

Indian general elections in early April

AFP, New Delhi

India is to hold general elections in early April, an Election Commission official told AFP yesterday.

The world's largest democracy must go to the polls before May, the end of the five-year mandate of the Congress party-led government, and the official confirmed the vote would be "in the first week or second week of April."

"These dates are decided by the commission in consideration with the government," said the official, who asked not to be named.

Rahul Gandhi, the 38-year-old son of slain former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi and Congress party leader Sonia Gandhi, is expected to take centre stage during the election campaign.

Indian army chief confirms Pak troop movements

Rival nations managing tension, says US

AFP, New Delhi

The head of India's army on Wednesday confirmed that Pakistan has redeployed troops along the two countries' tense border but said he regarded war as a "last resort."

"The aspect of some (Pakistani) troops coming towards the east... we are aware of it. That has happened. They have come to the eastern border of Pakistan with India," General Deepak Kapoor told a news conference.

"However, having known this fact, let me assure you that the Indian army has factored this in its planning," he added. "That is not something which is a cause of concern for us."

Tensions between the two nuclear-

armed rivals dramatically escalated after India accused "official agencies" in Pakistan of involvement in the November 26 Mumbai attacks in which 174 people, including nine gunmen, were killed.

Pakistan has strongly denied that accusation. Senior defence and security officials in Pakistan had said late last month that troops were being moved from the northwest tribal areas bordering Afghanistan, hotbeds of Taliban and al-Qaeda activity, to the eastern border near India.

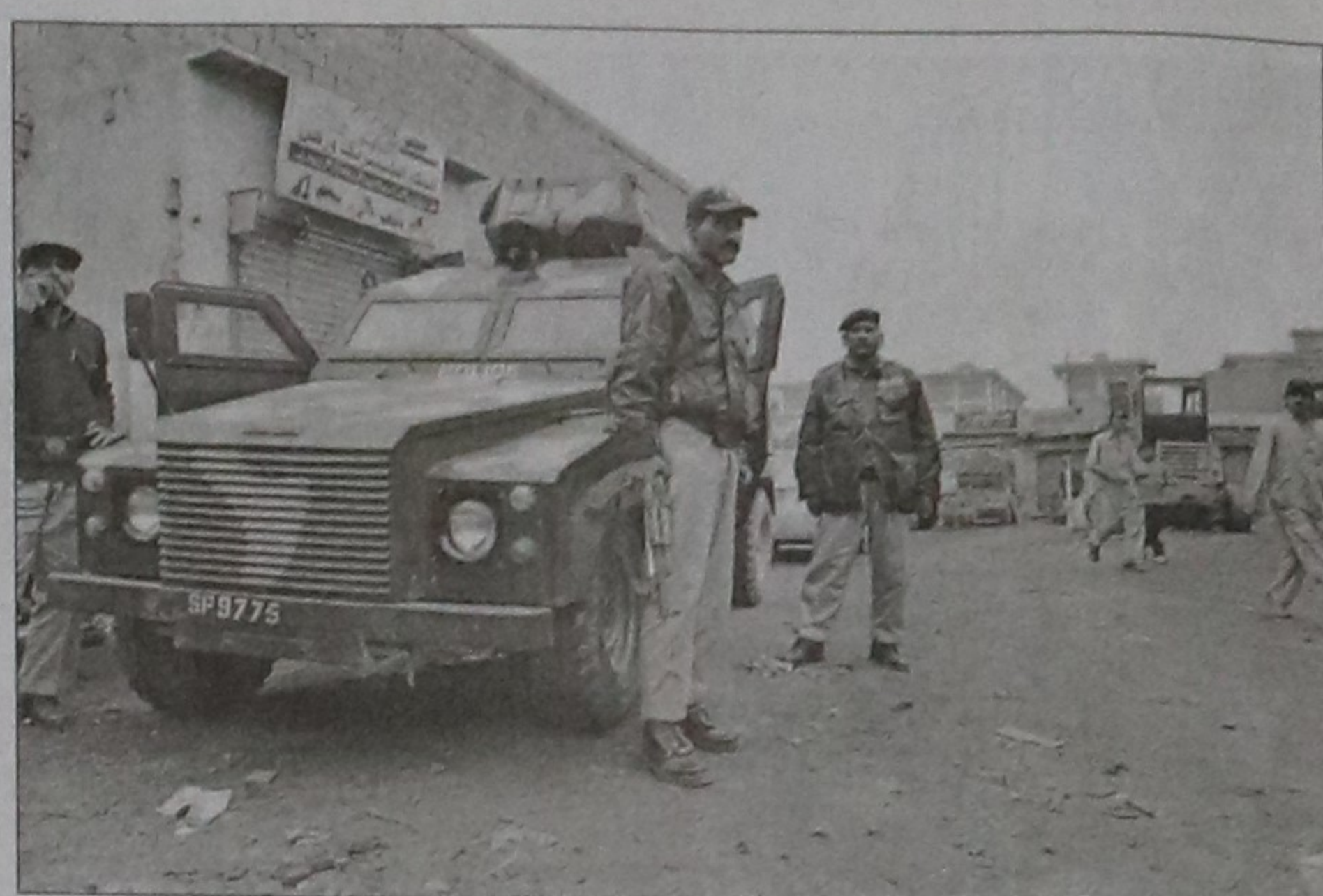
The chief of India's 1.3-million-strong army conceded that tensions between the two countries, who have fought three wars since their 1947 independence, were high.

