

Bombs, battles kill 27 in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

A suicide bomb tore through a southern Afghan town killing six security guards yesterday while a British soldier and 20 militants died in fighting linked to a growing Islamist insurgency.

The bomber, who was riding a motorbike, blew himself up alongside guards from a private Afghan company escorting a convoy of logistics for international troops, police said.

"Six private Afghan guards were killed," said the southern Afghanistan border police commander, General Saifullah.

The attack was near a bazaar in Spin Boldak, a town on a key border-crossing with Pakistan through which most of the supplies to foreign forces arrive.

In April, militants vowed to step up their attacks on Afghan and Western security forces who are trying to stem the Islamist insurgency, as well as other targets.

Fighting has escalated across Afghanistan, where at least a dozen people, including insurgents, have been reported killed almost daily in past weeks.

The violence has raised concerns about stability ahead of key presidential and provincial elections on August 20 for which Western countries have pledged thousands more troops.

The British Ministry of Defence announced that one of its troops serving with the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force was killed in a bomb attack in the southern province of Helmand on Tuesday.

Elsewhere in the south, police reported that Taliban rebels ambushed a convoy of Afghan and foreign security forces in the province of Zabul late Tuesday, sparking a battle that left 11 insurgents dead.

The bodies of the men were left at the site of the clash, near the provincial capital of Qalat. Zabul police chief Abdur Rahman Sarjang told AFP.

The Afghan interior ministry said another three militants were killed in a clash in Zabul's Shah Joy district earlier Tuesday.

The Afghan army commander for the south said six Taliban were killed in a gunfight outside the southern city of Kandahar late Tuesday.

80 hurt in protests in Indian Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

More than 80 people were hurt yesterday as police in Indian Kashmir battled demonstrators protesting against the alleged rape and murder of two women by security forces, police said.

The violence marked the third day of clashes in the Muslim-majority Himalayan region where Indian security forces have been fighting a two-decade-old insurgency against New Delhi's rule.

"Over 80 people were hurt in battles, including nine policemen," a police officer told AFP, asking for anonymity.

"The situation is tense and we're deploying more police and paramilitary to control the violence," he said.

The clashes coincided with the third day of a strike over the deaths of the women that preliminary investigations suggested appeared to have been caused by drowning rather than foul play, according to Indian officials.

Police said they were probing the deaths of the 17-year-old woman and her 22-year-old sister-in-law, whose bodies were found in a shallow stream last Saturday near the southern town of Shopian.

Their families have accused Indian security forces of abducting, raping and killing the women.

Police fought running battles with demonstrators in the streets of Srinagar and other communities in the Kashmir valley. Police hurled tear gas and in one instance in Srinagar opened fire on demonstrators, the police officer said.

Pakistan to appeal for release of cleric

AFP, Lahore

Pakistani authorities vowed yesterday to appeal against a court order to release the head of a charity blacklisted in the West as a terror group and linked by India to the deadly Mumbai attacks.

Hafiz Mohammad Saeed is the head of Jamaat-ud-Dawa and in 1989 founded the banned Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) group accused by India and Washington of killing 166 people in the Indian financial capital last year.

Tuesday's court order sparked reprimand from nuclear rival India and was likely to ruffle relations with the United States, which has made rooting out Islamist extremism in Pakistan its key foreign policy.

"The government has decided to file an appeal against the release order of Hafiz Saeed," Rana Sanaullah, law minister in Punjab province,

told AFP after the high court in the provincial capital Lahore ordered the cleric's release.

"We have received the detailed verdict of the court. Our legal advisers are studying it and we told them to file an appeal against this verdict," he said.

Pakistan put Saeed and three of his co-leaders under house arrest in early December and publicly shut offices of the charity after the UN Security Council blacklisted the organisation as a terror group.

The United States also sees the charity as a terror group and a front for LeT, and Pakistan is under huge Western pressure to round up Dawa members.

Saeed reportedly abandoned LeT when it was outlawed in Pakistan after India accused the group of being behind a 2001 attack on the Indian parliament which pushed the nuclear rivals to the brink of war.

