

Lanka army nears last LTTE hideout

23 militants surrender, 12 killed

THE HINDUSTAN TIMES, PTI, Colombo

Making a final push to overrun the last patch of LTTE-held territory, Sri Lankan forces yesterday captured strategic Vayarmadam area and encircled remaining six sq km strip of land which is the possible hideout of LTTE Supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran and his top aides.

"Sri Lankan soldiers have liberated Vayarmadam area and so far rescued 500 civilians held hostage by LTTE from there," the defence ministry said today.

Meanwhile, in yet another blow to beleaguered LTTE, 23 Tamil Tigers manning the rebels' defence line yesterday deserted the group and surrendered to the Sri Lankan army.

"As many as 23 LTTE cadres have surrendered so far this morning. They dressed themselves up as civilians and moved towards the army to surrender," Sri Lankan military spokesman Udaya Nanayakkara told PTI.

According to the defence

sources, Army Commandos and Special Forces soldiers backed by infantrymen of 10 Sri Lanka Light Infantry and 12 Gemunu Watch last evening entered into Vayarmadam area, located just six km from Vellamullivaikkal, the last remaining LTTE hideout.

"Troops declared the area fully secured this morning," the ministry said.

Meanwhile, LTTE's political head B Nadesan has denied the charges that his group was forcibly recruiting children as fighters to confront the government forces.

"LTTE political head B Nadesan has categorically denied recruitment and arming children as young as 12 to fight alongside the Tigers as alleged by news reports citing the UN," the pro-rebel Tamilnet website said.

The UN Colombo office accusation coincides with the visit of the Emergency Relief Coordinator of the UN and Under-Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs John

Meanwhile, military spokesman Udaya Nanayakkara said, "We expect

this to be the beginning and more LTTE rebels are expected to give themselves up."

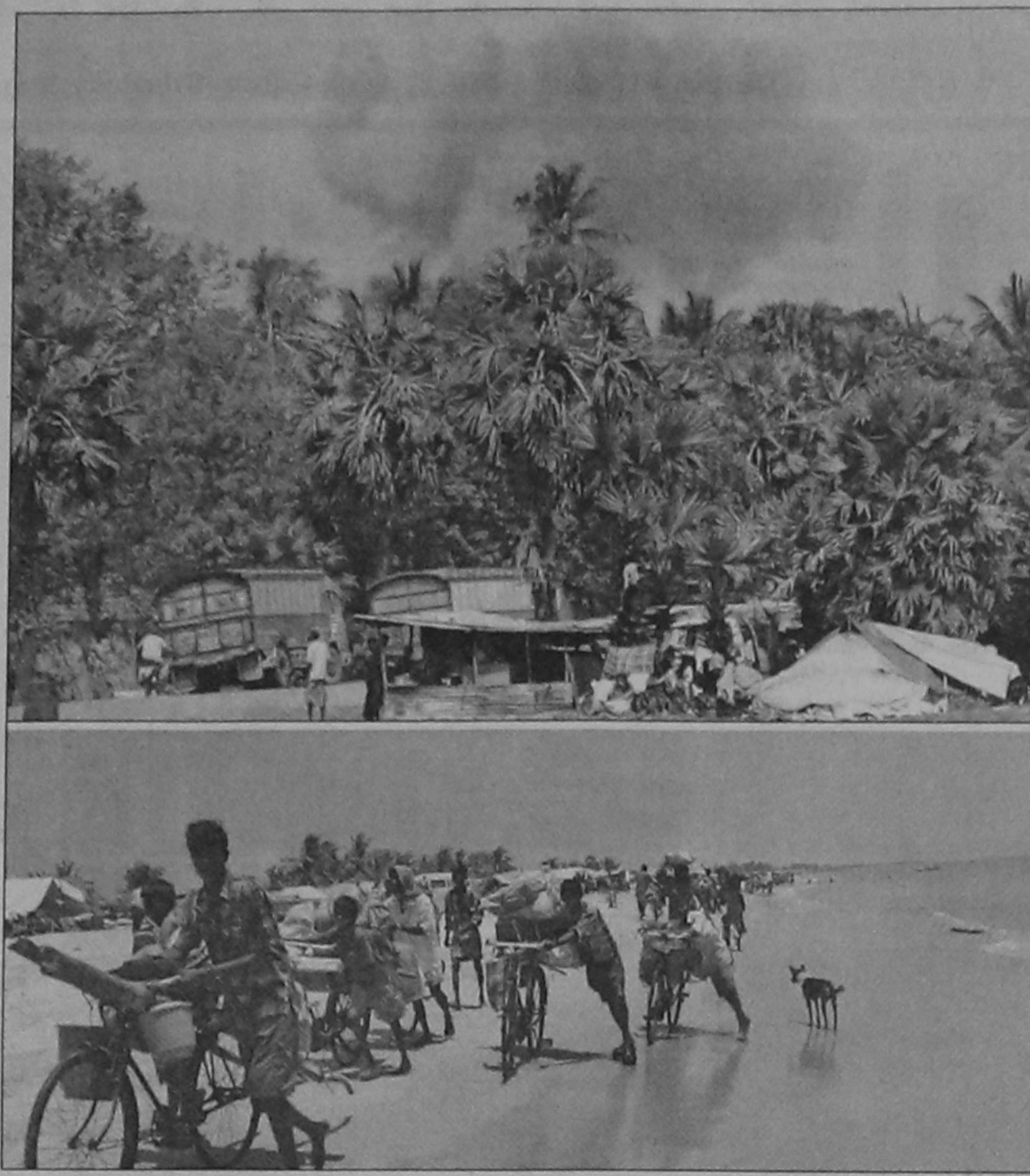
The LTTE cadres, apprehending the near end of the LTTE's offensives against army, chose to come out and give up as they realised the outfit was on the verge of being wiped out, a defence official said.

