

Pakistani army soldiers stand guard at a suicide blast site in Peshawar yesterday. The suicide bomber targeted a security checkpoint killing five people in the second such attack in the flashpoint northwestern city.

Suicide bomber kills 5 in NW Pakistan

Militants retain strength despite army offensive

AP, AFP, Peshawar

A suicide bomber struck a neighbourhood full of government buildings in Pakistan's main northwest city yesterday, killing five people and underscoring that militant groups retain strength despite being under siege by the army.

The attack was the second in three days in Peshawar, and the latest in a wave of violence that has killed more than 500 people in Pakistan since October. Insurgents are suspected of avenging a US-supported Pakistani army offensive against the Taliban in a northwest tribal region along the Afghan border.

The attackers have struck a range of targets, from markets popular with women to security checkpoints. Thursday's blast rocked a busy sector of Peshawar where buildings housing the state-run airline, a public school and a government insurance company were located.

TV footage from the scene showed shattered glass and debris covering a wide area as security officials flooded the zone.

Mian Iftikhar Hussain, the region's information minister, told the ARY news channel army installations also were nearby, but he "cannot say for sure what the target was."

The bomber walked up to a checkpoint along the road and detonated his explosives when a police officer asked him to stop, city police chief Liaquat Ali told The Associated Press. He paid glowing tributes to the slain policeman, saying if he had not acted the attacker might have struck a more crowded area, killing a higher number of people.

On Tuesday, a suicide bomber set off explosives at the Peshawar Press Club, a brazen attack on the media in what has long been an unsafe environment for journalists to operate.

Peshawar has been hit at least seven other times in the onslaught that began in

October. In one case, at least 112 people died when a car bomb went off in a market frequented by many women — one of the country's deadliest attacks ever.

The government condemned the bombings but vowed it will not be deterred in its battle to eliminate the Pakistani Taliban from its soil. The army offensive in South Waziristan tribal region has left hundreds of militants dead, but many are believed to have simply fled to other parts of the country's lawless tribal belt bordering Afghanistan.

Even though the Pakistani Taliban may be under siege, it is possible they are relying on other allied militant groups to help carry out the strikes across the country. Strong networks are believed to exist among the varying extremist factions in Pakistan, many of whom want to see the Pakistani state toppled because of its relations with the United States.

Chaotic situation in Pakistan ripe for another coup

Says US govt-run radio

ANI, Washington

With the political situation in Pakistan witnessing a tumultuous time following the Supreme Court's verdict declaring the special amnesty law, the National Reconciliation Ordinance (NRO), as 'unconstitutional' rumours are rife that the country is headed towards yet another stint of military rule.

During a political commentary on Pakistan, the US Congress funded Radio Free Liberty (RFL), while expressing concern over the troubled nation's present state, expressed fears of a military coup.

"Conditions in Pakistan have been ripening, like the mango fruit eaten there, for another military coup. The economy has slumped, corruption is rampant, and terrorism is endemic. People are losing faith in the officials they

brought to power," the commentary said.

The commentary written by Jamsheed Choksy, a professor of Central Eurasian, Indian, Iranian, Islamic, and international studies, highlighted that amid the crisis Pakistan's judiciary has emerged as a powerful player, but the military would ultimately emerge as the 'national saviours'.

"This time, the soldiers may not have to use guns and tanks. They can bide their time until the elected government descends into chaos, then march in as national saviours. But the country's judiciary is swiftly becoming a player to be reckoned with too," it said.

"President Asif Ali Zardari also faces the possibility of 12 corruption charges being reinstated. Worse, the Supreme Court has suggested that the government ask Switzerland to reopen a

money-laundering investigation against him that was dropped on grounds of poor mental health. Under Pakistani law, Zardari, mocked as a highly corrupt 'Mr 10 Per cent', cannot be prosecuted while he is president," it added.

The commentary pointed out that even if Zardari succeeds to hold onto his chair for the time being, Pakistan's democratic set-up is facing major threats from different quarters.

"Pakistan's armed forces often are expected to lead the nation in times of political uncertainty. As the generals remain silent, it is left to the government of President Zardari to deny the possibility of its ouster. Even if the civilian government survives the current legal crisis, it might not have long left in running Pakistan owing to the other mounting problems there," it said.

