

BRIEFLY

Blasts in train claim 2 in India: At least two people died and 65 were injured when three blasts ripped through a train near the Indian capital and three bombs exploded in a crowded business district in the city, police said yesterday. AFP reports from New Delhi.

Two passengers were killed and 38 others injured when three explosions rocked the frontier mail late Wednesday as it was nearing the city of Ghaziabad, adjoining New Delhi. Railway safety chief Indrajit Ghosh said four Australians and a Japanese were among those injured.

14 executed in China: Authorities in restive northwestern Xinjiang have executed 14 people for economic crimes, armed robbery and drug-related offenses, state-run media reported, AP reports from Beijing.

The 14 executions took place Sept. 26 following a public rally in the regional capital, Urumqi, the newspaper Xinjiang Daily said in a report sent Thursday in Beijing. Zhao Jianxin, a 30-year-old clerk at a Bank of China branch in Urumqi, was found guilty of embezzling more than 3.28 million yuan (dollar 396,000) in public funds, said the report, published Saturday.

Air crash leaves 2 dead in Russia: Two airmen died when a US-27 warplane crashed during a training flight outside Murmansk in the Russian far north on Wednesday, ITAR Tass news agency said, AFP reports from Moscow.

The airforce plane based on the Kola Peninsula went out of control and crashed near the Kill-Yaver military airfield in an area some 40 kilometres (25 miles) from Murmansk. Military sources, quoted by ITAR-Tass said the crew, Lieutenant-Colonel Vladimir Semyonov and Vladimir Yevsyugin, were experienced flyers with an air until noted for its skill and discipline.

3 held for damaging nat'l flag in HK: Three teen-agers were arrested early Thursday for damaging China's national flag, the first to be detained for the crime since Hong Kong returned to Chinese rule on July 1, a police spokesman said, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

The three boys, aged between 15 and 16, were detained for several hours after they were reported to have removed two flags from a pole on a holiday home in outlying Lantau island. They were released later after paying a bail of 300 Hong Kong dollars (39 US). Hundreds of Chinese flags were displayed throughout the territory to mark Wednesday's national day, the anniversary of Communist rule on the mainland.

Indo-Pak PMs try to quell border tensions

NEW DELHI, Oct. 2: The Indian and Pakistani prime ministers spoke on a recently activated hot line to try to end border clashes that killed at least 39 civilians this week, reports said Thursday, says AP.

India's Inder Kumar Gujral called Nawaz Sharif in Pakistan late Wednesday, reminding him of their agreement in New York last month to restore quiet to their ceasefire line in the disputed northern territory of Kashmir.

Artillery battles raged across the Himalayan frontier from Tuesday morning, India said 18 civilians were killed in the border town of Kargil Tuesday, Pakistan said seven of its civilians were killed by Indian shelling that day and 13 on Wednesday, when an Indian girl also was reported killed.

A defence spokesman in Jammu, the state capital of Jammu-Kashmir, said no incidents were reported overnight Wednesday or Thursday morning.

Gunfire is routine across the frontier, and United Nations observers report thousands of incidents every year. But the intensity of the exchanges this week was unusual and unexpected.

Each side has blamed the other for instigating the recent fighting.

The Pioneer newspaper said in an editorial that Pakistan's shelling of Kargil on Tuesday was "tantamount to an act of war."

"India cannot allow outrages like the one in Kargil to go unanswered," wrote The Indian

Express. The shelling dampened hopes of progress in talks between the two countries that were revived earlier this year.

Cross border firing

Gujral expresses deep concern to Nawaz Sharif

NEW DELHI, Oct. 2: Indian Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral has expressed "deep concern" to his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif over the artillery shelling by Islamabad in Kashmir, reports said today, reports AFP.

Gujral spoke to Sharif over hot line telephone and expressed deep concern at the continuing exchange of fire along the Kashmir border and loss of innocent lives," the Press Trust of India (PTI) said.

Sharif's response was not immediately known, no further details were available.

India accused Pakistani troops of firing heavy artillery and mortar on the town of Kargil in the Himalayan state of Kashmir on Tuesday, killing 17 civilians and injuring around 50 others.

The Pakistani attack reportedly sparked an exodus from Kargil, located barely 30 kilometres (18 miles) inside Indian territory.

Pakistan denied the allegation, and instead accused the Indian troops of shelling Pakistani territory and killing 10 civilians.

following a three-year interruption. The two leaders set up their hot line after their first summit meeting in May.

India and Pakistan — which have both acquired nuclear capability — have fought three wars since they became independent of Britain in 1947. Two of them were fought over Kashmir, the former princely state that each side claims as its own.

