



Pakistani local residents flee military operations against Taliban militants, by foot and a horse cart at the Rahim Abad area in Mingora the capital of troubled Pakistan's Swat valley yesterday. Pakistan's military suspended a curfew in a northwest city where it is fighting Taliban guerrillas, officials said, allowing tens of thousands of civilians to flee the area.

PHOTO: AFP

Nearly one million flee fighting in Swat: UN

AFP, Geneva

The number of people who have fled fighting in Pakistan over the past two weeks surged to nearly one million on Friday, UN agencies said.

There was little sign of the massive flow of people abating, said William Spindler, a spokesman for the UN refugee agency, as the total number of displaced in northwestern Pakistan exceeded 1.5 million.

By early Friday more than 987,000 people were registered as displaced since May 2, he told journalists.

That recent displacement added to the burden of helping more than 550,000 people who had fled earlier fighting in the same northwestern regions since late August.

"Every hour thousands of people are arriving at registration sites to be registered as internally displaced people," Spindler added.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, who is cur-

rently visiting Pakistan, noted that if massive support is not mobilised immediately, the crisis could have "an enormous destabilising impact on the affected populations."

The UNHCR is calling for hundreds of millions of dollars in international funding for the relief effort.

A major appeal for aid is likely to be launched next week, the interim UN humanitarian coordinator in Pakistan, Martin Mogwanja, said in a telephone news conference.

On Friday, Pakistan's military suspended a curfew in a northwest city where it is fighting Taliban guerrillas, officials said, allowing tens of thousands of civilians to flee the area.

When a similar curfew was relaxed in the northwestern Swat valley last Sunday, more than 100,000 civilians fled the area in the space of a few hours, aid workers said.

"Essentially it is the entire population of certain parts of Swat, Lower Dir,

Malakand and Buner who are being displaced," said Mogwanja. More than half of them are children.

Relief agencies said the displaced were largely in a good condition and nourished for now since more than 80 percent of them had found refuge with host families and had fled only recently.

But their hosts were often impoverished as well and the UN warned the burden would become apparent in the coming weeks.

"The humanitarian community remains extremely concerned that the continued displacement over the coming weeks and months would require a massive response programme from the humanitarian community and the government," Mogwanja said.

Some parts of the northwest where fighting was under way were out of bounds for relief agencies following "specific threats" by armed militants, he explained.

No time frame for anti-Taliban operations: Pak minister

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Islamabad

No time frame has been laid down for the military operations against the Taliban in Pakistan's restive northwest, the defence minister has said, while the junior interior minister said it would be completed in a month.

"The army is clearing the areas gradually and no time frame could be given in this regard," Defence Minister Ahmad Mukhtar told the APP news agency.

According to Mukhtar, it was up to the army to evolve the strategy for the operations in Swat and two other districts of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and he would not like to comment on this.

Questioned about reports of collateral damage due to the army operation, he said the army was making the utmost efforts to avoid this.

Heavy artillery, Mukhtar pointed out, was only being used to pound militants hideouts.

Speaking to reporters here, Minister of State for Interior Tasnim Ahmad Qureshi said the

military operations would be successfully completed within a month.

He did not elaborate.

The Pakistani Army went into action against the Taliban April 26 after they violated a controversial peace accord with the NWFP government and instead moved south from their Swat headquarters and occupied Buner district that is just 100 km from Islamabad. The operations began in Lower Dir to the west of Swat and which is the home district of Taliban-backed radical cleric Sufi Muhammad, who had brokered the peace accord.

The operations subsequently spread to Buner and Swat.

The security forces achieved major success Wednesday when helicopter troops, after a day-long battle, captured Pechar, the headquarters of Swat Taliban commander Maulana Fazlullah, who is also Sufi Muhammad's son-in-law.

Over 800 militants have been killed in the operations so far.

Pakistan increasing nukes, says US

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

The chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Mike Mullen, has confirmed reports that Pakistan is increasing its nuclear weapons programme, but has provided no details.

The confirmation came during a Senate Armed Services committee hearing Thursday when Democrat senator Jim Webb, an expert on defence issues, raised fears that Pakistan is adding to the nuclear weapons it traditionally has pointed toward India, and questioned whether US aid could be funding it.

Noting reports that Pakistan "may be actually adding on their weapon systems and warheads" Webb asked: "Do you have any evidence of that?"

Yes, Mullen answered.

Webb said that is a cause for "enormous concern," because with the militant threat, he said, Pakistan's government is not very stable.

The US has urged Pakistan to focus on the extremist threat instead of India. But Mullen told senators that it's still unclear that Pakistani leaders can shift their focus for a long period even as they slowly acknowledge that militants pose more of a security risk.

