

Pakistan to get 100 fighter jets from China, US

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan will acquire over 100 fighter jets from China and the US as well as airborne warning and air-to-air refuelling aircraft to maintain numerical parity with the Indian Air Force which enjoys a "qualitative advantage", the country's air force chief has said.

Air Chief Marshal Tanvir Mahmood Ahmed said the Pakistan Air Force was "very close" to signing a contract with China for serial production of 42 F-17 fighter jets.

It would also acquire two squadrons or 36 of the FC-20 multi-role fighters from China and 18 new F-16s from the US, he said.

Ahmed said the PAF had already received eight F-17 jets, which are being used for testing and evaluation. The first squadron of F-17s is expected to be raised later this year or early next year.

PAF has inked a contract with a Ukrainian firm for four air-to-air refuelling aircraft, and the first of them is expected to arrive in a month, Ahmed said in an interview with Dawn News channel.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian flood-affected villagers run to collect relief material dropped by a relief helicopter of the Indian Air Force in Madhepura district in India's northeastern state of Bihar yesterday. India was grappling with the task of feeding and housing close to a million villagers displaced by huge floods in the eastern state of Bihar as the rescue effort wound down.

Lankan air force pounds rebel camps

8 Tigers, 3 soldiers killed

AP, AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's air force launched attacks on two Tamil separatist camps in the embattled north Sunday, and infantry clashes elsewhere in the region killed eight rebels and three soldiers, the military said.

Helicopter gunships attacked a Sea Tigers camp in Kavitaranmuni in the rebel stronghold of Poonery before dawn, said air force spokesman Wing Commander Janaka Nanayakkara. The Sea Tigers are the rebels' naval wing.

Fighter jets attacked a training camp of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at Mankulam, just south of the rebel political capital of Kilinochchi, 330km north of Colombo, the ministry said.

It said Mi-24 helicopter gunships were deployed to bomb a naval base of the Tigers early Sunday in the Poonery area of

northern Sri Lanka.

There were no immediate reports of casualties. There was also no comment from the Tigers about the latest fighting, which came as Sri Lankan troops were on an offensive to capture Kilinochchi.

Hours later, fighter jets bombed a rebel training camp deep in guerrilla-held territory in Mankulam, Nanayakkara said.

Pilots said both attacks were successful but details of casualties were not immediately available, he said.

Meanwhile, ground battles Saturday along the front lines separating government-controlled areas from rebel-held territory left eight rebels and three soldiers dead, said military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara.

Clashes in Vavuniya killed five rebels and three soldiers, while fighting in Welioya and Kilinochchi killed three rebels and wounded

eight soldiers, he said.

With communication all but cut with the northern areas, rebel spokesman Rasiah Ilanthyiray said he could not be reached for comment.

Fighting has escalated on the Indian Ocean island in recent weeks with the government intensifying its campaign against the rebels' de facto state in the north, promising to crush them by the end of the year.

Independent verification of the fighting and casualties is difficult to obtain because most journalists are banned from the war zone. Both sides routinely exaggerate enemy casualties and under-report their own.

The rebels have been fighting for an independent state in the north and east since 1983, following decades of marginalization of ethnic Tamils by governments dominated by the Sinhalese majority.

More than 70,000 people have been killed in the conflict.

Maldives set for first multi-party election

AFP, Colombo

The Maldives is to hold its first multi-party presidential election next month as part of sweeping political reforms in the Sunni Muslim nation, a minister said yesterday.

The tourist paradise is due to hold a national vote to elect a new president for a five-year term under the constitution ratified in August, legal reforms minister Mohamed Nasheed told AFP by telephone from Male.

"Elections will be before October 10," Nasheed said.

An exact date is yet to be fixed.

Political parties were recognised in 2005 when President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Asia's longest-serving ruler, launched reforms after pro-democracy protests. Gayoom, 70, has been in power since 1978.

It was previously illegal for anyone to offer himself as a candidate for the presidency. A candidate instead had to be selected by the 50-member Majlis, or national parliament.

