

**Makkah fire incident
Indian victims were blocked
from fleeing inferno**

DUBAI, Apr 24: The Indian victims of last week's Muslim pilgrimage fire could have escaped but their Saudi guides locked them in their compounds instead of letting them flee to safety, an Indian diplomat said Wednesday, reports AP.

"What hurts is that all of them could have been saved," Indian Consul General Afzal Amanullah said in a telephone interview from the Saudi city of Jiddah.

"There was enough time for them to have been evacuated safely. You don't prevent your own pilgrims from rushing out to safety. You don't hold them back to a small space and certain death," he told The Associated Press.

Saudi authorities and pilgrimage officials were not available Wednesday to respond to Amanullah's criticisms despite repeated attempts to reach them.

By official count, the fire and stampede during the hajj — or annual Muslim pilgrimage —

killed 343 people and injured more than 1,500. But aid workers and diplomats say at least 500 people perished when the huge fire tore through the pilgrim tents April 15 at Mina on the plains outside Makkah.

Based on interviews with survivors, Amanullah recounted for the first time the details of the chaos during the fire.

The fire reached the Indian camp about 20 minutes after it started, probably in a camp housing pilgrims from Indonesia.

But Amanullah said that instead of evacuating the pilgrims at the first sign of fire, the Saudi pilgrim guides — or mutawifeen — locked the encampment gates. They apparently believed the fire would not reach the Indian camp and wanted to avoid panic by the pilgrims.

"That camp was a death trap," said Amanullah. "It should not have been set up right in front of a hill and without any emergency exits."

**Launching of criminal cases against Cong (I) leaders denied
'I'll rise from the ashes one day'**

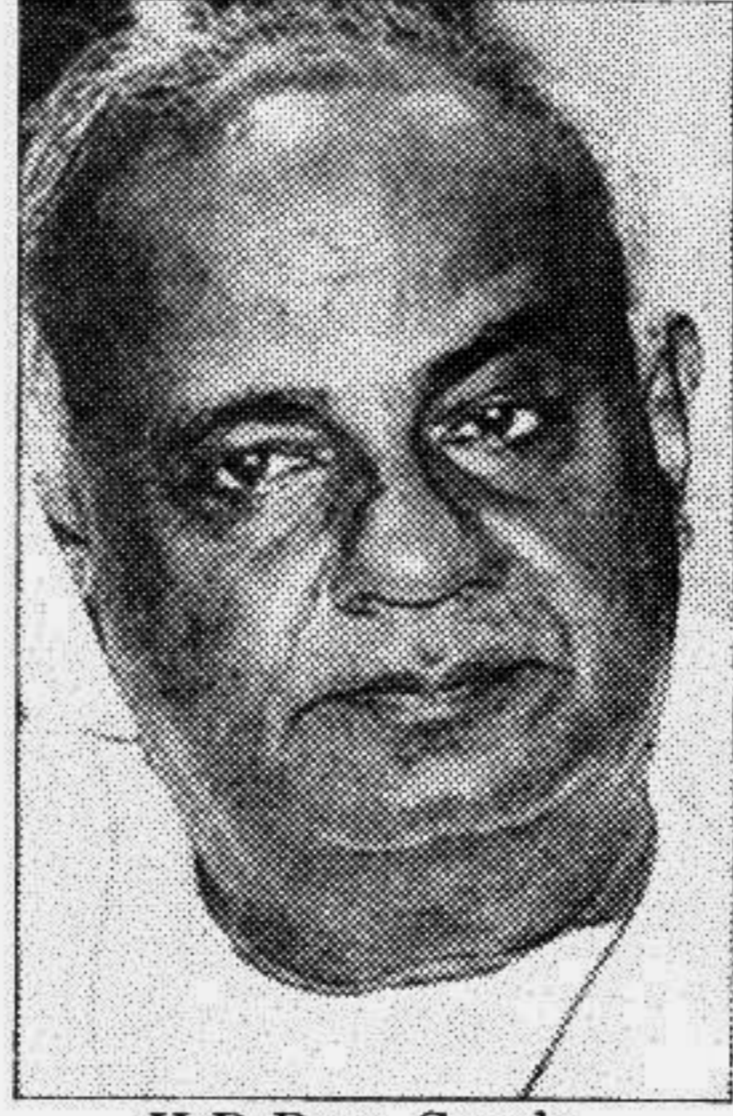
NEW DELHI, Apr 24: It was billed as a farewell lunch, but the man munching watermelon and grapes in the Indian prime minister's garden Wednesday seemed far from ready to retire from politics, reports AP.

