

Suicide blast at Pak army base kills 5

AFP, Peshawar

A suicide car bomber attacked a Pakistan army base in a troubled tribal region bordering Afghanistan yesterday, killing at least five soldiers and wounding a dozen others, officials said.

The bomber rammed vehicles at the gate of the military camp in Wana, the main town in South Waziristan district, where Pakistani troops have been battling Taliban and al-Qaeda militants for several years, they said.

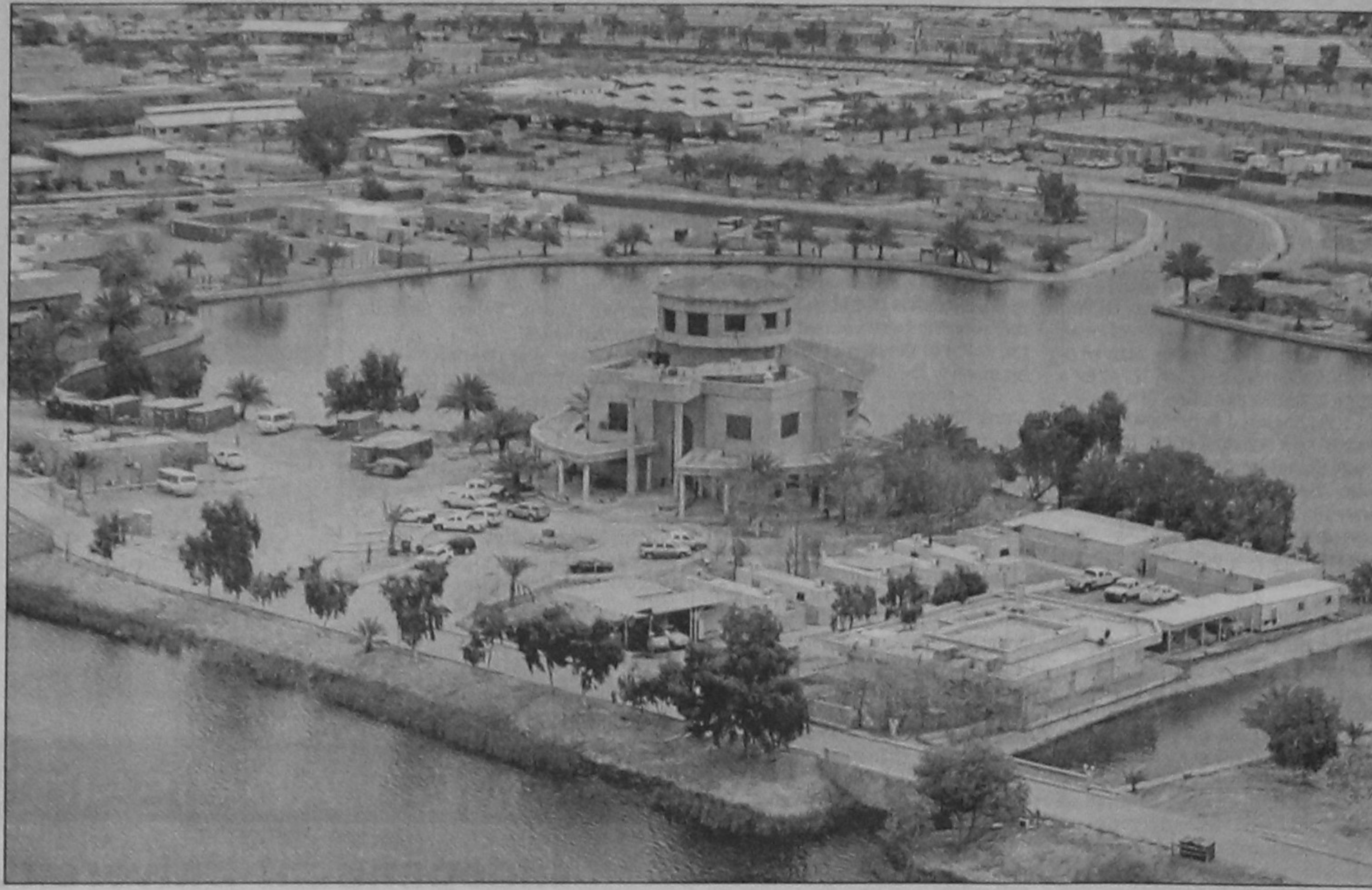
"It was a suicide attack. Five troops lost their lives and a dozen others were wounded," a local security official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

An army truck, some cars and soldiers were stationed at the gate of the camp and the bomber rammed his vehicle into them and blew himself up," the official said.

Another official confirmed his account of the attack.

An army spokesman said they were investigating a blast targeting troops in Wana, but did not have full details.

Pakistan's lawless tribal regions have been wracked by violence since hundreds of Taliban and al-Qaeda rebels fled there after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001.



An aerial view shows one of the castles of executed Iraqi president Saddam Hussein in western Baghdad yesterday. Saddam's castles near Baghdad Airport have been transformed into military bases for US troops. The US-led war on Iraq entered its sixth year yesterday with millions of Iraqis still battling daily chaos and rampant bloodshed.

