



A New Delhi police personnel stands guard outside the Maurya Sheraton Hotel yesterday where US President George W. Bush is scheduled to stay during his visit to the Indian capital. India began a major security drill for tomorrow's arrival of US President George W. Bush, calling out commandos and riot police for the world's most powerful man.

## Tight security for Bush's India trip

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

A multi-tier security structure consisting of American officials, Indian paramilitary commandos and police will be put in place for US President George W. Bush during his visit to India beginning tomorrow. A team of US secret service agents and officials from Homeland Security would form the proximate ring along with commandos from India's Special Protection Group and National Security Guards. Officials of US Homeland Security Department have taken charge of three floors of a five star hotel where Bush would stay during his three-day visit to the Indian capital. High tech electronic gadgets, including jammers, explosive detectors and an elaborate communication network have been installed at the hotel which will also

have a virtual "mini White House" and Bush's makeshift Oval Office complete with a board room and a presidential secretariat. The gadgetry will monitor each and every movement of President Bush who has a packed schedule. The presidential suite at the hotel, where Bush's predecessor Bill Clinton had stayed during his official visit to India in 2000, has been sanitised by US security officials. As a precautionary measure, anti-aircraft guns have been put up at strategic locations to shoot down any flying object over the hotel where the American president would be staying as it has been declared a "no-fly zone". Sharpshooters will be deployed around the 16th century "Purana Qila", built by Mughal ruler Sher Shah Suri, where Bush will address a select gathering of parliamentarians, industry and business tycoons among others on March 2.

## Nepal Maoists ambush army patrol: 4 killed

16 rebels killed in clash

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Dozens of Maoist rebels ambushed an army patrol in eastern Nepal on Monday and shot dead at least three soldiers following a fighting that left 16 rebels dead, an army officer said. One civilian was also killed in the crossfire during the gun battle in Kavre district, 80 km east of the capital Kathmandu, the officer said without elaborating. The attack came a day after the army said it killed at least 16 rebels in the west of the country. The rebels are fighting to topple the monarchy and set up a communist state in the Hindu kingdom tucked between China and India. Nepali soldiers killed the rebels on Sunday in fighting in the west of the revolt-torn Himalayan nation,

the army said. It said a group of Maoists opened fire on a security patrol in the forests of Rupandehi district, 300 km west of Kathmandu, the capital. "We have recovered 16 bodies of Maoist rebels. The search operation is continuing," an army officer, who declined to be named, told Reuters. He said six soldiers and policemen were wounded in the battle, which lasted more than an hour. There was no immediate comment from the Maoists who are fighting to overthrow the monarchy in the world's only Hindu kingdom. Witnesses said the fighting had been heavy. "There was heavy fighting and we could hear the sound of explosions," local journalist Sher Bahadur K.C.

said from Butwal, the nearest town. The Maoists, who want to set up a single party communist republic, have stepped up attacks on security forces since they ended a four-month truce in January after the royalist government refused to match it. More than 13,000 people have died in the decade-old conflict that has shattered the aid and tourist dependent economy. Sunday's fighting came hours after Nepal's army chief Pyar Jung Thapa said the army was "heading towards victory". In the statement on the annual army day, Thapa said the Maoists were spreading a "wave of killings, violence, vandalism, kidnapping and terror in the name of people's rights".

## EU releases funds for Palestinians

AFP, Brussels

The European Commission will release 120 million euros (142 million dollars) in much-needed funds for the Palestinians, EU external relations commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner said yesterday. The European Union's executive arm would release the funds to help the Palestinian Authority's transition government pay for its basic needs, such as energy bills

and salaries, for about the next two months, she said. "Today, I will announce (to EU foreign ministers) a very substantial package of assistance to meet the basic needs" of the Palestinians, the commissioner told journalists ahead of a meeting of the ministers. The Palestinian Authority is desperate for funds since Israel imposed sanctions after the militant group Hamas, which does not recognise the Jewish state, won last month's legislative elections.

