

Israel strikes Gaza as siege sparks fuel fears

Two more Hamas fighters killed in raid, Gaza closure provoking humanitarian crisis, says UN

AFP, AP, Gaza City

Israel kept up strikes against Gaza militants yesterday, killing at least two in a new raid, as its lockdown of the impoverished Palestinian territory started to take its toll on residents.

A pre-dawn air strike north of Gaza City killed two fighters of the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas, which has ruled the increasingly isolated territory since seizing power seven months ago, medics said.

A second strike on a car in Gaza City left no casualties.

Israel has escalated operations in Gaza, killing at least 36 militants since Tuesday while Hamas has launched about 200 rockets into southern Israel in the same period, lightly wounding more than 10, in the biggest flare-up of violence since the Islamist movement took power.

On Thursday Israel announced it would close all crossings into and out of Gaza for several days to all but essential humanitarian aid,

intensifying its almost two-year siege of the territory aimed at stemming rocket fire.

As news of the new measures spread, residents across the Gaza Strip stocked up on diesel fuel, leaving several service stations empty.

"We have already run out of diesel and we can only supply gasoline for two hours a day because they did not tell us there would be a reduction in fuel," gas station owner Ibrahim al-Berberi told AFP.

"The supply that comes to us is not enough, because it runs out the same day we receive it," he added.

A European Union official involved in fuel shipments to Gaza, speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity, said supplies were halted on Friday and Israel would reassess the closures on Monday.

Meanwhile, the head of Gaza's power authority warned that there was only enough fuel to run its only power station -- already operating at a third of its capacity -- for

another day.

"The fuel supply today is only sufficient for one day and tomorrow at 10:00 am (0800 GMT), if more fuel is not allowed in, we will see the supply to the power station cut off," Kanaan Obeid told AFP.

The station currently provides around 45 megawatts of power, with another 120 coming from Israel and 17 from Egypt. Power cuts have grown increasingly common in recent weeks in Gaza, where many residents rely on generators.

Israel imposed heavy restrictions on movement in and out of Gaza in the autumn after declaring Gaza a "hostile entity."

Hamas called on Egypt on Saturday to open the Rafah crossing along its border with Gaza -- the only crossing that bypasses Israel -- to allow the transport of "basic goods necessary for the continuation of life in Gaza."

Spokesman Taher al-Nunu condemned the "Israeli occupation's hardening of its unjust siege

against our people and its preventing the entry of medicine, food, and fuel in a way that threatens the lives of 1.5 million people."

In New York, UN chief Ban Ki-moon implored Israel to reverse its unprecedented decision to close the border crossings completely, warning that the cutoff of supplies is provoking a humanitarian crisis among 1.4 million Gazans. For the past seven months, since the violent Hamas takeover of Gaza in June, Israel had severely restricted access to Gaza, but basic food supplies and fuel were still getting through.

On Friday, UN chief expressed concern over Israel's decision to tighten the closures as he renewed his appeal for an immediate end to the escalating violence in the region.

"Of particular concern today, in addition to the upsurge in violence, is the decision by Israel to close the crossing points in between Gaza and Israel used for the delivery of humanitarian assistance," his press office said.