Myanmar delays Suu Kyi case

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's judiciary accepted an appeal from Aung San Suu Kyi's lawyers yesterday over the number of witnesses she could call, delaying closing arguments at her internationally condemned trial.

The democracy leader's legal team had challenged a ruling banning three out of the four defence witnesses she had asked for at the closed-door proceedings, saying it showed the military regime's case against her was one-sided.

Nyan Win, a spokesman for her party, said a higher court would now hear from the government and the defence on the matter on Friday, when closing arguments at the prison trial were originally due to be heard.

"I think it is a positive sign, if we look at the law," Nyan Win, who is also a member of Aung San Suu Kyi's legal team, told AFP.

"The Yangon divisional court accepted our revision (appeal) so both sides have to give statements to the court on Friday at 3:00pm. That means the final arguments in the trial are postponed," he added.

PROFILE

India's first Dalit woman to preside over Lok Sabha

PTI, New Delhi

From being a foreign service officer to a five-term MP and then a Cabinet minister, Meera Kumar has traversed a long way and a varied course that will come in handy to her in running the Lok Sabha that often throws itself into scenes of tumult.

Daughter of late Congress leader Jagjivan Ram, 64-year-old Kumar, Congress' Dalit face, had a steady rise in the echelons of power becoming the first woman to occupy the high office of Lok Sabha Speaker.

The career of Kumar in the rough and tumble of politics began when she quit her cushy IFS job and decided to fight the polls in 1985, a year before her father's death.

She was elected to Lok Sabha for the first time from Bijonore in Uttar Pradesh in 1985, defeating Mayawati and Ram Vilas Paswan.

Kumar became an MP again in 1996 and in 1998. She was re-elected in 2004. In between, she had quit Congress for two years from 2000 citing differences with the party leadership. She rejoined the party in 2002.

Soft-spoken Kumar became a Cabinet minister in the 2004 government of Manmohan Singh. She held the Social Justice and Empowerment portfolio.

Armed with a degree in law and a Masters in English, she joined the IFS in 1973 and served in the embassies in Spain, the UK and Mauritius. She also served as a member of the India-Mauritius Joint Commission.

As an MP, she served, among others, as a member of the Consultative Committee attached to the External Affairs Ministry, Public Accounts Committee, Committee on Home Affairs and its Sub-Committee on Personnel Policy of Central Para-Military Forces and Joint Committee on Empowerment of Women.

Born in Patna on March 31, 1945, Kumar studied in Indraprastha College and Miranda House in Delhi University. She also has an advanced diploma in Spanish. Kumar became a member of the Supreme Court Bar Association in 1980.

Married to Manjul Kumar, a Supreme Court lawyer, she has one son and two daughters.

