

US against talks with Pak Taliban chief

Pakistan to allow American drone strike on Laden

AFP, Islamabad/Washington

The United States does not approve of negotiations with Pakistan's top Taliban commander but backs Islamabad's talks with tribal elders near the Afghan border, a senior US envoy said yesterday.

Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher added that Washington welcomes an ongoing operation by Pakistani forces against Islamic hardliners near the northwestern city of Peshawar.

"We don't support making concessions to Taliban leaders like Baitullah Mehsud," the Taliban chieftain who was accused by authorities of masterminding the slaying of former premier Benazir Bhutto last year, Boucher told reporters.

He said the United States backed the policy described in a statement by Prime Minister

Yousuf Raza Gilani last week "where he said the intention was to negotiate with tribesmen not militants."

Gilani's government launched talks with Taliban militants in Pakistan's tribal frontier regions after defeating allies of US-backed President Pervez Musharraf in elections in February.

The move was aimed at ending a wave of Taliban-linked suicide bombings, but caused alarm among Western nations who allege that Pakistan-based militants are attacking their troops in Afghanistan.

Mehsud declared a ceasefire in April after negotiations with Pakistani authorities, but he announced at the weekend that he was halting all peace talks because of military operations by government forces.

Security forces launched an operation in the Khyber tribal district on the outskirts of

Peshawar on Saturday, saying that the city was under threat from Islamic militants who were terrorising residents.

Khyber is also home to the main supply route for Nato and US forces in Afghanistan.

Pakistani officials say they have taken at least one town out of militant hands, but there has been little activity except for the demolition of several rebel hideouts and residents say most of the insurgents have fled.

Boucher however said the operation was a good step.

"The operation around Peshawar is very welcome. All people up there have had enough of the harassment by these groups, the threats to Peshawar," he said.

"But it's a reminder of how much of a problem there is up there."

During a three-day visit Boucher held talks with Musharraf, Gilani and army chief General

Ashfaq Kayani in Islamabad. He also met ruling coalition partner and former premier Nawaz Sharif in the eastern city of Lahore.

Boucher said the United States was trying to support the new government's efforts to tackle mounting problems, including militancy as well as spiralling food prices and power shortages.

Meanwhile, Pakistan long ago gave Washington the right to launch an immediate Predator drone strike on Osama bin Laden, without first notifying Islamabad, if he is located in Pakistani tribal areas, The Washington Times reported Wednesday.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf granted this exception to other limits on US counterterrorism operations in his country "early" in the war against al-Qaeda, launched in Afghanistan in October 2001, the Times said, citing "a knowledgeable official."



Pakistan's Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi (L) shakes hands with US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher upon his arrival for a meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Boucher, who is on a three-day visit to Pakistan, discussed matters of mutual interest including the regional situation.

US senator prepared to push Indian nuclear deal in Congress

AFP, Washington

A senior US senator said he would push Congress to adopt a civilian nuclear deal with India if New Delhi was keen to pursue it as reported.

"If these reports are in fact true, and I hope they are, I am committed to work hard in order to get Congress to approve such a deal -- as long as the required steps are taken and if the agreement with the United States meets the requirements of US law," said Democratic Senator Joseph Biden.

India's prime minister Manmohan Singh promised Monday to bring to parliament the nuclear deal, which is fiercely opposed by left-wing parties in his ruling coalition, reports said. He appears ready to risk the collapse of his minority government.

The deal, in which Washington would provide New Delhi with nuclear fuel and technology for the first time in three decades, is being pushed by Singh's dominant Congress party as crucial for India's energy security.

But a grouping of left-wing parties who prop up the govern-

ment argues it will draw the traditionally non-aligned country too close to Washington.

Biden, the chairman of the Senate foreign relations committee, noted that he had told Singh during a visit to New Delhi in February that "time is running out very quickly."

"Every day without an agreement leaves us fewer legislative days before this Congressional term ends," he said.

US President George W. Bush's administration and the US Congress has warned India about the limited time available for the nuclear deal to be approved by the legislature before Bush leaves the White House in January 2009.

India, a declared nuclear weapons power that refuses to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), is currently barred from buying atomic energy technology.

