



Pakistani troops return after dropping tanks in Dargay on Friday. Pakistan's top military spokesman announced Saturday that more than 140 militants had been killed during a full-scale offensive to crush extremists in the Swat Valley during the last 24 hours.

PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan president sees 'war' against Taliban

Taliban 'on the run', says army

AFP, Washington/ Peshawar

Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari pledged Friday to mount an all-out war against Taliban extremists, pledging to kill the militants in a military offensive.

"This is an offensive -- this is war. If they kill our soldiers, then we do the same," Zardari told PBS public television during a visit to Washington.

Pressed on whether Pakistan's stated goal of "eliminating" militants meant killing them, Zardari replied in the affirmative.

"Eliminate means exactly what it means," he said.

Warplanes were bombing rebel hideouts in the northwestern Swat valley, where up to 15,000 security forces are deployed under orders to wipe out extremists.

Pakistan's military said Saturday a full-scale offensive in the northwest has put

militants on the back foot following a pledge from President Asif Ali Zardari to eliminate the Taliban.

Warplanes pounded rebel hideouts in the Swat valley, an ex-ski resort where up to 15,000 security forces have been deployed under orders to crush extremists in an escalating conflict that has displaced hundreds of thousands.

"They are on the run," the army said in an earlier statement.

But the statement added that Taliban fighters were "trying to block the exodus of innocent civilians by preventing their departure through coercion, IEDs (improvised explosive devices), roadblocks with trees and even (making them) hostages".

Jet fighters and helicopter gunships heavily bombarded militant positions and hideouts in Venai Baba, Namal, Qambar, Pechar, Fiza Ghat, Tiligram and Chamtalai, a senior military official said.

"Large number of militants were killed

including hardcore elements and many militants injured. The operation is in full swing," the official said.

On Friday the military said that more than 140 militants were killed. People fleeing the area, however, have accused the military of also killing civilians in the fierce bombardment.

Zardari was in Washington for talks Wednesday with US President Barack Obama and Afghan President Hamid Karzai on stepping up the fight against extremists seen as a growing threat in both countries.

Zardari also said Islamabad has shifted an unspecified number of troops from its border with India to fight against the Taliban, largely holed up in Pakistan's porous western border region with Afghanistan.

"We have already done so," Zardari said when asked why Pakistan would not move troops from the eastern front.

Pak, Afghan leaders back regional power project

AFP, Washington

Presidents Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan and Asif Ali Zardari of Pakistan gave crucial support Friday to a World Bank-backed 680-million-dollar regional electricity transmission project.

The planned project aims to supply surplus power from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to the Afghan capital of Kabul and northwestern Pakistan.

The two leaders issued a joint statement backing the Central Asia-South Asia electricity transmission and trade project -- code named CASA 1000 -- after talks in Washington with World Bank President Robert Zoellick.

Completion of the project -- which is being designed to accommodate an expanded volume of power in the future -- would "catalyse additional energy investments and trade" both in the four countries as well as in the region, the statement said.

Zardari and Karzai said the project could also have a "positive demonstration effect" for other regional infrastructure projects between their two countries.

Zoellick said the Central Asian republics,

with large energy resource potential, were well placed to help energy-constrained South Asia, while still meeting their own domestic energy needs.

"This project promises to bring substantial benefits for all four countries and could usher in a new era of regional cooperation that would promote sustained growth and help overcome poverty," he said.

Aside from the World Bank, several international financial institutions, including the Islamic Development Bank, are supporting the regional effort.

The project would develop the necessary physical infrastructure and create the institutional and legal framework to transmit surplus power available from existing generation facilities in Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic to Afghanistan and Pakistan, a bank statement said.

Infrastructure for the project is likely to include a high voltage direct current transmission system between Tajikistan and Pakistan through Afghanistan and a transmission link from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to connect to the high voltage line from Tajikistan to South Asia, the statement said.

Taliban vows to 'eliminate' Pakistan's top leadership

PTI, Islamabad

Angered by Pakistan government's decision to launch an all out war against them, the Taliban has vowed to 'eliminate' country's top leadership including President Asif Ali Zardari and Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani and their close family members.

"We thought that being a member of a religious family, Gilani will support our demand of implementing Sharia in the Malakand division but instead he has announced an all-out war against us, which has angered our commanders as well as fighters," an unnamed Taliban commander told The News daily.

The militant commander, who spoke to the newspaper by phone, said after Gilani declared during an address to the nation on Thursday that the Taliban would be wiped out from the Swat Valley and adjoining areas, the militants had started planning to "eliminate the top leaders of the ruling alliance, including President, Prime Minister and their close family members and aides".

The commander said Gilani's hometown of Multan and tomb of former premier Benazir Bhutto might also be targeted by the militants.

"Besides, the personnel and installations of security forces, we have now also included civilian rulers in our hit list. We will definitely need some time to plan our actions but it is not impossible for us and we have all the means to implement our plan of attack anywhere in Pakistan," he claimed.



