

Threat to crash land hijacked plane sparks chaos in Frankfurt

REUTERS, Frankfurt

A man threatened to crash a stolen light plane into the European Central Bank tower in Frankfurt Sunday, forcing German fighter jets to scramble before he finally landed and was arrested.

The lone, pistol-wielding pilot told a television station from the aircraft that he wanted to draw attention to astronaut Judith Resnik, who died in the US space shuttle Challenger, which exploded shortly after takeoff in January 1986.

Frankfurt airport, continental Europe's busiest, was shut, tall buildings evacuated, roads and bridges closed and military aircraft patrolled the sky as the motorized glider circled for almost two hours before landing at the main airport.

Kashmir CM blamed for backtracking over spl cops

AFP, Srinagar

The new leader of Indian Kashmir said Monday that notorious counter-insurgency police would be "re-oriented," sparking anger among human rights activists who accused him of backtracking on an election promise to disband the force.

Kashmir Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed, who came to power in November after state elections, had said he wanted to get rid of the dreaded Special Operations Group (SOG), which consists of local policemen who volunteer to work against Muslim rebels.

But under pressure from New Delhi, which has accused Sayeed of being soft on militants, he has now said the SOG will only be "re-oriented," although he did not spell out what the reforms would be.

"With the installation of the new government a controversy was sought to be created about the future of the Special Operations Group of the state police," Sayeed said in a statement.



PHOTO: AFP
Sri Lankan Constitutional Affairs Minister and the government's chief peace negotiator G.L. Peiris (R) shakes hands with Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam's (LTTE) chief negotiator Anton Balasingham (L) prior to the opening of the fourth round of peace talks at Rose Garden resort in Nakhon Pathom province, 32 km west of the Thai capital Bangkok, on Monday. The Lankan peace talks with the LTTE aimed at ending three decades of ethnic bloodshed.

Toughest round of Lankan talks gets underway

Muslim factor haunts peace effort

AFP, Nakhon Pathom

Sri Lanka's peace negotiators Monday opened a fresh round of negotiations at a riverside resort here amid fears of a stormy four-day session, officials said.

The Sri Lankan government team's chief negotiator G. L. Peiris and his Tamil Tiger counterpart Anton Balasingham shook hands and posed for the cameras at the Rose Garden resort, before sitting down for discussions likely to include thorny military issues.

The fourth and latest round of negotiations are taking place against a backdrop of growing unease between the government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) over the resettlement of thousands of refugees near military bases.

The peace delegates and their support staff walked through metal detectors to enter the Glass House banquet hall, where journalists were allowed to witness the formal start of

the talks in front of television cameras.

The two sides also held their second round of talks here, which concluded in November with the rebels announcing their intention to enter mainstream politics.

Peiris and Balasingham also jointly planted what is known as a cannon ball tree, while Norway's deputy foreign minister, Vidar Helgesen -- who is also the moderator at talks -- gave a hand.

Peace talks host Thailand has close Buddhist ties with Sri Lanka, as both follow the Theravada stream of Buddhism.

Meanwhile, a bitter power struggle within Sri Lanka's small but influential minority Muslim party could undermine peace talks opening here Monday, negotiators and diplomats said.

The crisis within the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), which provides crucial support for the Colombo government, could have a knock-on effect on the fourth round

of Norwegian-backed negotiations, officials said.

"They believe the Muslims could be pushed to take up harder-line positions in order to keep their internal battles out of newspaper headlines at home. Signs of this are already emerging here.

"The problems and issues faced by the Muslims should be taken up immediately and any delay could lead to further complications (of the problem)," the SLMC's beleaguered leader Rauf Hakeem said Sunday.

Hakeem, a minister in the Colombo cabinet and a member of the four-man government negotiating team, is unhappy that he is not recognised as a separate entity representing Muslim interests alone.

And the failure to implement agreements reached at earlier rounds of peace talks has undermined Hakeem's leadership within the SLMC, whose divisions could weaken the Sri Lankan government.

Saddam accuses US of plotting to occupy Gulf

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein accused UN arms inspectors Monday of spying and charged that the United States was plotting to "occupy" the Gulf as Washington reportedly drew up plans to govern Iraq after his ouster.

"Instead of searching for so-called weapons of mass destruction in order to expose the lies of the liars (the United States and Britain), the inspection teams have been compiling lists of Iraqi scientists, asking questions with undeclared purposes, and inquiring about army camps and non-prohibited armament," Saddam said.

