

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 a 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 serious-

ness 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.

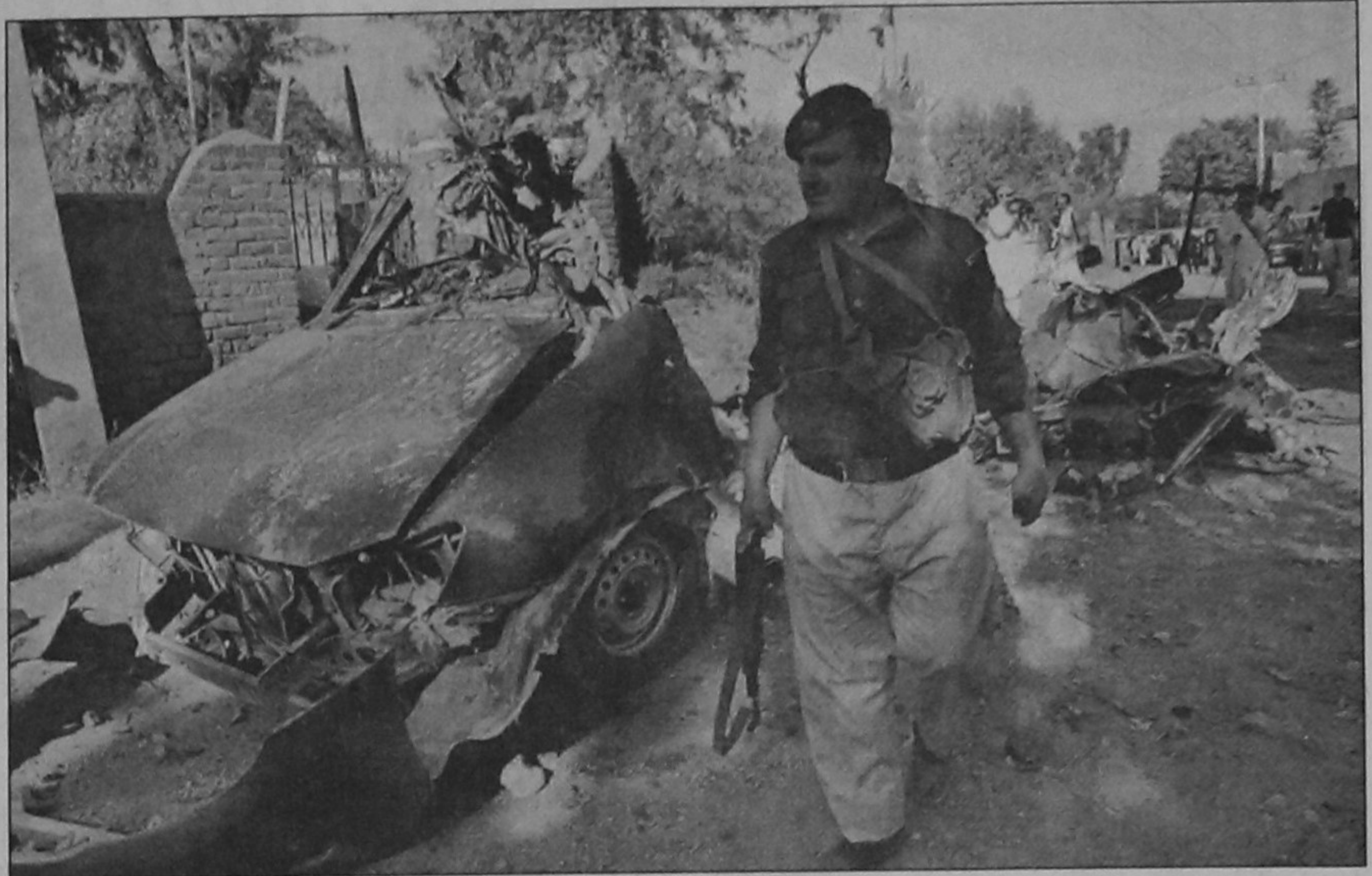


PHOTO: AFP

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.



PHOTO: AFP

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 partly 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 Bhurban 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.

