

Palestinian children watch the arrival of fuel trucks through the Nahal Oz terminal into the Gaza Strip yesterday. The spectre of a military invasion loomed large over Gaza Friday as militants fired another volley of rockets despite Israeli warnings that failure to stop the attacks would lead to bloodshed.

Israel set for Gaza invasion after rocket barrage

AP, Jerusalem

Israel moved closer to invading Gaza, saying Thursday it had wrapped up preparations for a broad offensive after Palestinian militants fired about 100 rockets and mortar shells across the border in two days.

Israel's foreign minister brushed off a call for restraint from Egypt's president, and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert made a direct appeal to Gaza's people to pressure their leaders to stop the barrages. But the attacks showed no signs of ending. By nightfall, three rockets and 15 mortar shells had exploded in Israel.

Olmert issued his appeal in a rare interview with the Arabic language satellite channel al-Arabiya, saying Israel would not hesitate to respond with force if the attacks continued.

"I am telling them now, it

may be the last minute, I'm telling them stop it. We are stronger," he said.

Thursday's rocket fire was far less than the barrage of 80 rockets the previous day, and there were no reports of injuries. But Israeli leaders said the continued fire the most intense since Egypt brokered a cease-fire last June was unacceptable.

One of the mortar shells landed at Israel's passenger crossing with Gaza just as a group of Palestinian Christians was going through on their way to the West Bank town of Bethlehem for Christmas celebrations, the military said. Another rocket exploded after nightfall in an industrial park south of the coastal city of Ashkelon, police said.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak invited Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni to Cairo to discuss the possibility of renewing the truce, which

expired Friday. But by the time Livni arrived, she was in no mood to discuss a cease-fire, and she dismissed Mubarak's pleas for restraint.

"Enough is enough," she said afterward. "When there's shooting, there's a response. Any state would react that way."

In Israel, Defence Minister Ehud Barak warned that "whoever harms the citizens and soldiers of Israel will pay a heavy price."

He did not elaborate. But defence officials, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were discussing classified information, said the Israeli operation would likely begin with surgical airstrikes against rocket launchers and continue with a land invasion. Harsh weather conditions are hampering visibility and complicating air force missions, so the operation won't be launched until the skies clear, they added.

ANTI-PIRACY OPERATION

3 Chinese navy ships leave for Somalia

AP, GUANGZHOU, China

Chinese warships armed with special forces, guided missiles and helicopters set sail Friday for anti-piracy duty off Somalia, the first time the communist nation has sent ships on a mission that could involve fighting so far beyond its territorial waters.

The three vessels two destroyers and a supply ship may increase worries about growing Chinese military power. The mission will also challenge China's ability to cooperate with other naval forces patrolling the Gulf of Aden, one of the world's busiest seaways.

US coalition kills 11 Taliban in operation

AP, Kabul

The US coalition said Friday its forces killed 11 Taliban militants, including the leader of a bomb-making cell, during an operation in southern Afghanistan.

The raid in Kandahar province on Thursday targeted a bomb-maker responsible for roadside bomb attacks that killed Nato soldiers, the coalition said in a statement.

Militants barricaded themselves inside a home during the raid and opened fire on the coalition forces. After giving time to allow women and children to leave, the coalition forces fired on the militants with guns and grenades, it said.

One woman who remained in the building was wounded in the leg. She was evacuated to a coalition medical facility, it said.

AIRPORT SECURITY

India issues instructions to state govts, airports

PTI, New Delhi

With heightened terror threat to the aviation sector, a series of instructions has been issued to all state governments, airports and agencies concerned across the country by the Civil Aviation Ministry, which has asked for their strict compliance.

"The Civil Aviation Ministry has circulated some instructions to all the airports," Home Minister P Chidambaram told reporters, but did not elaborate.

All airports across the country have been on a state of high alert since the Mumbai terror attacks, with Civil Aviation Secretary M Madhavan Nambiar writing to state governments and union territory administrations to secure all airports and airstrips under their jurisdiction.

