



A Sri Lankan Special Task Force (STF) soldier stands guard on the road outside the Supreme Court in Colombo yesterday as the court began hearing a fundamental rights petition filed against the detention of the former Army chief and defeated presidential candidate General Sarath Fonseka. The former Army chief was arrested on February 8.

US and Afghan troops ring Taliban stronghold

AP, Near Marjah

US and Afghan forces ringed the Taliban stronghold of Marjah on Thursday, sealing off escape routes and setting the stage for what is being described as the biggest offensive of the nine-year war.

Taliban defenders repeatedly fired rockets and mortars at units poised in foxholes along the edge of the town, apparently trying to lure Nato forces into skirmishes before the big attack.

"They're trying to draw us in," said Capt. Joshua Winfrey, 30, of Tulsa, Oklahoma, commander of Lima Company, 3rd Battalion, 6th Marines.

Up to 1,000 militants are believed holed up in Marjah, a key Taliban logistics base and centre of the lucrative opium poppy trade. But the biggest threats are likely to be the land mines and bombs hidden in the roads and fields of the farming community, 610km southwest of Kabul.

The precise date for the attack has been kept secret. US officials have signalled for weeks they planned to seize

Marjah, a town of about 80,000 people in Helmand province and the biggest community in southern Afghanistan under Taliban control.

Nato officials say the goal is to seize the town quickly and re-establish Afghan government authority, bringing public services in hopes of winning support of the townspeople once the Taliban are gone. Hundreds of Afghan soldiers were to join US Marines in the attack to emphasize the Afghan role in the operation.

A Taliban spokesman dismissed the significance of Marjah, saying the Nato operation was "more propaganda than military necessity."

Nevertheless, the spokesman, Mohammed Yusuf, said in a dialogue on the Taliban Web site that the insurgents would strike the attackers with explosives and hit-and-run tactics, according to a summary by the SITE Intelligence Group, which monitors militant Internet traffic.

Meanwhile, Police found the bodies of 20 Taliban militants who froze to death after being driven by troops into the

mountains of northern Afghanistan, police said yesterday.

The bodies were found in two caves deep in snow-covered mountains in Baghlan province on Tuesday, said regional police spokesman Lal Mohammad Ahmadzai.

"The militants fled into the mountain a day before Afghan and Nato military forces were due to start an operation in central Baghlan," he told AFP.

The deputy Taliban "shadow governor" of Baghlan was among the dead, he said, referring to the militant habit of settling up administrative and justice offices, often in areas that lack any government presence.

Police who found the bodies in the caves in the Bysakal area near where three provinces -- Baghlan, Kunduz and Takhar -- converge also recovered weapons and explosives, Ahmadzai said.

"Twenty Taliban froze to death in the caves," he said, adding they were identified as militants by their clothing and had been involved in highway attacks and several clashes with government forces.

Lankan SC to hear challenge to Fonseka's arrest

Opposition parties step up campaign for his release

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Supreme Court agreed yesterday to hear a challenge to the arrest of defeated presidential candidate Sarath Fonseka, as opposition parties stepped up a campaign for his immediate release.

The court accepted a petition by Fonseka's wife requesting that his arrest be ruled illegal, and ordered the state to allow the former army chief family visits and medicines.

"The court granted leave to proceed with the case," a court official told AFP.

Fonseka was arrested on Monday, two weeks after being trounced in presidential elections by the incumbent, President Mahinda Rajapakse. His detention triggered violent protests in Colombo and other parts of Sri Lanka.

The defence ministry says he is to be court-martialled on unspecified charges of conspiring against the government.

A lawyer for Fonseka said they regarded the

supreme court decision to take up the petition as a major victory.

Hundreds of Fonseka supporters packed the courtroom, while police manned barricades outside.

Anti-riot squads had been put on alert after violent clashes Wednesday outside the court complex between Fonseka loyalists and ruling party activists.

Members of the elite Special Task Force commandos were also deployed in the city.

"We have taken preventive measures to ensure that law and order is maintained," police spokesman Prashanth Jayakody said.

Hundreds of lawyers marched outside the court after the hearing carrying placards demanding Fonseka's release, but there were no clashes.

As the court proceedings got underway, the parliamentary opposition leader and former premier Ranil Wickremesinghe met with President Rajapakse to push for the former army chief's freedom.

Telangana leaders ask MPs, MLAs to resign

ANI, Hyderabad

The Telangana Rashtra Samiti (TRS) yesterday rejected the terms of reference (ToR) announced by the Union Government for the five member Justice BN Srikrishna committee and asked all its elected representatives to resign in protest against Centre's betrayal.