Kashmir was divided in the first war, with roughly two-thirds in Indian hands.

The recent fighting flared just a week after Gujral and Sharif met for breakfast while attending the UN General Assembly meeting in New York. They pledged to quell the tension that began in June and strengthen communications between front-line commanders.

While activity on the border is usually unpredictable, there were several theories for the latest escalation.

The Pioneer speculated that Pakistan decided to heat up the ceasefire line after the United States made it clear that it would not intervene in the Indo-Pakistan conflict.

"It is a display of pique at having been told by President Clinton that matters such as Kashmir are best settled in a bilateral manner," the editorial said.

The shelling also could be cover fire for moving more militants across the Line of Control, as the frontier is formally called, before autumn snow seal access routes, the paper said.



US soldiers, members of the NATO-led peace force in Bosnia, patrol the perimeter fence of a transmitter in Udrigovo, 25 kms North-East of Tuzla Wednesday. Udrigovo is one of four TV transmitters taken from Bosnian Serb TV stations in relation for failure to comply with implementation of the Dayton Peace Accord. — AP/UNB photo

NATO debates practicalities of expansion with new allies

MAASTRICHT, Netherlands, Oct. 2: NATO defence ministers met counterparts from three former Warsaw pact nations Thursday to discuss the nuts and bolts of the alliance's expansion into eastern Europe, reports AP.

President Clinton and other NATO leaders agreed in July to invite in Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, but the enlargement must be ratified by parliaments in the 16 member nations, including the US Senate, which is to begin hearings on the matter Tuesday.

If their membership is ratified, the three former Soviet bloc nations are scheduled to join NATO in 1999.

Representatives from the three members-in-waiting attended the second and final day of the allied defence ministers' meeting to discuss how to dovetail their forces with NATO's military structures and how NATO plans to extend its one-for-all, all-for-one defence pledge to cover the new members.

"We will analyse the commitment we expect from them to become full members of NATO," said Javier Solana, NATO's secretary-general.

"They have to take decisions to adapt their military structure," Solana told Cable News Network before the start of the meeting.

Sessions on Wednesday, the first day of the talks in this southern Dutch city, were dominated by the NATO-led

raid on Bosnian Serb television transmitters and the future of allied action in Bosnia.

Peacekeeping forces seized four transmitters in response to programming deemed inflammatory and destructive of Western peace efforts that was broadcast out of Pale, the stronghold of war crimes suspect Radovan Karadzic. Control of Bosnian Serb TV was handed to authorities in Banja Luka, the base of President Biljana Plavsic, the main rival of Karadzic.

One topic on the agenda for Thursday's talks is the question of how much NATO's eastward expansion will cost and how those costs will be shared among existing alliance members and the newcomers.

Many lawmakers in the US Senate are concerned about the price of expansion and the potential security risks of extending the US nuclear umbrella.

The US Senate is due to start hearings on the expansion plan Tuesday, with a vote on ratifying NATO membership for the three nations to come as early as February. A two-thirds majority in the Senate is required for approval.

The Congressional Budget Office has estimated expansion could cost the United States between 5 billion dollars and 19 billion dollars over 15 years — a figure the Pentagon and White House assert is grossly exaggerated.

"I don't think the opening of NATO to the three countries

will cost a lot of money," Solana said. "That is a popular misconception."

NATO officials are drawing up a joint study on how much the enlargement will cost the alliance as a whole.

They are looking at how much money needs to be spent on revamping installations and military hardware in the former Soviet Bloc nations and how the alliance has to adapt its own military structures to ensure that NATO's pledge that an attack on one will be treated as an attack on all can be extended to the three new members.

Czech Defence Minister Miloslav Voborny was expected to dispel criticism that his country was not prepared to increase military spending sufficiently to prepare for NATO membership. NATO officials are also worried that public opinion in the Czech Republic is less enthusiastic about NATO membership than in Hungary or Poland.

Solana brushed aside doubts that any of the invitees won't make the grade.

"By the end of the year, the three countries will qualify for being members of NATO," he told CNN.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation also looked at ways of improving cooperation with Romania, Slovenia and other eastern European candidates that were not picked to join the first wave of NATO enlargement.

Lanka plans major steps to end Tamil insurrection

COLOMBO, Oct. 2: Sri Lanka's draft constitution, designed to address the grievances of the Tamil minority and end a 14-year ethnic war, will go to parliament within five weeks, a Cabinet minister said Thursday, reports AP.

"We expect to present it before the annual budget which is on November 5," Constitutional Affairs Minister Lakshman Peiris told reporters.

