

Indo-Pak troops exchange fire in Kashmir

One killed

Pakistani and Indian troops exchanged fire yesterday along their disputed border in divided Kashmir, with each side blaming the other for the flare-up and Pakistan saying one of its soldiers was killed.

Pakistan said Indian troops had raided a military post in the Haji Pir sector of Pakistani-administered Kashmir, killing a soldier and injuring another.

"Pakistan army troops effectively responded to the attack," the Pakistani statement said, adding that Indian troops had left behind weapons as they retreated.

An Indian army spokesman said it had responded to a "ceasefire violation" but did not cross the Line of Control.

Kashmir is claimed by both nations in its entirety and has been a flashpoint between them for more than 60 years.

Exchanges are not uncommon but rarely result in fatalities.

However, he added: "None of our troops crossed the Line of Control. We have no casualties or injuries."

Another Indian army spokesman, Col Brijesh Pandey, told Associated Press that Pakistani troops had "initiated unprovoked firing" with mortar shells and automatic weapons at Indian military posts. One civilian home was destroyed, he said.

"We retaliated only using small arms. We believe it was clearly an attempt on their part to facilitate infiltration of militants," Col Pandey said.

There has been a ceasefire in Kashmir since late 2003.

Assad summons Syrians for war

Terms rebels as foreign agents; laments for countrymen

AGENCIES

A defiant President Bashar al-Assad yesterday called for national mobilisation in a "war to defend the nation", describing rebels fighting him as terrorists and agents of foreign powers with whom it was impossible to negotiate.

Appearing in an opera house in central Damascus packed with cheering supporters, the Syrian leader delivered his first speech to an audience since June last year, and his first public comments since a television interview in November.

He lamented the suffering of the people in the civil war, saying a "black cloud" of pain engulfed every corner.

Assad also set out a plan involving a national dialogue conference and a referendum on a national charter.

He said that his government has "not found a partner" for a political solution to the country's 21-month crisis which has killed at least 60,000 people.

He rejected the Syrian opposition movement as puppets fabricated by the West, and said that

Syria wanted to negotiate with the "master not the servants".

Assad said Syria had not rejected diplomatic moves but insisted it would not negotiate with people with "terrorist" ideas.

He said: "There are those who seek to partition Syria and weaken it. But Syria is stronger... and will remain sovereign... and this is what upsets the West."

His speech was interspersed with applause and chants from defiant supporters in the opera house in central Damascus, and at the end he was mobbed on the stage.

Assad said the opposition against him was not a revolution.

He accused the rebels of stealing wheat from the people, depriving children of school and cutting off electricity and medical supplies.

Facing a uphill battle against the advancing rebel, he came out fighting, appealing to all Syrians to join together to defend the nation.

"We are now in a state of war in every sense of the word. This war targets Syria using a handful of Syrians and many foreigners. Thus, this is a war to defend the nation."

"The nation is for all and we all must protect it," he said.

Assad's last public comments were in November, when he told Russian TV he would "live and die in Syria".

Since then opposition forces have gained control of swathes of territory in northern Syria, and have formed a more inclusive leadership council which has been recognised by the US and the EU.

But their efforts to gain ground in and around major cities including Damascus have been met by stiff resistance and increasingly destructive airstrikes.

On Saturday the UK-based activist group, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, reported fierce fighting in Harasta and Daraya, suburbs of Damascus.

Diplomatic attempts to end the conflict in Syria have so far failed.

UN and Arab League envoy Lakhdar Brahimi has been pushing a plan approved at an international conference in June that would create a transitional government.

But the plan leaves President Assad's role unclear. The Syrian opposition has insisted that Assad must step down for the conflict to end.



ASSAD'S ROAD MAP TO PEACE

- Outside powers to stop arming rebels
- The army would then halt military operations
- The government would then engage in national dialogue
- The dialogue would try to establish a national charter
- A referendum will follow, leading to parliamentary elections



Nepalese activists perform a street drama during a protest near the prime minister's residence in Kathmandu yesterday, during a protest demanding justice in rising cases of violence against women. Hundreds of Nepalese campaigners are protesting over the alleged rape and robbery of a maid by government officials, echoing widespread anger in neighbouring India over violence against women.