"All this, or at least most of it, is sheer intelligence activity," he said in a televised speech marking the

country's Armed Forces Day.

The Iraqi leader said the United States was applying "psychological pressure" to make the UN experts, who resumed arms inspections in Iraq on November 27 after a four-year break, "go beyond the UN Security Council's declared objectives."

Saddam, under threat of a US invasion aimed at toppling his regime, accused the administration of US President George W. Bush of plotting to "occupy" the oil-rich Gulf region.

"Behind this uproar and self-defeating pandemonium, the enemy is pursuing several objectives and Iraq is not the only target," he said.

"The objective is to fully and effectively occupy the Arab Gulf in

order to achieve several goals ... secure control of its resources and fragment some countries, a dream he (the enemy) has nurtured since the 1970s."

But Saddam vowed that Iraq would emerge "victorious" from a showdown with the United States, which is engaged in a massive military buildup in the Gulf in preparation for a possible war against Iraq.

"You should know that you are victorious now, and that you will also be during the final confrontation, despite the fuss and hysteria kicked up by the enemy," Saddam told the armed forces on the 82nd anniversary of their formation.

His remarks were echoed by Monday's state-run press, which said Iraq's army was ready to stand

up to any new US "aggression."

"Our valiant army will fight the infidel armies which Bush is boasting of, and it is capable of ... teaching the aggressors, mercenaries and US-Zionist tyranny a bitter lesson," wrote the daily Al-Jumhuriya.

The United States, continuing to beef up its forces in the Gulf, said a giant hospital ship equipped to treat wounded soldiers would set sail for an undisclosed location in the Indian Ocean Monday.

The announcement followed an unconfirmed media report that US special forces and CIA teams had already been secretly sent to Iraq, despite Bush's repeated assurances that he had not yet decided whether to go to war.

Indian docs eye cure for diabetes

INTERNET, New Delhi

Two Indian doctors may be on the verge of finding a limited cure, as opposed to controlled medication, for diabetes. Abhimanyu Garg and Anoop Misra have achieved a breakthrough in curing a rare fat disorder and the diabetes it causes, according to a report placed on the online edition of The Hindustan Times.

This could indicate a cure for all diabetics.

"Our research is a gateway to understanding common obesity disorders and will help us understand the function of fat in the body and how it leads to insulin resistance," says Garg, who works at the University of Texas at Dallas. Misra is a professor of internal medicine at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, and the personal physician of the Prime Minister.

Hopes for life on Mars shot down

AFP, Sydney

An Australian scientist claimed Monday to have found the first evidence of fluid flows on Mars, but he said the discovery long sought by those hoping to find life on the red planet probably proves the contrary.

University of Melbourne geologist Nick Hoffman said he found recent gully and channel development near polar regions of Mars while examining images taken by the Mars Global Surveyor spacecraft.

"I spent a long time looking round the area trying to figure out what was going on and eventually I realised we were seeing flows in action here on Mars," Hoffman said on public radio.

First shipment of US guns to fight Maoists reaches Nepal

AP, Kathmandu

The weapons were delivered on Sunday in Kathmandu by cargo plane, The Himalayan Times newspaper reported.

Royal Nepalese Army spokesman Deepak Gurung said the new rifles were lighter and more efficient than the guns currently used by its soldiers.

The shipment is part of a \$17 million assistance package from the United States. The Nepalese army is expecting another 2,000 guns soon, US training for the military and help in rehabilitating victims of the insurgency, which has killed more than 7,000 people since it began in 1996.

Snow storms blitz Europe: 21 killed

AFP, Rome

The death toll from avalanches, snowstorms, floods and freezing cold that swept Europe at the weekend rose to at least 21 on Sunday.

Avalanches killed two mountain climbers in Italy's Vezza d'Oglio and Aosta valley and injured six others on Sunday, a day after the bodies of two Czech mountaineers, were found in an avalanche in central Slovakia's Tatras mountains.

In Germany, the authorities said a total of seven people had died since Friday in storm-related car accidents and floods, including a four-year-old boy who fell into a swollen river.

The Moscow rescue services said on Saturday 12 more people had frozen to death in the Russian capital, bringing this winter's death toll there to 227.

State govts warn Delhi ahead of talks with Naga rebels

AFP, Guwahati

State governments in India's north-east warned New Delhi Monday not to agree to a settlement with the main tribal separatist group in the region unless it was acceptable to neighbouring regions.

The federal government and exiled leaders of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) are to hold peace talks in New Delhi Thursday aimed at bringing an end to 56 years of violent insurgency in the state of Nagaland.