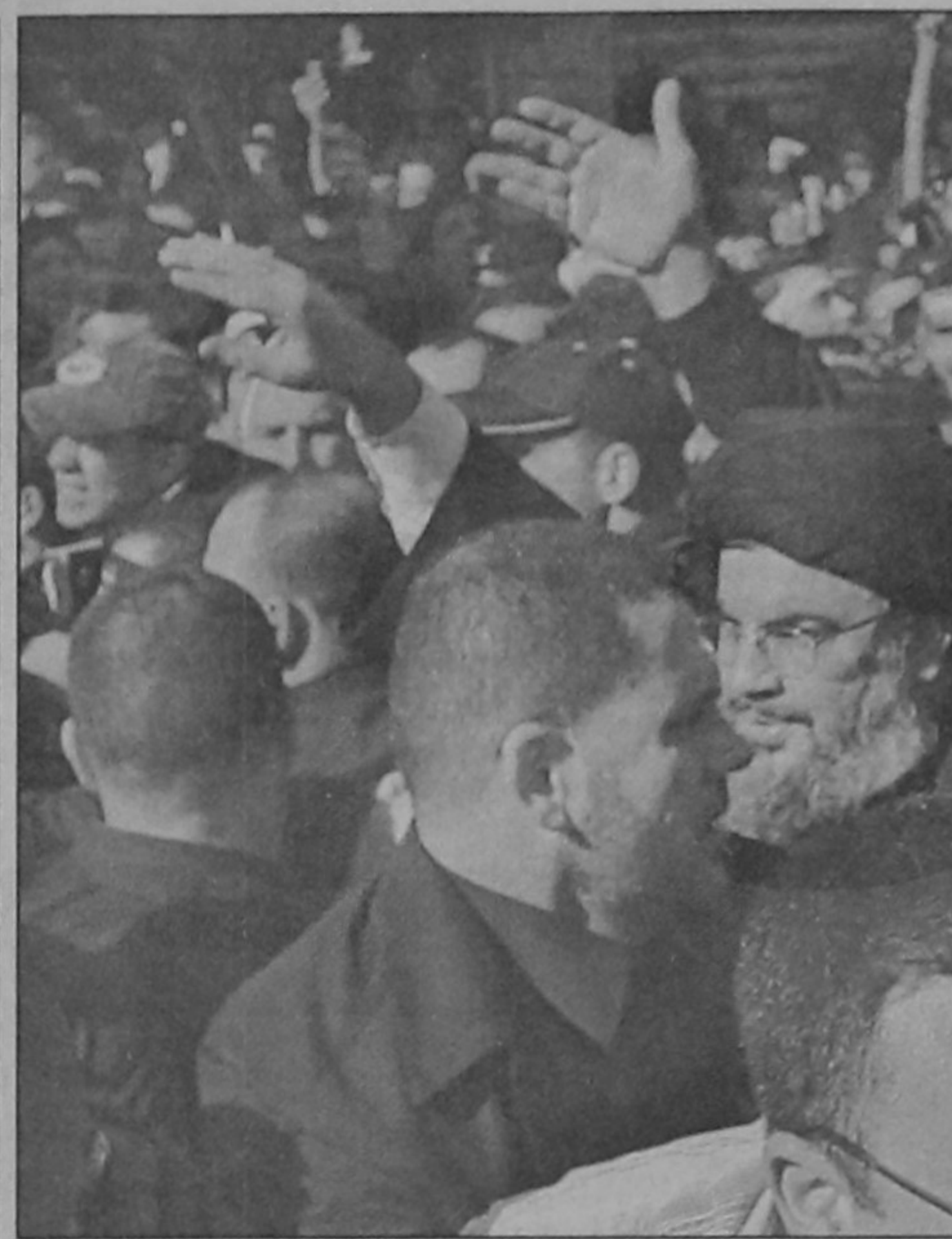


PHOTO: AFP

Surrounded by dozens of bodyguards in black, Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah (R) waves to supporters as he makes his way to the podium through the crowd at the start of the Ashura mourning ceremony in the southern suburbs of Beirut yesterday. Nasrallah, one of Israel's most wanted men, appeared in public for the first time in more than a year to attend the religious event Saturday, which marks the seventh century slaying of the revered Shia Imam Hussein, grandson of Prophet Hazrat Mohammed (SM).

INDO-US ACCORD

Diplomat's exodus muddles nuke deal

AP, Washington

The departure of the State Department's No. 3 official adds uncertainty to a US nuclear deal with India that is already in deep trouble.

The United States announced Friday that Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns would step down in March. Though Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said he would remain as the chief US negotiator for the deal even after his departure, it was not immediately clear what his role would be.

It also was unclear whether his resignation as a full-time diplomat would set back dwindling hopes to complete the deal during the Bush administration, which ends in a year.

"It could go either way," said Sharon Squassoni, a nonproliferation expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, who opposes the deal. "You could see this as a concession that it is looking increasingly unlikely that all the pieces will be in place to get the deal through Congress, and that it is not going any further."

