

21 burnt alive as houses set on fire in West Bengal

PTI, Kolkata

In a horrific incident, 21 people, including two women, were burnt to death when unidentified people set ablaze the house of a CITU-affiliated workers' union leader in a tea estate in West Bengal's Jalpaiguri district yesterday.

State IGP (Law and Order) Chayan Mukherjee said in Kolkata that some unidentified people set ablaze the house of Tarakeswar Lohar, secretary of a CITU-affiliated labour union in the Dalgajon tea garden.

When police reached the spot at around 8.30 am after getting information about the incident, it found the house in flames.

The fire was doused and 21 charred bodies were recovered from the house, he said adding that so far 106 people were arrested in connection with the incident.

Blast outside Nepali crown prince's house

AFP, Kathmandu

Suspected Maoists planted two bombs Wednesday outside the palace of Nepal's Crown Prince Paras but no one was injured, although 12 rebels were reported dead elsewhere in the troubled kingdom, officials said.

One bomb exploded and a second was defused outside the heir to the throne's sprawling Nirmal Niwas compound in Kathmandu but there was no significant damage, police said.

A police official said the blast was the work of the Maoists, who have been fighting since 1996 to overthrow the monarchy and establish a communist state.

Troops sealed off the area around the palace, where Paras lives with his wife Crown Princess Himani and their three young children.

7 burned to death in caste conflict in UP village

AFP, New Delhi

Seven members of the same family were burned to death in an Indian village by higher-caste Hindus over an apparent land dispute, a television report said yesterday.

A simmering conflict boiled over Wednesday in the Unao district of the northern state of Uttar Pradesh when members of a low caste walked onto disputed farmland, the NDTV network reported, quoting local authorities.

Enraged high-caste villagers trapped the seven family members in a house and torched it, killing all of them, it said.

The report said the area had been tense for the past year after men were accused of raping lower-caste women.

Musharraf to visit Turkey

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf will visit Turkey in January, a senior official said Wednesday.

The January 20-22 visit will be Musharraf's fourth to Turkey, where he lived as a child while his diplomat father was posted there.

The trip will fall six months after Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's three-day state visit to Pakistan in June.

Musharraf denies aiding N Korean nuclear drive

AFP, Seoul

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf met with South Korean leader Roh Moo-Hyun here yesterday after denouncing as a smear campaign charges that Islamabad helped North Korea's nuclear weapons drive.

Pakistan, which maintains cordial ties with the North Korean leadership, has been repeatedly accused of aiding Pyongyang's atomic ambitions in return for help with Islamabad's own missile development.

"I would like to assure you that all reports linking Pakistan to North Korea's nuclear programme are totally incorrect and malicious in nature," said Musharraf in an interview with the Korea Herald newspaper.

The one-hour meeting, the first between the two leaders, focused on the nuclear crisis and bilateral relations, especially trade, South Korean officials

Education still a luxury for girls in South Asia

AFP, New Delhi

Education is still a luxury for girls in the male-dominated South Asian region where there are only 84 girls for every 100 boys in primary school, according to a UN report released yesterday. Christopher Colclough, director of the report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco), told a press conference in New Delhi that two-thirds or 21 million of the world's out-of-school children were girls.

In 2000 the Unesco Education for All programme was endorsed by 164 governments, setting a goal of achieving gender parity in primary and secondary schools by 2005.

"Bangladesh, India and Pakistan weigh heavily in global education trends. Unfortunately, inequality is

patent and widespread in South Asia," said Colclough.

"Dominantly, it is girls who are more unequal than boys. Very large disparities are found in Pakistan, followed by India and Nepal," he added.

In Pakistan there are 74 girls in primary school for every 100 boys, in India the figure is 83 and in Nepal the figure is 85.

According to the report, Bangladesh and the Maldives were the only countries in the region that had already achieved gender parity at the primary school level.

"Countries likely to achieve parity in 2005 are Iran and Nepal," added the UN report.

According to UN forecasts, India and Pakistan may not achieve gender parity at the primary and secondary

school levels even by 2015.

