

Clashes, air strikes kill 55 in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

At least 51 militants and four soldiers have been killed in air strikes and clashes with Pakistani security forces in the restive north-west over the past week, officials said yesterday.

Pakistani planes bombed the tribal belt bordering Afghanistan, killing 26 militants, a senior paramilitary official told AFP.

"Pakistani jet strikes today killed 26 militants and wounded 15 others and destroyed their seven hide outs in different areas of Upper Orakzai and Kurram (tribal districts)," the official said.

Most of Upper Orakzai is in Taliban hands and is the scene of frequent clashes between security forces and Islamist militants.

Separately, at least 25 militants and four soldiers were killed in Bara, a restive town in Khyber tribal district in gunfights between March 12 and Sunday, the official said.

"Four security forces personnel embraced martyrdom and 12 others were wounded in gunfights which left 25 militants dead," he said.

The military operation was directed at militants belonging to the Taliban-linked Lashkar-e-Islam group that is led by warlord Mangal Bagh, said the official.

The group has been involved in recent suicide attacks and kidnapping in the north-western city of Peshawar, which borders Khyber, he said.

Two local intelligence officials confirmed the clashes and death toll.

Independent verification of the incident is not possible as access to the area is restricted by the military.

Some 18,000 people fled their homes in Khyber in October last year amid fears of a fresh outbreak of fighting between the army and Islamist militants linked to the Pakistani Taliban.

Pakistan's seven tribal districts near the Afghan border are rife with homegrown insurgents and are strongholds of Taliban and Al-Qaeda operatives.

Islamist militants have killed more than 4,800 people across Pakistan since government troops raided an extremist mosque in Islamabad in July 2007.



A woman shouts against the on going violence in Syria during a rally in support of the Syrian opposition yesterday at Puerta del Sol Square in Madrid.

Mossad, US agree on Iran assessment

AFP, Washington

Israel's intelligence service Mossad agrees with US assessments of Iran's nuclear ambitions, even though Israeli leaders have talked about Tehran's plans to acquire nuclear weapons, The New York Times reported late Saturday.

"Their people ask very hard questions, but Mossad does not disagree with the US on the weapons program, the newspaper quoted an unnamed former senior US intelligence official as saying.

"There is not a lot of dispute between the US and Israeli intelligence communities on the facts," the former official said.

The Times reported last month that US intelligence analysts continue to believe there was no hard evidence that Iran has decided to build a nuclear bomb.

The latest assessments by US spy agencies are broadly consistent with a 2007 intelligence finding that concluded that Iran had abandoned its nuclear weapons program, the paper said in that report.

According to Saturday's report, US spy agencies have spent years trying to track Iranian efforts to enrich uranium and develop missile technology, and they are watching for any move toward weaponisation.

While the National Security Agency eavesdrops on telephone conversations of Iranian officials and conducts other forms of electronic surveillance, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency analyzes radar imagery and digital images of nuclear sites, the paper noted.

Outside analysts believe high-tech drones prowl over secret Iranian installations, The Times pointed out.

NEWS IN brief

Egypt's Coptic Pope Shenuda III dies

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's Coptic Pope Shenuda III, spiritual leader of the Middle East's largest Christian minority, has died aged 88 after a battle with illness, leaving the country's Copts in mourning.

He died Saturday after suffering "a severe heart attack", sources at the church told the official MENA news agency.

Shenuda led the Copts, estimated at 10 percent of Egypt's population of more than 80 million, for the best part of a generation, in which Egypt was hit by a wave of Islamic militancy from which he sought to protect his people.

Maoists kidnap 2 Italians in India

AFP, Raipur, India

Maoist rebels have kidnapped two Italian tourists in poverty-hit eastern India, police said yesterday, in what police said was the first abduction of foreigners by the left-wing militants.

Television reports said the kidnappers had issued 13 demands for the release of the Italians, including a request for police to release an unspecified number of prisoners and end their drive to root out Maoists from the region.

The abduction occurred on Saturday in the scenic Kandhamal district in central Orissa, police said.

Miliband's office 'burgled'

THE TIMES OF INDIA ONLINE

Britain's opposition Labour Party chief Ed Miliband's parliamentary office has been reportedly burgled.

