

## India hails Pak truce proposal

AFP, New Delhi

India welcomed on Monday Pakistan's announcement of a unilateral ceasefire along the Line of Control in Jammu and Kashmir, but said it wanted an end to the infiltration of terrorists into the state.

"We... welcome the announcement by the Prime Minister of Pakistan of a unilateral ceasefire with effect from holy occasion of Eid," External Affairs Ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna told a news conference in New Delhi.

"We will respond positively to this initiative."

Eid-ul-Fitr is to be celebrated in Jammu and Kashmir on Wednesday or Thursday, according to the sighting of the new moon.

Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali on Sunday announced a unilateral ceasefire by Pakistan along the Line of Control.

"Our armed forces deployed on the Line of Control (LoC) have been ordered to observe a complete ceasefire with effect from Eid day," he said in a nationally televised address.

# Georgian leaders seek US cash for polls

## Washington voices support to new interim govt

REUTERS, Tbilisi

Georgia's new leaders, boosted by US support for the bloodless ouster of President Eduard Shevardnadze, sought urgent financial aid yesterday and called for order and stability after the country's "velvet revolution."

A senior economic aide close to the interim president said Georgia would ask Washington for \$5 million to stage new elections after a discredited November 2 parliamentary ballot which led to Shevardnadze's downfall.

Developments are being watched closely by Georgia's big neighbor Russia, and by Western powers wanting political stability to avoid problems with a pipeline being built through the

territory to take Caspian oil to the Mediterranean Sea.

Shevardnadze, 75, resigned late on Sunday, bowing to three weeks of mass protests over economic mismanagement and widespread corruption during his 11 years in power, culminating in alleged vote-rigging in the November parliamentary polls.

Washington voiced support overnight for Nino Burdzhanadze, speaker of the outgoing parliament, who will act as head of state until new polls in the impoverished former Soviet state.

"The United States and the international community stand ready to support the new government in holding free and fair parliamentary elections in the future," said State Department spokes-

man Richard Boucher, adding that Secretary of State Colin Powell had called Burdzhanadze to offer support.

Under the constitution, presidential elections must be held within 45 days in the Caucasus mountain state of five million, but the status of the contested new parliament is ambiguous.

One strongly tipped candidate to replace the snow-haired Shevardnadze is Mikhail Saakashvili, a 35-year-old US-trained lawyer who, with Burdzhanadze, led the protests that toppled him.

Powell also spoke to Shevardnadze, and Boucher praised the former Soviet foreign minister -- a hero in the West for his role in overseeing the end of the Cold War -- for standing down "in the best

interests of (Georgia's) people."

For her part Burdzhanadze, addressing the nation in a broadcast late on Sunday, urged Georgians to restore order quickly.

"From tomorrow order and stability should be restored in the country and I appeal to all law enforcement agencies to return to a normal rhythm of work. And I appeal to our citizens to help them," she said.

Early on Monday, only small knots of protesters huddled round the dying embers of fires outside parliament. Tens of thousands of Georgians delirious with joy had danced late into the night, honking car horns, waving flags and embracing on news of Shevardnadze's departure.



A Georgian woman shouts as she rides a car on Sunday night in Tbilisi. Thousands of people went out into the streets of Georgian capital to celebrate Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze's resignation. Shevardnadze handed over power to former parliament Speaker Nino Burdzhanadze in a dramatic climax to mounting popular unrest after an allegedly rigged November 2 parliamentary polls that tapped into widespread dissatisfaction with his rule. Photo showing Georgian opposition leader Mikhail Saakashvili is seen on the car window.

PHOTO: AFP

## Nepal PM talks Saarc, insurgency issues with Indian FM

AFP, New Delhi

Nepalese Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa yesterday began a three-day visit here with talks with Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha on strengthening a South Asian grouping set to hold a summit in January, officials said.

Thapa is currently the rotating chairman of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (Saarc), which besides India and Nepal groups Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and the Maldives.

