

Quran riots rock Pakistani city

AFP, Lahore

At least 3,000 protesters enraged by the alleged desecration of the Quran clashed with police and torched two cinemas in Pakistan's second largest city Lahore, police said Wednesday.

The city, which is the capital of Punjab province, was tense after the mob rampaged through a poor neighbourhood overnight and also smashed up dozens of vehicles, local police officer Mohammad Abbas told AFP.

The trouble erupted late Tuesday when copies of the Muslim holy book were found lying in a drain in the Bhatta Chowk area on the fringes of the sprawling city, located near the Indian border.

"The news of the desecration of the Quran spread quickly in the neighbourhood and within no time some three to four thousand people took to the streets shouting slogans against the desecration," Abbas said.

He said the crowd armed with bamboo sticks turned violent, setting fire to two cinema houses and attacking public and private properties.

4 more die in rioting over Prophet cartoons

AFP, Qalat

Appeals for calm in a furor over cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed went unheeded Wednesday as police shot dead four more protesters during rioting in Afghanistan, bringing the worldwide death toll to 13.

Eleven demonstrators have been killed since Friday in Afghanistan, and one each in Somalia and Lebanon.

The re-printing of the 12 offending caricatures of the Prophet Mohammed in a French satirical weekly on Wednesday, along with a fresh batch of related cartoons, was likely to deepen Muslim anger against what is perceived as an act of blasphemy.

Also on Wednesday, Russia's President Vladimir Putin slammed the cartoons -- first published in Denmark and later reproduced in dozens of mainly European papers -- as a provocation, equating them with child pornography.

He called on Denmark to "ask

for forgiveness."

In Pakistan, meanwhile, thousands of protesters burned an effigy of US President George W. Bush Wednesday in a remote Pakistani tribal area, the third day of large-scale demonstrations in different Pakistani cities.

Around 3,000 demonstrators shouting "Allahu Akhbar" (God is great) in Dara Adamkhel, near the Afghan border, accused Bush of backing the caricatures.

"Bush is behind this, he heads the gang which is against Islam," Said Wazir, the leader of a local Islamic group called Qumi Tehreek, told the crowd.

"We condemn Bush and we condemn Denmark for publishing blasphemous cartoons."

Bush assured Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen on Tuesday of his "support and solidarity," as did British Prime Minister Tony Blair and French President Jacques Chirac.

In the West Bank city of Hebron, scores of Palestinians Wednesday

hurled stones and bottles at the offices of a team of international monitors to protest the cartoons.

Denmark, meanwhile, continued to close diplomatic outposts and ensure the safety of its nationals abroad, pulling out 11 Danish members of a peace-monitoring team in the West Bank, officials said Wednesday.

Its embassies and consulates have been fire-bombed and stormed in Tehran, Beirut and Damascus in recent days.

The latest deaths in Afghanistan occurred as protesters and police clashed in Qalat, the capital of southern Zabul province.

About 400 protesters hurled stones as they tried to storm the police headquarters, before moving to a US-led military coalition base where they torched four fuel tankers, witnesses and an army commander said.

A provincial official said police had opened fire to control the crowd while witnesses said coalition troops had fired into the air.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan protesters burn the Danish flag during a protest in Kabul yesterday. Four people were killed 08 February as police opened fire to control stone-throwing rioters in southern Afghanistan during a fifth day of protests against cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, the army said. The new deaths bring to 11 the number of Afghans killed in riots against the publication of newspaper cartoons of the prophet.

Barracks collapse kills 12 in Chechnya

REUTERS, Moscow

A total of 12 people were killed when a military barracks collapsed in Russia's turbulent Chechnya region on Tuesday after what appeared to be a domestic gas explosion, local officials said on Wednesday.

Valery Kuznetsov, a top local justice official, was quoted by RIA news agency as saying 22 people were injured when the two-storey building at Kurchaloi, about 60 miles from the regional capital Grozny, came down after the blast.

Many of the dead were soldiers but they included one woman.

A fire that followed the explosion was brought under control, and the scene of the blast was cordoned off. Soldiers helped emergency services well into the night to remove chunks of rubble trapping colleagues.

