

26 feared dead as Indian chopper crashes into sea

AFP, Mumbai

Some 26 people were feared killed yesterday when an Indian oil firm's helicopter on its way to an offshore exploration site crashed into the sea, company officials said.

The helicopter, belonging to the state-owned Oil and Natural Gas Commission (ONGC), took off from the western city of Mumbai and fell into the Arabian Sea during the 45-minute flight to the exploration platform, they said.

"There were 25 passengers and four crew in the helicopter which crashed into the sea," said ONGC spokeswoman Narayani Mahal, adding the accident occurred at 12:20 pm (0650 GMT).

Another company spokesman, Mohan Reddy, said that so far one body had been recovered and three critically injured people had been rescued and were in hospital. Twenty-five were still missing.

Bill to ban cow slaughter gets Indian cabinet approval

AFP, New Delhi

The cabinet of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee yesterday cleared a draft law which seeks to slap a ban on the slaughter of cows, revered as holy by the country's majority Hindu community.

Government sources said the bill will be presented in the current session of the federal parliament for debate.

Vajpayee's ruling Hindu nationalist BJP party has been actively campaigning for a law to protect cows from the butcher's knife since they came to power in 1998.

Observers, however, say that while the draft law would be endorsed in parliament's 545-seat Lower House, where the Hindu nationalists are in majority, the resolution is doomed to be shot down in the upper house.

The cow is worshipped across overwhelmingly Hindu India and the emotive issue has been one of the key electoral planks of Vajpayee's BJP and its rightwing allies.

Pakistan shells Indian posts along LoC

PTI, Jammu

Pakistani troops shelled Indian positions along the Line of Control (LoC) and International Border (IB) in Jammu division on Sunday night, forcing Indian troops to retaliate, official sources said in Jammu yesterday.

Pakistani troops targeted forward defence locations in Jhanghar and Bhawani areas in Rajouri district's Noushera sector with mortar bombs, the sources said.

They fired more than 25 mortar bombs but there was no loss of life or damage on the Indian side.

Landmine blast kills 5 troopers in Tripura

AFP, Guwahati

Tribal separatist rebels Monday killed five Indian paramilitary troopers in a landmine ambush in the northeastern state of Tripura, police said.

The blast happened in the town of Barkatal, 30 km north of Tripura's provincial capital Agartala, while a paramilitary convoy was on a "routine patrol," a state police spokesman said.

Rebels belonging to the outlawed National Liberation Front of Tripura have claimed responsibility for the attack, he said.

NATO takes over Afghan peace mission

AP, Kabul

NATO took command of the 5,000-strong international peacekeeping force in the Afghan capital on Monday, a historic move that marks the alliance's first operation outside Europe since it was created 54 years ago.

The alliance took over from Germany and the Netherlands, who have jointly led the force since Feb. 10. The outgoing commander, German Lt. Gen. Norbert van Heyst, handed over control during a formal ceremony to NATO Lt. Gen. Gotz Gliemeroth, who is also from Germany. Van Heyst passed a green flag to Gliemeroth to officially mark the change.



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli soldiers deploy a heavy cannon along the eastern area of the Israeli-Lebanese border yesterday near the Israeli town of Metulla. A young Israeli was killed on Sunday after the Lebanese fundamentalist Hezbollah fired anti aircraft rounds into Shlomi at the western end of the border.

Israeli jets buzz Lebanon after Hezbollah fire

Tel Aviv threatens Syria, Beirut urges UN 'Big-5' to halt attacks

AFP, REUTERS, Beirut

Israeli warplanes buzzed Lebanon's capital yesterday after Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon considered following up on air strikes on the country launched in retaliation over the death of an Israeli in cross-border fire from the Hezbollah militia.

Sonic booms from low-flying Israeli warplanes shook Beirut residents awake shortly after 1:00 am Monday (2200 GMT).

The flights followed a meeting Sharon held late Sunday with his military chiefs to discuss "a range of Israeli retaliatory options" in case of further Hezbollah attacks, security sources in Jerusalem said.

Air strikes were among the options agreed upon, they said.

"Israel can not just do nothing in the face of these attacks, but we do not want a military escalation with Syria and Lebanon," an Israeli official said after the meeting, asking not to be named.

On Sunday Israeli warplanes carried out an air strike on south Lebanon after an Israeli was killed and five wounded in cross-border fire in what Israel said was the second border attack in three days by Hezbollah, fuelling fears in the Jewish state of the reopening of a northern front after a seven-month lull.

The Israeli military said the raid on a hill outside the village of Tayr Harfa destroyed the gun used by fighters of the radical Shiite Muslim militia to lob

the deadly shells.

