

Pak jets pound Taliban bases

Army awaits orders to stage a full-scale offensive on South Waziristan

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani jets pounded Taliban sanctuaries after a dramatic hostage siege at the army headquarters, as the military geared up yesterday for a full ground assault to take on the increasingly brazen rebels.

The airstrikes late Sunday and early Monday on Taliban strongholds in South Waziristan and Bajaur districts left at least 31 suspected militants dead, officials said, although there was no independent verification of the toll.

The latest of a months-long series of air raids designed to soften up the rebels came after suspected Taliban-linked gunmen staged an audacious daytime attack on the military command centre near Islamabad on Saturday.

In total, eight militants, 11 soldiers and three hostages were killed in the crisis that unfolded at the heart of the military establishment in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, which ended with a commando raid

Sunday.

Three Pakistani commandos died in hospital Monday raising the death toll from a day-long hostage drama at the army headquarters over the weekend to 22, a military statement said.

The army said it was now awaiting orders to stage a full-scale offensive on the Pakistani Taliban seat of power in South Waziristan, a rugged mountainous region bordering Afghanistan which lies outside direct government control.

"The army is fully prepared to launch an operation against Tehreek-e-Taliban," said a military spokesman, referring to the al-Qaeda-linked Islamist militant group TTP.

"We are waiting for government orders... The government has decided in principle to launch an operation against Taliban in Waziristan."

Interior Minister Rehman Malik has said that recent attacks -- including a car bomb Friday that

killed 52 people in the northwestern city of Peshawar -- may hasten the assault on the area.

"An operation against the Taliban in Waziristan is a must," Syed Shahab Ali Shah, the top administrative official of South Waziristan, told AFP.

"According to my information the government has decided to launch an operation against Waziristan's Taliban, but I do not know about the date."

Under intense US pressure to take on the militants, the Pakistani army claimed success in an offensive against the Taliban earlier this year in the one-time tourism paradise of Swat valley.

The army also said it had driven Taliban fighters out of the remote Bajaur district west of Swat after a six-month operation launched in August last year.

Analysts say, however, that an operation in Waziristan will be a tougher task than flushing militants out of Swat, with the Taliban entrenched in a hostile

terrain and able to slip easily across the Afghan frontier.

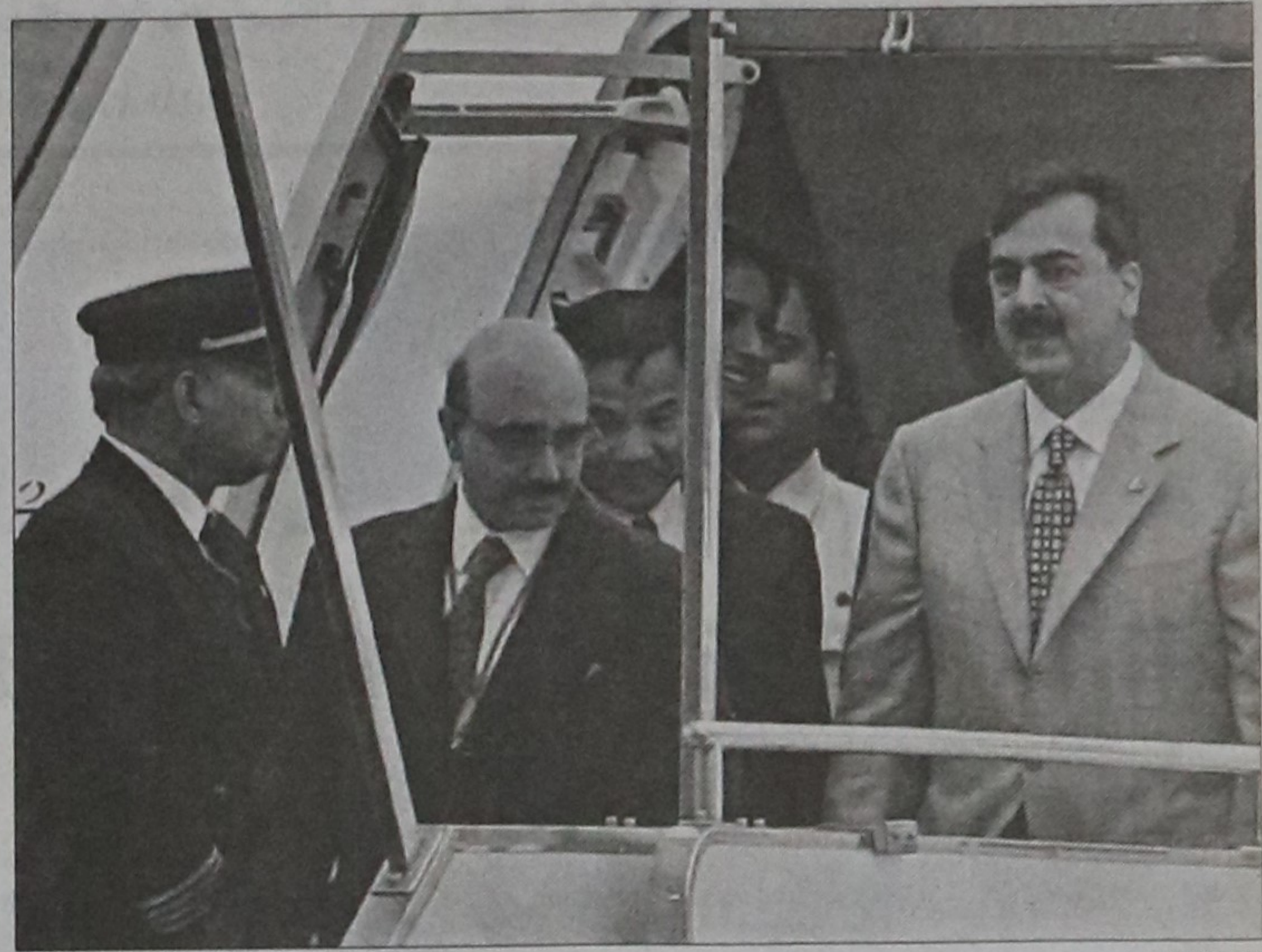
And a wave of attacks in the past week show the Islamist threat is far from quashed.