He did not say if India had also bolstered its troops along the already heavily militarised border, including the tense Line of Control that divides the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir.

"There has been a larger amount of tensions since 26/11 because we do feel that the perpetrators came from Pakistani soil," Kapoor said.

Meanwhile, the US State Department said the two nations had so far managed to control tensions over the Mumbai attacks, despite the deployment of troops to their common border.

The nuclear-armed South Asian neighbours -- which have fought two of their three wars since independence from Britain over Kashmir -- have said they do not want to go to war again.



Pakistani policemen stand guard at the site where a gunbattle raged between police and militants in Karachi yesterday. Security forces in Karachi arrested about a dozen militants after a pre-dawn raid on their hideout in which two policemen were killed.

Afghan general among 13 killed in army chopper crash

AFP, Herat/Kabul

An Afghan National Army (ANA) helicopter crashed yesterday in western Afghanistan, killing the top general for the region and a dozen other people on board, defence officials said.

Two Nato soldiers helping to fight a Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan were killed in a "hostile incident" in the south of the country, the alliance's multinational force said Thursday.

The International Security Assistance Force (Isaf) did not give the soldiers' nationalities or say how they had died late Wednesday.

"Two Isaf servicemen were killed yesterday evening in a hostile incident in southern Afghanistan," it said in a statement.

"We will continue to fight for the cause for which they made the ultimate sacrifice," Isaf spokesman Brigadier General Richard Blanchette said in the statement.

The helicopter crashed in bad weather in the Adrasikan district of Herat province, about 80 kilometres (50 miles) south of Herat city, officials said.

The delegation had been en route to neighbouring Farah province to visit an army base, they said.

Qaeda remains 'number one threat' to US: Obama

AFP, Washington

President-elect Barack Obama said Wednesday that al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden remain the "number one threat" to US security, after a new voice recording emerged from the terror group's leader.

"Bin Laden and al-Qaeda are our number one threat when it comes to American security," Obama told reporters, after the recording warned the president-elect of new fronts in bin Laden's self-styled holy war against Western interests.

"We're going to do everything in our power to make sure that they cannot create safe havens that can attack Americans."



British Foreign Minister David Miliband speaks at a press conference in Mumbai yesterday. Miliband called on Pakistan to show "zero tolerance" towards militant groups based in the country that have been blamed for the Mumbai terror attacks.

'War on terror' was wrong Says British Foreign Secy Miliband

AFP, London

British Foreign Secretary David Miliband on Thursday delivered a sharp critique of outgoing US President George W. Bush's foreign policy, declaring the concept of a "war on terror" was "mistaken."

Speaking in India at one of the hotels targeted in the militant attacks on Mumbai, Miliband distanced the British government from the Bush administration shortly before Barack Obama takes over the White House.

"For a couple of years now the British government has used neither the idea nor the phrase 'war on terror,'" he said.

"The reason is that ultimately the notion is misleading and mistaken. Historians will judge whether it has done more harm than good. But we need to move on to meet the challenges we face."

Miliband said that the phrase "war on terror" had successfully "captured the gravity of the threats we face."