Soon after his arrival late Sunday, Thapa said Nepal wanted the SAARC summit to take place "properly and... function effectively so that its future is protected."

Thapa was scheduled to meet later Monday his Indian counterpart Atal Behari Vajpayee.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) talks to his Nepalese counterpart Surya Bahadur Thapa (L) prior to a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. Thapa is on a three-day visit for talks on strengthening an association of South Asian nations, which is set to hold a summit in January. Thapa is currently the rotating chairman of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (Saarc), which besides India and Nepal groups Bhutan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and the Maldives.

# Mullah Omar urges Afghans to fight US forces out

REUTERS, Islamabad

The supreme leader of the ousted Taliban, Mullah Mohammad Omar, urged Afghans to unite against US-led foreign forces on their soil, a Pakistan-based Afghan news service reported Sunday.

Omar, in his message ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr which marks the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, said promises of democracy and reconstruction made two years ago in Afghanistan were yet to be fulfilled, Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) said.

"Now the US-backed system is two years old. Where is the democracy, freedom, human rights and reconstruction?" Taliban spokesman Hamid Agha quoted Omar as saying in a message delivered to some Pakistani newspa-

pers.

AIP said a few newspaper offices in the northwestern Pakistani city of Peshawar had received the one-page message in the Pashto language.

Omar said that instead of having their promises fulfilled, two years after the Taliban's ouster at the hands of US-led forces Afghan people were now subjected to murder, destruction and obscenity amid attempts to subvert Islamic morality.

Few Afghans openly call for a return of the Taliban, which has regrouped and carried out a series of attacks in recent months on Western and aid targets. But many say they felt safer under the hard-line Islamic militia.

Omar dismissed as a charade next month's planned Loya Jirga, or grand assembly to finalize a constitution.

## New Zealand PM frisked at Sydney airport for explosives

AFP, Sydney

An Australian minister voiced embarrassment and regret yesterday over an incident in which New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark was frisked for explosives by security agents at Sydney Airport.

"It was obviously an error, a bad error, it's embarrassing, we would hope this doesn't happen again," Tourism Minister Joe Hockey said of the incident, which happened late last month when Clark was transiting through Sydney on her way to visit New Zealand troops in the Middle East.

Clark revealed the episode during an interview on New Zealand radio Monday and said she believed there would have been "an uproar" if Australian Prime Minister John Howard had been similarly frisked for explosives in New Zealand.

# Kashmiri hardliners reject talks offer

AFP, Srinagar

India's offer of the first high-level talks with separatists to end a protracted rebellion in Kashmir has won the approval of the main rebel movement but been outrightly rejected by hardliners.

Kashmir's main separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, is willing to accept the Indian government's offer dialogue made last month, moderate separatist leader Umar Farooq said Friday.

The Hurriyat has even prepared a "durable and acceptable roadmap" for the resolution of the Kashmir dispute, his colleague Abdul Gani Bhat said.

The plan would be presented to foreign diplomats in New Delhi and later to India and Pakistan, Bhat said.

But hardline Islamic group Jamiat-ul-Mujahedin, fighting for Kashmir's merger with neighbouring Pakistan, said the proposed talks, which could

take place as early as next month, would be a betrayal and "sell-out".

"To bring flexibility in a genuine and just stand is a crime. And anyone who does it deserves to be punished," Jamiat chief Sheikh Abdul Basit told local news agency Current News Service.

He accused Bhat and his colleagues of trying to follow in the footsteps of the late Sheikh Mohammed Abdullah, Indian-administered Kashmir's most towering leader who until a 1975 accord with New Delhi was striving for a plebiscite in the region on whether it should separate from India or join Pakistan.

Abdullah eventually gave up the fight and became the region's chief minister.

"Bhat and his friends may present a roadmap similar to Abdullah to New Delhi and thus betray the people of Kashmir," said Basit, adding "mujahedin" (holy warriors) would prevent any further agreements with New Delhi.

