

Pilot blamed for plane crash in Turkey

AFP, Ankara

Pilot error was blamed Monday when a Ukrainian transport plane slammed into a fog-shrouded mountain in Turkey and exploded, killing 62 Spanish peacekeepers and a 12-man Ukrainian crew.

The plane, an Ukrainian-operated Yak-42 transport aircraft, was flying the Spanish troops home from missions in Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan, and crashed on its second attempt to land at the port of Trabzon for refuelling, civil aviation officials said. "Even if it is still too early to state definitively, it seems that there was a pilot error because the plane hit the mountain for no apparent reason," said a Turkish civil aviation official, who requested anonymity.

Indian dust storm kills 19

AFP, Lucknow

A severe dust storm in northern India has killed 19 people, including seven children, and injured scores of others, an official said Tuesday.

The victims died when they were buried under houses which collapsed in the storm over the weekend in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, of which Lucknow is the capital.

"Because of the intensity of the storm, the shack houses were swept away," said M.D. Swami, Additional District Magistrate of the worst hit Aligarh district.

Electricity, water supply and telephone services were disrupted.

An intense heatwave in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh has claimed nearly 200 lives this month.

Canada battles dual threats of SARS, mad cow disease

AFP, Toronto

Canadian officials welcomed good news in their battle against mad cow disease on Monday but regrouped to contain a SARS epidemic, which rebounded after being under control.

The number of "probable active" SARS cases in the epidemic rose from eight to 11, officials announced Monday, on the heels of news a day earlier SARS had been linked to three more deaths, making Canada's nationwide death toll 27.

Health authorities in Ontario in whose capital city Toronto the disease has hit the hardest, urged residents to take precautionary measures, including hand-washing.

Ontario's Commissioner of Public Health Colin D'Cunha also told reporters that anyone taken sick should put themselves in quarantine.

Algerian relief finally in high gear

AFP, Bumerdes

Relief operations finally got into high gear in quake-stricken Algeria on Monday as the embattled government promised a probe into whether corrupt developers should be blamed for hundreds of deadly building collapses.

Truck convoys laden with mattresses, gas canisters, potatoes and bottled water headed east out of Algiers to the areas that took the brunt of the disaster -- Reghaia, Bumerdes, Zemmora, names now synonymous with calamity.

By Monday the death toll had risen to 2,217 with hundreds still missing in what looks set to become Algeria's worst earthquake disaster ever in a nation that feels it has been punished enough, both by nature and by civil strife.

Hu in Russia on first trip abroad

AFP, Moscow

New Chinese President Hu Jintao held informal talks with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin late Monday at the start of a week-long visit to Russia, his first foreign tour since becoming head of state in March.

The two leaders were joined only by their wives, Liu Yongqing and Lyudmila Putin, at the Russian leader's Novo-Ogarevo country residence west of Moscow.

"This is my first foreign trip since my election as president of China and Russia was my first stop. This shows how much importance we attach to the development of ties with Russia," Hu said.

"I think this visit will definitely achieve important results," he added.

Delhi-Lahore bus service to resume

130 Pak prisoners to get freedom

AFP, New Delhi

India has decided to resume bus services between New Delhi and the eastern Pakistani city of Lahore as part of a peace initiative between the two countries, the foreign ministry said Monday.

The Indian government has also decided to release 70 Pakistani fishermen and 60 civilian prisoners from Indian custody.

Foreign ministry officials said the decision was taken to improve people-to-people contact between the two countries.

"Accordingly, the Government of India has today approved the resumption of the Delhi-Lahore bus service, on a twice-weekly basis, as soon as details have been worked out by the technical

authorities of the two countries," the ministry said in a statement.

"The Government of India has also decided to release 70 Pakistani fishermen and 60 civilian prisoners presently in Indian custody. They would be transferred as soon as Pakistan indicates it is ready to accept them."

The Delhi-Lahore bus service was closed down in December 2001 following an attack on the Indian parliament that New Delhi said was masterminded by Pakistani intelligence agencies. Pakistan has denied the charges.

Following the attack, the South Asian rivals deployed nearly a million troops on their common border and were on the verge of war.

Tensions between the nuclear-

armed neighbours eased after Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee offered a "hand of friendship" to Pakistan last month.

The two countries have announced a resumption of air and diplomatic links but no date for bilateral dialogue, suspended 17 months ago, has yet been set.