PM's advisers recommend autonomy for Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

High-level advisers appointed by Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh are recommending autonomy for Kashmir, where militants have fought for 20 years against rule from New Delhi.

Under its accession to India in 1947 upon the country's independence from Britain, Muslim-majority Kashmir was granted autonomous powers over all sectors excluding communications, defence and foreign affairs.

These powers have been eroded over the years. But the advisory group, headed by former Supreme Court Judge Saghir Ahmad, recommended that the prime minister look at various formulations "to restore the autonomy to the extent possible."

The group's report was delivered to the Kashmir chief minister late Wednesday and made public Thursday.

The Kashmir legislative assembly in 2000 passed a

resolution favouring full restoration of the state's autonomy. But India's then Hindu-nationalist government rejected the resolution passed unanimously by the assembly.

Autonomy is the main demand of the ruling National Conference, the state's biggest pro-India political party, which had moved the resolution in 2000.

The government has not reacted to the report so far.

"We will react only after going through the report. It is a long report," said Ali Mohammed Sagar, Kashmir's law and parliamentary minister.

Singh had appointed the working group in May 2006 to try to find a permanent solution to the unrest in the scenic Himalayan region, which is split between India and Pakistan.

Most of the rebel groups fighting New Delhi's rule want the region to become part of Pakistan. A few support its independence.