"We welcome the talks with the NSCN, but at the same would like to make our views known to New Delhi that any attempts at threatening our territorial integrity would be highly objectionable and not tolerable," Arunachal Pradesh's chief minister Mukut Mithi told AFP by telephone from the state capital Itanagar.

The two top leaders of the NSCN, Isak Chishi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah, who have been fighting for an independent tribal homeland in the state, are expected to arrive in New Delhi on Wednesday from Europe, where they live in exile.

Northeastern states like Manipur, Assam, and Arunachal Pradesh, which share borders with Nagaland, are worried the federal government may agree to a peace settlement which is not acceptable to them.

In 2001 the federal government extended the jurisdiction of the ceasefire with the NSCN beyond Nagaland, leading to violent pro-

tests in Manipur that claimed at least 19 lives.

The extension of the ceasefire triggered fears that New Delhi was considering carving slices off the three neighbouring states -- which have sizeable Naga populations -- to create a Greater Nagaland, a concept mooted by the NSCN.

"There would be more turmoil than peace in the region if New Delhi tries to appease the NSCN by agreeing to a Greater Nagaland," said Ahantem Montu, advisor of the All Manipur Students' Union (AMSU), a powerful student body in Manipur.

The Manipur government said it would arrest the two NSCN leaders if they entered the state as there are criminal charges pending against them.

The threat of arrest come even though the Indian government has offered a safe passage to the two guerrilla leaders to enter the country for peace talks.

The NSCN and the government agreed a ceasefire in 1997 and in November last year New Delhi lifted a 12-year ban on the group.

Talks between the NSCN and the government emissary, K. Padmanabhaiah, have been held in several South Asian cities with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee meeting the rebel leaders in 2001 in the Japanese city of Osaka.

The NSCN is the oldest and the most powerful of the nearly 30-odd rebel armies operating in the north-east since India's independence in 1947.



PHOTO: AFP
An Israeli Arrow missile soars through the air shortly after its launch in the latest test from the Palmahim air force base south of Tel Aviv on Sunday.

Israel tests anti-missile system

AP, Palmachim

Sending a message to both Saddam Hussein and his own people, Israel conducted an ambitious test of its anti-missile system on Sunday with the simulated firing of several interceptor missiles at once at incoming rockets.

Israelis have shown growing concern that Saddam would retaliate against them if the United States attacks Iraq as he did during the 1991 Gulf War, and a successful test of the Arrow system might help allay those fears.

The Iraqi capability of hitting Israel is limited, but Israel must be "prepared for surprises, things we didn't think about," air force commander Maj. Gen. Dan Halutz told Army Radio before the test.

Missile defence system proof of US plan to attack: N Korea

Pyongyang violating truce accord: US

AFP, Seoul

Pyongyang said Monday that Washington's development of the missile defence system was proof that the United States intends to launch a military strike on North Korea.

"The Bush bellicose forces are starting the deployment of the MD (missile defence system) to take military sanctions and strike against the DPRK (North Korea) under the pretext of its alleged 'progress made in acquiring nuclear capability' and 'missile threat'," the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said.

"This goes to clearly prove that the US intends to launch military intervention against the DPRK on the plea of 'nuclear and missile threat' in a bid to settle the bilateral issue not by peaceful means but force."

Washington and Pyongyang are locked in a stand-off over the North's decision to reactivate a nuclear complex which was mothballed since 1994 under an agreement with the United States.

North Korea has consistently called for a non-aggression pact

with the United States, fearing that it will become a target after being labelled by President George W. Bush as part of an axis of evil.

Washington has insisted it has no plans for an assault but says it will not talk or bargain with the Stalinist state, a process it believes would be tantamount to nuclear blackmail.

The United States has also accused North Korea of embarking on a separate nuclear weapons drive based on enriched uranium, a charge which Pyongyang denies.

"The rumor about the non-existent 'missile threat' from the DPRK persistently spread by the US is no more than a cunning trick to justify its establishment of the MD," the KCNA commentary said.

"By perfecting the MD the US seeks to contain those independent countries and big powers and hold global supremacy."

Meanwhile, the commander of US troops in South Korea has accused North Korea of raising security concerns by violating a truce agreement that has maintained peace on the peninsula for

five decades.

General Leon J. LaPorte said that North Korea had refused to acknowledge the jurisdiction of the armistice in transport corridors in the demilitarized zone (DMZ) which are being linked in a joint North-South project.