Local residents said a Hezbollah anti-aircraft post took a direct hit, but no information on casualties was available.

The Shiite group said it only fired anti-aircraft guns at Israeli warplanes overflying Lebanon, but Israel said Hezbollah had fired shells across the border in a deliberate attack.

Israeli public radio named the dead Israeli as 16-year-old Habib Dadon, while medical sources said one of the five wounded in the north-western town of Shlomi was in serious condition.

Moreover Beirut asked the United Nations and the five permanent Security Council members Monday to stop Israel from carrying out

threats of retaliatory air strikes against Lebanon, a foreign ministry official said.

The call came during separate meetings by Foreign Minister Jean Obeid with the heads of diplomatic missions of the permanent members as well as the representative of UN chief Kofi Annan.

Reuters adds: Israel threatened Syria on Monday after Hizbollah guerrillas in Lebanon fired anti-aircraft shells that killed an Israeli teen-ager on Israel's northern border, but said it hoped to defuse tension through diplomacy.

Israeli Deputy Defence Minister Zeev Boim said Israel held Syria, the main powerbroker in Lebanon, responsible for Hizbollah's actions.

SAARC should step in to mend Indo-Pak ties: Musharraf

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf yesterday urged the South Asian regional forum SAARC to step in to help spur stalled peace moves between Pakistan and India.

Musharraf said the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, which groups Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, should take on the job of resolving regional conflicts, of which the worst was Pakistan's 56-year old dispute with India.

"There is a need to amend the SAARC charter, it should be the forum to resolve regional and bilateral conflicts," Musharraf told a conference of academics, scholars and serving and former ambassadors from Europe, the United States, China, Japan and India.

"The worst dispute in the region is the Kashmir dispute, in which

many wars have been fought and many people have been killed along the LoC (Line of Control). "Kashmir has become a flashpoint."

Since the subcontinent was divided by outgoing coloniser Britain in 1947, Pakistan and India have been fighting for control of the Himalayan region of Kashmir, which straddles both countries.

Its status was never resolved during partition, and it has been the cause of two wars between the South Asian giants in 1948 and 1965. They were close to war again over Kashmir for most of last year.

Both claim full control of the scenic region, but it has been divided between them along a ceasefire line, which was first drawn up after their 1948 war and in 1971 became the Line of Control.

"The conflict between India and Pakistan is affecting the economic development of other countries of

the region," Musharraf said.

"If we are sincere about development and prosperity of the region then we should resolve all regional and bilateral disputes through the SAARC forum.

"From this a new confidence will emerge in the region."

Musharraf's call for mediation by SAARC comes four months after Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's peace offer, which was matched immediately by Pakistan's offer for dialogue.

But the reconciliation process has yet to move beyond the resumption of bus links and ambassadorial-level diplomatic ties.

SAARC has often been pilloried as an ineffective forum, and India has long objected to its meetings being used as forums for addressing its conflict with Pakistan.

An annual summit was supposed to have been held in the Pakistani capital in January but it has been

delayed by India's refusal earlier in the year to attend.

It has now been rescheduled to January 2004 and India has said it would attend.

Despite apparent sluggishness at an official level there have been ongoing people-to-people contacts in recent months in the form of exchange of visits by parliamentarians, businessmen and youths.

A 60-member Indian delegation of ruling and opposition MPs, journalists and former diplomats is currently in Islamabad for a two-day peace seminar sponsored by the South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA).

"It's a good sign that the Indian delegation is here," said Musharraf, announcing he would meet the delegation on Tuesday.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistan President General Pervez Musharraf (R) salutes as he arrives accompanied by the President of the Institute of Regional Studies, Major-General Jamshed Ayaz Khan at a seminar on South Asia in Islamabad yesterday. Musharraf urged the regional forum, South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, (SAARC) to step in to help spur on stalled peace moves between Pakistan and India.

