



Pakistani army soldiers and policemen inspect the site where a suicide bomber rammed his explosives-laden jeep into a police station in Chaharbagh district of Swat valley yesterday. Pakistani soldiers killed up to 35 militants in a massive offensive on Saturday in Swat valley in North West Frontier Province and at least seven people were killed in separate bomb attacks.

Troops kill 35 militants in NW Pakistan

Suicide bombing claims 7 others

AFP, Peshawar

Pakistani troops killed up to 35 Taliban militants Saturday in a major army offensive in the restive northwest, while at least 12 people were killed in separate attacks, officials said.

The violence came as Pakistan's political future remained up in the air, with an election set for September 6 to choose a successor to Pervez Musharraf, who resigned as president Monday amid a prolonged struggle with the militants.

Troops backed by helicopter gunships and heavy artillery pounded militant hideouts in the scenic Swat valley, a former tourist hotspot that erupted in violence last year when a pro-Taliban cleric declared jihad on Islamabad.

"Up to 35 militants have been killed and scores were injured

when security forces launched a massive operation against militants in the Kabal district of Swat valley," local military spokesman Major Nasir Ali told AFP.

"Two soldiers embraced martyrdom and three others were injured," Ali said.

Several militant hideouts including their command and control centre in Kabal were destroyed during the offensive in North West Frontier Province, he said.

The military said it had launched a "search and cordon" operation against militants in Akhund Qille and Kabal districts.

Last year, the pro-Taliban cleric, Maulana Fazlullah, launched a violent campaign to enforce harsh Islamic Sharia law in the region.

Since then, the valley has been rocked by fierce clashes, which flared up several weeks ago.

Earlier Saturday, seven people including three policemen were killed and 23 others wounded in a suicide bombing and other attacks on police stations in the valley, officials said.

The suicide bomber rammed his explosives-laden jeep into a police station in Chaharbagh district, killing three policemen and a civilian, police said. Fourteen others were wounded.

Another bomb attack at an abandoned police station in Bari Kot district killed two people, including an eight-year-old girl. In Kabal district, a young girl was killed when militants fired mortars at her home, police said.

Taliban spokesman Muslim Khan claimed responsibility for the attacks.

"We carried out the suicide attack and other bombings and will continue with more attacks if the

government does not halt the military operation against us," Khan told AFP.

A curfew has been imposed in the violence-hit district, officials said.

Elsewhere, in lawless Bajaur tribal district near the border with Afghanistan, five civilians were killed and six others were injured when a mortar shell hit a house near the main town Khar, a government official said.

Meanwhile, in the southern port city of Karachi, a senior police official, his security guard and two civilians were wounded when a bomb attached to a bicycle exploded outside his police station, police said.

The official had been investigating the activities of militant networks, which could be the motive for the attack, police officer Iqbal Mehmood said.

Sadrists slam emerging US-Iraq deal

AP, Baghdad

Several thousand supporters of anti-American Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr protested Friday against an emerging US-Iraq security agreement, saying it would turn Iraq into a US colony.

The march in the southern city of Kufa came a day after US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with Iraqi leaders in Baghdad to discuss the deal, which includes a gradual withdrawal of US forces.

Under a draft agreement, American combat troops would pull out of major Iraqi cities by next June and leave Iraq by 2011, according to Iraqi officials familiar with the document.

The schedule could be modified if the two governments agree, and the pact has not been approved by either the Iraqi Cabinet or the parliament, which has the final decision.

Al-Sadr, who lives in Iran but retains significant political clout in Iraq, strongly opposes the US military presence. Al-Sadr and other critics fear that the pullout deal will bind the US and Iraq in a long-term security relationship, instead of restoring Iraqi sovereignty.

Pentagon considers independent operations in Pakistani tribal belt

AFP, Washington

Senior Pentagon officials are debating whether the US military should undertake independent operations against Islamic militants operating in Pakistan's north-western tribal areas, The Los Angeles Times reported yesterday. The newspaper said these internal debates followed US intelligence warnings that al-Qaeda and other militant groups are consolidating their hold on northwestern Pakistan.