US military deaths in Iraq near 4,000

War enters sixth year

AFP, Baghdad

The US military's death toll in Iraq is nearing the 4,000 mark as the conflict launched in March 2003 to topple Saddam Hussein's iron-fisted regime enters its sixth year.

The latest casualty in the five-year-old conflict was a soldier who died north of Baghdad on Wednesday.

His death brings to 3,991 the number of US service members killed over the past five years. More than 29,000 others have been wounded, according to an AFP tally based on independent website www.icasualties.org.

At least 97 percent of the losses occurred after US President George W. Bush announced the end of "major combat" in Iraq on May 1, 2003, as the American military became caught between raging anti-American insurgency and brutal sectarian strife unleashed since the toppling of Saddam.

According to icasualties.org, 81.3 percent of the soldiers killed

have died in attacks by al-Qaeda in Iraq fighters, Sunni insurgent groups loyal to Saddam and radical Shiite militias.

The remainder died in non-combat related incidents. Roadside bombs caused most of the casualties, with small arms fire the second biggest killer.

Around 40 percent of those killed were struck by roadside bombs, according to the website, making these weapons the main cause of fatalities.

Others died variously in car bombings, small arms fire, helicopter crashes, ambushes, rocket attacks and suicide bombings.

The deadliest year for the military was 2007 when it lost 901 troops on the back of a controversial "surge", which saw an extra 30,000 soldiers deployed in a bid to break the stranglehold of violence that has killed tens of thousands of Iraqis.

This figure compares with 486 deaths in 2003, the first year of the conflict, 849 in 2004, 846 in 2005 and 822 in 2006.

Since the start of 2008, 86 soldiers have died.

US military commanders in Iraq acknowledge that putting extra troops on the ground also exposed them to more attacks.

In recent months the military has begun withdrawing the surge troops as violence levels fall across the country, with US and Iraqi officials reporting a 60-percent drop in attacks since June.

Most of the attacks in the past five years have been staged in four of Iraq's 18 provinces.

The western Sunni province of Anbar witnessed most overall casualties, with 1,282 losses since the US-led invasion, according to icasualties.org, followed by Baghdad with 1,247, Salaheddin with 375, and Diyala with 237.

In Anbar and Salaheddin the military faced a strong anti-American insurgency, while in Baghdad and Diyala it is caught in a three-way fight involving al-Qaeda, Sunni groups loyal to Saddam and Shiite militias.

Bush to visit Croatia

AFP, Zagreb

US President George W. Bush is to visit Croatia in two weeks, after a NATO summit at which the Balkan country is expected to be invited to join, the foreign ministry said yesterday.

Bush's April 4-5 visit was a confirmation of Croatia as an "essential factor in ensuring a lasting peace, stability and cooperation in central and southeastern Europe," said a ministry statement.

During his stay in Zagreb, Bush is to meet his Croatian counterpart Stipe Mesic and Prime Minister Ivo Sanader.

The visit will be the second made to Croatia by a US president since the former Yugoslav republic proclaimed independence in 1991.

Bill Clinton made a brief stop in Zagreb in 1996.

Cheney expects new Pak govt to be good allies

AFP, Kabul

US Vice President Dick Cheney said yesterday he expected the new Pakistani government to be "good and effective" US allies, as he made a surprise visit to neighbouring Afghanistan.

"I expect they'll be good and effective friends and allies of the United States, just as the previous government has been," Cheney told a news conference.

"I have no reason to doubt their commitment to dealing with the problems that emerge," the vice president said, referring specifically to the troubled tribal area

along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

He said the new government, which has already vowed to take on Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, a close ally in the US-led "war on terror", had "as big a stake as anyone else" in fighting militancy.

Musharraf faces a fight for his political survival after his backers were trounced at the polls last month, with voters showing their anger over growing Islamic militancy and a host of economic problems.

The party of assassinated former premier Benazir Bhutto won

the most seats in the elections and has agreed to form a coalition with the grouping of Nawaz Sharif, who was ousted as prime minister by Musharraf in 1999.

Pakistani authorities and the US CIA have accused an al-Qaeda-linked militant chief based in the tribal belt bordering Afghanistan for slaying the pro-Western Bhutto in a suicide attack on December 27.

Hundreds of al-Qaeda and Taliban militants fled into Pakistan's lawless tribal areas after the US-led invasion of Afghanistan, and US officials have identified the region as a haven for Islamic militants.

Blast at Hamas training base kills two

AP, Gaza City

An explosion rocked a Hamas training base in central Gaza Strip yesterday, killing two activists and wounding one, Palestinian medical officials said.

Hamas blamed Israel for the blast, which it said was caused by an air strike, but the Israeli military denied any involvement.

Hamas security men kept photographers and TV cameramen away from the scene.

The incident happened amid new signs that Israel is moving closer to a cease-fire with Hamas militants in the Gaza Strip. Israeli defence officials said Amos Gilad, a senior Defence Ministry official, traveled to Cairo on Tuesday for talks with Egyptian mediators.