New Delhi needs to negotiate an accord with the International Atomic Energy Agency to allow inspections of its atomic plants and garner a waiver from the 45-nation Nuclear Suppliers Group before it can enter the global nuclear trade.



Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) chairman Yasin Malik (2L) sits as Kashmiri Muslims march in Kashmir's main commercial hub Lal Chowk in Srinagar on Tuesday. Indian Kashmir formally revoked a decision to hand over land to Hindu pilgrims after days of violent protests that left five dead and nearly 350 injured in the Muslim region.

Pakistan 'petri dish' of int'l terrorism, says Zardari

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan is now the "petri dish of international terrorism", ruling PPP Chairman Asif Ali Zardari has said blaming the West which "used" the country for its short-term political objectives by investing more in its military rather than its people.

Pakistan is now the "petri dish of international terrorism" and this is "a product of failed international politics and not our creation", Zardari said in his keynote address at the Socialist International Congress at Athens in Greece.

Vowing to root out extremism, Zardari, whose Pakistan People's Party-led alliance came to power after the February 18 elections, declared that madrassas, which will not conform to a national curriculum, will be shut down.

"We were exploited under colonialism, manipulated as a tool of Cold War intrigue, made into surro-

gates for a war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, and when that war was won, Pakistan and the country we liberated were abandoned to the forces of extremism and fanaticism," he said in his speech yesterday.

The world community has paid a "terrible price" for using Pakistan for its short-term political objectives, Zardari said while calling for an international effort to rebuild the economies and infrastructure of the region to eradicate terrorism.

Pakistan could still be converted into a successful model of modernity for 1.3 billion Muslims worldwide and the help of the international community is needed for this, he remarked.

"We can't do it alone. We need the help of the world," he said. "If we succeed, we will contain extremism and terrorism. But if we fail, the world will fail with us."

Pointing out that new political madrassas and radical mosques

emerged every month in Pakistan's tribal and frontier areas and in Afghanistan, Zardari asked: "Has the UN or the US or the United Kingdom contributed one cent to the victims of terrorism in our land?"

He urged the world community to convene a South and Central Asia regional conference to coordinate a multi-faceted international programme to not only contain terrorism militarily but to choke "the social and economic oxygen of the fire of terrorism by rebuilding the economies and infrastructure of our region."

"A prosperous Pakistan will smash the remnants of terrorism from our frontiers better than the bullets, missiles and tanks of the superpowers," he said.

Pleading for the socio-economic development of Pakistan, he said this will ensure the stability of the country and the entire world.

Afghan missile attack kills 2 in Pakistan 11 militants die in violence

AFP, Kar

Two people were killed and two wounded yesterday when a missile fired from Afghanistan landed near a border post in a Pakistani tribal area, a senior security official said.

It was not clear if the missile that hit the troubled Bajaur district was launched by Taliban militants in Afghanistan or international forces fighting them, the official said.

The missile apparently "fired from the eastern Afghan province of Kunar landed near a Pakistani check post" in Sakhi Pass area of the tribal district, Khyber security official Javed Khan told AFP.

It killed an Afghan refugee and a local resident. Two others including a security official and a taxi driver were wounded, residents and local officials said.

Last month 11 Pakistani troops were killed and nine wounded in a

similar strike in the Mohmand tribal district bordering Afghanistan. Pakistan blamed US-led coalition forces in Afghanistan and condemned the attack as an "unprovoked and cowardly act."

Pakistan has protested over a series of missile strikes attributed to US-led forces in Afghanistan in recent months, including one in Bajaur region in May that killed more than a dozen people.

Meanwhile, two policemen and 11 Taliban militants were killed in separate incidents in the latest wave of violence in southern Afghanistan, officials said Wednesday.

The police were killed when a roadside bomb struck their vehicle late Tuesday in Lashkar Gah, the capital of troubled Helmand province, provincial police chief Mohammad Hussain Andial told AFP.

Zimbabwe opposition rejects unity govt

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai yesterday rejected forming a government of national unity with President Robert Mugabe, saying it would not solve the country's crisis.