PHOTO: AFP

Sudan leaders back buffer zone

BBC ONLINE

The leaders of Sudan and South Sudan on Saturday reaffirmed their commitment to setting up a buffer zone on their shared border and resuming oil exports.

African Union mediator Thabo Mbeki said both sides had agreed "unconditionally" to implement a deal first struck in September.

Presidents Omar al-Bashir of Sudan and Salva Kiir of South Sudan smiled and shook hands, but made no comment.

The neighbours came close to war after the South's independence in 2011.

NEWS IN brief

Obama ends Hawaii vacation

AFP, Honolulu

US President Barack Obama and his family left Hawaii late Saturday where they had spent a Christmas vacation.

Air Force One carrying the president, the first lady and their daughters took off from Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam at about 9:30pm local time and headed for Washington.

Obama initially began his vacation on December 21, but was forced to interrupt it on December 26 and fly back to Washington to help lawmakers pass a tax package to avert the so-

Philippine shootout kills 13

AFP, Manila

Police in the Philippines killed 13 members of a criminal gang in a shootout yesterday, the third violent incident within days amid widespread calls for stricter gun controls.

The battle erupted after gunmen in two vehicles tried to smash through a police checkpoint near the town of Atimonan, according to the national police headquarters' operations centre.

A police statement said one senior police officer was wounded and taken to hospital, and 10 firearms were recovered from the gang members, including

Cat 'arrested' at Brazil prison

BBC ONLINE

A cat has been detained in the grounds of a jail in Brazil with contraband goods for prisoners strapped to its body with tape.

The white cat was apprehended crossing the main prison gate. The incident took place at a jail in Arapiraca city, 250km south-west of Recife in Alagoas state.

The confiscated items included drill bits, files, a mobile phone and charger, plus earphones. The cat was taken to a local animal centre.

The incident took place at New Year, but the

Turkey ban on books lifted

AFP, Istanbul

From communist works to a comic book, thousands of titles banned by Turkey over the decades were taken off the restricted list Saturday, thanks to a government reform.

In July, the parliament adopted a bill stipulating that any decision taken before 2012 to block the sale and distribution of published work would be voided if no court chose to confirm the ruling within six months.

The deadline came and went Saturday and no such judicial decisions were recorded, the head of Turkey's TYB publisher's union, Metin Celal Zeynioglu, told AFP.

Disney's world in new lights

THE GUARDIAN ONLINE

A British-designed and directed opera about Walt Disney which premieres in Spain this month before coming to London has been forced to tell the great cartoonist's story without any of the images of the characters that made him a household name. Minnie, Donald, Pluto and Goofy, not to mention Mickey Mouse himself, will not be appearing on stage with the singers.

The Perfect American, the latest work by the acclaimed composer Philip Glass, concentrates on the last years of Disney's life, when he lay dying of lung cancer while planning to have his body frozen. It portrays Disney as a megalomaniac with McCarthyite, racist and misogynist tendencies, so it is clear why the global entertainment corporation has denied rights.

Yet, ironically, the most damaging charge the new opera levels at a man whose vision continues to dominate children's culture is probably the claim that he did little actual work on the drawings that made him famous.

The new opera is based on a fictionalised account of working at Disney's cartoon factory written by Peter Stephan Jungk in 2005.

Walt Disney Studios called Glass to dissuade him, but by then the composer was committed. Glass asked librettist Rudy Wurlitzer to turn the book into an opera and the work was duly sent to Disney Studios for consideration. There was no response and Jungk, the original author, interpreted this as "a green light".

In a key early scene, Disney is tended by a nurse he calls Snow White, when his family visit together with the directors of the Disney Company. The dying mogul makes them all take a solemn promise on the American flag never to say the word "die". In later scenes Disney compares himself to Henry Ford, Thomas Edison and Abraham Lincoln and says he is convinced that Ronald Reagan will become president if he will follow his advice.

The Perfect American is the 24th opera from Glass, who has described Disney as the man responsible for "perhaps the most pervasive fantasy world on our planet" and his story as "gripping".



Walt Disney

Mass killing visits Aurora again

Four shot dead

BBC ONLINE

A gunman killed three people before police shot him dead Saturday in a shooting at a house in the Colorado town of Aurora, scene of a massacre at a cinema last year, police said.