Gender parity at the secondary school level is a tough call even for Bangladesh though it has made "strong gains" in recent years, said the report.

"Countries will need to allocate more of their own resources and use them more effectively," it said.

"Half the countries in the region with data were spending 3.8 percent of national income on education in 2000 -- up from 2.7 percent in 1990 but still lower than the 4.1 percent average for developing countries."

However, the gloomy report held out one bright hope for the education of girls.

"In most countries with data, survival rates to grade five are often higher for girls than boys, showing that once girls have access to schools

they do as well or even better than boys," said the UN report.

Among the barriers to the education of girls are high costs for parents and the need for children to work to help support their families, as well as early marriage, HIV/AIDS and violence.

The UN estimated that up 100,000 girls directly participated in conflicts in at least 30 countries during the 1990s as fighters, cooks, porters, spies, servants and sex slaves, the report said. The vast majority of the world's estimated 25 million displaced persons are women and children.

"Poverty and conflicts have a detrimental effect on education for girls and women. But when they fill up classrooms girls often leave boys in the shade," said Colclough.



Indian girls ride on a rickshaw during their daily journey to school in New Delhi yesterday. Education is still a luxury for many girls in the male-dominated South Asian region home to three of the world's most populous developing countries: India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, according to a report released yesterday by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco).



Sri Lankan Police Force members oversee workers unloading and positioning mobile barriers to be used at a random check-point on Government road (the road leading to Parliament) in Colombo yesterday, the day after a state of emergency was declared. Sri Lankan security forces were armed with sweeping powers under a state of emergency that took effect on November 5 as President Chandrika Kumaratunga tightened her grip on the government, following the sacking of three key cabinet members.

Kashmir govt urges Delhi not to withdraw BSF

AFP, Srinagar

Eleven people were killed in Indian Kashmir while the state government appealed to New Delhi not to withdraw troops fighting the insurgency, officials said yesterday.

Police said suspected militants barged into three separate houses in the Kunzer village in Baramulla district late Wednesday and shot dead three people, including a woman working with state-owned television.

No group has claimed responsibility for the killings, which sparked panic in the area.

Another victim was a government official, police said.

Separately, troops sealed off a house Thursday morning in Shopian, 50km

south of the summer capital Srinagar, and shot dead two militants in a three-hour gun battle, an army spokesman said.

He said troops recovered two automatic rifles and a radio set from the slain rebels.

Another rebel was shot dead by the army near the village of Busan, 35km northeast of Srinagar, late Wednesday, he said.

Three more rebels were shot dead overnight in the Rafiaband and Bandipora areas of Baramulla, the spokesman said, adding two Indian army officers and three other soldiers were injured during one of the gun-fights.

Indian troops also shot dead two militants in the Chingus area of Rajouri

Thursday, police said.

Meanwhile Deputy Chief Minister Mangat Ram Sharma appealed to the federal government to put off a withdrawal planned for later this month of the Border Security Force (BSF), the main unit fighting rebels in Kashmir.

New Delhi plans to refocus the BSF on border protection and deploy the Central Reserve Police Force to put down insurgencies in Kashmir and northeastern India.

Sharma, quoted by the English-language daily Greater Kashmir, said he told Indian Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani that the withdrawal of the BSF from counter-insurgency operations "would cause problems in fighting militancy."

China-India ties thaw with first ever joint war games

AFP, Beijing

India and China will hold their first-ever joint naval war games next week, officials said yesterday a day after Pakistani leader Pervez Musharraf left Beijing trumpeting bilateral ties.

The drills will take place off the Shanghai coast on November 14 in a sign that the frosty relationship between the world's two most populous countries is gradually thawing.

"They will hold one-day search and rescue exercises on November 14. It's the first time. It's a landmark," a senior Indian diplomat in Beijing told AFP.

UN envoy meets Suu Kyi

AFP, Yangon

United Nations rights envoy Paulo Sergio Pinheiro met yesterday Myanmar's pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi who is under house arrest after being taken into custody in May, witnesses said.

Pinheiro was seen arriving at her lakeside residence in Yangon where she has been confined since September after being shifted from detention at a secret location to recuperate after major surgery.

