

Pak army's 'mother of all battles' might turn futile as Taliban slip away

ANI, London

Though Pakistan has announced an all out offensive, a 'mother of all battles', against the Taliban in South Waziristan, local residents see the offensive as futile as they believe many Taliban have slipped away into other neighbouring areas.

There were reports of Taliban compounds being bombed by helicopter gunships as troops moved out in three columns from Razmak to the north, Jandola to the east and Shakai in the west. But people in the region believe the operation has come a bit late.

"Many Taliban fighters, including Uzbek militants, Arabs and Mehsud tribesmen have slipped away into the neighbouring Orakzai agency to dodge the army onslaught and live to fight another day," The Telegraph quoted local residents, as saying.

They said real fighting is yet to commence, as most of the Taliban have retreated into mountains surrounding Makeen and Ladha, and are waiting for the right opportunity to make their moves.

Countries, which consider Islamabad as an important ally in the 'war on terror', have welcomed the Pakistan Army's latest offensive, but they also know it may not necessarily help their

struggle against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Pakistani forces have already made it clear that they would target Taliban fighters from the Mehsud tribe, which have allied themselves with al-Qaeda in launching audacious attacks on country's military institutions, which means that operation will not target the infamous 'Haqqani network', which has targeted Nato forces in Afghanistan on numerous occasions in the recent past.

Pakistan's reluctance to target anti-Nato Taliban factions has worried both Britain and the United States, but refusal to counter certain extremist groups has neither impressed the people who against western involvement in the region, the newspaper further said.

"The Pakistan army is supporting the Americans, so they (the Jihadis) consider the Pakistan army to be like American and Nato forces," said an Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) officer Khalid Khawaja.

Khawaja, who describes al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden as his friend, accused the US of trying to destroy Pakistan and declare it a failed state.

"America is trying to destroy Pakistan as a state. You (Pakistan) have to turn your back on America and they (America) have to get out of Afghanistan. Otherwise, this will never end," he said.

100,000 flee Pak offensive

AFP, Islamabad

More than 100,000 people have fled South Waziristan, the lawless area on the Afghan border where Pakistan has launched a major ground assault against the Taliban, officials said Sunday.

"Around 100,000 people have been displaced. They are settling in neighbouring Tank and Dera Ismail Khan districts," Colonel Waseem Shahid from an army support group told AFP.

"Some 80,000 people had already left Waziristan before the operation. More people are coming out. In the last two days about 1,500 families or you can say some 22,000 people have left the area," he added.

Pakistani officials say the number could rise to 200,000 with more families expected to leave in coming days, despite an indefinite curfew slapped on parts of South Waziristan, normally home to a population of 600,000.

A spokeswoman for the UN refugee agency in Pakistan confirmed that local authorities had registered more than 100,000 displaced.



An internally displaced Pakistani family, riding on a vehicle with their belongings, cross a security post in Dera Ismail Khan on Saturday as they flee homes amid military operations against Taliban militants in South Waziristan.

US military plane forced to land in India

AFP, Mumbai

Indian military officials ordered a United States air plane carrying 205 Marines to land at Mumbai airport yesterday over an airspace clearance dispute.

"The Indian Air Force had to instruct the US plane to land as it did not have the mandatory clearance required to fly in Indian airspace," Indian Air Force spokesman TK Singha told AFP.

The chartered plane was on its way from Fujairah in the United Arab Emirates to Bangkok when it was forced to land.

All passengers remained on board as US authorities applied for the missing paperwork, Singha said.

India to send Mumbai attack evidence to Pakistan

PTI, Mumbai

Statements of key witnesses in the Mumbai attack case in an anti-terror court in Mumbai will be forwarded by India to Pakistan to be used as evidence in the trial there, Special Public Prosecutor Ujjwal Nikam said in Mumbai yesterday.

The court has allowed the prosecution's plea for certified copies of the statements and within a day or two they will be forwarded to Pakistan through diplomatic channels, Nikam told PTI.

The statement of witnesses includes the deposition of a magistrate before whom the lone captured Pakistani gunman Mohammad Ajmal Kasab had given a voluntary confession of his alleged involvement in the November 26 attacks here.

Besides, the statements would also include deposition of foreign nationals and seizures of some articles recovered from terror sites such as Hotels Taj and Oberoi and Nariman House, Nikam said.

The magistrate's statement is considered significant as she told the trial court that Kasab had disclosed before her that the conspiracy was hatched in Pakistan by Lashkar-e-Taiba operatives including alleged mastermind Zaki-ur-Rehman Laqvi, who is facing trial in a Pakistani court.

