

250 militants, 60 Pakistan troops killed in a month

AP, Miran Shah

About 250 militants and 60 Pakistani troops have died in a month of fierce fighting near the Afghan border, the army said yesterday.

"In the past one month, we lost about 60 soldiers in suicide and other attacks," Maj Gen Waheed Arshad told The Associated Press.

He added that security forces also killed about 250 militants in the same period.

Violence has surged in the Afghan border region since July, when militants scrapped a September 2006 peace deal after accusing the government of violating the agreement by deploying

more troops and targeting their hideouts.

"The militants have suffered more than 250 casualties for the past month now," army spokesman Maj Gen Waheed Arshad said on Dawn News television.

The suicide car bomber struck on a road near Miran Shah, the main town in the North Waziristan tribal region bordering Afghanistan, killing five soldiers, a local security official said.

Hours later, a roadside bomb went off near another military convoy in the nearby village of Razmak, killing at least one soldier, said the official.

Army spokesman Maj Gen Waheed Arshad confirmed the attacks and casualties, but pro-

vided no details.

The official, who asked for anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to media, said troops rushed from Miran Shah to the scene of attacks, and that authorities were trying to cordon off the area to catch any accomplices.

The dead and injured were taken to a nearby hospital, he said.

Earlier Friday, rebels fired several rockets at a military checkpoint in Miran Shah, wounding two soldiers, the official said. Troops responded with mortars, rockets and assault rifles, but it was unclear whether the militants suffered any casualties.

Pakistan is a key ally of the United States in its war on terror, and has deployed about 90,000

troops in the border region in an effort to contain al-Qaeda and Taliban militants and their local supporters, who often target security forces.

The latest attack came two days after a rocket attack killed four soldiers in Bannu, a troubled town just east of North Waziristan.

Violence has surged in North and neighbouring South Waziristan since July, when militants scrapped a September 2006 peace deal after accusing the government of violating the agreement by deploying more troops and targeting their hideouts.

Sudan expels Western diplomats

AFP, Khartoum

Sudan has expelled European and Canadian diplomats for "interfering in its affairs," a move that could further strain relations with the West over the conflict in Darfur.

The White House reacted to Sudan's announcement on Thursday saying it hoped it was not an attempt to sidetrack international efforts to end the violence in Darfur, which Washington has termed genocidal.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon is expected to travel to Khartoum early next month to thrash out details of the deployment of up to 26,000 peacekeepers to the war-ravaged western region.

"Sudan has summoned the envoy of the European Commission and the Canadian charge d'affaires and informed them they were considered persona non grata because they interfered in Sudanese affairs," foreign ministry spokesman Ali al-Sadeq told the official SUNA news agency.

Another ministry official, Minister of State Ali Karti, said the two diplomats had been holding what the government regarded as unaccept-

able contacts with opposition leaders.

"It is necessary now to send a clear message to whoever thinks that the kind of relationship between Sudan and the United Nations, and the international community in general, is that of submissiveness," Karti told the Sudan Tribune newspaper.

The London-based Arabic daily Al-Hayat quoted a Sudanese source as saying that the two diplomats had been "holding meetings and contacts with rebels in Darfur and opposition figures in Khartoum and NGOs which the government considers a front for dissidents."

The government had "indirectly warned the diplomats over the issue twice before," the paper added.

Canada has demanded an explanation from Khartoum.

"We have asked them why they expelled our charge d'affaires," foreign ministry spokesman Rodney Moore, who identified the diplomat as Nuala Lawlor, told AFP.

"Mrs Lawlor, in the best tradition of Canadian diplomacy, defended our values of freedom, democracy, personal rights and the rule of law," Moore said.

Crackdown thwarts Myanmar protest

AP, Yangon

Myanmar's military junta moved swiftly yesterday to crush the latest in a series of protests against fuel price hikes, arresting more than 10 activists in front of Yangon City Hall before they could launch any action, witnesses said.

The arrests came after protests spread beyond the main city of Yangon, and amid mounting international condemnation of the government's suppression of the peaceful, but rare, displays of opposition in the tightly controlled country.

Demonstrators on Thursday had marched through the oil-producing town of Yaynang Chaung to protest the fuel price hikes. The protest the first known of outside Yangon ended peacefully, said residents, who requested anonymity for fear of government reprisals.

Another protest planned for Friday was cancelled after authorities agreed to reduce bus fares, which had been raised as a result of the fuel price increases. Nevertheless, in Yangon, rumours swirled Friday of more upcoming demonstrations.

Myanmar's ruling junta has been widely criticized for human rights violations, including the 11-year house arrest of opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi. The junta tolerates little public dissent, sometimes sentencing activists to long jail terms for violating broadly defined security laws.

