

## India marks start of high speed rail era

AFP, New Delhi

India's railways minister Wednesday flagged off the country's first high-speed train, connecting the Indian capital to the Taj Mahal city of Agra, an official said.

"The Delhi-Bhopal Express train is the fastest train in south Asia with a speed of 150 kms per hour," Rajiv Saxena, chief public relations officer of Northern Railways told AFP.

The train will speed to Agra in northern Uttar Pradesh state but then slow down to 120 kms per hour for the rest of the journey to Bhopal further south.

"We have cut down the travel time from two hours 40 minutes, to under two hours for the Delhi-Agra stretch," Saxena said. "This will greatly benefit tourists."

The magnificent 17th-century marble Taj Mahal, built by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan as a tomb for his queen Mumtaz Mahal, is India's top tourist attraction drawing some 2.3 million tourists annually.



PHOTO: AFP  
Pakistani firefighters extinguish a fire after buses were set on fire by a mob protesting against the publication of cartoons of Prophet Mohammed during a protest in Peshawar yesterday. Three people, including a child, were killed and dozens injured in Pakistan, officials said, bringing the country's death toll from protests against cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed to five.

## 3 more dead as cartoon riots spiral in Pakistan

AFP, Peshawar

Fresh protests against cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed engulfed Pakistan Wednesday, leaving Western businesses in flames and three people dead, including an eight-year-old boy.

Two people died in northwestern Peshawar city when police fired tear gas shells and shot in the air to quell around 50,000 demonstrators who rampaged through the dusty streets and torched a KFC outlet.

Violence flared for a second day in the historic eastern city of Lahore, where another person was killed, and in at least half a dozen other towns across the world's second most populous Muslims nation.

More than 45 people including a policeman were also injured in the riots, sparked by the printing of the caricatures in a Danish newspaper in September and later in other Western publications.

The surge of unrest came a day after two people were shot dead and

US fast food chains were attacked during huge demonstrations in Lahore and students stormed a diplomatic enclave in the capital Islamabad.

Wednesday's deaths brought the toll from the cartoon protests in Pakistan to five and worldwide to 17. Eleven died in the past two weeks in neighbouring Afghanistan and one each in Lebanon and Somalia.

In Peshawar, a volatile city near the Afghan border, enraged demonstrators clashed with baton-wielding police and targeted anything linked to foreign firms, witnesses and police said.

Provincial chief Minister Akram Durrani blamed the riots on "troublemakers" and urged people to avoid violence. "We will not ban rallies against sacrilegious cartoons but protesters must remain peaceful," he told reporters.

Around 200 protesters stormed the KFC restaurant and set it ablaze, badly damaging the building and the nearby offices of cellphone

company Mobilink, witnesses said. Mobs also set fire to two cinemas, a petrol station and a police van, while another 500 rioters damaged several private buses at the main Daewoo bus stand on the outskirts of the city.

The bodies of a boy and a 28-year-old man also killed in the riots were taken to the city's Lady Reading Hospital, its deputy medical superintendent Yousuf Pervez told AFP, while others were wounded by tear gas shells.

"The 28-year-old, named Feroz, fell on an electric wire that is said to have snapped in police firing," he said. "The eight-year-old boy, who was identified only as Mohammed, died when a bullet hit his head during aerial firing."

The Islamist-led government in North West Frontier Province, of which Peshawar is the capital, ordered all schools, colleges and universities to close for a week.

## EU chief slams attacks on missions

AFP, Strasbourg

European Commission chief Jose Manuel Barroso condemned Wednesday violence against Danish and EU diplomatic missions over the Prophet Mohammed cartoons and urged dialogue to cool tensions.

"The (European) Commission condemns, in the strongest possible terms, the violence perpetrated against our office in Gaza, and against the missions of the member states, in particular those of Denmark," he told EU lawmakers.

"It is ironic that the aim of these missions is to bring real benefits to the lives of the people of their host countries," he told the European Union's legislative assembly.

The EU's offices in Gaza and mainly Danish but also other EU embassies have faced violent protests recently as the cartoon row continues to simmer.

Barroso said that it was through dialogue that the tensions would be defused.