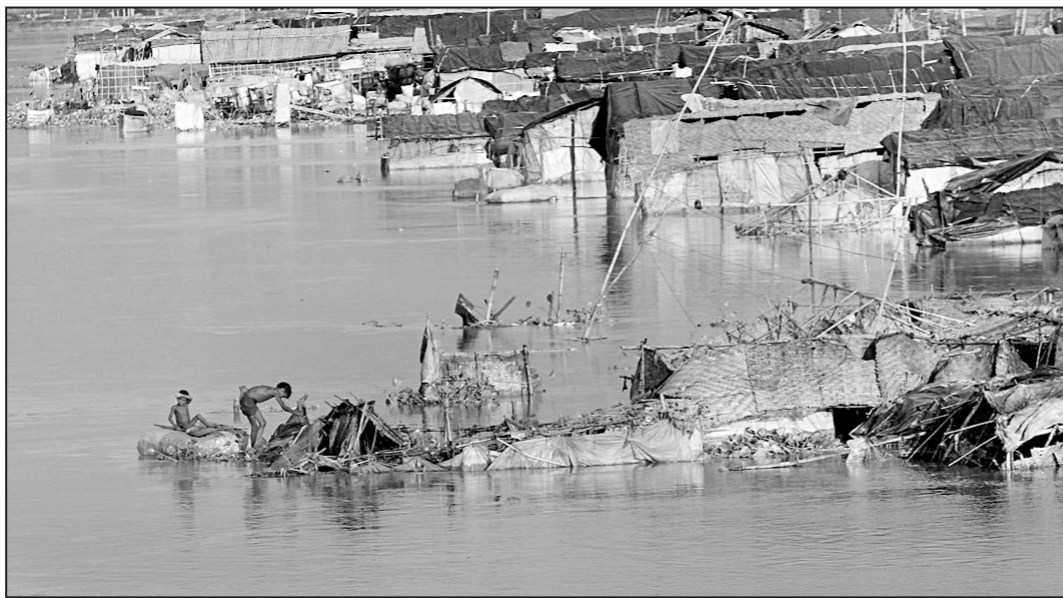


PHOTO: AFP

A man looks for belongings in his submerged hut as his son sits on a make-shift raft in raised water levels of the Yamuna river, New Delhi on Sunday. People living in the lower river-basin face problems as the river floods either due to rain or due to water being released from the Tajewala reservoir in neighbouring Haryana state.

Man on space station weds bride on Earth

AP, Houston

The bride blew the groom a kiss. He blew one back from about 240 miles above terra firma.

Russian cosmonaut Yuri Malenchenko didn't let the fact that he's living aboard the international space station stop him from marrying his earthbound bride, Ekaterina Dmitriev, in the first wedding ever conducted from space.

The couple wed Sunday before family and friends in a private ceremony at Johnson Space Centre in Houston, where Malenchenko took part via video. Texas law allows weddings in which one of the parties is not present.

Israel postpones ME peace roadmap implementation

AP, Jerusalem

Israeli leaders said they would put the brakes on the US-backed "road map" to peace until Palestinian police disarm violent groups, warning that militants are using a cease-fire to rearm. Palestinians, however, say Israel is the one violating the plan.

At a meeting of the Israeli Cabinet on Sunday, the military chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Moshe Yaalon, said that while the Palestinian public was opposed to terror attacks on Israelis and wanted a six-week-old cease-fire to continue, Palestinian security forces were doing little to stop attacks, according to an official who briefed reporters on condition of anonymity.

"The Palestinian Authority must

dismantle the terrorist infrastructure - period," the official quoted Yaalon as saying.

Palestinian legislator Saeb Erekat said it was Israel, rather than the Palestinians, which was failing to live up to its commitments under the "road map," which calls for Palestinian statehood by 2005.

"In accordance with the road map, what should be dismantled is the Israeli occupation and the Israeli settlements," Erekat told The Associated Press.

The peace plan is a three-stage program. In the first phase the Palestinians are to dismantle "terrorist capabilities and infrastructure (including) confiscation of illegal weapons."

Israel is to commit to "immediately

dismantle" about 100 unauthorised settlement outposts established in the West Bank since 2001. It also is to take "all necessary steps to help normalise Palestinian life" and to withdraw "progressively" from Palestinian autonomous zones occupied since fighting between the two sides erupted in September 2000.

About a dozen outposts have so far been taken down, but a similar number have gone back up. Also, some roadblocks have been removed, but dozens remain.

The official said Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon made it clear during the Cabinet meeting that there can be "no progress toward a Palestinian state without full implementation of their obligations."

Taylor blames US for ousting him

AP, Monrovia

Liberian President Charles Taylor accused the United States of being behind the rebel war to oust him in his farewell address to the nation a day before he is to step down.

It was a goodbye that few would hear in his desperate, war-divided capital - preoccupied in the search for food, and without fuel to keep radio or TV stations on the air.

Two months of rebel sieges have left well over 1,000 civilians dead in the capital, as insurgents and Taylor's forces dueled with the city of 1.3 million as its battlefield. The war has left Taylor controlling little but downtown, referred to derisively by rebels as Taylor's "Federal Republic of Central Monrovia."

At the request of West African leaders, Taylor has promised to leave Monday, then go into exile in Nigeria at some unspecified time.

Taylor made no apologies in Sunday's address - asking only forgiveness from any he may have wronged in what have been his years of carnage.

