

THREE KILLED IN KASHMIR STAND-OFF WITH MILITANTS

SRINAGAR: Government forces in Kashmir were battling suspected rebels yesterday after they stormed a police facility in a pre-dawn attack and killed one officer and two paramilitary troops, police said. The militants detonated grenades and fired automatic assault rifles to gain entry to the district police headquarters in southern Pulwama district which also houses families of some officers, director general of police S.P. Vaid said.

One police officer was killed in the initial assault and three paramilitary troops were injured who were evacuated to a nearby hospital, he said. "Two more CRPF (Central Reserve Police Force) soldiers died" in pursuit of the attackers, Vaid said. "We are evacuating the families and everyone from there," he said. It was not clear how many attackers were inside the compound where hundreds of police and paramilitary troops are usually present.

"Exchange of fire is still on inside," inspector general of police Muneer Ahmed Khan said. Authorities cut off mobile internet services in the district to prevent residents from organizing anti-

India demonstrations as a tactic to help the militants escape. Sporadic protests have already broken out close to the police facility, an officer said on condition of anonymity. In recent months, residents, sometimes entire villages, have increasingly hit the streets and thrown stones at soldiers when rebels are trapped in military cordons to help them escape.

Dozens of civilians have died during such clashes since last year. Government forces have stepped up counterinsurgency operations since the start of the year and have killed at least 136 rebels, including most of the top commanders of rebel groups operating in the disputed territory. Kashmir has been divided between Indian and Pakistan since the end of British colonial rule in 1947. Both claim the territory in full. Rebel groups have for decades fought the more than 500,000 Indian soldiers deployed in the restive territory, demanding independence or a merger of the former Himalayan kingdom with Pakistan. Tens of thousands, mostly civilians, have died in the fighting. —AFP



SRINAGAR: An Indian army soldier stands guard in an apple orchard while a gunfight takes place between militants and government forces in Pulwama, south of Srinagar. — AFP



KABUL: Men pray over the bodies of victims who died in a Shiite mosque attack in Kabul, Afghanistan. — AP

DEATH TOLL FROM MOSQUE ATTACK IN KABUL REACHES 28

HUNDREDS TAKE PART IN THE BURIAL OF VICTIMS

KABUL: The number of people killed in an attack on a Shiite mosque in the Afghan capital during Friday prayers rose to at least 28 - up from 20 - including women and children, the chief of Kabul's hospitals said yesterday. Meanwhile, hundreds took part in the burial of two dozen victims in the mosque compound. Two assailants blew themselves up and another two were shot dead by Afghan security forces, according to police. Kabul hospital chief Mohammad Salim Rasouli said more than 50 people were wounded in the attack that went on for hours.

The Interior Ministry said four of the dead were police. Hundreds of family members, relatives and local people participated in the burial of about two dozen victims inside the mosque compound yesterday. Sayed Jan Agha, 34, lost his mother and an aunt in the attack. He said that he tried several times to get into the mosque and rescue his mother and other relatives, but security forces prevented him. "My mother was martyred while she was trying to come down from the second floor, she was shot right at the stairs," said Agha.

Agha said his aunt called him and asked for help while she was bleeding, but no one could help her while the battle was going on between

the attackers and security forces and she died from her wounds, he said. The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the attack, the latest to target Afghanistan's minority Shiites. The Taliban condemned the violence, with a spokesman for the militants, Zabihullah Mujahid, telling The Associated Press in a telephone interview that the group had nothing to do with it.

President Ashraf Ghani condemned the violence and said the militants were turning to attacking places of worship because they were losing on the battlefield. He urged Islamic clerics everywhere to condemn the bloodshed. The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) in a statement condemned the attack. It said at least two attackers wearing police uniforms stormed the mosque while several hundred worshippers, including many women and children, attended Friday prayers.

Terrified worshippers

One assailant detonated his suicide vest outside the mosque, while another continued inside, indiscriminately killing and wounding people, the statement said. "This latest in a series of attacks targeting members of the Shi'a community at worship has no possible justification,"

said Toby Lanzer, the UN Secretary-General's Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan and acting head of UNAMA.