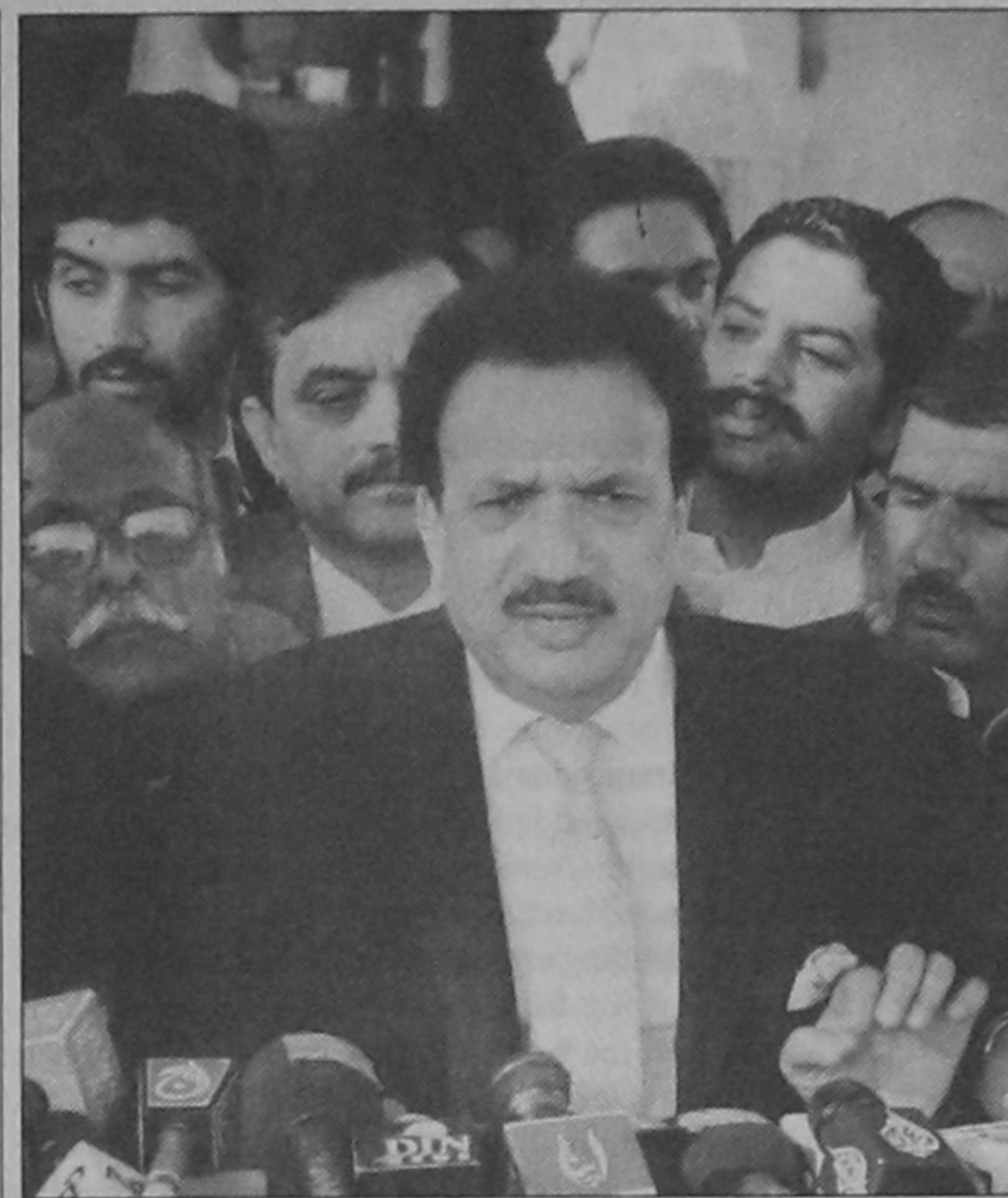


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Interior Minister Rehman Malik speaks with media representatives at the Supreme Court in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan Supreme Court has adjourned until next month a hearing in a contempt case against Malik as he vowed to uphold supremacy of law and respect of judiciary.

Dad flies to US with son after winning custody battle in Brazil

AFP, Rio de Janeiro

A US man who won a five-year legal battle to regain custody of his young son flew back to the United States with the boy yesterday after an emotional Christmas Eve reunion.

David Goldman and his nine-year-old son Sean were aboard a flight chartered by a US television network that bought exclusive access to their story, a US lawmaker who helped the father, Chris Smith, told AFP.

Early Thursday, the pair were brought together at the US consulate in Rio de Janeiro for a "very warm, very emotional" meeting made possible by a Brazilian supreme court order delivered this week, Smith said.

The legal victory capped Goldman's long custody struggle against his late ex-wife's Brazilian family. She died in childbirth last year.



PHOTO: AFP

Ex-Tamil Tigers attend a class in a state-run training centre in the northern town of Vavuniya on Wednesday. Nearly 300,000 of displaced Tamil minority people were housed in Vavuniya camps since mid-May when the government troops emerged victorious over Tamil Tigers.

500 child soldiers still in Lanka govt custody

ANI, Colombo

The Sri Lankan Government has claimed that it has 550 ex-child soldiers in its custody — and about half of them are 'being given the chance of education.'

Officials say 273 former child combatants are currently attending the Ratmalana Hindu College near Colombo.

"Others are given vocational or technical training because their education has been interrupted for a long period," the commissioner general of rehabilitation, Major General Daya Ratnayake (Retired), told the

BBC.

Before coming here, these former soldiers were kept in rehabilitation centres in Vavuniya, in northern Sri Lanka, and Ambepussa in the south.

"These students are very keen to learn. They don't want to talk about their past. They want to forget it. We understand that. We are trying to create a good atmosphere in the classroom and motivate them," one teacher said.

Students are provided with hostel accommodation, but not allowed to mingle with other students and are taught in separate classrooms.

Sharifs own properties worth billions in London

ANI, Lahore

Its not only President Asif Ali Zardari who owns property worth billions in Britain, but former Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif and his family members too are the owners of costly flats and apartments in and around high-end Central London.

According to The Daily Times, Sharif's own property worth more than 20 million pounds (2.7 billion rupees) across London. Of these, the Sharif family residence, three flats at 17 Avenfield House, 118 Park Lane alone are worth around 12 million pounds (1.6 billion rupees).

The documents related to the

Flagship Investments Limited, one of the companies run by the Sharif family in London, the family owns property worth around 10 million pounds in Central London, excluding the value of the company's office.

The company's website mentions Nawaz Sharif's son, Hasan Sharif, as its director.

According to the website, www.flagshipinvestments.co.uk, it refurbishes and redevelops luxury residential properties in the upscale Central London.

Meanwhile, a report carried out by a private television accused Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) chief Nawaz Sharif of being involved in a money laundering scandal worth 700,000 dollars.

Four drown, 23 missing as Philippine boat sinks

AFP, Manila

Four people were killed and were 23 missing yesterday after two boats collided in darkness near Manila during the Christmas holiday rush, the latest disaster to hit the Philippines in a year of tragedy.

