

Female Belgian diplomat murdered in Delhi

AFP, New Delhi

A Belgian diplomat posted to India was found stabbed to death in her New Delhi home in an upscale neighbourhood last morning, police said.

The woman, who had been stabbed 22 times, was identified as Isabelle Dessoy, 35, a Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency report quoted police as saying.

Dessoy was a secretary at the Belgian embassy, according to the diplomatic mission's web site.

Police told PTI that Dessoy may have been killed after a party Saturday night at her home in the Vasant Vihar neighbourhood in south New Delhi which is home to several foreign embassies and staff.

Five people, including Dessoy's driver, were held in connection with the murder, PTI said.

India's National Crime Records Bureau in August ranked New Delhi as the most dangerous city for women in India.



A balloon seller stands in front of a tank thronged with tourists next to a temple in Bangkok yesterday. Thailand's new military rulers rolled their tanks out of central Bangkok yesterday, less than five days after a bloodless coup which was greeted calmly in the capital.

India formally calls off truce with Ulfa rebels

Tea planter killed for resisting extortion

AFP, New Delhi/Guwahati

India formally called off a ceasefire yesterday with a dominant separatist group in the restive northeast state of Assam and resumed military operations after renewed attacks by the rebels.

In New Delhi, the army said it was rushing troops to suspected strongholds of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Assam (Ulfa) in oil- and timber-rich Assam following the ceasefire's expiry.

"We are moving troops to Tinsukia, Jorhat Nagaon, Barpeta and Darrang to prevent the Ulfa from re-grouping," a top army commander told AFP.

"The operations are being launched as the Ulfa is killing and abducting tea gardens officials and targeting government installations," he said as the Indian home ministry

announced the end of the one-month ceasefire.

Two attacks at the weekend have been attributed to the Ulfa, which had announced a "cessation of hostilities" early this month in response to the government ceasefire that has since lapsed.

Although the ceasefire expired last week, New Delhi had not announced a resumption in anti-insurgency operations. Instead on Friday it asked rebels to commit in writing to peace talks as a condition for renewing the truce.

But the militants, who have been fighting for an independent homeland in Assam, have said they cannot give such a pledge until five jailed rebel leaders are freed.

State police said the rebels killed two people at the weekend.

A tea plantation manager in the state's easternmost Tinsukia district

was gunned down late Saturday, a local official said.

"Two Ulfa militants came on a motorcycle and asked the manager to come out of his residence and then pumped four bullets from close range," district official Absar Hazarika said.

Police believe the manager was killed for refusing to pay the rebels one million rupees (22,000 dollars).

"The garden management refused to pay the money and probably that was the reason why the manager was killed," said a senior police official who asked not to be named. "He was told to pay the extortion money or face death."

Rebels have in the last month demanded sums of one million to 15 million rupees from many of Assam's 800 or so tea plantations, security officials said.

A policeman investigating one of

the extortion demands was shot dead Friday.

The murders and the aggressive extortion drive have cast a cloud over Assam's tea industry, which produces more than half India's annual output.

"Planters and executives are panicking and worried for their lives with most of the gardens located in remote areas," said A. Sharma, a veteran planter.

Rebel groups in Assam depend on money extorted from tea, oil and other business to purchase weapons for their campaign against security forces.

In January, the state-run Oil and Natural Gas Corporation received a demand from Ulfa for five billion rupees but refused to pay.

Iran ready to negotiate 'everything' if US changes approach: Ahmadinejad

AFP, Washington

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on Sunday signalled his government's readiness to put "everything" on the negotiating table, if those in the US government who talk about regime change in Iran abandon their plans. "If they change their behaviour, it is possible to talk about everything," the Iranian leader told The Washington Post. "It's the attitude and the approach of some American politicians that ruin things."

The comments came as world powers are considering imposing sanctions that would target Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile sectors if Tehran persists in refusing to suspend uranium enrichment.

A diplomatic source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the sanctions were discussed by senior diplomats from Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York.

Asked if Iran was willing to take any steps to suspend uranium enrichment, Ahmadinejad

responded to the Post: "We think that the American politicians should change their attitudes. If they think that by threatening Iran they'll have results, they are wrong."

The Iranian leader was asked four times if he would like to see Israel wiped off the face of the Earth but ducked a direct answer each time.

Instead, he suggested that the Palestinian people should be allowed to "decide their fate in a free and fair referendum, and the result, whatever it is, should be accepted."

Reinvigorated negotiations in Europe this week about Iran's suspected nuclear weapons programme will be shadowed by a determined US drive to ready a list of sanctions to impose on Tehran if diplomacy fails.

EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana will have a strengthened mandate from the major powers when he meets with Iranian nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani for the latest in a series of negotiating sessions.

Thai junta shuts down 300 radio stations in pro-Thaksin provinces

AFP, Bangkok

Thailand's military has shut down hundreds of community radio stations in rural provinces where deposed prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra had widespread support, the junta said Sunday.