Eight members of the Majlis were appointees of the incumbent president.

India focuses on care for flood victims

Rescue effort winds down

AFP, Patna

India was grappling on Sunday with the task of feeding and housing close to a million villagers displaced by huge floods in the eastern state of Bihar, as the rescue effort wound down.

Some 900,000 people fled from their homes or were evacuated by boat since the Kosi river breached its defences three weeks ago on the Nepal border and changed course.

Bihar officials have turned every available building -- schools, temples, student housing -- into temporary shelters.

But as destitute villagers squat on roads after getting off rescue boats and mothers held babies ill from drinking muddy flood waters, survivors and charities said far more aid would be needed.

"Private people are helping us,

but the government is not helping us," said Mithilesh Yadav, 30, who left his village on a rescue boat with his wife and five children Wednesday.

"The schools, the camps, everything is full. We have put up these huts ourselves. We have to live somehow."

Up to five million people have been affected in India and another 60,000 in Nepal, aid agencies say, underlining the scale of the task facing authorities and charities.

In relief camps in Nepal at least 14 people have died from disease, the top official of the border district of Sunsari told AFP on Sunday.

The Indian media has been critical of aid efforts by the government and international agencies.

One national daily, the Hindustan Times, ran a photograph of children with their hands outstretched for food with the

headline, "India's Shame."

Aid agencies said they and authorities were doing everything they possibly could, but admitted there were still many awaiting food, shelter and health supplies.

"The government machinery and everyone have been moving around the clock," said Aditi Kapur, a spokeswoman for British aid group Oxfam, which has workers in the badly affected Supaul area.

"At the same time, there are still people in remote areas who are waiting for relief. Shelters are cramped and unhygienic. There are pregnant and lactating women who need safe drinking water. These things are not there."

The top administrative officials in three of the five Indian districts flooded by the river have been replaced in the past two weeks amid allegations of mismanaging

relief efforts, the Press Trust of India news agency has reported.

With India and Nepal still trading accusations on who was to blame for the failure of the flood walls, it was unclear when work on repairing the breach would start, and how long it would take to complete.

The delays have meant that India must ready to provide for at least a million people for several months.

"This is really only the beginning," said Malini Morzaria, a European Commission humanitarian aid representative who visited the area last week, adding that the body has pledged two million euros (three million dollars) to the aid effort.

"There is still much work to be done in reaching the most vulnerable," she said.