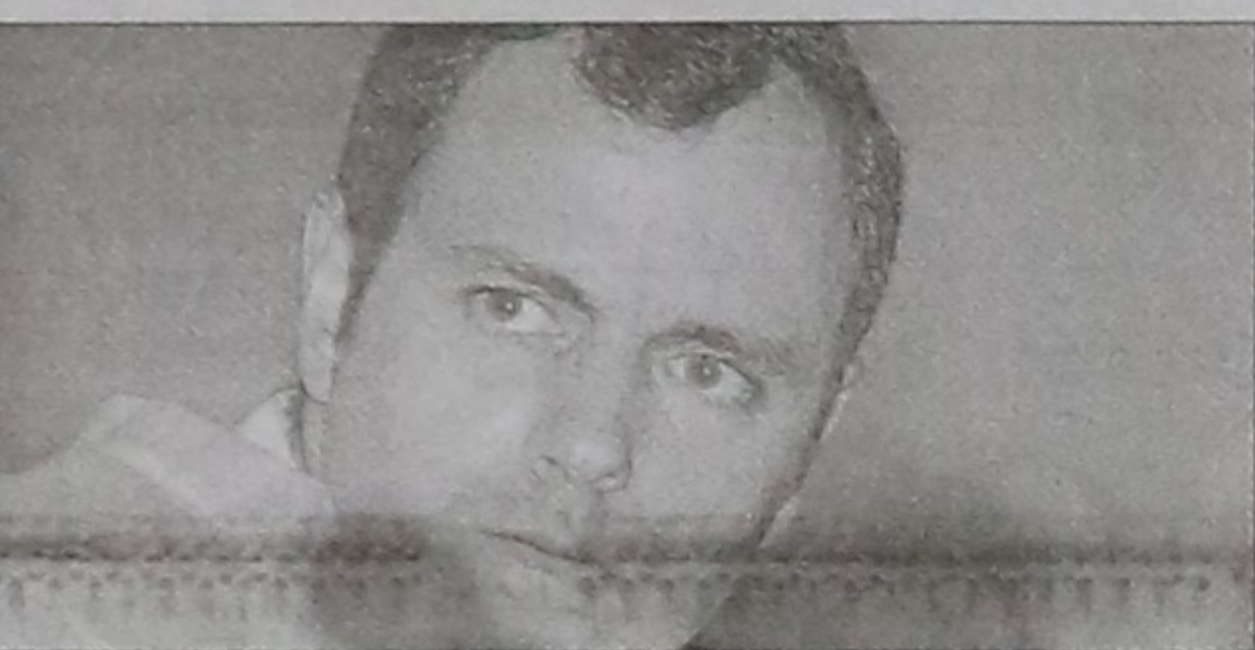
"We must respond to terrorism by championing the rule of law, not subordinating it, for it is the cornerstone of the democratic society," he said ahead of Obama's inauguration on Tuesday.

Miliband emphasised that Britain was at risk of attack from Islamic extremists similar to those who struck Mumbai in November, killing 165 people.

"It is a big issue for us in Britain too, because the majority of terror plots that Britain faces are linked back to Pakistan," he said.

In 2005, 52 people were killed when four Islamists -- motivated in part by Britain's close involvement in the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq -- blew themselves up on London's public transport network.

Copycat attacks were thwarted two weeks later. Earlier in his visit, Miliband said Pakistan must act against militants based on its soil, including the Lashkar-e-Taiba group that is accused by India of training, equipping and financing the Mumbai gunmen.



Newly elected Chief Minister of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir Omar Abdullah addresses a press conference in Srinagar yesterday urging the world community to step-in and help towards removing tensions between India and Pakistan.

Troops capture LTTE airstrip

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan troops have captured another airstrip used by Tamil Tiger guerrillas as ground battles escalated across the troubled region, the defence ministry said yesterday.

The makeshift jungle runway is the fifth of its type to be overrun by government soldiers, who are rapidly advancing on areas in the north once controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

the ministry said.

It said the air strip at Iranamadu, south of the Tamil Tigers' former political capital of Kilinochchi, was protected by bunkers and trenches. However none of the light planes used by the LTTE were recovered.

The Tigers are believed to have five Czech-built Zlin-143 aircraft, smuggled onto the island in pieces and re-assembled. The guerrillas last launched an air attack early in September, when they bombed a military base.

Military spokesman Brigadier Udaya Nanayakkara said troops on Thursday captured another village from the Tigers.

"Security forces took control of Dharmapuram village and it is an area where the military had not set foot before," Nanayakkara said.

The air force said it had also carried out three bombing raids in the Mullaitivu region Thursday in support of advancing ground troops.

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