

15,000 teachers in Nepal have fake degrees

AFP, Kathmandu

An anti-corruption body in Nepal has started checking the academic qualifications of teachers after a probe found that nearly 15,000 could have fake certificates, officials said yesterday.

The high powered Commission for Investigation on Abuse of Authority (CIAA) will check the qualifications of the 15,000 teachers in the Himalayan Kingdom.

"The CIAA launched an investigation against suspected teachers who are holding fake certificates after the education ministry carried out a probe," said Education Ministry official Rameshwor Lamichhane.

He did not reveal details of the initial investigation, but said the ministry suspected about 14,800 teachers may be holding fake academic certificates out of 150,000 teachers working in 17,000 schools across the country.

"On initial investigation, over 14,000 certificates submitted to the concerned authorities by applicants for the teacher's jobs were found to be forged," a CIAA official said.

"A majority of fake certificate-holding teachers are found at schools in the southern Terai belt where forged certificates can be obtained at 150 to 500 dollars," the official said.

"The government has decided to act against all the fake certificate holders within six months", a cabinet source said.

Pak jeweller relieved after FBI admits mistake

AFP, Lahore

A Pakistani jeweller proclaimed victory yesterday after "days of agony" when the FBI admitted it was duped into posting on its website photos of five men suspected of illegally entering the United States.

Mohammad Asghar, who runs a gold jewellery store in the eastern city of Lahore, believed his photo, under a different name, was among the five. He said it fell into the US Federal Bureau of Investigation's hands after he arranged for a fake passport in an attempt to enter the United Kingdom.

"This is a victory of truth that I have been found innocent by the FBI," Asghar, who said he had never travelled to the United States, told AFP.

"During the last five or six days I suffered badly. Various (Pakistani) agencies came to my home and shop and interrogated me.

The FBI said Tuesday the information received on the men was found to be false, a hoax reportedly attributed to a Canadian-based people smuggler facing charges for trying to illegally bring 19 foreigners into the United States.

"As a result of uncovering fabricated information, there is no longer a need for public assistance in locating the five individuals," FBI spokesman Bill Carter said. "We are not looking for them anymore."

The photos, posted on the agency's website December 29, have since been removed.

Asghar said he would not seek compensation or an apology over the alleged photo mix-up.

Anna Nicole Smith named worst dressed

REUTERS, Los Angeles

Now we know why she made her living as a stripper -- her clothes were just too ugly to keep on.

Fashion designer Mr. Blackwell named former Playboy Playmate Anna Nicole Smith as the worst dressed woman of 2002. She was followed closely by a bevy of pop singers including Christina Aguilera and Shakira, actresses like Meg Ryan and Cameron Diaz, Britain's Princess Anne and Kelly Osbourne, the daughter of British rocker Ozzy Osbourne.

Mr. Blackwell said Smith topped his 43rd annual list because "Anna's fashion follies are the worst of the year ... don't bother with a new designer, Anna, just hire a structural engineer!"

In second place was Kelly Osbourne. Mr. Blackwell described her as "A fright-wigged Baby Doll, stuck in a goth prom gown. Now we know what happened to Ozzy's hand-me-downs!"

Named third was pop singer Shakira, whom Mr. Blackwell described as "overwrought and underdressed ... somebody should tell her those are probably Madonna's old clothes!"

Film star Cameron Diaz nabbed fourth place. Mr. Blackwell said she "looks like she was dressed by a color-blind circus clown." Britain's Princess Anne was in fifth place because: "Her Royal Dowager Drag is dreary, drab and dour."

Ricin find sparks fear among Britons

UK experts track deadly poison

REUTERS, London

Britons, readying for possible war with Iraq as reserve troops were mobilised, were troubled by fears of a battle at home after the seizure of the deadly toxin ricin sparked fears of a looming terror campaign.

Anti-terrorist police said they were questioning six north African men after seizing a small amount of the lethal poison in raids in north London at the weekend.

As security agents worked to establish whether any of the toxin had been distributed around Britain or abroad, doctors and hospitals around the country were put on alert for symptoms.

