

Musharraf prepares for Kabul jirga

More assaults on militants

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani helicopter gunships launched new assaults yesterday on al-Qaeda and Taliban hideouts in the mountainous northwest as President Pervez Musharraf prepared to address a peace summit in Kabul.

Cobra helicopters killed three suspected militants, pounding what was believed to be their base after a freight Saturday in Mir Ali town in North Waziristan tribal district, the military said.

"A security convoy was passing when an improvised explosive device planted by militants exploded, causing no harm to the security person-

nel," chief military spokesman Major General Waheed Arshad told AFP.

"Armed miscreants then attacked security men with automatic weapons that injured a soldier.

"In retaliatory firing by helicopters three miscreants were killed," Arshad said.

The continuing violence in the tribal area comes amid a joint tribal gathering organised by Pakistan and the Afghan government in Kabul to discuss ways to counter the al-Qaeda and Taliban threat.

Musharraf cancelled his trip Thursday to the inaugural session of the "peace jirga" which is being attended by around 700 tribal elders

from the border regions.

The jirga is scheduled to end on Sunday and the foreign ministry in Islamabad said late Friday the president had agreed "in principle" to address the closing session.

Musharraf's decision to attend the talk-fest followed a conversation with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice who telephoned him Thursday to discuss the jirga as well as reports he was considering imposing a state of emergency, the foreign ministry said.

The turnaround also followed a call late Friday from Afghan President Hamid Karzai, who again urged him to attend the gathering which runs to

Sunday.

Relations between Karzai and Musharraf have been strained over the resurgence of the Taliban, which was driven from government by a US-led coalition in 2001 after having been helped to power by Pakistan in 1996.

The border regions have become an intense headache for Musharraf, who is facing accusations from Washington and at home that not enough is being done to root out the terrorist presence on the Pakistani side of the border.

He has been angered by the

Case filed against Taslima in India

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Police in the southern Indian city of Hyderabad registered a case against controversial Bangladeshi writer Taslima Nasreen, who was recently attacked by workers of Majlis Ittehadul Muslimeen (MIM) here, for allegedly creating ill-feeling among communities.

The writer has been booked under IPC Section 153 (A) (promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, language etc) on a complaint registered by MIM legislator Akbaruddin Owaisi, police said Saturday.

In his complaint, Akbaruddin alleged Taslima had hurt the sentiments of the community with her writings and speeches against Islam, police said.

Akbaruddin, MIM legislator in Andhra Pradesh Assembly, had threatened to kill the exiled author if she visited Hyderabad again.



A Pakistani commuter rides past through a submerged graveyard in Karachi yesterday. Flooding caused by torrential rains has killed at least 22 people in Pakistan's southern port city of Karachi.

PHOTO: AFP



An Indian paramilitary soldier watches over traffic on the Assam-Agartala national highway 44, in the Atharamura Hills, some 65 km east of Agartala yesterday. Security has been increased in the region after several rebel groups have called for an Independence Day boycott.

PHOTO: AFP

UN steps toward greater Iraq role

AP, United Nations

The Security Council voted unanimously Friday to expand the UN role in Iraq and opened the door for the world body to promote talks to ease Iraq's sectarian bloodshed.

The broader UN initiatives on Iraq which could begin next month were supported by Washington in an apparent bid to bring together Iraqi factions and neighbouring countries under an international umbrella rather than struggling on its own to bridge the many religious, ethnic and strategic battles opened by the five-year-old war.

The Bush administration is also seeking ways to boost the embattled government of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which has been paralysed by internal political feuds.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he hopes to organize a meeting of foreign ministers from the region at UN headquarters in late September on the sidelines of an annual General Assembly meeting. The United Nations will also be urging discussions among different Iraqi factions, ethnic and religious groups, he said.

"A peaceful and prosperous future is for Iraqis themselves to create, with the international community lending support to their efforts," Ban told the council after the vote. "The United Nations looks forward to working in close partnership with the leaders and people of Iraq to explore how we can further our assistance under the terms of this resolution."