"We have now finished recovering dead and injured from the ruins. The figures we now have are the final ones," Kuznetsov said.

Asked if the explosion could have been caused by a Chechen separatist bomb, Kuznetsov said nothing could be ruled out, but other officials made clear it appeared to be the result of a gas explosion.

UK police face criticism over Hamza

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Police in the UK are facing questions over why they did not act sooner against radical Muslim preacher Abu Hamza al-Masri.

Detectives were "very alert" to the activities of the cleric - jailed on Tuesday for seven years for inciting murder and racial hatred - in 1999.

But the 47-year-old, from London, was not arrested until 2004.

Anti-terror police say evidence was sent to prosecutors "on several occasions" but no action was taken by the Crown Prosecution Service.

But BBC correspondent Rory MacLean said CPS decisions not to proceed had probably been based on the proposition that a conviction was unlikely.

"Particularly if there was evidence - or at least the police had seen things like telephone intercepts - which is not allowed in British courts, the CPS has to take a view about whether a case will actually succeed at trial," he added.

India, US discuss global nuke alliance

IANS, Washington

India and the US stepped up negotiations to reach what looks like a difficult civil nuclear energy agreement.

The two sides on Wednesday began discussions on Washington's new brainwave: an ambitious broad-based Global Nuclear Energy Partnership (GNEP).

GNEP envisages an international programme for the production of nuclear power and exchange of nuclear fuel.

US Under Secretary of Energy David Garman met Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran and presented the broad outlines of the GNEP that is being touted by the

Bush administration as a "nuclear renaissance" crucial to meeting the world's growing energy needs, which were expected to double by 2050.

The two top officials will also discuss the possibility of India's participation in new-age Generation IV nuclear reactors and \$1 billion dollar FutureGen project aimed at building the world's first "zero-emission" coal-fuelled power plant, sources said.

The details of India's participation in the multi-billion dollar International Thermonuclear Energy Reactor (ITER) that aims at producing nuclear energy through the fusion method will also be discussed between the two sides.

Garman is likely to meet other

officials from the department of energy and environment on Thursday.

The discussions on the GNEP begin at a critical stage in negotiations between the two sides over a civil nuclear agreement, with India's Atomic Energy Commission chief Anil Kakodkar saying in an interview that New Delhi was not ready to place its indigenous fast breeder reactor programme in the civilian list.

If differences over New Delhi's separation plan of its civilian and military nuclear facilities are anything to go by, the agreement might not be in place before President George Bush comes here in early March.

The GNEP, which is part of Bush's Advanced Energy Initiative, seeks a partnership with other nuclear power producing countries such as Britain, France, Russia, China and Japan to export nuclear fuel waste to developing countries and encourage them to use so-called fast reactors that burn plutonium and other by-products from conventional reactors.

This arrangement, which has been designed to allay proliferation concerns, would enable the construction of nuclear power plants in the US for the first time in a generation and development of fuel recycling facilities in a consortium of "nations with secure, advanced nuclear capabilities."

One killed in Pakistan nuke facility blast

AFP, Islamabad

A technician was killed in an explosion at a top Pakistani nuclear research facility founded by disgraced atomic scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan, a military spokesman said Wednesday.

Tuesday's blast at the Khan Research Laboratory (KRL) near Islamabad involved only conventional explosives and not nuclear material, Major General Shaukat Sultan told AFP.

"The technician was handling normal, conventional material," Sultan said. "It was an accident and the cause of the explosion is being looked into."

KRL, founded by A.Q. Khan in the 1970s, played a key role in uranium enrichment leading to Pakistan's nuclear weapon tests in May 1998, which were in reaction to similar detonations by rival India.

Khan admitted in 2004 that he had leaked atomic secrets to Iran, North Korea and Libya. The scientist is being held under house arrest but has been pardoned by President Pervez Musharraf.

Iraq on high alert ahead of Ashura

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's security forces imposed a massive clampdown on Baghdad and the southern holy city of Karbala on Wednesday to prevent insurgent attacks on tens of thousands of pilgrims gathering for a major Shia religious ceremony.

