

Vajpayee's Kashmir visit marred by blasts, protest

TNN, Srinagar

Two powerful blasts rocked Srinagar and Baramulla on Wednesday morning even as Prime Minister Vajpayee arrived here to inaugurate the crucial two-day inter-state council meeting.

At least three persons were injured in the blasts, the police said, adding security had been tightened around Srinagar city.

Vajpayee will be presiding over the 8th inter-state council meeting to be held at 4.30 pm on Wednesday at the Sher-i-Kashmir convention complex on the banks

of Dal Lake here. Thousands of personnel drawn from the state police, CRPF and BSF have been deployed at the conference venue.

A powerful improvised explosive device (IED) planted near the wall of a house went off at high security Karan Nagar in civil lines area on Wednesday morning causing injuries to three civilians. Another blast took place in Baramulla in north Kashmir.

Meanwhile, normal life was affected in the city due to a general strike. All public transport and government offices remained

closed for the day. The strike call was given by various militant groups, including the Hurriyat Conference and Syed Ali Shah Geelani, against the Prime Minister's visit.

Vajpayee and Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani are expected to arrive here in the afternoon.

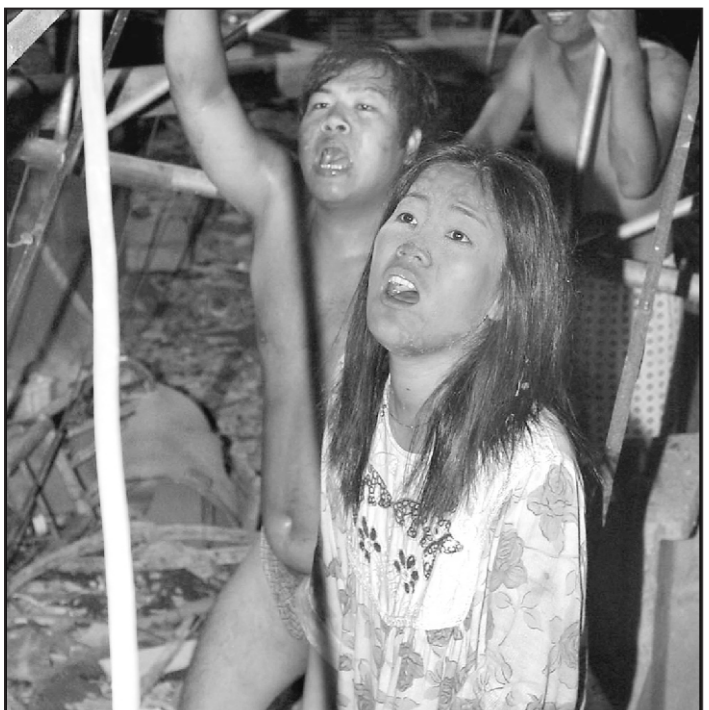
Official sources said that Indian Air Force's help was sought in the wake of militants' threat to use explosive-laden toy planes to create destruction.

Marine commandos from the Navy, who have been posted to guard the Manasbal lake in north

Kashmir, would also be assisting divers of the state police and BSF in maintaining vigil at Dal Lake.

Meanwhile, participants have started arriving in Srinagar. Jharkhand Chief Minister Arjun Munda, Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh, Madhya Pradesh Deputy Chief Minister Subash Yadav, and Rajasthan Deputy Chief Minister B L Barwah are among those who have arrived here with their teams.

The administrator of Dadra and Nagar Haveli has also reached Srinagar, besides teams from Assam and Bihar.



20 dead, 30 hurt in China fireworks blast

AFP, Beijing

At least 20 people were killed and more than 30 injured in a large fireworks blast in China's south-eastern Fujian province, state television reported yesterday.

The explosion occurred at 10:50pm local time Tuesday inside an old wooden shed used to illegally manufacture and store large quantities of fireworks, China Central Television said.

The force of the blast destroyed homes 60 metres away and torched four nearby residential buildings.

Rescue workers yesterday were still searching for possible casualties and authorities said an investigation was underway.

Officials said they had checked up on factories in the area producing illegal fireworks after five people were killed in a blast last month, but many of these makeshift facilities were able to easily transfer locations.

China is the world's biggest producer of fireworks, with people in rural areas often illegally making them in their homes under unsafe conditions.

Chinese authorities have repeatedly vowed to crack down on illegal and hazardous fireworks factories, but accidents continue to happen.

Most recently, 35 people died and 103 were injured in a fireworks factory explosion last month.

A Chinese couple who escaped their burning house, search for their child, after an explosion at a fireworks warehouse in southeast China's Fujian province. After the explosion occurred inside an wooden shed used to store fireworks at 10:30pm local time it destroyed houses 60 metres away. At least 20 people were killed.