The draft includes the governments answer to a demand which Tamil politicians have long campaigned for: the merger of the Tamil-dominated northern and eastern provinces to give Tamils more control over their own affairs.

The other seven provinces are controlled by the majority Sinhalese, who also dominate the central government.

The complicated plan calls for a referendum in the Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts of the eastern province, Peiris said.

If the two districts choose to merge with the north, the third eastern district, Ampara, which

is dominated by Muslims, could either remain separate or merge with the Sinhalese-controlled Uva province, said Peiris. Three small heavily Muslim municipalities in the Batticaloa district would be a separate area.

Tamil Tiger guerrillas who are battling for a separate nation for themselves, have already rejected the plan. But a series of military offensives in the last two years have driven them out of the cities and into small jungle towns, and the government hopes to weaken them further and force them to negotiate.

Puliyanakulam, a strategic northern town the military has been besieged for four months by Sri Lankan forces. In a battle Tuesday, 51 rebels and 19 soldiers were killed, according to military figures.

The new constitution would transfer wide powers to the regional administrations, including authority over the police, land, and education. The central government would retain control of the military, foreign relations and banking.

Iraq urges IAEA to approve lifting of sanctions

VIENNA, Austria, Oct. 2: Iraq said it has fulfilled obligations to bare its nuclear secrets and asked delegates to a conference of the UN atomic agency to back its quest for an end to UN economic sanctions, reports AP.

Addressing the 41st annual general conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Iraq's Humam Abdulghafour said Wednesday that his country has permitted inspectors to look for weapons as demanded by the UN Security Council.

Iraq is under an October 11 deadline, when a team of UN inspectors must tell the Security Council whether Baghdad has honoured its promises to stop harassing UN inspectors as they check to determine whether the Iraqis have complied with UN orders to scrap chemical, biological, nuclear and long-range missile programmes.

Until the team certifies compliance, the council will

not lift crippling economic sanctions imposed on Iraq after President Saddam Hussein sent his forces into Kuwait in 1990, touching off the Gulf War.

Abdulghafour, the minister of culture and information, complained that although Iraq has turned over 1.5 million pages of documents on its nuclear programme and has allowed monitors to conduct hundreds of inspections, the agency continues to stall.

"The agency should not allow its credibility to be called into question," Abdulghafour said, urging Hans Blix, outgoing director-general of the 116-member IAEA, to recommend that the sanctions be lifted.

Last fall, the agency requested more information after Iraq filed a final report on its nuclear programme. In April, it told the UN Security Council the report was still under review.

Abdulghafour said the final report already included all the requested information, and the

agency never explained why additional material was necessary.

Hans Forrester, head of the Dutch delegation, said the agency has made little progress with Iraq in the past year. He said investigators' efforts have been "hampered by the unwillingness of Iraq to supply the information with the information it requested."

Criticism Wednesday also was targeted at Israel by Arab nations, which said the Israelis had failed to disclose the extent of their nuclear programme.

With its undeclared nuclear reactors, Israel "poses a serious menace not only to its neighbours but to the World at large," said Samir Hobeica, head of the Lebanese delegation.

Hobeica, along with representatives from Saudi Arabia, Libya and Qatar, all urged Israel to sign the nuclear non-proliferation treaty and place its nuclear programme under agency scrutiny.

Taliban bombing raids 150 civilians killed in 2 days

UNITED NATIONS, Oct. 2: A total 150 civilians have been killed in two days of Taliban bombing raids on the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif, an Afghan envoy said here Wednesday, reports AFP.

Abdullah, the vice-minister for foreign affairs of the ousted Kabul government, gave the toll in an address to the UN General Assembly.

He said that the victims of the bombings were mostly women and children.

He told the assembly he had just received the "sad news of the aerial bombardments by the Taliban of the city of Mazar-i-Sharif for the 16th time in a row in just two days which have taken as many as 150 lives of the civilian population of the city, mostly women and children."

"I express in outrage and condemnation of this cowardly act of terror," Abdullah said.

The envoy, whose faction is part of an alliance fighting the Taliban, stressed that the Islamic state of Afghanistan remains committed to the safety

of the UN personnel and other aid agencies in Afghanistan."

He spoke after a spokesman for the opposition Hezb-i-Wahdat faction said "serious action" will be taken against UN staff in Mazar-i-Sharif unless the United Nations acts to stop Taliban jet raids.

The spokesman, Mohammad Haidari, speaking in a telephone interview from the besieged city, accused the workers of passing on intelligence to the Taliban.