"Historically, they haven't done that," Mullen said. "So right now, I'm encouraged by what's happened, but I certainly withhold any judgment about where it goes because of the historic lack of sustainment, and they know they need to do that."



French President Nicolas Sarkozy (L) bids farewell to Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari after a meeting at the Elysee Palace in Paris yesterday. Zardari visits his French counterpart as his soldiers are engaged in fierce battles with Taliban militants.

Pak president seeks support in France

AFP, Paris

Pakistan's President Asif Ali Zardari visited his French counterpart Nicolas Sarkozy on Friday as part of a tour to reassure Western backers that his government can meet the challenge of the Taliban.

Zardari came away from his meeting in Elysee Palace with a promise of 12 million euros (16.2 million dollars) in French aid for civilian refugees fleeing the fighting north of his capital, and insisted his forces would eventually prevail.

"We've come to an understanding for a larger cooperation for the strengthening of Pakistan, strengthening of the war... the war going on in this region," Zardari said.



Indian Kashmiri Muslim activists of the Democratic Political Movement (DPM) shout slogans during a demonstration in Srinagar yesterday. The protesters carried placards as they demanded the release of all political prisoners detained in different jails across India.

British expenses scandal claims first minister

AFP, London

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown yesterday suspended a junior minister whose expense claims are under investigation in the latest escalation of the embarrassing row.

The announcement came after The Daily Telegraph revealed that junior justice minister Shahid Malik claimed tens of thousands of pounds from public funds for a second home while paying below-market rent for his main house.

Malik, the first Muslim minister in Britain's government, is the first minister to be hit by the expenses scandal, which has rocked all three main parties over the last week.

Congress keeps options open on post-poll allies

SP rules out post-polls alliance with BJP

ANI, New Delhi

Congress Party has said that it intended to work with new 'like-minded, progressive and secular parties' after the election results are declared.

Addressing a news conference here on Thursday, Congress party spokesman Abhishek Manu Singhvi said the party does not want to get into speculations of the exit polls, as it was confident of emerging as the single largest party to form a stable government.

"We are not entering into any speculations on the number of seats. We are confident that we will form the government both individually, largest and collectively, providing a stable government. We are working with all like-minded, progressive and secular parties in the interest of India's development," said Singhvi.

Meanwhile, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) accused the communists of being opportunistic.

"The Left enjoyed four-and-a-half years of power, then indulged in six months of drama of opposing the government and now wishes to come back to power. We pity the Third Front as it is becoming extinct even before counting has begun," said Ravi Shankar Prasad, BJP spokesman.

Meanwhile, Samajwadi Party general secretary Amar Singh on Friday put a dampener on speculations of any alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Squashing rumours of any talks of forging a post-poll alliance fuelled by his meeting with BJP president Rajnath Singh, Amar said, "It was not possible as there was an ideological difference between the two parties."

Pakistan should prosecute Mumbai perpetrators: US

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

Improvement of India-Pakistan ties hinges a great deal on action taken by Islamabad to bring perpetrators of the 26/11 Mumbai terror attack to justice, according to a top US diplomat.

The Mumbai attack has been a major setback to the Indo-Pak peace process, Robert O. Blake, told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Thursday at his confirmation hearing as Obama's new point man for South and Central Asia.

"They've taken some steps to bring cases against nine of the suspects in Mumbai attacks. But now it's important that they prosecute them," he said.

A former deputy chief of mission at the US Embassy in New Delhi, Blake was most recently

ambassador to Sri Lanka. If confirmed he would replace Richard Boucher as assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs.

"I believe that concerted action by the Pakistanis against not only those suspects but against Lashkar-e-Taiba would enable the two countries to regain some of the progress and restart some of the progress that they've made in the composite dialogue and other areas of their cooperation," Blake said.

"Prior to the attacks in Mumbai, the governments of India and Pakistan were making quite good progress in forging closer relations across a broad range of fronts. They had something called the 'composite dialogue', which had a number of components to it to try to address some of the most ticklish issues in Indo-Pak relations," he said.