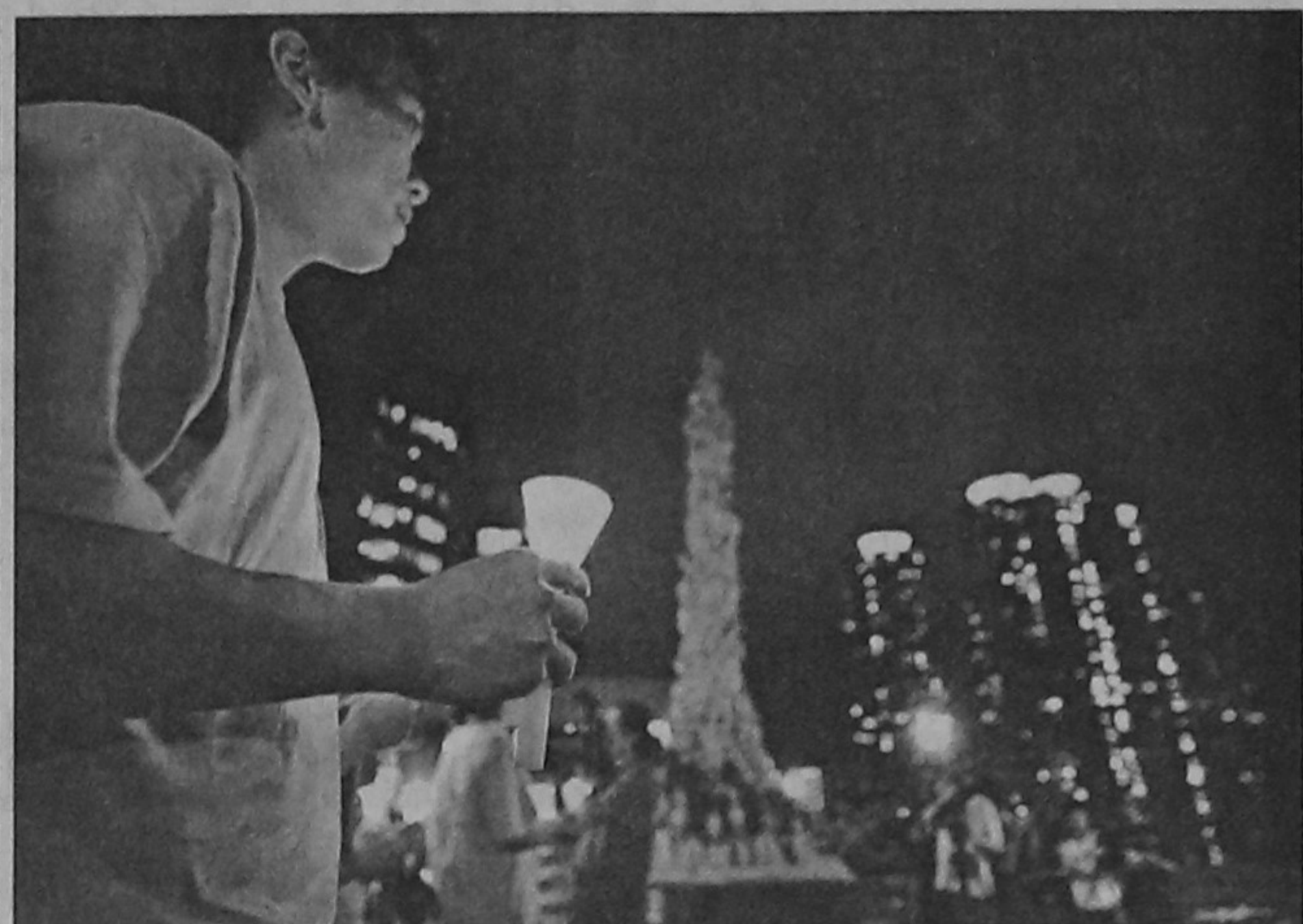


PHOTO: AFP

Students from the University of Hong Kong hold a candlelight vigil next to the pillar of shame (C) last night to mark the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Tiananmen crackdown, in Hong Kong. Today is the 20th anniversary of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. China imposed massive security on Tiananmen Square on the eve of the 20th anniversary of the crackdown on pro-democracy protests, as dissidents said they faced even tighter curbs.

Pakistani military to stay in Swat for a year

AP, Mingora

The military offensive to expel the Taliban from Pakistan's Swat Valley could take another two months to complete, and troops may have to stay for a year to prevent militants from retaking control, commanders said yesterday.

The armed forces have secured control over several key towns during the month-old campaign in the volatile northwestern region, but the fighting has uprooted some 3 million people from their homes and triggered a series of suspected reprisal attacks elsewhere in the country.

Chief army spokesman Maj Gen. Athar Abbas told reporters on a military-organized tour of Mingora town that it could take another two months of fighting to root the militants from all of their hide-outs in the lush, mountainous valleys of Swat and surrounding areas.

He cautioned, though, that two months timetable was "a rough estimate."

Earlier, Maj Gen Ijaz Awan, a senior commander in the eight-day battle for Mingora, said the military is gearing up for a fight in nearby Kabal town where top Taliban leaders

are suspected of being holed up.

"We have bottled them up very well, hopefully this will be a decisive battle here" in Kabal, said Awan. "Their deaths are vital to killing their myth."

The battle for Swat, launched in late April after the militants abandoned a peace deal with the government that gave them control of the region, is seen by Washington as a test of Pakistan's resolve against militants in the northwestern border region with Afghanistan.

The United States strongly backs the campaign, and it has enjoyed broad support among Pakistanis tired of militant attacks in the country that have killed hundreds of civilians.