PHOTO: AFP

A displaced Pakistani family sit on a truck as they cross Buner on Friday. Pakistan's top military spokesman announced Saturday that more than 140 militants had been killed during a full-scale offensive to crush extremists in the Swat Valley during the last 24 hours.



PHOTO: AFP

Supporters of the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) burn an effigy of Nepalese President Ram Baran Yadav during a demonstration in Kathmandu yesterday. Nepal's political parties held urgent talks on Saturday in a bid to cobble together a new government as a midnight deadline set by the Himalayan country's president loomed.

Malaysia frees 13 'internal security' detainees

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia said on Saturday it has freed 13 people held under its tough internal security laws, including three ethnic Indian activists detained since organising anti-government protests in 2007.

"All of them have been released today," police chief Musa Hassan told AFP.

He said five Filipinos and two Indonesians released will be sent back to their home countries. The remaining six Malaysians were freed on certain conditions on which the police chief declined to comment.

"We will pass the foreign detainees to the immigration to be deported to their home country," Musa said.

The release of the Indians, members of the banned ethnic Indian rights group Hindraf, removes a thorn in the side of new Prime Minister Najib Razak, who is trying to promote his reform credentials.

States to eliminate 9 more poisonous chemicals: UN

AFP, Geneva

Nine chemicals, including headlice treatment lindane, have been added to a list of poisonous substances that are to be eliminated under the Stockholm Convention, the UN Environment Programme said Saturday.

More than 160 signatory states of the convention targeting hazardous substances that can kill or are seriously harmful to health, added the chemicals to the existing list of 12 after a week-long meeting in Geneva.

"The tremendous impact of these substances on human health and the environment has been acknowledged today by adding nine new chemicals to the Convention," said UN Under-Secretary General Achim Steiner in a statement.

"This shift reflects international concern on the need to reduce and eventually eliminate such substances throughout the global community."

The nine chemicals that member states have now committed to eliminate are:

- Lindane -- used in treatment of headlice and scabies, and in insecticides
- Alpha hexachlorocyclohexane -- a by-product of lindane
- Beta hexachlorocyclohexane -- a by-product of lindane
- Hexabromodiphenyl ether and heptabromodiphenyl ether -- used in flame retardants
- Tetrabromodiphenyl ether and pentabromodiphenyl ether -- used in flame retardants
- Chlordecone -- used in agricultural pesticides
- Hexabromobiphenyl -- used in flame retardants
- Pentachlorobenzene -- used in fungicides, flame retardants
- Perfluorooctane sulfonic acid, its salts and perfluorooctane sulfonyl fluoride -- used in electric and electronic parts, photo imaging, textiles.

'A number of civilians' killed in Afghan fighting

Reveals investigation; Karzai demands end to US airstrikes

AFP, Kabul

An Afghan and US military investigation has confirmed that "a number of civilians" were killed in a heavy fighting last week, a joint statement said yesterday, after claims that dozens had died.

The long-awaited statement gave no firmer figures on civilian casualties although President Hamid Karzai said up to 130 were killed, which would make it the deadliest such incident for since the foreign forces arrived in 2001.

"The joint investigation team confirms that a number of civilians were killed in the course of the fighting..." the statement said.

However, it "is unable to determine with certainty which of those casualties were Taliban fighters and which were non-combatants because those killed are all buried", it said.

"The investigation team visited three grave sites containing seven individual graves and two mass graves with an indeterminate number of people buried in each mass grave," it said.

Teams from the US military and Afghan

National Security Forces were still looking into the "complex series of Taliban attacks on innocent civilians, ANSF and coalition forces in Farah province", it said.

The investigation had found that "a large number of Taliban fighters, to include non-Afghans" had gone to two villages in Bala Buluk district, Ganj Abad and Grani, and demanded money from locals.

They attacked police checkpoints, inflicting some casualties on officers.

The provincial government had called for help and Afghan security forces and coalition forces responded with an operation to clear the Taliban fighters out of the villages.

As heavy fighting continued for several hours, coalition troops called for close air support against positions from which they were being attacked.

"Reports also indicate that Taliban fighters deliberately forced villagers into houses from which they then attacked ANSF and coalition forces," the statement said.

"The joint investigation team strongly condemns the brutality of the Taliban extremists deliberately targeting Afghan civilians and using them as human shields."

Rise against Mayawati govt in Uttar Pradesh

Varun urges voters

INDO ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Pilibhit

A day after a court panel recommended revocation of the National Security Act (NSA) provisions against him, Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Varun Gandhi asked the electorate of Pilibhit to rise against the "anti-poor" Mayawati government of Uttar Pradesh.

Addressing voters in Puranpur in Pilibhit, which goes to the polls in the last phase May 13, Varun Gandhi said: "We should rise against the Mayawati government as she is against the poor and those promoting nationalism."

"Everyone knows I do whatever I say even if I have to go to jail," Varun Gandhi said, as his supporters chanted 'Jai Sri Ram'.

"My fight is not against any individual but against all those who are against the poor and weaker sections of society."

He exhorted the people: "Please remember, I don't want to live in an Uttar Pradesh where people are suppressed, the poor are not looked after."