"A government of national unity does not address the problems facing Zimbabwe or acknowledge the will of the Zimbabwean people," Tsvangirai told reporters after a meeting of his party's national executive committee.

Speaking after African Union leaders called for the formation of a national unity government, the Movement for Democratic Change leader said the AU had failed to acknowledge that he won the first round of Zimbabwe's election before Mugabe staged a one-man run-off last Friday.

"The resolution does not recognise the illegitimacy of the June 27 election and the fact that most African leaders refused to recognise Mugabe as head of state," he said.

"The resolution endorses the concept of a government of national unity without acknowledging that the MDC, as the winner of the last credible election, on March 29 should be recognised as legitimate government of Zimbabwe."

Tsvangirai said his party was committed to negotiations on the country's crisis but these should be based on the basis of finding a transitional agreement that would lead to a new constitution and fresh elections.

"While the MDC remains committed to negotiations this must be based on the March 29 result and must move towards a transitional agreement," he said.

"Our commitment to a negotiated settlement is not about power-sharing or power deals but about democracy, freedom and justice."

Mugabe's Information Minister Sikhanyiso Ndlovu had earlier told AFP that the government welcomed the AU's call and said that it was "ready for dialogue with whoever, a dialogue for national unity in Zimbabwe."

Left against early polls despite nuke row: SP

PTI, New Delhi

With the Congress going whole hog to woo it, Samajwadi Party on Wednesday appeared to delink the issue of support to UPA government from the nuclear deal project.

Communalism as the "biggest challenge" facing the country, Party general secretary Amar Singh claimed that even the Left, which has threatened to withdraw support to UPA government, was against early Lok Sabha polls.

"During my talks with Karat, I requested him to unite against communalism. Even he is against early general elections," Singh said.

Singh's comments came after hectic parleys amongst its top leadership including party chief Mulayam Singh Yadav who on Tuesday made it plain that there were "no political enemies" for SP.

The remarks were interpreted as signals that SP, having 39 members, was ready to do business with the Congress-led UPA in the event of the Left parties pulling the rug.

Singh, however, sidestepped a volley of questions whether SP would support the nuclear deal. Mulayam Singh Yadav too was evasive over the issue.

Singh's refrain was that communal forces posed a bigger danger to the country and secular forces would ill afford an early Lok Sabha election.

"Communalism is the biggest challenge facing the country today. We identified it as a major issue during the meeting of the party's Parliamentary board," Singh said.

The SP general secretary also claimed that the UNPA, which is meeting here on Thursday in the backdrop of the political stalemate