Though it's still unclear whether anything was stolen from Miliband's office at House of Commons on Friday evening, British intelligence agency MI5 has launched a major probe into the "sensitive" incident, the 'Sunday Express' reported.

The 42-year-old is the most senior politician outside the UK government to receive regular updates from MI5 and external spy agency MI6.



Germany elects new president

AFP, Berlin

Activist pastor Joachim Gauck was elected German president by an overwhelming majority yesterday, marking the first time a candidate from the former communist east will be head of state.

Gauck, 72, claimed 991 votes out of 1,232 from a special assembly of MPs and other dignitaries, parliamentary speaker Norbert Lammert said, against prominent Nazi hunter Beate Klarsfeld.

It was the third presidential election in three years for Germany after the abrupt resignations of Gauck's two predecessors.

Chancellor Angela Merkel gave her backing to the plain-spoken Lutheran pastor in February after then president Christian Wulff stepped down amid a flurry of corruption allegations dating from his time as a state premier.

The media and the public cheered his candidacy as an opportunity to remove some of the tarnish from the largely ceremonial office, which serves as a kind of moral compass for the nation.

Blasts hit Syria ahead of UN missions

AFP, Damascus

Syria was hit by the third lethal car bombing of the weekend yesterday as UN teams readied for a government-led humanitarian mission and to work to launch a monitoring operation to end a year of bloodshed.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, in a statement, said the latest blast targeted political security offices in the northern city of Aleppo, killing three civilians and wounding more than 25 others.

State media, which have said that such attacks aimed to sabotage efforts to find a political solution to Syria's crisis, said it exploded near residential buildings and a post office.

On Saturday, twin car bombings killed 27 people and wounded 140 in the Syrian capital.

UN humanitarian chief Valerie Amos, who held talks in Damascus this month, said they would at the weekend join the assessment mission to Daraa, Homs, Hama, Tartus,

Latakia, Aleppo, Deir Ezzor and rural zones around Damascus.

Activists say the year-long conflict has cost more than 9,100 lives.

Former UN chief Annan, who met Assad in Damascus last weekend, has ordered a team of experts to Syria to discuss a possible ceasefire and international monitoring mission, his spokesman said.

Annan's team are to head to Damascus from New York and Geneva on Monday, his spokesman said.

Meanwhile, a top Arab diplomat said on Saturday Saudi Arabia is delivering military equipment to Syrian rebels.

"Saudi military equipment is on its way to Jordan to arm the Free Syrian Army," the diplomat told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"This is a Saudi initiative to stop the massacres in Syria," he added saying further "details will follow at a later time."

In Trinamool, do as Didi asks you to do

THE HINDU ONLINE

West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's assertion, within hours of Railway Minister Dinesh Trivedi announcing fare increase in his rail budget speech on Wednesday, that "we will not allow this hike" has proved yet again that when one is in the Trinamool Congress, one should do what she asks one to do.

Trivedi resigned yesterday. But this is not the first occasion that a senior Trinamool leader has drawn Banerjee's ire for expressing a contrarian view.

Whether or not Banerjee was informed of the fare hike before it was announced, Trivedi's comment

that his efforts were directed at "pulling out Indian Railways from the ICU" can only be perceived as an attack on the performance of his predecessor, Banerjee herself.

"This is a one-person government... Others are immaterial as they do not know when their wings will be clipped," said Surya Kanta Mishra, leader of the opposition in the West Bengal Assembly.

The Sword of Damocles seems to be hanging over every leader of the Trinamool and the attitude of toeing the line Banerjee has taken is reflected within the rank and file.

State Education Minister Bratya Basu has already faced the music for his remark that "just as one has the



Mamata Banerjee Dinesh Trivedi right to work [when a strike is called, one also has the right not to come to work] in contradiction of Banerjee's dictat that all employees would have to report for duty on the day of the all-India strike called by 11 registered trade unions on February 28.

Anxious to avoid a similar gaffe, Partha Chatterjee, secretary-general,

merely said "can all questions be answered" when he was quizzed by journalists on the chief minister's comments on the alleged rape of a 37-year-old woman. Banerjee claimed that the rape was "staged," but she was later proved wrong.