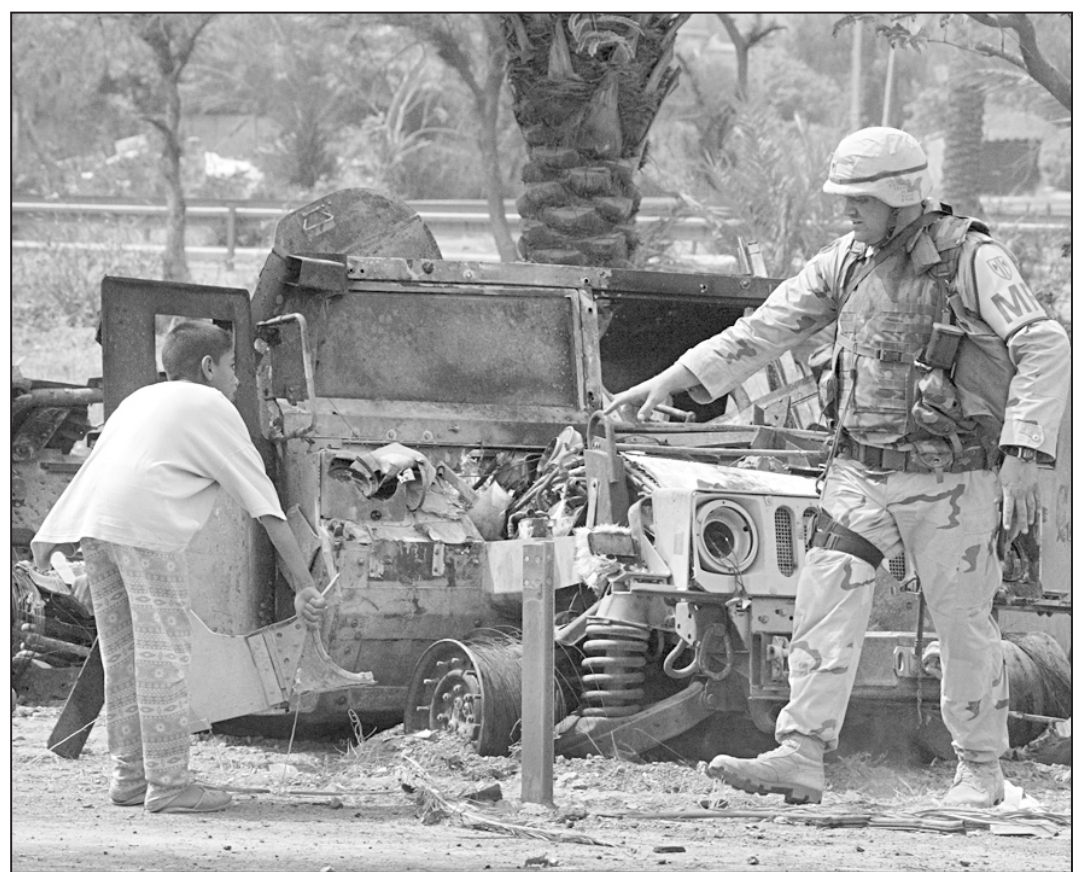
The bus service began auspiciously in 1999 with an historic ride by Vajpayee in a peace and goodwill gesture that inaugurated the first bus service of its kind to Pakistan since independence.

Analysts expect India and Pakistan to take a series of confidence-building measures before a comprehensive peace dialogue gets rolling, including discussions over Kashmir, the scenic Himalayan region claimed by both.

India accuses Pakistan of fomenting a 13-year insurgency against its rule in Kashmir, terming it "cross-border terrorism." Islamabad says it only gives moral and diplomatic support to an "indigenous" movement.

In the past, India had rejected any possibility of talks with Pakistan until cross-border infiltration of militants ended in the Indian zone of Kashmir.

PTI adds: India is confident that a conducive atmosphere will be created for talks with Pakistan, but for a meaningful dialogue cross-border terrorism should end and the terrorism infrastructure there should be dismantled, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said on Tuesday.



A US soldier drives a young boy away from the wreckage of a US Army Humvee left in a street in Baghdad on Tuesday at the site where a US soldier was killed and four others wounded. Witnesses say the casualties occurred when an unknown attacker threw a bag packed with explosives in front of a convoy of US troops on a major highway leading to Baghdad airport. The attacker was shot and wounded but managed to escape.

PHOTO: AFP



PHOTO: AFP

A Philippine jeepney (C) pass through a flooded area in Manila as commuters walk along the centre island in the road amid the heavy rains brought by tropical storm Linfa on Tuesday. Five people were killed as tropical storm Linfa smashed into the northern Philippines early Tuesday, causing a landslide, uprooting trees and producing widespread flooding.