But Squassoni also noted that the new arrangement could help Burns focus on India, which proponents hope is correct. In his current position, Burns is responsible for a

host of time-consuming issues, including the negotiations on U.N. sanctions against Iran and on Kosovo's likely declaration of independence from Serbia, which the United States supports.

In a ceremony with Rice to announce his departure, Burns said he would look for opportunities in the private sector after leaving his post.

He said he was leaving because it is "time for me to meet my obligations to my wife and three daughters, and it's time to pursue other ventures outside the government."

Some proponents of the deal argue that the new arrangement will allow Burns to spend more time ensuring that the Indian deal gets swift approval by international regulatory bodies in coming months. Burns, a well-known official with US lawmakers, also will be able to make the case for approval by Congress, where some members have misgivings about it.

"I think he is willing to see this baby through, and I think he will pull it off," said Teresita Schaffer, a former US ambassador to Sri Lanka and current director of the South Asia program at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, who supports the deal. "I don't see this as any administration signal that they are giving up."

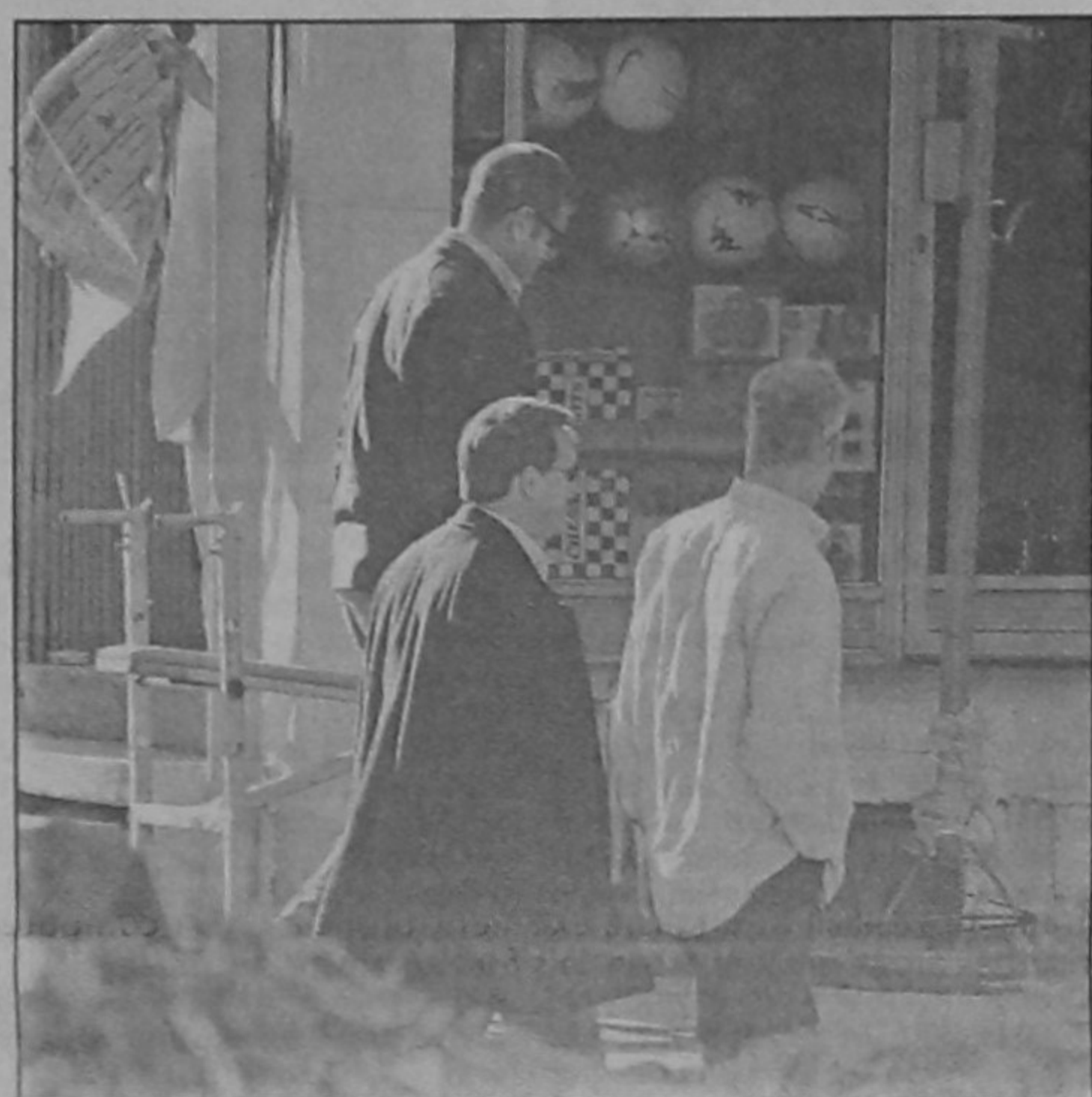


PHOTO: AFP

Members of a Scotland Yard team, who are investigating the assassination of Pakistan's former opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, visit the Super Market in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistani police have arrested a teenager who was allegedly part of a five-man squad assigned to kill Benazir last month, security officials said.

Sharif's party wants Musharraf to go

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Islamabad

With less than a month remaining for Pakistan's general elections, the party led by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif is insisting that President Pervez Musharraf must quit.

The Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) has also called for the formation of a national government and rescheduling of the entire election process.

"The government can't change the polling date only," PML-N senior vice president Javed Hashmi told IANS, referring to Islamabad's decision to put off the polls from Jan 8 to Feb 18 following the assassination of Pakistan People's Party (PPP) chief Benazir Bhutto.

Hashmi said no free and fair elections were possible as long as Musharraf, the former army chief, remained at the helm of affairs.

"He (Musharraf) should step down immediately, he is the biggest problem and cannot be a solution," said Hashmi, who led the party when Sharif was in exile in Saudi Arabia and London.

12 convicted over Gujarat riots

