

US military chief warns Iraq on security deal

Iraqi ministers seek changes in pact

AP, AFP, Aboard A US Military Aircraft

Iraq's cabinet was discussing a contentious security pact with Washington yesterday as the top US military chief warned that time was running out for Baghdad to back the deal.

Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, bluntly warned that Iraq risked security losses of "significant consequence" unless it approved an agreement that provides a legal basis for US forces to remain in the country.

Admiral Mullen also charged that US archfoe Iran was working

hard to scuttle Iraq's adoption of the so-called Status of Forces Agreement, or SOFA, which has been the subject of months of fraught negotiations.

"We are clearly running out of time," said Mullen, warning that when the current UN mandate governing the presence of foreign forces expires on December 31, the Iraqi military "will not be ready to provide for their security."

"And in that regard there is great potential for losses of significant consequence."

Mullen's comments aboard a US aircraft came as Iraqi cabinet ministers were meeting to discuss

the latest draft of the security pact that in its current form will see US combat troops withdraw from Iraq in 2011.

Iraqi ministers sought changes on Tuesday to a draft security pact with Washington that will govern US troop levels after the year-end expiry of a UN mandate, a parliamentary source said.

"The agreement was examined by the cabinet and the ministers will present some modifications in a few days," a senior Shia parliamentary source told AFP.

Iraqi politicians have been discussing the contentious deal for several days amid fierce opposition

from some quarters in the government.

The biggest Shia alliance has expressed reservations over the agreement and some Sunni lawmakers are also opposed.

Government spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh says the Cabinet meeting began Tuesday with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki chairing the session.

The spokesman says it's doubtful the ministers will take a decision Tuesday.

Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari said on Al-Arabiya television that he doubts parliament will vote before the Nov. 4 US election.

Raj's arrest sparks protests in Pune

PTI, Pune

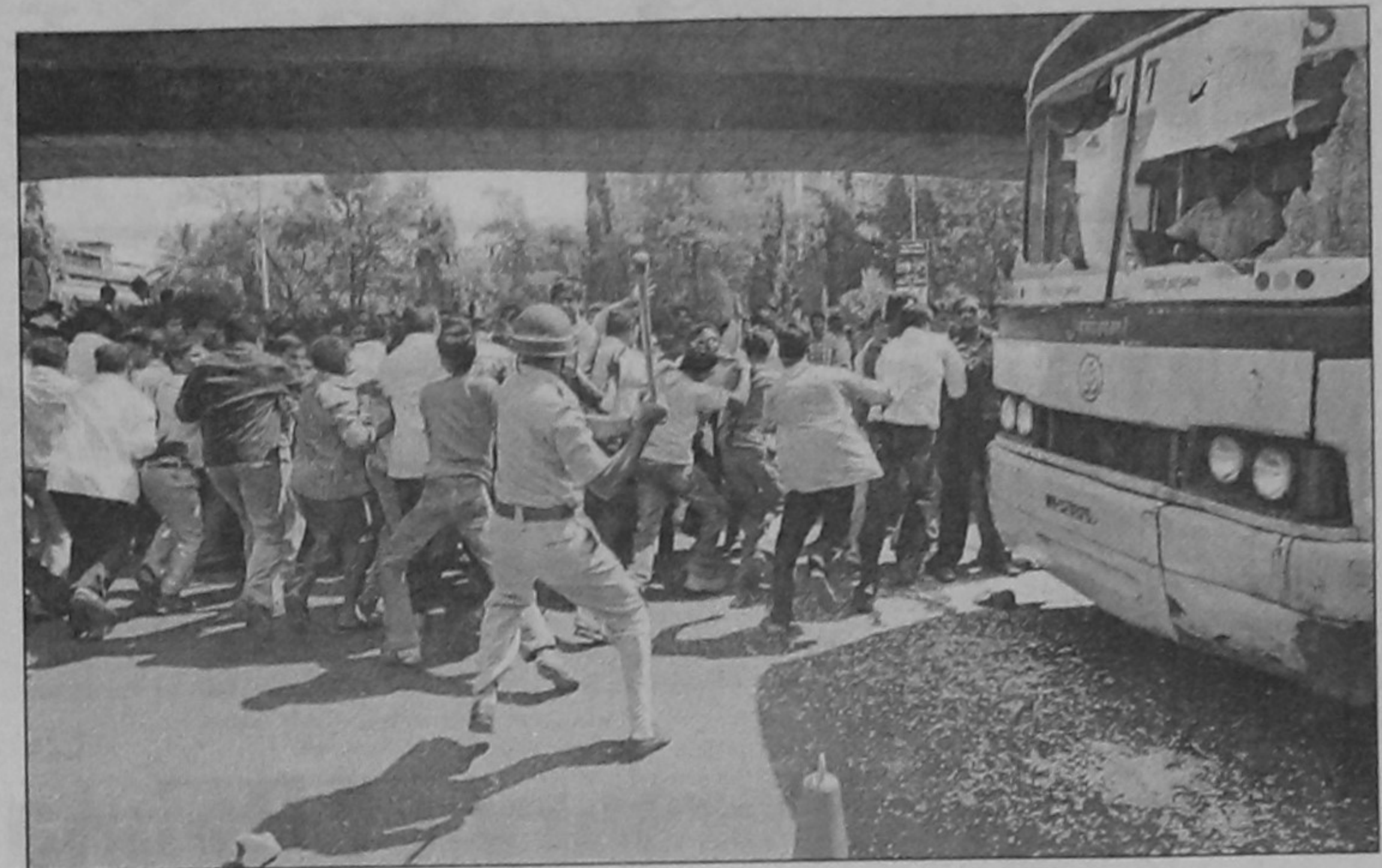
Sporadic incidents of stone pelting at municipal and private buses were reported here this morning following the arrest of MNS chief Raj Thackeray in Ratnagiri.