"Such attacks directed against congregations and places of worship are serious violations of international law that may amount to war crimes." Terrified worshippers endured about four harrowing hours of gunfire and explosions before the four attackers were killed. The Islamic State said in a statement that it had deployed two attackers to the mosque. There was no immediate explanation for the contradictory number of attackers. Security forces surrounded the mosque in the northern Kabul neighborhood but did not initially enter to prevent further casualties to the many worshippers inside, police said.

Later, as police tried to advance, one of the attackers set off an explosion that forced them to withdraw. The cleric who was performing the prayers was among the dead, said Mir Hussain Nasiri, a member of Afghanistan's Shiite clerical council. The gunmen had taken over both the cavernous prayer hall for the men and the separate, second-floor prayer area for the women, he said. The mosque could accommodate up to 1,000 people, Nasiri added. — AP

NORTH KOREA FIRES SHORT-RANGE MISSILES

SEOUL: North Korea fired three short-range ballistic missiles yesterday, the US military said, reviving tensions with Washington after President Donald Trump had said Pyongyang was starting to show some "respect". The launches come as tens of thousands of South Korean and US troops take part in joint military drills in the south of the peninsula, which the North views as highly provocative.

Following an initial US assessment saying that two of the missiles had "failed in flight", a spokesman for the US Pacific Command later said the two weapons had not failed but "flew approximately 250 kilometers in a northeastern direction". One of the three missiles blew up "almost immediately", with none of the weapons posing a threat to either North America or the US territory of Guam, the spokesman said.

Lee Il-Woo, an analyst at Korea Defense Network, said the launches represented a "low-level provocative act" carried out in response to the US-South Korea exercises, which are seen by Pyongyang as a rehearsal for an invasion of its own territory. The joint exercises started Monday at a time of heightened tensions between Pyongyang and Washington, after two successful intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launches carried out by North Korea last month apparently brought most of the United States into range for the first time.

Analyst Yang Uk at the Korea Defense and Security Forum told AFP the latest launches by Pyongyang were "carefully calibrated... to avoid revving up tensions too high beyond its control". The launches, which took place over a span of 30

minutes, came as North Korean state media reported that leader Kim Jong-Un oversaw a military exercise simulating a special forces assault on South Korean border islands involving aircraft, "multiple-missile launchers" and howitzers.

Wiped out the enemy

Shells hit islands standing in for South Korea's Baengnyeong and Yeonpyeong islands while special forces landed in rubber boats or para-

chuted in and "wiped out the desperate enemy with various combat methods", the Korean Central News Agency said. The North bombarded Yeonpyeong island in November 2010 in response to a South Korean live-fire drill near the tense sea border, killing four South Koreans-two soldiers and two civilians-and prompting Seoul to return the fire. "Kim Jong-Un expressed great satisfaction over the successful target-striking contest," it said. —AFP



NORTH KOREA: This undated photo released by North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) shows rockets being launched by Korean People's Army (KPA) personnel during a target strike exercise at an undisclosed location in North Korea. — AFP

VIOLENCE CONTINUES IN MYANMAR'S RAKHINE STATE

MAUNGDAW, Myanmar: Gun shots rang out across northern Rakhine State yesterday afternoon as clashes continued between suspected Rohingya militants and Myanmar security forces, officials said, a day after fighting killed 89 people and forced civilians to flee remote villages. The state has become a crucible of religious hatred focused on the stateless Rohingya Muslim minority, who are reviled and perceived as illegal immigrants in Buddhist-majority Myanmar.

Hundreds of men from the persecuted Muslim group appear to have organized under the banner of the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), which claims to be leading the insurgency that has scorched the area since October last year. Three village officials were killed overnight near the town of Maungdaw, according to the office of State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi-Myanmar's de facto leader. Hours later residents in Maungdaw, which is close to the Bangladesh border, ran for safety as a local administration office came under attack by militants.

"Our situation is urgent," Myint Kyaing, a Maungdaw administrative officer said yesterday afternoon before hanging up the phone. Ethnic Rakhine Buddhists armed themselves with knives and sticks as tension soared in a town that has repeatedly been the epicenter of religious violence since 2012. As panic spread, scores of

Hindu villagers fled from surrounding villages to Maungdaw after rumors they were also a target for the militants. "There is no security in the villages," Buthon, a Hindu man in Maungdaw said.