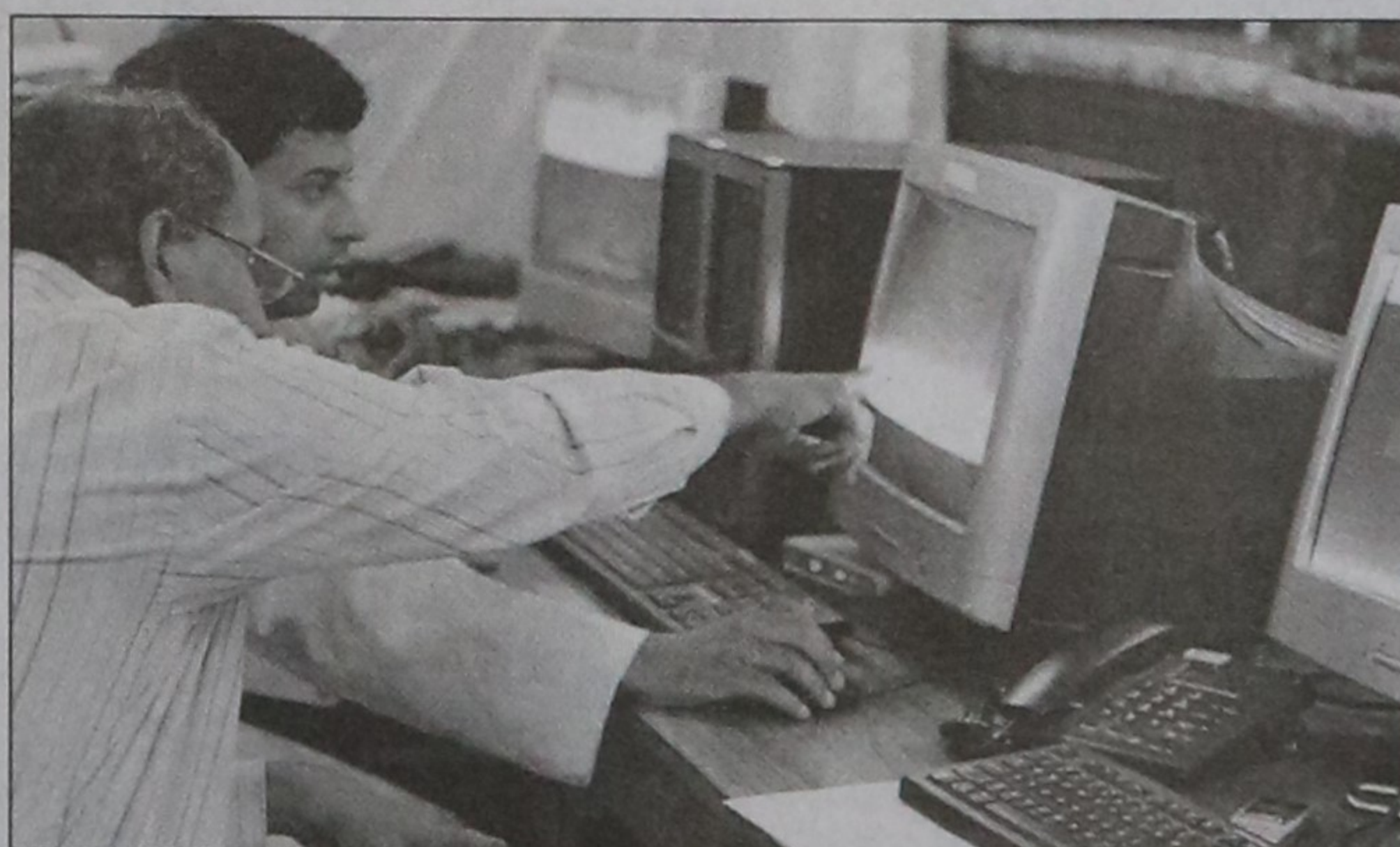
Manmohan to step down as PM on May 17

ANI, New Delhi

Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh will resign from his office on May 17, a day after the election results are out.

According to sources, the Prime Minister will have a meeting with his council of Ministers at 4 PM on Monday, and then, he will proceed to Rashtrapati Bhavan to submit his resignation. He is also expected to move out of the Prime Minister's official residence at 7, Race Course Road.

He is expected to continue as caretaker PM till the next government is formed.



Indian Election Commission officials update websites, which will feature election results at a vote counting hall in Hyderabad yesterday. The counting of votes from India's national elections is scheduled to take place today, across the country's after the most expensive marathon parliamentary elections held in five phases since April 16 to elect a new federal government.

IAEA chief warns of new 'virtual' nuclear powers

AFP, London

Between ten and 20 countries will likely soon develop the capacity to build nuclear weapons unless major powers take steps to disarm, the head of the UN's nuclear watchdog said Friday.

In an interview with the Guardian newspaper, IAEA chief Mohamed ElBaradei predicted a surge in the number of "virtual nuclear weapons states" who can produce plutonium or highly enriched uranium and know how to make warheads.

While they would likely stop short of assembling a weapon, thus remaining technically compliant with the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT), they could be within a couple of months of deploying and using a nuclear

bomb.

"This is the phenomenon we see now and what people worry about in Iran. And this phenomenon goes much beyond Iran," said ElBaradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy (IAEA).

