing 40 government soldiers.

The guerrillas said 322 members of the elite Black Tiger suicide units had perished in attacks so far.

The latest Black Tiger anniversary came amid an upsurge of fighting on the tropical island. More than 5,000 people have been killed in the new wave of bloodshed that began in December 2005.

The Tamil Tigers are fighting for an independent homeland for the minority ethnic Tamils on the majority Sinhalese island. The 35-year-old conflict has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

N Korea nuclear talks to resume in July

AP, Beijing

South Korea's chief nuclear negotiator said Friday that long-stalled talks on dismantling North Korea's nuclear arsenal are to resume this month as Seoul prepared to ship a first batch of promised energy aid to the North next week.

Chun Yung-woo said the exact date of the talks would likely be announced next week.

"A meeting among the head delegates of the six-party talks will be held this month," Chun told reporters in Beijing following discussions with his Chinese counterpart, Wu Dawei. "No date has been determined. It looks like China, as the host country, will decide after listening to the other countries' opinions."

China is the host of the so-called six-nation forum, which also involves the two Koreas, Japan, Russia and the United States. The last round of negotiations was held in Beijing in March.

Efforts to push the talks forward and implement a February agreement that committed the North to shutting down its main reactor in exchange for economic aid and political concessions had been held up by a financial dispute between Pyongyang and Washington. The issue was finally resolved last week.

India AIDS cases lower than thought

Says minister

AFP, New Delhi

The number of people living with HIV/AIDS in India stands at two million to 3.1 million, sharply lower than earlier estimates, the health minister announced on Friday.

Previous estimates from India's National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) had put the HIV caseload at 5.2 million while UNAIDS in 2006 estimated 5.7 million cases.

"Today we have a far more reliable estimate of the burden of HIV in India," said Health Minister Anbumani Ramadoss.

"The results show that there are an estimated two million to 3.1 million people affected with HIV/AIDS," Ramadoss told a news conference in the Indian capital.

International health organisations have for years worried about the possibility of a South Africa-style AIDS epidemic in India but the new figures being mentioned would suggest a fairly low infection rate.

Japan seeks greater military role abroad

AP, Tokyo

Japan's military is making international peacekeeping a priority, scrambling to bolster its missile defences and deepening its coordination with US troops, an annual report said Friday.

The new focus on peacekeeping is part of a major transformation of Japan's post World War II military into a more ambitious institution. The change reflects efforts to make the country a more forceful player on the world stage and Japan's growing concern at China's expanding military might.

Japan has in recent years become more involved in peacekeeping missions, and sent several hundred troops to southern Iraq, where they were involved in reconstruction, water-purification and other humanitarian, non-combat activities.

Sr Republican senator abandons Iraq policy

AP, Washington

In another setback to President Bush's increasingly unpopular war strategy, GOP stalwart Sen. Pete Domenici said he wants to see an end to combat operations and US troops heading home from Iraq by spring.

The longtime New Mexico senator is the latest of several party loyalists and former war supporters to abandon Bush on Iraq in the past 10 days. They have urged a change sooner rather than later and further isolated the GOP presi-

dent in his attempt to defend the unpopular war.

Last week, Sens Richard Lugar, R-Indiana, and George Voinovich, R-Ohio, said the US should significantly reduce its military presence in Iraq while bolstering diplomatic efforts. Sen John Warner, R-Virginia, this month is expected to propose a new approach.

"I do not support an immediate withdrawal from Iraq or a reduction in funding for our troops," Domenici said. "But I do support a new strategy that will move our troops out of combat operations and on the path

to coming home."

With Congress on its July Fourth break, Domenici made his views known Thursday at a press conference in Albuquerque, N.M., though he said he has not talked to the administration about wanting a strategy shift.

"I have carefully studied the Iraq situation and believe we cannot continue asking our troops to sacrifice indefinitely while the Iraqi government is not making measurable progress to move its country forward," he said.

Thailand unveils constitution to curb premier's power

AFP, Bangkok

A military-appointed council yesterday approved its final draft of a new constitution that is meant to guide Thailand back to democracy after last year's coup, but faces stiff opposition.

The document will go to a referendum next month, but campaigning is already underway to reject it, a result analysts fear could prompt fresh upheaval in a country rocked by 18 months of political turmoil.

Noranit Sethaputra, president of the Constitution Drafting Assembly (CDA), said 98 members had approved the charter, with no votes against it or abstentions.

"This meeting concluded that the referendum on this draft constitution will be held on August 19," he said.

Some 19 million copies of the 150-page charter will now be distributed to every household ahead of the country's first referendum.