In Kothrud area, some alleged MNS activists damaged a company's bus that was taking its employees to workplace.

Elsewhere, a few Pune Municipal Transport (PMT) buses were stoned by miscreants, police said.

Meanwhile, police have picked up around 100 MNS activists, including some corporators since last night as a preventive measure.

In Nashik, MNS activists set ablaze a truck near PWD minister Chhagan Bhujaal's farm this morning and also damaged another truck at Vilholi-Phata area, police said.



An Indian policeman (C) charges his baton past a vandalised bus as he chases an unruly crowd of Maharashtra Navnirman Sena supporters hurling stones to protest the arrest of their firebrand political leader Raj Thackeray outside a city court in Mumbai yesterday.

15 killed as insurgents clash with Iraqi Sunni tribes

AFP, Hilla

At least 15 men were killed and 14 more wounded on Tuesday in fierce early morning clashes between insurgents and Sunni tribes in the central Iraq Shia province of Babil, police and a medic said.

The ferocious firefight came just two days ahead of a planned transfer of security control in Babil by US forces to Iraqi troops.

Police lieutenant Haider al-Lami from Hilla, the capital of Babil, said the battle broke out in Jurf al-Sakhr, a town located on the border of the Sunni Anbar province and Shia Babil, around 5.00am (0200GMT) and raged for about two hours.

Lami said the fighting pitted suspected insurgents against members of the Sunni tribes Al-Osan and Al-Ojan, who had formed anti-Qaeda militia to oust the jihadists from their areas.

Doctor Mohammed al-Shammari from the nearby town of Iskandariyah confirmed receiving the bodies of the victims.

Jurf al-Sakhr had been a violent town after insurgency broke out in Iraq following the US-led invasion of the country in 2003. But since the anti-Qaeda groups were formed late last year, a measure of stability was restored.



PHOTO: AP

This undated photo released by the University of Utah shows a trackway, or set of prints made by the same dinosaur, as it walked through a wet, sandy oasis some 190 million years ago in what is now the Coyote Buttes North area straddling the Utah-Arizona border.

Geologists discover 'dinosaur dance floor'

AP, Salt Lake City

Geologists say they have discovered prehistoric animal tracks so densely packed on a 3/4-acre site that they're calling it a "dinosaur dance floor."

The site along the Arizona-Utah state line offers a rich new set of clues about the lives of dinosaurs 190 million years ago.

Back then, large stretches of the West were a Sahara-like desert. More than 1,000 tracks were found in what would have been a watery oasis nestled among towering, wind-whipped sand dunes.

The footprints could provide fodder for researchers trying to understand dinosaurs that survived in what many considered a "vast, dry, uninhabitable desert," said Marjorie Chan, professor of geology at the University of Utah and one of the authors of a new study of the site.

"Maybe it really wasn't as lifeless as we think," Chan said Monday.

Top US official praises Pakistani army for combating militants

PTI, Islamabad

Top US diplomat Richard Boucher has lauded the efforts of the Pakistan armed forces to clear the restive areas in the NWFP and the tribal belt along the border with Afghanistan of Taliban and al-Qaeda militants.

Boucher, the Assistant Secretary of State, who held a series of meetings, including with President Asif Ali Zardari, Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani among others said Pakistan was showing resolve to combat the threat from militants.

