

US offers help for Pakistan's anti-Taliban operations

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Washington

The US has thrown its full weight behind Pakistan's anti-Taliban military operations in its restive northwest, with two officials saying Washington would provide whatever assistance was required for their successful conclusion.

"Wherever those threats exist, we would be encouraging of the Pakistani military taking it to them head on and defeating them," Pentagon spokesman Geoff Morrell said at a briefing here Monday.

He was quick to add that Washington was not advising Islamabad on the conduct of the operations that began in three districts of the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) April 26 and which the Pakistani military says has resulted in the elimination of little over 1,300 Taliban fighters.

"I am not going to go through a strategy; we want them to go here next and there after that. I mean, they are an independent, sovereign nation that makes decisions on its own about what's in its interests in terms of self-defence,"

Morrell maintained.

"But we are clearly encouraged by the fact that, ever since there was this encroachment on Islamabad by the Taliban and associated other militant groups, that we are seeing an aggressive and sustained military operation in response," he added.

"We are, from a defence department perspective, very encouraged by the fact that they have continued these operations, and they show no signs of letting up at this point," Morrell contended.

Speaking separately, US Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair noted that for the first time, the Pakistani Army's anti-Taliban operations had the full support of the government and the public.

"For the first time, the Pakistan army operations in that part of the world have support of the government and the public. This is really different from the past, when the army went up and there was little backing," Blair said in an address to intelligence professionals Monday.

"I think these are having the effect of driving home to the public the seriousness

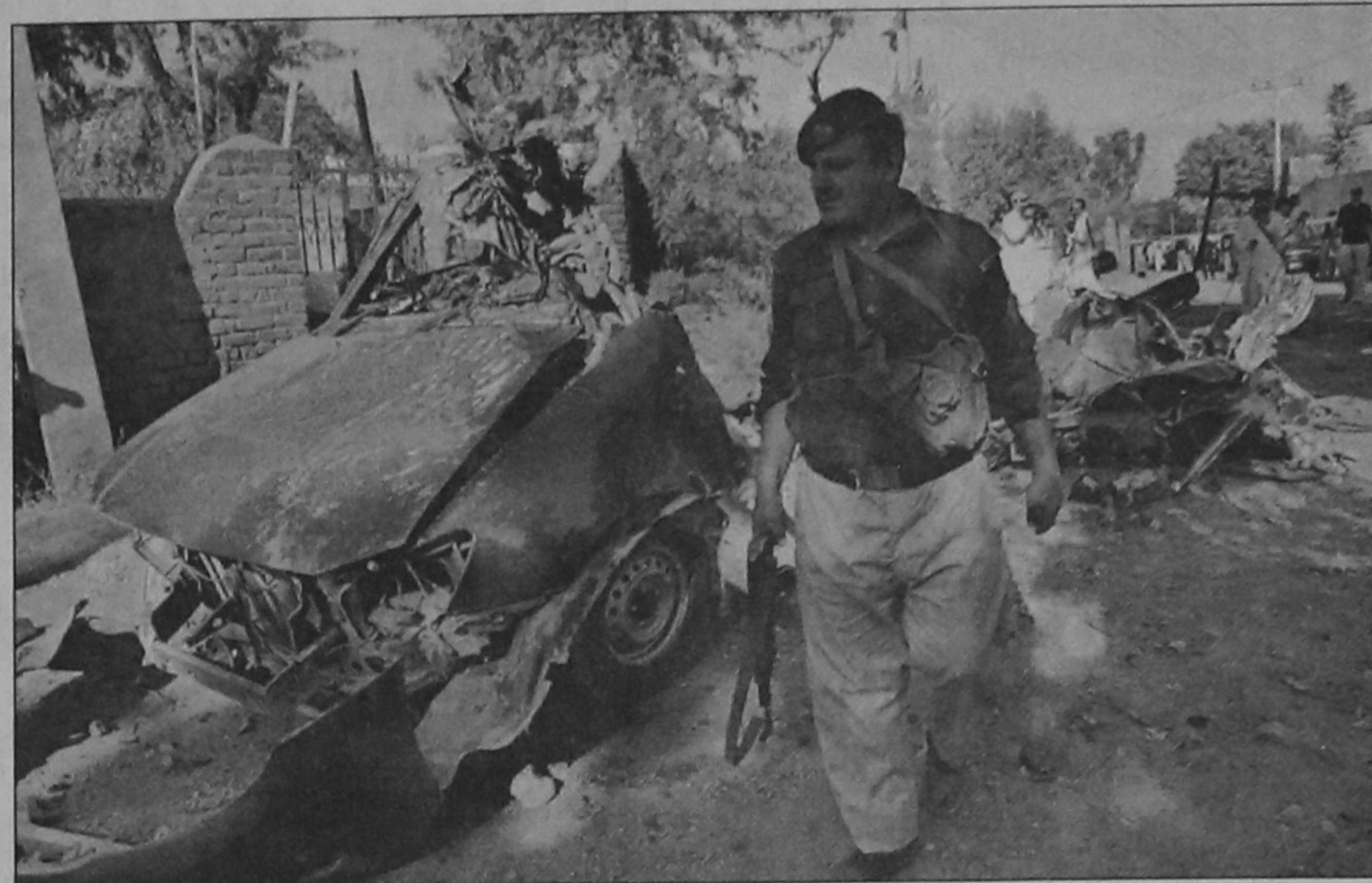
of the threat that's coming from that part of the country," Blair added.