The military, which ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra last September after months of protests over alleged graft, is pressing hard for voters to approve the charter, which they say will rein in the powers of

future premiers.

Elections have been promised by the junta for later this year, but a rejection of the charter could postpone polls.

Although some controversial aspects of the initial draft were watered down, Thaksin's allies said they were determined to quash the new constitution.

"We will ... work together with other groups of activists to educate people and convince them to reject the draft," said Surapong Suebwonglee, spokesman for Thai Rak Thai, the political party formed by Thaksin but officially dissolved in May.

"Compared to 1997 charter, this draft is less democratic," he told AFP.

Shortly after the generals seized power, they tossed out Thailand's 1997 constitution, which had been widely hailed as the most democratic the kingdom had ever known.

The military accused Thaksin of exploiting loopholes in the charter to consolidate power in the prime minister's office and enrich his business empire.

Mass grave unearthed in Afghan jail

AFP, Kabul

A mass grave containing hundreds of bodies has been discovered in an underground prison north of the Afghan capital, the BBC reported early yesterday.

Police General Ali Shah Paktiwal told the BBC the grave was unearthed in a former military base dating back to the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s.

The grisly find was made after an old man who recently returned to Afghanistan led police to the site where victims were apparently walled up in rooms and left to die.

"An old man told us about the grave. He told us he worked as a driver when there was a Russian military base here," Paktiwal told the BBC World Service.

"They used to bring people here. They put them in these rooms, they shut the door and then they put bricks and stones and covered the door with earth."

Several hundred bodies have been discovered in the 15 rooms unearthed so far but it was not known how many were buried there

in total, the report said.

Paktiwal who is overseeing the criminal investigation into the mass grave said many of the victims had their arms tied and had been blindfolded or gagged.

Photographs on the BBC News website showed policemen digging skulls and other bones out of the underground chambers in the abandoned prison.

The find is a grim reminder of the nearly three decades of conflict and human rights abuses Afghans have endured.

More than 1.5 million Afghans were killed and thousands more tortured or raped during the resistance to the Soviet invasion and ensuing civil war, which left the capital in ruins.

It was the second mass grave reported to have been found near Kabul.

Last year Nato troops discovered another one near the notorious Pul-e-Charkhi prison in the east of the city where many opponents of the Soviet invaders were tortured and killed.



An Israeli soldier directs a Merkava tank onto a transport truck following an incursion into the central Gaza Strip Mughazi refugee camp, at a staging area located along the Gaza-Israel border yesterday. Israeli troops withdrew from the Gaza Strip Thursday night after a commando-style incursion left 11 Palestinian fighters dead in heavy fighting.

Israeli troops pull out of Gaza after deadly raid

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli troops withdrew from the Gaza Strip overnight after an operation in which they killed 11 Palestinian fighters during heavy fighting, sources on both sides said yesterday.

An Israeli army spokesman said the incursion in central Gaza around the Mughazi refugee camp, and another in the northern part of the territory that was used to fire rockets on Israel, had ended and troops were back in Israel.

Of the 11 Palestinian fighters killed, six belonged to the armed wing of Hamas, the Islamist movement blacklisted as a terrorist organisation in the West and which seized control of the Gaza Strip last month.

More than 25 Palestinians were wounded during the incursion, including five seriously, local medical sources said.

Two Israeli soldiers were also wounded in the central Gaza Strip operation, which saw around 100 troops, backed by tanks and helicopters, advance through the territory on foot, witnesses said.

Six houses were damaged by Israeli fire and a former Palestinian security station completely destroyed in fighting around Mughazi where army bulldozers ripped up two hectares (five acres) of farm land, local witnesses said.

Another five hectares of farm land were bulldozed in the north, they said.

Although Israel has vowed to bolster Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas and his new Western-backed emergency government based in the occupied West Bank, it has sworn to continue attacks on militants.

Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert are expected to meet this month in the West Bank oasis town of Jericho, a senior official in Olmert's office told AFP, for talks cancelled during the crisis that saw Hamas seize Gaza.

Israeli and Palestinian officials also began security discussions this week, which Israel would like to continue regularly in Ramallah and Jerusalem with a view to reforming a united Palestinian security force, the source said.



Mexican soldiers inspect the wreckage of a cargo plane that smashed into a busy road in Culiacan in the Mexican Pacific coast state of Sinaloa Thursday. The plane broke through a wall and smashed into a busy road, hitting a military truck and a car and killing nine people after failing to take off at the Culiacan airport in northwestern Mexico.