There are about 340 airports and airstrips in the country, with many of them non-functional. A large number of these airstrips are of the Second World War vintage.

8 dead as gun-toting Santa opens fire, kills self in US

AFP, Los Angeles

A man dressed in a Santa Claus costume burst into a Christmas Eve party at his former in-laws' house and opened fire, killing at least eight people before taking his own life, US officials said yesterday.

Bruce Pardo, 45, who reportedly had been embroiled in a bitter divorce with his ex-wife, knocked on the door of her parents' home in the quiet Los Angeles suburb of Covina and launched the assault just before midnight, police lieutenant Pat Buchanan said. An eight-year-old girl who answered the door was shot in the face before Pardo stormed the home in Covina, 37km east of Los Angeles, and began spraying revellers with bullets fired from a semi-automatic handgun.

No war with India: Pak PM

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Islamabad

Pakistan on Thursday reduced its rhetoric a notch, with Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani saying "there is absolutely no question of war" with India.

At the same time, the authorities arrested an "Indian spy" for a terror attack in Lahore that killed a woman.

Christmas Day newspapers hailed Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh for his comments on Tuesday that there was "no question of war" with Pakistan despite the Mumbai terror attacks for which New Delhi has blamed Pakistani terrorists, triggering tensions between the two countries.

But amid reports of Pakistani troop deployment along the border with India, Pakistan Prime Minister Gilani told reporters that his coalition government desired "excellent relations" with its larger neighbour.

"There is no question of war. There is absolutely no question of war," he said in Lahore.

At the same time, Gilani urged the world to convince India to defuse the situation that followed the audacious Nov 26-29 Mumbai terror attack that left at least 170 people dead, including 26 foreigners.

"We had good relations with India. I assure you that we want excellent relations with India. We want to maintain good relations with India," said the prime minister. "In my assessment, there will be no war."

The authorities, meanwhile, claimed to have arrested an Indian spy who they said was involved in Wednesday's blast in Lahore that killed a woman and injured four people.

An interior ministry official said on Thursday that the man, who worked in the Indian high commission in Britain for about three years, was caught on the strength of secret information.

The alleged Indian was identified as Satish Anand Sharma, who was said to be living in Lahore's interior city for one year as Munir Ahmad. He allegedly planted the bomb.

"During initial investigation he has admitted the crime which he carried out

at the behest of an Indian intelligence agency," the official said, in what appeared to be a tit-for-tat following the much publicised arrest of a Pakistani soldier in Jammu and Kashmir.

Sharma has allegedly identified three other Indian "spies" in Pakistan and Pakistani security agencies were reportedly trying to nab them.

The police claimed to have recovered fake national identity cards, letters and other devices from Sharma.

The Pakistani media has, however, hailed Manmohan Singh's declaration that there was "no question of war" post Mumbai.

"Manmohan Singh's statement... will have allayed some of the fears that the tension on our eastern border may spiral out of control," Dawn said in an editorial headlined "The right response".

Holding that the Mumbai attacks were an "escalation in tactics" to put pressure on the Pakistan-India peace process, Dawn said: "With the composite dialogue put on hold by India, the terrorists have already partially achieved their goal."



A Kashmiri demonstrator (L) hurls a brick towards Indian police during a protest in downtown Srinagar yesterday. Militant violence in India-administered Kashmir has fallen to an all time low, Indian police said, while noting that more than 800 militants are still operating in the state.

Kashmir violence at all time low Says Indian police

AFP, Srinagar

Militant violence in Kashmir has fallen to an all time low, Indian police said yesterday, while noting that more than 800 Islamist militants still operated in the state.

The violence that has wracked Kashmir for nearly 20 years started to decline after India and Pakistan, which have rival claims to the disputed region, launched a peace process in January 2004.

The number of violent incidents in 2008 fell by about 40 percent to 700 compared with last year's figure of 1,090, Indian Kashmir police chief Kuldeep Khuda said in a statement.