Striking an emotive chord with the people, he said: "The day I was arrested, you all gave me blood, took bullets."

"When there is trouble upon you, then Varun Gandhi is prepared to take on your problems," he declared to thunderous applause.

On Friday, the special advisory board of the Allahabad High Court recommended withdrawal of the stringent NSA invoked against the Varun Gandhi for his inflammatory communal utterances. The Mayawati government has decided to move the Supreme Court against this.

Varun Gandhi termed the court panel's recommendation as 'historic' and said the 'authorities' would have to 'answer' for the 20 days he spent in detention.

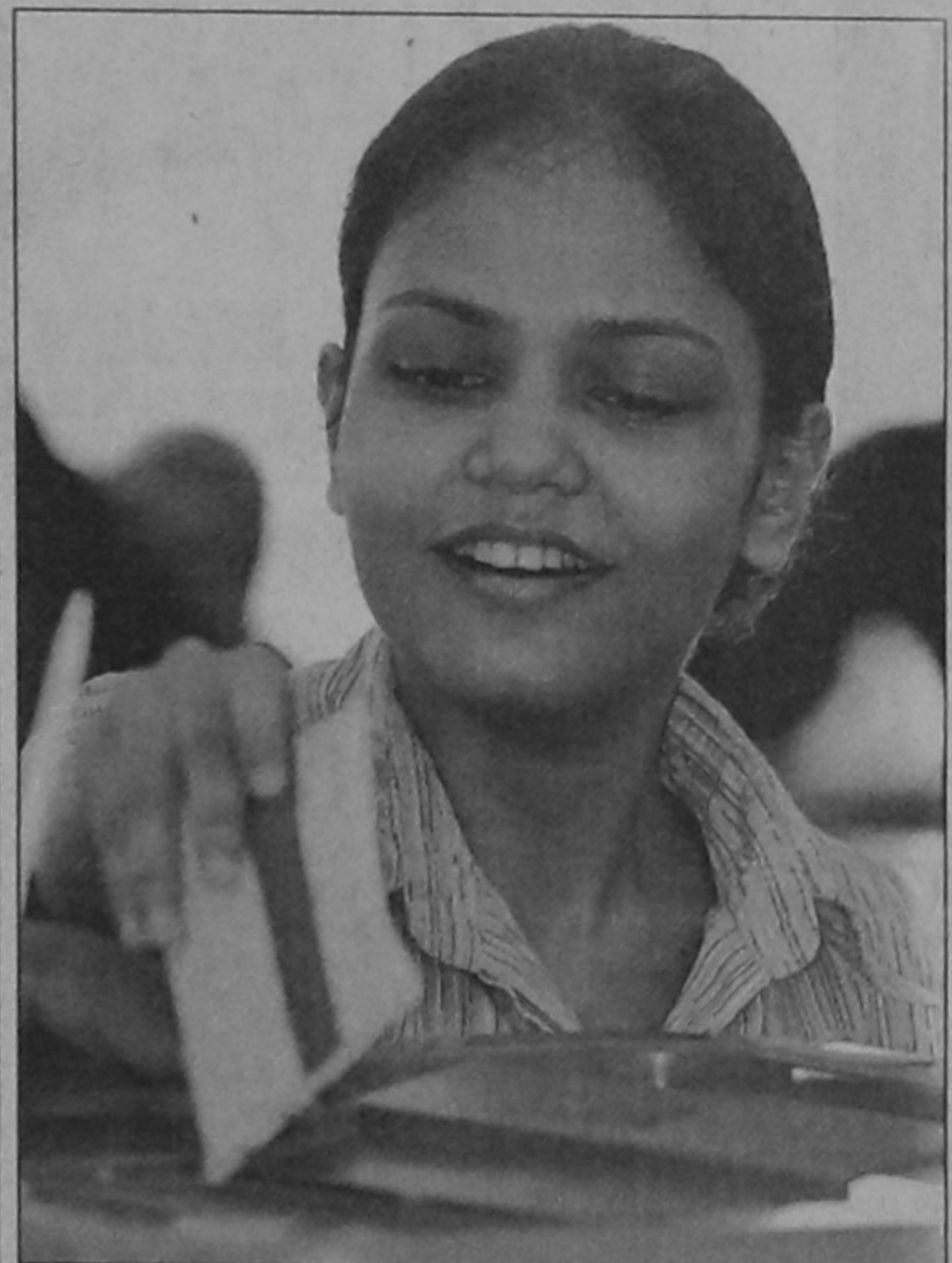


PHOTO: AFP

A Maldivian woman votes at the country's diplomatic mission in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo yesterday. The Maldives is holding its first Majlis, or parliamentary vote, following the election of President Mohammed Nasheed in October 2008.

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Dhaka Liaison Office
Suite B-3 (Level-4), House 10, Road 53, Gulshan-2, Dhaka-1212, Bangladesh
Phone: 885 0422 Fax: 885 4056 Email: dhaka@parkway-dmrc.com

Chittagong Office
IFCO Complex, 10th Floor (South Side), 1147/A East Nasirabad, CDA Avenue, Chittagong
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