"I will rise from the ashes, one day," said H D Deve Gowda, who was toppled as prime minister last month when the Congress Party withdrew its support, accusing him of failing to curb Hindu nationalists and pursuing economic policies that hurt ordinary Indians.

Gowda's successor, Inder Kumar Gujral, took over Monday.

Indian politics have degenerated, many leaders are left with no morals whatsoever, they just want power, they just want to grab power by any means," Gowda said as he circulated among 75 guests, most of them journalists, invited to the posh prime ministerial residence he will vacate by the end of the week.

Gowda's vow to rise again



H D Deve Gowda

could signal more struggles within his United Front coalition, now headed by Gujral. The front took three weeks to settle on Gowda's replacement, and

ousted prime minister H D Deve Gowda Tuesday denied charges he had launched criminal cases against leaders of the Congress (I) Party when he was in power.

Deve Gowda, who stepped down as the leader of the 13-party coalition he headed for 10 months with the support of the Congress Party, denied the allegations as "baseless".

The Congress withdrew its parliamentary support to his ruling coalition on May 30 and later said it could restore the backing and keep the alliance in power only if Deve Gowda was removed from the top post.

The Congress has privately said the withdrawal of its parliamentary support, which led to the formation of a new government Monday, was linked to criminal cases launched allegedly by Deve Gowda against its leaders.

Deve Gowda said some of the investigations were ordered before he became prime minister in June last year.

Earlier AFP adds: India's

9 Shi'ite Muslims gunned down in Pakistan

KARACHI, Apr 24: Masked men on motorcycles gunned down nine Shi'ite Muslims in southern Punjab province on Thursday in the latest wave of sectarian violence to hit this troubled nation, police said, reports AP.

Zial Hussein Zargar had just opened his textile embroidery shop in the remote city of Kharpur Tangywala, 500 kilometers (300 miles) northeast of Karachi on the Arabian Sea, when the gunmen roared past.

They opened fire with machine guns killing nine people and wounding three others, police said.

"It is simply an act of terrorism," said Ali Akbar, a police in Kharpur Tangywala.

No one has been arrested and no one has taken responsibility for the killings.

In recent months militants from among Pakistan's minority Shi'ite Muslims have clashed with heavily armed radicals belonging to the majority Sunni sect of Islam.

As many as 50 people have been killed in the bloody confrontations.

Bombs have been thrown into packed buses, both Shi'ite and Sunnis have been gunned down and the Punjab provincial Chief Minister Shahb Sharif has created an anti-terrorist cell to try to curb the sectarian bloodshed.

There is considerable fear in Pakistan that violence between the two sects may increase next month when Shi'ite Muslims celebrate the holy month of Muharram during which they mourn the death of Hazrat Imam Hussain, the grandson of Islam's Prophet Mohammed (SM).

Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims dispute who should have inherited the mantle of Islam from the Prophet Mohammed (SM) back in the seventh century.

In Islamic Pakistan the majority of people from both sects of Islam generally get along, however, in recent years militant groups of Shi'ite and Sunnis have sprung up and they routinely clash.

It's not clear what prompted the violence in Kharpur Tangywala, which has not been affected by sectarian killings since 1986 when one Shi'ite Muslim was gunned down during the month of Muharram.

Fresh violence claims 47 in Algeria

ALGIERS, Apr 24: An armed group attacked two more villages south of Algiers, slashing and hacking to death 47 people in the latest massacres blamed on a Muslim insurgency, witnesses and a newspaper reported Thursday, reports AP.

The slayings brought to about 420 the number of people killed in massacres in villages around the capital, part of an offensive aimed at defying government assurances it is crushing the insurgency, and at disrupting June legislative elections.