## HK's pro-govt party suffers polls defeat

AFP, Hong Kong

Hong Kong's main pro-government party suffered a serious setback in the first polls since massive street protests in July, while the pro-democracy camp recorded gains, results published yesterday showed.

The pro-democracy camp claimed 93 seats compared to 86 at the 1999 polls while the pro-government Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong (DAB), which backed a controversial security bill that sparked the huge July protests, slumped to just 64 seats compared to 83 at the last elections.

# Myanmar frees 5 key NLD leaders

REUTERS, Bangkok

The Myanmar military government released five senior members of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy put under house arrest nearly six months ago, party officials said yesterday.

The five, all on the NLD's nine-member central executive committee, were put under house arrest after bloody clashes between Suu Kyi's supporters and government backers on May 30.

The officials said Than Tun, 82, Nyunt Wai, 81, Soe Myint, 80 and Hla Pe, 77 -- all elected in 1990 general elections won by the NLD but ignored by the generals -- were freed over the weekend. Lun Tin, 82, was released on Monday morning, leaving four central committee members in detention, the officials said.

Vice chairman Tin Oo was in jail in the town of Kalay and the three others were under house arrest in Yangon, they said.

Suu Kyi was detained in an unknown location -- for her own protection, the generals said -- after the May 30 violence until she went to hospital for an operation in September.

She was then allowed to go home under house arrest, but UN human rights envoy Paulo Sergio Pinheiro, who met her earlier this month, said Suu Kyi would not accept her own liberty until 35 NLD figures held since May 30 were released.

Pinheiro said the government had released eight of the 35 and was talking about freeing the other 27. It was not known whether the five elderly NLD members freed were among the 27 because Pinheiro did not give names.

# Maoists take deadly toll at Nepali schools

AFP, Kathmandu

Beyond the daily deaths of Maoist rebels and soldiers in Nepal, educators warn a generation of children is being scarred as rural schools become a frontline in the bloody insurgency.

Officials say more than 300 teachers and students have died in the seven-year uprising as schools emerge as de facto symbols of government authority in a kingdom where troops and guerrillas tussle for control.

Lava Prasad Tripathy, spokesman for the education and culture ministry, said 149 teachers and 152 children have died since the Maoists in 1996 declared their "people's war" aimed at overthrowing the monarchy.

But like much data in Nepal, the toll is merely a collection of figures from

local officials. Tripathy described as "deplorable" the quality of statistics on the insurrection's effects on education.

The Maoists, hoping to show their rule in the countryside, have routinely destroyed bridges, roads and any other sign of the government's influence.

Teachers, with their accreditation from central authorities and commitment to instructing a curriculum set by Kathmandu, are often the most visible target for guerrillas bent on establishing a far-left republic.

Mohan Gyawali, general secretary of the Nepal Teachers Organisation, said 85 teachers supporting the Kathmandu-based union have been killed since 1996 and another 1,200 others have fled or been forced out of their home communities.

# Chirac in UK to meet Blair

## First top-level bilateral talks since Iraq war

AFP, London

French President Jacques Chirac arrived in London yesterday for a day-long summit with British Prime Minister Tony Blair focusing on the way forward in Iraq, European defence and the EU constitution.

Their talks at Downing Street -- hot on the heels of US President George W. Bush's state visit to Britain last week -- will be their first bilateral meeting since they fell out over the US-led invasion of Iraq last March.

Blair was also to meet later in the day with Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar, who is in London for a business seminar.

Officials say Chirac, accompanied by his prime minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, will discuss occupied Iraq's reconstruction and the proposed June 2004 transfer of sovereignty with Blair.

The two leaders fell out over the need for war against Saddam Hussein, with Blair siding with Bush and Chirac opting for more time for UN inspectors to seek out alleged Iraqi weapons of mass destruction.

Blair and Chirac were also due to review the stymied Middle East peace process, and it was likely that the French president will give public words of solidarity for Britain after last Thursday's suicide bombings in Istanbul.