Another blast on Monday killed four security personnel at a bazaar in a district adjoining Swat, in an attack that police said was likely the latest in a deadly series of suicide bombings.

"It was at the first security check post, where an apparent suicide attacker managed to reach the checkpoint and blew himself up," Shargha district police chief Gul Wali Khan said.

Pressure is mounting on the military to follow up the Swat push with a full-fledged ground offensive on TTP bastions in Waziristan.

"An entire international community that includes the US, India and China wants Pakistan to take the battle to the (headquarters) of the Taliban in South Waziristan," Pakistan's Daily Times said in an editorial.



Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani arrives at Beijing airport yesterday. Pakistan and China will explore further opportunities to strengthen their strategic cooperation in various areas including trade, defence and energy sectors during the four-day visit, Pakistani Ambassador Masood Khan told a press conference.



Supporters of former Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif's PML-N party march in Lahore yesterday. The PML-N observes October 12 as a black day in commemoration of former president general Pervez Musharraf's coup against the PML-N government in 1999.

Pak court scraps case against Hafiz Saeed

CNN-IBN, New Delhi

Lahore High Court on Monday dismissed two FIRs lodged against Lashkar-e-Taiba front Jamaat-ud Dawa chief Hafiz Mohammad Saeed.

The High Court dismissed the FIRs lodged under Anti-Terrorism Act against Saeed observing that Jamaat-ud Dawa was not a proscribed organisation.

"Those FIRs have been dismissed straight away because Jamaat-ud Dawa was not a proscribed organisation. Hafiz Saeed is a free man again," said Saeed's lawyer AK Dogar.

Saeed had challenged the FIRs against him by police under the Anti-Terrorism Act for inciting people to wage jihad.

Police in Faisalabad in Punjab province had filed two FIRs against Saeed for making speeches in the city in which he allegedly called on people to wage jihad or holy war against infidels and sought funds for Jamaat-ud Dawa.

At that time also Dogar had claimed the Jamaat was not a banned group and restrictions imposed on by the UN Security Council did not apply in a "sovereign country" like Pakistan.

India successfully test fires Prithvi-II missiles

ANI, Chandipur

Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) scientists on Monday successfully test fired in quick succession two Prithvi-II surface-to-surface short-range ballistic missiles, from the Integrated Test Range (ITR) here.

According to the DRDO sources, the indigenously developed missiles were test fired successfully at 10:28 am and 10:33 am, from mobile launchers.

The tests were conducted as part of user trials by the army, and both the missiles

had different target ranges, sources added.