About 30 attackers armed with sabers, knives and axes descended on the mountain village of Omaria near Medea, 80 kms (50 miles), killing 42 people overnight Tuesday, said the witnesses speaking on condition of anonymity.

Among the dead were 17 women and three babies, said the witnesses, who identified the attackers as Muslim militants who have stepped up their attacks ahead of June legislative elections.

In the nearby village of Ouzera, attackers who set up a fake official roadblock stopped a bus and killed five of those aboard, reported the independent newspaper El Watan. That report could not be independently confirmed.

The new slayings followed the massacre of 93 villagers before dawn Tuesday in the town of Haouch Mokkhi Khemisti, about 20 kilometers (12 miles) south of Algiers.

That attack, described as three hours of carnage, was the worst of its kind since the insurgency began more than five years ago.

The violence came six weeks before the June 5 legislative balloting, the first since the army canceled January 1992

Clinton concerned about protecting Tibet

WASHINGTON, Apr 24: US President Bill Clinton assured the Dalai Lama Wednesday that he is concerned about protecting Tibet and said Beijing should start direct talks with the exiled Himalayan god-king, reports AP.

"I am very happy, very satisfied," said the Dalai Lama after the specially choreographed White House visit.

The 1989 Nobel laureate met officially with Vice President Al Gore and the President joined the talks "in progress," a strategy aimed at avoiding a direct diplomatic slap at Beijing.

Clinton followed the same procedure last week when Hong Kong's chief China critic, Martin Lee, was granted a "drop-by" presidential audience.

Tibet, annexed by China in the 1950s, is a hot spot in US-Sino relations like Hong Kong, and the Dalai Lama said Clinton showed "not only sympathy but genuine concern" over the matter.

White House spokesman Mike McCurry said Clinton also will express those sentiments in talks here next week with Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, and later this year at a summit with President Jiang Zemin.

"President Clinton expressed his continuing concern for the preservation of Tibetan religion and culture," the White House said in a statement after Clinton's meeting.

It also urged Beijing to open direct talks to resolve the dispute with the Dalai Lama, who fled Tibet in 1959 when Chinese forces suppressed an anti-Chinese uprising.

**Uncertain future grips MRTA rebels
Peruvian troops hide for a day in tunnels before onslaught**

LIMA, Apr 24: Elite Peruvian troops hid for a day in tunnels and adjacent houses before launching a fiery assault on the Japanese embassy residence that freed hostages and killed their Marxist captors, officials said on Wednesday, reports Reuter.

They used two tunnels to enter the building in a blaze of bullets and explosions, catching the guerrillas off guard as they played soccer on the ground floor, hostages said.

The commandos, trained by British and US counter-terrorism experts, rescued all but one of the 72 hostages alive to end the 126-day ordeal. All 14 rebels of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) died in the fighting.

The raid "was nothing like cinema or television" and much more terrifying, freed hostage Juan Julio Wicht, a catholic priest, told the news agency. "I don't know how I got out alive."

The soldiers blasted their way into the residence from the back and the front, while more commandos took the roof and began ferreting away the hostages, who were gathered on the second floor.

Hostages said they got a 10-minute warning the assault was about to begin and were told to remain calm. Peruvian officials said the attack had been coordinated with the hostages, but did not give details of how this was done.

"This operation was planned down to the last millimeter," President Alberto Fujimori said at a news conference, where he gave a blow-by-blow account of the assault illustrating the action with a model of the house.

After months of fruitless negotiations, there was no option but to storm the residence, Fujimori said.

"all possibilities of a peaceful solution were exhausted," he said, pointing out where hooded troops moved in through tunnels with smoke bombs and laser-guided weapons.

AP adds: Their leaders are either dead or in jail. Their all-or-nothing hostage take over ended in failure, and their time on the world's stage is fading away.

But some, including Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori, warn it's too early to sound the death knell for the Tupac Amaru guerrilla movement which has proven it can use its limited resources to create maximum terror.

"It is not necessarily (the end of the rebels)," Fujimori said during a press conference at the presidential palace. "There could be spasms of violence... but we are taking every security precaution."