The Pakistani military went into action after the Taliban reneged on a controversial peace deal with the NWFP government and instead moved south from their Swat headquarters and occupied Buner, which is just 100 km from Islamabad.

The operations had begun in Lower Dir, the home district of Taliban-backed radical cleric Sufi Mohammad who had brokered the peace deal and who is the father-in-law of Swat Taliban commander Maulana Fazlullah, and later spread to Buner and Swat.

The fighting has spurred the largest and quickest refugee exodus in recent time, with some three million civilians streaming out of the three districts.

The UN estimates that some \$543 million would be required for the relief and rehabilitation of the refugees. The US, which has already pledged \$110 million, has promised another \$200 million. Pakistan has also received pledges of \$244 million at an international donors conference in Islamabad in May.



Pakistani policemen inspect the site of a bomb blast on the outskirts of Peshawar on Monday. A policeman was killed and another wounded when a powerful roadside bomb tore through their vehicle in the northwestern Pakistani city.



Stranded Indian tourists walk down the road during a one-day strike called by Maoist-affiliated ethnic Tamuwan community in Pokhara, 140km west of Kathmandu on Monday. A strike called by Maoist sympathisers has paralysed large swathes of Nepal, forcing schools and businesses to shut and stranding tourists visiting Pokhara, a popular lakeside resort.

Myanmar court grants Suu Kyi 1 more witness

AP, Yangon

A Myanmar court has reinstated one of three barred defence witnesses in the trial of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Lawyers for Suu Kyi immediately said they would appeal the Tuesday decision by Yangon's Divisional Court in efforts to have all three testify at her trial.

The ruling party reversed a lower court decision to disqualify all but one witness in the trial that has sparked global outrage.

Suu Kyi faces five years in prison if convicted of violating the terms of her lengthy house arrest.

The case revolves around an American man who swam secretly to her closely guarded lakeside home and stayed two days.

Critics say Myanmar's military rulers are using the case as an excuse to keep Suu Kyi locked up.

Lawyers for Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi expressed hope Tuesday that a court would accept their request to reinstate three defence witnesses at a trial that has sparked global outrage.

Security was tightened at the Yangon Divisional Court ahead of the ruling. Truckloads of riot police were stationed near the court, where a group of pro-junta supporters gathered outside. Anti-government protests are illegal in Myanmar.