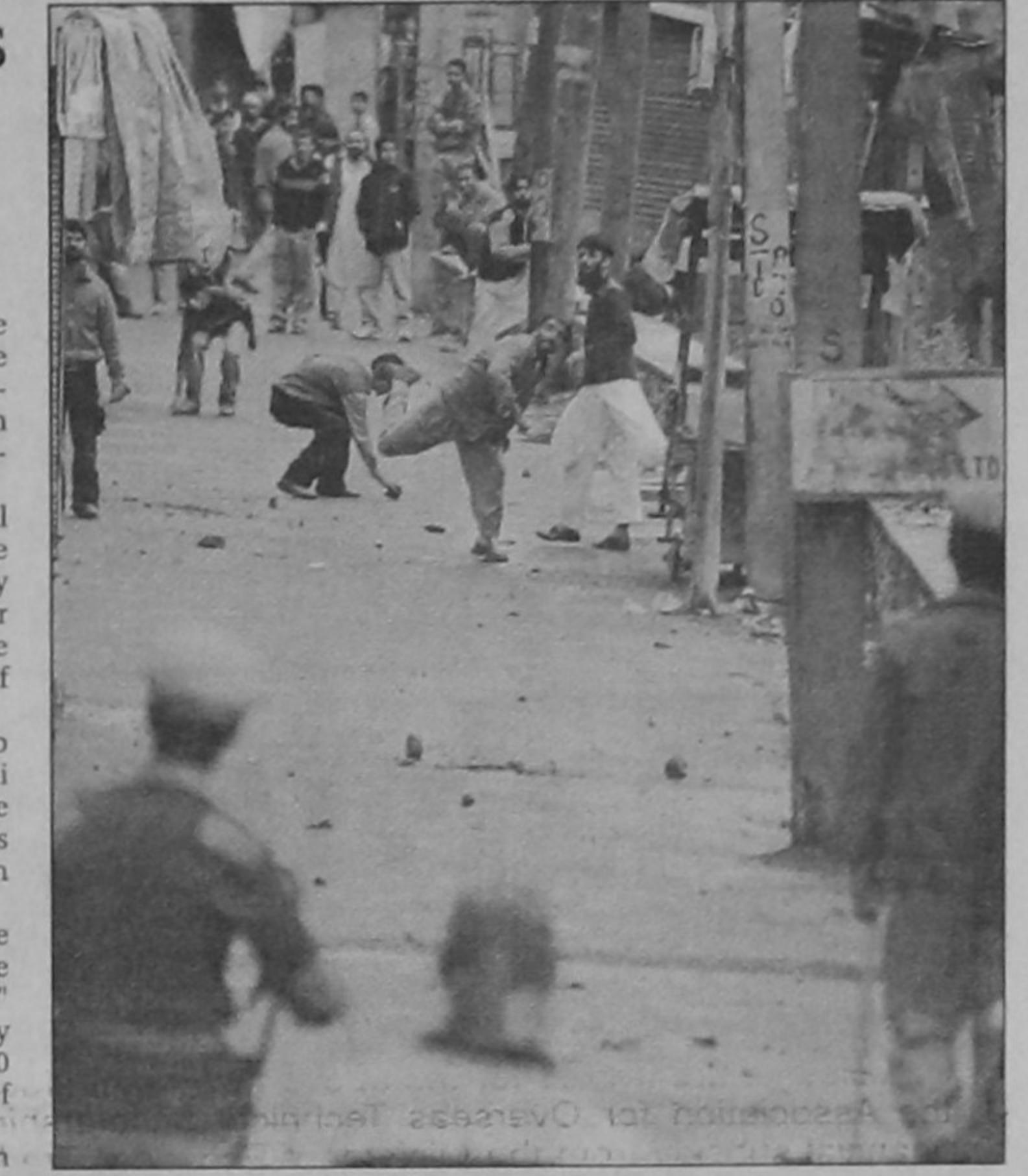


PHOTO: AFP

Indian Kashmiri Muslim demonstrators throw stones towards Indian police during a demonstration in Srinagar yesterday. Indian police clashed with stone-throwing protesters in the Kashmiri summer capital, a day after a protester died in similar anti-India demonstrations.



Fight against N-deal not over: CPI-M

PTI, New Delhi

Describing India's bid to gain the NSG waiver as "another surrender", the CPI-M on Sunday said its fight against the Indo-US nuclear deal was not over and it would work now to see a new government in power, which would terminate the 123 Agreement.

"Our political battle is here and not in Vienna or Washington. Earlier we withdrew support on this issue and we are now fighting against this ruling coalition. The struggle to rescind or reverse this deal is not over."

"After the next elections, our goal will be to see that the new government takes steps to terminate the 123 Agreement. ... We will work for this," CPI-M General Secretary Prakash Karat told reporters in New Delhi.

He said his party had told the Congress to take the people's mandate before going ahead with operationalising the deal, for which the UPA Government has "converted its voluntary moratorium on nuclear testing into a

multi-lateral commitment".

India would not get any better terms from any other country supplying nuclear fuel or reactors as all of them would now align with the 123 Agreement, Karat said.

Maintaining that the NSG waiver was "neither clean nor unconditional", Karat said it reflected the "continuous concessions" that India has made on the nuclear issue.

"Starting from the joint statement of July 18, 2005, India has given in steadily to US pressure, starting with the 123 Agreement, the IAEA Safeguards and now finally the NSG."

He said all these steps to get the waiver from an organisation (NSG), set up by the US itself, were in conformity with the provisions of the Hyde Act.