Prithvi-II, a highly sophisticated single stage liquid propelled missile, is equipped with inertial navigation system.

The missile, which is about nine metres in length and one metre in width can carry conventional as well as nuclear warheads and has a range of 350 kilometres.

The trajectories of the missiles were tracked by a battery of long-range, multi-function radars and electro-optic telemetry stations at different locations for post-launch analysis.

US wants 'new relationship' if Karzai reelected: Hillary

AFP, London/Washington

The United States would want a "new relationship" with Hamid Karzai if he is re-elected as Afghan president, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said yesterday.

She underlined how "helpful" Karzai has been and the progress made under his government since the 2001 US-led invasion of the country, but declined to be drawn on the outcome of disputed and fraud-tainted elections.

"Karzai has been very

helpful on many fronts. We often overlook the progress that's been made in Afghanistan because of the serious challenges that still exist," she told BBC radio.

"We are very clear that, if this election results in his being re-elected, there must be a new relationship between him and the people of Afghanistan, and between his government and the governments of countries like yours and mine," she told the British broadcaster.

She described the situation as "complex" following the

elections in August, which have been overshadowed by the fraud allegations, mostly aimed at Karzai, Washington's tainted ally.

"Clearly we expect more, we are going to be working toward more, and we are anxiously awaiting the final outcome of the election," she said.

The UN special representative to Afghanistan, Kai Eide, acknowledged Sunday for the first time that the country's presidential election had been tainted by "significant" and "widespread" fraud.

N Korea tests 5 missiles

AFP, Seoul

North Korea test-fired five short-range missiles off its east coast yesterday and banned ships from the area from October 10-20, a South Korean official said.

The official, speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity, confirmed a Yonhap news agency report of the launches.

The official, speaking to AFP on condition of anonymity, also said the North has warned fishing boats to stay clear of parts of its coast from October 10-20 -- indicating more possible launches.

Yonhap news agency said

the missiles were fired from south of Musudan-ri.

The launches were the first reported since early July, when the North fired four short-range missiles believed to be surface-to-ship types.

It followed these with a salvo of seven longer-range ballistic missiles on July 4, apparently to mark US Independence Day, attracting sharp criticism from the United Nations.

The North has frequently launched short-range missiles off its east and west coasts in recent years. South Korean defence officials describe these as part of military exercises but the

launches are sometimes timed to make a political point.

The North is under pressure to return to six-nation nuclear disarmament talks. It quit the forum in April and staged its second nuclear test in May.

Last week the North told visiting Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao it was willing to return to the talks but only after direct negotiations with the United States.

Washington has said it is ready for bilateral talks but merely to persuade the North to return to the multilateral forum. It has not set a date for such talks.

Yemen army kills 59 Shia rebels

AFP, Sanaa

The Yemeni army said yesterday it had "purged" pockets of resistance of Shia rebels near the northern city of Saada, and killed 59 fighters in various operations.

A military spokesman quoted by the website of the defence ministry 26sep.net said that the operation in the city of Anad resulted in the deaths of 37 Zaidi Shia rebels, who had been using the area as a launchpad for attacks against Saada.

Another five rebels were killed in clashes with the army, while seven others died when attempting an attack on the army in Jebel Samaa, near Saada, the spokesman said.

In Harf Sufyan in the Amran

province, the army attacked a vehicle carrying rebels, killing 10 of them, the statement added.

It said on the other hand that seven teachers had been kidnapped by the rebels in Aal al-Waqis of Saqain district and were taken to unknown place.

The army statements could not be independently verified.

Fighting between government forces and the Zaidi rebels entered its third month on Sunday and there is no prospect for a ceasefire in sight.

Dozens of people have been killed or wounded and tens of thousands have been forced to flee their homes, resulting in a humanitarian crisis with a dire shortage of food and aid material.

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India's ruling Congress party and main opposition BJP face a key political battle when elections to legislatures in three states -- Maharashtra, Haryana and Arunachal Pradesh -- are held today.

More than a month of heated campaigning for the polls, that saw top leaders of both Congress and BJP addressing a series of rallies in the three states, ended Sunday evening setting the stage for balloting in the three states where Congress is in power.

The biggest talking point of today's elections is of course Maharashtra and whether Congress and its ally Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) led by Sharad Pawar will be able to

make it a hat-trick in the state having ruled it since 1999 after toppling BJP-Shiv Sena alliance in the elections.