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 remain 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

Sri Lanka's government yesterday extended tough anti-terror laws, arguing that remnants of the defeated Tamil Tiger rebels could still try to stage a comeback.

Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickrematunge told parliament that the government wanted to extend the state of emergency by a month despite last month's defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the deaths of their leaders.

"There could be fire beneath the embers," he said. "If there are elements who still support terrorism, we will deal

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

Thailand's army chief on yesterday accused separatist militants of killing 11 people at a mosque in the country's south, denying claims that security forces were behind the attack.

The government ordered General Anupong Paojinda to fly to the volatile region a day after masked gunmen stormed the mosque in Narathiwat province and sprayed worshippers with bullets during evening prayers.

Villagers blamed Thai forces for the attack, one of 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 the "barbaric act."

"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.

After the attack militants made false claims against the authorities. They want to terrify villagers by creating a climate of fear," he said.

Anupong later met

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.

India to address 'outstanding issues' to boost ties with neighbours: FM

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India has promised to work with its South Asian neighbours to ensure that "outstanding issues" are addressed and pitched for inter-connectivity among the countries of the region.

Addressing the heads of foreign missions here on Monday for the first time since assuming office about ten days ago, External Affairs Minister SM Krishna said, "we will work with our neighbours to ensure that outstanding issues are addressed and the full potential of our region is realised."

"India has an abiding interest in the stability and prosperity of its neighbours. We also believe that a prosperous and economically vibrant India is an asset and opportunity for our region. In this new term of our government, we look forward to further strengthening our relationship with our neighbours," he said.

Krishna pointed out that relations are further strengthened by the bonds of history, cultural affinities and geography and said, "South Asia has always prospered when it has been inter-connected. We therefore hope to re-establish these links towards greater economic integration."

"We will make every effort to take the Saarc agenda forward through deeper cooperation in South Asia that focuses on the primary task of reducing poverty and improving the quality of life of the common people," he said.

Krishna also asserted that India will engage more closely with the global community to deal with international terrorism "which threatens us all".

He said India looked at cooperation with Asean as an important dimension of its diplomacy in the 21st century as reflected in its "Look East" policy, which "is built on a strong economic foundation and a cooperative paradigm of converging security interests".