Baghdad was under tight security with roads closed to cars and additional checkpoints set up throughout the capital.

Police announced they have closed bridges leading to the south of the country in effort to block a squad of suicide bombers reported to be heading to Karbala to disrupt the Ashura ceremonies marking the death of the Imam Hussein.

As the holiest of Shia occasions, whose commemoration was banned under ousted dictator Saddam Hussein's regime, Ashura has often been the target of Sunni extremists.

In 2004, 170 people were killed in attacks in Baghdad and Karbala and another 44 died in 2005.

A day before the climax of the commemoration itself, the streets of Karbala were thronged with tens of thousands of devout Shiites chanting and beating themselves with chains to reenact the last painful days of the seventh century imam.

In Baghdad, the mournful thump of a drum announced parades of black-clad men moving across the city's car-less bridges, bearing colorful flags and remembering the death of Hussein, a grandson of the Prophet Mohammed.

On the bridge across the Tigris leading to the city's main Shia mosque, Al-Khilani, were crowds of black clad worshippers while inside, Abdel Aziz Hakim, leader of the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) gave a sermon.

One of the most powerful political and religious leaders in the country, Hakim took the opportunity to denounce European papers for running cartoons insulting the Muslim prophet.



PHOTO: AFP

South Korean marine soldiers go through intense physical training in the snow during the winter field drill in Heonggye some 182 km east of Seoul, 20 January 2005. North Korea said yesterday that South Korea had to scrap joint military exercises with the United States next month if it wanted to improve ties with Pyongyang.

N KOREA SAYS US must remove sanctions before talks

REUTERS, Beijing

North Korea will only return to six-party talks on its nuclear program if the United States drops sanctions against it, a North Korean official said on Wednesday as talks between Tokyo and Pyongyang ended in rancor.

"The condition is to remove the financial sanctions," said Song Il Ho, North Korea's ambassador to bilateral discussions with Japan in Beijing. "If the Japanese tell the US, they will actually listen to them more carefully."

Song made the comments the day talks between Japan and North Korea wrapped up with both sides as far apart as ever over abductions of Japanese citizens and no agreement on when Pyongyang might return to six-way talks on its nuclear program.

But both countries agreed to keep talking and try to hold another round at an early date, Kyodo news agency cited Song as saying.

North Korea has said more than once it cannot return to the six-party talks, which group the two Koreas, Japan, Russia, the United States and host China, unless the United States drops the sanctions.

The United States in recent months has cracked down on firms

suspected of involvement in counterfeiting, money laundering and drug trafficking by North Korea. Pyongyang is believed to earn as much as \$1 billion annually from these activities, which US officials say benefit the elite at the expense of the population.

South Korea's foreign minister said he regretted that the North was making an issue of the US crackdown.

"We feel it's very regrettable and disappointing that issues outside the six-party talks have created a hurdle to resuming the talks," Ban Ki-moon told a news briefing in Seoul.

"We hope that the North will return to the talks at an early date, and we have passed on that position to the North through different channels."

North Korea has also threatened to halt talks with Seoul unless it pulls out of joint US-South Korean military drills which Pyongyang sees as a preparation for an invasion, its official media reported on Wednesday.

The North's communist party newspaper, Rodong Sinmun, said in a news analysis it was wrong of South Korea to say it would hold exercises at about the same time the two Koreas were holding talks on military confidence-building measures.

US Presidents join mourners at King funeral

AP, Atlanta

Reunited at last in death, Coretta Scott King was laid to rest beside the tomb of her husband after a stirring funeral with 10,000 mourners that was both lyrical and mournful, and at times political.

The interment Tuesday capped a day when four US presidents and more than three dozen speakers took turns remembering King for her efforts to realize the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream of equality for nearly 40 years after his assassination.

"Coretta Scott King not only secured her husband's legacy, she built her own," President Bush said. "Having loved a leader, she became a leader, and when she spoke, Americans listened closely."