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian court has convicted 12 Hindu men, including a policeman, over the gang-rape of a pregnant woman and the murder of her family members in 2002 anti-Muslim riots in Gujarat state, a report said.

The case, which drew global attention, has been regarded by human rights groups as central to providing justice to victims of some of the most savage religious violence in India since its independence in 1947.

Eleven men were found guilty of rape and murder while the policeman was convicted of trying to shield the culprits, the Press Trust of India reported late Friday.

Seven others were acquitted because of lack of evidence and one man had died since the trial began.

The crimes took place in western Gujarat state where the government, headed by hawkish Hindu nationalist chief minister Narendra

Modi, was accused by rights groups of tacitly supporting the anti-Muslim riots.

The pregnant woman, Bilkis Bano, and two of her children were the only survivors of a group of 17 Muslims attacked in the incident.

Two other women were also raped and Bano's three-year-old daughter was killed.

In 2004, the Supreme Court ordered the case moved from Gujarat to India's financial capital Mumbai after lawyers said witnesses could be intimidated to change their evidence.

Sentencing was due on Monday.

At least 2,000 Muslims were hacked, beaten, shot or burnt to death in the riots which erupted after 59 Hindu pilgrims died in a train fire first blamed on a Muslim mob, but which an inquiry later concluded was accidental.

The state government has been accused of dragging its heels in prosecuting those accused in the riots.

Lankan troops kill 31 rebels in fighting

AFP, Colombo

At least 31 Sri Lankan guerrillas and one soldier were killed in heavy fighting between government forces and Tamil Tiger rebels across the embattled north, the defence ministry said yesterday.

The rebels died in clashes Friday and early Saturday in the Vavuniya, Mannar and Jaffna districts bordering the de facto mini-state run by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the defence ministry said in a statement.

A government trooper was killed in Vavuniya late Friday, it said.

The latest ministry figures raised the death toll since the start of the year to 469 rebels and 21 soldiers. The figures cannot be independently checked as no journalists or rights groups have access to the embattled areas.

The latest fighting came after the military accused the Tigers of killing at least 10 civilians late

Thursday in the relatively calm south of the island.

Sri Lanka's military said Thursday its war planes had "completely destroyed" a hideout where Tamil Tiger leaders were meeting, a day after its truce with the rebels officially ended.

The air strike on the northern rebel centre of Kilinochchi also came after suspected rebels killed 27 people in an attack on a public bus in the south.

