



PHOTO: AFP

Malaysians surf the Internet through computers at TM points (Telekom Malaysia) in downtown Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Millions of people across Asia suffered a second straight day without a full Internet service as telecom operators raced to counter gloomy predictions of weeks without web access.

## Police kill top Maoist rebel in Andhra

REUTERS, Hyderabad

Security forces shot dead a senior Maoist rebel leader in Andhra Pradesh on Thursday in what police said was a big blow to the leftist insurgents.

W Chandramouli, directing rebel activities on Andhra Pradesh's border with Orissa, was killed during a shootout with police in the forests of Visakhapatnam district, 590 km east of Hyderabad, the state capital.

"The dense fog and poor visibility in the forests brought the Maoists face-to-face with security personnel in the early hours of Thursday, leading to a shootout," said Swarnjit Sen, the state's police chief.

Chandramouli's wife was also killed, he said.

Police had long sought Chandramouli, who had a price of 1.2 million rupees (\$27,000) on his head. He stood accused of kidnapping four senior government officials in the early 1980s.

Andhra Pradesh is one of the worst hit of at least 13 Indian states facing Maoist violence. But Sen said the Maoists were being wiped out in large parts of the state and many had fled to neighbouring Chhattisgarh.

"Chandramouli's elimination will be a fatal blow to Maoist strength in Andhra Pradesh," he said.

The Maoists say they are fighting for the rights of millions of India's poor labourers and landless peasants in an insurgency that has killed thousands.

## British soldier killed in southern Afghanistan

REUTERS, Kabul

A British soldier was killed and three others hurt, one of them seriously, after a blast caused their vehicle to crash during a reconnaissance mission in southern Afghanistan, Nato said yesterday.

Britain's Ministry of Defence confirmed those involved in the incident on Wednesday in Garmser in Helmand province were British serving in the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force.

"It is too early to say what caused the explosion, but there were no Taliban in the vicinity and there was no follow-on contact," a ministry spokesman said.

# Pak border fencing plan not a solution: Karzai

### UN voices concern over border mining

REUTERS, AP, Kabul

Afghanistan's president yesterday urged Pakistan to do more to stop Taliban and other militants sheltering and training on its territory rather than separating families with an impractical border fence and landmines.

Hamid Karzai said the plan announced by Islamabad this week would do nothing to stop cross-border incursions by militants and would merely divide families already split by the British-drawn frontier.

"It's going to be, in effect, a separation of tribes and families from each other, not a prevention of terrorism," he told reporters at his palace in Kabul.

"If we want to prevent terrorism as a whole, forever eradicate them, defeat them, then you must remove their sanctuaries, then you must remove the places where they get training, their sources of finances and equipment and training.

"That's the best way," he said. Pakistan, under pressure from Afghanistan and its Western allies to do more to seal the border, said on Tuesday it would fence and mine parts of the largely unmarked frontier that stretches 2,500 km from snow covered mountains in the north to remote deserts on the border with Iran in the west.

Pakistan had previously suggested a fence but Afghanistan, which does not recognize the border, said doing so would divide

ethnic Pashtun communities.

The United States and other allies say part of the reason the Taliban has been able to regroup so well this year, five years after being toppled, is their ability to shelter in Pakistan.

Pakistan denies charges by some senior Afghan officials that it still sponsors the militants, saying it is doing all it can to stop them and pointing out it has helped capture large numbers of Taliban and al-Qaeda members.

But violence and a war of words over Taliban safe havens has strained relations between the two US allies in the war on terrorism. Karzai this month levelled some of his strongest criticism at Islamabad.

Pakistan also denies accusa-

tions by nuclear rival India that it supports separatists fighting New Delhi's rule in Kashmir. But it has objected to India fencing their disputed border.

This has been the bloodiest year in Afghanistan since US-led forces ousted the hard-line Taliban government in 2001.

More than 4,000 people have been killed, many of them in fighting and bomb attacks near the Pakistani border.

Meanwhile, a top UN human rights officer said Wednesday that Pakistan's plan to mine parts of its border with Afghanistan would only add to civilian casualties in a region already littered with unexploded ordnance.

## Two soldiers killed in Lanka mine blast

AFP, Colombo

At least two soldiers were killed and three more wounded in a powerful mine attack in northern Sri Lanka Thursday, defence officials said.

The victims were on a routine patrol in the Jaffna peninsula when the fragmentation mine went off, military officials said, adding they suspected the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were behind the attack.

The defence ministry said two Tiger rebels were shot dead by troops along the de facto front lines in the Jaffna peninsula on Wednesday.

The LTTE is fighting for independence for the island's minority 2.5 million Tamil community. The conflict has claimed at least 60,000 lives since 1972.

## London plot suspect might face Pakistani terror court

REUTERS, Islamabad

A Pakistani high court has suspended the trial of a Pakistani-British man suspected of involvement in a plot to blow up US-bound airliners in a move that could see him tried in an anti-terrorism court.

In August Pakistani officials identified the suspect, Rashid Rauf, as a "key person" in a plot broken up by British police that month to carry out suicide bombings on airliners travelling from London to the United States.

A Pakistani anti-terrorism court dropped terrorism charges against Rauf on December 13, citing a lack of evidence, and referred lesser charges, including the possession of explosives, to a civil court. It began proceedings on December 22.

