

Pakistan tightens security around its nuke facilities

AFP, Rawalpindi

Pakistan said yesterday that it had tightened security around all its nuclear facilities amid a surge in militant attacks in the country, but no specific threat had been made against the sites.

In a rare briefing to foreign media, retired Lieutenant General Khalid Kidwai rejected international fears that Pakistan's weapons could fall into the wrong hands and warned against any foreign intervention over the issue.

"The state of alertness has gone up," Kidwai, director general of Pakistan's strategic plan division which controls the country's nuclear programme, said in response to a question on whether growing violence had impacted security around nuclear facilities.

Kidwai did not give details on how security had been bolstered. But, "there is no terrorist threat as yet" against the nuclear sites, he added.

The United States and other Western allies have showed mounting concern about the security of Islamabad's estimated 50 warheads, with Pakistani forces battling a growing insurgency by al-Qaeda-linked militants.

"There is no conceivable scenario, political or violent, in which Pakistan will fall to the extremists of the al-Qaeda or Taliban type," Kidwai said.

"The fears are based on a lack of objective understanding of Pakistan's ground situation and lack of information."

Kidwai's comments come one day after the chief of Pakistan's powerful army, General Ashfaq Kiyani, dismissed "unrealistic" fears that al-Qaeda could seize the country's nuclear weapons.

The normally reclusive Kiyani rejected speculation that Pakistan's warheads could be at risk amid the turmoil sparked by the assassination of former premier Benazir Bhutto in December.

Report from Peshawar add: Pakistani paramilitary forces clashed with militants yesterday to wrest control of a key road tunnel in the northwest and recover arms-laden trucks seized by rebels, the army said.

Militants have occupied the Japanese-built tunnel in the lawless town of Darra Adam Khel which connects the main city of Peshawar in North West Frontier Province to the city of Kohat.

"The operation is ongoing to recover seized trucks, retrieve control of the tunnel and open a major highway which had been blocked by miscreants," chief military spokesman Major General Athar Abbas told AFP.

There were no immediate reports of casualties in fresh clashes but on Friday troops said they had killed 30 rebels and lost two soldiers in Dara Adam Khel, which is known for its weapons bazaar and illegal arms makers.