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH URGES NEPAL Stop crackdown on Tibetan exiles

AP, Kathmandu

An international human rights group urged Nepal to stop doing Beijing's bidding yesterday and end its crackdown on Tibetan exiles protesting against China.

New York-based Human Rights Watch said Nepal "should cease arbitrary arrests and detentions, harassment, and the use of excessive force to silence Tibetan protesters, activists and journalists."

The Nepalese government, in response, denied using excessive force, but said it would continue to clamp down on illegal anti-China rallies in Nepal. The rights group

said in a statement yesterday that Nepal's government needs to reaffirm its commitment to freedom of assembly, association and expression.

There have been several protests by Tibetan exiles in Kathmandu in the past week, the latest on Wednesday when about 100 Tibetan protesters attempted to rally at the U.N. headquarters to demand an investigation into China's recent crackdown in Tibet.

The protests in Kathmandu have often turned violent, with police firing tear gas and beating protesters with bamboo batons. Scores have been arrested and detained, often for hours at a time.

Oscar winner Paul Scofield passes away

AFP, London

British actor Paul Scofield, who won an Oscar for his role in "A Man For All Seasons," has died at the age of 86, his agent said yesterday.

Scofield died peacefully in a hospital near his home in Sussex in southeast England, where he was being treated after being diagnosed with leukemia.

He was considered one of the leading actors of his generation and won the Oscar in 1966 for his portrayal of the Tudor statesman Sir Thomas More in the film version of Robert Bolt's play "A Man For All Seasons."

Scofield made his name on the London stage, playing many of the greatest roles in theatre including an impressive body of Shakespeare work.



Afghan President Hamid Karzai (L) along with US Vice-President Dick Cheney inspects the guard of honour at the presidential palace in Kabul yesterday. Cheney arrived in Afghanistan for talks with President Hamid Karzai to assess the fight against extremism ahead of a summit of Nato partners in the battle.

Thai court to hear vote fraud case against parliament speaker

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's Supreme Court yesterday agreed to hear a vote fraud case against the speaker of parliament, which could lead to the sacking of ousted premier Thaksin Shinawatra's close ally.

Yongyut Tiyapairat is accused of bribing local officials in northern Thailand during his campaign for the People Power Party (PPP), which went on to win December elections and form a coalition government.

The former environment minister denies the claims, but after the polls the Election Commission (EC) -- which was appointed by the junta that overthrew Thaksin in 2006 -- ruled that the charges should go to the Supreme Court.

"The court has decided to hear the case and will send a letter to Yongyut Tiyapairat and (his sister) Laong Tiyapairat to come and pick up a copy of the charges within seven days," a Supreme Court statement said.

Yongyut's secretary Garn Teinkao told reporters that his

boss would send a representative to pick up the charges, and accused the EC of bias.

"The EC is not neutral. The commission has not done its job," he said. "The EC has it clear in their mind that they want to dissolve the PPP."

If convicted, PPP executive Yongyut could be stripped of his seat in parliament. A conviction could also open the door to a broader investigation by the EC into the operations of the PPP itself.

That would be a risky development for the party, which supporters of Thaksin built up in less than a year to contest the December elections.

Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party was disbanded by a military-appointed tribunal in the wake of the coup. The PPP could face a similar fate if the EC decided to keep pursuing the case.

Yongyut, 47, was instrumental in building Thaksin's support in rural areas, particularly among poor farmers whose support also helped propel the PPP to victory on December 23.

Iraq withdrawal will hand victory to al-Qaeda: McCain

AFP, London

Withdrawing US forces from Iraq would hand victory to al-Qaeda, US Republican presidential hopeful John McCain said here yesterday on the fifth anniversary of the US-led invasion of Iraq.

McCain, speaking after talks in London, said the issue was "whether we withdraw and have al-Qaeda win and announce to the world that they have won and things collapse there, or do we see this strategy through to success?"

"al-Qaeda is on the run," he said, but added: "They are not defeated. We're going to have to continue training the Iraqi military and do what we have been doing if we are going to achieve a stable situation in Iraq."

Speaking after a meeting with Prime Minister Gordon Brown, McCain said a "functioning

democracy" in Iraq would have a positive effect on the entire region.

McCain, a member of the US Senate Armed Services Committee, also praised Brown as a strong supporter of the United States.

"I appreciate very much his commitment to the continued, unique relationship between our two countries which will remain unique. I am a great admirer of the Prime Minister as well," he said.

McCain, 71, has also visited Iraq, Jordan and Israel this week and is due to go on from Britain to France.

In Amman on Tuesday, McCain alleged that Iran was training al-Qaeda, before correcting himself and saying: "I am sorry, the Iranians are training extremists, not al-Qaeda, not al-Qaeda, I am sorry."



Anti-Musharraf lawyers shout slogans during a protest rally in Lahore yesterday against the detention of sacked Supreme Court chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry and others judges. The incoming ruling coalition has pledged to restore about 60 judges, including Chaudhry, sacked by President Pervez Musharraf in November last year.

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