News of the find came in the same hour the government announced the call-up of reserve troops for possible war with Iraq, although it insisted military action was not a foregone conclusion.

But that announcement was overshadowed as the spectre of a different kind of war on the home front dominated headlines and the minds of ordinary Britons.

Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon said the arrests were a "very considerable success" for security services but denied that Britain needed to work on defending the home front rather than attacking Iraq.

"It's part of our overall effort to ensure the world is a safer and more secure place," he told BBC television.

"Terrorism is clearly disturbing particularly when it is so close to home but at the same time we have an obligation as a matter of the United Nations Security Council...to ensure that the threat posed by Iraqi President Saddam

Hussein cannot materialise."

Londoner Simon Birkbeck, 34, a financial web producer, told Reuters that many people were convinced action in the Gulf would lead to terror attacks at home and the ricin find only heightened those fears.

"If there is a war on one front, Iraq, there is bound to be a war on another front, home. It is inescapable, they are interlinked."

Ricin, which some experts have linked to al-Qaeda, is one of the world's deadliest poisons and is easily derived from the castor oil bean. There is no known antidote.

Developed during World War II by the United States and its allies, it has a long history of use in international espionage but experts say it is hard to use as an agent of mass death.

The discovery is the latest security scare in Europe, where several cells of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda movement have been found and many arrests made.

Germany, France and Britain have all issued warnings of potential terror attacks to their populations in recent months, with Britain thought to be particularly at risk because of its strong support for the US led war on terror.

Although fears of a potential chemical attack have swirled around Europe for months, this is the first hard evidence made public of the manufacture of a substance which could be used.

Inhaled, injected or ingested, less than a milligram of ricin would kill a 70kg (154lb) man, causing flu-like symptoms before death. Its best-known victim was Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov assassinated by a jab to the leg with a poison-tipped umbrella in London in 1978.

Israeli crackdown continues following Tel Aviv bombings



REUTERS, Gaza

Israeli troops shot dead two Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip yesterday as the army cracked down in response to suicide attacks that killed 22 people, Palestinian witnesses said.

Punitive measures imposed by Israel following the Tel Aviv bombings Sunday included a ban on Palestinians invited to London talks on US requested reforms, drawing British ire and pressure from Washington to reconsider.

The diplomatic row and fresh violence clouded the buildup to Israel's January 28 general election further shaken up by allegations that Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon may have been involved in election funding irregularities.

Israeli troops shot dead a 30-year-old Palestinian man outside the Jewish settlement Neve Dekel in the Gaza Strip, Palestinian medics and witnesses said.

Witnesses also said the man, a resident of Khan Younis in the Gaza Strip, was shot in the head as he watched soldiers.

The Israeli army said troops opened fire in the area when attacked by grenades, petrol bombs, and anti-tank fire but it could not confirm soldiers had shot and

killed a Palestinian.

In the West Bank town of Saida near Tulkarm, Palestinian witnesses said Ahmed Ajaj, 17, was shot dead by Israeli troops after they demolished a neighbour's home.

Residents gathered shouting Allahu Akbar or "God is the Greatest" and soldiers fired a stun grenade. A gunbattle between the troops and Palestinians broke out, they said.

The Israeli army said they razed the home of a militant responsible for the deaths of eight Israelis. Military sources said two gunmen had opened fire on soldiers after the house demolition and soldiers hit one of them.

After Sunday's suicide attack, Israel slapped restrictions on Palestinians that included a travel ban between West Bank towns and cities that included ministers and senior officials.

Palestinian officials called the restrictions collective punishment. But Sharon's right-wing government said the travel ban is among measures needed to stop Palestinian attacks.

Sharon's response to the Tel Aviv attack is seen as a deliberate effort to look tough to Israeli voters, who have turned sharply to the right amid a wave of Palestinian bombings and are widely expected to re-elect him.

Iraq, Kuwait begin talks after four years

AFP, Jordan

Iraqi and Kuwaiti officials opened crucial Red Cross-sponsored talks yesterday in Jordan on the fate of hundreds of their citizens who have been missing since before the 1991 Gulf war.