"This is to avoid unrest and cause no misunderstanding of the situation," junta spokesman Colonel Acar Tiproj said, adding the radio stations had been closed since Friday, three days after the kingdom's bloodless coup.

"We want to prevent any reports that can cause disunity for the country," he said.

The military shut down more than 300 community radio stations in 17 northern provinces, including Thaksin's home province of Chiang Mai, 650km north of Bangkok, another military official said.

It also closed down some 50 radio stations in the northeastern province of Roi Et in Issan, Thailand's poorest region, a Thai daily said.

The junta confirmed the shutdown of stations in Roi Et but could not confirm the figure.

No evidence Laden is dead, say Saudis

REUTERS, Washington

Saudi Arabia said yesterday it had no evidence that Osama bin Laden had died, shedding further doubt on a secret document leaked in France that said Saudi secret services believed he had died last month.

France and the United States said on Saturday they could not confirm the report in French regional daily L'Est Republicain which quoted France's DGSE foreign intelligence service as saying the Saudi secret services were convinced the al-Qaeda leader had died of typhoid in Pakistan in late August.

Time magazine separately posted an article on its Web site citing an unidentified Saudi source, who claimed bin Laden was stricken with a water-borne disease and may already be dead.

The Saudi Embassy in Washington, however, issued a statement saying: "The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has no evidence to support recent media reports that Osama bin Laden is dead. Information that has been reported otherwise is purely speculative and cannot be independently verified."

Militants attack Pak military base

Rebels blow up gas pipeline

AP, AFP, Dera Ismail Khan

Suspected Islamic militants attacked a military base in north-west Pakistan, seriously wounding two soldiers, an official said yesterday.

A single rocket was fired at the base in South Waziristan on Saturday night, hitting a barracks, an area government official said on condition of anonymity because he did not have the authority to make official comments to the press.

No one claimed responsibility but the official blamed militants for the rocket fire.

Arab, Central Asian and Afghan militants suspected of links with al-Qaeda operate along with local tribal sympathisers in the rugged region bordering Afghanistan.

Pakistan is a key US ally in the war against terrorism and says it has deployed about 80,000 troops along the Afghan border to stop militant infiltration.

Meanwhile, insurgents blew up

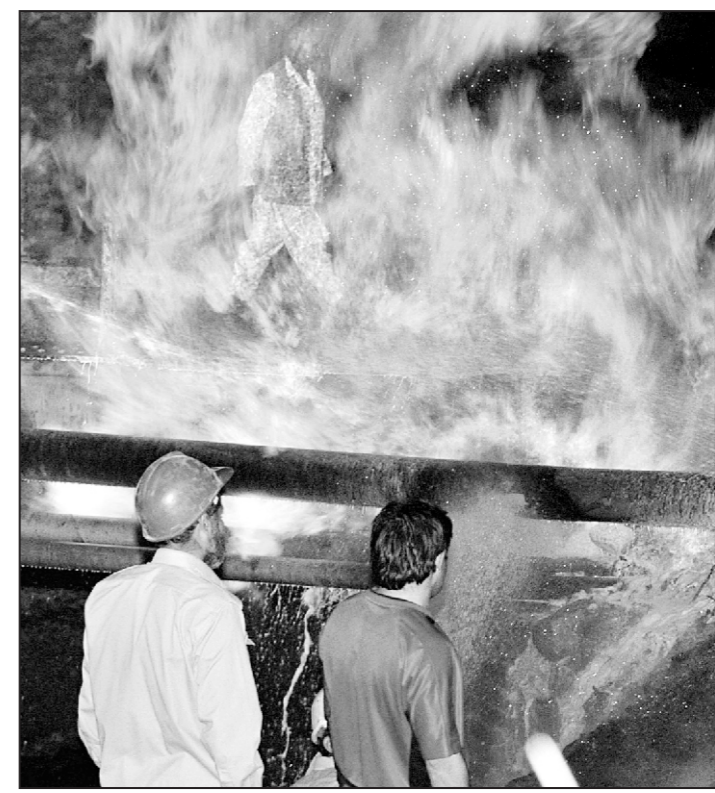
a natural gas pipeline in the restive southwestern Pakistani province of Baluchistan, cutting supply to thousand of homes, police said Sunday.

There were no casualties when the pipeline, which supplied gas to suburban areas of Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan, was hit by explosives late Saturday, police official Mohammad Arif Shah told AFP.

The blast was so loud that it panicked residents and started a huge blaze, he said, adding that repairs to the pipeline were underway.

The unrest in Baluchistan continues over the August 26 killing of rebel chieftain Nawab Akbar Bugti.

The death of the veteran Baluch nationalist sparked nationwide protests and deadly violence in the province, with 10 people killed in bomb blasts, attacks and clashes with police.