34 die as bus plunges into river in India

HYDERABAD, India, Oct. 2: At least 34 people died when a bus plunged into a river in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, officials said here on Thursday, reports AFP.

They said dozens of other passengers were still not accounted for.



Fireworks explode over Hong Kong's Victoria Harbor, Wednesday as the former British territory celebrated Chinese National Day for the first time since its return to Chinese rule on July 1. — AP/UNB photo

Elton John's tribute to Di smashes US sales records

NEW YORK, Oct. 2: "Candle in the wind 1997," Elton John's tribute to Princess Diana, smashed US sales records with nearly 3.5 million copies sold in its first week, the tallying group Soundscan said Wednesday, reports AFP.

But Soundscan also said that sales of the album, which came out September 22, could be still higher because it is also being sold in unusual venues like clothing and perfume shops which do not report sales.

The tribute to the princess, killed in an August 31 car crash in Paris, broke a record set by Whitney Houston's recording of the Dolly Parton song "I will always love you" which sold 632,000 copies between December 21 and 27, 1992.

That album, the theme song of the movie "The Bodyguard", has sold 4.6 million copies to date, followed by the "Macarena" by Los Lobos at 4.2 million.

Jones to fight lawsuit against Clinton

SAN MARINO, California, Oct. 2: Paula Jones will fight her sex harassment lawsuit against President Bill Clinton with Dallas lawyers who say they aren't interested in settling out of court. And a conservative organisation in Virginia has agreed to raise funds to cover their fees, reports AP.

"I'm excited about the future. Why should I be scared?" Mrs Jones said in making the dual announcement Wednesday with her spokeswoman, Susan Carpenter-McMillan.

The Rutherford Institute of Charlottesville, Virginia, a conservative group, will raise money to pay for legal representation by the Dallas firm of Rader, Campbell, Fisher and Pyke, which specialises in environmental and employment law.

Mrs Jones' previous lawyers, Joe Cammarata and Gilbert Davis, recently withdrew after a disagreement over a settlement. They had worked on the case for three years.

Mrs Jones said she felt comfortable with the Dallas firm, partly because its lawyers have Southern accents and they showed they were very willing to go to trial.

The firm chose The Rutherford Institute for fund-raising after Mrs Jones made it clear she could not afford to pay, said Carpenter-McMillan.

The new lawyers said in statement that they were "retained as litigation counsel, not as special settlement counsel. ... We intend to vigorously prepare it for trial. ... In a court of law, there are no presidents and no plebeians — all parties are equal in the eyes of justice."

Attorney David Pyke said Mrs Jones sought out his firm.

"Attorneys had solicited her directly and indirectly and but we did not," Pyke said Wednesday. "Three (of the firm's attorneys) met with her and her husband, and we believe her."

Clinton denies her allegations. Trial is set for May.

Train explosion in India Police suspect involvement of separatists

NEW DELHI, Oct. 2: Police Thursday were probing the possible involvement of secessionist militants in the bombing of an express train near the Indian capital that killed two people and wounded 35 others, reports AP.

"We suspect it was the work of terrorists but no one has claimed responsibility," said Narendra Kumar, the officer of the railway police investigating Wednesday's explosions near Ghaziabad, about 25 miles (40 kilometers) from New Delhi.

Five Australian tourists and a Japanese were among the wounded.

India is battling a number of separatist insurgencies. Muslim militants have been fighting since 1989 to sever the far northern territory of Kashmir from India. In Punjab, south of Kashmir, Sikhs conducted a 10-year rebellion for a separate state that was declared crushed five years ago but which flares occasionally. Tribal insurgents also are fighting Indian forces in the remote northeast.

The blasts in three sleeper coaches of the Frontier Mail, traveling from New Delhi to the Sikh holy city of Amritsar, occurred three hours after two crude bombs exploded in a busy old quarter of the Indian capital, wounding 24 people.

It was not clear if the incidents were connected.

Survivors told police one bomb on the train was in a box wrapped in a clear plastic bag that lay unclaimed. A policeman in the carriage told passengers not to touch it, but one of them picked up the box and it exploded, Kumar said. The man who handled the box was injured.

The three explosions occurred 16 minutes apart, Kumar said. The latter two were more powerful.

One bomb killed two Indians immediately and wounded the five Australians traveling together in the same compartment.

Forensic experts and the Anti-Terrorist Cell of the Delhi police were examining the damaged carriages for clues to the kind of explosives used, the Press Trust of India news agency said.

Academics term drive to stamp out illiteracy from India unworkable

NEW DELHI, Oct. 2: A new drive to stamp out illiteracy in India, which has the prime minister's backing, is already being rubbished as unworkable by the country's top academics, reports AP.

Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral told parliament last month the battle to teach half the country's population of 960 million people to read and write should be seen as India's "second liberation struggle."

His remedy was simple, high school children, before graduating, would have to prove they had taught five illiterates — at least two of them girls — to understand the alphabet.

It seemed brilliantly simple, akin to the easily-understood policies of Mahatma Gandhi, the hero of India's independence struggle, who had coined the slogan, "Each One, Teach One."

However, according to Mustafa Ahmed, chairman of the government funded National Institute of Adult Education, Gujral's idea is unworkable.

Although the prime minister has taken a lot of interest, his prescription will never work and will just lead to corruption, Ahmed said.

He said students already overburdened with classroom tutorials, would simply buy certificates purporting to show they had taught five children.

"In the process, all sorts of erroneous data will creep into our literacy drives, which in any case have already suffered, Ahmed warned.

India, despite improving overall literacy rates from around 34 per cent of the population in 1970 to 51 per cent today still has the biggest illiterate population in the world, fewer than a fifth of all Chinese in comparison cannot read.

Israel frees Hamas spiritual leader

JERUSALEM, Oct. 2: Israel on Wednesday freed Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, spiritual leader of radical Islamic group Hamas in a deal to appease Jordanian fury over a botched assassination bid against a Hamas leader, officials said, reports AFP.

Yassin, 61, was taken overnight from a prison outside Tel Aviv to Amman in a Jordanian military helicopter.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat welcomed Yassin's release, but Hamas, the main Palestinian group opposed to peace agreements with Israel, said it would not dull its armed struggle against the Jewish state.

The Israeli army said Yassin was released after more than eight years in prison due to a "long-standing and deteriorating" medical condition and in response to an appeal from King Hussein to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for "positive steps" to help the faltering peace process.

Palestinians initially reacted angrily to the move, fearing Yassin had been deported.

Israelis term drive to stamp out illiteracy from India unworkable

"Gujral is noble but very naive, he said in a democratic set-up like in India, the government cannot compel one to do what it wants."

"India needs pluralistic strategies and realistic measures to fight the evil, how can a child just walk into a village full of adult illiterates and try to teach them?"

His colleague PK Bhargava, added: "Gujral's ideas are positive and optimistic but not at all practical."

"Should high school students concentrate on their studies or go out and teach adult illiterates?"

"One has to be careful because rules of this kind can have serious repercussions if enforced without thought."

Earlier campaigns by the National Institute of Education, Planning and Administration, to make a serious impact on illiteracy had failed.

Indian Education Secretary PR Dasgupta admitted that a 1978 campaign to educate 100 million within five years and a similar scheme a decade later to teach 85 million to read and write, had flopped.

Thousands protest ouster of mayor in Belgrade

BELGRADE, Yugoslavia, Oct. 2: Defying club-wielding police, thousands of Belgraders marched Wednesday to protest the ouster of their first non-Communist mayor in more than 50 years, reports AP.

President Slobodan Milosevic and his allies took revenge Tuesday for massive pro-democracy marches last winter by ousting Zoran Djindjic, the most popular protest leader, from his post as Belgrade's mayor.

On Tuesday, thousands took to the streets in protest but were forced to disband by riot police wielding batons. On Wednesday, about 10,000 people marched again, led by Djindjic.

Police again intervened with their clubs, beating up people and dispersing the demonstrators. An Associated Press reporter was hit in the back, but not seriously injured.

In a consolidation of power by Milosevic, his camp also dismissed the pro-democracy directors of the city's top independent television station, Studio B. They pulled off the move by persuading one of Djindjic's former pro-democracy allies, Vuk Draskovic, to turn against him.

Israel frees Hamas spiritual leader

The double blow in Serbia's capital unraveled the major gains from last winter's three months of protests. At the time, Milosevic was forced by domestic and international pressure to let Djindjic become mayor of Belgrade — the first non-Communist in the post since World War II.

The pro-democracy coalition fell victim to the bitter personal rivalry between Draskovic and Djindjic, the most telegenic and popular of the trio who led last winter's protests.

The pro-democracy coalition split apart when Draskovic decided to participate in Serbian parliamentary and presidential elections Sept. 21 that Djindjic and other opposition parties boycotted, saying they were unfair.

Draskovic finished third in the presidential race, behind ultranationalist Sesej and Zoran Ljilic, a Milosevic protégé. Ljilic and Sesej go into a run-off this weekend.

Chatting "Traitor, Traitor," the protesters booed and jeered when they passed Draskovic's office Wednesday.