Khuda described the decline as "phenomenal". The peace process has been frozen since last month's attacks in Mumbai, which New Delhi

blamed on the Lashkar-e-Taiba -- a Pakistan-based militant outfit fighting Indian rule in Kashmir.

Khuda said more than 800 militants were still active in Kashmir, including 200 "foreigners" - a reference to those of Pakistani, Arab and Afghan origin.

"Some of them are even members of Lashkar-e-Taiba," he said. Last year, police estimated the number of active militants at 1,500.

Pakistan denies Indian allegations that it arms and funds the insurgents. The police statement said Indian troops shot dead 350 militants this year, including 102 "top ranking commanders".

Meanwhile, police used teargas and batons Friday to disperse hundreds of protesters in the Kashmiri summer capital Srinagar.

Thousands gather at tomb of slain Benazir

AFP, Karachi

Tens of thousands of Pakistanis massed yesterday near the tomb of slain former premier Benazir Bhutto on the eve of ceremonies marking the first anniversary of her killing, officials said.

More than 35,000 people had already arrived in rural southern Pakistan ahead of Saturday's ceremonies at the Benazir Bhutto family mausoleum in Garhi Khuda Bakhsh, Pakistan People's Party (PPP) spokesman Ijaz Durrani told AFP.

People were travelling by train, bus, car, bicycle and even on foot to reach the site, he said. Hundreds of thousands were expected by Saturday.

5,000 officials punished for corruption in China

AP, Beijing

Nearly 5,000 higher-level Chinese government officials were punished for corruption over the past year, state media reported yesterday.

The officials all above the county-head level were involved in corruption, bribery, acting against the public interest and other violations of discipline or the law said Gan Yisheng, deputy head of the Communist Party's Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, according to the official Xinhua News Agency.

In the worst cases, a total of 801 officials were legally prosecuted for crimes, he said. He vowed to step up anti-graft efforts and "win trust from the people with actual results."

Russia selling missiles to Libya, Syria

AFP, Moscow

Russia has begun to fulfil a 250-million-dollar contract to deliver surface-to-air missiles to seven countries including Libya, Syria and Venezuela, the Vedomosti business daily reported yesterday.

Russia will also deliver the S-125 Pechora-2M missile batteries to Egypt, Myanmar, Vietnam and Turkmenistan under the contract, the newspaper said, citing a source in the state-owned Russian Technologies corporation.

Asia at risk of era of mega-disasters

AFP, Sydney

The Asia-Pacific faces an era of large-scale natural disasters, which could kill up to one million people at a time, with Indonesia, the Philippines and China most at risk, an Australian report said yesterday.

The Sydney Morning Herald cited a scientific report which found that the impact of natural events such as earthquakes and tsunamis would in coming years be amplified by rising popula-

tions and climate change.

The paper said the report, by government body Geoscience Australia, had prompted Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to create a joint disaster training and research centre.