"If the North Koreans continue to use this practice of refusing to acknowledge the armistice agreement's authority in the DMZ, it could undermine the armistice's most visible mechanism for maintaining a separation of opposing forces -- the DMZ," LaPorte said in a statement received here Monday.

"This refusal brings into question North Korea's commitment to comply with the Armistice Agreement itself.

"It also attempts to deflect international attention from their armistice violations in the transportation corridors, and is a direct challenge to the Armistice Agreement's authority to keep military forces separated in the DMZ," said the general who also heads the United Nations Command (UNC).

The UNC has supervised the border since US troops fought alongside South Korea to repel North Korean troops during the 1950-53 Korean War.

LaPorte's statement is the latest salvo in an ongoing dispute over North Korea's refusal to acknowledge the UNC's control over inter-Korean rail and road links across the world's last Cold War frontier.

The two Koreas completed work to clear mines from their buffer zone last month to build two transportation corridors in the zone. But the project became bogged down in a row over border-crossing procedures between North Korea and the UNC.

The UNC has accused North Korean troops of violating the armistice accord by bringing machine guns into a DMZ transportation corridor on several occasions in December.

UNC officials see the deployment of banned weapons in the corridor as part of North Korea's attempt to control the DMZ's transportation corridors.

Countdown for manned mission begins

AFP, Beijing

China Monday began the countdown to sending a human into space as scientists prepared to move the safely returned unmanned Shenzhou IV craft to Beijing for analysis.

The touchdown on schedule late Sunday of Shenzhou IV on a snow-covered plain in Inner Mongolia after a 162-hour mission proves China is nearly ready for its first manned spaceflight later this year, experts say.

"The return of the spaceship represents a complete success of the fourth test flight of the program, which began in 1992," the Xinhua news agency quoted unnamed experts in charge of the program as saying.

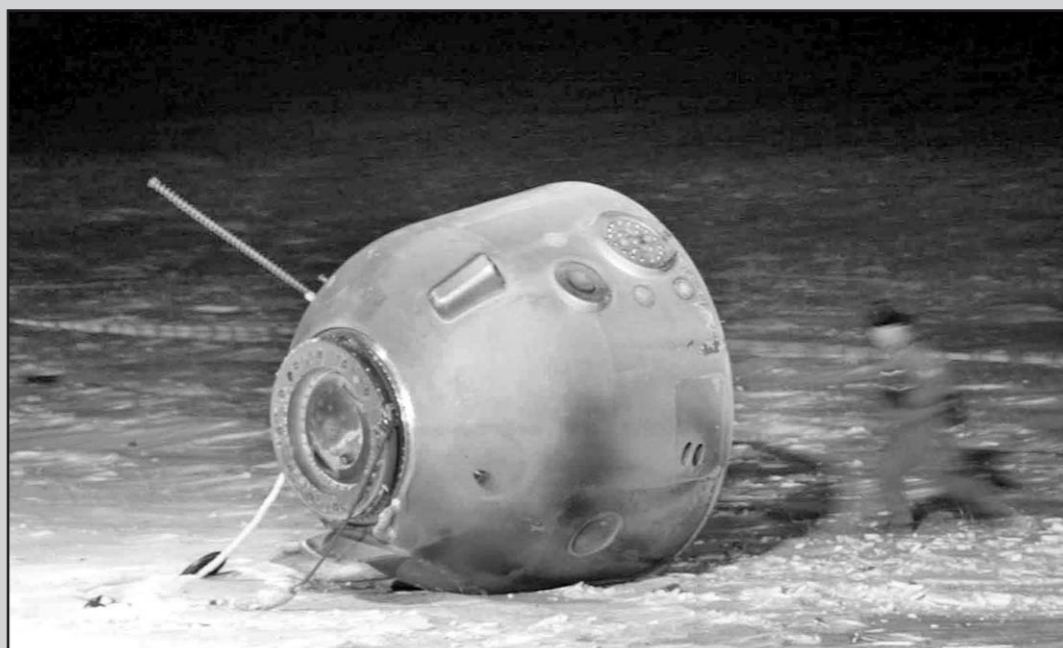


PHOTO: AFP
A technician runs towards the Chinese spaceship Shenzhou IV following its landing in the middle part of the Inner Mongolia region in northern China on Sunday. China moved a major step closer to joining an elite group of nations to send a human into orbit when its unmanned spaceship, Shenzhou IV, returned safely to earth on Sunday, six days after its launch into space.