

# Suicide attack kills 4 in Pakistan

Talks continue for release of 150 trapped soldiers

AP, AFP, Dera Ismail Khan/ Islamabad

A suicide bombing killed four Pakistani troops near the Afghan border yesterday, as tribal elders met with Islamic militants elsewhere in the troubled northwest of the country to seek the release of at least 120 Pakistani soldiers, officials said.

Maj Gen Wahid Arshad said a suicide car bomber rammed into a security forces' vehicle in Bajur tribal region on Saturday around 10 am, killing four Pakistani Frontier Constabulary troops, and wounding three others. Two civilians also were wounded, he said.

Earlier, local official Abdul Hamid had described the attack as a roadside bombing and said the civilians were wounded in a shootout triggered by the blast. He also said a government official was among the dead. It was not immediately possible to reconcile the differing accounts of the incident.

Pakistani forces are struggling to contain a spike in militant attacks in its volatile tribal regions, where a recent American intelligence report suggested al-Qaeda may be regrouping.

On Saturday, Pakistani authorities and tribal elders were negotiating yesterday to secure safe pas-

sage for around 150 soldiers trapped in a remote region near the border with Afghanistan.

Military authorities insisted the soldiers were stranded after straying into Ladda region in South Waziristan district on Thursday in stormy rainfall.

Tribal elders and pro-government tribesmen met with militants to urge them to free scores of troops who went missing Thursday in South Waziristan, about 292km southwest of Bajur, two local security officials said.

The troops were travelling in a 16-vehicle convoy when they lost contact with their base camp.

## S Korea paid \$2m to buy hostages' release?

AFP, Tokyo

South Korea paid \$2 million to Taliban extremists in Afghanistan to secure the release of 19 hostages, a Japanese newspaper reported on Friday.

Citing unidentified sources in Afghanistan, the respected Asahi Shimbun said Afghan mediators persuaded South Korea's ambassador in Kabul that there was no other way to end the six-week kidnap ordeal.

"Two million dollars were paid to release all 19 people," an Afghan mediator was quoted as telling the influential Japanese daily.

The Asahi Shimbun said both a South Korean official and a Taliban spokesman contacted by the newspaper denied any payment.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian demonstrators flee as gas grenades are fired to break up a protest against Israeli closure of West Bank villages in the village of Saraya near the northern Israeli occupied West Bank city of Nablus Friday. The protesters were trying to remove the cement blocks placed across the main road by the Israeli military during the second Intifada, which began in the year 2000.

## Heavy loss of life in fresh Lanka fighting

AFP, Colombo

Government forces and Tamil Tiger rebels traded artillery fire in the island's northwest, with each side claiming heavy casualties against the other as well as among civilians.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said they killed a government soldier and lost one of their own during Friday's clashes in the coastal district of Mannar and accused the army of killing eight civilians.

The pro-rebel Puttunam.com website said the victims were fleeing a military push into rebel-held territory in the Mannar district when they were killed in a mine attack carried out by the security forces.

There was no immediate comment from the military.

After the initial confrontation, "the LTTE front liners searched the area, where they found a dead body of a Sri Lankan armed force soldier and military equipment," LTTE spokesman Rasiah Ilangthiriyam said.

The body would be returned to the military through the Red Cross, he said in a statement.

A Tiger rebel was also killed in the confrontation, he said.

However, the defence ministry said intercepts of rebel radio communications indicated that 11 guerrillas were killed. The ministry said nine of its soldiers were wounded.

Government forces have been trying to break into rebel-held territory in the Mannar district for weeks, but the guerrillas have been offering stiff resistance.

At least two people died and more were wounded in an exchange of artillery fire between Sri Lankan troops and Tamil rebels in the island's northwest, guerrillas and the defence ministry said yesterday.

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## US to intensify fight against Iraqi Qaeda

AFP, Baghdad

most of them loyal to Sadr.

The military said three people were detained, while one of its vehicles was struck by a roadside bomb returning from the mission.

Pictures showed mangled remains of at least four cars hit by artillery shelling, while splinters of glass were strewn across a pavement in the area.

Jaysh al-Mahdi, widely known as Mahdi Army, has carried out sustained attacks against US-led troops in Iraq since the March 2003 invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein.

A US statement said radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr's decision to rein in his feared Mahdi Army would help American and Iraqi forces "intensify their focus on al-Qaeda-Iraq without distraction from Jaysh al-Mahdi attacks."

But despite the declaration, US and Iraqi forces carried out a raid early Saturday in Baghdad's Sadr City, an impoverished slum that is home to about one million Shias, most of them loyal to Sadr.