With war drums again beating against Baghdad, the meeting at the Amman headquarters of the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) got underway at 0700 GMT with the participation of Saudi and ICRC delegates.

"The meeting started behind closed doors and let's wish them good luck in their endeavor," ICRC information officer Mo'n Qassis told reporters gathered outside the white-stone building in west Amman.

"The fact that this meeting is taking place is very encouraging,"

Qassis said. "They are resuming the dialogue so we hope that this eventually will lead to a conclusion with results," he added.

The Amman meeting is the first of its kind in four years since Iraq boycotted in 1998 meetings of a technical sub-committee formed by the Red Cross in 1994 to deal with the humanitarian issues resulting from the Gulf war.

It was not immediately clear who was heading the Iraqi delegation, which was the last one to arrive at ICRC headquarters in Amman.

Kuwait's seven-member delegation was headed by Ibrahim Majid Shahin, the deputy chief of a national committee for prisoners and missing persons while Saudi ambassador to Jordan Abdel Rahman bin Nasser al-Ohalai led a five-member team.

The ICRC delegation is being chaired by George Cominos, head of operations for Middle East and North Africa in Geneva.

Wednesday's meeting in Amman comes as the United Nations on Monday said that the UN coordinator on people and property missing since the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Yuli Vorontsov, will visit Baghdad for the first time on January 17.

In December, Iraq promised the Arab League it will cooperate at the Amman meeting, which it was the first to announce earlier that month in a gesture of goodwill.

Kuwait has repeatedly charged that Iraq, which occupied the tiny Gulf emirate in 1990 before being driven out by a US-led coalition in the Gulf War, is holding 605 people, most of them Kuwaitis.

Baghdad has rejected the

accusations and said it wants clarification about more than 1,000 of its nationals who are still missing or allegedly detained in Kuwait.

The ICRC has said, however, that it has no "accurate" figures on the number of Iraqi and Kuwaiti nationals missing since the 1991 US-led Gulf war that ended Iraq's seven-month occupation of Kuwait.

"The figures that exist have been submitted by the two parties but have not been verified," he told AFP.

The Iraqi foreign ministry said in December that the meeting was the result of an agreement reached by the three Arab countries, as well as France, Britain, the United States and the ICRC.



PHOTO: AFP
The top floor flat above a chemist in Wood Green High Road, North London, where traces of the deadly poison ricin were discovered, Scotland Yard said on January 7, 2003. Six men of North African origin were arrested after an operation by the anti-terrorist branch in north and east London. The yard said "equipment and materials" were found at an address in Wood Green, where one of the men was also arrested.

UN inspection enters 7th week in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

Five UN disarmament teams took to the field in Iraq yesterday as weapons inspections entered their seventh week since resuming in November after a four-year break, information ministry officials said.

Nuclear experts toured three cement works in the southern cities of Samawa, Kufa and Kerbala.

In Baghdad, a chemical team visited the al-Tariq company and a biological team inspected the medical faculty of Saddam University.

Missile specialists visited the Al-Mamun factory near al-Qaa Qaa, some 30 kilometres (20 miles) south of the capital and a combined team visited a pharmaceutical plant, the Iraqi officials said.

The inspectors have been intensifying their operations ahead of a key report to the UN Security Council on January 27, opening a regional office in the northern capital of Mosul at the weekend and making first use of a new helicopter fleet on Tuesday.

The heightened activity has sparked the first howls of protest from Baghdad, with President Saddam Hussein Tuesday renewing charges that the inspectors were overstepping the bounds of their disarmament mission and engaging in "intelligence activity".

N Korea accuses US of nuke war threat

AFP, Seoul

North Korea accused the United States of increasing the danger of nuclear war on the Korean peninsula, hours after Washington offered to talks to end the ongoing crisis.

"There is an increasing danger of a nuclear war on the Korean peninsula due to the US criminal policy toward the DPRK (North Korea)," the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said.

KCNA also accused the United States of using the "nuclear issue" to poison attempts at reconciliation between North and South Korea.