"Sri Lanka Air Force fighter jets targeted an LTTE (Liberation Tiger of Tamil Eelam) senior leaders' gathering at Jayapoor in Kilinochchi," the defence ministry said in a statement. "Pilots confirmed that the location was completely destroyed."

The pro-rebel TamilNet website however said the bombs hit a civilian area in Kilinochchi, the main town in the rebels' northern mini-state, wounding seven people and damaging nine houses.

It said the planes "bombed a civilian area with a mechanic workshop," and that the Tamil Tigers responded with anti-aircraft fire.

No independent confirmation of the conflicting accounts of the raid was available. The Sri Lankan government has barred journalists from visiting the rebel-held north.

Both the LTTE and the largely ethnic-Sinhalese armed forces have been accused of killing civilians during the decades-old ethnic war that has left tens of thousands of people dead.

Suspected rebels triggered a roadside bomb killing 27 villagers on a bus, as a truce signed by the LTTE and the government in 2002 officially ended on Wednesday.

Sri Lanka's government pulled out of the Norwegian-brokered truce accusing the Tigers, who have been fighting for an independent homeland in the island's north and east since 1972, of only using the truce to re-arm.

20 Taliban killed in joint operation

AFP, Asadabad

More than 20 Taliban rebels were killed and over a dozen wounded in a joint operation between Afghan and Western forces in eastern Afghanistan, officials said yesterday.

The Islamic extremists were killed late Friday in the province of Kunar, a troubled region on the Pakistani border, its governor Fazlullah Wahedi said.

The rebels had recently crossed the border from Pakistan to launch an attack on Afghan and foreign targets, he said.

The Afghan National Army and our foreign friends identified their locations and launched a successful operation. Over 20 of them were killed and over 10 were wounded," he said.

An army commander, Captain

Adam Khan Mateen, citing military intelligence reports, said some of the fighters were foreigners.

"We've intercepted their radio conversations and have intelligence reports that some of those killed and injured were foreign terrorists," he said.

Foreign nationals are usually a reference to al-Qaeda members fighting with the Taliban.

The Taliban, who were in government from 1996 until being ousted in 2001, are waging an insurgency against the US-backed government in Kabul and tens of thousands of Western troops based in the country.

Most of the Western troops are operating under the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force, a United Nations-mandated peace-keeping force.

Nepal Maoist leader to stand in key polls

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebel leader turned politician Prachanda said Friday he would stand for election in key polls set for April that will decide Nepal's political future and formally abolish the monarchy.

The April 10 polls will elect a body that will rewrite Nepal's constitution, and formally declare the impoverished Himalayan country a republic, ending a 239-year royal dynasty led by unpopular King Gyanendra.

"As a leader of Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist), I will contest in the upcoming elections," Maoist leader Prachanda, whose nom-de-guerre means "the fierce one," told a news conference.

Analysts have said the Maoists' continued use of mafia-like tactics means they will get minimal support at the polls.

South Carolina, Nevada enter political fray

AP, Washington

Voters in two states a continent apart were choosing among Republican and Democratic candidates for president in contests shadowed by racial politics and the threat of recession.

No front-runner had emerged in either party as South Carolina's Republicans headed for the polls and Nevadans of both parties prepared for the novelty of caucuses.

"My friends, these are challenging times," John McCain told supporters Friday while aboard a World War II aircraft carrier in Charleston's harbour. He was referring to the slumping economy, but he could have been talking about the intensity and the expense of the neck-and-neck fight for the GOP nomination.

To the East, Republicans battled for delegates in South Carolina, home of 6.6 percent unemploy-

ment in December after the largest one-month increase in nearly 20 years. Political viability was at stake for McCain, Mike Huckabee and Fred Thompson; Mitt Romney, meanwhile, lowered expectations for his prospects in the Palmetto State by moving on to Nevada.

To the West, candidates of both parties braced for caucuses in Nevada that for Democrats have been mired in legal disputes and exchanges about race. The uncertainty stemmed in large part from earlier-than-usual voting in the nation's fastest-growing state.

