

Assam cracks down on rebels after attacks

AFP, Guwahati

Security forces in the restive north-east Indian state of Assam Monday launched an anti-rebel offensive after insurgents killed 36 people in the past week, officials said.

"The operation involving the army, police and the paramilitary has already begun and is aimed at flushing out militants holed up in bases in the eastern Karbi Anglong district," a senior police official who did not wish to be named told AFP.

The decision to start the crack-down was taken at a meeting of top army, paramilitary and police officers in Assam's main city of Guwahati on Monday.

It came after 28 Hindi-speaking migrant workers -- mainly from eastern Bihar state and the western desert state of Rajasthan -- were shot dead by separatists in separate attacks over the past week in Karbi Anglong district.

The victims had lived in Assam for decades after moving there in search of work.

Eight others, most of them Assamese, were also killed in a series of explosions across Assam in the past week in violence linked to Indian Independence Day celebrations on Wednesday.

Authorities blamed the attacks on the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa) and the Karbi Longri National Liberation Front (KLNLF).

Anti-terror battle for country's sake

Says Musharraf in Independence Day address

AFP, AP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf marked Pakistan's 60th anniversary yesterday saying the battle against terrorism is being waged for his own country's sake and not America's.

al-Qaeda and other militant organisations using Pakistani border regions as a base for operations posed a threat to Pakistan and it was time they were dealt with, he said in comments marking Independence Day.

"It is time that the entire nation rises against them," Musharraf said, referring to Taliban and al-Qaeda cells in the northwestern tribal regions bordering Afghanistan.

"We are not confronting terrorism for America, we are doing it for ourselves," he said in remarks quoted by state run Associated Press of Pakistan.

"I see everything from Pakistan's point of view. Now if that from Pakistan's point of view suits America, all right," he said.

Pakistan marked the 60th anniversary of its independence from British rule Tuesday amid a political crisis facing the country's US-allied president and surging militant

violence.

Artillery guns boomed at day-break in Islamabad, and military cadets held a changing of the guard ceremony at the mausoleum of Quaid-e-Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founder, in Karachi, the country's largest city. Flag-raising ceremonies and 21-gun salutes took place in the four provincial capitals.

Some 10 million people moved across borders in one of history's largest mass migrations as the princely states sewn together in 200 years of British rule were split into Muslim Pakistan and Hindu-majority India in 1947.

Musharraf has reacted angrily to accusations that he is not doing enough to deal with terrorist groups, and to threats from the United States that unilateral airstrikes could be launched against the cells in northwest.

The threats from Washington were sabre-rattling, he was quoted as saying Tuesday, but would not result on attacks on Pakistan's sovereign territory.

"I am 200 percent sure that these are neither at official nor at government level," he said.

With national elections set for later this year or early next, Musharraf issued a call for voters to participate.

"I urge all Pakistani citizens to get involved in the electoral process and become the instruments of enlightened moderation in their beloved country," Musharraf said in an address titled "To all who care about Pakistan."

He said elections would be free and fair, ensure economic stability and be held in a free media environment.

Musharraf toppled the elected government of prime minister Nawaz Sharif in a coup in October 1999.

The president, who took power in a 1999 coup, has had his standing badly shaken by his widely unpopular bid to oust Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammed Chaudhry earlier this year and a surge in attacks and suicide bombings across Pakistan since early July.

Much of the violence has taken place in Pakistan's tribal region along the border with Afghanistan, where US intelligence officials say al-Qaeda and the Taliban are

regrouping.

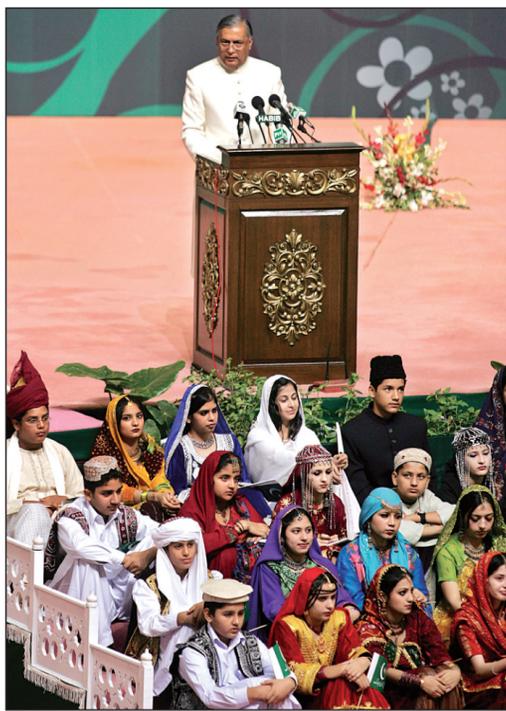
In recent weeks, US presidential hopefuls have said they would consider launching military strikes against terrorists in the region if intelligence warranted it and if Musharraf did not act on his own. US government officials have not ruled out such strikes, which Pakistan views as a potential breach of its sovereignty.

Musharraf said President Bush had assured him of Pakistan's sovereignty.