BSF personnel stand guard on the deserted streets of Srinagar yesterday. A general strike called by Kashmir's main separatist alliance, All Parties Hurriyat Conference (APHC) and separately by hardline leader Syed Ali Geelani.

Truce effectively over

Nepal Maoists say

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels said yesterday that a seven-month truce was effectively over after Nepal's government refused to agree to their key demand of a constitutional assembly.

"The significance of the ceasefire has now ended," said a Maoist statement quoted to AFP by Padma Ratna Tuladhar, a rebel-appointed go-between in the peace process.

The Maoists had given the government a deadline which expired yesterday to agree to elections for a "constituent assembly" that would redraft Nepal's constitution.

But the government refused, saying the rebels must first give up their weapons.

The assembly dispute helped scuttle a long-delayed third round of peace talks last week. The two sides agreed a ceasefire on January 29.

The UN Security Council voted unanimously to protect humanitarian aid workers in war zones, despite some US misgivings over the wording of the resolution.

Mexico's draft version had referred to the International Criminal Court, before the United States demanded that the phrase be dropped.

The resolution was passed on Tuesday, a week after a bomb attack on the UN offices in Baghdad killed 23, including the UN envoy to Iraq, Sergio Vieira de Mello.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan underlined the importance of a unanimous decision, in brief remarks ahead of the vote.

"Emphasising that there are existing prohibitions under international law against attacks knowingly and intentionally directed against personnel involved in a humanitarian assistance or peacekeeping mission undertaken in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations which, in situations of armed conflicts, constitute war crimes and recalling the need for states to end impunity for such criminal acts," the resolution said.

The United States objected to

Israel to continue targeted killing

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli army will continue its policy of killing targeted members of the radical Palestinian group Hamas, an Israeli official said yesterday, following a failed airstrike in the Gaza Strip.

"Our liquidation operations are going to continue against everyone implicated in terrorist attacks, in the preparation of attacks or in the firing of rockets," the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told AFP.

"No terrorist should expect to benefit from the least impunity," the official added. "We will continue to act when and where we judge

useful, with all means necessary, until the Palestinian Authority decides to fight the terrorists as it is committed to doing."

A Palestinian was killed Tuesday evening and more than 20 others wounded in a failed helicopter strike in the northern Gaza Strip.

Hamas said the targets had been Wael Akilan and Khaled Massoud, two members of the group's armed wing, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades.

The army said the raid had targeted Massoud, who it said had fired Qassam rockets into Israel.

UNSC votes in favour of shielding aid workers

AFP, United Nations

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The United States objected to

the original language that would have made any attack on humanitarian personnel a war crime, including acts committed in what it called the "fog of war."

US ambassador to the United Nations John Negroponte said: "This resolution creates no new international legal obligation but rather reaffirms existing regulation."

The US ambassador also recalled that other international conventions allow the occupying powers to restrict freedom of movement of aid workers in areas they control.

Annan emphasised that the resolution "strengthens the obligation to take every step to protect those working 'blue flag' and to bring to justice those who hurt them."

"It allows the governments to take action against the perpetrators and to work with us to be sure our personnel are not in harm's way."

He said that the removal of the mention of the ICC changed nothing.

"It was a compromise that was necessary to get the resolution passed," he said.

Non-governmental organisations and human groups lobbied for Mexico's draft resolution.

Astrologers warn of war as Mars approaches

AFP, Bangkok

Thai astrologers are warning Mars could bring war and conflict as it passes near Earth yesterday, while their astronomical counterparts are more concerned about storm clouds obscuring the spectacle.

Leading Thai astrologist Pinyo Pongcharoen said the "planet of

war" would have a greater influence over the earth's inhabitants as it moves closer than it has been in the last 60,000 years.

"When it comes towards the earth, people should be careful about their emotions because it will put people in a bad mood and spark conflicts," he told the Thai-language Daily News

yesterday.

"It will also increase the chances of war, terrorism and accidents," he added.

However, with the rainy season in full swing in Thailand and storms battering Bangkok most afternoons, there are fears that poor weather could prevent Thais from getting a good look at the Red Planet.

"Poor visibility could be a problem. But if the sky is clear, the rare spectacle can be viewed from anywhere in the world," Worawit Tanwuthibundit from the Thai Astronomical Society told the Nation newspaper.

Crowds have been gathering at the Science Ministry to catch a glimpse of the spectacle through the

three telescopes and large projectors installed for the public.

On August 27, the Red Planet will be 55.76 million km from Earth, according to Belgian astronomer Jean Meeus, who says the two planets last came as close nearly 60,000 years ago.

The next time the two planets will be closer than in 2003 will be in 2287.