Police said they went to a townhouse after shots were heard there overnight.

Officers later entered the home. Following a gunfight they found the suspect dead, along with three people apparently killed earlier, police added.

Aurora, near Denver, was the scene of a mass shooting at a cinema in July, in which a gunman killed 12 people.

He opened fire at random during the premiere of the Batman film The Dark Knight Rises.

Suspect James Eagan Holmes is currently being tried on murder charges.

In Saturday's incident, police said they were alerted by a woman who had escaped from the townhouse.

The suspect barricaded himself for five hours, before officers moved in and shot him.

Entering the property, the team found the shooter dead, along with two other men and a woman. Their identities have not been disclosed.

US GUN VIOLENCE

Obama considers broad arms sales restrictions

AFP, Washington

The administration of President Barack Obama is considering a broad array of measures to curb the nation's gun violence, including more than just a reinstatement of a ban on assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition, The Washington Post reported yesterday.

Citing multiple people involved in the administration's discussions, the newspaper said a working group led by Vice President Biden is seriously considering several measures: universal background checks for firearm buyers, tracking the movement and sale of weapons through a national database, strengthening mental health checks, and stiffening penalties for carrying guns near



schools or giving them to minors.

To push these measures through Congress, the White House is developing strategies to work around the National Rifle Association, the report said.

The proposals are a response to last month's tragedy in Newtown, Connecticut, the site of one of the worst school shootings in US history where a disturbed shooter killed 20 six- and seven-year-old children and six adults in spree that shocked the world.

However, the NRA, the most powerful gun lobby in the United States, stands firm against any additional restraints on firearms and ammunition sales -- despite a national outcry.

Egypt president in major cabinet reshuffles

AFP, Cairo

Egypt's President Mohamed Morsi reshuffled his cabinet yesterday amid a serious economic crisis and ahead of talks with the International Monetary Fund for a \$4.8-billion loan, media reports said.

Ten new ministers swore oath, including Finance Minister Al-Morsi al-Sayed Hegazi, whose predecessor Muntaz al-Said headed the IMF loan negotiations which stalled during a period of intense political unrest in December.

Hegazi, a specialist in Islamic finance, will report to Prime Minister Hisham Qandil, who remains in his post.

The Muslim Brotherhood, from which Islamist Morsi emanates, had criticised

Said as being too close to the army, which held power during the transitional period after the overthrow of president Hosni Mubarak in 2011.

Mohammed Ibrahim, a former police general, replaced Ahmed Gamal al-Din as interior minister, and eight other portfolios all related to the economy changed hands.

The ministers for transport, electricity, domestic development, civil aviation, the environment, communications, supply and domestic trade and parliamentary affairs were all replaced.

Morsi announced the reshuffle on December 26, after the ratification by popular vote of a controversial new constitution draft by an Islamist-dominated panel allied to the president.

FRENCH TAX ROW Depardieu receives Russian passport

BBC ONLINE

Gerard Depardieu, the French actor who has threatened to quit his homeland to avoid higher taxes for the rich, has received a Russian passport and met with President Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin said yesterday.

The actor had announced he was seeking Russian citizenship after the French government criticised his decision to move abroad to avoid higher taxes.

Depardieu met Putin in Russia's Black Sea resort of Sochi. Depardieu and Putin shook hands and hugged each other at the meeting.

Earlier this week, Putin signed the decree granting Russian citizenship to Depardieu.

Depardieu's highly publicised tax row began last year after new President Francois Hollande said he would raise taxes to 75% for those earning more than 1m euros (£817,400).

Ambassador sacked over wild party

BBC ONLINE

The Honduran ambassador to Colombia has been sacked after a wild Christmas party at the embassy in Bogota.

Ambassador Carlos Rodriguez has been told to resign "to safeguard relations with Colombia", the Honduran Foreign Ministry said in a statement on Saturday.

An investigation has begun into reports that two prostitutes had been invited to the party on 20 December.

The two women have been accused of stealing laptop computers and mobile phones from the embassy.

An inquiry committee has been set up in Honduras.

An employee close to Rodriguez has been accused of organising the party and hiring the prostitutes.

It is not clear whether the ambassador was present.