Musharraf said he would be personally insulted if someone suggested he was serving another country's interests before Pakistan's, and cited examples where he had gone against the United States' wishes.

These included his refusal to send troops to join the US-led war in Iraq, Pakistan's recognition of the Palestinian militant group Hamas, and its diplomatic relations with Iran.

"We are not confronting terrorism for America," Musharraf said. "We are doing it for ourselves."



Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz (C) addresses the gathering during the Independence Day celebrations in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan celebrated the 60th anniversary of independence with prayers and a minute of silence, low-key festivities for a country in the grip of political and religious turmoil.

4 Palestinians killed in Israeli Gaza incursion

AFP, Gaza City

Four Palestinians, including two civilians, were killed and 13 wounded in an Israeli incursion in the Gaza Strip early Tuesday, medics and the army said.

The operation saw Israeli tanks roll into the Palestinian territory and air strikes carried out against targets near the southern town of Khan Yunis, they said.

The victims included two Hamas militants, 24-year-old Mohammed Abu Musameh and Omar al-Farah, and two civilians, 40-year-old Ibrahim al-Shami and Farrah's mother, Sabha.

Earlier reports had said that only one militant was killed in the operation.

An army spokesman said the troops were operating "against terror threats in the area, including rockets and tunnels" and had carried out three air raids and one ground strike against "armed militants that represented a threat to the forces."

"We identified hitting the targets in the four strikes," he said.

The deaths brings to 5,815 the number of people killed since the start of the Palestinian uprising in September 2000, the vast majority of them Palestinian, according to an AFP count.

UN resumes Nepali Maoist army checks

AFP, Kathmandu

The United Nations resumed checks yesterday to determine if thousands of Maoists confined to camps are genuine fighters, a spokesman said, six weeks after a row about status halted the process.

Critics have accused the former rebels of boosting their number of combatants in order to exercise more clout.

The former rebels have said all 31,000 people registered in 28 UN-monitored camps are ex-fighters but analysts say the real number is about a third.

"Verification started in Sindhuvi on Tuesday morning," Kieran Dwyer, spokesman for the United Nations Mission in Nepal (UNMIN) told AFP, referring to a district 80 kilometres (50 miles) east of Kathmandu.

The Maoists have been confined to the camps as part of a landmark peace deal reached with the government late last year ending a decade-long civil war.



Rescuers remove the body of a victim in Fenghuang, Hunan province yesterday, a day after a 268-metre (885-foot) bridge collapsed into the Tuo river just before it was to be put into use killing 28 people.

28 killed in China bridge collapse

AP, Beijing

A bridge under construction in an ancient Chinese city collapsed as workers removed scaffolding from its facade, killing at least 28 people, the government said yesterday.

The 140-foot-high bridge spanning the Tuo River in the central Hunan city of Fenghuang collapsed Monday, the Hunan Administration of Work Safety said in a statement posted to the official Gov.cn Web site. The span in Hunan's Fenghuang county, intended for both pedestrian and vehicle traffic, had four decorative stone arches and was scheduled to open at the end of the month, the administration said.

At least 28 people were killed and 86 people were rescued, including 22 who were injured, the official Xinhua News Agency said. An estimated 123 workers were at the site at the time.

Premier Wen Jiabao ordered a

thorough investigation into the collapse of the 880-foot bridge, China Central Television reported.

The accident came less than two weeks after the collapse of a bridge in Minnesota that drew attention to aging transport infrastructure in the United States.

Surrounded by lush mountains and rice paddies, the ancient city of Fenghuang is a well-known tourist spot and home to the Miao and Tujia ethnic minorities. It is also famed for traditional stilt houses lining the Tuo River.

China Central Television showed bulldozers ploughing through the rubble, overturning chunks of stone and concrete mixed in a tangle of steel reinforcement bars. News photos showed anxious and weeping villagers waiting for news about their loved ones.

Most of the people working on the bridge were local farmers, the agency said.

Manmohan meets Karat to bridge differences

Sonia backs PM on nuke deal

PTI, New Delhi

Setting aside the chill in their relations in the past few days, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday had a breakfast meeting with CPI(M) General Secretary Prakash Karat after which both sides said that efforts would be made to "sort out" issues over the Indo-US nuclear deal.

The meeting comes a day after the Prime Minister made a strong defence of the deal in Parliament, but the Left registered its opposition with a walkout in both Houses.

Singh's talk with Karat comes within days of his daring the Left to withdraw support to the government on the deal.

But after creating political ripples, the Prime Minister had indicated that government wanted to avoid any confrontation with the Left, saying issues would be resolved "amicably".

At the breakfast meeting attended by External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee, both Karat and the Prime Minister discussed issues connected with the bilateral civil nuclear cooperation agreement between the two countries.

Meanwhile, in the backdrop of the Left onslaught, Congress President Sonia Gandhi on Tuesday came out in full support of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the Indo-US Nuclear deal issue, saying the agreement fulfils all the assurances he had given repeatedly in Parliament.