The sanctions include a freeze on paying customs duties, worth around 60 million dollars a month, travel restrictions on people affiliated with Hamas and extra security checks. Breaking down the total EU funds, Ferrero-Waldner said that 40 million euros would be used directly for the Palestinian Authority's energy bills and there would be 64 million euros in direct aid channelled through UN agencies.

## Thai opposition to boycott snap polls

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's opposition parties said yesterday they would boycott a snap election called by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra for April 2. "Because of Thaksin's distortion of the (reform) issue ... the three parties decided not to meet with Thaksin and will not stand any candidates in the election," said Abhisit Vejjajiva, leader of the Democrat party, following a meeting with two other opposition allies. The three parties had given Thaksin until late Monday to commit in writing to constitutional reforms or face an unprecedented boycott of the elections that could throw the democratic process into disarray. Thaksin promised late in the day to introduce political reforms but said he would not enter into a pact with the opposition parties committing to constitutional amendments. Instead, he proposed a meeting

of leaders from all of Thailand's 30 registered political parties "to show their political stance in order to make a social contract ... which is more significant than a pact" with only the main opposition parties. Earlier three parties have given Thaksin until the end of the day to commit in writing to the reforms or face a boycott of snap April elections that could throw the democratic process into disarray. Thaksin called the polls Friday after dissolving parliament in response to mass street protests demanding his ousting. "We support political reform by amending the constitution in order to make it truly a people's constitution," said Sudarat Keyuraphan, deputy head of Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party, as intense consultations continued. But she added that there were "slight" differences in the reform proposals made by the Democrat and Mahachon parties and their anti-Thaksin ally the Chart Thai party.



Thai protesters shout slogans against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra on the second day of a mass rally in Bangkok yesterday. Thai opposition parties announced that they will boycott snap polls called by Thaksin Shinawatra, a move that threw the kingdom deeper into crisis.

## Philippines widens crackdown

16 more charged, 4 cops arrested

AFP, Manila

The Philippines yesterday detained four police officers and filed charges against 16 opposition figures for trying to overthrow the government, as President Gloria Arroyo widened a crackdown against alleged coup plotters. Chief Superintendent Marcelino Franco, who was sacked Friday as head of an elite paramilitary police unit, and three of his men were "placed under restrictive custody" amid reports they were recruiting people for a coup plot, national police chief Arturo Lomibao said. At the same time, police filed charges of rebellion and attempting a coup d'etat against 16 opposition figures, including House of Representatives members Crispin Beltran, Satur Ocampo, Liza Maza and Teodoro Casino. Beltran was arrested Friday and the three others said they feared they would be taken in when Congress resumed sessions later Monday.

The four leftist legislators had been at the forefront of street protests, which the authorities said were part of a plot to topple the government. Also on the list of those facing charges was former senator Gregorio Honasan, an ex-army colonel who in the 1980s led several coup attempts against the government, said Chief Superintendent Jesus Versoza, head of police criminal investigations. Honasan's whereabouts were unknown. The charges, which carry a maximum penalty of life in prison, came a day after about 100 members of the Marines, led by decorated combat veteran, Colonel Ariel Querubin, holed up at their headquarters in a defiant stand against Arroyo. They were protesting the sacking of their commandant, Major-General Renato Miranda, who had apparently taken the heat for his subordinate's political actions.

## German agents gave US copy of Saddam's war plan: NYT

REUTERS, Washington

German intelligence agents in Baghdad obtained a copy of Saddam Hussein's plan to defend the Iraqi capital, which was passed on to US commanders a month before the 2003 invasion, The New York Times reported. In providing the Iraqi document, German intelligence officials offered more significant assistance to the United States than their government has publicly acknowledged, the newspaper said on its Web site on Sunday. The plan gave the American military an extraordinary window into Iraq's top-level deliberations, including where and how Saddam planned to deploy his most loyal troops, the Times said. An account of the German role in acquiring a copy of the Iraqi plan is contained in an American military study, which focuses on Iraq's military strategy and was prepared in 2005 by the US Joint Forces Command, it said.