The resolution authorises the United Nations at the request of the

Iraqi government to promote political talks among Iraqis and a regional dialogue on issues including border security, energy and refugees as well as help tackling the country's worsening humanitarian crisis, which has spilled into neighbouring countries.

The United States and Britain, co-sponsors of the resolution, believe the world body should do more to use its perceived neutrality to promote dialogue on Iraq.

US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, a former US envoy to Iraq, has said, for example, that Iraq's top Shiite spiritual leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, won't talk to the Americans but he will talk to the UN envoy, Ashraf Qazi.

Khalilzad said the unanimous support for the resolution "underscores the widespread belief that what happens in Iraq has strategic implications not only for the region, but for the entire world."

"We hope that this resolution will be a springboard to greater international support for Iraq's government and people," he said.

But Khalilzad stressed that the resolution is not a substitute for the US commitment to Iraq.

"The United States will continue to shoulder all of its responsibilities to assist Iraq's government and people," he said. "We are fully dedicated to success in Iraq, and our commitments to Iraq, to the region, to the UN and to the rest of the international community remain."

INDO-US NUKE DEAL

Manmohan dares Left to withdraw support

PTI, New Delhi

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has dared the crucial allies Left to withdraw the support to his government on the Indo-US civil nuclear deal.

"I told them (Left parties) that it is not possible to renegotiate the deal. It is an honourable deal, the Cabinet has approved it, we cannot go back on it. I told them to do whatever they want to do, if they want to withdraw support, so be it...," he told a Calcutta based daily in an interview.

The prime minister's virtual challenge to the Left parties, whose 64 members in Lok Sabha provide a crucial make or break support to the UPA government, comes in the

context of strong statements made by CPI-M leader Prakash Karat and CPI A B Bardhan. The Left leaders had warned that the government may have to pay a "heavy price" if it went ahead with the nuclear deal with the US.

The paper quoted the prime minister as saying he was "not angry but anguished" at the harsh tone and tenor Left's reaction and made it clear that the UPA-Left relationship could not be a one-sided affair.

"I don't get angry; I don't want to use harsh words. They are our colleagues and we have to work with them. But they also have to learn to work with us."

The Left parties yesterday

downplayed Manmohan Singh's challenge to withdraw their support on the Indo-US civil nuclear deal, maintaining that "we are going to oppose it" and "everything should not be linked with pulling down the government".

While senior CPI(M) leader Sitaram Yechury and CPI's D Raja went roundabout reacting to Singh's statement, their junior allies, RSP and Forward Bloc, were forthright saying the Left support cannot be taken for granted.

Asked whether the Left will withdraw support, Yechury, leader of the CPI(M) in Parliament, said "everything should not be linked with pulling down the government."

Spectre of hunger looms over flood-hit India

AFP, Madhubani

Senior bureaucrat Nibha Thakur ran short of cash as she shopped for vegetables in India's eastern Bihar state, where severe floods have pushed basic food prices beyond the reach of millions.

"Survival is now a major issue," said Thakur, lugging a bagful of potatoes she had just purchased at four times their cost last month.

"We may just have to do with boiled rice in the coming days as everything else is getting out of the reach of even the middle class," said the civil servant in hard-hit Madhubani district.

Here, 1.6 million flood victims are surviving on state food handouts, but many complain they are far from enough.

Nearly 14 million people have been affected by the worst floods in 30 years in Bihar -- and at a time when crops were ripening in the fields.

Prices of various food items in Bihar, already one of India's poorest regions, have on average shot up

around threefold as the shortages worsen.

Residents of Madhubani district are suffering more than many others because unlike the rest of Bihar, food crops are not grown in this area.

The monsoon has left 2.2 million people homeless in Madhubani. Most are now squatting in roadside shelters.

"We don't grow anything here," district administrator Rahul Singh told AFP as hundreds of flood survivors picketed his fortified bungalow, begging for food.

"Prices of vegetables are spiralling in Madhubani but we can't do much as the floods have breached highways," he said. "The shortages are beginning to tell."

He said he had overseen the establishment of state-run food shops to counter profiteers.