Regarding Europe, political analysts say Chirac will be looking for signs of commitment from Blair for the creation of a European military planning capability independent of NATO.

Blair was initially cool to the idea -- co-sponsored by France, Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg -- when it was announced in April. The Bush adminis-

tration is opposed, fearing it will undermine NATO.

But more recently he has signalled a willingness to agree to it, though observers expect he will want an iron-clad guarantee that NATO will remain the linchpin of European security.

The proposed military planning facility, likely based in Brussels, would supply the brainpower for EU military operations which US-dominated NATO would prefer not to participate in.

Blair and Chirac are also likely to review work on the proposed EU constitution that will be put before European leaders at their quarterly summit in Brussels on December 12-13.

The two leaders' last bilateral summit took place at Le Touquet, on the French side of the English Channel, in February, but they have seen each other several times since then at multilateral events.

# Sharon vows to end ME peace stalemate

## Israel expels 3 Palestinians from WB to Gaza

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, facing flak from the United States, said Sunday he was considering unilateral moves to kickstart the peace process and was determined to break the impasse with the Palestinians.

Sharon told a weekly cabinet meeting that he "does not rule out unilateral steps" in response to reports which said he was considering measures such as the dismantling of isolated settlements, a government statement said.

"However, the prime minister emphasised that his position is not yet fully formed, and that any plan will be submitted to the cabinet at the appropriate time," the statement added.

He also said he remained committed to the "roadmap", an internationally-backed peace plan which has ground to a complete halt in recent weeks.

Sharon's move comes amid preparations for a first meeting with his new Palestinian counterpart Ahmed Qorei, which suffered a blow late Saturday with the killing of two guards protecting Israel's controversial separation barrier.

Smarting from accusations that he failed to help bolster the position of the previous moderate Palestinian premier Mahmud Abbas, Sharon has been keen to avoid any suggestion that he is unwilling to give Qorei a chance to prove himself.

The prime minister also told the Yedioth Aharonot daily that he was determined to make progress in the peace process despite recent criticism from the US.

"I just wanted the Israeli public to know that its prime minister has not stopped thinking how to get out of the impasse with the Palestinians," Sharon said.

The settlements which face dis-

mantling are on the Palestinian side of a controversial barrier being built by Israel across the West Bank, or in areas which are considered difficult to defend, reports have said.

"The plan is meant simply to make things easier for Israel," Sharon was quoted as saying earlier by the Maariv daily.

"These are steps that can be taken without undermining security and their purpose is to make things easier for us and not for others."

Meanwhile, three Palestinian Islamists were expelled Sunday night by Israel to the Gaza Strip from the West Bank, raising to six the number of such punishments carried out this month, Israeli military sources said.

The Israeli government also announced it would release 10 Jordanian prisoners as a goodwill gesture towards its neighbour on the eve of the Muslim festival of Eid al-Fitr.

# Assam faces food shortage as truckers avoid riot-torn state

AFP, Guwahati

India's northeastern region was facing a food shortage yesterday after truck drivers refused to enter Assam due to ethnic clashes that have claimed 46 lives, officials said.

"Most of the truckers are Hindi-speakers and they are reluctant to come to Assam from other parts of the country carrying essentials," an Assam Chambers of Commerce spokesman said.

"The state will witness a food crisis as most of the essentials come from outside the region. Already we have noticed prices of goods going up manifold."

Assam has been rocked by violent clashes between Hindi-speaking settlers and locals for the past nine days in which 46 people -- all from the nearby state of Bihar -- have been killed.

Assam's strategic geographical location -- forming a bridge between the main mass of India and the other six northeastern states of Arunachal

Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura -- makes it the gateway to the region.