The report came as Pakistani soldiers killed up to 35 militants in a massive offensive in northwest Pakistan, and at least six people were killed in separate bomb attacks, according to Pakistani military and police officials.

Troops are battling Taliban militants in the Swat valley in North West Frontier Province where the violence has left dozens of dead and wounded.

But there is a growing belief within the US government that the new leadership in Islamabad has proved to be ineffectual in the fight against the militants.

"Radical terrorist groups in the border regions have undermined and fought against the central government of Pakistan and carved out sanctuaries and training bases," an unnamed senior US officer in Afghanistan is quoted by The Times as saying. "They have come back, and they are presenting a significant challenge."

A team of as many as 30 trainers was supposed to be sent to Pakistan this summer to operate out of a base near the northwestern city of Peshawar.

But Pentagon officials said the training has been blocked by the Pakistani government for months, in part because of anger over the June killing of 11 Frontier Corps members in a US airstrike near the Afghan border.

No talks with militants who kill poor Says Pak PM

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani Premier Yousuf Raza Gilani Saturday said his government would not negotiate with militants but would tackle the poverty and unemployment at the root of the unrest, which has claimed hundreds of lives.

Pakistan is experiencing a renewed wave of suicide attacks in response to its ongoing military operations against Taliban militants active in tribal areas bordering Afghanistan.

"We will not negotiate with those who are attacking you, who are attacking the poor people," Gilani told reporters at a hospital in the nearby town of Wah after visiting the victims of a twin suicide attack.

The Taliban suicide bombing at Pakistan's biggest weapons factory on Thursday, the deadliest ever attack on a Pakistani military site, killed at least 64 people and wounded 70 others.

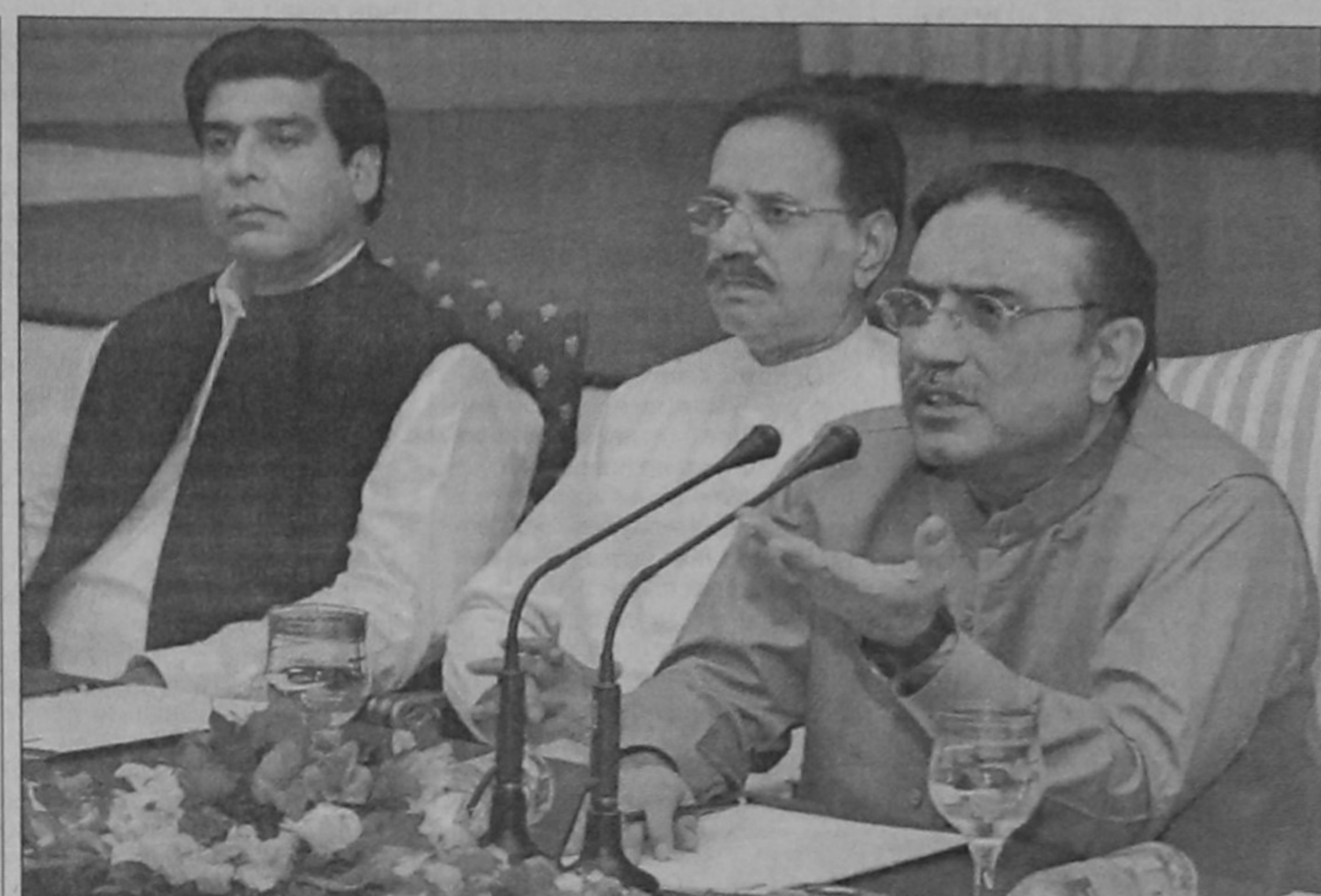
"They attack the poor labourers. They want to snatch their livelihoods. We strongly condemn such attacks against poor people," Gilani said and added that such attacks gave the country a bad name.