According to the Indian government, at least 1.1 million hectares (2.7 million acres) of farmland and 6,500 villages were submerged in Bihar.

The state normally produces 7.7

million tonnes of vegetables a year on 4.98 million hectares of land.

State agriculture experts are still working to tally the losses in 18 of the 19 districts where food crops are grown.

"We foresee a 90 percent loss in vegetable growth which will have a grim impact on per capita nutritional intake," warned BC Chowdhury, chief researcher in Bihar's Agriculture University in Samastipur district.

"In very simple words, millions will go hungry if this crisis is not averted very, very quickly," warned prominent doctor AK Jha in the state capital Patna.

Bihar was ranked India's number one producer of okra, or lady's finger, which now costs three times the six rupees (14 cents) a kilo (2.2 pounds) it fetched before the floods began in late July.

The state was also one of India's leading producers of cauliflower, potatoes and tomatoes but now the prices of those vegetables have also tripled, according to traders' associations.

Hamas detains 32 Fatah men

AP, Gaza City

Hamas militiamen detained 32 Fatah supporters across Gaza, half of them after breaking up a wedding and beating guests with clubs and chairs, Fatah officials and witnesses said Saturday. Ten people were hurt.

After taking control of Gaza by force in June, Hamas had promised amnesty to Fatah loyalists and it was not immediately clear whether the arrests late Friday and early Saturday signalled the start a crackdown on Fatah or were isolated incidents.

In the northern town of Beit Hanoun, 15 Fatah supporters were arrested after Hamas security men broke up a wedding of Fatah loyalists on Friday.

The Hamas force policing Gaza said it stopped the celebration because guests shot in the air, disturbing the peace, and confirmed four arrests. Fatah activists denied anyone had fired in the air.

Wedding footage filmed by a cameraman from the local Ramattan news agency showed guests singing Fatah songs in praise of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and his predecessor, the late Yasser Arafat.

Ayodhya attack mastermind killed in Kashmir

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Jammu

The mastermind behind the July 2005 attack on the Ram temple in Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh was shot dead on Saturday in a gun battle with the police on the outskirts of Jammu, officials said.

Saifullah Qarri, a divisional commander of the Jaish-e-Mohammad, was hiding in a house in Ramzan Mohalla of Janipur, a congested locality, with one of his associates.

Officials said a joint team of the Jammu and Kashmir Police and Delhi Police zeroed in on the militant leader and engaged him in a gun-fight lasting for over two hours.



Taliban representative Mullah Bashir (L) addresses media representatives as Mullah Nasrullah (R) looks on outside the Afghan Red Crescent Society of Ghazni province yesterday after talks with South Korean delegation over 21 hostages.

PHOTO: AFP

Kashmir arms dump catches fire

AFP, Srinagar

A huge fire broke out in a major Indian army ammunition depot in revolt-hit Kashmir yesterday, killing two people and forcing an evacuation of the surrounding area, police said.

Shells and grenades exploded in the air as panic-stricken villagers rushed to leave their homes in Khandroo village, where the high-security installation was located, and surrounding areas, witnesses said.

Police evacuated an area of nine kilometres (five miles) after the fire

erupted.

Two Muslim guerrilla groups fighting New Delhi's rule in Indian Kashmir separately claimed responsibility for starting the fire, but Indian authorities said it appeared to have been an accident.

Huge plumes of smoke from the burning depot streaked the sky.

The fire "broke out inside the army's central ammunition depot," a police spokesman said in Srinagar, summer capital of Indian Kashmir, where a separatist revolt has raged for nearly two decades.

An army statement said a civilian and a soldier were killed in the fire

and subsequent blasts at Khandroo, 70km south of Srinagar.

"The known casualty figures at the moment are two dead and 20 wounded," the statement said.

Police said more than 30 people were hurt, mostly firefighters, and that they had ordered people to evacuate nearby areas, fearing the blaze could spread.

The army said information provided by one of the injured soldiers suggested the fire might have been caused by highly combustible white phosphorous ammunition kept in one of the sheds.