Congress is heading the coalition in Maharashtra where the state assembly has the strength of 288 seats for which 3,559 candidates are in fray.

In Haryana, the Jat heartland in north India, Congress appears well set to retain power for a second consecutive five-year term under the leadership of Chief Minister Bhupinder Singh Hooda as the opposition is totally fragmented. Jats constitute 25 per cent of the state's voters.

For the 90-member Haryana legislature, 1222 candidates are in fray and this is the first time BJP is contesting the elections without alliance.

In Arunachal Pradesh, Congress' principal challengers for majority in the 60-member assembly are NCP, BJP, Trinamool Congress and People's Party of Arunachal. Congress' main worry is the presence of 14 of its lawmakers in the dissolved legislature who are contesting this time as candidates of NCP, Trinamool Congress and BJP.

Arunachal Pradesh had over the last six years witnessed the drama of frequent switch in political loyalties. In 2003, most of Congress and regional outfit Arunachal Congress members of the assembly changed sides overnight to give BJP, which was then ruling India, to enable the saffron party form its first government in the North East.



Indian polling officials carry Electronic Voting Machines (EVM) at a temporary election distribution cell as they head to a polling booth in Itanagar, capital of northeastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh yesterday, just a day ahead of state assembly elections.

Greens protest at British parliament

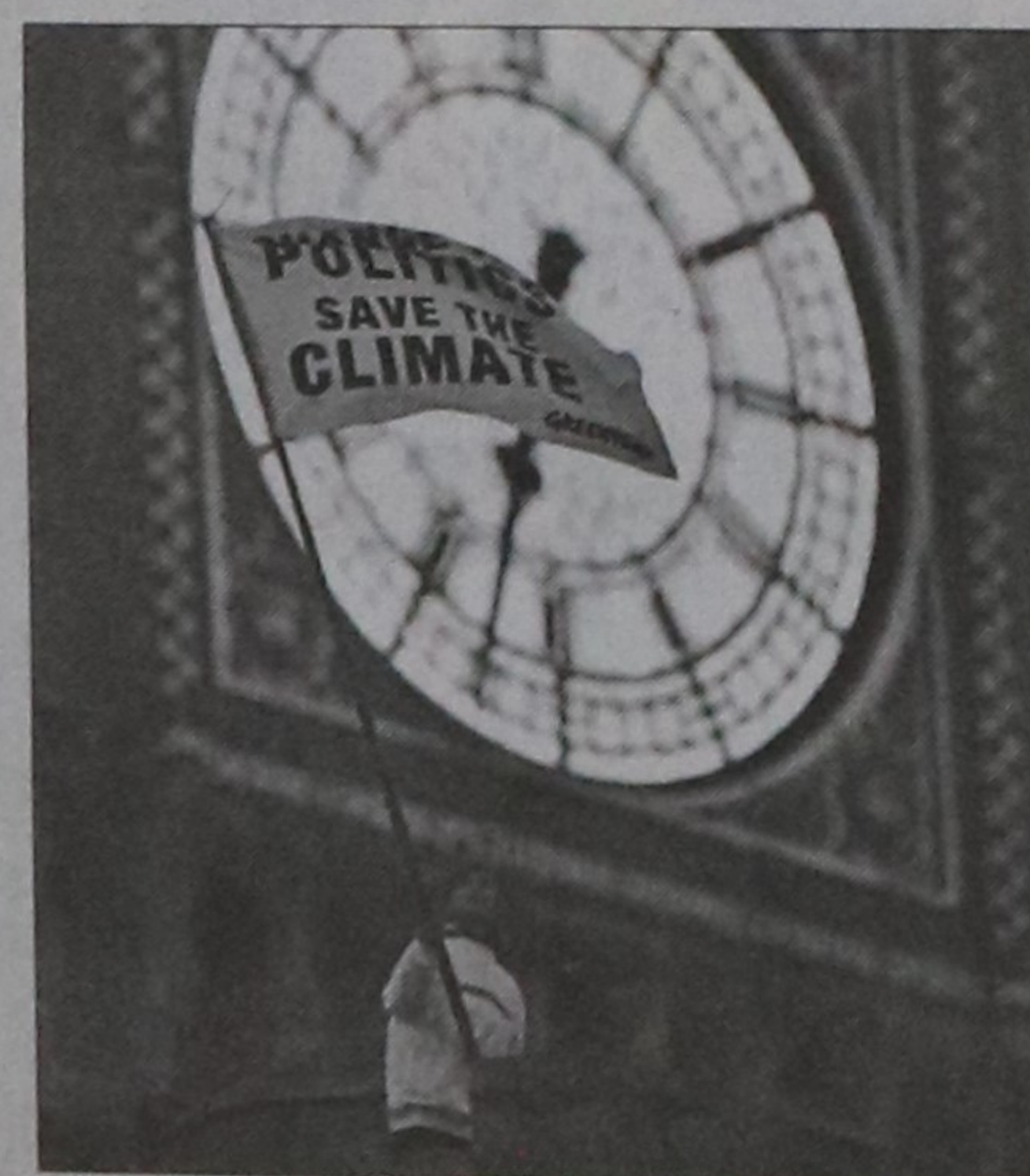
AFP, London

Twenty-three people who climbed on to the roof of Britain's Houses of Parliament for a protest to urge ministers to overhaul climate change policies have been arrested, police said yesterday.

The campaigners, who unveiled banners saying "Change the politics, save the climate", want action before the UN's Copenhagen summit in December and are targeting parliament as lawmakers return from their near three-month summer break.

"We've got to raise the temperature of the debate because we are really running out of time," said Greenpeace executive director John Sauven.

"Parliament is opening and there is an election looming so this is a golden opportunity for the political parties to really think about the future."



A Greenpeace activist holds a "Save the Climate" flag in front of the Big Ben after Greenpeace demonstrators scaled the roof of the Houses of Parliament to protest against perceived government inaction on climate change yesterday in London.

Turkish PM casts doubt on landmark deal with Armenia

AFP, Istanbul

Turkey's prime minister cast doubt Sunday on landmark deals signed with Armenia to end decades of hostility, seeming to pose conditions on the opening of their common border.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan's comments came less than a day after top US and European officials, including US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, engaged in frenetic diplomacy to help Armenia and Turkey overcome last-minute differences.

