

Pakistan serious in fighting militants: Official

AP, Islamabad

A senior Pakistani official said yesterday the government is serious about fighting Islamic militants, after authorities said they had rounded up 220 suspects as a military operation proceeded in a volatile tribal region.

But critics claimed the operation along the Afghan border has been largely ineffective because many of those targeted had already fled and no leading militant chiefs were captured.

North West Frontier Province Gov. Owais Ahmed Ghani defended the deployment of hundreds of security forces in Khyber agency, where authorities say they have also banned three local militant groups.

"The state is very serious" in fighting militants and the government plans to launch crack-

downs against militants in other parts of the province, Ghani told reporters, without elaborating.

The Ministry of Interior said it has so far arrested 92 "criminals" and seized large caches of arms and ammunition in Khyber. Another 128 suspects have been arrested and drugs and weapons seized separately in the nearby city of Peshawar.

The government said it launched the operation as Peshawar, the main city in the volatile northwest, was under threat from militants. Khyber is also a supply route to US and Nato forces in Afghanistan.

Former lawmaker Lateef Afridi, who is a Khyber native and a senior figure in the Awami National Party that rules the province, contended that security forces were not serious in going after militant leaders.

He alleged that only "common people" were arrested.

Another senior politician in the province said supporters of the Lashkar-e-Islam and Ansarul Islam groups fled to the remote Tirah valley ahead of the crackdown. The groups are accused of trying to impose their own Taliban-style Islamic rules in Khyber.

The politician requested anonymity as his party is a member of the ruling coalition and does not want to publicly criticise the government.

Despite the operation, the two groups have been fighting each other this week in the valley, reportedly killing dozens.

Nevertheless, Ghani maintained that the operation in Khyber was "going on successfully" and that the government had a program for tackling the province's law and order problems.

"I can say confidently that the targets we had laid down are gradually being achieved," he said.

Meanwhile, a bomb exploded on a busy street in the southwestern Pakistan city of Quetta on Friday, killing a 4-year old girl and wounding 11 other people.

The bomb was rigged to a motorcycle and it exploded outside a commercial bank, said Raja Mohammed Ishtiaq, a Quetta police officer. There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

Four of the wounded were traffic police on duty nearby, and others were passers-by, said Mohammed Khalid, another police officer.

The wreckage of the motorcycle to which Ishtiaq said the bomb was attached lay scattered on the roadside. The windows of cars parked in front of the bank were damaged.



Officials farewell an Air China charter flight to Taiwan from Beijing airport yesterday. The resumption of regular air services between mainland China and Taiwan on Friday marked a "new start" in relations between the long-time rivals, Beijing's top official on Taiwan said.

Bush to attend Beijing Olympics opening gala

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush will attend the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Olympics, defying boycott calls from critics of China's record on human rights and in Tibet, the White House said Thursday.

Some world leaders are skipping the August 8 gala, and the two principle US presidential rivals had strongly urged Bush to at least consider not going in order to highlight concerns about religious and political freedoms in China.

But "the president and Mrs Bush will attend the opening ceremonies of the Summer Olympic Games on August 8" as part of a trip to China after stops in South Korea and Thailand, Bush spokeswoman Dana Perino said in a statement.

The decision was expected to anger human rights activists and critics of a mid-March Chinese crackdown in Tibet, including many in the president's Republican party who regularly target Beijing over alleged abuses.

Pentagon extends tour of 2,200 Marines in Afghanistan

AP, Washington

The Pentagon has extended the tour of 2,200 Marines in Afghanistan, after insisting for months the unit would come home on time.

The 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, which is doing combat operations in the volatile south, will stay an extra 30 days and come home in early November rather than October, Marine Col. David Lapan confirmed Thursday.

Military leaders as recently as Wednesday stressed the need for additional troops in Afghanistan.

Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has often praised the work of the 24th MEU in fighting Taliban militants in Helmand Province.

Defence Secretary Robert Gates, however, has repeatedly said he did not intend to extend or replace the US Marines in Afghanistan, calling their deployment there an extraordinary, one-time effort to help tamp down the increasing violence in the south.

Asked about the possibility of an extension in early May, Gates said he would "be loathe to do that." He added that "no one has suggested even the possibility of extending

that rotation."

Lapan said Thursday that commanders in Afghanistan asked that the Marines stay longer.

Pentagon press secretary Geoff Morrell said the longer tour does not open the door to an extension beyond the 30 days, nor to the possibility of replacing them with other US troops when they come out in November. "This is a slight addition to this tour and nothing more," he said.

He added that commanders in Afghanistan "asked for 30 more days to milk the fighting season to the bitter end and cement the gains they have made in the south."

6 killed in stampede during Rath Yatra in Bhubaneswar

PTI, Puri

Six pilgrims, including three women, were killed and several injured in a stampede outside the Sri Jagannath temple in Puri during the annual Rath Yatra festival.

The incident took place in front of the Lion's Gate when the deities of Lord Jagannath, Balabhadra and Subhadra were being taken out of the temple for a traditional procession.