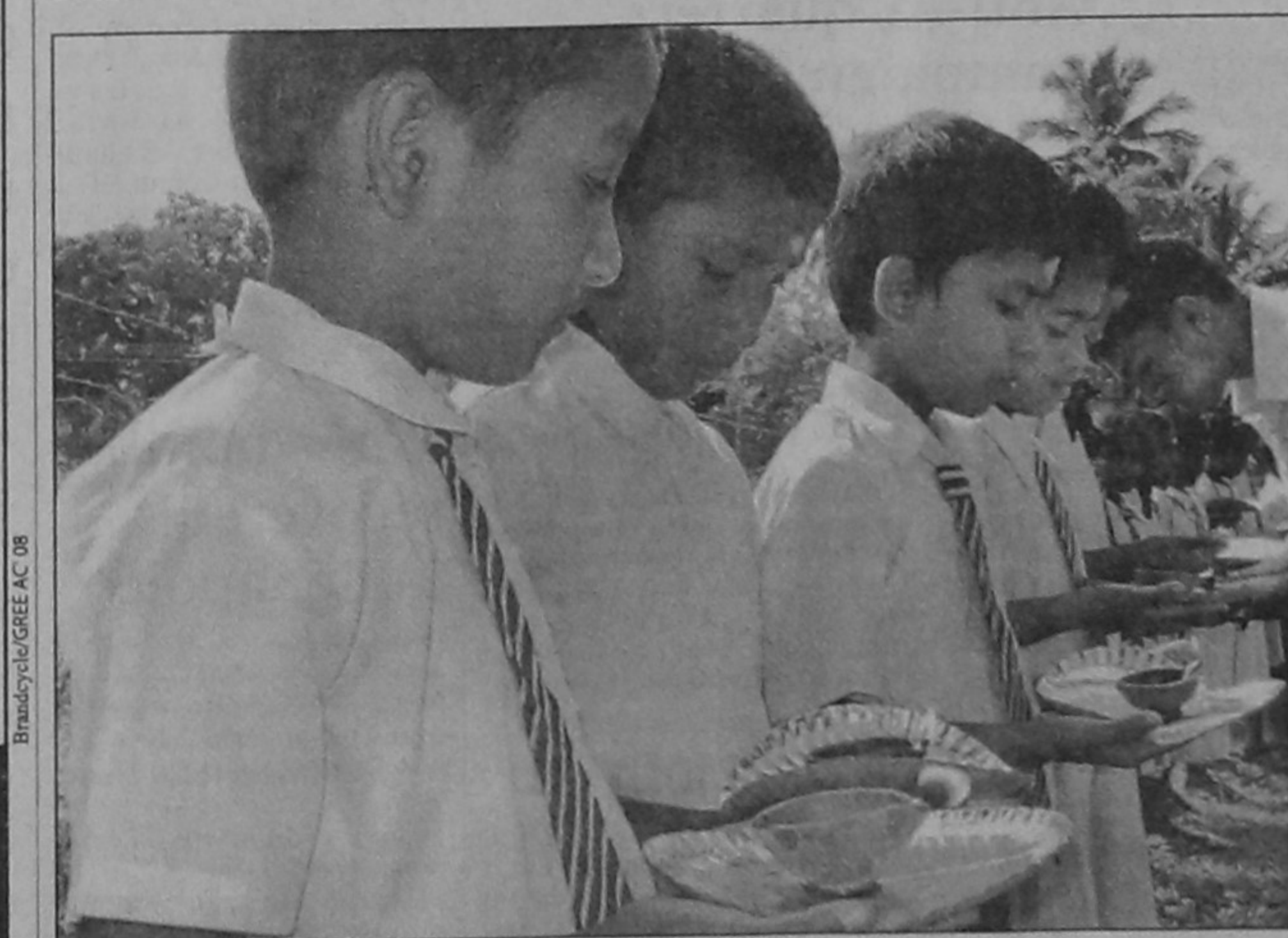
Geoscience Australia could not be reached for comment Friday.

The Herald said the Australian scientists had analysed the likelihood of earthquakes, cyclones, tsuna-

mis and volcanoes occurring in the region and then estimated the likely casualty toll.

The study found that cities in the Himalayan belt, China, Indonesia and the Philippines could experience earthquakes where the death toll could top one million.

Indonesia and the Philippines were also at risk of volcanoes, which could affect hundreds of thousands of people while a low-lying country like Bangladesh could be ravaged by tsunamis, floods and cyclones.



Sri Lankan Tamil students hold oil lamps as part of remembrance ceremonies in the northern town of Vavuniya yesterday to mark the fourth anniversary of the Asian tsunami that killed an estimated 31,000 people in the island.

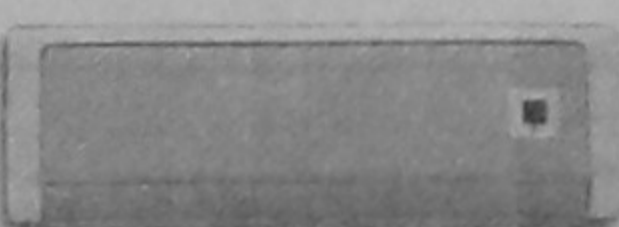
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