The army does not expect more than 700 LTTE cadres in the no-fire-zone near Pudukudiyirippu in Mullaitivu with many being new recruits.

Meanwhile, Sri Lankan Navy sunk three rebel boats and killed 12 Sea Tigers, a defence ministry official said.

While the UN estimates about 50,000 Tamil civilians to be caught in the LTTE areas, the Sri Lankan government puts the figure at between 10,000 and 15,000.

The army claimed that the LTTE hardcore team of about 300 militants guarding the top cadres including its leader V Prabhakaran are demoralised and are in disarray in the no conflict zone in Puthumathalam.



This undated picture (top) released on April 25 by pro-LTTE website Tamilnet shows civilians taking cover after what they say is an explosion caused by a government air strike in the no-fire zone in Mullaitivu district. Picture Bottom, also undated, handed out by a pro-Tamil organisation on April 24 shows displaced Tamil civilians pushing their belongings on bicycles at a coastal area in Mullaitivu.

Pakistan launches offensive against Taliban militants

AFP, PTI, Peshawar

Pakistan yesterday launched a new offensive to halt the advance of Taliban militants in the country's northwest, the military said, after the extremists ambushed troops, killing one soldier.

The expanding encroachment of hundreds of armed Pakistanis from the repressive movement, whose brethren were toppled by the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan, has sparked massive US concern for nuclear-armed Pakistan.

The country has come under Western and domestic pressure to rescind a deal to put three million people in the northwest region of Malakand under Islamic law, which critics charge has only emboldened the Islamist militants.

The accord was the end of a brutal Taliban insurgency that turned the pristine ski resort of Swat into a region of fear where girls' schools were bombed, government officials beheaded and from which tens of thousands fled.

Across Pakistan, more than 1,800 people have been killed in a wave of Al-Qaeda and Taliban-linked extremist attacks since July 2007.

But the Taliban have not disarmed. Hundreds of them pushed into the district of Buner, 100 kilometres from the capital Islamabad, and despite a publicised withdrawal residents say they remain.