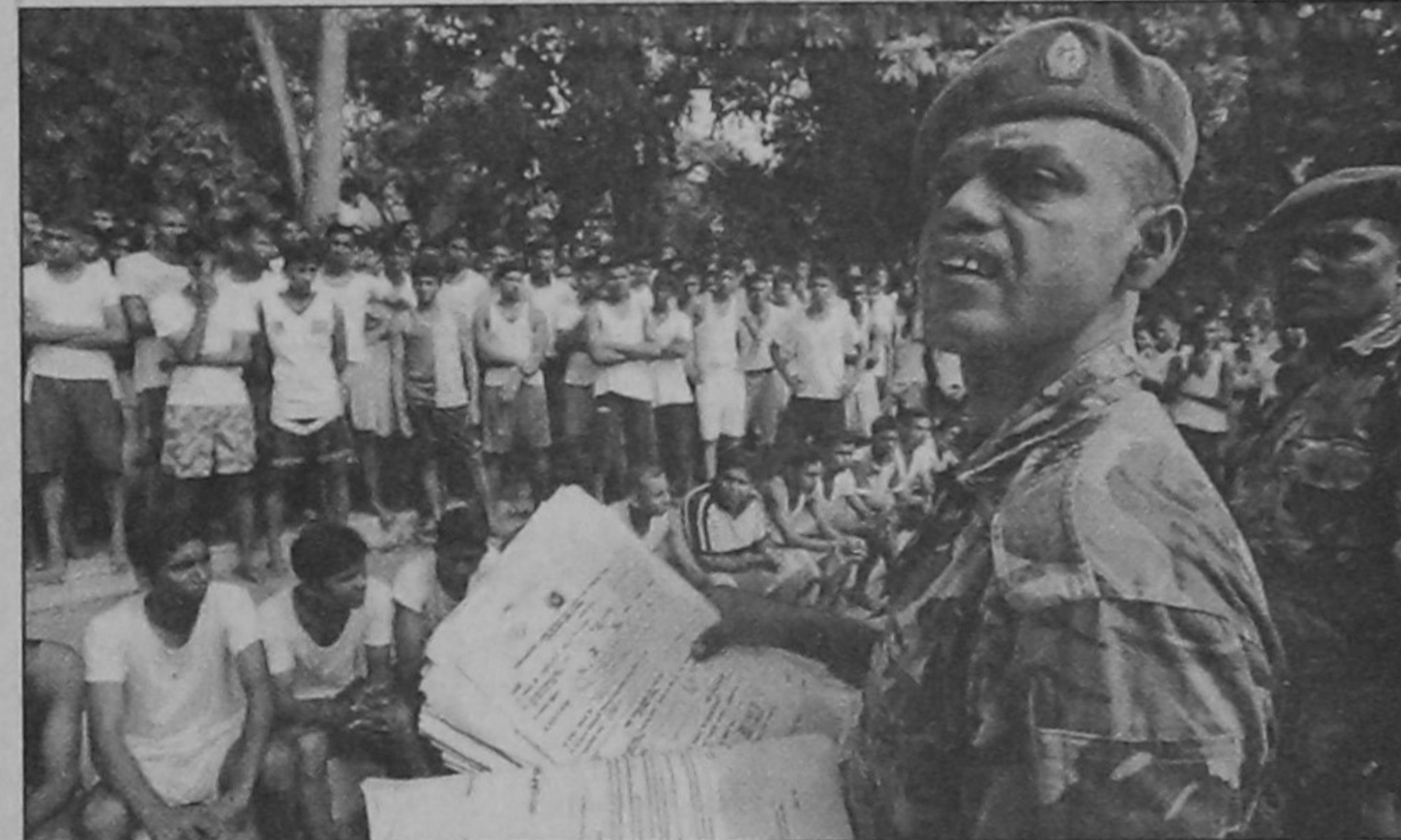


PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan police commandos supervise the physical training of new recruits in Colombo yesterday. Police have stepped up their recruitment drive, just weeks after government troops ended the over three decades old armed rebellion of the Tamil Tigers. The government plans to deploy more security forces in the newly liberated north and east of the island.

BNP hints at return to JS

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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," Sircar 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."

Later at night, Abdul Hamid told The Daily Star, "I have requested them (the BNP) to return to House proceedings and speak out their demand there. I am trying to resolve the seating arrangement crisis."

At the briefing the opposition chief whip said the BNP Parliamentary Party would sit in a meeting this week to decide whether to join parliament or not.

Farroque added that they have all kinds of preparation for joining the budget session. "We hope that the speaker will bring a respectable solution to the seating arrangement crisis," he said.

In a written statement, Farroque strongly criticised the

government, saying, "They are astonished at the way the government is behaving with a successful former prime minister and incumbent opposition leader Khaleda Zia."

He claimed that the government is not allowing papers of daily House proceedings sent from parliament to enter Khaleda's residence.

"The car sent from parliament for Khaleda Zia's use has also not been allowed to enter her residence since Sunday," Farroque added. "We have no alternative to launching a movement against the way the government is running the country and parliament," he said.

Ten BNP lawmakers were present at the briefing.

River-gobblers must be defeated

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not be allowed to operate, he said.

Referring to the successful ban on use of polythene and black smoke emitting three-wheelers, the minister said, "We are sure we can save our environment, and the campaign will be successful."

Bangladesh Paribesh Andolon's air and noise control programme committee member Secretary Sirajul Islam Mollah also expressed solidarity with the campaign.

"The campaign must continue until the objectives are met. We must be careful so that the government does not retreat from its position to reclaim all rivers," he said.

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

played photos depicting river pollution and encroachment. They also expressed 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 Shaju, 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 (Was), wrote that the way Turag has been encroached, it will not be able to accommodate the rainwater from Dhaka city during the monsoons, ultimately putting the city under water.

Lutfunnahar Mili, another visitor, wrote: "Let not the slogans remain as mere slogans. We want to see the rivers flowing again."

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

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