## Schoolchildren blown up in Baghdad blast

AFP, Baghdad

Three Iraqi children were killed by a roadside bomb near their school on Wednesday in a wave of explosive violence in Baghdad that claimed a total of 11 lives, police said.

The children were on their way to school when they stopped to examine a bag in the central Baghdad neighborhood of Al-Fadel, a lower-income predominantly Sunni area, witnesses said.

"I saw the children playing with a bag lying in front of a photography store and suddenly it exploded," said Ali Mahmud, 35, who was driving by in his minibus.

Five store fronts were destroyed and walls smeared with bits of flesh and blood from the two boys and girl caught in the blast.

"I saw the body of one of the children thrown five meters (yards) into the street and I didn't have time to stop my bus and run over it," Mahmud said. "It was awful."

The children were believed to be aged about 11.

"These are takfireen (Islamist

extremists)," said Mohammed Sami, standing on the street near the blast site littered with rubble and bits of bone. "This is not jihad, this is terrorism."

The owner of the now ruined photography store looked at the site in disbelief and horror.

"I don't understand why the bomb was in front of my shop," he said, refusing to give his name. "I have no links with any political party."

Roadside bombs, often hidden in plastic bags or other such innocuous bits of street debris are most often set off early in the morning in Baghdad.

Four policemen were blown up by a car bomb in the Sunni neighborhood of Adhamiya in a blast that also wounded three other policemen and one civilian.

Another car bomb in the middle class neighborhood of Karada also targeted a police commando patrol. One civilian killed and eight wounded, including two police officers and two women.

## Israel threatens to cut all ties with Palestinians

PTI, Jerusalem

Israel will immediately cut all contact with the Palestinian Authority if the next prime minister is affiliated with Hamas, Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz said in an interview published on Wednesday.

"If the Palestinians choose a parliament speaker and prime minister who are affiliated with Hamas, Israel will immediately sever all contact with the Palestinian Authority," Mofaz told the Yediot Aharonot ahead of Saturday's inauguration of the new Palestinian parliament.

Hamas is widely expected to choose two of its own senior members as both prime minister and speaker after its landslide victory in last month's Palestinian general election.

The militant Islamist group, which has carried out dozens of suicide attacks, has been under massive international pressure to commit itself to non-violence and respect the Jewish state's right to exist if it forms a new government.

## Pictures of Abu Ghraib abuse on Australian TV

AFP, Melbourne

Australian public broadcaster SBS on Wednesday released a handful of what it said were previously unpublished photographs of the abuse of prisoners in Iraq's notorious Abu Ghraib jail by US soldiers.

The pictures seen by AFP -- which include a man with his throat slit, another with massive head injuries and a third covered in what could be faeces -- were among what SBS said would be dozens shown later Wednesday.

Their release comes amid fury in the Muslim world, where anti-Western sentiment is raging over cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, and follows earlier pictures of abuse by US forces at the Baghdad prison.

"These images reveal further widespread abuse including new incidents of homicide, torture and sexual humiliation," SBS said. No US troops were identifiable in any of the images seen by AFP.

"The extent of the abuse shown

in the photos suggests that the torture and abuse that occurred at Abu Ghraib in 2004 is much worse than is currently understood," the broadcaster said.

Other photographs released ahead of the broadcast showed one naked man hanging upside down from a bunk bed and another, hooded and bound in an orange jumpsuit, apparently being threatened by a dog.

Another man displayed what looked to be burn marks on his left forearm. One photo showed a man with serious injuries to his head, covered in blood and lying on a stretcher.

The station claims a "world exclusive", saying the pictures have never before been shown publicly. A spokeswoman would not comment on how the photographs had been obtained.

The photographs, to be shown on the "Dateline" programme at 8:30 pm (0930 GMT) on Wednesday, are the subject of a legal battle to prevent their publication in the United States, SBS said.



PHOTO: AFP  
A man splashes melted iron onto the wall of an ancient archway creating a vibrant visual effect on Tuesday night in Weixian, in northern China's Hebei province. The residents are celebrating a centuries-old tradition done annually at the close of the two-week spring festival holiday period.