The KCNA commentary was the first word from Pyongyang since the United States offered to hold talks with North Korea. In contrast to recent days, KCNA made no appeal for talks with Washington and made no reference to the US offer.

The United States said Tuesday it was willing to talk to defuse the standoff over North Korea's nuclear program, aggravated by Pyongyang's decision last month to revive the mothballed Yongbyon nuclear complex and expel UN monitors.

But Washington also warned the cash-starved communist state that it would get no new incentives to halt its nuclear programs.

President George W. Bush's administration had previously

rejected all dialogue until North Korea halted its two alleged nuclear weapons programs.

"The US delegation explained that the United States is willing to talk to North Korea about how it will meet its obligations to the international community," said a statement released at talks among senior US, Japanese and South Korean diplomats in Washington.

"However the US delegation stressed that the United States will not provide quid pro quos for North Korea to live up to its existing obligations."

The State Department said it had informed North Korea directly of its willingness to pursue talks by handing over a copy of the statement to its diplomatic representatives at the United Nations.

South Korea said after the talks in Washington that it was on board with US strategy to defuse the nuclear showdown.

Deputy Foreign Minister Lee Tae-shik, who was leading the delegation from Seoul, said that both sides were resolved on how to move forward.

"We are pretty much in line with each other in terms of how we are going to deal with the situation," he said.

It was up to North Korea to make the first move towards ending the crisis, he added.

NY names 97 streets after WTC attack victims

AFP, New York

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg has officially renamed 97 city streets after victims of the September 11, 2001, attacks that levelled the twin towers of the World Trade Centre.

"All of the people who lost their lives were heroes as well as victims," Bloomberg said yesterday as he signed the ordinance renaming streets after mostly policemen, firemen and emergency service workers who died in the terrorist attack.

Many of the streets were in the boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens. Most were in Staten Island, the island borough in New York's harbour where those public servants traditionally live.

The renamed streets also included the names of civilian victims.

"Today we both celebrate their lives and mourn their passing by renaming streets in their memory," said Bloomberg.

New York has bestowed similar honours in the past, but yesterday's list was the longest in the city's history.



PHOTO:AFP
Volunteers pour buckets of water over the 80 remaining live pilot whales found stranded on remote Ocean Beach on New Zealand's southern-most Stewart island, January 8, 2003. A pod of 159 pilot whales beached themselves of which half have since died of dehydration. Rescuers are still hopeful of floating around fifty of the larger mammals at high tide.



PHOTO:AFP
US actor Leonardo DiCaprio arrives at the Empire Cinema, Leicester Square in London on January 7, 2003, for the UK premiere of his latest movie, Gangs of New York.

Sri Lanka says peace talks on track

REUTERS, Thailand

Sri Lanka's peace negotiators brushed aside a dispute over disarming yesterday and firmed up a timetable for rebuilding war-hit areas of the island, picking the World Bank to run a fund to pay for it.

The dispute has overshadowed the latest round of talks to end two decades of war that has killed 64,000 people. On Tuesday, the Tamil Tigers pulled out of a special committee on de-escalation to protest against calls for the rebels to disarm.

But government spokesman G.L. Peiris said solid progress was made in talks Wednesday morning, adding the rebels' withdrawal from the panel would not hinder a peace bid that has given the island its best chance yet of ending the ethnic war.

"It does not affect the peace process, and the proof of that was the fact that despite this difference of opinion all this work was done today," Peiris told reporters.

He said the two sides had firmed

up a timeframe for rehabilitation work in areas hit hard by the war, and also selected the World Bank to be the custodian of funds for the rehabilitation work.

Acustodian is important because international donors do not want to give the money directly to the rebels, and the Tigers do not want the government controlling money to be spent in rebel-controlled areas in the north and east.

"What is emerging is a very complete plan with a timeframe that can be verified and monitored," Peiris said of the rehabilitation plans.

"The World Bank is going to play a role with regard to the north-east reconstruction fund," he said, adding the details would be released when the four days of talks end Thursday.

Peiris said the government did not agree with the Tigers' decision to pull out of the de-escalation committee, but added differences of opinion are "to be expected in the course of negotiations like this."