As the idol of Subhadra was being taken out by the priests, women and children standing near the chariot were pushed from behind by those accompanying the deity and fell down, police said.

"We have received six bodies so far. All the victims are aged between 40 years to 50 years... They might have died due to stampede or suffocation," chief district medical officer, (Puri) Trilokan Baral said.

Iraqi Shias denounce security pact with US

AFP, Baghdad

Large crowds of Shias yesterday denounced the security pact Baghdad is negotiating with Washington for a long-term US military presence in violence-wracked Iraq.

In Baghdad's Sadr City, the bastion of radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, Shia men, women and children shouted anti-American slogans as they demonstrated against the security deal after the weekly Friday prayers.

"No, no to colonisation! Out, out you occupier!" the crowd shouted in the centre of Sadr City where fierce battles raged in March and April between Shia militants and US forces in which hundreds of people were killed.

The fighting ended with a truce on May 10.

Washington and Baghdad are currently negotiating a security pact on the long-term foreign troop levels in Iraq.

Last November US President George W. Bush and Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki agreed to sign the pact by July 31 this year.

However the country's political factions have strongly opposed the agreement, saying it would put Iraq on the path of "slavery."

On Thursday Foreign Minister Hoshiyar Zebari tried to dispel such fears by saying that the agreement would not compromise Iraqi sovereignty.

He said if the two countries failed to sign the deal then Iraq may have to ask for the renewal of the

UN mandate which expires in December 2008 or sign a separate bilateral deal with Washington.

The UN mandate is the legal basis for the presence of US-led foreign forces in the country.

Friday's protests against the security agreement reverberated across all Shia regions of Iraq.

In the central town of Kufa, protesters chanted anti-US and anti-Israel slogans.

"No to America! No to Israel! We reject signing the agreement with the occupation," shouted devotees.

In the city of Karbala, an aide of revered Shia cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani urged Baghdad to refrain from signing a deal that would compromise national interests.



Pakistani security personnel inspect the bomb blast site in Quetta yesterday. An eight-year-old beggar was killed when a bomb attached to a motorcycle exploded at a crowded market in Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan province on Friday.

No talks without Mugabe acceptance as president

AFP, Harare

Robert Mugabe said yesterday he is only open to negotiations on an end to Zimbabwe's political crisis if he is accepted as the country's president following his widely condemned one-man election.

"I am the president of the republic of Zimbabwe and that is the reality," Mugabe told supporters at Harare airport after flying back home from an African Union summit in Egypt.

"Everybody has to accept that if they want dialogue."

The 84-year-old leader said "there shall never be acceptance of us of anything else but the meaning and significance of the vote passed on the 27th of June."

Speaking of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), he said, "let them not delude themselves into ever believing we will reverse that, never ever."

He added that "if they agree on that and we are satisfied, then we shall go into dialogue and listen to them by way of ideas. Those votes can never be thrown away as the British want. They are mad, insane."

Mugabe, who has often sought to portray his rival and opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai as a stooge of former colonial power Britain, said last Friday's run-off "was a total rejection of British policy towards Zimbabwe."

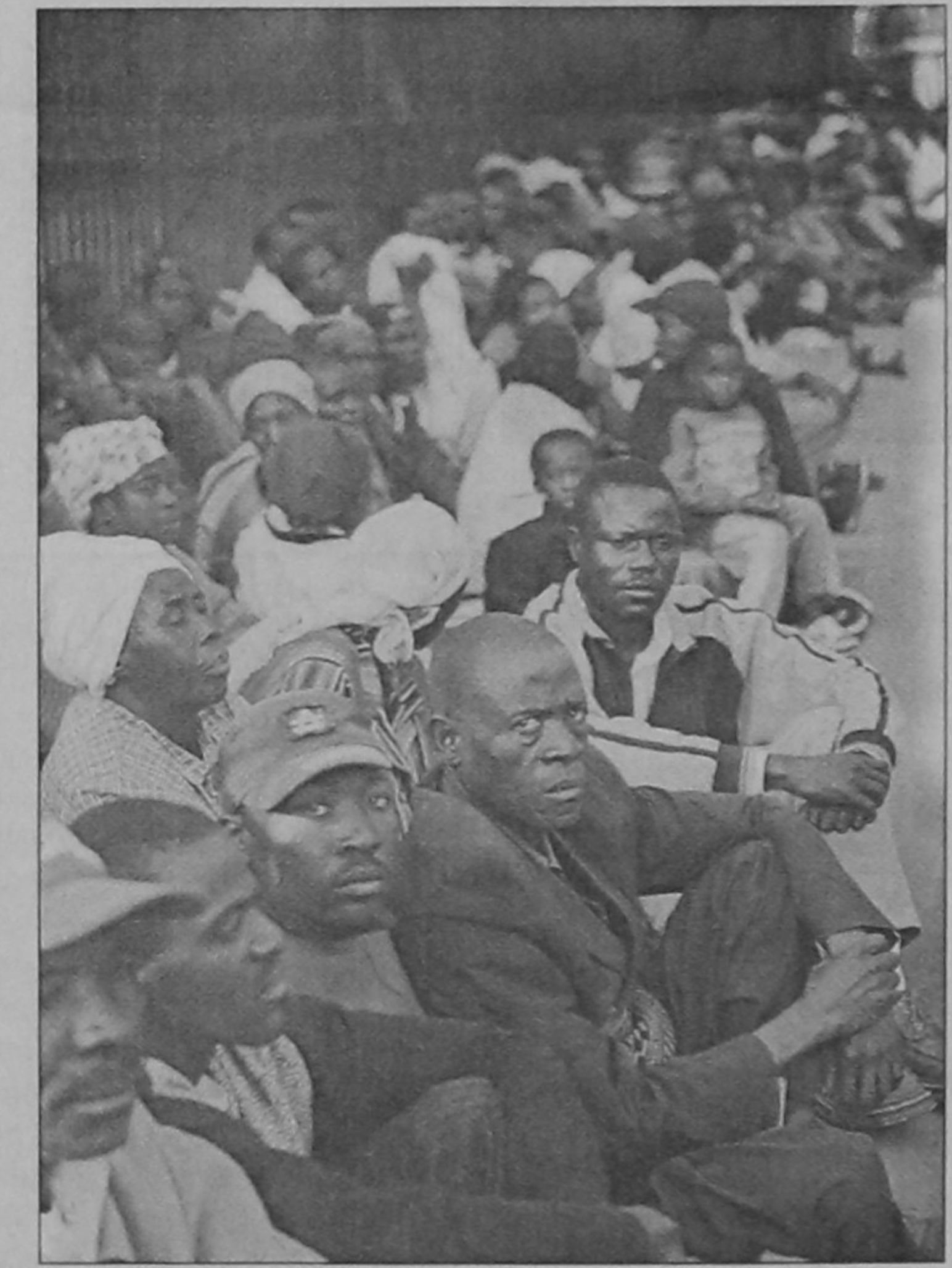
Tsvangirai boycotted the vote, citing rising violence against his supporters that he blamed on Mugabe thugs and which left some 90 dead and thousands injured.