Boucher's visit here comes amid strains between Washington and Islamabad over suspected American air strikes on militant

targets in Pakistani territory.

The strikes, which American officials in Pakistan and Afghanistan rarely confirm or deny has angered Pakistan's new leaders, who feel it will fan feelings in the region.

The diplomat also visited the NWFP and met governor Owais Ahmed Ghani yesterday. His visit comes as Pakistani forces used fighter jets and artillery to target militant strongholds in Bajaur and Swat valley tribal belt, killing six of them.

Pakistan has launched a major offensive since August against militants all along the border with Afghanistan and it claims to have killed more than 1000 militants in the operations.

'Nuclear incident would make 9/11 insignificant'

AFP, Sydney

The world is on the brink of an avalanche in the spread of devastating weaponry, a new global non-proliferation group warned yesterday, saying that a nuclear incident would dwarf the September 11 attacks.

The Middle East, particularly Iran, is a potential tipping point, according to Gareth Evans, co-chair of the newly formed International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament.

Evans, a former Australian foreign minister, said the world had

been "sleepwalking" on the issue of atomic weapons for a decade.

"The devastation that could be wreaked by one major nuclear weapons incident alone puts 9/11 and almost everything else (in) to the category of the insignificant," he said, referring to the attacks inflicted on the United States in 2001.

Evans was speaking as the commission, which was first proposed by Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd after a visit to the Japanese city of Hiroshima in June, entered the second and final day of its inaugural meeting in Sydney.



PHOTO: AFP

Democratic presidential nominee US Sen Barack Obama (D-IL) and Sen Hillary Clinton (D-NY) attend a campaign rally together at Amway Arena on Monday in Orlando, Florida. Obama continues to campaign against his challenger, Republican presidential nominee Sen John McCain (R-AZ) as Election Day draws near.

Political will for Afghan war 'wavering': US general

Attacks kill 3 Westerners, 5 Afghan children

AFP, London/Kabul

The failure of Nato member countries to send the troops they promised to Afghanistan shows a "wavering" political will that is hindering the mission's progress, a top US general warned here Monday.

General John Craddock, the supreme allied commander in Europe, added the war against Taliban insurgents could not be won by the military alone, but required a wider development and reconstruction effort that was currently "disjointed".

"A brief look at the will of our alliance in the mission in Afghanistan demonstrates some real shortcomings," he said in a lecture to the Royal United Services

Institute (RUSI) in London.

With the restrictions placed on Nato troops by their governments on where they could operate, and "our continual inability to fulfil our agreed upon statement of requirements in theatre, we are demonstrating a political will that is, in my judgment, sometimes wavering," Craddock said.

"It is this wavering political will that impedes operational progress and brings into question the relevance of the alliance here in the 21st century."

But he also warned force alone would not transform the country.

While the military could provide a safe and secure environment to deliver good governance, reconstruction and development, "for

this co-operative effort to succeed, we in the international community must come together as part of a truly comprehensive approach," he said.

"The current effort remains disjointed in time and space." Meanwhile, a British aid worker, two German soldiers and five Afghan children were killed in Afghanistan Monday in a day of bloodshed that highlights worsening security seven years after the ouster of the Taliban.

The Taliban, an extremist Islamic group that was in government between 1996 and 2001, claimed responsibility for the killings which come soon after a security group and the United Nations said attacks were at a high this year.

China releases list of wanted terror group leaders

AP, Beijing

Chinese police on Tuesday called on foreign nations to arrest and extradite eight alleged Islamic terror group leaders accused plotting attacks during the Beijing Olympics.

The eight men, all Chinese citizens, are believed to have financed, incited and organised a series of terrorist activities during and around the Aug. 8-24 games as part of an ongoing insurgency against Chinese rule in the country's traditionally Muslim west, said Public Security Ministry spokesman Wu Heping.

In brief comments during a news conference, Wu gave no information about the men's believed whereabouts, but called on foreign countries to arrest and extradite them to China to face justice.

Taliban 'order' mobile signals off in Ghazni

AFP, Kandahar

Afghanistan's insurgent Taliban rebels is taking longer than the central province of Ghazni on Tuesday to turn off their signal towers for 10 days or face a "reaction."

The Taliban leading council made the demand because Afghan and international military attacks, apparently launched on the basis of data from cell phones, had increased during the day, spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid told AFP.

Three of the country's four mobile phone networks were down in the province, suggesting the companies had complied. They could not be immediately reached for comment.

"We have banned cell phone facilities during the day now for 10 days. Anyone who violates this decision will face a Taliban reaction," Mujahid said.