Four bodies, including that of a woman in a life jacket, were pulled out of Manila Bay following the early-hours collision between a flimsy passenger boat and a deep-sea fishing vessel, the coast-guard said.

Three of the bodies were found floating near the submerged wreck of the Catalyn B, a wooden-hulled passenger vessel that sank after it rammed into the fishing boat at 2:25 am (1825 GMT Wednesday).

US woman charged over threat to kill Michelle Obama

AFP, Washington

A US woman with a history of making threatening phone calls to the United States Secret Service has been arrested and charged with threatening to kill First Lady Michelle Obama.

According to a criminal complaint obtained by AFP, Kristy Lee Roshia has been charged before a court in Hawaii with knowingly and willingly stating on November 10, 2009: "I will kill Michelle Obama."

Roshia has also been charged with assaulting a US Secret Service (USSS) agent who arrested her on December 19.

The affidavit attached to the criminal complaint says Roshia had travelled from the US mainland to Hawaii, where President Barack Obama and his family are scheduled to arrive shortly for a Christmas vacation.

NEW STATE DECLARATION DELAY

11 MPs, 80 legislators from Telangana resign in protest

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, New Delhi/Hyderabad

Eleven out of 12 Congress party MPs from the Telangana region and as many as 80 legislators — cutting across party lines — yesterday decided to resign to protest the central government's move to put on hold the process of forming a Telangana state out of Andhra Pradesh.

Congress MPs from Telangana region, who met in New Delhi, decided to hand over their resignations to party

chief Sonia Gandhi. They said there was ambiguity in Home Minister P Chidambaram's statement Wednesday, which indicated that the government was planning to put on hold the process for forming a Telangana state out of Andhra Pradesh.

"We are trying to get an appointment with the Congress president. Then we will hand over our resignations. The Congress legislators from Telangana region will also quit," said Sarvey Sathyanarayana

after a meeting of MPs at Andhra Bhavan in New Delhi.

Meanwhile, all the 80 state legislators who have decided to quit came under the banner of the Joint Action Committee (JAC).

The legislators who have quit or decided to quit include 30 each from the ruling Congress party and the main opposition Telugu Desam Party (TDP). All 10 legislators of the Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) have already submitted their resignations.

Bacteria could cut spread of mosquito borne diseases

AFP, Chicago

A common type of bacteria could help curtail the spread of mosquito-borne diseases by making the pests more resistant to infection, according to a study published Thursday in the US journal Cell.

The research built on an earlier study that found the lives of one type of disease-carrying mosquitoes could be cut in half by infecting them with a bacterium extracted from fruit flies.

"Together with the previously described life-shortening effects, the results suggest we might be able to have a major impact on disease," said study author Scott O'Neill of The University of Queensland.

Mosquitoes infected with the bacteria proved resistant to dengue fever and Chikungunya, an insect-borne virus. They also became poor hosts for a form of malaria parasites that infect birds.

There is no vaccine or cure for dengue fever, a painful and debilitating disease that kills more than 40,000 people and afflicts 50 million more every year. Chikungunya usually isn't fatal, but can cause symptoms similar to dengue.



PHOTO: AFP

Airline workers walk through the apron as Mayon volcano (background) spews ash into the air at the airport in Legazpi City, Albay province, southeast of Manila yesterday. The volcano continues its mild eruption.

Cambodia accuses Thailand of preparing coup

AFP, Phnom Penh

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen yesterday accused neighbouring Thailand of preparing a coup against his government as the war of words between the neighbouring nations worsened.

Hun Sen said he had seen a secret Thai government document outlining the plan to mount a coup, which he said he had passed to Cambodia's

King Norodom Sihamoni to show the "bad character of our neighbouring leaders".

"In your secret document it says that although the (Thai) foreign ministry does not agree to stage a coup in Cambodia... others are working on it," Hun Sen said.

"Don't even think about it. I know who is doing this," he added, during a speech at a provincial ceremony.

The Cambodian premier said he had also seen docu-

ments that showed Thailand has considered waging war against its neighbour.

"You have outlined bad scenarios, including preparing to wage war against Cambodia," he said.

Hun Sen's comments follow the leaking of a document in Thailand last week, written by the Thai foreign minister to premier Abhisit Vejjajiva, in which the worsening relations between the two countries are analysed.