The statements would also cover deposition of FBI officers who told the trial court that mobile phones recovered from terror sites were used (by terrorists) to communicate with their Pakistani handlers during the terror siege.

The officers of a mobile company from abroad had also deposed in the court here through video conference saying that the mobile phones (used by terrorists) were exported from China to Pakistan.

Evidence about articles seized from terrorists such as "rubber boat" and food items bearing labels "Made in Pakistan" will also be forwarded to the neighbouring country to prove that the conspiracy was hatched from their soil and that terrorists had come to India from Pakistan, Nikam said.

Taxman probes 27 British lawmakers over expenses

AFP, London

A total of 27 British lawmakers are being investigated by tax officials amid revelations over their expense claims, officials said Saturday.

HM Revenue and Customs confirmed a report in The Daily Telegraph newspaper charting a new twist in the long-running scandal, which has led to a wave of resignations and raised questions about politicians' probity.

The probes will look at whether lawmakers broke tax laws in making expense claims. They are only allowed to avoid tax on them if they are "wholly, necessarily and exclusively" related to parliamentary duties.

"Inquiries are an integral part of HMRC's work ensuring everyone pays the right tax," a spokeswoman said.

"An inquiry does not necessarily mean that there is a problem. Most inquiries are closed quickly."

Mike Warburton, a tax partner at the accountants Grant Thornton, told the Telegraph: "The rules are clear and MPs (members of parliament) will struggle to argue that claims like horse manure for their gardens are essential."

Lawmakers returned to Westminster after a three-month summer recess this week to find that the expenses scandal, which the Telegraph first highlighted in May, had flared up again.

6 firemen choked to death after battling blaze in India

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Thane

In a gruesome Diwali tragedy, six firemen suffocated to death after they battled a blaze at a multi-storied building in Thane district of Maharashtra state in India yesterday, a senior officer said.

The victims suffocated due to toxic fumes which engulfed the lift of the 14-storey building in which they were returning after dousing fire, Thane Chief Fire Officer Vijay Vaidya said.

After they successfully doused the fire on the terrace of the building, they got trapped in the lift and choked in the fumes that may have accumulated there, he told IANS.

All those dead were from the Wagle Estate Fire Brigade and had answered an emergency call around 4.30 am on the top floor of the 14-storey Punarvasu Building in the posh Tarangan Complex.

Vaidya said it was the second fire call from the same building in less than four hours as people were bursting Diwali crackers.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Pak army faces black hole in Waziristan battle

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's military faces near impossible odds to smash Taliban networks in South Waziristan on impenetrable terrain infested with some of the most dangerous militants in the world, analysts say.

Riding on a wave of popular support after a relatively successful operation against the Taliban in the picturesque Swat Valley, commanders have spent months drawing up battle plans to take on Waziristan.

But South Waziristan will be a far tougher nut to crack given its fiery warrior culture -- its tribesmen famously resisted the British in the 19th century -- and its mountainous terrain of goat tracks, caves and thick forest.

"War in Waziristan will not be a simple one, it will be more difficult than Swat," Rahimullah Yusufzai, a tribal affairs expert, told AFP.

"Waziristan is like a black hole. Troops already suffer

from a lack of intelligence. Even the army describes Waziristan as an intelligence black hole," he said.

South Waziristan is part of Pakistan's lawless northwest tribal belt where US officials believe al-Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden, fled with thousands of Taliban diehards after the 2001 US-led invasion of Afghanistan.

The enemy is battle-hardened and well-trained. The military lacks vital air assets and sophisticated counter-insurgency expertise. Central Asian fighters, Arabs and north Africans are among those hunkered down in Waziristan.

There is no border demarcation, allowing militants to escape into neighbouring Afghanistan or vanish in a district bigger than Lebanon whose 600,000 population is dominated by the Mehsud and Wazir tribes.

The heavy snowfalls of winter looming in the next two months pose another con-

straint on the army, with commanders outlining a window of just six to eight weeks to complete the operation.

Pakistan's weak civilian government promised a big offensive months ago. US and domestic pressure on the military to act has intensified after a blizzard of militant assaults that have left more than 170 people dead this month.

But a rushed military operation in response to the embarrassing militant attacks, which exposed grave security lapses, may be counter-productive.

"Dealing an effective blow to Taliban needs a good strategy, a premature army operation will create a lot of problems," Mahmood Shah, a former security chief for Pakistan's seven tribal districts, told AFP.

