

Pakistan on alert amidst fear of attacks on MPs

Pak policeman, militant die in failed suicide attack

PTI, AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani security forces have been put on high alert after intelligence agencies warned of terrorist attacks targeting parliamentarians and sensitive locations, including the Parliament House, in retaliation for the bloody military operation at the Lal Masjid last month.

Intelligence agencies have warned of terrorist attacks at Parliament House and its lodges in Islamabad as revenge for the Lal Masjid operation.

Security agencies have reported to the Interior Ministry that terrorists could hit parliament while it is in session.

Parliament lodges, where several parliamentarians are staying, could also become a target for terrorist strike.

Intelligence report said that the terrorists could use an improvised explosive device, suicide attack or car

bombing to target parliamentarians. The district administration has increased the presence of security forces at the lodges, while the Frontier Constabulary is manning the highly sensitive Ministers Enclave area.

Islamabad Deputy Commissioner Chaudhry Mohammad Ali was quoted by the Daily Times as saying that "foolproof" security arrangements have been made in the entire city.

Intelligence agencies have recommended that security be enhanced in and around Parliament House and the Parliament Lodges.

The Interior Ministry has ordered walkthrough gates and cameras installed at the entrance of the Parliament Lodges to increase security for the parliamentarians, the daily said.

Meanwhile, an Islamic militant and a policeman died Thursday when officers foiled a suicide bombing at a

Pakistani police school, the latest attack since the army stormed a radical Islamabad mosque. The attack in the central city of Sargodha in Punjab province comes amid a wave of violence that has killed more than 200 people across the country in recent weeks, piling pressure on key US ally President Pervez Musharraf.

The Islamic militant tried to enter the police training facility with seven kilograms (15 pounds) of explosives strapped to his body as dozens of recruits ended their morning parade, Sargodha police chief Sheikh Omar told AFP.

"He was a suicide bomber but police foiled his attempt," Omar said, adding that casualties would have been "heavy" had he succeeded in entering the training area.

He said security officials at the gate of the school stopped the suspect, in his early 20s, who pulled out a pistol

and opened fire, killing one police officer and wounding another. A hand grenade was also found on his corpse. "A constable on duty shot him dead. His presence of mind saved many lives," local police officer Nasar Hayat said.

"The bomber apparently had full details about the morning's drill schedule but it was just by chance that the person in charge today called off the drill about five minutes early," Hayat added.

Police said the attack appeared to be a "continuation" of attacks on police and the army in apparent revenge for the siege and storming of the pro-Taliban Red Mosque in the capital, in which more than 100 people died.

Fifteen people were killed on Friday when a suicide bomber attacked a group of policemen during fresh protests at the mosque.



PHOTO: AFP

Emergency personnel survey the site of a collapsed bridge over the Mississippi River on Wednesday in Minneapolis, Minnesota. At least seven people were killed when cars, trucks and massive chunks of concrete plunged into the rushing waters, officials said. The bridge was under construction at the time of the accident and only one lane was open in either direction when it collapsed shortly after 6 pm (2300 GMT), right in the middle of the local rush hour.

Mississippi bridge collapse kills 7

AFP, Minneapolis

Divers resumed sifting the mangled wreckage yesterday of a highway bridge that collapsed in rush hour plunging vehicles into the Mississippi river, killing several people.

Officials put the latest toll at seven. Some local media said at least nine people were killed in the wreck, while other reports early Thursday citing police revised the toll down to four.

"There's no question the fatality number will go up," Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty told NBC, as recovery workers at the site of the wreckage resumed their search in daylight.

"We know there are a number of cars in the water we haven't been able to get to and they've been there submerged since last evening ... so the fatality number is likely to go up."

Officials said 20 to 30 people were still reported missing after the search was halted for the night at 1:00 am and recovery teams could see at least 50 vehicles submerged, television

reports said.

Dozens of vehicles fell into the river or were crushed as massive sections of the eight-lane bridge on a major highway, rising 64 feet (20 meters) over the water, were sheared off during Wednesday evening rush hour in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

"The bridge started falling, cars were flying everywhere and I saw the water coming up," said Catherine Yankelevich, who was driving across the bridge when it fell.

Her car ended up in the water but she managed to roll down her window and swim to safety.

After four hours of frantic rescue efforts before night fall, the head of the fire department said the focus on Thursday would shift from search to recovery.

Jim Clack said more than 60 people were taken to hospital and it was unlikely that any more survivors would be found.

"We have moved from a rescue mode... to a recovery mode," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice (L) looks on as Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad (R) looks at a signed document yesterday in presence of Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas (C) and US Consul General in Jerusalem Jacob Walles (CL) and US Security Coordinator Lt Gen Keith Dayton (CR).

Israel ready to talk peace fundamentals

Rice tells Abbas

AFP, Jerusalem

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas yesterday that Israel was ready to discuss "fundamental issues" to advance the stalled Middle East peace.

"The prime minister (Ehud Olmert) said to me that he will support new discussions with you and that he is ready to discuss the fundamental issues that will lead to negotiations soon for the creation of a Palestinian state," Rice told Abbas at a joint press conference in Ramallah.