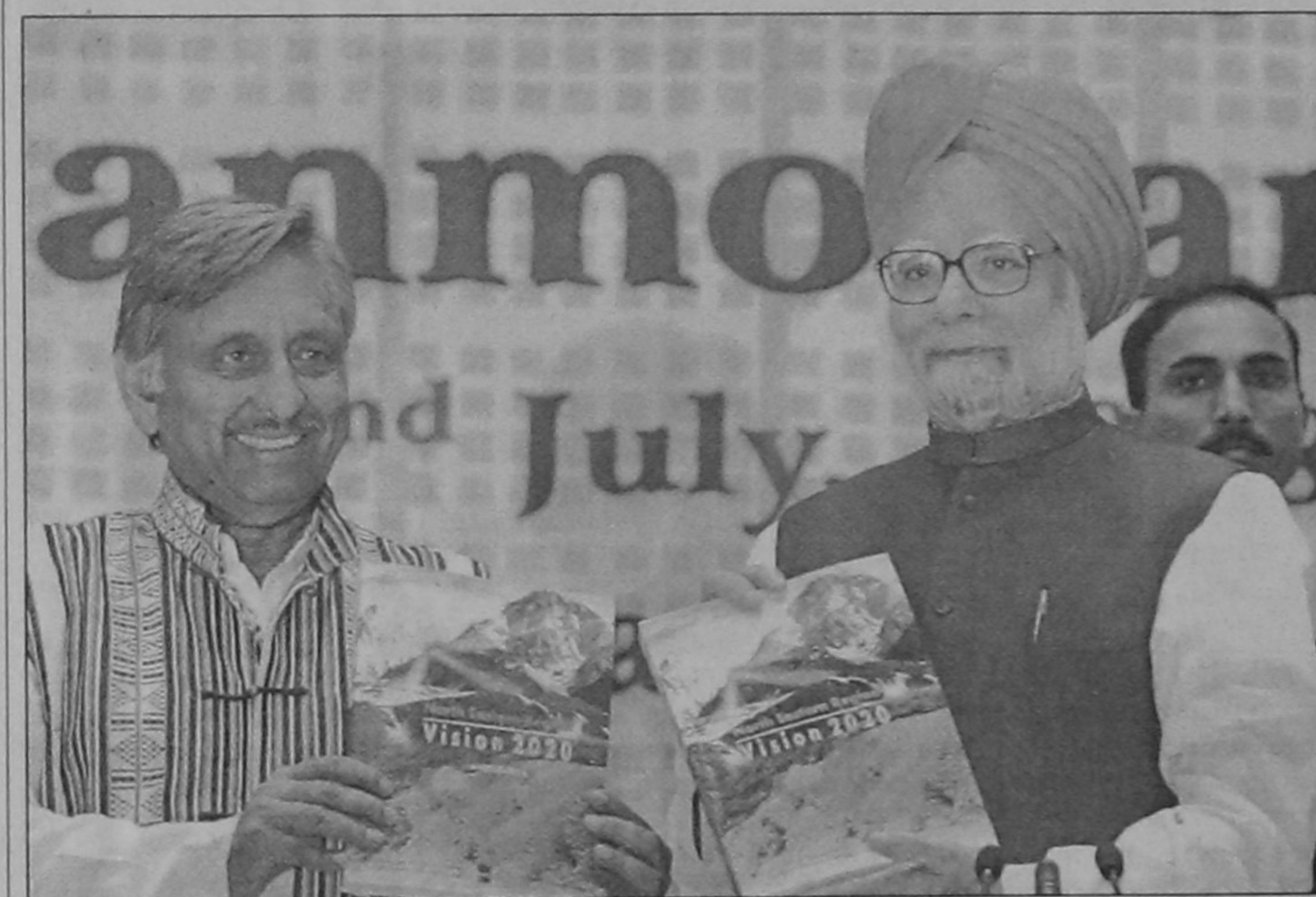
over the nuclear deal, would not split over the issue and continue to be united.

"We will not break and our policies will also not break," he said.

Singh dismissed as "big lie" reports suggesting that SP was angling for key Cabinet berths at the Centre in lieu of its support.

The SP leader projected that the BJP and the BSP were coming together. "This was clear from Advani's rally in Kanpur recently, where he declared SP as BJP's enemy number one. He opened all his cards there and showed his openness towards BSP," Singh said.

Attacking the BSP, Singh said that Mayawati openly campaigned for Narendra Modi during Gujarat polls "and it became clear from Advani's speech in Kanpur that BSP is the B-team of BJP".



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh (R) poses with Minister of Development of North Eastern Region (DONER) and Panchayathi Raj Mani Shankar Aiyer as he releases the 'Vision Document 2202 for the North-Eastern Region' in New Delhi yesterday. Holding that infrastructure deficiency in north-east is a "major concern", Manmohan announced linking of all state capitals in the north-east by a rail network.

British police nets 500 in human trafficking crackdown

AFP, London

British police have arrested more than 500 suspects in a crackdown on human trafficking in the sex trade, the government said on Tuesday.