The military says the operation will be limited to strongholds of Baitullah Mehsud, the warlord killed by a US missile who turned Tehreek-e-Taliban (TTP) into the most active

killers of security personnel and civilians in Pakistan.

"The Taliban will fight a guerrilla war. The military should put the emphasis on capturing the command structure or destroying it, otherwise they will make a network again," said Masood Sharif, former chief of Pakistan's Intelligence Bureau.

The TTP is thought by the military to have 10,000 to 12,000 fighters in South Waziristan. Experts say a successful operation should have been preceded by harder bargaining to divide and rule among Pakistan's Pashtun tribesmen.

The doctory tribesmen are veterans of every major campaign in the region, including the legendary 1980s Afghan war against the Soviet Union.

"An operation against a guerrilla-type Taliban force should be selective and intelligence-based. Political work in the area and winning the confidence of tribesmen is also required," said Yusufzai.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Kidnapped aid workers freed

AFP, Khartoum

Two members of Irish aid agency GOAL kidnapped in Sudan's conflict stricken Darfur region in July were freed early Sunday after more than 100 days in captivity, a Sudan minister told AFP.

"They are free, they are in good health," said state humanitarian affairs minister Abdel Baqi Gilani.

Irish national Sharon Commins and Ugandan Hilda Kawuki were kidnapped in the North Darfur town of Katum on July 3. They were taken by a gang of armed men from a compound run by GOAL.

Russian cargo ship docks with ISS

AFP, Moscow

A Russian cargo ship, launched Thursday from the Baikonur space station in Kazakhstan, docked successfully Sunday with the International Space Station, Russia's space command centre said.

The docking was completed in automatic mode at 0141 GMT, a Russian space command centre official told Russian news agencies.

Gabon PM appoints new cabinet

AFP, Libreville

Gabonese Prime Minister Paul Biyoghe Mba named on Saturday a new slimmed-down government of 30 ministers, including 12 from his previous cabinet.

The 53-year-old Mba was immediately reappointed Friday after Ali Bongo Ondimba, son of Gabon's late strong-arm leader, was sworn in as president nearly two months after his hotly disputed election victory.



Indian police fire teargas canisters at Kashmiri protesters during demonstration in Srinagar yesterday. Anti-India sentiment runs deep in the region, which is in the grip of a nearly two decade old insurgency against Indian rule that has so far left more than 47,000 people dead by official count.

Lanka arrests editor over military rift story

AFP, Colombo

A Sri Lankan editor was arrested for reporting on an alleged rift between a senior military commander and the government after the defeat of the Tamil Tiger rebels, police and his newspaper said yesterday.

Chandana Sirimalwatte was held for questioning after police raided the offices of his "Lanka" newspaper, a spokesman for the paper said.

Police spokesman Nimal Mediwa confirmed that the editor was arrested on Saturday, but declined to say why he was taken in.

The newspaper, which is closely linked to the opposition JVP, or People's Liberation Front, said Sirimalwatte had been questioned about a story in Friday's edition.

Maoists want one-party rule in Nepal

PTI, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoists are in favour of a one-party rule in the country similar to that in communist China, a top CPN-United leader has said, raising doubts about their commitment to multi-party democracy.

Unified CPN-Maoist, which is inspired by the great Chinese leader Mao Zedong has opposed the constitutional provisions agreed upon by all other political parties that proposed as 'unchangeable' human rights, rule of law, independent judiciary, periodic elections and rule of law that are known as the basic characteristics of democracy.

During the meeting of the Constitutional Committee of the Constituent Assembly yesterday the Maoists have reiterated that the new constitution should not include any provision that cannot be

amended.

During the meeting the Maoists argued that the people should have rights to change any constitutional provision as sovereignty is vested upon them.

"The Maoists are still opposed to the political system that guarantees free competition among political parties as they wanted to incorporate the provision which advocates supremacy of a single political party over others similar to one prevalent in China," CPN-United general secretary Sunil Manandhar said.

However, Nepali Congress (NC), CPN-UML and other political parties have argued that the constitutional provisions like rule of law, human rights, independent judiciary and periodic elections should be unchangeable, while the Maoists are against it.

Immigrant allowed to stay in Britain, thanks to pet cat!

