

Pakistan gunships pound Taliban, al-Qaeda amid US pressure

AFP, Miranshah

Helicopter gunships pounded militant hideouts in northern Pakistan as the military scoured mountains yesterday for 16 missing soldiers believed kidnapped by Taliban rebels.

As the US called for greater efforts against militants using Pakistan's remote Hindu Kush mountains as a base, the military said at least 10 al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters were killed in the air attack on Thursday.

The operation also involved ground forces in the restive North Waziristan region near the Afghan border, where military strikes on militants, suspected of launching attacks, have taken place all week.

"The miscreants killed in

Thursday's strike were local militants allied to Taliban and al-Qaeda," a security official told AFP.

Military spokesman Major General Waheed Arshad said security forces were focused on squeezing out the militants, who include local and foreign fighters.

"There is no planned operation going on in North Waziristan but we are responding with greater force against militant attacks on security forces now," Arshad said.

"In previous months there were several attempts made by miscreants against security forces and we would show patience but it is not the case now."

Arshad said the military was hunting for 16 paramilitary soldiers who went missing Thursday morning in

South Waziristan.

The kidnapping was the first by local Taliban since the South Waziristan authorities struck a peace accord in 2005 with the militant leader in the region, Baitullah Mehsud, said Khaista Rehman, senior political officer in the region.

He said the soldiers were wearing plain clothes and travelling in unmarked vehicles on their way to Sararogha Fort from Jandola FC (frontier constabulary) Camp when they were abducted by unknown gunmen in the Spinkai Raghza area.

Tensions have been running high in the area since last month when another Taliban leader, Abdullah Mehsud, reportedly blew himself up in the Zhob area of Baluchistan during a military operation, Rehman said.

Militants have said the deployment of troops in South Waziristan is a breach of the peace accord and had threatened revenge for Mehsud's death, he said, adding the militants had not yet claimed responsibility for the kidnapping.

Local authorities were negotiating for the safe release of the soldiers, he said.

The fiercely independent tribes of the Waziristan region have been accused of sheltering Taliban and al-Qaeda militants blamed for plotting bombings and other attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan and around the world.



PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani man carries his daughter on his back as he wades through floodwaters after a heavy downpour in a residential area of Karachi yesterday. Floods unleashed by a tropical cyclone and monsoon rains in the south and southwest of Pakistan since July, have claimed over 200 lives and affected some 1.6 million people.

Nepal PM accepts Maoist minister's resignation

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's prime minister has accepted the resignation of a Maoist minister who had complained of a lack of cooperation from his government partners, officials said yesterday.

"Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala accepted minister for forest and soil conservation Matrika Yadav's resignation today (Friday)," said government spokesman Krishna Bahadur Mahara, who is also a Maoist minister.

Yadav, one of the five Maoists given ministerial roles in April, submitted his resignation letter last week saying other parties in the coalition government were not cooperating and the demands of minority groups had gone unheeded.

Maoist minister for local development Dev Gurung will take over the vacant portfolio, Mahara said.



PHOTO: AFP

Former Indian prime minister and senior leaders of BJP Atal Behari Vajpayee (C), Lal Krishna Advani (3L), opposition vice-president candidate Najma Heptulla (2L) BJP president Rajnath Singh (2R) and members of parliament (MPs) arrive at parliament to cast their votes in the Indian vice-president election at Parliament in New Delhi yesterday.

'Pak election now only choice for Musharraf'

AFP, Islamabad

Pervez Musharraf's decision not to impose emergency rule indicates the Pakistani military ruler will go ahead with planned elections, despite his diminishing popularity, analysts said yesterday.

As pressure intensifies on Musharraf to deal with al-Qaeda and Taliban militants on his territory, most analysts said he had no choice but to call national elections, due early next year, as they offered the only solution to the multi-dimensional crisis he is facing.

"Musharraf's failure to sign the emergency bill indicates the political and civil forces have gained strength and they can deter undemocratic moves of the government," said political analyst Rasool Baksh Rais.

"Now there is no escape for the general except to give up his military uniform, hold free, fair and impartial elections, otherwise the country will be in a big turmoil," said Rais, who teaches political science at Lahore University of Management Sciences

(LUMS).

He said Musharraf had ruled Pakistan without any serious challenge until lawyers launched a movement for the reinstatement of chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry who he suspended on misconduct charges in March.