Pakistani fire-fighters extinguish a burning gas pipeline near Quetta late Saturday. Insurgents blew up a natural gas pipeline in the restive southwestern province of Baluchistan, which suspended supply to thousand of homes. The unrest in Baluchistan continues over the August 26 killing of rebel chieftain Nawab Akbar Bugti.

Military remains potent political force in Southeast Asia

AFP, Singapore

The military takeover in Thailand underscores the entrenched political role of the armed forces in much of Southeast Asia despite democratic reforms over the past 20 years, analysts say.

Weak state institutions, competing elites and personality-driven political parties enable the military to remain a key player even in countries with free elections, said Robert Broadfoot, managing director of Hong Kong-based Political and Economic Risk Consultancy.

"I think there has been way too much use of the word democracy in most of the Asean countries," Broadfoot told AFP.

"An election is part of democracy but an election without an institutional structure can lead to a very dysfunctional situation."

Of the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), four are ruled by the military or regimes in which the military is an integral backer: Myanmar, Vietnam, Laos and -- once again -- Thailand.

Myanmar's ruling junta has for years frustrated Asean's other members by refusing to relax its grip on the country, and observers fear the coup in Thailand may have given the Myanmar generals another excuse to dismiss the idea of civilian rule.

Thailand, which has been under various forms of military rule since the 1930s, enjoyed a relatively long spell of civilian rule from 1992 until the September 19 bloodless putsch against Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Thaksin was the first elected Thai prime minister to complete a four-year term but after his 2005 reelection, he was dragged into a power struggle with the opposition that snap elections and court cases failed to resolve.

"In times like this when it is perceived that the institutions are no longer working, it provides an avenue for the military to come in," said Mely Caballero-Anthony, a professor at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies in Singapore.

Manmohan seeks public support to tackle terror by cooperating with Pakistan

AFP, Nainital

India's prime minister yesterday sought public support to tackle terrorism by cooperating with Pakistan, saying such a move would pressure Islamic militants accused in a series of deadly attacks.

Manmohan Singh and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf agreed at talks in Cuba this month to share intelligence on terrorism linked to Islamic militants that has hit India repeatedly in Kashmir and elsewhere.

But critics dismissed the idea of cooperation with Islamabad who they say arms and trains militants to carry out attacks in the disputed state of Kashmir and Singh sought to assure the public the idea was workable.

"The decision to set up the joint mechanism will only test Pakistan on how it fulfils its promise of not allowing territory in its control to be used for terrorism against India," Singh said in this northern Indian summer resort.

"I believe our two countries have to find ways and means to get over the problems, that includes terrorism and for the end of terrorism talks have to take place," he told chief

ministers of 14 of India's 29 states, which are governed by his ruling Congress party.

"There has been a trust deficit between India and Pakistan and so talks are essential," he said in Nainital, 350km north of New Delhi.

India in July and August suspended the peace process with Islamabad begun in 2004 after a spate of blasts by suspected Islamic militants in Mumbai two months ago left 183 train commuters dead and 900 injured.

In Havana, Singh met Musharraf on the sidelines of the Non-Aligned Movement summit and agreed to the cooperation to get peace talks back on track.

The Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has attacked the plan, labelling it a "betrayal" of India's interests. Singh, speaking to his provincial chiefs, dismissed the criticism.

"The criticism against setting up of the joint mechanism is not right and there is no change in our approach on terrorism," Singh said.

AFP, Colombo

Tamil rebels and Sri Lankan troops waged artillery duels yesterday in the embattled east, the military said, in continued fighting despite a push by Norway to restore a ceasefire ahead of talks.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fired artillery and mortar bombs at the Kiran and Vavunathivu army camps in the Batticaloa district, the defence ministry said in a statement.

"Tiger terrorists fired artillery and mortars for nearly two hours," the statement said. "Troops retaliated with artillery and mortars at the Tiger terrorist camps."

The ministry said there were no casualties among security forces, but the guerrillas suffered unspecified damages. The statement could not be independently confirmed.

In neighbouring Ampara district, the rebels fired mortars at a police Special Task Force commando unit and wounded a guard, the statement said.

In another incident, two men detonated a hand grenade and killed themselves when troops attempted to arrest them for possessing firearms in the northwest Puttalam district, it said.

The latest violence came as Sri Lanka's peace broker Norway continued an attempt announced earlier this month to arrange a face-to-face meeting between the government and the rebels for early October in Oslo, diplomats said.

Abbas to resume unity govt talks with Hamas

REUTERS, Ramallah

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas will meet Hamas leaders in the Gaza Strip as early as today to try to revive stalled talks on a unity government, aides said.

Senior Abbas aide Saeb Erekat said the president would tell Hamas: "If you want a unity government, there are international requirements that need to be met, and that's the only way to form a unity government."

Abbas has accused Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and other Hamas leaders of reneging on an agreement reached earlier this month on a political programme for a unity government that included recognition of interim peace deals with Israel.

Palestinians hope formation of a unity government will prompt Western powers to ease an aid embargo that has increased poverty and lawlessness in Gaza and the occupied West Bank.