He said the government would leave the door to negotiations open for those tribes who separate themselves from the militants and would also talk to those rebels who surrender their weapons.

"Our tribesmen are patriotic people and we will negotiate with those tribes who isolate themselves from the militants," the premier said.

He said that the government was addressing the root cause of militancy and suicide attacks, identifying poverty, unemployment and lack of basic healthcare and education facilities as the main reasons behind the unrest.

"We are working for the economic uplift and development of the tribal areas," he said.



This handout picture released by the Pakistan People's Party shows Asif Ali Zardari (R), co-chairman of the ruling Pakistan People's Party as he addresses the Central Executive Committee meeting in Islamabad on Friday. Pakistan's ruling coalition was riven by divisions despite crunch talks on Friday, raising fears for the government's ability to tackle Taliban bloodshed.

A look at Zardari

AP, Islamabad

Key facts about Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan.

BORN: July 21, 1956 in Karachi.

FAMILY: His wife, Benazir Bhutto, was twice prime minister of Pakistan. She was assassinated Dec. 27, 2007, while campaigning for re-election after 8 years of self-exile. Three children, a 19-year-old son, Bilawal, a student at Oxford University, and two teenage daughters, Bakhtwar and Asifa.

POLITICS: Succeeded his late wife as head of the Pakistan People's Party.

LEGAL WOES: Zardari was nicknamed "Mr. 10 Percent" for allegedly receiving kickbacks on government contracts during his wife's terms as prime minister. He spent eight years in jail for alleged corruption, a charge he and his wife say was politically motivated.



Nepalese Prime minister Pushpa Kamal Dahal also known as Prachanda (R) shakes hands with his second-in-command and finance minister Baburam Bhattarai (2-L) as his wife Sita Dahal (C) looks on, before leaving for his first international trip as Prime Minister at Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu yesterday.