The Supreme Court overturned Musharraf's order last month after widespread street protests led by lawyers and opposition political parties.

News Analysis

ties, dealing him a humiliating political blow.

"A dictator cannot function authoritatively without a subjugated judiciary and now he has to put up with an independent judiciary," said Rais.

Musharraf on Thursday decided not to impose a state of emergency in Pakistan, apparently ignoring the advice of aides who wanted strong action to prevent more instability in the troubled nation.

Since Pakistani troops stormed Islamabad's Red Mosque a month ago to dislodge militant gunmen, there has been a steady uptick in attacks on troops in tribal zones as well as suicide bombings and other attacks across Pakistan.

Pressure is also building, both domestically and internationally, for him to deal with escalating violence in the border areas that have become a haven for militants associated with al-Qaeda and the Taliban and from where they plan attacks inside Pakistan, over the border in Afghanistan and worldwide.

Any declaration of a state of emergency would have handed ammunition to his political rivals, analysts said, but opposition and public agitation for a return to democracy was unlikely to fade.

Pakistan's top court is hearing a petition by ex-premier Nawaz Sharif, whom Musharraf banished in December 2000 after overthrowing him in a coup, challenging his exile to Saudi Arabia.

Quick ME peace deal hope is 'fantasy' Says Barak

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Defence Minister Ehud Barak has ruled out as "fantasy" any peace deal with the Palestinians in the near future, a local newspaper reported yesterday.

The Yediot Aharonot also quoted him as saying in private conversations that Israel would not withdraw from the West Bank before finding a solution to Palestinian rocket attacks, "which will take between three to five years."

Barak, who is also leader of the Labour Party in the ruling coalition, said such a delay was necessary for the army to develop anti-rocket weaponry systems.

He said this had to be done because of the risk of attacks from the occupied West Bank, like those launched from the Gaza Strip after Israel's withdrawal two years ago.

Japan, US sign military information pact

AFP, Tokyo

Japan and the United States yesterday signed an agreement aimed at protecting classified military information to be shared by the two countries promoting closer defence cooperation.

Japanese Foreign Minister Taro Aso and US Ambassador Thomas Schieffer signed the general security of military information agreement at the Japanese Foreign Ministry.

"It's a great day for Japan and the United States," Schieffer said after the signing ceremony and subsequent talks with Aso, according to Kyodo News.

"We think that this will give Japan and the United States an opportunity to share more intelligence and more information in the future," he said.

The agreement between the two allies follows the revelation of a series of Japan's embarrassing leaks of sensitive information including confidential data on the US-developed high-tech Aegis combat system.

Pak media welcomes decision against emergency

AFP, Islamabad

The decision by Pakistan's military leader not to impose a state of emergency was broadly welcomed yesterday with calls for elections and stepped-up operations against militants in border regions.

Newspaper editorials attacked emergency rule as being against the interests of the nation and called on the government of President Pervez Musharraf to secure a public mandate via the ballot box to tackle existing problems from a position of strength.

"The threats facing the nation are grave, and only a government armed with a mandate from the people -- a

mandate secured through a fair and free election -- can stem the tide of extremism and meet the threats to Pakistan's sovereignty from many quarters," said Dawn newspaper.

Musharraf on Thursday decided against declaring a state of emergency after mulling it over with advisers for two days amid what senior government ministers had said were "internal and external threats."

Sources close to the president said Thursday his decision to reject the advice of political allies on imposing emergency rule was based on his commitment to elections that are slated for early next year.

'Natural forces offset global warming effects for last two years'

AFP, Chicago

Natural weather variations have offset the effects of global warming for the past couple of years and will continue to keep temperatures flat through 2008, a study released Thursday said.

But global warming will begin in earnest in 2009, and a couple of the years between 2009 and 2014 will eclipse 1998, the warmest year on record to date, in the heat stakes, British meteorologists said.

Existing global climate computer models tend to underestimate the effects of natural forces on climate change, so for this analysis, Met Office experts tweaked their model to better reflect the impact of weather systems such as La Nina, or fluctuations in ocean heat and circulation.

Instead of using approximations, they used real data on the state of the ocean and the atmosphere to generate forecasts of

climate change for the decade beginning in 2005 and running through 2014.