5 killed as storm hits Philippines

AFP, Manila

Five people were killed as tropical storm Linfa smashed into the northern Philippines early Tuesday, causing a landslide, uprooting trees and producing widespread flooding, rescuers said Tuesday.

President Gloria Arroyo shut down government offices by noon and ordered city officials to deploy trucks to help stranded civil servants and thousands of other commuters get home, hours after Linfa slammed into the Lingayen Gulf before dawn Tuesday.

It picked up strength as it tore inland into the main Philippine island of Luzon with peak winds of 105 kilometers (65 miles) an hour and hurricane-force gusts of 130 km raking across a 300-km radius, the weather bureau said.

A tree uprooted by high winds crushed a jeep in Santa Barbara town on Tuesday, killing two people and critically injuring a third, the civil defense office said here.

N Korea warns Japan of 'fatal fiasco' if it blindly follows US

AFP, Tokyo

Japan will "meet a fatal fiasco" if it continues to blindly follow US policy, Pyongyang's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said Tuesday.

It said Japan's cabinet had approved a statement defending American use of cluster bombs in Iraq, saying the targets were "carefully selected" and that the US military "strove to prevent civilians from falling victim" to them.

"This was nothing but Japan's shameful act of flattery and servile support for its master, the US," said the report, quoting a commentary in the North Korean ruling party mouthpiece Rodong Simun.

"Japan's act of supporting and shielding the US use of weapons of mass destruction indicates that it will leave no means untried for overseas aggression as the US does," it said.

"The Japanese authorities are well advised to bear in mind that if they continue acting blindly to the tune of the US out of their senses, they will only meet a fatal fiasco," the report said.

A Japanese foreign ministry spokesman said the statement, passed by the cabinet on May 7 in response to an opposition legislator's question, merely "acknowledged" the US stance, however, and did not amount to approval.

The United States has drawn criticism from rights groups for its use of cluster bombs in Iraq, Afghanistan and other conflicts. The weapons explode and release hundreds of smaller bomblets that disperse over a wide area. Three US soldiers were injured in early May when a suspected US cluster bomb exploded inside a major US base in northern Iraq.

Chirac, Bush may heal rifts at summit

AP, Paris

For President Jacques Chirac, it will be a moment of truth: a handshake with President Bush that will be photographed and scrutinized for clues to whether their fractious relationship is on the mend.

Chirac meets Bush at a summit starting Sunday that offers them and other world leaders who argued bitterly over the war in Iraq a major opportunity to heal rifts.

For Chirac, the success of Group of Eight summit in the French spa town of Evian could hinge on how well - or badly - his encounters with Bush go. Bush has not set foot in France since the crisis over Iraq met with Chirac since November, although they have spoken by phone.

Observers at Evian "will be measuring the length of a handshake with minute rulers," Britain's ambassador to France, Sir John Holmes, told The Associated Press.

Iraqi Shiites campaign against Kurdish arms ban exemption

AFP, Baghdad

The main Shiite Muslim group that opposed Saddam Hussein Tuesday stepped up its campaign against the US-led occupation administration's decision to dissolve its military wing.

The Badr Brigade "had given more than 2,500 martyrs" in the struggle against his Sunni-dominated regime, Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI) number two Abdul Aziz al-Hakim told the Azzaman daily.

"The decision to dissolve it goes against the agreement among opposition groups to incorporate their militias in the new Iraqi army to be formed soon," Hakim said.

Even before the war, the Badr

Brigade mounted occasional hit-and-run attacks from exile in Iran, but the US-led coalition barred it from entering Iraq.

Many of the brigade's members have since taken advantage of the post-war chaos to slip back into Iraq, but last week the head of the US-led occupation administration, Paul Bremer, banned all heavy weapons from June 15 and required coalition authorization for carrying of small arms.

The decree effectively dissolved all militias, except those of the Kurdish factions in northern Iraq, which were exempted as coalition members.

The head of coalition ground forces, Lieutenant General David McKiernan, made clear that the exemption would apply only to the

three northern provinces which the Kurdish rebels held under Western protection even before the 2003 Gulf war.

But it sparked an angry reaction from SAIRI, which insisted that the ban be applied equally.

"Maybe we didn't fight with the coalition, but we didn't fight against them," SAIRI official Adel Abdul Mahdi told the New York Times last Friday.

"We want conditions where all militias are dissolved and we will not accept that other militias will be allowed to stay there with their weapons while we will not be there with ours."