Besides, the government had also entered into the Defence Framework agreement and gave commitments to the US on economic policy as quid pro quo, thereby entering into a strategic alliance with Washington, the CPI-M leaders said.

Abbas casts doubt on ME peace deal this yr

AFP, Cairo

November

with the goal of reaching a comprehensive peace deal by the time US President George W. Bush leaves office in January 2009.

But the two sides remain sharply divided on the core issues of the conflict, despite several meetings in recent months between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators.

Differences focus on the future status of Jerusalem, final borders, the fate of some 4.6 million UN-registered Palestinian refugees, and the future of Jewish settlements on Israeli-occupied territory.

Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni in August also played down the chances of a peace deal this year, saying: "Until everything is agreed, nothing is agreed."

Abbas insisted that the Palestinians "want a solution... but it must not ignore any of the key issues."

On August 31 a senior Israeli government official said his country wants to reach a peace deal with the Palestinians by the end of the year but postpone a final

agreement on the future of Jerusalem.

"Both sides are interested in reaching a full agreement by the end of 2008 and believe it is possible," the official said after a meeting between Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

"But since the question of Jerusalem is not solvable within this timeframe they will have to agree to postpone an accord on this issue and agree on a mechanism and a timetable for Jerusalem."

Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni in August also played down the chances of a peace deal this year, saying: "Until everything is agreed, nothing is agreed."

Abbas was in Egypt to discuss with Mubarak efforts by Egypt to organise an inter-Palestinian dialogue to end months of fighting between rival Palestinian factions.



PHOTO: AFP

Thai leader dismisses talk of military coup

AP, Bangkok

Thailand's embattled prime minister denied a rift with the army Sunday and dismissed the possibility of a coup when he travels to the UN General Assembly in New York later this month.

Prime Minister Samak Sundaravej noted that Thailand's last coup occurred in 2006 when then-premier Thaksin Shinawatra was in New York at the UN headquarters as massive anti-government protests were going on at home.

But, he ruled out history repeating itself.

"I will deliver my speech at the United Nations and I don't believe any unwanted incident will happen like when Thaksin went to speak there," Samak said in his weekly television broadcast.

"The military will not stage a coup," he said. "They know the international community will not tolerate (another coup)."

NEWS ANALYSIS

Pak military unlikely to put pressure on Zardari

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's president-elect Asif Ali Zardari is unlikely to have the country's powerful military breathing down his neck as did his slain wife during two stormy stints in power, analysts said.

Zardari was overwhelmingly elected Saturday in a secret ballot of lawmakers, capping a remarkable rise from jail, exile and his wife Benazir Bhutto's assassination just nine months ago.

Pakistan remains the world's only nuclear-armed Islamic nation and is seen as the frontline state in the US-led "war on terror," amid widespread international concern about its political stability.

The military that has ruled Pakistan for around half its 61-year existence, most recently under

former general Pervez Musharraf, remains a potent force.

But analysts said Zardari's civilian rule would not be impeded as long as he did not interfere or challenge military doctrine.

"The army has decided to coexist with the present political realities and leadership," Talat Masood, a retired general and military analyst, told AFP.

"They realise any meddling in politics will be very much misunderstood and will not be helpful to their own institution and interest in the country."

Pakistan's military was heavily involved in terminating both Bhutto governments, in 1990 and 1996, when she blamed its army chief in a bloodless coup in 1999.

His downfall is widely acknowledged to have started in March

2007 when he sacked the country's chief justice, fearing that he would create hurdles in his bid for re-election later that year.

Musharraf's initial reluctance months later to confront radical Islamists holed up in Islamabad's Red Mosque -- and its eventual storming which saw scores killed -- also earned him disrepute.

Zardari will now have to grapple with the militant threat that has seen nearly 1,200 people die in bombings and suicide attacks across Pakistan since the July 2007 siege.

As president, Zardari has the right to appoint heads of the military, cementing an already strong position as co-chairman of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), which won elections in February.