The projections suggested that while man-made greenhouse gases would raise temperatures over the long run, cooler water in the tropical Pacific and a resistance to warming in the Southern Ocean would counteract the effect of global warming in the early years of the decade.

The findings fit with the weather patterns seen so far, said Doug Smith, a research scientist at the UK's national weather service, the Met Office, in Exeter, Devon.

To test the accuracy of their new and improved computer model, Smith and his colleagues decided to run a series of "hindcasts," or forecasts for the years 1982-2001.

The new model yielded far more accurate "projections" for global surface temperatures than the previous model, Smith said.

Iraq's neighbours agree to help boost security

AFP, Damascus

Iraq's neighbours, some accused by Washington of not doing enough to improve security in the war-torn country, agreed in Syria on Thursday to cooperate with Baghdad in a bid to restore stability.

"The participants expressed a willingness to cooperate with the Iraqi government to bring about security and stability in Iraq and to build the Iraqi army," said a statement read by the Iraqi delegate after a two-day meeting of the Iraqi Neighbours Border Security Working Group.

"The participants examined ways of controlling the (Iraqi) frontier, of fighting organised crime and exchanging information," added the communique read out by Lubaid Abbavi.

The Iraqi delegate said the participants agreed that "controlling the

frontier is the responsibility of all of Iraq's neighbours... who have agreed to cooperate in building up Iraq's security forces and army on a patriotic basis."

US charge d'affaires in Damascus Michael Corbin, who attended the meeting as an observer, called for a clampdown on the flow of foreign fighters into Iraq.

"What is required now is action on specific security measures that improve the security of Iraq and its neighbours," he said in a statement.

"Most important, the flow of foreign fighters -- whose terrorist acts are killing thousands of Iraqis -- must be halted. The provision of weapons and training to those involved in acts of violence and terror inside Iraq must also cease," Corbin said.

Hostages safe for now: Taliban

AP, Ghazni

The Taliban said Friday it would not kill any of the 21 remaining South Korean hostages it is holding until planned face-to-face meetings have been held with a delegation from the East Asian country.

The captors have repeatedly threatened to kill more of the captives they seized on July 19 if their demands are not met, though negotiations appear to have bogged down in recent days.

Taliban and South Korean officials have agreed they want to meet for talks to break the deadlock, but have not been able to agree on a location that both sides consider safe.

Taliban spokesman Qari Yousef Ahmadi said negotiations on a location were continuing by phone.

"Until we sit for face-to-face negotiations with the Koreans, we have no plans to kill any Korean hostages," Ahmadi said.

'Afghan, Pakistan jirga won't stop violence'

AFP, Kabul

A meeting of Afghan and Pakistani tribal elders aimed at thrashing out a response to growing Taliban and al-Qaeda violence will do little to stem extremism in the short term, analysts said Friday.

The "peace jirga" could nonetheless help mend relations across the troubled border, improve ties between tribal groups and eventually allow them to forge a closer and more effective partnership against the threat, some said.

But stop the violence -- at least in the short term -- it will not.

"No one should exaggerate or overestimate the ability of one meeting to overcome very complex issues," the deputy head of the United Nations' mission in Afghanistan, Chris Alexander, told AFP.

Thursday's opening session had brought together some of the region's most powerful people in a "remarkable display" of determination, he said. "We simply have not seen that before."

About 700 delegates, many sporting flamboyant turbans unique to their areas, gathered for the second of three days of talks Friday in a giant white tent in the west of Kabul. The speakers

called for militants to be driven from their areas, and for peace and unity.

Kabul and Islamabad regularly meet to discuss internationally-backed efforts to fight insurgents operating across the border, but they just as regularly accuse each other of not doing enough against militants and their hideouts.

The scale of this jirga, the first to involve tribal elders from both countries, "may be what is needed to generate a real sense of common cause on the two sides," Alexander said.

But Afghan MP and analyst Ahmad Behzad fixed on the absence of President Pervez Musharraf, who pulled out on the eve of the talks Wednesday, saying that this "shows Pakistan's lack of interest and sincerity."

"The outcome will be nothing more than an emphasis on the need for 'good and brotherly relations' -- as has been repeatedly said by both governments," Behzad said.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian children run near a burning tyre during an Israeli incursion into the West Bank city of Jenin Thursday. The Israeli army said yesterday it had charged a junior officer with carrying out an unauthorised operation in the occupied West Bank that left a Palestinian civilian seriously wounded.