Tupac Amaru's best-trained commandos were all killed in the government's daring Tuesday afternoon raid on the Japanese ambassador's residence where rebels held 72 hostages.

Madhya Pradesh Tiger foundation formed

BHOPAL, Apr 24: The Madhya Pradesh government has constituted a Madhya Pradesh Tiger Foundation for protection and conservation of wildlife, especially the endangered tigers in the state.

The foundation will help in protection of tigers from poaching and also maintaining the ecological balance for their conservation, according to the State Forest Minister, Shiv Netam.

Netam told PTI yesterday that the foundation headed by the state forest minister, will accept funds and cooperation from non-government organizations (NGOs) and persons for wildlife conservation and safety in the state.



US President Bill Clinton meets with Tibet's exiled leader the Dalai Lama at the White House in Washington on Wednesday. Clinton assured him that he is concerned about protecting Tibet. — AFP/UNB photo

**AI echoes UN accusation
Zairean rebels killing thousands of refugees by starvation**

LONDON, Apr 24: The human rights group Amnesty International here today echoed a UN accusation that advancing rebels were killing by starvation thousands of Rwandan refugees in eastern Zaire, reports AP.

The organisation said about 80,000 refugees from the earlier conflict in neighbouring Rwanda camped at several locations south of rebel-held Kisangani were reported to be severely weakened by starvation, disease and exhaustion.

"How many refugees have to die or suffer human rights violations at the hands of the alliance of democratic forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire

(AFDL) before world governments and intergovernmental organisations send a clear message to the AFDL that they would be held accountable for any further deaths ordered or condoned by their leaders?" said an Amnesty spokesman.

Amnesty said attacks on Rwandan refugees "appear to be part of a pattern of human rights abuses by the AFDL" against them.

"The organisation has received numerous and consistent reports of human rights abuses, including deliberate and arbitrary killings and disappearances of Rwandan Hutu refugees and Zairean Hutus since the armed conflict began in September 1996."

The group said Laurent Kabila's AFDL had not intervened in attacks on humanitarian aid convoys to the refugees and its refusal to provide security had led to the suspension of relief work.

Amnesty also accused the alliance of blaming the refugees for spreading cholera and claiming that aid agencies only help Rwandans.

"As many as 90 refugees were dying each day before the assistance was disrupted by violence at the end of last week. The organisation is concerned that many more may be massacred," said the spokesman.



US actor Tony Curtis (R) with his girlfriend Gill Van den Berg paints, Wednesday, on the Croisette in Cannes, where he exhibited for the first time in Europe several of his paintings and sculptures. — AFP/UNB photo

Chechnya creates own professional army

GROZNY, Russia, Apr 24: Russia's breakaway region of Chechnya has begun creating its own professional army with soldiers from the often disjointed field units, a news report said Wednesday, says AP.

The first battalion already has been formed and was undergoing training at a base near the Chechen capital Grozny, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported, citing Chechen army headquarters.

The battalion is made up of soldiers from 15 field commando units. President Aslan Maskhadov ordered each unit to send its 10 best fighters, the report said.

and tried to cover our faces with whatever we could, books, blankets, pillows. Everything was used so we wouldn't be identified," Gumucio said.

The hostages had feared that more prominent members would be singled out by the rebels for execution during a government raid.

Three guerrillas in the hallway guarded the six rooms where hostages were kept.

When the tunnel under the floor where the rebels played soccer was blown up, the rebels guarding the hostages opened fire, "but not against us," Gumucio said.

Gumucio, the only hostage who wasn't either Peruvian or Japanese, was kept because Bolivian holds four Tupac Amaru rebels, who are accused of kidnapping.

In January, Gumucio got into a shouting match with one of the rebels after they began belting out a song so "they'll hear us in Bolivia."

"They began throwing insults at my country, which was not going to tolerate, even being a prisoner. I also yelled at them and one of them pointed a machine-gun pistol at my chest and told me, 'I'm going to kill you.' And I replied, 'Kill me,'" he said.

The confrontation ended when Cerpa entered the room and calmed down the rebels. He then explained to Gumucio that his followers were singing to raise their morale.