He compared his departure from the presidency to Jesus submitting himself to the Romans. He accused the United States of arming Liberia's rebels, calling it an "American war" and suggesting it was motivated by US eagerness for Liberia's gold, diamonds and other reserves.

"If I were the problem - which you know and I know I'm not - I would ... become the sacrificial lamb," Taylor

said. "I would become the whipping boy that you should live."

In Washington, a senior Bush administration official said he wasn't aware of a claim by Taylor about the United States and the rebels in Liberia, but that it would be false to claim the United States was arming or funding rebels.

Taylor, sitting solemnly with folded hands, recorded the address in front of a Liberian flag at his home, for broadcast on the evening before he was to hand power to Vice President Moses Blah on Monday.

"I do not stop out of fear. I do not stop out of fright. I stop out of love for you, my people," Taylor declared, adding, "I fought for you."

Speaking slowly, with a raspy voice, the Liberian leader declared: "I love this country very much. This is why I have decided to sacrifice my presidency."

"They can call off their dogs now," Taylor said. "We can have peace."

At least three West African heads of state, including South African President Thabo Mbeki, were expected for what Taylor's regime was trying to organise into an hours-long formal resignation ceremony.

By late Sunday, the speech had not been played on local radio in the unit capital, shattered by shelling and littered with shrapnel, bullet casings and rubbish from looting by Taylor's forces.

9 killed in Kashmir violence

AFP, Srinagar

Nine people, including five soldiers and three militants, were killed in separate clashes overnight and Monday in the Indian-administered zone of Kashmir, police said.

At least four Indian soldiers and one militant were killed in a gunbattle in the frontier region of Rajouri, 150 km west of Jammu, the winter capital of Indian Kashmir.

Militants burst out from their stronghold when Indian soldiers surrounded the region in Rajouri's Bowani village, sparking off the intense firefight.

The fighting, which began mid-morning Monday, was continuing into the afternoon, he added.

In another clash, two Muslim rebels and a soldier died in the Banihal area of Doda district, about 120 kilometres (75 miles) south of Srinagar, the spokesman said.

The battle erupted late Sunday evening when troops ringed Sarchi village near Banihal following a tip-off.

Weapons and six grenades were recovered near the scene of the encounter, police said.

In a third incident, civilian Assadullah Lone was killed when he stepped on an explosive device in the Khag area of the central Budgam district overnight, a police spokesman said in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir.

It was not known who left the device in the area, where Lone was grazing his cattle.

Fragile peace prevails in riot-shaken Basra

AFP, REUTERS, Basra

A fragile peace prevailed Monday in the southern port city of Basra, where British troops hoped to prevent a third day of riots over the coalition's failure to provide electricity and fuel.

"It's all calmed down. We're delivering fuel to stations," said Major Charlie Mayo, military spokesman in the British-administered city where people rioted for two days as tempers spilled over about the poor conditions in the city.

A foreign security guard and two Iraqis were killed in a second day of violence in Basra on Sunday in which British troops fired warning shots as crowds attacked vehicles and blocked streets with burning tires.

The British patrolled in tanks as hundreds of stone-throwing Iraqis rampaged in protest against fuel and power shortages. In one incident troops said they returned fire from gunmen, but a tense calm settled over Iraq's second city by evening.

The violence was some of the worst in Iraq since Saddam Hussein was toppled by US-led forces on April 9 and occurred in a city at the heart of the mostly Shiite Muslim south, which has been relatively peaceful in the wake of his fall. Iraq's majority Shiites were repressed under Saddam, a Sunni Muslim.

The British blame oil smugglers, looters and saboteurs for the fuel

and power shortages, but Basra residents are angry at seeing fridges and air conditioners stop working as summer temperatures soar to more than 120 Fahrenheit.

The Gurkha was delivering mail in the lead vehicle of a two-car convoy when three shots were fired at 3:00 PM (1100 GMT), one of which hit him in the shoulder, said British spokesman Iain Pickard.

Gurkhas formerly with the British army have been hired out by Global Security, a private firm being used by the Coalition Provisional Authority for protection, the spokesman added.

By Sunday night, British troops distributed fuel to gas stations for the population of 1.5 million fed up with gas shortages, electricity outages and the rampant smuggling of petrol under the coalition's nose.

A statement said the CPA was "providing extra stocks of benzene (petrol) from coalition military sources and from stocks seized as a result of anti-smuggling operations."

It added that new gas turbines were being installed in faltering power plants, which break down repeatedly, in a bid to cool tempers in the middle of the summer heat.

Czech troops operating alongside the British said they also had to resort to warning shots and that another Iraqi was killed when he fell under the wheels of a truck he was trying to climb.