Benazir niece wants to make her own political mark

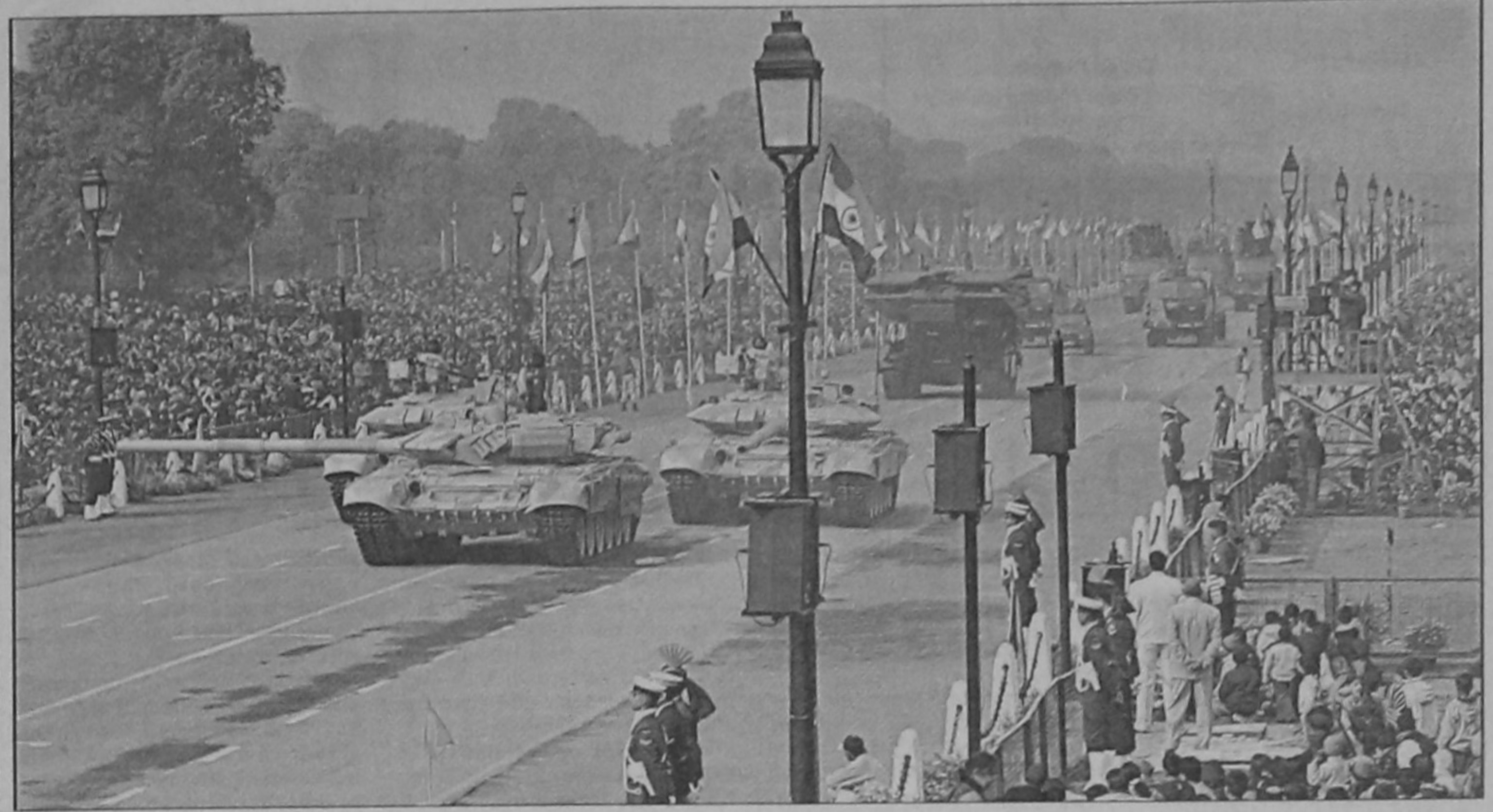
AFP, New Delhi

Fatima Bhutto, niece of slain Pakistani leader Benazir Bhutto and tipped as a future leader, says she wants to make her own political mark and not be a "political inheritor," media reported yesterday.

Fatima's striking looks, strong will and charm have led to comparisons with her famous aunt and suggestions by political observers that she could be an eventual political successor despite deep rifts within the Bhutto family.

"I am also a political Bhutto -- and I also know how the name restricts me," Fatima, a poet and author, told a literary festival in the northern Indian city of Jaipur.

"I don't want to be a political inheritor and would like to make my own mark. Politics in Pakistan should promote the new generation beyond the lineage system," she said, according to India's Mail yesterday.



Indian tanks take part in 59th Republic Day parade in New Delhi yesterday. French President Nicolas Sarkozy was guest of honour at India's Republic Day parade as New Delhi showcased its latest military hardware including nuclear-capable missiles.



French President Nicolas Sarkozy (C) visits Taj Mahal, India's monument to love, in Agra yesterday. Taj Mahal was sealed off to tourists for a visit by the French President.

West Bengal seeks help from centre to fight bird flu

AFP, Kolkata

The Indian state of West Bengal, battling the country's worst outbreak of deadly bird flu, appealed yesterday to the federal government to send "all possible help to defeat" the virus.

The call by state animal resources minister Anisur Rahaman came as authorities struggled to stop the disease spreading beyond the 12 out of 19 state districts already affected.

"We have to control the disease immediately as the deadly H5N1 virus has been spreading fast," Rahaman said, adding "avian flu is knocking on the doors of Kolkata," the eastern state's congested capital of 13.5 million people.

"I'm urging the federal government to send all possible help to

defeat the virus before it affects the humans," he told AFP.

New Delhi has already sent some medical teams and other assistance to the state.

Three days of heavy rains have held up efforts to slaughter poultry, turning some rural dirt roads into muddy rivers and making it impossible for health teams to reach chicken farms in the poverty-ridden state.

Rahaman said he was deeply concerned by reports some villagers in rural areas were eating slaughtered chickens.

"We don't understand why people do not understand the dangers of the disease despite repeated warnings," he said, adding children were still playing with chickens.

Annan hits out at Kenya 'abuses'

AFP, Nairobi

Former UN chief Kofi Annan said yesterday he had seen "gross and systematic human rights abuses" in western Kenya after violence sparked by contested presidential elections last month.

"We saw gross and systematic human rights abuses of fellow citizens," Annan said in Nairobi after a visit to the conflict-torn western Rift Valley.

"Impunity cannot be allowed to stand," he added.

Annan earlier visited the heart of Kenya's ethnic fighting along with former Tanzanian president Benjamin Mkapa and Graca Machel, wife of South African president Nelson Mandela, as 15 more people were reported killed overnight in nearby Nakuru.

They are part of the latest international effort to mediate the crisis sparked by the widely-contested reelection of President Mwai Kibaki on December 30, in which opposition leader Raila Odinga claims to have been robbed of victory.

Along with Kenyan officials, the trio toured camps of the displaced in Cherangani and Eldoret, scene of some of the worst post-poll violence,

as well as Total, a shopping post in Molo district that was razed to the ground in fighting between supporters of Kibaki and Odinga.

Around 800 people have been killed and some 260,000 others displaced across the country, mainly in the west and the capital's slums, since the disputed poll touched off a wave of deadly rioting and ethnic killings.

At least 19 people were killed overnight in the western Kenyan town of Nakuru, a police commander told AFP.

The new deaths brought the toll to 29 in the provincial capital Nakuru since ethnic disputes in western Kenya spread to the town on Thursday night.