The activists arrested Friday mostly belonged to a recently formed group called the "Myanmar Development Committee," which in February staged its first protest in busy downtown Yangon holding placards calling for better health and social conditions and complaining of economic hardship.

On Thursday, plainclothes security personnel and tough-looking civilians stopped about 40 people, mostly from Suu Kyi's party, as they walked quietly for two miles toward their party headquarters in eastern Yangon.

Authorities ordered bystanders, especially reporters, out of the area as the protesters outnumbered by about three-to-one were overwhelmed after a 30-minute standoff.



Supporters of deposed Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif light fireworks as they celebrate after a Supreme Court verdict in Lahore Thursday. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf faced mounting political pressure after two-time former premier Nawaz Sharif, the man he ousted in a coup, vowed to return to contest elections.

Thailand adopts new constitution

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand enacted a new army-backed constitution Friday, after King Bhumibol Adulyadej formally signed the charter that was approved by voters last weekend.

The king signed three gilded copies of the charter, written in ornate calligraphy on 296 folding slats of broad parchment traditionally used by Buddhist monks to write down prayers.

This now becomes the 18th constitution that Thailand has used since the end of absolute monarchy 75 years ago.

The military-installed government says the constitution will guide the country to elections to restore democracy by December after a bloodless coup last year that removed premier Thaksin Shinawatra.

"I hope that this constitution will help prevent anyone from holding a monopoly on power, while ensuring that politicians are moral and ethical and that politics is transparent," said Meechai Ruchuphan, president of junta-appointed National Legislative Assembly.

Hamas fires shots at rival's rally in Gaza

AFP, Gaza City

Members of Hamas's Executive Force opened fire at a mass rally by the rival Fatah movement in Gaza City yesterday, an AFP correspondent on the scene said.

It was not immediately clear whether anyone was wounded during the protest in central Gaza City, where several thousand Fatah supporters had gathered.

Hamas forces detained three photographers at the rally, including AFP journalist Mohammed Abed, witnesses said.

Hamas fighters tried to arrest two cameramen filming the rally for a foreign news agency and a television station, but were prevented by dozens of people who rushed to the scene.

Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip in mid-June, overrunning pro-Fatah security forces loyal to president Mahmud Abbas after a week of street clashes that killed more than a 100 people.



Local resident Jerome Crum walks down a flooded section of Main street Thursday, in Findlay, Ohio. Some 200 people remain in a Red Cross shelter while main street and many other roadways near the Blanchard River remained impassable. Flooding was blamed for at least one death in northern Ohio, US.

More storms hit flooded US Midwest

AP, Findlay

Peeking into her waterlogged basement, Gail Leatherman didn't break down until she saw a soggy photo of her and her husband, taken for their 17th wedding anniversary. She salvaged the picture, but not her treasured Christmas decorations. Next door, her son lost all of his 1-year-old boy's winter clothes. And that wasn't the worst off.

"A year ago, our insurer told us we could drop our flood insurance," she said. "So we did."

Water from the worst flood in nearly a century in this northwest Ohio city began receding Thursday, as it did elsewhere in the Midwest, allowing some of the more than 1,000 homeowners who had been displaced to get a look at the soaked photo albums, boxes of clothes and furniture in their basements.

With the flooding and more storms moving through, the death toll across the Upper Midwest and from the remnants of Tropical Storm Erin that swept Texas, Oklahoma and Missouri over the past week also rose to at least 26. In one Ohio county alone, the tally of damaged homes was more than 700.

The weather wasn't through with the region, however, as funnel clouds were spotted in the suburbs west of Chicago and storms lashed Iowa and Minnesota.

Republican senator calls for Iraq pullout

AP, Washington

Sen John Warner's call for troop withdrawals from Iraq is likely to ratchet up pressure on President Bush substantially and lend momentum to Democratic efforts to end US combat.

Warner, R-Virginia, former chairman of the Armed Services Committee and Navy secretary during the Vietnam War, said Bush should bring some troops home by Christmas. Doing so, he told reporters Thursday, would send a powerful message that the US commitment in Iraq was not open-ended.

Warner says the president should get to decide when and how many troops should leave. Bush has opposed setting a date to pull out troops and contends that conditions on the ground should dictate deployments.

"I'm hopeful that this (redeployment) could lead to more emphasis on the Iraqi forces taking the major responsibility, as it relates to the internal insurgency in that country," the Virginia Republican said.

Warner's suggestion comes as a new intelligence assessment says Iraqis have failed to govern

effectively or reach the political compromises believed necessary to tamp down sectarian violence.

Overall, the report finds that Iraq's security will continue to "improve modestly" over the next six to 12 months, provided that coalition forces mount strong counterinsurgency operations and mentor Iraqi forces. But even then, violence levels will remain high as the country struggles to achieve national political reconciliation, and the Iraqi government led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is likely to become increasingly vulnerable because of criticism from various Shia, Sunni and Kurdish factions.