Musharraf's version of Akbar Bugti's murder is a 'white lie': Talal Bugti

ANI, Islamabad

Slain Baloch leader Nawab Akbar Bugti's son, Talal Bugti, has rebuked former Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf's claims that Akbar Bugti was not killed in a military operation.

Terming Musharraf's claims as a 'white lie', Bugti said the former President had himself congratulated security personnel in Burban for killing his father.

He said he would soon meet the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) chief Nawaz Sharif to devise a strategy for registering case against Musharraf.

In a written statement, Farroque strongly criticised the

40,000 civilians still in volatile Swat: Red Cross

AFP, AP, Geneva/ Islamabad

Some 40,000 civilians remain in Pakistan's troubled Swat region where they lack access to electricity and water amid a military assault against the Taliban, the Red Cross said yesterday.

"Every time we entered a village, hundreds of people asked for help," said Michael von Bergen, an International Committee of the Red Cross representative who was part of a convoy delivering aid in the region last weekend.

"Those who did not leave are now desperate. They need food, clean water and working medical facilities," he added in a statement.

The situation in the area "remains volatile," assessed the ICRC, adding that a curfew remains in place in Swat.

Pakistan launched its push into Lower Dir, Buner and Swat in late April and early May after the Taliban advanced to within 100 kilometres (60 miles) of Islamabad, violating a deal to put three million people under Sharia law in exchange for peace.

Pakistan has not released civilian casualty figures as a result of the operations but says more than 1,300 rebels have been killed. The fighting has displaced around 2.4 million people.

Meanwhile, a group of Taliban fighters under siege by hundreds of angry tribesmen tried to sneak to another village in northwest Pakistan, only to find themselves cornered there too, an official said Tuesday.

A citizens' militia that sprang up over the weekend to avenge a deadly suicide bombing at a mosque in Upper Dir district appeared unwilling to stop pursuing the Islamist fighters, underscoring the rising anti-Taliban sentiment in Pakistan.

Lanka extends anti-terror laws despite defeat of Tamil Tigers

AFP, Colombo

with them."

The state of emergency allows the government to arrest and detain suspects for indefinite periods without trial.

The military has detained more than 9,200 Tigers, but fear that rebel cells may still be active across the island.

Sri Lanka has been under a state of emergency since 1983 with a few short breaks in between. Parliament must vote on the state of emergency every month.

The United Nations has estimated that up to 100,000 people may have been killed in the island's decades-long Tamil separatist conflict.

Thai army chief accuses militants of mosque attack

AFP, NARATHIWAT, Thailand

regional army commanders, police and security forces

from Thailand's three southernmost provinces at a military camp, but officials said

he did not visit the attack site in Cho-ai-rong district.

Thai Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva pledged to curb the violence in the south, where a flare-up in unrest over the past week has left 27 people dead, including those killed on Monday.

"I am worried and regret this attack that has killed or wounded so many people. My government will do its utmost to improve the situation," Abhisit told reporters.

"The sooner we resolve the case the better, otherwise they (militants) will use this incident to incite further unrest," he added.

About 1,000 sombre villagers gathered near the mosque on Tuesday, offering prayers for the victims as locals collected the bodies of eight of the dead, including the local imam, witnesses said.

Several villagers said they believed security forces carried out the raid, which also left 12 wounded, saying the masked gunmen had attacked the mosque from several sides and that insurgents would not strike at a place of worship.

40 Taliban killed in Afghan operations

US failed to follow airstrike rules: Pentagon

AFP, Kandahar/Washington

More than 40 Taliban militants have been killed in a week-long operation to stabilise a southern province ahead of August elections, a police chief said yesterday.

The operation focused on an area of the southern province of Zabul near the provincial capital Qalat, where the government has weak authority with one district in Taliban hands, the provincial police chief said.

"During one week in different incidents and different areas, more than 40 Taliban fighters were killed and most of their bodies were left in the fighting area," Abdur Rahman Sarjang told AFP.

Six suspects were arrested and a haul of motorcycles and weapons were seized, he said.