"Our Government has entered into this agreement after tough negotiations. The agreement fulfils all the assurances that the Prime Minister has given repeatedly in Parliament," she said addressing the Congress Parliamentary Party (CPP) meeting, with Singh by her side.

Hundreds of N Koreans dead, missing in floods

Pyongyang seeks UN assistance

AP, AFP, Seoul/Geneva

Heavy rains spawned flooding that left "hundreds" dead or missing in North Korea and destroyed more than 30,000 homes, the country's state media reported yesterday.

The official Korean Central News Agency said preliminary information revealed massive casualties after the storms that began last week, but gave no specific figures.

It said the rain also flooded tens of thousands of acres of farmland in the impoverished country that suffers from regular food shortages.

"The heavy rain destroyed at least 800 public buildings, over 540 bridges, 70 sections of railroads and at least 1,100 vehicles, pumps and electric motors," KCNA said.

Hardest hit appeared to be Kangwon province, where KCNA said there were "huge casualties" and that homes for more than

20,000 families were partly or completely destroyed. The effects also reached to the North Korean capital, Pyongyang.

"The material damage so far is estimated to be very big," KCNA said. "This unceasing heavy rain destroyed the nation's major railways, roads and bridges, suspended power supply and cut off the communications network."

North Korea also suffered from flooding last year that caused massive casualties, although the exact numbers of dead were never revealed by the secretive country.

Damage from storms is often worsened in North Korea because its citizens denude vast hillsides to create more arable land to grow food, meaning natural vegetation that can stop erosion and landslides is no longer present.

More than 2 million people are estimated to have died in North

Korea after a famine struck in the mid-1990s, which the government blamed on natural disasters but was also linked to outdated farming methods as well as the loss of the country's Soviet benefactor. North Korea still relies on outside food aid to help feed its people.

Meanwhile, North Korea has asked the UN's food relief agency for help in the wake of "massive" floods, a spokesman for the World Food Programme said Tuesday.

North Korean authorities said the floods are worse than those that reportedly left hundreds dead or missing and tens of thousands homeless in central and southern regions last year. WFP spokesman Simon Pluess told AFP.

"Pyongyang has made a preliminary request for the WFP's assistance," Pluess said.

Iran not supplying arms to Taliban

Says Ahmadinejad

AFP, Kabul

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad yesterday rejected US and British claims that Iranian weapons are being supplied to Taliban insurgents fighting the Afghan government and international troops.

"I doubt seriously if there is any truth in it," Ahmadinejad said at a press conference with Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Kabul on his first visit to the country since taking office.

"With all our force, we support the political process in Afghanistan," he said.

Both British and US officials have charged that Iranian-made weapons were aiding the Taliban, the extremist militia which is waging a guerrilla war against the Kabul government as well as the multinational forces here.

US Defence Secretary Robert Gates said in June there were so many weapons of Iranian origin coming into Afghanistan that it was

hard to believe "it's taking place without the knowledge of the Iranian government."

The charges have been strongly denied by Tehran, which was a staunch opponent of the Taliban movement's 1996-2001 regime.

Karzai has also downplayed the claims, saying they have not been proven.

Afghanistan was close to Iran and also a friend and strategic partner of the United States, Karzai told reporters after meeting Ahmadinejad.

"If Afghanistan can bring them closer, that will be a great happiness for Afghanistan -- but it depends on both sides," Karzai said.

The United States led the invasion that drove the Taliban from power in late 2001 and is the biggest supplier of troops towards international efforts to defeat the Taliban insurgency.

Hostage release raises hopes

Fears remain for 19 other S Koreans

AFP, Ghazni

Friends and family of two South Korean women freed by Afghanistan's Taliban spoke Tuesday of their relief, but vowed not to rest until 19 other Koreans are also released.

Amid uncertainty over their fate and with two other hostages already dead, there was a subdued mood at the Saem-Mul Presbyterian church on the outskirts of Seoul.

Most relatives declined to speak to reporters as the crisis drags on. "This is the first breakthrough in the negotiations to win their freedom, and we welcome it," said Kwon Hyuk-Soo, an official at the church, which sent the original group of 23 on its mission.

"However we cannot be overly joyful until all the remaining 19 return home," Kwon told reporters at the church at Bundang, where families have gathered to support each other

in their weeks-long ordeal.

President Roh Moo-Hyun told a cabinet meeting he hoped the release "will be a good signal for the release of all the hostages" who are still suffering.

"The government has to make greater efforts to have them released. We shouldn't relax until the last moment," Roh said.

The two women, Kim Gin-A, 32, and Kim Kyung-Ja, 37, were freed Monday after nearly one month in captivity.

"I feel relieved but at the same time I have a heavy heart because of the other hostages who are still in captivity," said Kim Ji-Ung, brother of Gin-A. "We will stick together until all of them are freed."

For their mother Seon Yeon-Ja, 60, joy was tempered with sadness. "Two have come back home dead and others are still there. I feel really sad for the other hostages," she said.



Communist Party of India Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML) activists shout anti-government slogans as they burn an effigy during a demonstration against the Indo-US nuclear deal near Parliament House in New Delhi yesterday.