"The strains of the security situation and absence of key leaders have stalled internal political debates, slowed national decision-making, and increased Maliki's vulnerability" to factions that could form a rivaling coalition, the document says.

Democrats say the grim report and Warner's conclusion bolster their position that Bush should change course and start bringing troops home this fall. Party leaders this year tried to pass legislation ordering troops home this fall, but

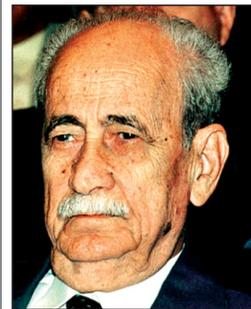
repeatedly fell short of the 60 votes needed in the Senate to pass.

"Our military has performed their duties excellently, but the purpose of the escalation in Iraq was to create a secure environment in which political change could occur, and it is clear that the Iraqi leaders have failed to make progress," said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-California.

Republican leaders countered that the intelligence assessment bolsters their position that US troops should stay. The report warns that limiting the mission of US forces to a support role and counterterrorist operations as Democrats and some Republicans suggest would "erode security gains achieved thus far."

"The fact that Democratic leaders continue to push for precipitous withdrawal despite the significant progress our troops are making shows just how deeply invested they are in failure," said House Minority Leader John Boehner, R-Ohio.

Democrats agree the military has made substantial gains in Iraq, but they say the progress made is useless if the Iraqi government is unable to take control.



Iraq ex-president dies in Jordan

AFP, Amman

Former Iraqi president Abdel Rahman Aref, who was ousted by Saddam Hussein's Baath party in 1968, died in Jordan on Friday at the age of 91, his family said.

Aref, who had been living in Amman for three years, died of natural causes at Al-Hussein Medical Centre, a military hospital in the Jordanian capital, according to a family source.

Aref, who is survived by five children, took part in the 1958 military coup led by his brother Abdel Salam Aref that overthrew the Iraqi monarchy.

After his brother died in a helicopter crash, he ruled the country from 1966 to 1968, until he himself was ousted in a Baathist coup and then lived in exile in Turkey before returning in 1979.

India's 'Red Czar' plotting to end US nuclear deal

AFP, New Delhi

India's Prakash Karat, the Communist Party leader who wants to halt an Indo-US nuclear deal, is an old school Marxist but his methods have so far proven highly effective, plunging the government into crisis.

Amiable but dogmatic, Karat -- nicknamed the "Red Czar" for his opinions -- has caught the government of Manmohan Singh off-guard with his anti-US stance on the landmark agreement.

"The Manmohan Singh government should decide whether it wants to be with the people of India or the imperialist US," he said earlier this week.

"The agreement will bind India to the United States in a manner that will seriously impair an independent foreign policy and our strategic autonomy."

The pact seeks to bring India into the loop of global atomic commerce after a gap of three decades while also binding the country closer to Washington.

Singh argues that India cannot sustain the blistering pace of its economic growth -- currently nine percent -- without greater access to

nuclear energy sources.

In a political gamble, he has dared the Left to withdraw its support, even though the communists help prop up his minority Congress coalition government in parliament.

It has left him facing his biggest test since taking power in 2004.

But Karat, the general secretary of the Communist Party of India-Marxist or CPI-M, shows little sign of giving way.

The quiet-spoken Karat opposes "imperialism" and as "the US is the world's biggest 'imperialist power', the party line has to be argued," says Business Standard political columnist Aditi Phadnis.

Karat is one half of India's so-called "Red Power couple" of the Left.

Married to Brinda Karat, another member of the policy-making politburo, the pair decided not to have children but to devote their lives to the party.

Brinda, known for her signature handloom saris and silver bangles, dislikes discussion of their relationship, dismissing personal questions with a snort of derision.

Pakistan, Britain sign prisoner transfer accord

AP, Islamabad

Pakistan and Britain signed an agreement yesterday to allow inmates in each other's prisons serve their sentences in their home countries.

The agreement will allow some of the 428 Pakistanis imprisoned in Britain to serve their time in Pakistan, while seven British citizens convicted in Pakistan can seek transfers to British prisons, officials said.

The two countries are deepening their law enforcement cooperation, including counterterrorism efforts against Islamic extremists in Britain's Pakistani community.

It was unclear if terrorists or other jailed serious offenders would be moved under the accord, which lets either government or the prisoners themselves block a proposed transfer.

British High Commissioner Robert Brinkley said sending prisoners home would make it easier for them to maintain families ties and remove cultural barriers that can hamper their rehabilitation.

"This is a good agreement because we have a large Pakistani community in the UK," Pakistani Interior Minister Aftab Khan Sherpao said at a news conference.