

RED MOSQUE STORMING

Pak parents in agonising waiting game for children

AFP, Islamabad

With explosions and machinegun fire rattling in the background, the distraught parents of children trapped inside the Red Mosque could only gaze helplessly towards the trails of black smoke. At dawn on Tuesday troops stormed the mosque compound, which includes an Islamic school, and spent the rest of the day fighting Islamic militants holed up inside. At least 58 people were confirmed dead.

Family members have spent the last eight days while the mosque was under siege waiting at a make-shift registration area, next to a school tennis court, for news of their loved ones.

"When I hear these blasts and gunfire I feel that they are piercing me in the chest," said Maqsood

Hussain, 45, a labourer from the northwestern city of Abbottabad, whose 14-year-old son Aitasham Ali was inside the compound.

Most of the parents were visibly disturbed, sitting on the ground or at the roadside, some of them on mobile phones. Many of the men chain-smoked.

Barbed wire ringed the area while a stream of ambulances and heavily armed troops in pickup trucks constantly whizzed past.

The army set up lorries to block the view of the Red Mosque several hundred metres (yards) away but could not block out the pillar of black smoke rising above it -- nor the sounds of combat.

There was a brief disturbance when several burqa-clad women who had been taken out of the mosque complex by security forces began

chanting "Al-Jihad! Al-Jihad!".

The mood was markedly different from the previous day, when many parents were hopeful about efforts by ministers and clerics to thrash out a solution with the hard-line cleric leading the mosque.

Many complained that the government had done nothing to keep them informed. Others said the authorities had set up meal tents for officials and the media but given them nothing.

Some parents said their Islamic faith kept them going.

"Our faith is that when death comes it should come in the name of God," said Jamila Bibi, who has waited for news of her son Mahmood.

Qazi Khalilur Rehman, 50, said his 17-year-old son Ajmal Mahmood was not a student from the mosque but he was caught inside when the

unrest started a week ago.

"Since then we don't know if he is dead or alive," said Rehman as he sat on a patch of grass where had listened to the sounds of automatic weapons for more than 12 hours.

Abid Hussain Shah from Rawalpindi, near Islamabad, said he had been sitting in the open for three days waiting for his sister Sadia Bibi, 22, a student at the mosque's madrasa for the last four years.

"Yesterday when the negotiations were going on I was very hopeful, but since this morning it sounds like they are invading a country," he said.

"With this amount of explosives they could blow up a mountain. Now I can only pray that Allah keeps my sister alive."



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani paramedics carry an injured army commando on a stretcher at a hospital following the military assault on the Red Mosque in Islamabad yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP

Hundreds of Pakistani Islamic students hold bamboo sticks and shout anti-government slogans against the army raid on the Red Mosque in Islamabad during a protest rally in Multan yesterday.

'Musharraf had to tackle mosque for Pak future'

AFP, Islamabad

al-Qaeda-linked militants in control of an Islamabad mosque posed a threat to the very fabric of Pakistan and President Pervez Musharraf could not allow such a challenge to his authority.

Analysts said the fight for the Red Mosque in the centre of the capital Islamabad, just a few kilometres from the seat of government and foreign embassies, had become a battle for the future of the extremist-hit nation.

Dozens of people were killed when troops stormed the radical Red

Mosque in at dawn on Tuesday at the end of an eight-day siege.

Analysts said Musharraf faced a crunch decision -- take on the most serious militant threat to the country in years at the risk of a bloodbath or to bow to the militant strain in Pakistani society and thereby strengthen it.

Rasool Bakhsh Raees, professor of political science at the Lahore University of Management and Sciences, said the mosque symbolised a wider confrontation.

"The trend (of extremism) has been more than menacing, it has

been genuinely threatening the internal security of the country," Raees said.

He added that it was "suicidal" of the mosque to challenge the strength of the state in the national capital.

"Doing it in the heart of city was an extremely irrational thing," he said.

The mosque's headline presence in the moderate city of one million people came to embody widespread concerns about the spread of militancy from the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.