The two countries eventually signed historic pacts to normalise ties and open the border at a ceremony in Zurich Saturday, but not before a three-hour delay and a decision to scrap speeches that were to be made there because

of a dispute over them.

At a meeting of officials from his party on Sunday, Erdogan raised concerns over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region in Azerbaijan, which has long been one of the stumbling blocks toward reconciliation between Turkey and Armenia.

"We want all the borders to be opened at the same time... but as long as Armenia has not withdrawn from Azerbaijan territory that it is occupying, Turkey cannot have a positive attitude on this subject," Erdogan said.

Armenia has rejected any link between Nagorno-Karabakh -- an Armenian-majority enclave which broke free from Turkish-backed Azerbaijan after a war -- and its reconciliation efforts with Turkey.

Jackson's new song released

AFP, New York

A previously unreleased song by Michael Jackson entitled "This Is It" was unveiled to the world yesterday almost four months after the star's death.

The track was released at the stroke of midnight at www.MichaelJackson.com, marking "yet another exciting moment in music history for one of the world's most revered artists," Sony Music Entertainment said in a statement.

The recording features backing vocals by Michael's brothers and will be played during the closing sequence of the forthcoming film "Michael Jackson's This Is It" and feature on a two-disc CD set of the same name.

Afghan vote fraud probe panel member resigns over 'interference'

AP, Kabul

A member of a UN-backed panel set up to investigate fraud complaints in Afghanistan's presidential election resigned Monday, blaming what he called "the interference of foreigners" and dealing another blow to a vote already mired in controversy. The fraud panel is expected to decide this week whether to throw out enough votes to force a runoff between President Hamid Karzai and his top challenger, Abdullah Abdullah.

Maulavi Mustafa Barakzia was one of the only two Afghans on the Electoral Complaints Commission. He alleged Monday that the three foreigners on the panel one American, one Canadian and one Dutch were "making all

decisions on their own" without consultation.

UN spokesman Aleem Siddique said the resignation was "regrettable but the work of the Election Complaints Commission must continue. The Afghan people need to see an election outcome that faithfully reflects their will as soon as possible."

A day earlier, the top UN mission chief, Kai Eide, acknowledged "widespread fraud" had occurred in the Aug. 20 presidential election and said the complaints commission was working to determine the extent of it.

Eide has been heavily criticised by his deputy, Peter Galbraith, who had alleged that the UN mission chief played down allegations of widespread ballot-stuffing by Karzai's supporters.