On Sunday, militants ambushed paramilitary reinforcements, killing a soldier and wounding at least five others in Lower Dir, another district of Malakand, where the Taliban have boosted their presence, security officials said.

Hours after the ambush, the military announced that the Frontier Corps had launched an operation against the Taliban in Lower Dir at the request of provincial officials and residents, securing control of the area.

"Heavy exchanges of fire took place at Kaladag and reportedly scores of militants have been killed, including an important local commander," the statement said.

US worried over Pak nukes going to Taliban hands

PTI, Washington

Worried by the "worst" and "unthinkable" possibility of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal falling into the hands of the Taliban, the US is pushing Islamabad hard to devise a strategy to regain control of the country, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has said.

The unchecked advances of Taliban who moved to about 100 km of Islamabad by taking control of Burner district just outside the capital region has stunned the Obama Administration.

Reacting to the Taliban's march towards other Pakistani cities from their stronghold in Swat, Hillary said the US cannot even contemplate that and cannot let this go on any further.

"One of our concerns, which we've raised with the Pakistani government and military is that if the worst, the unthinkable were to happen, and this advancing Taliban encouraged and supported by al-Qaeda and other extremists were to essentially topple the government for failure to beat them back -- then they would have the keys to the nuclear arsenal of Pakistan," Hillary told Fox News.

"We can't even contemplate that. We cannot, you know, let this go on any further. Which is why we're pushing so hard for the Pakistanis to come together around a strategy to take their country back," Hillary said, three days after she asked the Pakistani leadership of basically abdicating to the advancing Taliban.

Taliban still in Buner despite deal

PTI, Islamabad

Some heavily armed Taliban militants who entered the strategic Buner district near the Pakistani capital from Swat valley are still in the area despite a deal with local authorities for their withdrawal, a media report said yesterday.

About 10 per cent of the hundreds of Taliban who came to Buner from Swat are still present in the area while the local Taliban from the district are patrolling some parts of the district, Geo News channel quoted its sources as saying today.

Taliban spokesman Muslim Khan had yesterday claimed that all the militants from Swat had withdrawn from Buner, located 100 km from Islamabad. He also said the local Taliban of Buner would remain in the area.

Taliban fighters began pulling out of Buner yesterday after the Pakistan Army began preparing for possible operations against them. Army chief Gen Ashfaq Parvez Kayani warned that his force would root out terrorism and not allow militants to dictate terms to the government.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Is Modi the other PM candidate for BJP?

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Is BJP trying to project Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi as its prime ministerial candidate after K Advani?

At least three senior leaders of BJP—Arun Jaitley, M Venkaiah Naidu and Arun Shourie—have in the last two days backed Modi as the party's next candidate for the top post.

All the three leaders have gone public with their choice of Modi, who is in his mid-fifties, for the top post after 82-year-old Advani. What is interesting is that this has come in the thick of campaign for parliamentary election in which Advani has been projected as the BJP's prime ministerial candidate. However, all three of them made it clear that Advani is the party's nominee for the top post in 2009 elections.

"I, along with other BJP workers, will be very happy if Shourie's wishes come true,"

said Jaitley, the party General Secretary reacting to the journalist-turned-politician's remark on Friday that he wanted to see Modi as PM.

"If Modi becomes PM, many of us would be very happy. Gujarat is the model state where development has taken place", Jaitley told mediapersons in Vadodra, Gujarat, on Saturday.

On the same day in Bangalore, Naidu told reporters "we are happy about Modi's projection as PM (after Advani)".

When asked about Shourie and Jaitley's comments, Naidu said their reference was to the responsibility Modi could be given in the year 2014 parliamentary elections.

Does it mean that Advani will retire from politics by that time? Jaitley replied "talk now about 2009 Lok Sabha poll. Rest we shall keep for later".