But that support may sour if civilian casualties turn out to be high or if the government is perceived to deal badly with the refugee crisis. The government is also having to contend with a rise in militant attacks in other parts of the country that officials say an attempt to distract the military's attention from Swat.

One such attack was Monday night's ambush-kidnap of scores of students from a military cadet school in North Waziristan, near the Afghan border.

Lankan president calls for outreach to Tamils

AP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president urged the military yesterday to win over the Tamil people and to ensure they live without "fear or suspicion" in the wake of the army's victory over Tamil separatist rebels.

President Mahinda Rajapaksa addressed a military parade and victory ceremony that commemorated the government's defeat of the Tamil Tiger separatists last month after more than a quarter-century of conflict.

The government has held a succession of celebrations over the past two weeks, to the delight of the majority Sinhalese community. But many Tamils fear even harsher security crackdowns and worry their appeals for a greater voice in the government will now be brushed aside.

Speaking in the Tamil language, Rajapaksa

reached out to the minority group, saying the war was fought against the rebels, not against Tamils.

"Beloved soldiers now the war against the terrorists is over, you must now win over the hearts of our Tamil people," he said. "You must protect the Tamil-speaking people, and they must live without fear and suspicion. That is the responsibility of all of us."

The UN estimates tens of thousands of Tamil civilians were killed or wounded in the last months of fighting, and nearly 300,000 are being held in overcrowded displacement camps in the north.

Rajapaksa's speech was followed by a two-hour parade that included tanks, armored personnel carriers and artillery pieces. Naval craft skimmed the waters off the coast, jets flew overhead and paratroopers jumped out of planes.



PHOTO: AFP

Paul-Louis Arslanian (R), director of French Office for Inquiries and Analysis BEA, flanked by Alain Bouillard (L), in charge of the inquiry, speaks during a press conference in Paris yesterday. The BEA said it was not optimistic that the black box flight data recorders of an Air France airliner that crashed into the Atlantic would be found.

'There was no problem with Air France jet'

AP, Paris

A French accident investigator said yesterday there were no signs of problems with Air France Flight 447 before takeoff and it was unclear whether the chief pilot was at the controls when the plane plunged into the Atlantic Ocean.

The head of France's accident investigation agency, Paul-Louis Arslanian, also said he was "not optimistic" that rescuers will recover the plane's black boxes, believed to be on rugged terrain miles (kilometers) under the sea.

The plane, carrying 228 people, lost contact with ground controllers after leaving Rio de Janeiro for Paris on Sunday night. The crew made no distress call before the crash, but the plane's system sent an automatic message just before it disappeared, reporting lost cabin pressure and electrical failure.

The reason for the crash remained unclear, with fierce thunderstorms, lightning or a catastrophic combination of causes as possible theories.

Arslanian told a news conference at Le Bourget airport north of Paris that investigators were studying the plane's maintenance and

other records, and that there were "no elements" suggesting the plane had problems before takeoff.

He stressed the investigation was only beginning and was likely to last long. He said investigators didn't have enough information to determine whether the plane broke up in the air or upon impact with the sea.

"We don't even know the exact time of the accident," he said.

Asked whether the chief pilot was in the cockpit when the plane went down, Arslanian said, "We don't have for the time being the answer." Pilots on long-haul flights often take turns at the controls to remain alert.

"Until the last minute we all hoped it was just a normal loss of contact. It's very difficult to accept such a disaster," he said.

Military planes and ships from Brazil and France homed in Wednesday on the bobbing wreckage of the Air France jet, 400 miles (640 kilometers) northeast of the Fernando de Noronha islands off Brazil's northern coast, where an airplane seat, a fuel slick and pieces of white debris were spotted a day earlier.



PHOTO: AFP

South African president Jacob Zuma (L) and his wife Sizakele Khumalo (R) take the national salute ahead of the State of the Nation address at Parliament in Cape Town yesterday. Zuma promised to create half a million jobs this year in his first state of the nation address to parliament and said fighting poverty was his priority, a week after South Africa announced it was facing its worst recession in 17 years.



PHOTO: AFP

Meira Kumar greets the media yesterday after India's Parliament elected her as its first-ever female speaker.

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