# Civil war erases Lanka's 'paradise isle' tag

REUTERS, Hikkaduwa

Glass bottom boats tethered to the shore, candlelit shacks serving seafood empty of patrons, a solitary bar open: Not the signs of a vibrant beach resort at the height of the holiday season.

Thousands of travellers normally flock to this sun-kissed, palm-fringed spot on Sri Lanka's south-west coast, renowned for its coral reefs and ochre beaches.

But most tourists have stayed away this year, deterred by renewed civil war between the state and Tamil Tiger rebels that has killed 3,000 people this year alone amid a rash of land battles, air raids and suicide bombings.

A backpacker haven since the 1970s, Hikkaduwa has sprouted luxury hotels with pop bands, internet cafes, and diving schools catering to mostly middle-aged Germans and Britons looking for tropical sunshine in the middle of their winter.

"This is the worst it's been in 30 years," said WM Bandaranayake, manager of the Coral Sands Hotel on Hikkaduwa's main strip.

"We had more guests after the tsunami."

The war has prompted foreign governments to issue travel advisories discouraging their citizens from visiting the island this year, causing a dramatic drop in tourist arrivals.

Not even the bargain basement travel deals on offer have lured many tourists to the island's south coast.

"Every day there are more cancellations," said Bandaranayake,

whose hotel is running less than 20 percent full at a time of year when it is usually overbooked.

Unsurprisingly, the Coral Sands Hotel's regular calypso band has not been asked to report to work.

Tourist arrivals fell 22.4 percent in November compared to a year ago, on the back of a 12 percent drop in October -- not an encouraging sign for a country dependent on tourist dollars and still recovering

from the 2004 tsunami.

With a 2002 ceasefire agreement in tatters and many expecting a conflict that has killed more than 67,000 people since 1983 to escalate, the drop in tourist numbers is expected to continue this month and into 2007.

"We're very concerned about the numbers, and incidents like the assassination attempt against the Pakistani High Commissioner and

the President's brother have really hurt us," said Prathap Ramanujam, Secretary to the Ministry of Tourism, referring to two suspected rebel attacks in the capital.

"The LTTE have gained a lot of media exposure recently, and the perception is that Sri Lanka is synonymous with them," he added, referring to the Tamil Tigers rebel group.

# 9 killed in Kashmir violence

AFP, Srinagar

Nine people including five Islamic rebels were killed and 10 injured in separate incidents in violence-wracked Indian Kashmir, the police and army said yesterday.

"Three armed militants were killed in a gunbattle with Indian army soldiers in Rampur village along the de facto border between India and Pakistan in Uri sector, 100km north of Srinagar," Kashmir's summer capital, army spokesman Hemant Joneja told AFP.

"The militants were sighted Thursday morning and killed when they crossed into this (Indian) side from Pakistan-occupied Kashmir." India accuses nuclear rival

Pakistan of training, arming and sending Islamic rebels into Indian-Kashmir to stoke a Muslim insurgency in the restive Himalayan region. Pakistan denies the charge.

The separatist insurgency has left more than 44,500 thousand dead since 1989, according to official count but separatists say the toll is at least twice as high.

Late Wednesday, two rebels were killed in another gunbattle with police in Doda district, 170km south of Srinagar, a police spokesman said.

The two were members of the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba rebel group, one of nearly a dozen militant groups operating in Indian Kashmir.

"One of the two was Mohammad Ashraf Ganai, a top commander of the outfit and wanted in connection with massacre of 19 unarmed persons in ...April," the spokesman said.

The Lashkar-e-Taiba has already denied its involvement in the massacre.

Elsewhere, suspected rebels killed former militant Shahnawaz Ahmad War in Baramulla district and suspected police informer Mohammad Ashraf in Doda district overnight.

In another incident in Doda district, a police official said the body of a Muslim man, identified as Mohammad Ramzan Sheikh, was recovered from Darna village on Wednesday.



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese women patients leave the Teaching Hospital on a motor-bike without a proper check-up on the third successive day of a nationwide doctor's strike in Kathmandu yesterday.



PHOTO: AFP

Activists from the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), burn an effigy of US President George Bush and shout anti-US slogans during a demonstration against the death sentence for former Iraqi President Saddam Hussain in New Delhi yesterday.

## British, Pak diamond dispute revealed in Bhutto's letters

AFP, London

The Pakistani prime minister called on Britain to right historic wrongs 30 years ago by returning a precious diamond which left during colonial times, newly declassified documents showed Friday.

Zulfikar Ali Bhutto wrote to his then counterpart, James Callaghan, in August 1976 about the Koh-i-noor diamond, which was once the largest known diamond in the world and was set in a royal crown on being presented to queen Victoria in 1852.

The historic dispute over its ownership again flared up in 2002, when the crown sat on top of the coffin of queen Elizabeth the queen mother as her body lay in state in London.

But it remains in the Tower of London as part of the British crown jewels collection.

The 108-carat gem has also

been claimed by countries including India, Iran and Afghanistan.

In his letter, Bhutto told Callaghan that "little is left in our land from what was bequeathed to us by the centuries of pre-colonial history" and decried the disappearance of "the unique treasures which are the flesh and blood of Pakistan's heritage".

The diamond's return to Pakistan "would be a convincing demonstration of the spirit that moved Britain voluntarily to shed its imperial encumbrances and lead the process of decolonisation," Bhutto added.

"Indeed, it would be symbolic of a new international equity strikingly different from the grasping, usurping temper of a former age."

When Callaghan replied to him in September, he did not agree to hand the gem over, though.