Prachanda asks armed forces to forget 'bitterness' of past

PTI, Kathmandu

Republic Nepal's first Premier Prachanda, whose Leftist group's main target were security personnel before it gave up the decade-long insurgency in 2006, today appealed to armed forces and police to "forget the bitterness of the past" and extend support to his government.

"Appeal to Nepali Army, Armed Police Force, Nepal Police, National Investigation Department to forget the bitterness of the past and extend their support for national unity," Prachanda said in his first message to the nation delivered prior to his departure for Beijing to attend the closing ceremony of Olympics Games.

"Taking the peace process to logical conclusion and writing a new constitution within stipulated time are the main tasks of this

government," he said.

Maoist chief and the former rebel leader Prachanda said that he wanted to consolidate the national unity based on full equality among the people from Himal (Mountain), Pahad (Hills) and Terai (Plains).

"I express my firm commitment towards modern democratic principles such as multi-party competition, periodic elections and rule of law," he said, and expressed his commitment to protect private sector and bring about modern industrial economy in the country.

Prachanda said the new government will encourage foreign investments in priority sectors such as agriculture, tourism, water resources and infrastructure. He also assured industrialists that the government maintains industrial peace by improving relations between labour and employers.

Pro-independence strike cripples life in Kashmir

15 killed in a border gunbattle

AFP, Srinagar

A massive pro-independence strike brought Indian Kashmir to a halt yesterday, a day after a huge separatist rally in the revolt-hit region where 15 people were killed in a border gunbattle.

The strike was the latest in a string of shutdowns and demonstrations called by separatists in the scenic Muslim-majority Himalayan region.

"The strike is part of continuing protests against India's rule in Kashmir," said leading separatist Mirwaiz Umar Farooq, who is chief priest at the region's main mosque.

"It is also to demand our right to self-determination through a referendum," he said in Srinagar, summer capital of Indian Kashmir

where a revolt has raged against New Delhi's rule since 1989.

In Srinagar, shops, schools, banks and businesses remained closed for a second day running. There were similar shutdowns in other towns in the Kashmir valley.

The strike is set to continue until Monday, when separatists plan to hold a protest sit-in at Lal Chowk, the heart of Srinagar.

Meanwhile, the death toll from an overnight gunbattle with militants near the de facto border dividing Kashmir between India and Pakistan rose to 15, the army said.

"The fighting that is still raging has so far left 12 militants and three soldiers dead, including a colonel," army spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Anil Kumar Mathur told

AFP.

He said three soldiers were critically wounded during the gunbattle, the fiercest this year in Kashmir.

There has been a surge in skirmishes along the border in the past few months and New Delhi accuses Pakistan of arming, training and pushing militants into Kashmir to fight India's rule in the region -- a charge Islamabad denies.

India says decades-old UN resolutions calling for a referendum on Kashmir's future are "obsolete."

On Friday, hundreds of thousands of people massed in Srinagar to demand "azadi" or freedom and to protest against New Delhi's rule in the second major demonstration this week.

India will not accept conditions to clinch US nuclear deal

AFP, New Delhi

India will not accept any new conditions to win approval from nuclear supplier nations for lifting a decades-old embargo on nuclear trade with New Delhi, a report said yesterday.

The statement by Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee came a day after nuclear supplier nations ended a two-day meeting in Vienna without reaching agreement on lifting the 34-year-old embargo on nuclear trade with India.

The Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG), which controls the export and sale of nuclear technology worldwide, convened for two days "to discuss a US draft proposal on a statement on civil nuclear cooperation with India."

"We cannot accept prescriptive conditions," Mukherjee told the Press Trust of India as Foreign Secretary Shivshankar Menon headed for Washington to discuss amendments to the draft NSG waiver.

Diplomats who attended the

discussions of the highly secretive 45-member group signalled that the US-India deal had run into stiff resistance among member states, with some setting conditions for giving approval.

Menon, however, described the meeting as "constructive and useful."

The United States wants a special waiver of NSG rules for India, which refuses to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), allowing Washington and New Delhi to cooperate in the civilian nuclear field.