## 5 Saudi oil plant attack suspects killed

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi security forces yesterday killed five men linked to a bid to blow up the world's largest oil-processing plant who were hiding in a house in a Riyadh residential suburb with a cache of explosives. The attempted attack on the Abqaiq processing plant in the oil-rich Eastern Province was foiled Friday by security forces when they killed the would-be suicide-bomber drivers of two trucks laden with explosives. Security sources said that according to their information the suspects holed up in the Al-Yarmuk quarter of Riyadh, who battled police for an hour since being surrounded in the early morning, were linked to the Abqaiq attack. "Five armed wanted men were killed today," a police officer on the scene told AFP. "Large quantities of arms and explosives as well as material destined to prepare car bombs have been seized" in the house where the suspects were holed up. The suspects "used grenades in

a bid to flee but they were prevented in doing so," the officer added. "The clashes are over. The (suspects) lair was assaulted and we killed those we found there," said another security source. Ambulances were rushed to the scene but the area around the siege house remained sealed-off to regular traffic amid a heavy security presence. Two helicopters hovered over the scene of the hour-long shoot-out. The names of the five dead men were on a Saudi most-wanted list of 36 al-Qaeda-linked militants. On Friday suicide bombers attempted but failed to penetrate the oil-processing plant at Abqaiq, in the oil-rich Eastern Province, leaving two security men dead as well as the bombers. An al-Qaeda statement posted on the Internet claimed responsibility for the attack and identified the two "martyrdom-seekers" in what the terror network claimed was a successful attack, vowing defiantly to attack more Saudi oil installations.

## Iraqi daytime curfew lifted despite civil war threat

AFP, Baghdad

Life returned to the streets of Baghdad yesterday after Iraqi authorities lifted a curfew and other restrictions imposed on the city in the wake of an unprecedented wave of sectarian killings that had threatened to spark civil war. A bomb exploded in the centre of the capital shortly after noon, but there were no immediate casualty reports. Meanwhile, the trial of Saddam Hussein was set to resume in the capital today with his appointed lawyers, who are expected to end their boycott of proceedings, saying the ousted dictator has given up on his hunger strike. Both road traffic and pedestrians were back on the streets of the capital Monday after a two-day curfew and a 24-hour vehicle ban imposed last week in the wake of inter-communal violence triggered by the bombing of a revered Shia shrine which has left more than 150 dead. A three-hour extension to the usual seven-hour night curfew will however continue for the time being in the capital and the three

central provinces of Salaheddin, Bail and Diyala, officials said. Meanwhile, Iraq's national security adviser, Muwaffak al-Rubaie, announced that 10 people, including four security guards, have been arrested in connection with the investigation into Wednesday's bombing of Samarra's golden domed shrine, north of Baghdad. "We have arrested 10 people -- four from the guards of the Golden Tomb shrine," he told CNN television. "These leads are very, very good in our investigations," al-Rubaie said, adding that additional details about the probe would be made public "in the very near future." The destruction Wednesday of the shrine's famed golden dome -- one of Shia Islam's holiest shrines -- sparked the worst sectarian violence in the country since the 2003 US-led invasion with Shia reprisals against Iraq's Sunni minority and their holy sites. Iraqi officials acknowledged that some 120 people were killed nationwide between Wednesday and Friday.

Rubaie expressed relief that the violence had not exploded into all-out civil war. "Iraqi people have proven that they've gone through this difficulty, yet again, and they have shown the al-Qaeda and the outside world that they will never be driven to the civil war," he said. "They wanted to drive a wedge between the two communities in Iraq -- between the Shia and Sunnis. And they've been trying this for the last two and a half years. And they failed miserably in this," Rubaie said. In the latest violence on Sunday, insurgents killed at least 23 Iraqis and three US soldiers across the country. The bodies of two unknown men who had been executed were also discovered Monday morning in south Baghdad, an interior ministry official said. Iraqi radical Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr, whose Mehdi Army militia was accused of attacking Sunnis, told a press conference in his home town of Najaf he had returned early from a trip to Iran to assert control over the militia, while denying it was responsible for the violence.



Protestors sit during a rally at the University of the Philippines in Manila yesterday calling for the ouster of Philippines president Gloria Arroyo and an end to repressive measures undertaken by Arroyo's Proclamation 1017.