Interacting with the media here, TRS president K Chandrashekar Rao said the terms of reference were unacceptable to people of Telangana and the Centre has betrayed once again.

"The Centre has once again betrayed the people of Telangana. The terms of reference are not acceptable to us. We will continue the agitation and insist on acceptance of our resignations," he said.

Rao directed all his party MPs, MLAs and MLCs to resign from their posts immediately in protest against the "betrayal".

In December 2009, Rao undertook 11-day fast, which forced the Centre to announce the process for formation of Telangana state.

"The centre has once again betrayed the people of Telangana. The terms of reference are not acceptable to us. We will continue the agitation and insist on acceptance of our resignations," he added.

Meanwhile the Telangana all-party Joint Action Committee (JAC) will hold an emergency meeting this evening to chalk out its future course of action.



Indian members of the Telangana Students Joint Action Committee (JAC) carry the effigy of Srikrishna Commission during their protest at Osmania University in Hyderabad yesterday.

Twin blasts targeting Pak cops kill 15

AP, Peshawar

Two suicide bombers struck outside a police complex in north-western Pakistan, killing 15 people and underscoring the relentless militant threat despite army operations and US missile strikes against al-Qaeda and the Taliban.

The second blast Thursday went off as rescuers responded to the first - a militant tactic seen before in Pakistan, but not often. Of the 15 dead, at least nine were police, while the 30 people wounded included the city's police chief, hospital official Abdul Hafeez said.

The attacks in the city of Bannu coincided with a visit to Islamabad by White House National Security Adviser Jim Jones.

Militants have carried out numerous attacks on security forces over the past several years to undermine the public's confidence in the already-weak state. On Wednesday, a suicide bomber killed 10 police officers and seven civilians in the Khyber tribal region near the Afghan border.

No group immediately claimed responsibility for Thursday's blasts, which were carried out by attackers on foot outside a gate to the police complex, but suspicion is likely to fall on the Pakistani Taliban. The city of Bannu lies just outside North Waziristan, a major militant stronghold.

The suicide bombings come amid growing certainty that the militant group's top commander, Hakimullah Mehsud, died from wounds sustained in a US missile strike in mid-January. The Taliban have denied he is dead, but failed to offer proof that he is alive.

A potential succession struggle in the wake of Mehsud's death could temporarily weaken the Pakistani Taliban but is unlikely to cripple its ability to carry out deadly attacks.

The Pakistani military has pursued the militant group in its main stronghold, the South Waziristan tribal region, for months and has managed to dismantle a good deal of its infrastructure. But many of the militants are believed to have fled to North Waziristan and other areas in the tribal belt or just outside it.

Good governance a must for graft battle

Says Nepali PM

ANI, Kathmandu

Prime Minister Madhav Kumar Nepal has said that good governance is absolutely necessary to control rampant corruption that exists in the country.

Speaking at a function organised here on Thursday, he said that although the Commission for the Investigation of the Abuse of Authority (CIAA) has played an instrumental role in the fight against corruption in the country, good governance is necessary to control it.

Admitting that corruption has increased because of the delay and carelessness seen in the government works, Nepal expressed commitment to end it.

According to Nepalnews, he also vowed to make government activities and work more transparent so that there is less chance of corruption or malpractices.

PM Nepal, however, called upon all to commit themselves to fight corruption.

However, claiming that the government will draft the new Constitution within the fixed timeframe, he urged cooperation of the Maoists.

India-Pakistan agree on roadmap to resolve water disputes

ANI, Lahore

In order to resolve the long pending water issues between them, India and Pakistan have agreed on a 'roadmap' and decided to hold two additional meetings, besides a routine meeting due in May, over the next six months.

Pakistan's Indus Commissioner Syed Jamaat Ali Shah said the two sides have decided to hold one of the additional meetings by the end of March, and the other by the end of June to expedite the pace of deliberations to end the dispute.

"The decision is the biggest achievement made during five days of deliberations," The Dawn quoted Shah, as saying.

The decision was taken on the last of a five-day visit of a three-member Indian delegation.

The three-member Indian team of Permanent Commission on Indus Waters (PCIW) headed by Auranga Nathan inspected the Sutlej, Ravi and Bias river sites.

Shah said the Indian delegation had agreed that settlement of all water disputes must be time-bound because open-ended talks were counter-productive and gave rise to confusion and frustration.

Later, talking to reporters at the Lahore airport before leaving for India, Nathan rejected the notion that the water dispute between India and Pakistan could lead to war.