Palin breaks with McCain on gay marriage

AP, New York

Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin says she supports a constitutional amendment banning gay marriage, a break with John McCain who has said he believes states should be left to define what marriage is.

In an interview with Christian Broadcasting Network, the Alaska governor said she had voted in 1998 for a state amendment banning same sex marriage and hoped to see a federal ban on such unions.

"I have voted along with the vast majority of Alaskans who had

the opportunity to vote to amend our Constitution defining marriage as between one man and one woman. I wish on a federal level that's where we would go. I don't support gay marriage," Palin said. She said she believed traditional marriage is the foundation for strong families.

McCain, an Arizona senator, is supporting a ballot initiative in his state this year that would ban gay marriage. But he has consistently and forcefully opposed a federal marriage amendment, saying it would usurp states' authority on such matters.

Governor Palin vetoed a bill that would have denied benefits to

the partners of gay state employees. In a debate with Democratic rival Joe Biden, Palin said she was "tolerant" of gays and said she supported certain legal protections for same-sex couples, like hospital visitation rights.

Biden, meanwhile, said during an appearance Monday on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show" that if he lived in California he would vote against a ballot measure that seeks to ban gay marriage. DeGeneres, who is gay and newlywed to actress Portia de Rossi, has urged Californians to reject Proposition 8.

"I think it's regressive," the Delaware senator said. "I think it's unfair, and so I vote 'no.'"

Long lines form as early voting begins in Florida

AP, Miami

Florida kicked off early voting on Monday, with record crowds heading to the polls and voters waiting hours to cast their ballots. Elections officials said the few reported problems were minor.

Final statewide numbers for ballots cast Monday won't be available until Tuesday, but counties large and small, traditionally Democrat and traditionally Republican, were reporting record turnout. The early voting sites will remain open two weeks until the weekend before Election Day.

"Lines are a sign of a healthy democracy, and certainly our democracy is healthy today," said Secretary of State Kurt Browning.

The Sunshine State is again key this election season, with a prize of 27 electoral votes. 10 percent of the 270 needed to clinch the election. The state's disputed election in 2000 gave the presidency to George W. Bush, and he captured the state in 2004. This year, Republican John McCain and Democrat Barack Obama are locked in a close race.

Registration numbers released Sunday show a 600,000-voter edge for Democrats over Republicans in Florida: 4.7 mil-

lion versus 4.1 million, with 2.1 million people identifying with neither party.

The McCain campaign acknowledged it expected more Democrats than Republicans to vote early, but says GOP voters have requested 295,000 absentee ballots statewide compared with 199,000 Democrats.

Underscoring how important the state is, Obama campaigned in Tampa, while former Democratic rival Hillary Rodham Clinton held an event for him in Fort Lauderdale. They planned to appear together at an evening rally in Orlando.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents stand in line to on the first day of early voting at the Lauderhill Mall on Monday in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Thousands of voters stood in line, some for hours, as Florida kicked off the state's early voting.

Lankan battle against Tigers delayed for civilians

AFP, Colombo

A massive offensive against Tamil Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) over the weekend.

The defence ministry said troops had edged closer to the rebels' northern capital of Kilinochchi but battles since Saturday had left 33 soldiers dead, three missing in action and 48 injured.

Rajapakse accused the LTTE of using "human shields".

"We have directed the armed forces to refrain from inflicting any harm, even a scratch, to the innocent civilians who are being utilised as human shields by the terrorists," he said.

"We are proud to have an army which is complying and carrying out their humanitarian operations accordingly."

Government forces say they are about 10 to 15 kilometres (six to 10 miles) south-west of Kilinochchi,

or injured in fighting with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) over the weekend.

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Government forces say they are about 10 to 15 kilometres (six to 10 miles) south-west of Kilinochchi,

the administrative capital of the LTTE, but had breached the final major defences of the town.

Neighbouring India, which itself has a large Tamil population, has expressed "grave concern" over the plight of tens of thousands of Sri Lankan Tamil civilians caught up in fighting in the north of the island.

New Delhi has told Colombo a military solution to the long-running conflict is impossible.

But Rajapakse told local newspaper editors Tuesday that there was no pressure from India to halt the ongoing military operations.

"In the telephone conversation with the Indian Prime Minister (Manmohan Singh, last week) there was no reference to the stopping of military operations against the terrorism of the LTTE," his office said in a statement.



PHOTO: AFP

An Indian Christian family looks at their damaged hut on their return after close to two months in hiding at a village in Phiringia in Orissa's Kandhamal district, some 350kms southwest of Bhubaneswar yesterday.