Other villagers sought shelter in monasteries. Friday's clashes left 12 security officials and 77 militants dead according to Suu Kyi's office-the highest declared single day toll since fighting broke out last year. Hundreds of militants ambushed police posts in the early hours of Friday, some carrying guns and using homemade explosives, Myanmar's military said. Focal point of Friday's unrest was Rathedaung township. The area has seen a heavy build-up of Myanmar troops in recent weeks, with reports filtering out of killings by shadowy groups, army-blockaded villages and abuses.

The government has declared the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA) a terrorist organization. Myanmar says the group is headed by Rohingya jihadists who were trained abroad but it is unclear how large the network is. Deadly attacks in October 2016 by the militants sparked a military response that left scores dead and forced some 87,000 people to flee to Bangladesh. The UN believes the military crackdown may have amounted to ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya. The army denies the allegations which included killings of civilians and mass rape. —AFP



MYANMAR: Women and children fleeing violence in their villages arrive at the Yathataung township in Rakhine State in Myanmar. — AFP

THOUSANDS AT BOY'S BURIAL SEEK END TO PHILIPPINE DRUG WAR

MANILA: Thousands of Filipinos yesterday called for an end to extrajudicial killings as the funeral of a boy killed by police turned into the largest single demonstration yet against President Rodrigo Duterte's brutal drug war. The killing of 17-year-old Kian Delos Santos last week triggered rare protests against Duterte's controversial but popular campaign to eradicate drugs, with critics saying it highlighted rampant rights abuses by police enforcing the crackdown.

Since Duterte's term began 14 months ago, police have reported killing 3,500 people in anti-drug operations, with thousands more murdered over drug-related crimes and in unexplained circumstances. Duterte and his drug war are backed by a large majority of Filipinos fed up with high crime and a slow-moving judicial system, according to national polls. But the killing of Delos Santos, the son of a poor sidewalk vendor and a migrant domestic worker, have dominated the media and sparked public outrage.

"We will pursue this fight. What happened to him was so unfair. We cannot let it stand," his 21-year-old cousin Jhai Delos Santos said as she joined the protest march. "We have rights too. They cannot just wage a drug war against people who have no drug records and are not taking drugs," she said, adding that the boy's father and grandfather have since received anonymous death threats. Police said the teenager was a drug courier who fired at them while resisting arrest.

However CCTV footage showed the two policemen dragging the unarmed boy away moments before he was killed. Duterte, who had controversially drawn parallels between his drug campaign to Hitler's extermination of Jews and vowed to protect police from prosecution, has promised to bring the boy's killers to jus-

tice. "The president has clearly stated that the war against drugs is not a license to break the law," Duterte's spokesman Ernesto Abella said in a statement issued late Friday.

Stop Killing the Poor

After the boy's family held a wake for him at home, around 3,000 people including his classmates, neighbors, nuns, priests and human rights activists marched under cloudy skies to protest his killing, according to an AFP photographer at the scene. "Kian is the name and face of the truth. We must not allow the truth to die with Kian's murder," said Father Robert Reyes, one of several Catholic priests who celebrated a church mass for the boy yesterday.

Crowds lined the narrow streets as participants, many wearing black ribbons, carried posters and streamers that read "Stop Killing the Poor", "Justice for Kian", and "End Duterte's Fascist Drug War". The cortege stopped briefly for prayers outside a police station where the three officers who had arrested the boy were deployed. They have since been suspended. Following their claims of Delos Santos being involved in the drugs trade, police told a public enquiry on Thursday that they only read about his alleged narcotics activity on "social media" after his death.

A police autopsy also concluded the boy was fatally shot in the head twice as he lay prone on the ground. Amnesty International alleged in a report released in February that Philippine police shot dead defenseless people, fabricated evidence, paid assassins to murder drug addicts, and stole from those they killed or the victims' relatives. It also said police were being paid by their superiors to kill drug suspects, and documented victims as young as eight years old. —AFP