When asked to elaborate, she said: "I think the word fundamental speaks for itself... I think the desire to move towards a two-state solution seems to be there on both sides."

It was not clear from her remarks, however, whether Olmert had agreed to discuss "core issues" as the

Palestinians have been pushing for months -- the thorniest problems of the conflict such as the status of Jerusalem and borders.

Israeli officials had said earlier that Israel wanted to agree a framework on these issues before the international Middle East peace conference that US President George W. Bush has called for later in the year.

"We must reach an agreement with the Palestinians on the framework of the final status issues, which will guarantee a clear diplomatic and security horizon for both sides," a senior Israeli government official quoted Haim Ramon, minister without portfolio, as telling Rice on Thursday.

"This should happen before the summit in November," said Ramon, one of the Olmert's closest allies.

The conference is expected to take

place in the autumn after the end of the Jewish and Muslim holidays in mid-October, a senior US official said.

"All negotiations to reach a final agreement must include the principles contained in the international roadmap (for Middle East peace)," Abbas said.

Rice's trip was her first to the Palestinian territories since Hamas seized the Gaza Strip in mid-June and came at the end of a regional tour aimed at building on diplomatic momentum to lay the groundwork for the conference.

The bloody routing of forces loyal to the moderate Abbas from Gaza by the Islamists of Hamas fuelled new diplomatic drives to revive Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, which have been dormant for more than six years.

Indo-US nuke deal risks arms race

Says Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan warned yesterday that a civilian nuclear accord between India and the United States threatens regional stability, saying it would allow its arch rival to produce more atomic bombs.

The caution came at a meeting of Pakistan's National Command Authority (NCA) chaired by President Pervez Musharraf, a statement said. The body oversees the country's nuclear strategy.

The long-delayed deal announced in July in Washington allows US exports of civilian nuclear fuel and technology to India for the first time in 30 years.

"The NCA noted that the US-India nuclear agreement would have implications on strategic stability as it would enable India to produce signifi-

cant quantities of fissile material and nuclear weapons from unsafeguarded nuclear reactors," the statement said.

The deal has caused unease in Islamabad, which has firmly allied itself with Washington in its post-9/11 "war on terror" and is suspicious of growing US ties to neighbouring India.

Muslim majority Pakistan and mainly Hindu India have fought three wars since independence from Britain 60 years ago and they carried out tit-for-tat nuclear detonations in 1998 that alarmed the world.

The NCA said that peace in South Asia "would have been better served if the United States had considered a package approach for Pakistan and India", neither of which are signatories to the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Pakistan would continue to pursue its military and civilian nuclear

programmes, it added.

"While continuing to act with responsibility in maintaining credible minimum deterrence and avoiding an arms race, Pakistan will neither be oblivious to its security requirements, nor to the needs of its economic development which demand growth in the energy sector," the statement said.

President George W. Bush said last week he looked forward to working with the Democratic-controlled Congress to implement the nuclear deal, saying it was "another step" in ties with India, which he called "a vital world leader."

The accord also allows India to reprocess spent fuel under safeguards imposed by the International Atomic Energy Agency, going one step further than a law passed by the US Congress in December.

8 slain Kashmir infiltrators were Pakistanis: Indian army

AFP, Srinagar

Eight suspected militants killed in a clash with Indian troops were Pakistani nationals who were "major leaders" of a powerful rebel group, the army said yesterday.

The eight were killed as they tried to sneak into Indian Kashmir from the Pakistani side of the region across a heavily militarised ceasefire line.

India, which accuses Pakistan of arming, training and pushing across rebels into Indian Kashmir, said it was the biggest single attempt by militants to penetrate the Indian zone this year.

"This group had major leaders of Lashkar-e-Toiba who were tasked to provide leadership to the terrorists in the (Kashmir) valley and coordinate their operations," an army statement said.

Indian officials routinely refer to Kashmiri rebels fighting New Delhi's rule in the insurgency-racked Himalayan region as "terrorists."

Taliban agree to meet South Koreans over hostages

AFP, Ghazni

A face-to-face meeting between a South Korean delegation and the Taliban is being planned in a new bid to end a deadlock over 21 hostages, an Afghan official and the rebels said Thursday.

South Korea is desperate to end the more than two-week ordeal of the 21 largely female captives, most of whom are said to be ill, with the rebels threatening to kill more after shooting two dead.

The Afghan government and the Taliban told AFP talks were being planned, but a spokesman for the South Korean delegation said there had been no official confirmation of a meeting.

"A South Korean diplomatic delegation is to meet the Taliban for face-to-face talks to look for ways and solutions to free the South Korean

nationals," Ghazni governor Mirajuddin Patan told AFP.

"This request from the Koreans has been accepted by the Taliban and now we are working on how, where and when this meet could take place," he said.

A spokesman for the Taliban told AFP the group had selected a team to meet the South Koreans at a secret location.

"Our delegation is in contact with South Koreans and the government and are working on how and where exactly the meet could take place," Yousuf Ahmadi said.