Sadr on Wednesday ordered his militia to suspend all activities for six months after it was blamed for gunbattles with police in the shrine city of Karbala that left 52 people

## Sonia hails Manmohan for Indo-US N-deal

PTI, New Delhi

Even as the Left parties have sought to put the Government in the dock on the nuclear deal, Congress President Sonia Gandhi has congratulated Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his team of "able negotiators" for hammering a treaty that "satisfies all the conditions" laid out before Parliament.

"... India and the US have signed a historic 123 agreement that lifts the decades-old embargo against nuclear trade with India. This will allow India to expand its energy sector to meet the growing demands of our economic growth and put an end to the power shortages that we are all familiar with," she said.

In a "Letter to Congress Workers", Gandhi said, "We congratulate Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and his team of able negotiators who have hammered a treaty that satisfies all the conditions laid out before Parliament and brought home an agreement that is in the long term in the interest of India."

## US, N Korea start nuke talks in Geneva

AFP, Geneva

The United States and North Korea began face-to-face talks in Geneva on Saturday aimed at reaching an agreement on how to proceed with Pyongyang's denuclearisation pledge.

The talks started just after 10:00 am (0800 GMT) and were expected to last for two days, the US mission in Geneva said in a statement. The US delegation had nine participants while the North Koreans numbered eight.

Washington's top negotiator Christopher Hill said he hoped the bilateral talks would make progress on declaring and disabling North Korea's nuclear programme, ahead of six-party talks scheduled for later this month in Beijing.

"We are going to try to set the agenda and figure out how we can most efficiently use these two days here in Geneva," Hill, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, told journalists before leaving for the talks.



PHOTO: AFP

A child of a Sri Lankan Police Special Task Force (STF) member places flowers during a memorial ceremony at Kalutara yesterday to commemorate 447 members of the elite unit killed in action in the past 23 years. The Special Task Force is a key unit of the security forces battling Tamil rebels and has also been used to combat Marxist Sinhalese rebels in the late 1980s.

## US presses for action against Myanmar

China, Russia reluctant

AFP, Washington

The United States is pressing for international action over Myanmar's military junta crackdown on peaceful protests but is expected to again face opposition from China and Russia.

A day after US President George W Bush strongly condemned the arrests of pro-democracy activists protesting against a massive hike in fuel prices in the Southeast Asian state, his wife Laura Bush on Friday called on UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to push the Security Council to act.

In a rare political intervention by the wife of the US president, the First Lady also asked Ban to join the United States in condemning the junta's "brutal crackdown," her press secretary Sally McDonough said in a statement.

"Mrs Bush noted that by staying quiet, the United Nations -- and all nations -- condone these abuses," McDonough said as top American lawmakers also urged Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to demand

Security Council action. Last January, China and Russia vetoed a Security Council resolution pushed primarily by Washington urging Myanmar's rulers to free all political detainees and end sexual violence by the military.

"I expect China and Russia to take the same position again if this issue is pushed forward at the UN Security Council," said Mohan Malik, an Asian expert at the Hawaii-based Asia-Pacific Centre for Security Studies.

China and Russia, two of five permanent members of the Security Council, have both invested in Myanmar's energy sector, ignoring sanctions imposed on Yangon by the United States and European Union.

Myanmar is also providing China, which is flexing its military muscle in Asia, strategic access to the Indian Ocean. Russia has also ignored US protests to build a nuclear research centre for Myanmar.

## Hundreds displaced in northern Iraq

AFP, Mardin

As explosions boomed in the distance, a Kurdish woman stood outside her house and pointed to where shells scorched parts of her father's grapes and plum orchards.

"It was a bad day when some 20 shells hit our village in a single day last week. We were crying as we prayed to God to protect us from the bombs of the Islamic Republic of Iran," said Serwa Ibrahim, one of the few remaining villagers in Mardin, about 25 miles from the Iranian border.

"Despite the shelling, I will stay in my village until the end," Ibrahim, 33, said Thursday.

Iranian troops have been accused of bombing border areas for weeks against suspected positions of the Free Life Party, or PEJAK, a breakaway faction of the separatist Kurdistan Workers' Party.

Iran says PEJAK, which seeks autonomy for Kurds in Iran, launched attacks inside Iran from bases in Iraq.

"We are here because the refugees are in need," said ICRC member Patrick Youssef, standing by a truck with canned food and bottled water.

"We are helping them with needed stuff because most of them left their homes leaving their things behind."



PHOTO: AFP

French ultralight-plane pilot Christian Moullac performs with his trained Barnacle geese and cranes over Bex airfield during the Switzerland's largest Airshow yesterday in Bex. The French environmentalist raises birds and flies with geese, swans and cranes to make the public sensitive to the protection of the migratory birds.