The immense crowd filled the New Birth Missionary Baptist Church - a modern, arena-style megachurch in a suburban Atlanta county that was once a stronghold of the Ku Klux Klan but today has one of the most affluent black populations in the country.

Indian in jail for 38 years without trial

AFP, Faizabad

India's Supreme Court has asked a lower court for the details of a murder after it discovered that a man has spent 38 years in jail without a trial because police lost his papers, a lawyer said Wednesday.

Jagjivan Ram Yadav has never had a court appearance although he has been incarcerated for nearly four decades in Faizabad town, about 150 km south-east of Uttar Pradesh's capital, Lucknow.

"It is inhuman to see a man languishing in jails because there is no one to pursue his case," said I.B. Singh, convener of lawyers group, 'We the Citizens', which has taken up Yadav's cause.

The group decided to pursue the matter after his case came to light in July when a jail official sought from the court information about the status of trials of all inmates.

Yadav, 70, is charged with the murder of a married woman in 1968. He was arrested with 20 others from his village.

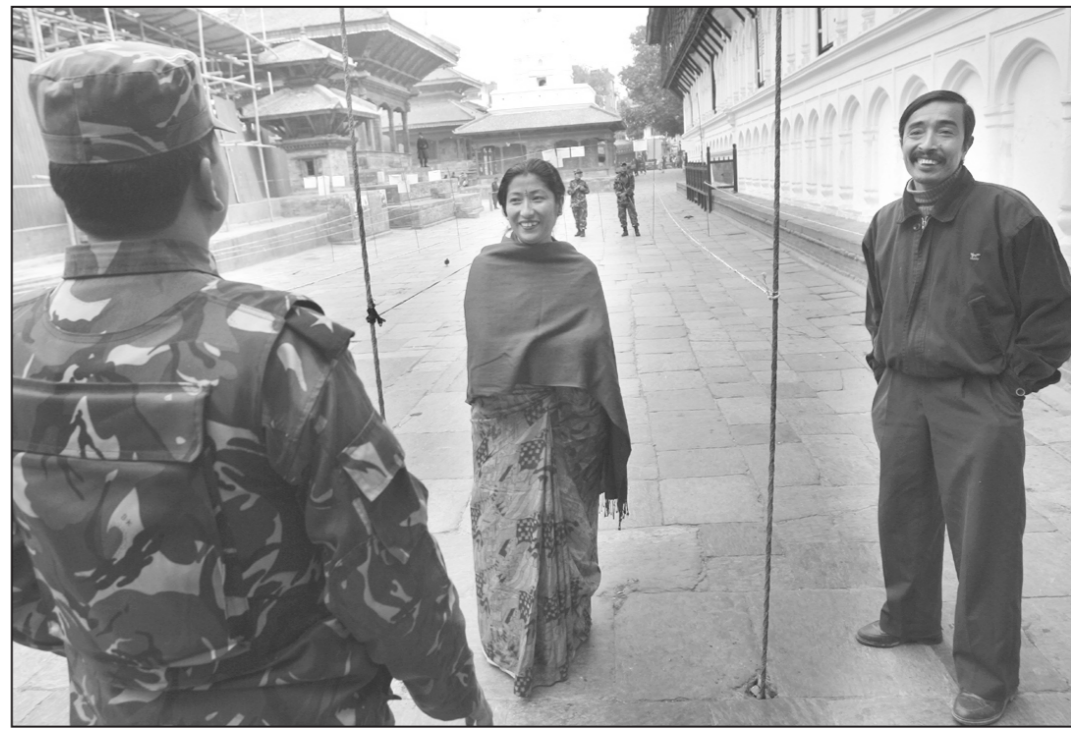


PHOTO: AFP

Two lone Nepalese voters share a light moment with a riot policeman while waiting in line to cast their vote in the country's municipal elections, in Kathmandu yesterday. Polls opened across Nepal under tight security in controversial municipal elections touted by Nepal's King Gyanendra as the first step back to democracy after he seized power a year ago. Turnout for the polls is expected to be thin, with Maoist rebels and opposition parties urging a boycott amid a crippling general strike and sporadic violence against candidates.