But a number of countries have openly expressed reservations about the 2005 agreement between the United States and India.

The proposed waiver "would blow a hole in the nuclear non-proliferation system," Daryl Kimball, non-proliferation expert and executive director of the Washington-based Arms Control Association, told AFP on Friday.

Under NSG rules, all nuclear trade with India is banned because it refuses to sign the NPT, develop atomic bombs in secret and

conducted its first nuclear test in 1974.

The United States argues the new deal would bring India into the NPT fold after 34 years of isolation and help combat global warming by allowing the world's largest democracy to develop low-polluting nuclear energy.

Critics argue the deal undermines international non-proliferation efforts by providing US nuclear technology to a non-NPT state.

They accuse nuclear states supporting the deal of ignoring proliferation dangers in pursuit of commercial and political gains.

The deal must clear three major hurdles before it can come into effect.

The first came earlier this month when the International Atomic Energy Agency approved an India-specific safeguards agreement.

The NSG represents the next obstacle before the deal must finally be approved by the US Congress. Unanimous approval is required from the group.

Philippine peace on shaky ground after attacks

AP, Kauswagan

The latest violence in the southern Philippines took the government and the military by surprise, coming just weeks after Muslim rebels initiated a peace accord.

Moro Islamic Liberation Front guerrillas angry over snags in the peace plan went on a rampage Aug. 18 in the southern hinterlands, shooting or hacking to death at least 37 people as they fled in panic from houses that had been set on fire.

Lani Banglos was one of those caught in the middle. Her small village store and her family's home in Kauswagan township were burned down and some of her neighbours were killed.

The 27-year-old had laboured for more than two years as a housemaid in faraway Qatar to earn the money to build a store to support her parents and her siblings.

Poking a stick into the gray ash, she searched for money in the rubble of her shop.

"These are all that's left," she said of seven, soot-covered coins in her palm as she wiped away tears. "I'm back to square one."

The peace process may be, too. Just weeks ago, a deal to end a decades-long insurgency in the troubled south had seemed within