On Friday evening, reacting to Shourie's remarks, BJP spokesman Ravi Shanker

Prasad had told media persons that "of course, Modi can be a candidate for the PM post in future after Advani. There is every possibility of his becoming Prime Minister."

It was on Thursday in Ahmedabad that Shourie, had said "Gujarat has the opportunity to elect PM this time (reference to Advani who is contesting Lok Sabha poll from Gandhinagar) and next time also you will have the opportunity to elect the PM from this state (reference to 2014 parliamentary poll)".

Shourie had said that other Indian states today talk about the Gujarat model of development.

Two leading entrepreneurs of India—Anil Ambani and Sunil Bharati Mittal—had some time back endorsed Modi as PM and a CPI (M) Muslim leader from Kerala was expelled from the party recently for praising the development of Gujarat under Modi's rule.

Baitullah plans to attack Pak cities

HINDUSTAN TIMES, Islamabad, London

Pakistani Taliban chief Baitullah Mehsud plans to carry out terror attacks in major cities, including Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Lahore, and has despatched his top five commanders along with 300 terrorists and suicide bombers to execute the mission.

The five Taliban commanders will supervise the terrorist operations planned by Mehsud and the Taliban-Himayat Tehrik in these cities, Interior Ministry sources told The News Daily.

The Taliban commanders who had left North Waziristan on the mission were identified by intelligence agencies as Shikaari, Inayatullah, Walid, Mujahid and Abdali, sources said.

A security official said the Taliban commanders had left North Waziristan Agency for Islamabad on April 11 along with an explosives-laden Toyota Corolla car with the registration number IDG-8720.

The sources, quoting an intelligence report, said about 300 terrorists and suicide bombers would reach Islamabad with the five commanders.

However, law enforcement agencies are unaware whether the militants have reached their destination or postponed their operation, the official said.

Interior Secretary Kamal Shah confirmed the report and said foolproof security measures have been adopted to thwart the threats.

"The law enforcement agencies have chalked out counter strategies to deal with the situation," he said.

Baitullah Mehsud, the neo-Taliban leader in Pakistan, has replaced Osama bin Laden as the West's deadliest Islamist threat and public enemy number one and the most deadly threat to the West. The neo-Taliban groups in the tribal areas of Pakistan could become a global menace, said Nigel Inkster, former deputy chief of the British Intelligence Service, MI6.



Indian boys play in a pool of water to beat the heat near India Gate in New Delhi yesterday. Several parts of northern India continued to experience mixed weather with the mercury fluctuating above and below normal. The maximum temperature in the capital shot up well above average due to dusty hot winds, with temperatures up to 40 degrees over the past few days.

Separate blasts claim 18 in Pakistan

AFP, BBC ONLINE, Miranshah

Six of a family and 12 children were killed in two separate blasts in Pakistan yesterday.

Twelve children were killed in north-western Pakistan after playing with a bomb they mistook for a toy, local officials say.

The children died after the bomb, which resembled a football, exploded on Saturday in Lower Dir district of North West Frontier Province.

The children—seven boys and five girls—were between five and 13 years old, officials say.

They found the device outside a local school as they were going home.

Officials say an investigation is under way to

determine how the children got hold of the bomb.

Lower Dir is part of Malakand division in North West Frontier Province.

Taliban militants there have recently agreed a peace deal with the government.

In the other incident, six family members were killed and four others injured yesterday when a hand grenade exploded on board a pick-up truck in a Pakistani tribal area near the Afghan border, officials said.

The incident took place late Saturday near Asar Madakhel village, around 45 kilometres west of Miranshah, the main town of the restive North Waziristan tribal district.

"I saw the bodies of a husband, wife and their four children, and also four injured at the hospital," local administration official Niaz Gul told AFP.

Gul said the pick-up carrying passengers from the border village of Lawara

Mandi was heading to Miranshah when the grenade exploded.

"It is not clear how the grenade exploded," he said, but added that tribesmen usually carried guns and hand grenades with them.