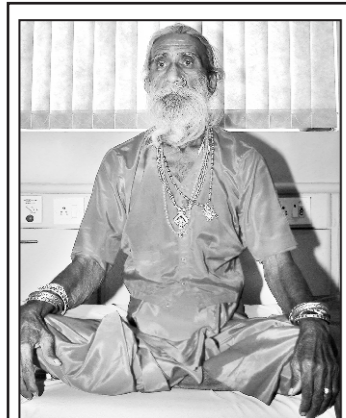
The only highway connecting the rest of India with the northeast -- which adjoins Bangladesh -- runs through Assam and this route carries all supplies including and food and fuel to the six provinces.

On Monday morning, senior police official Khagen Sharma told AFP that there had been no overnight incidents of violence and the situation "is fast returning to normal."

To instill confidence among the people, authorities were forming vigilante groups in vulnerable areas involving local Assamese youths to foil attacks on Hindi-speakers.

"We are taking all security and other measures to bring down the situation under control," Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi told AFP.

A curfew, still in place in many parts of eastern Assam, may be relaxed later Monday, police official Sharma said.



Surviving without food for 68 years!

AFP, Ahmedabad

An Indian man who claims divine inspiration says he has survived 68 years without eating, drinking or relieving himself, baffling doctors who are unable to prove him an impostor.

Prahlad Jani, a 76-year-old whose extraordinary tale has won him a small band of devotees, took a dare and underwent round-the-clock surveillance at a hospital in Ahmedabad, the commercial capital of the western state of Gujarat.

Clad in his trademark red sari, bangles and earrings meant to fashion Hindu goddesses, Jani managed to puzzle the Sterling Hospital's 400 doctors.

Neurologist Sudhir Shahsai said Jani was under watch for 10 days, with a closed-circuit camera running, and that doctors were convinced he did not break any of his vows, although there was no way of verifying whether Jani has pulled it off for 68 years.

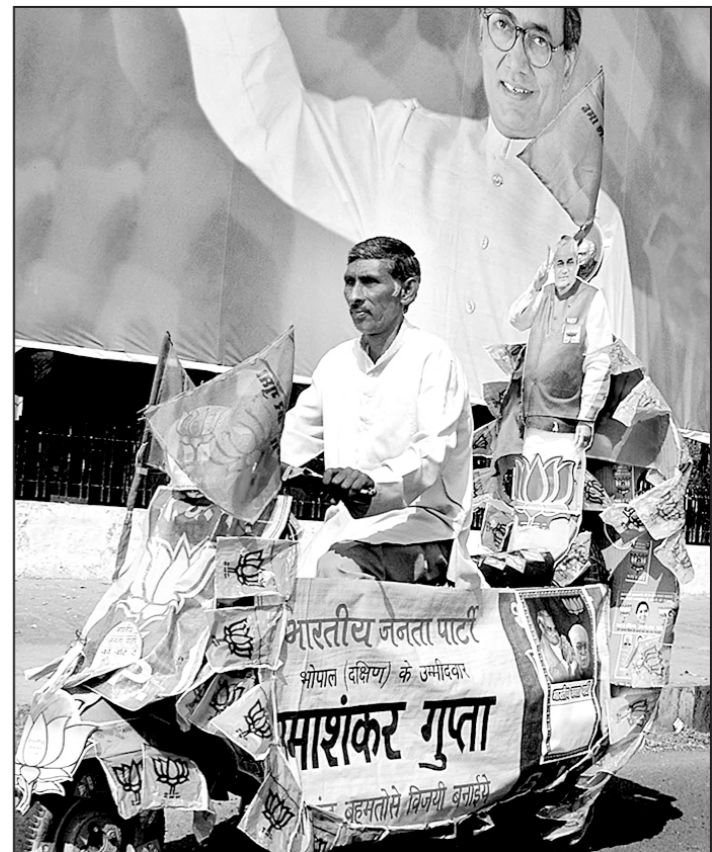


PHOTO: AFP

An Indian man rides his scooter covered with Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) posters by a billboard depicting Chief Minister Digvijay Singh in Bhopal yesterday. Indian Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani ruled out a general election earlier than scheduled in October 2004.