Iraq govt missed all targets: US official

AP, Washington

A progress report on Iraq will conclude that the US-backed government in Baghdad has not met any of its targets for political, economic and other reforms, speeding up the Bush administration's reckoning on what to do next, a US official said Monday.

The "pivot point" for addressing the matter will no longer be Sept. 15, as initially envisioned, when a full report on Bush's so-called "surge" plan is due, but instead will come this week when the interim mid-July assessment is released, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because the draft is still under discussion.

But another senior official said Bush's advisers, along with the president, decided last week there was not enough evidence from Iraq

to justify a change now in current policy.

They had launched discussions about how to react to the erosion of support for the president's Iraq approach among prominent Republicans, that official said, and the debate was part of a broader search for a way out of a US combat presence in Iraq by the end of Bush's presidency.

The second official said the decision was to wait for the September report one originally proposed by Defence Secretary Robert Gates and other administration officials, and then enshrined into law by Congress before deciding whether any course shift is warranted. The official spoke on condition of anonymity so he could talk more freely about internal deliberations.

3rd US aircraft carrier heads to the Gulf

AFP, Manama

Another US Navy aircraft carrier is heading towards the Middle East, boosting the number of the giant warships in the region to three, the navy said in a statement yesterday.

The nuclear-powered USS Enterprise and its strike group will join the USS John C Stennis and USS Nimitz in the navy's Fifth Fleet area of operation, which includes Gulf waters off Iran.

"The Enterprise is heading to Fifth Fleet waters and is not replacing any other ships in the area," a US Navy spokesperson told AFP without elaborating.

The US Navy has significantly beefed up its presence in the region recently amid growing concerns in the West that Iran is secretly developing a nuclear weapons programme -- an accusation Tehran strongly denies.

The Enterprise "provides navy power to counter the assertive, disruptive and coercive behaviour of some countries, as well as support (to) our soldiers and marines in Iraq and Afghanistan," Vice Admiral Kevin Cosgriff said in the statement.

"Regular deployments of the strike groups to the Middle East are not designed to provoke any of the Gulf countries," it added.

Will Turkey invade northern Iraq?

AP, Istanbul

Reports that Turkey has massed a huge military force on its border with Iraq bolstered fears that an invasion targeting hideouts of Kurdish rebels could be imminent.

But how deeply into Iraq is the Turkish army willing to go, how long would it stay and what kind of fallout could come from allies in Washington and other Nato partners?

All these questions weigh on Turkey's leaders, who have enough on their hands without embarking on a foreign military adventure. Turkey is caught up in an internal rift between the Islamic-rooted government and the military-backed, secular establishment, less than two weeks ahead of July 22

elections that were called early as a way to ease tensions in a polarised society.

A military operation could disrupt Turkey's fragile democratic process by diverting attention from campaign topics such as the economy, and raise suspicion about whether the government and its opponents are manipulating the Iraq issue to win nationalist support at the polls.

On Monday, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Turkish television that Turkey would take whatever steps were necessary if the United States fails to fulfil its pledge to help in the fight against Kurdish rebels, but he appeared reluctant to order an invasion before the elections.

Tigers slow Lankan advance on key jungle base

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels in the east of Sri Lanka are showing stiff resistance and have slowed a military advance on a strategic jungle base, defence authorities here said yesterday.

Government spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella told reporters the Tiger rebels were still holed up in a small area known as Thoppigala, adding that they had buried mines and were slowing the military campaign.

"We have captured about 98 percent of the territory, but the balance two percent won't be in a matter of days," Rambukwella said, dismissing media reports that troops were about to take Thoppigala.

"It may even take two years," he said.

He said the objective of the security forces was not limited to capturing Thoppigala, but was to take full control over the multi-ethnic eastern province by neutralising the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Military spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe said the army had taken up position about "five to six kilometres" away from Thoppigala. He too rejected media reports that

the military had captured the area.