The incident, Gumucio said, only put more distance between the rebels and the hostages.

6 killed in Bihar gunbattle

NEW DELHI, Apr 24: Six people were killed in a gunbattle between policemen and alleged criminals Wednesday in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, the United News of India (UNI) said, reports AP.

Four police personnel were also injured in the clash near the Bihar state capital of Patna.

UNI said the gunbattle erupted when the police launched a search operation for Maoist guerrillas who allegedly massacred six people in a Bi-hari village Sunday.

The attackers also burnt the house of a local Hindu nationalist leader.

70 Pakistani victims to be buried in Makkah

JEDDAH, Saudi Arabia, Apr 24: At least 70 Pakistanis died in the huge fire near Makkah which broke out during the annual pilgrimage, a Pakistani diplomat asked with identifying the victims said Wednesday, reports AP.

"Seventy Pakistanis died, of whom 65 have been identified," Emad Khan told the news agency, adding that the toll could eventually rise to more than 100.

"The process of identification is lengthy and complex" because of the charred state of many of the bodies, he added.

The Pakistani victims will all be buried in Makkah the site of Islam's holiest shrine, Khan said.

Mobutu's envoy arrives in SA

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa, Apr 24: An envoy for Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seko arrived Wednesday for a meeting with South Africa's deputy president, raising doubts that Mobutu would attend peace talks with Zairian rebels, reports AP.

The prospects of talks taking place here faded Wednesday when Mobutu's son, Mobutu Nzanga, told a news conference in the Zairian capital Kinshasa, that his father was too sick to travel to South Africa.

"The president won't go to South Africa because he's convalescing," he said.

The talks were proposed last week when rebel leader Laurent Kabila flew to Cape Town to meet with President Nelson Mandela to discuss a meeting between the two leaders.

BRIEFLY

Albright to travel Russia soon: Secretary of State Madeleine Albright said Wednesday that she will travel to Moscow as early as next week to discuss Russia's charter with NATO. AFP reports from Washington.

"There are elements of the agreement that are not yet decided upon," Albright told lawmakers. The United States has proposed that Russia sign a charter with the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation to address Moscow's anxieties over the eastward expansion of the defense alliance. Russian President Boris Yeltsin has said the charter should be ready for signing next month in Paris although a final agreement has not yet been reached on the document.

Ex-state minister in India dies: Ghasiram Majhi, former state minister in the Janata Dal government and senior member of the Orissa assembly, died Wednesday night, PTI reports from Bhubaneswar.

Majhi, 72, was suffering from asthma. Dal sources said. He was admitted to the SCB Medical College Hospital on Tuesday. Majhi was elected to the state assembly nine times. His body would be taken to Nuapada, his native place, for cremation.

Chirac's stopover in HK cancelled: French President Jacques Chirac has cancelled a planned stopover in Hong Kong on the way back from a visit to China next month due to forthcoming elections, his press service said Wednesday, AFP reports from Paris.

The French head of state will leave Paris on May 14 for Beijing. He will also visit Shanghai during the Chinese visit, before returning to Paris on Sunday May 18, they said. Chirac on Monday announced early legislative elections in France for May 25 and June 1 saying parliament needed a new mandate to continue reforms and prepare for entry to a single European currency.

7 held in India on rape charge: Indian police have arrested seven men from rich and influential families in connection with the repeated gang rape of a 21-year-old girl, which turned her into a mental wreck, reports said Wednesday, AFP reports from New Delhi.

The arrests were made Tuesday in Ghaziabad town, near New Delhi, following a complaint by the girl's father, a retired air force officer. The Pioneer said. Senior superintendent of police Arun Kumar alleged the girl was used as a "sex slave" by the men who allegedly first raped her some two months back after luring her with the promise of a job. "Unable to bear the trauma, the girl developed acute mental illness," the officer said. She is now undergoing psychiatric therapy.

Laos, Italy sign agreement: The governments of Italy and Laos have signed a memorandum of understanding for a community development and environmental protection project in the Laotian wetlands along the Mekong River, official Laotian radio said Thursday, AP reports from Bangkok.