The operation has been conducted by international troops and Afghan forces, he said. Two Afghan policemen were also killed and four wounded.

Sarjang said the operation would continue until the area was stable enough to allow people to cast their ballots at the August 20 presidential and provincial council elections.

A spokesman for the Taliban, Yousaf Ahmad, confirmed the clashes in Zabul but said that security forces had suffered heavy casualties. Taliban information is often incorrect or exaggerated.

A hand grenade that exploded near US troops in eastern Afghanistan on Tuesday killed a boy and wounded more than 40 people, including three foreign soldiers, officials and witnesses said.

An Afghan witness said the grenade was thrown by US troops into a crowd that had gathered around a crashed military vehicle, but the Nato-led force said the weapon was tossed by insurgents.

"More than 40 people including children

and women suffering from shrapnel wounds have been admitted to our hospital so far," said a doctor in the northeastern town of Asadabad.

"Some of the wounded are in bad condition. A 13-year-old boy was killed," said the doctor, Ihsanullah Fazli.

Meanwhile, the Pentagon said on Monday that US forces failed to follow procedures in carrying out deadly air strikes last month in western Afghanistan in an incident that killed dozens of civilians.

"There were some problems with tactics, techniques and procedures, the way in which close air support was supposed to have been executed in this case," press secretary Geoff Morrell told a news conference.

Morrell cited the conclusions of a military investigation into US bombing raids in the May 4 incident in western Farah province, which the Kabul government says claimed 140 civilian lives.

The probe found that a B-1 bomber involved in the incident lost contact with its intended target temporarily, Morrell said.

"That plane, because of how it takes its bombing routes, had to break away from positive identification of their target at one point to make its elongated approach," he said.

The finding on the B-1 aircraft was "the fundamental complaint that was rendered I believe from this investigation."

But Morrell said it was unclear if the failure to follow certain procedures resulted in civilian deaths.

"It was just noted as one of the problems associated with these events, not that it was the cause of the civilian casualties," he said.

The investigation was "exhaustive" and it shows "the guys on the ground who are involved in this incident took great pains to limit civilian casualties, to target those who had attacked them," he said.

River-gobblers must be defeated

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they have no alternative to launching a movement against the government for the way it is running the country and parliament.

"But it does not mean that we are interested only in raising movements. We will join the House proceedings as we are elected lawmakers," Sirsar said.

After the press briefing, the BNP lawmakers went to the office of Speaker Abdul Hamid to place their demand for allocating one more seat in the front row on the left side of the speaker's podium.

Talking to The Daily Star, Farroque said, "We have urged the speaker to allocate one more seat."

In a written statement, Farroque strongly criticised the

lawmakers for their

opinions on the problem.

"I found something rare in these photos. I would not have believed that the conditions of our rivers are so bad had I not seen the photos," a visitor wrote in the comment book.

Khokan Jasim, a freedom fighter, said the rivers should be saved in the same spirit as safeguarding the independence of the country.

Those who pollute and grab rivers are enemies of the country, they should be dealt with an iron fist," he said.

Shahjahan Ali Shajju, a dramatist and director, wrote in the comment book no one in the country is safe.

"We must continue the united movement to save the

rivers, for our own survival," he wrote.

Kazi Habibullah, an official of Water and Sewerage Authority (Wasa), wrote that the worst in a five-year insurgency that has left 3,700 people dead, but Anupong said rebels were trying to pin the blame on the authorities for "barbaric" acts.

They absolutely want to raise this issue to a level of international concern, by making it seem like state authorities are violently cracking down on villagers," he told reporters in Bangkok before leaving for Narathiwat.

Industries Minister Dilip Barua visited the photos on display at the exhibition. The Daily Star Managing Editor Syed Fahim Munain and Deputy Editor (News) Inam Ahmed accompanied him.

Baul singers also presented folk songs on rivers during the ceremony.

Anupong later met

the visitors, for their opinions on the problem.

Visitors from different walks of life who visited the exhibition at the park admired the dis-