"We are at Narakamulla and this is about five to six kilometres away from Thoppigala," Samarasinghe told reporters. "Media reports said that we captured a place nicknamed 'Tora Bora' yesterday. That is also not correct."

Samarasinghe said the Tigers had a complex network of bases in the jungle area, which has been used by the rebels as a main command and control centre for their operations in the eastern region.

Security forces moved to take Thoppigala earlier this year, capturing several key bases from the Tigers in the districts of Batticaloa and Ampara.

Three weeks ago, the military estimated rebel forces at Thoppigala at 150, but military commanders in the area have estimated the current strength at over 200.

More than 60,000 people are reported to have been killed in the LTTE's separatist campaign since 1972.

In other violence, the Tigers said at least five people in a vehicle were killed Tuesday in a roadside bomb attack inside rebel-held territory in the north of the island.



PHOTO: AFP

Dr Muhammad Yunus (R), founder of the Grameen Bank, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006, is welcomed by Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tokyo yesterday. During his stay in Japan, Yunus will deliver speeches at symposiums and universities.

Abbas calls for int'l force in Gaza

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas yesterday called for an international force in the Gaza Strip, which is now controlled by the rival Hamas movement.

"We have insisted on the necessity of deploying an international force in the Gaza Strip to guarantee the delivery of humanitarian aid and to allow citizens to enter and leave freely," Abbas said at a joint news conference in Ramallah after talks with visiting Italian Prime Minister Romano Prodi.

The call threatened to further widen the yawning Palestinian chasm, as Hamas has warned that it would not accept any foreign troops in Gaza and would treat them as an occupying power.

Militants from Islamist Hamas overran forces loyal to the moderate Abbas in Gaza on June 15, effectively splitting the Palestinians into two entities, the president controlling the occupied West Bank and Hamas running Gaza.

China executes ex-food and drug chief

AP, Beijing

China executed the former head of its food and drug watchdog on Tuesday for approving untested medicine in exchange for cash, the strongest signal yet from Beijing that it is serious about tackling its product safety crisis.

The execution of former State Food and Drug Administration director Zheng Xiaoyu was confirmed by state television and the official Xinhua News Agency.

During Zheng's tenure from 1998 to 2005, his agency approved six medicines that turned out to be fake, and the drug-makers used falsified documents to apply for approvals, according to previous state media reports. One antibiotic caused the deaths of at least 10 people.

Thai court to hear Thaksin graft case

AP, Bangkok

Thailand's Supreme Court agreed yesterday to hear a corruption case against ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and his wife in a multimillion-dollar land deal, and ordered the couple to appear before the panel next month.

It was the first time that Thailand's top court set a date for the exiled former premier to appear, scheduling the first hearing for Aug. 14.

Thaksin, who has lived overseas since his government was toppled in a coup last September, already has ignored previous orders from police to appear in Thailand to face corruption allegations, and his Bangkok attorney said he would not appear at Supreme Court hearing either.

UK terror suspect worked in aviation

AP, Bangalore

Officials confirmed yesterday that an Indian suspect in the failed car bombings in Britain had worked as an aeronautical engineer at a company contracted by the biggest names in aviation.

Kafeel Ahmed, 27, is in a Scottish hospital with burns suffered after allegedly crashing a Jeep Cherokee into the Glasgow airport a day after police found two unexploded car bombs in central London.

Ahmed worked in Bangalore as an aeronautical engineer for Infotech Enterprises, a large outsourcing firm, from December 2005 to August 2006, said the company spokesman KS Susindar.

N Korea nuke talks to resume next week

AP, Seoul

International talks on North Korea's nuclear disarmament will resume in Beijing next week, a report said Tuesday, as the UN's nuclear watchdog prepared to return to the North to oversee the promised shutdown of its main reactor.

Host China has informed participating countries that the negotiations will start July 18, South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported from Beijing, citing an unidentified diplomatic source familiar with the negotiations.

The session was expected to last two days, but could go on for one more if necessary, Yonhap said. China was expected to make an official announcement on the talks as early as Tuesday, Yonhap added.