"Pretty soon... you will have nine weapons states and probably another 10 or 20 virtual weapons states."

Western powers fear Iran is secretly trying to build nuclear weapons, a charge denied by Tehran, which says its nuclear programme is for civilian use.

ElBaradei, who is due to leave his job in November, said the regime built around the 1970 NPT to stop the spread of nuclear weapons risked collapse.

Recession storms across Europe

AFP, Paris

Recession storms barreled across Europe on Friday as data revealed the extent of the damage to Germany and France, but the IMF forecast that the world economy would turn the corner by year's end.

Germany registered its worst performance on record when its output was shown to have shrunk 3.8 percent in the first quarter, French gross domestic product contracted 1.2 percent over the same period and Italy fell back by 2.4 percent.

The gloomy news from western Europe was reflected further east with Romania and Austria becoming the latest countries to officially slide into recession while Hungary and Slovakia also registered sharp falls in output.

However Europe's leading stock mar-

kets all rose, mirroring a trend in Asia and Wall Street and reflecting a growing belief the crisis had bottomed out.

"We still see a recovery in first semester of 2010 and the beginning of the turning point in October, November or December" this year, the International Monetary Fund's managing director Dominique Strauss-Kahn said in Vienna.

Even in Japan, where there were signs of mounting deflationary pressures, the government detected signs that the worst was over.

The quarter-on-quarter contraction in Germany, the world's biggest exporter, was even steeper than the 2.2 percent fall recorded in the final three months of 2008, the statistics office said.

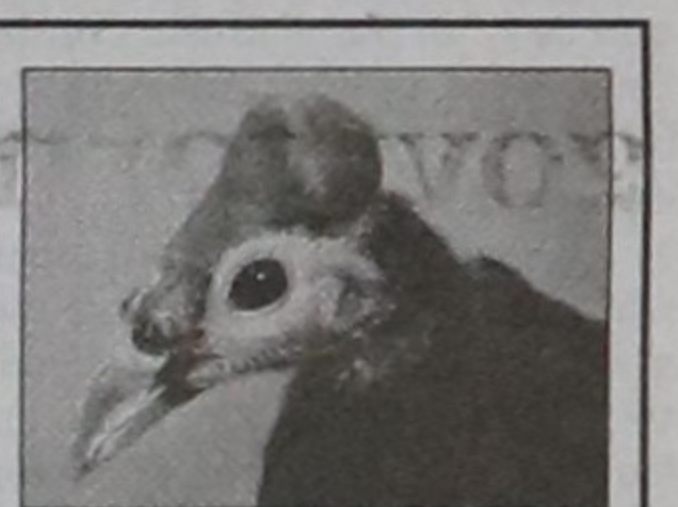
The worse-than-expected German result -- economists had forecast a drop of 3.2 percent -- was the worst since records

began in 1970.

"This very bad news, which was broadly expected, had demonstrated the large dependence of the German economy to foreign trade," said Natexis economist Costa Brunner. "But the good news is that the worst is behind us."

France's statistics agency released figures showing that French gross domestic product shrank 1.2 percent in the first quarter of 2009 and had been contracting since the second quarter of last year, correcting previous figures and revealing that the country has been in underlying recession for 12 months.

French officials had already forecast output would fall by 2.5 percent this year but, following the release of new estimates, Finance Minister Christine Lagarde said the drop would be closer to three percent.



In this undated photo released by the Wildlife Conservation Society shows a close-up shot of a Maleo, that can only be found on Sulawesi island in eastern Indonesia.

Bizarre bird gets private beach in Indonesia

AP, Jakarta

A species of birds able to fly immediately after hatching from eggs buried beneath the tropical sand has just been given its own private beach in eastern Indonesia, a conservation group said Friday.

Maleos chicken-sized birds with black helmet-like crests number from 5,000 to 10,000 in the wild and can only be found on Sulawesi island. They rely on sun-baked sands or volcanically heated soil to incubate their eggs.

The US-based Wildlife Conservation Society said it has teamed up with a local environmental group to purchase and protect a 36-acre (14-hectare) stretch of beach in northern Sulawesi that contains about 40 nests.

Mogadishu fighting claims 103 lives

AFP, Mogadishu

A week of fighting between pro-government forces and insurgents in Mogadishu has left 103 people dead and 18,000 displaced, Somali Information Minister Farhan Ali Mohamoud said yesterday.

Mohamoud also told reporters that 420 people have been wounded in the new strife in the seaside capital which woke up to an uneasy calm as Islamist insurgents maintained positions in trenches along streets near the presidential palace.

War-weary residents carrying belongings on their heads or strapped to their backs fled some parts of the capital.