Police said four others had died in nearby Molo on Friday, pushing the total death toll from a month of violence sparked by the disputed presidential polls to close to 800.

Authorities imposed an overnight curfew in Nakuru after gangs of rival youths clashed with machetes and bows and arrows on Friday.

Gunshots were heard in Nakuru's southern slums on Saturday, and police fired bullets and tear gas in the air to disperse hundreds of machete-wielding youths who had erected barriers along highways into the town.

Female US aid worker abducted in Afghanistan

AFP, Kandahar, Afghanistan

A female US aid worker was kidnapped by unknown gunmen in the southern Afghan city of Kandahar yesterday, officials told AFP.

"Today in the morning, unknown gunmen kidnapped an American woman who was working for an NGO," Asadullah Khalid, the governor of Kandahar province, told AFP.

The interior ministry confirmed the abduction and said it was investigating the incident.

"Today in... Kandahar an American woman who worked for an NGO was abducted by unknown people. We're investigating and there has not yet been any contact by the kidnapers," ministry spokesman, Zemarai Bashary said in Kabul.

Kandahar province was the birthplace of the Taliban and more than six years after they were toppled by US-led forces remains one of the most troubled areas in the country.

Khalid said the woman who "has been in Kandahar for a while" was travelling by car from home to her office wearing a burqa -- the tent-like veil worn by most Afghan women -- when she was kidnapped at gunpoint.

Sarkozy visits India's monument to love

AFP, Agra

French President Nicolas Sarkozy jetted to famed monument to love the Taj Mahal yesterday while on a state visit to India but without his supermodel-turned-popstar girlfriend Carla Bruni.

The 17th-century white marble mausoleum was sealed off to tourists for the brief visit, with Sarkozy writing in the visitors' book that his trip was "unforgettable," local officials told AFP.

Sarkozy's plan to visit the Taj Mahal had prompted intense speculation on whether or not he would be joined by Bruni, who has not been with him for the official events in New Delhi on Friday and early Saturday.

The 40-year-old Bruni herself told the Liberation newspaper earlier this week that she would not be accompanying the president as they were not yet married.

Foreign ministry sources in conservative India had raised eyebrows over the prospect of Bruni attending as a first lady due to protocol issues, although her joining him for the trip to the Taj Mahal in Agra had not been ruled out.

French officials were also apparently uncertain if Bruni would turn up at the last minute.

But going solo at the Taj Mahal, Sarkozy obliged photographers before flying back to New Delhi for a final function. He was due to leave India later on Saturday.

Malaysian police detain 50 anti-govt protesters

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian police yesterday detained dozens of people including a journalist at the capital's iconic Petronas Twin Towers, as they clamped down on an anti-government protest.

Up to 50 people, including many from opposition parties, were hauled away in police trucks. As they were driven off some shouted "Reformasi" or "Reform" which was the catchcry of dissident former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim.

The protest -- the latest in an unprecedented series of street rallies -- had been aimed at highlighting public anger over rising prices of food and fuel, ahead of elections expected to be held in March.

Police, who had warned the protest was illegal, turned out in their hundreds to disperse the gathering of about 100 people at the Twin Towers, which were barricaded and under heavy guard.

"We're not causing any problems, we're just saying that prices are going up and the poor are hurting," Socialist Party of Malaysia chairman Mohamed Nasir told AFP before he was taken away by police.

"The leadership is paranoid, there's no democracy," he said.

The detained journalist was from Malaysiakini, a news website which is one of the few independent media organisations in the country and whose offices were raided by the government in 2003.

"I'm definitely disturbed by this. It shows that police are not respecting the rights of journalists to do their job," said Malaysiakini's editor in chief Steven Gan.

"They should have released him as soon as he identified himself as a journalist," he told AFP.

Police refused to say why the reporter, who had been asking an officer for information, was taken away. The government has refused to give Malaysiakini staff the press pass which journalists need to access official events.

Puzzled tourists milled on the edges of the protest, watching the riot police who stood in formation as a helicopter buzzed overhead.

"It's pretty crazy," said Jon Iliffe, a British businessman on a work trip to Malaysia. "It's a bit strange that they're not allowed to protest and say what they want."

Malaysia's government has been infuriated by the street rallies which began breaking out in November, targeting issues including electoral reform and rights for the nation's ethnic Indians.

Fire engulfs luxury hotel in Delhi

AFP, New Delhi

Firefighters battled to put out a blaze yesterday that raced through a luxury hotel in the Indian capital where hundreds of Western tourists were staying.

There were no immediate reports of casualties as rescue workers evacuated hotel guests from the burning building, a fire department spokesman told AFP.

The fire erupted in the restaurant facilities of The Grand Hotel in New Delhi's residential Vasant Kunj district and quickly spread to other floors, the official said.

About 35 fire trucks backed by hundreds of firefighters fought the flames which reached the fifth floor of the 350-room low-rise hotel.

"The fire is very serious. We've now nearly brought it under control," the spokesman said.

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