A tribesman injured in

the blast told AFP that some of the passengers were carrying guns and hand grenades, but that he did not know how the grenade exploded.

"We were travelling and suddenly there was blast," Mir Aslam Khan said.

Drugs, chemicals burnt in Afghanistan

AP, Kabul

Afghan counter-drug officials destroyed 6.5 tonnes of drugs and precursor chemicals in a raging bonfire Sunday they said symbolised recent successes in Afghanistan's fight against opium poppies and heroin.

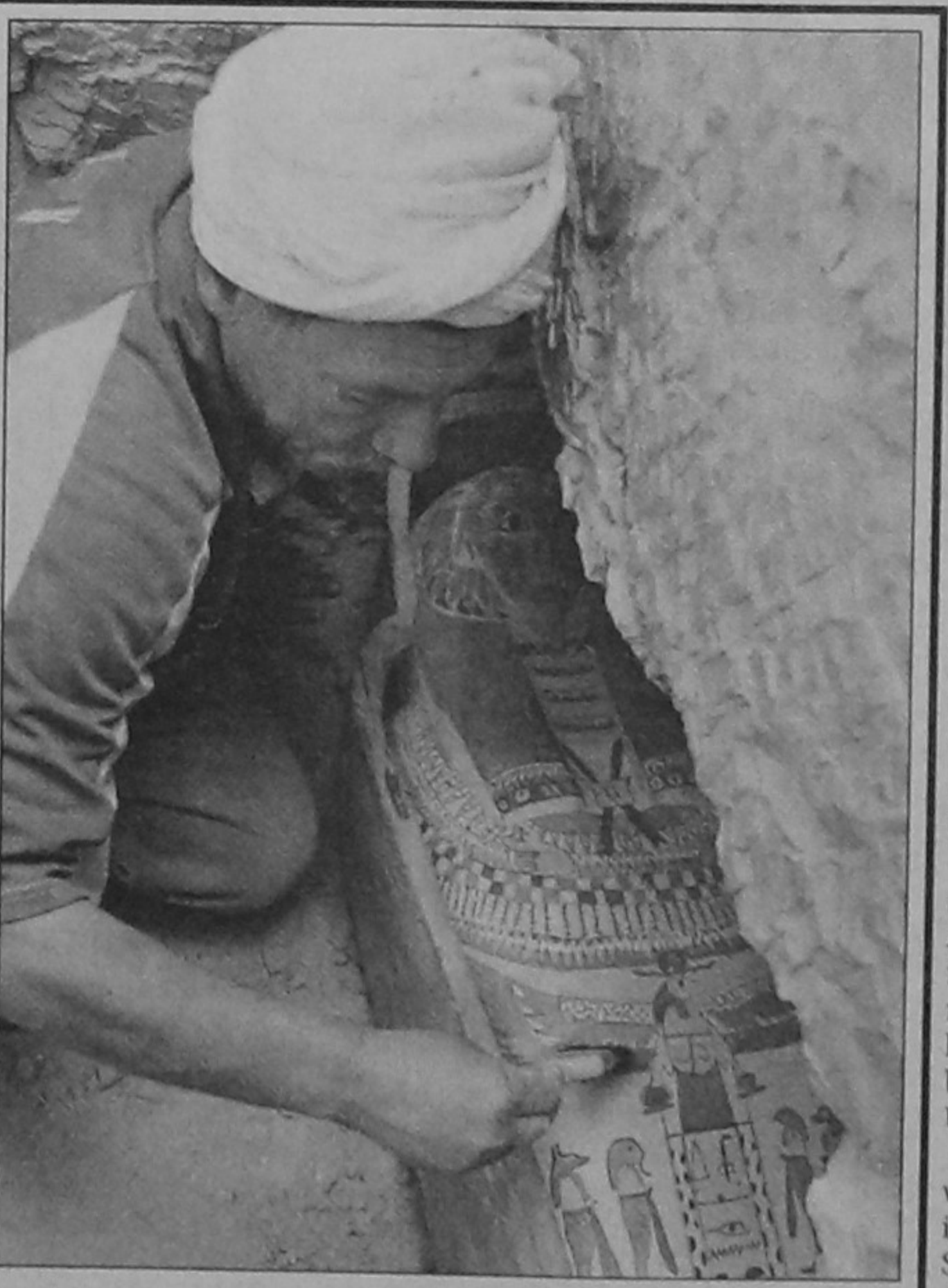
The drugs burnt in a large pile on a sloping mountainside on the outskirts of Kabul, were confiscated by authorities over the last three to four months, said Gen. Khodaidad, the country's counternarcotics minister.