Meanwhile, Trinamool MP Kabir Suman, infamous for his frequent remarks which are not in line with Banerjee's stated stand, has already been dismissed by her "as a guest of the party."

While those within the party would never dare her, Banerjee's attitude has been described as "dictatorial" by representatives of the Congress in her Council of Ministers.

Time to build capacity

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waves, they observed.

The suggestions came at a discussion titled "Victory at the Sea: Potentials and Responsibilities" organised by leading Bangla daily Prothom Alo at its conference room.

Ending a 38-year dispute with neighbouring Myanmar, Bangladesh on March 14 won a landmark victory at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) that gave Bangladesh 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic and territorial rights in the Bay of Bengal.

It also gave Bangladesh a substantial share of the outer continental shelf beyond 200 nautical miles and a full 12-mile territorial sea around the St Martin's Island.

Following the verdict that was based on equitable share, Bangladesh is set to get another verdict over a maritime boundary dispute with another neighbour India, speakers said.

"This is a grand achievement," said AA Ziauddin Ahmed, chairman of the National Oceanography and Maritime Institute (NOAMI), who regretted that there is no course on oceanography at the country's universities.

Surveying the sea is crucial to learn about its resources first; then comes the issue of exploring them,

he said. Generating energy from the sea tides and waves is very much feasible. Once it is done, there will be no dearth of power, he noted.

"However, unless we have our own expertise, we cannot explore these resources," Ziauddin Ahmed said, putting emphasis on science education and oceanography studies at home.

Former navy chief MH Khan said, "Nothing can happen unless there is a combination of technology and political will."

He regretted that the previous governments had not paid adequate attention to settle the maritime disputes or explore the marine resources.

Khan said Bangladesh should not go for a bilateral settlement of the dispute over maritime boundary with India, which previously did not agree to equitable share, but equitable distance. Prof Anu Muhammad of economics at Jahangirnagar University said the latest verdict reflects that Bangladesh can achieve something if it wants, but there is a general inferiority on the country's national capacity.

"Now that we gained legal sovereignty on our maritime territory, we have to have sovereignty on its resources," he said. The resources in the Bay are to be used not only for the present

generation but also for the future, he added.

This victory, however, could turn a farce if the authorities lease out the oil and gas blocks of the sea to foreign companies, Prof Anu Muhammad said, suggesting that the country should seriously plan to strengthen Petrobangla, even by hiring Bangladeshi experts working abroad.

The Bay is a strategic place for the western forces, who could come here in the name of security. "Allowing them here would never yield anything good," he noted.

Md Khurshed Alam, additional secretary to the foreign ministry, presented various aspects of how the government went to the ITLOS and won the battle.

He said some people were unknowingly commenting that Myanmar had got five gas oil blocks. Bangladesh's earlier claim of having 28 blocks was not based on any law. Now that Bangladesh got sovereignty on 200 nautical miles and continental shelf beyond, it is much more than that of mere 28 blocks, he said.

Law Commission Chairman Shah Alam, Prof Badrul Imam of geology at Dhaka University and Prof Habibur Rahman of law at Rajshahi University also spoke at the discussion moderated by Prothom Alo Editor Matir Rahman and Joint Editor Abdul Quayum.

Libya, France, ICC want to try Gaddafi spy chief

AFP, Nouakchott

France and the International Criminal Court have filed formal requests with Mauritania to extradite Libya's ex-spy chief Abdullah Senussi, a security source said yesterday as Tripoli insisted that it should put him on trial.

"For the time being two requests have been received by Mauritania. One from France arrived on Saturday and the second from the ICC on Sunday," the Mauritanian source told AFP.

A delegation from the Libya is expected to visit Mauritania soon to discuss Senussi's handover.

Libya is determined to try him who is wanted by The Hague-based ICC for crimes committed while trying to crush last year's uprising.

However, Amnesty international on Saturday said that Senussi should be tried by the ICC in the absence of a functioning judiciary in Libya.

Senussi faced an international arrest warrant after a Paris court sentenced him in absentia to life imprisonment for involvement in the downing of a French airliner in 1989.

Senussi was arrested late Friday night at Nouakchott airport in Mauritania carrying a fake Malian passport.

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