Hillary Rodham Clinton and John Edwards ganged up on Barack Obama in the final days, mocking his evocation of Ronald Reagan in an effort to offset Obama's endorsement by the powerful Culinary Workers Union. Obama was thought to benefit from special caucus rules that Clinton supporters tried but failed to overturn in federal court.

Two million Shias attend Karbala ceremony

AFP, Karbala

Two million devout Shia Muslims attended the annual Ashura ceremonies in the Iraqi shrine city of Karbala, the provincial governor said on Saturday as the week-long event drew to a close.

Huge crowds had packed the streets of Karbala, many beating their backs with metal chains in rituals commemorating the killing of Imam Hussein by armies of the Sunni caliph Yazid in 680.

Karbala, 100 kilometres (60 miles) south of Baghdad, was heavily guarded as devotees from across the Muslim world passed through multiple security checkpoints to reach the focus of their pilgrimage -- two shrines, one to Imam Hussein and the other to his half-brother Imam Abbas.

"Two million people have come to Karbala for Ashura," Akil al-Khazali told a press conference. "There have been no security violations so far and the ceremonies have gone ahead without incident."

"We are preparing buses to take people home," he added.

The ceremonies have been targeted by Sunni insurgents in the past and on Thursday a suicide bomber blew himself up at an Ashura procession outside a mosque in Baquba, 60 kilometres (35 miles) north of Baghdad, killing eight people.

On Saturday two people were also killed and seven wounded in a roadside bomb attack on an Ashura event in the northern city of Kirkuk, police said.

Separate street battles in the southern cities of Basra and Nasiriyah killed at least 66 people, police said, in fighting on Friday and Saturday between members of a Shia messianic sect and Iraq's security forces.

In Karbala, vast crowds started their long journeys home after sombre processions in which men, accompanied by drummers, beat their chests and engaged in the devotional self-flagellation that characterises Ashura rituals.

Kenya opposition vows more pressure

AP, AFP, Nairobi

Clashes between rival tribes armed with machetes and bows and arrows on Friday marked the third, the bloodiest and what the government hopes is the last day of opposition protests over Kenya's disputed presidential election.

With more than 33 people killed since Wednesday, the opposition announced a new strategy of economic boycotts and strikes to ratchet up pressure.

At least eight people were killed overnight in Kenya, bringing to 33 the number of deaths over the past three days related to opposition protests against President Mwai Kibaki's re-election, police sources said Saturday.

"Three people were killed overnight in Baba Dogo and in Kibera slums in Nairobi, but we will restore law and order no matter the case," a top police official, who requested anonymity, told AFP.

He said they were killed by

police.

Another five people were killed in Kisumu, in the west of the country, and police said they are investigating who killed them.

Kisumu has been wracked with post-election violence since the disputed December 27 presidential poll.

The US ambassador, citing "many factors and underlying grievances," compared Kenya's violence to the 1968 race riots in the United States.

At a town hall meeting for Americans in Nairobi, Ambassador Michael Ranneberger said there was "a lot of cheating on both sides" in the Dec. 27 elections that pitted President Mwai Kibaki against opposition leader Raila Odinga.

Kibaki insists he won the election, but international and local observers say the vote count was rigged. Kibaki's power has become more entrenched and he appears unlikely to accede to demands he step down. The opposition's best

hope may rest in wrangling a power-sharing agreement that might make Odinga prime minister or vice president.

The US Embassy estimates that between 23,000 and 100,000 votes separated the two candidates. "You can't have a recount and you can't have a new election... so the two sides need to sit (together) and work things out," Ranneberger said, suggesting the best solution was for the two to share power.

Friday's deaths raised the toll to at least 22 people killed in three days of protests called by the opposition all but five blamed on police.

A few dozen miles from Kenya's famed Masai Mara game reserve in Narok, Masai fighters and men from Kibaki's Kikuyu tribe battled for hours with machetes, clubs, swords and bows and arrows. Five people were killed and 25 wounded, police chief Patrick Wambani told The Associated Press. Homes and shops were set ablaze.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi soldier secures yesterday the area where a gunfight took place on Friday in the southern Iraqi city of Basra. "Dozens" of members of a doomsday cult were killed Friday in clashes with Iraqi security forces in the city, a police chief said.