"After all the two countries have signed an international treaty which includes elaborate dispute resolution mechanism. They not only committed to the treaty provisions but also regularly invoke different provisions to resolve disputes. Under such circumstances, there was hardly any chance of war between Pakistan and India on water issues," Nathan said.

Myanmar to set free deputy leader of NLD

AFP, Yangon

Military-ruled Myanmar is set to release the elderly deputy leader of Aung San Suu Kyi's opposition party when his house arrest term expires this weekend, an official said yesterday.

Tin Oo, 83, vice chairman of the National League for Democracy (NLD), has been detained without trial since he was arrested with Suu Kyi after an attack on their motorcade during a political tour in 2003.

"U Tin Oo will be released tomorrow (Saturday) as his detention period is complete," a government official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

A week ago, the NLD said it was expecting Tin Oo's release and said he would resume his political activities.

Tin Oo, a retired general, was transferred from prison to house arrest in Yangon in February 2004 under an anti-subversion law.

The NLD won a landslide victory in 1990 elections but the junta never allowed it to take office. Party leader and democracy icon Suu Kyi, 64, has been detained for most of the past 20 years.

Release of new Bollywood film scaled back over political row

AFP, Mumbai

Cinemas in the Indian city of Mumbai scaled back the release yesterday of top actor Shah Rukh Khan's new film, in the face of violent threats from right-wing Hindus locked in a row with the Bollywood star.

Some single-screen theatres decided not to show "My Name Is Khan" at all, while some multiplex cinemas opted to limit or cancel showings of the movie.

Activists from the ultra-nationalist Shiv Sena party said they would disrupt the film's release because of the actor's comments regretting the absence of Pakistani cricketers in the Indian Premier League tournament.

The Shiv Sena has long claimed to champion the rights of people from western Maharashtra state, of which Mumbai is the capital, over "outsiders", often backing up its stance with violence.

It also sees itself as a guardian of traditional Hindu values and pushes a strong anti-Muslim, anti-Pakistan rhetoric.

"Shiv Sainiks tore the screen at Maratha Mandir (cinema) even before the release of the film. Why should I take chances?" said Manoj Desai, who owns a number of single-screen theatres in the city.

Another owner of a single screen cinema near the party's central Mumbai headquarters also decided not to show the film, which in part tackles the treatment of Muslims in the United States after the September 11, 2001 attacks.

Multiplex chains Fun Cinemas and TVR said the film would be released but with limited screenings, while Cinemax India and INOX have decided to postpone showings and assess the situation, sources told AFP.

Their decision came despite pleas from the chief minister of Maharashtra for people to see the film and police reassurances that security will be tight.

Thailand to deport North Korean plane crew

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand was set to deport yesterday a five-man plane crew detained in Bangkok with a 35-tonne cache of sanctions-busting arms from North Korea after charges against them were dropped.

The Belarusian pilot and four Kazakh crew were detained in December after flying into Bangkok to refuel with a cargo which included missiles and rocket-propelled grenades.

Thai authorities initially charged the men with possessing illegal weapons and ammunition, smuggling weapons and other banned products and failing to report the cache.

But on Thursday, the attorney general's office said it was not in the national interest to pursue the case and that the five would be deported.



Adam Ferguson of Australia wins the first prize Spot News Singles of the 2010 World Press Photo contest yesterday in The Hague with a photo of an Afghan woman rushed from the scene of a suicide bombing in Kabul on December 15, 2009.

Australia probes alleged Indian cyber attacks

AFP, Sydney

Australian police yesterday said they were investigating a string of hacking attacks against Melbourne-based companies, reportedly linked to recent violence against Indian nationals.

The cyber raids, which have occurred in the past week, are being probed by a specialist taskforce, a spokeswoman said, refusing to confirm media reports that they were linked to the Indian assaults.

"The Victoria Police e-crimes squad is investigating reports of alleged hacking of a number of different business servers hosted in Melbourne," the spokeswoman told AFP.

"The ongoing investigation is in its infancy and it would be inappropriate to comment any further."

The Australian newspaper reported that several Melbourne construction and engineering firms had been attacked in recent days by a hacker called "Ghost Buster".



Moviegoers wear T-shirts in support of the film "My Name is Khan" at a city multiplex in Mumbai yesterday. Cinemas in the Indian city scaled back the release of top actor Shah Rukh Khan's new film, in the face of violent threats from right-wing Hindus locked in a row with the Bollywood star.

House for Rent

Triplex independent house situated in the most secured location of Baridhara Diplomatic Zone. It is in Road # 03 (right opposite of AISD).

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*** Foreigners preferred.**

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