US military officials suspect Iran of using the Badr Brigade to spread the Islamic revolution into Iraq, although Tehran denies this.

Cheer for Sir Hillary in Nepal

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Just as he did 50 years ago, Edmund Hillary rode through the centuries-old lanes of Kathmandu in a horse-drawn carriage on Tuesday, cheered by thousands of Nepalis crowding footpaths and clinging to temple steps.

The tiny Himalayan kingdom is feting the 83-year-old former beekeeper from New Zealand, now Sir Edmund, to mark Thursday's 50th anniversary of the first ascent of Mount Everest, a feat that kicked off a tourism boom in the impoverished nation.

Garlanded with marigolds, bougainvillea and a yellow Buddhist prayer scarf, Hillary drew loud cheers and claps when he spoke at Hanuman Dhoka ("the gate of the monkey god") as a band played wedding music and curious monkeys hung from temple roofs.

"Today is a fantastic celebration of the warmth of the people of Nepal for their mountaineers who have climbed their great Mount Everest," Hillary told a large crowd packing the 300-year-old square lined with Hindu and Buddhist temples.



PHOTO: AFP

Sir Edmund Hillary (C) waves to admirers during a felicitation ceremony for him in Kathmandu on Tuesday as part of the Mt. Everest golden jubilee celebration. Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay were the first to scale the world's highest mountain, reaching the summit on May 29, 1953. At far (L) is Italian Reinhold Messner, Hillary's wife, June 3rd (R) and Japanese Junko Tabei, the first woman to climb Everest (2nd R). Other persons are unidentified.

Air pollution raises asthma risk in kids

REUTERS, London

Pollution from heavy traffic can make children more susceptible to asthma, wheezing and coughs, scientists said on Tuesday.

Teams of researchers from Taiwan and Germany have shown that chemicals in vehicle exhausts lead to an increased risk of respiratory disorders in children living in heavy traffic areas.

"Our results support the increasingly popular hypothesis that exposure to traffic pollution modifies children's susceptibility to allergens," said Yueliang Leon Guo of the National Cheng Kung University in Taiwan.

The Taiwanese scientists compared air pollution levels and cases of allergic rhinitis, or hayfever, in a study that involving 800 Taiwanese schools.

They discovered that boys exposed to high levels of traffic pollution had a 16 percent higher risk of hayfever, which is linked to the development of asthma, while girls a 17 percent increase.

Son of Shah sees opportunity as US turns heat on Tehran

AFP, Washington

Reza Pahlavi, eldest son of Iran's ousted Shah, sees opportunity as US officials turn their attention to his country's Islamic regime as a possible next target in Washington's relentless campaign against terrorism.

For the past 18 months, Iran's clerical rulers -- beset by opposition at home -- have watched uneasily as US military power has surrounded them after victories over an Islamist regime in Afghanistan and Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

They now find themselves accused by Washington of developing nuclear weapons and harboring members of the al-Qaeda Islamist militant group, allegations they insist are untrue.

"The momentum today has swung in a very clear way in the direction of change in Iran," said Pahlavi, 42, whose father, former Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, was forced from power in the 1979

Islamic revolution.

But as US leaders debate what to do with Iran, they might discover they have few options.

Experts say internal political and religious currents may play a greater role in Iran's future than US pressure or the efforts of exile groups. Events in Iraq, now controlled by the United States and Britain under UN auspices, also could influence Iran's destiny, they say.

US pressure on Iran has intensified since President George W. Bush named Tehran's Islamic rulers part of an "axis of evil" with Saddam and North Korea's communist rulers in January 2002.

Questions over how Iran has handled members of al-Qaeda have torpedoed tentative steps towards greater dialogue between Tehran and Washington, and prompted some US lawmakers to propose support for Iranian resistance groups and funds for pro-democracy broadcasts into the country.

The Washington Post reported Sunday that Pentagon officials are advocating trying to foment a popular uprising to topple Iran's government, and the State Department may accept that approach if Iran does not take steps to crack down on al-Qaeda.

Key lawmakers, however, ruled out US military action similar to the massive armed assault on Iraq which overthrew Saddam last month, saying it was not necessary.

"There are a lot of people in Iran who truly like us," Senator Richard Lugar of Indiana told CBS.

With Washington's victories against Islamist radicals and reformists inside Iran intensifying their pressure on the clerical regime, Pahlavi sees US support as a crucial element that might tip the balance in favor of the secular democracy he supports. "Iranians at home are deeply and positively impacted by such changes," he said. "It can only contribute to stability."