"This is a big success against terrorism, against people who are producing poppies," said Khodaidad, who like many Afghans goes by one name. "Poppy mainly

supports the insurgency in Afghanistan."

The Taliban and other warlords may have earned almost a half billion dollars from Afghanistan's 2008 opium trade, the head of the U.N.'s Office on Drugs and Crime has said. Afghan officials have also been implicated in the trade.

Khodaidad acknowledged that the 6.5 tons of drugs including heroin, opium, hashish and chemicals used to turn opium into heroin was only a symbolic drop in the bucket. A U.N. report last year said Afghan farmers produced 7,700 tonnes of opium in 2008 with an export value estimated at \$3.4 billion.



An Egyptian worker brushes the dust off a wooden coffin containing a linen-wrapped mummy found in a necropolis southeast of the pyramid field of Lahun at the entrance of Egypt's Fayyum oasis, some 130 km southwest of Cairo yesterday. The mummy was discovered by the Egyptian archaeological mission inside a necropolis consisting of 53 rock-cut tombs, dating to the Middle (2061-1786 BC) and New (1569-1081 BC) Kingdoms, as well as the 22nd Dynasty (931-725 BC).

Bomb kills 6 Afghan policemen

AFP, Kabul

Six policemen were killed in two bomb blasts in insurgency-plagued Afghanistan at the weekend, authorities said yesterday.

Three policemen were killed and two wounded yesterday when a roadside bomb tore through their patrol vehicle in troubled central Wardak province, just south of the capital Kabul, the interior ministry said.

The ministry blamed the attack on the "enemies of Afghanistan"—a term authorities use to refer to the remnants of the Taliban, who are leading an insurgency after being ousted from power in a US-led invasion in late 2001.

Three other policemen were killed and two wounded in a similar explosion on Saturday in eastern Khost province near the border with Pakistan, said senior police official Sher Ahmad Kochi.

About 70,000 foreign troops are stationed in Afghanistan, with the United States preparing to deploy an extra 21,000 troops as part of a sweeping new strategy to counter the increasingly deadly Taliban-led insurgency.

Israel arrests Palestinian over axe attack

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli security services have arrested a Palestinian man who allegedly killed an Israeli teenager and wounded a child at a settlement in the occupied West Bank earlier this month, army radio said yesterday.

Mussa Ibrahim Mussa Tit, 26, was arrested by the Shin Beth internal security services on April 11, but his detention was not made public until Sunday, it said.

On April 2 an axe-wielding Palestinian man rampaged through the hardline Israeli settlement

of Bat Ayin in the West Bank, killing an Israeli teenager and wounding a seven-year-old boy before fleeing.

The attack came a day after hawkish Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu officially assumed office.

The radio said that Tit allegedly told security services that he carried out the attack for "religious reasons" and in order to become a "martyr" and that he had led them to the place where he hid the axe used in the attack.

In a phone call to AFP

and a statement released to media in the West Bank, the attack was claimed by the Islamic Jihad and the Imad Mughniyeh Group.

The Imad Mughniyeh Group is named after a Hezbollah commander who was killed by a car bomb in Damascus in a February 2008 attack that was blamed on but denied by Israel.

It also claimed responsibility for a March 15 attack that saw two Israeli policemen shot dead near a settlement in the northern Jordan Valley.