ANI, London

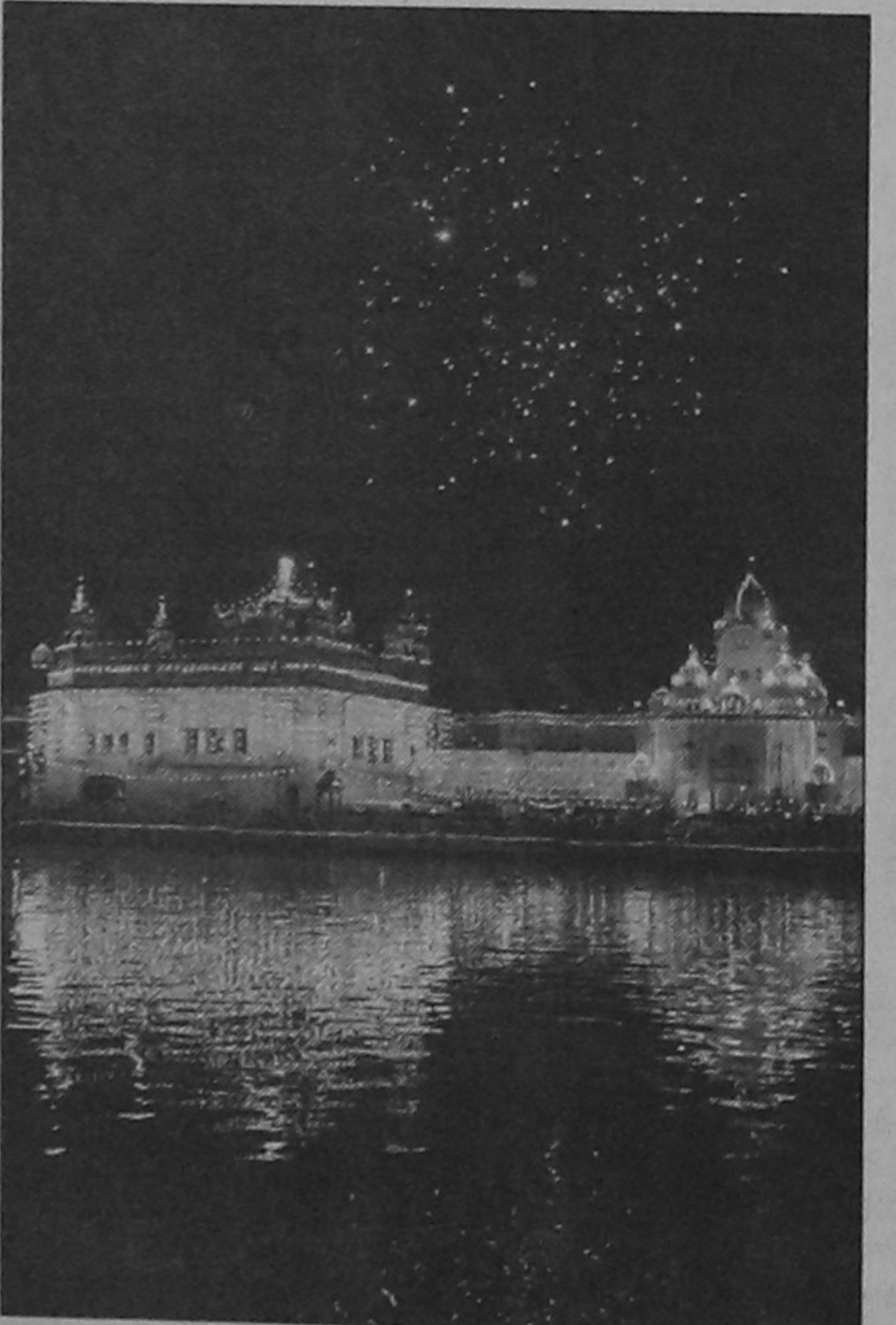
An immigrant in Britain, who was about to be deported, has been allowed to stay in the country after a court ruled in his favour - just because he and his girlfriend had bought a pet cat.

The Asylum and Immigration Tribunal ruled that sending the Bolivian man back to his homeland would breach his human rights because he was entitled to a "private and family life".

The court said that the joint ownership of a pet was evidence that he was fully settled in this country.

However, the decision by immigration judge James Devittie to allow the immigrant to stay in Britain did not go down too well with lawyers for the Home Secretary.

They lodged an appeal, but their case was again rejected.



Fireworks are seen above the illuminated Golden Temple on the occasion of Bandi Chhor Divas or Diwali in Amritsar on Saturday. Bandi-Chhor Divas commemorates the return of the sixth Guru, Sri Hargobind Ji, to the holy city of Amritsar after his release from detention.