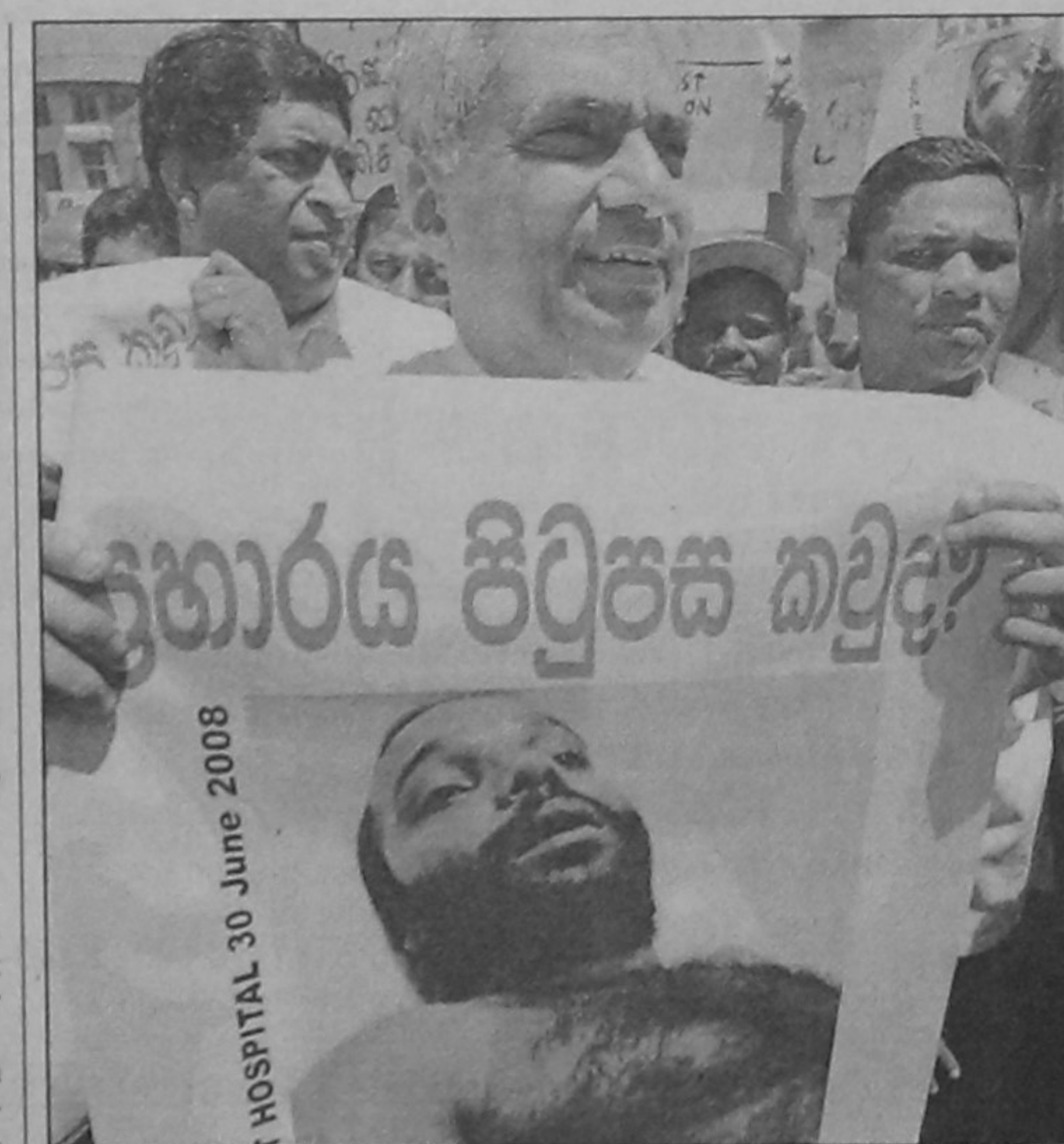
The Home Office said the majority of the 167 victims identified originated from China, south-east Asia and eastern Europe. Most were women, with the youngest aged just 14.

Police made 528 arrests in the operation, codenamed Pentameter 2, after raiding 822 premises, of which 157 were massage parlours and 582 houses and flats.

The government said the high proportion of private residences being used showed the "covert nature" of human trafficking for prostitution.

Home Secretary Jacqui Smith said: "Human trafficking is a despicable crime, perpetrated by organised criminal gangs whose business is to make money from human misery."

"Human trafficking has no place in modern society and I am absolutely determined that we continue to take tough action to disrupt these criminal gangs."



Sri Lankan opposition leader Ranil Wickramasinghe (C) holds a placard as he walks with media rights activists during a protest rally in Colombo yesterday after an assault on two journalists in the Sri Lankan capital on June 30. Hundreds of Sri Lankan reporters and cameramen staged a protest outside President Mahinda Rajapakse's home demanding an end to a wave of killings, abductions and assaults against journalists.