The project covers 54 villages in the Siphandone area of southern Champassak province, where the Mekong flows into neighboring Cambodia. The wetlands area is also known as The Four Thousand Islands. The programme will begin in four villages with data collection, monitoring an assessments of fisheries and biology, and environmental assessments.

Strong quake rocks Guam: An intense earthquake with a magnitude of 6.3 rocked Guam Thursday, knocking out power across the Western Pacific Island. There were no immediate reports of injuries or major damage, AP reports from Agana.

The 5:50 am (1950 GMT Wednesday) quake's epicentre was in the Mariana Islands, 46 miles (74 kilometres) north of Guam and 44 miles (71 kilometres) west of Rota, according to the US Geological Survey.

Damage estimates were not immediately available, though the Seoul Regency Hotel in the islands resort district was evacuated after cracks were found in some walls, said Guam Civil Defense Director John Rosario. Power was not expected to be restored before midnight, Rosario said.

Vietnam, Belarus aim friendship pact: Belarus' authoritarian president, Alexander Lukashenko, is looking for friends in Asia even as his leadership faces mounting criticism from the West, AP reports from Hanoi.

Lukashenko met with Vietnamese President Le Duc Anh in the capital, Hanoi, on Thursday to discuss a friendship pact, bilateral economic ties and cooperation. Bilateral trade between Belarus and Vietnam remains modest at just 14 million dollars, but the two leaders expressed hope that there was room to expand on their economic ties.

Laos repatriates remains of 493 soldiers: They came home in a convoy of trucks Vietnam's war dead killed in Laos more than two decades ago, AP reports from Hanoi.

After a year of searching for the missing soldiers, Vietnamese authorities recently repatriated 493 dead, official media reported Thursday. Peasants, villagers and local leaders — flowers and wreaths in hand — lined the roads of northern Vietnam's Nghe An province as a procession of trucks brought the fallen soldiers home, the People's Army newspaper reported.

Ordeal of 72 Peruvian hostages that lasted for 126 days

LIMA, Peru, Apr 24: The 72 hostages held for four months developed tight friendships with one another and kept apart from their captors, who remained isolated until the day they died, Bolivia's newly freed ambassador says, reports AP.

That distance — born of differences in age, status and educational levels — kept the hostages from developing sympathy for their captors, a common reaction to captivity known as the Stockholm Syndrome, Ambassador Jorge Gumucio said Wednesday.

"Most of the kidnap victims did exercises, read books and prepared conferences and talks," he said a day after being freed from 126 days of captivity at the Japanese ambassador's residence.

Only in the last couple of days of the standoff did the 14 Tupac Amaru rebels begin to open up to the hostages. Many began telling their personal histories in what Gumucio speculated was a last-ditch effort to gain the hostages' sympathies.

"But it was already too late, because the group of 72 had pulled together. They were isolated," he said.

He said the rebels included eight former Peruvian soldiers, three men from jungle villages, two teen-age girls and leader Nestor Cerpa.

One of the men from the jungle recalled seeing the army kill his parents. He told the hostages how much he hated the army, and bragged of cutting off the head of an enemy.

The jungle rebels were the most fierce of the guerrillas, and a key factor in Cerpa's inability to reach an agreement with the government, Gumucio said.

"I think that Cerpa himself was a prisoner of his own lieutenants, who would not let him accept some type of way out," he told The Associated Press in an interview at his home in the San Isidro district of Lima.

While the hostages read and engaged in scholastic debates, the rebels organised a fated soccer tournament between three teams of four guerrillas each, using a rolled up piece of curtain for a ball.

Twenty minutes into the game, the soldiers attacked. Gumucio, who said earlier that hostages had been given 10 minutes warning, now says the

advance notice may have been shorter.

"Perhaps it was less. In these conditions time passes slowly. Now I believe maybe it was two or three minutes," he said.

A retired navy officer among the hostages reportedly kept a radio hidden from rebels for the entire four-month standoff, which authorities used to warn the captives.

But President Alberto Fujimori would not confirm that, saying the method of warning hostages was a secret of Peruvian intelligence. The Lima daily El Comercio reported that microphones were also smuggled into the residence, including one hidden inside a guitar that the hostages requested.

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