

The new king of Bhutan, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck (L) takes part in a religious ceremony moments before his coronation in Thimphu yesterday. The isolated Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan crowned a new king, placing a charismatic Oxford-educated bachelor as head of state of the world's newest democracy.

Pakistan swaps four Taliban for 10 troops

AFP, Peshawar
Pakistani authorities yesterday freed an important Taliban commander and three other rebels after the militants released 10 security officials in a northwestern town, local officials said.
The swap was negotiated by tribal elders in restive Hangu district, local government official Khan Afzal said.
He said the authorities released Pakistani Taliban commander Maulana Rafiuddin with three of his men after the Taliban agreed to release three army soldiers and seven paramilitary troops.
Hangu district, which has a history of violence between minority Shiite and majority Sunni sects, is close to tribal areas bordering Afghanistan where pro-Taliban militants are active.
Pakistan is facing growing unrest, with Islamist violence on

the rise involving suicide attacks, bomb blasts and abductions targeting security officials.
Rafiuddin was arrested in July after security forces launched an operation in Hangu.
Officials at the time described him as a deputy of the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan's Baitullah Mehsud.
"We negotiated the deal with Taliban and the authorities," Afzal said.
Rafiuddin was granted bail by a local court in September but the authorities kept him under detention under new charges, residents said.
His arrest triggered trouble in the area and Taliban militants surrounded a police station and whisked away security officials.
The release was negotiated after tribal elders said Rafiuddin's release would help restore peace in the troubled region.

No ME peace deal in 2008

Admits Rice

AFP, Tel Aviv
US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice arrived in Israel on Thursday in her latest bid to push Middle East peace, but she admitted the sides may not achieve the goal of a deal by the year's end.
Rice stressed the US-backed peace process will continue after George W. Bush hands over the presidency to Barack Obama on January 20.
"it is our expectation that the Annapolis process has laid groundwork which should make possible the establishment of a Palestinian state when political circumstances

permit," Rice told reporters aboard her plane.
"I think that whatever happens by the end of the year, you've got a firm foundation for quickly moving forward to a conclusion," said Rice who played a key role in relaunching the peace process at a November 2007 conference in Annapolis, Maryland.
She admitted the peace process is affected by the decision to hold February 20 elections in Israel, which is now under a caretaker government.
"Obviously Israel is in the middle of elections and that is a

constraint on the ability of any government to conclude what is the core conflict for Israel and the Palestinians... But I think we can sustain momentum," Rice said.
During her visit to the region, her 19th in two years, Rice will hold talks with Israeli and Palestinian leaders and attend a meeting in Egypt of the Middle East Quartet of peace mediators.
Rice also hinted she wishes the sides to define the progress made so far in the talks.
"I think at some point it will be important to work to wrap all of that work up, one way or another."

Lanka unveils largest war budget

AFP, Colombo
Sri Lanka yesterday unveiled its biggest ever war budget, imposed a new tax to boost nationwide rebuilding efforts and downgraded its economic growth forecast to a four-year low.
President Mahinda Rajapakse, who is also the commander-in-chief and finance minister, announced a one percent tax on most goods and services in a bid to fund war-related reconstruction expenses.
The president proposed "a Nation Building Tax as a social contribution towards welfare of security forces, and to rebuild communities and infrastructure facilities affected by terrorism," he told parliament.
The government is fighting the

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who have been trying to carve out a homeland for minority Tamils, in a conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives on both sides since 1972.
Sri Lankan troops are currently locked in a fierce offensive to dismantle the Tigers' main stronghold in the north of the island.
Rajapakse's new budget will see defence expenses rise to 1.6 billion dollars in calendar year 2009, up from 1.5 billion dollars in 2008.
The president said Sri Lanka needed to address the consequences of "terrorist activities" that had destroyed hospitals, schools, roads and railways in the past three decades.
"The time has now come to rebuild these. As such we should accord priority for development

and welfare, whilst seeking a political solution," he said.
He announced increased taxes on imported food, electrical and household goods. He also raised import and export cargo tax from three percent to five percent.
Official figures showed that state expenses for 2009 will increase 15 percent to 15.6 billion dollars, nearly twice the expected government revenue of 7.92 billion dollars.
The government hopes to bridge the deficit with local and foreign loans.
Rajapakse said the island's 2008 economic growth was downgraded to 6.5 percent, down from an earlier projected figure of 7.0 percent. The island's economy grew by 6.8 percent in 2007.

The Kingdom of Bhutan

Infographic titled 'The Kingdom of Bhutan' showing population (670,000), area (47,000 sq km), economy (GDP US\$1.10 billion), and politics (King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck). Includes a map of Bhutan and a pie chart showing economic sectors: Services (42%), Agriculture and mining (24%), and Manufacturing, power, construction (34%).