Nuclear Iran is world's biggest threat Says Obama adviser

AFP, Washington

Democratic White House contender Barack Obama thinks a nuclear-armed Iran is the world's biggest threat and that Europe should adopt tougher sanctions against Tehran, a top aide of his told the Financial Times of London.

"The most dangerous crisis we are going to face potentially in the next three to 10 years is if the Iranians get on the edge of developing a nuclear weapon," Obama's senior foreign policy adviser Anthony Lake said in an interview published Monday.

"If I were the Europeans I would much rather put on the table more sanctions, together with bigger carrots, and have that negotiation than I would face that crisis down the road," he added, suggesting Obama's tack should be elected in November.

European Union nations last week agreed new sanctions over Tehran's nuclear programme, notably banning the country's largest bank, Bank Mellat, from

operating in Europe.

Existing UN sanctions against Tehran aim to force it to halt uranium enrichment over fears the process could be used to make a nuclear weapon.

Obama has come under fire during his campaign for saying that if elected president he is willing to hold unconditional talks with Iran, which is on a US list of state sponsors of terrorism. His Republican rival John McCain says Obama's proposal is a sign of his inexperience.

"Unless you assume that (Iranian negotiators) have IQs less than those of eggplants, they are not likely to make major concessions for the privilege of speaking with us. So the question is: what is your strategy for the talks?" Lake told the Financial Times.

"Do you believe that simply sanctioning them can drive them into concessions before you talk, or do you believe that you need to have the sanctions there as a stick at the heart of negotiations?" he added.

12 die in 2-day Kashmir clash

AFP, Srinagar

Eleven Muslim rebels and an Indian soldier have been killed in two days of fierce fighting in a Kashmir district bordering the Pakistani part of the disputed state, the army said yesterday.

The gun battle took place in Kupwara district, near the Line of Control dividing Kashmir, and broke out after militants sneaked into Indian territory from Pakistan, an army spokesman said.

"The two days of fighting left eleven terrorists dead. We are looking for more militants in the mountainous area," he said, adding that an army officer was also killed and the fighting was among the fiercest so far this year.

India accuses Pakistan of arming and funding militants who are engaged in an 18-year-old insurgency in the Indian part of the scenic Himalayan region.

Pakistan denies the charge and says it is doing its best to prevent armed rebels from crossing into Indian Kashmir.

Violence has dropped sharply since the two nuclear-armed neighbours started a peace process in 2004 to resolve all disputes, including Kashmir.

'Taiwan will not shrink from Beijing threat'

China deploys new ballistic missiles

AFP, Taipei

President Ma Ying-jeou on Wednesday said Taiwan would not shrink from a military showdown as China reportedly deployed new ballistic missiles targeting the island despite improving ties.

Ties have begun warming since China-friendly Ma took office in May, pledging to improve relations with the island's giant and booming neighbour, with direct charter flights due to begin this week.

But despite the thaw, the Taipei-based China Times reported that the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has built a new ballistic missile base on China's southeastern coast opposite Taiwan and replaced missiles already deployed with improved versions.

"Maybe some of you may feel confused whether China is a friend or foe," Ma said while addressing hundreds of military cadets during a commencement ceremony in southern Kaohsiung county.

"Don't get confused. All you have to do is to step up your combat

readiness as it is the only way to deter war," said Ma of the China-friendly Kuomintang party.

"While Taiwan would never seek a military showdown, we will by no means avoid a war nor be afraid of taking it on" if necessary, he said, mindful of China's repeated threats to invade Taiwan should the island declare formal independence.

The China Times said the PLA had once "pulled out" its Russia-made S-300 air-defence missiles from several bases along its south-east coast.

However, it said, the PLA lately had rearmed the bases with the improved version of missiles, which place Taiwanese air force bases within striking range.

Defence authorities had previously said China had targeted the island with more than 1,000 short-range ballistic and cruise missiles.

Taiwan's defence ministry declined to comment on the report. Ma's predecessor Chen Shui-bian had irked Beijing with his efforts steering Taiwan towards independence.