The envoy is only the second outsider to meet the 58-year-old Nobel peace laureate since May 30 clashes between her supporters and a pro-junta gang in northern Myanmar triggered her arrest and a crackdown on her opposition party.

Earlier United Nations rights envoy to Myanmar Paulo Sergio Pinheiro met leaders of the opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) who have been under house arrest since May, a UN official said.

"He has been meeting with some of the NLD CEC (Central Executive Committee) this morning," the official told AFP.

Pinheiro held talks with the three

leaders. NLD chairman Aung Shwe, Nyunt Wai and Soe Myint, at a government "guesthouse" in Yangon, he said.

The Brazilian academic was expected later met the opposition's figurehead Aung San Suu Kyi, who is also confined to her Yangon residence.

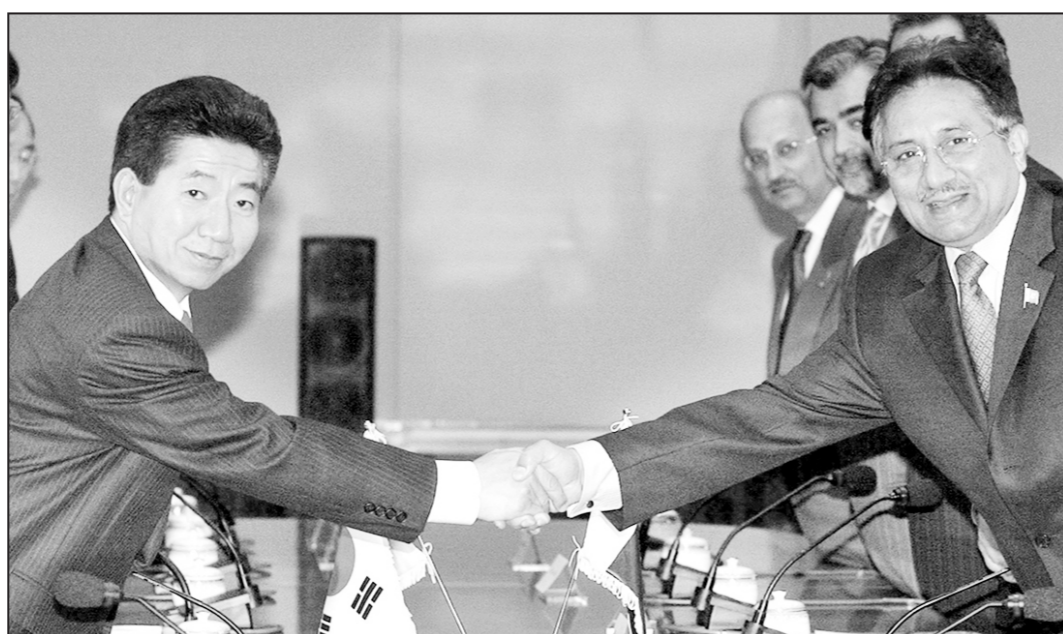
Pinheiro would be only the second outsider to meet the Nobel peace laureate since May 30 clashes between her supporters and a pro-junta gang in northern Myanmar which triggered a crackdown on the opposition party.

Aung San Suu Kyi was arrested and taken into secret detention before being shifted to house arrest in September. All members of the decision-making CEC have either been jailed or confined to their homes.

On Thursday Pinheiro visited the notorious Insein jail north of Yangon to interview political prisoners.

"I talked to security and political prisoners I interviewed in the past to evaluate their situation and to see if there was any change," he told AFP late Wednesday.

"All in all we interviewed a total of 20 security and political prisoners... some of them were arrested after the May 30th incident."



Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (R) shakes hands with South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun before a summit at the Blue House yesterday in Seoul. Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, ahead of a summit with South Korean leader Roh Moo-Hyun, denounced as a smear campaign charges that Islamabad helped North Korea's nuclear weapons drive. Pakistan, which maintains cordial ties with the North Korean leadership, has been repeatedly accused of aiding North Korea's atomic ambitions in return for help from Pyongyang with missile development.