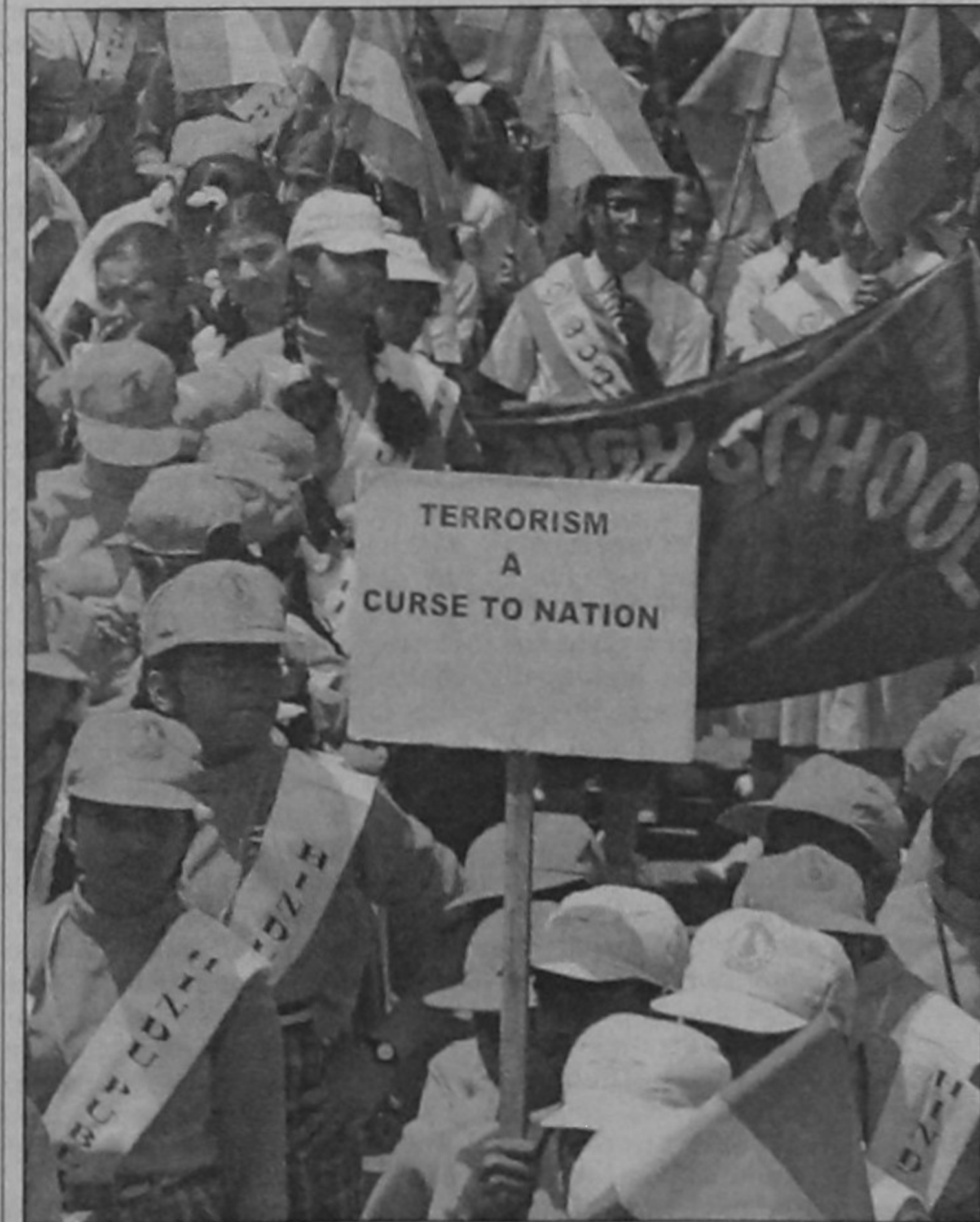
reach after the government and the rebels initiated an agreement on the crucial point of ancestral domain the size of an expanded Muslim autonomous area.

But Christian politicians, wary of losing land and power, challenged the deal in the Supreme Court. Two rebel commanders described as frustrated with yet another delay in the peace process then led their men on raids Monday on five coastal towns in Lanao del Norte province on southern Mindanao island, killing 37 people and sending 44,000 fleeing their homes.

The province is in the same area as the autonomous zone and the violence displaced Christians and Muslims alike. In some areas, the rebels targeted Christian politicians.

Rebel leaders said they did not sanction the attacks but have refused to hand over the two commanders. The government has announced it no longer plans to sign the territorial accord, throwing the peace talks into disarray.

The outbreak of violence was one of the worst in years and came amid an escalation of isolated attacks by the rebels. Now there are concerns the situation could spiral out of control.



Indian school children from the Hindu Public School carry placard against terrorism in the country during a protest rally in Hyderabad yesterday. The protest rally was organised by the opposition Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP) following the recent terrorist attacks in India.

US 'concerned' over planned Russian arms sale to Syria

AFP, Washington

The United States is "very concerned" over reports that Russia wants to sell weapons to Syria, a State Department spokesman said Friday.

"We are obviously very concerned about reports that Russia may be providing weapons, weapons systems to Syria," said spokesman Robert Wood.

"We have always said to the Russians that these sales should not go forward, they don't contribute to regional stability and, again, I urge them not to go through with these sales if there is an intent to go through with them," he told reporters.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad won promises of fresh arms sales during a visit to Russia this week. He said Moscow could again become a bulwark against the West and help resist Israeli influence in the Middle East.

Israel, a key US ally, is particularly concerned Russia could deliver anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles to Syria that could end up in the hands of Lebanon's Syrian-backed Hezbollah militia whose political rhetoric centres on the destruction of the Jewish state.