"So far no specific place has been chosen for the talks. I cannot tell you where the meeting might take place because of security concerns."

"We have been waiting even after deadlines so that the Koreans get ready for the direct talks," he said.

Sharif challenges exile in court

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday launched a Supreme Court appeal against his exile seven years ago by President Pervez Musharraf, who overthrew him in a bloodless coup.

Military ruler Musharraf expelled Sharif and his family from Pakistan in 2000, a year after toppling him from power. The Sharifs went to live in Saudi Arabia and London.

"The court should order the government not to directly or indirectly obstruct, hamper or resist Nawaz Sharif and his family members ... to return to their country or force them to live in continued exile," the petition said.

The appeal comes after Sharif and another former premier, Benazir Bhutto -- who is living in self-imposed exile due to corruption charges -- both said they would return to Pakistan for elections that are due by early next year.

Sharif still officially heads his faction of the conservative Pakistan Muslim League party from exile, while Benazir Bhutto is the leader of the centrist Pakistan People's Party.

It also follows the July 20 reinstatement by the Supreme Court of Pakistan's top judge after Musharraf suspended him in March, in a move seen as a political blow to the president and an assertion of the judiciary's independence.

"We are filing this petition as our confidence in the judiciary has now been fully restored," Pakistan Muslim League lawmaker Khawaja Mohammad Asif, who filed the petition on Sharif's behalf, told reporters outside the court.

The petition also called for the court to end the exile of Sharif's brother, Shabaz, former chief minister of Punjab.

The Sharifs had a "fundamental right" to return to the country as Pakistani citizens, Asif said.

Suicide bomb kills 13 in Iraq

3 more US soldiers slain

AP, AFP, Baghdad

A suicide car bomber slammed into an Iraqi police station northeast of Baghdad yesterday, killing at least 13 people, police said.

Most of the victims were policemen and recruits lining up outside the station in Hibhib, the same small Sunni town near Baqouba where al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was killed in a US airstrike more than a year ago. The area is considered a stronghold of both al-Qaeda-linked militants and Saddam Hussein loyalists.

Fifteen others were wounded in the attack, a police officer said on condition of anonymity because of security concerns.

Altogether at least 142 Iraqis were killed or found dead on Wednesday, including 70 who died in three separate bombings in Baghdad.

On Thursday, the US military said American and Iraqi troops had killed seven suspects and captured 22 others in

two days of raids across Iraq.

Among those targeted were emirs, or top-ranking figures, of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the US military said. One emir was captured and another was killed Wednesday in separate operations in Mosul, it said. Another emir was captured a day later in Baghdad, it added.

The US military announced three more soldier deaths: two killed in a mortar or rocket attack Tuesday, and another killed by a roadside bomb Wednesday.

A roadside bomb attack killed one soldier and wounded two others on an armed supply convoy near Basra in southern Iraq on Wednesday.

Two other soldiers were killed and 10 wounded after coming under fire on Tuesday, but the military did not specify the location of the attack.

Four more US soldiers have been killed in Iraq, including three who died when a roadside bomb struck their vehicle in eastern Baghdad, the military said on Wednesday.

Aid scarce for 18m people stranded in S Asia floods

AFP, New Delhi

Relief teams in India, Bangladesh and Nepal yesterday battled to reach about 18 million people stranded in massive flooding, with food, clean drinking water and medicines in short supply.

More than 1,100 people have died across South Asia since the start of the annual monsoon season in mid-June, with the region's rivers bursting their banks due to relentless heavy rains and snows melting in the Himalayas.

Britain and the United Nations have stepped up to assist local authorities, with London pledging 2.5 million dollars in aid and the world body launching emergency relief operations.

Northern India has borne the brunt of the disaster, with 1,000 people dead and more than 12 million villagers in Bihar and Assam states desperately awaiting much-needed aid -- and fears mounting that disease could soon spread.

"Whatever baby food I had is now exhausted and there is no alternative other than trying to forcibly feed my

daughter boiled rice," 27-year-old Rahima Begum, whose home near the Brahmaputra River in Assam is under water, told AFP.

"My son is down with fever and diarrhoea for the last two days," said labourer Bhairab Madhab, who like Begum lives in the village of Senimari.

"Getting a doctor is a distant dream with flood waters surrounding us."

Some 5.5 million people have been displaced in Assam, while nearly seven million others are stranded in Bihar state, where 3,000 villages have been inundated, officials said.

An official in the state's hard-hit Darbhanga district said the area had been drenched with 875 millimetres (three feet) of rain in July, more than three times what it received during the entire monsoon season last year.

The Indian capital New Delhi was also battered with rain overnight, receiving 166 millimetres of rain in the last 24 hours, more than half its average for the entire month of August.



PHOTO: AFP

An Indian villager transports his family to safety on a boat through floodwaters at Kolongpaar village in the Kamrup District of Assam, some 60 km east of the state capital Guwahati yesterday. Rescue operations were underway as the number of people stranded by floods from torrential monsoon rains and glacial snowmelt climbed to 12 million across north India.