Mugabe arrived back home to a hero's welcome by thousands of supporters on Friday following the AU summit, where he avoided serious censure over his country's political crisis.

AU leaders shunned calls for his suspension or the imposition of sanctions and instead passed a resolution calling for the formation of a national unity government.

While Western powers have pushed for sanctions following Mugabe's re-election, South African President Thabo Mbeki has warned against imposing a solution from the outside.

Mbeki, the regionally appointed mediator for Zimbabwe, has faced criticism over his quiet diplomacy approach to the crisis.



Some of the 200 people who are sitting outside the US Embassy in Harare, pose on Thursday. The people are reportedly victims of violence stemming from the Zimbabwe presidential elections.

Einstein's theory of general relativity holds up

AFP, Washington

Einstein's theory of general relativity holds up, according to astrophysicists who tested it against a unique cosmological configuration of two pulsars orbiting each other.

Pulsars are small and extremely dense stellar objects left behind after massive stars explode.

They spin at staggering speeds, generating huge gravity fields and emitting strong beams of radio waves from their magnetic poles -- much as lighthouses emit beams of light -- which can be picked up by radio-telescopes on Earth.

Scientists know of more than 1,700 pulsars in our galaxy but of only one binary-pulsar system, discovered in 2003. It comprises two pulsars locked into close orbit around each other, so close they could fit within the Sun.

Because of its strong gravitational field, this system is the best place to test Einstein's 93-year-old theory, the international team of astrophysicists reported in the July 3 edition of the journal Science.

'Pregnant man' gives birth to a girl

AFP, Los Angeles

A US man who was born a woman before undergoing gender realignment surgery has given birth to a baby girl, US media reported Thursday.

Thomas Beatie, who is legally male but decided to keep his female sex organs during chest reconstruction surgery and testosterone therapy, attracted worldwide attention in April after revealing his pregnancy.

The 34-year-old gave birth to a baby girl at a hospital in Bend, Oregon, on June 29, People Magazine reported.

"The only thing different about me is that I can't breast-feed my baby. But a lot of mothers don't," the magazine quoted him as saying.

It said the girl is Beatie's first child, and he had given birth naturally, not by Caesarean section.



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SC ruling could free Guantanamo detainees in US

Says White House

AP, Washington

The White House said Thursday that dangerous detainees at Guantanamo Bay could end up walking Main Street USA, as a result of last month's Supreme Court ruling about detainees' legal rights. Federal appeals courts, however, have indicated they have no intention of letting that happen.

The high court ruling, which gave all detainees the right to petition federal judges for immediate release, has intensified discussions within the Bush administration about what to do with the roughly 270 detainees held at the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

"I'm sure that none of us want Khalid Sheikh Mohammed walking around our neighbourhoods," White House press secretary Dana Perino said about al-Qaeda's former third in command.

President Bush strongly disagreed with the Supreme Court decision that the foreigners held under indefinite detention at Guantanamo have the right to seek release in civilian courts. The 5-4 ruling was the third time the justices had repudiated Bush on his approach to holding the suspects outside the protections of US law.

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