7 more Afghan civilians killed in US-led strike

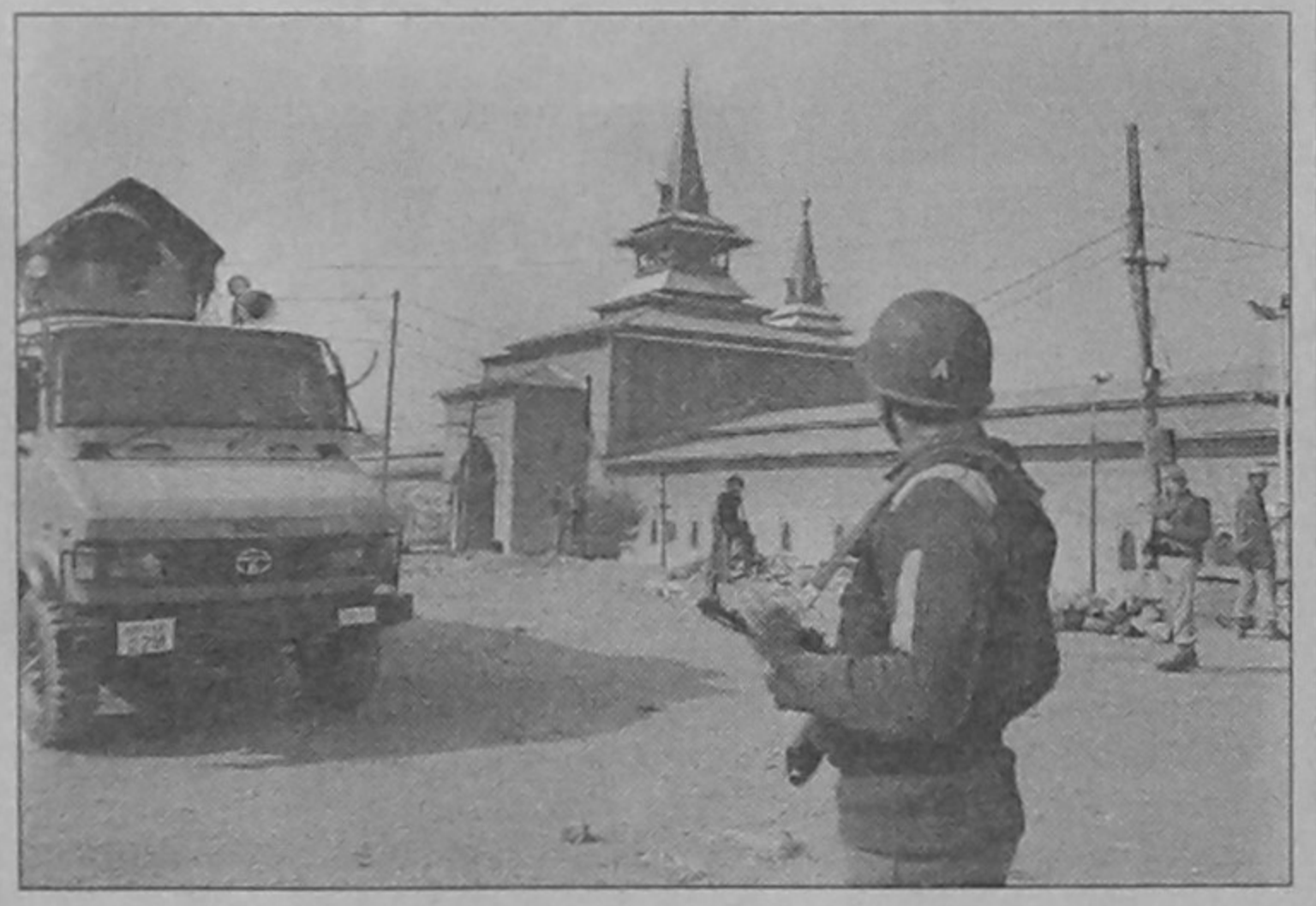
AP, Kabul
An airstrike in northwest Afghanistan killed 13 Taliban militants and seven civilians yesterday, Afghan officials said, a day after President Hamid Karzai demanded a halt to civilian casualties in US-led coalition operations.
The United States has conducted missile strikes in Afghanistan and in Pakistan's tribal areas along the border strikes US Gen. David H Petraeus said Thursday he killed three of the top 20 extremist leaders there.
The strike came just days after another coalition airstrike in the south of the country killed 37 people, mostly women and children.

The Thursday incident happened in the Ghormach district of Badkhis province, where a three-hour long clash between the militants and Afghan and foreign troops preceded an airstrike that hit the house of a provincial council member, said deputy governor Abdul Ghani Saburi.
Thirteen militants and seven civilians, including two women and two children, were killed in the attack, he said.
A statement from the US military in Afghanistan said they are aware of "possible civilian casualties that may have occurred while responding to an insurgent ambush on a route clearance patrol in the Ghormach district of Badkhis province."

United Nations World Food Programme Dhaka, Bangladesh. Announcement for Developing Recruitment Roster for Immediate and Future WFP Vacancies. The United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) Bangladesh will develop a Roster of qualified, energetic, and experienced Bangladeshi nationals who have experience in Emergency Relief operations, Food/Cash for Work, Nutrition interventions etc. and are interested in field based monitoring and reporting activities.

Putin preparing Kremlin comeback next year

AFP, Moscow
President Dmitry Medvedev's proposal to extend the presidential term in Russia paves the way for Vladimir Putin's return to the presidency in 2009, a newspaper reported Thursday, citing Kremlin sources.
The Vedomosti daily cited a source close to the presidential administration as saying that the proposal, made by Medvedev in a speech on Wednesday, would lead to elections and was part of a broader plan for Putin's comeback.



Indian Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel enforce a curfew outside the Jamia Masjid grand mosque in downtown Srinagar yesterday to prevent a rally planned by separatists. Thousands of troops were deployed in Indian-held Kashmir to prevent a protest rally called by separatist leaders against Indian rule in the Muslim-majority region.

Troops deployed in Kashmir to scuttle anti-India protests

AFP, Srinagar
Thousands of troops were deployed in Indian Kashmir Thursday to prevent a protest rally called by separatist leaders against New Delhi's rule in the Muslim-majority region.
Heavy deployment has been made in Srinagar and other major towns of the valley to foil the separatist rally, a police official told AFP.
Protesters had planned to march to an important mosque in downtown Srinagar, but were met with tight security with heavily-armed police manning street corners and checking vehicles.
"The Indian police are not allowing anyone out of their homes," said local resident Javid Ahmad, who lives near the

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