

Strike in Karachi

KARACHI, Sept 9: Six vehicles were torched as a general strike called by an ethnic-based opposition party against the killing of its activists hit business activity in Karachi on Thursday, police and residents said, reports AFP.

Police said groups of protesters belonging to the Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) exploded crackers late Wednesday when a police official was also shot dead by gunmen in a drive-by shooting.

They said a low intensity bomb planted in a parking lot gutted six vehicles in the city's southern district of Liyari, a stronghold of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto.

Officials said police had arrested 12 people for arson following a string of raids.

The MQM, which represents Urdu-speaking migrants from India after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947, called for a day-long suspension of transport and business activity in Karachi and other cities of southern Sindh province to protest the killings of two of its workers on last Tuesday.

The party, politically strong in urban Sindh, has alleged the activists were killed by the local police. Police have denied the charge.

Tight security in Yangon on uprising day

YANGON, Sept 9: Troops manned roadblocks and patrolled the streets Thursday as authorities tightened a security net on Yangon after dissidents called for a nationwide uprising to end decades of military rule, reports AFP.

Soldiers were out in force at government buildings and other sensitive sites and few people apparently dared to venture outside with many shops and restaurants closed, witnesses said.

Riot police also barred traffic and pedestrians from the downtown headquarters of the National League for Democracy (NLD) of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

There would normally be more people around than this, people have definitely stayed off the streets," said a Yangon-based diplomat.

"It is abnormally calm, there is very little traffic on the roads," said another foreign envoy, who said many people would normally have congregated outside as Thursday is a Buddhist holiday.

Activists hoped to incite unrest Thursday on the so-called Four Nines day or 9/9/99 in honour of hundreds gunned down in a student uprising on August 8, 1988 or 8/8/88.

Sources told AFP that dissidents would try to hold "cat and mouse" demonstrations in the suburbs to frustrate security officers.

However, few observers and diplomats expect mass protests due to the tight control exerted on the country by military intelligence.

Security was also beefed up in provincial cities and towns after the government threatened to mete out tough treatment to any protesters.

There were no reports of any incidents, although the military's control means it is often days before news of unrest reaches the outside world.

Sources in Yangon said however three foreigners tried to incite a protest in a street close to the British and Australian embassies on Wednesday.

The unidentified group was chased into a nearby hotel but there were no reports of arrests.

'Mahathir vital witness to Anwar sex trial'

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept 9: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad would be an important witness in the sodomy trial of his ex-deputy Anwar Ibrahim and should have been called to the dock, a defence lawyer said Thursday, reports AFP.

Counsel Karpal Singh told the high court that former driver Azizah Abu Bakar had complained to the premier in a letter late 1997 that he was allegedly sodomised by Anwar.

"Why is the prosecution not prepared to call (Mahathir)? He is terrorising the country. People are so afraid of him. He is a material witness but not even a statement was taken from him," Karpal said.

"He was necessary to unravel the prosecution case," he said in his submission to have the sodomy charge against Anwar thrown out at the end of the prosecution case.

Anwar, who was sacked and arrested last September and is serving a six-year sentence for abuse of power, is jointly on trial with his Indonesian adopted brother Sukma Darmawan for allegedly engaging in sodomy with Azizah one night between January and March 1993.

Sukma faces a further charge of abetting Anwar to sodomise the driver.

Karpal, who is also an opposition lawmaker, urged the high court to "disregard" Azizah's evidence as unreliable.

"The witness says one thing today and another thing tomorrow. The evidence by Azizah ought not to be accepted," he said. "Both the accused should be acquitted and discharged. No defence should be called."

The lawyer also urged Justice Arifin Jaka to be independent urging him to be "on guard of the unseen black hand" that may affect the outcome of the trial.

"A judge should not view evidence with goggles on. He should go beyond the surface," he said.

UN postpones pullout of E Timor for 24 hours

DARWIN, Australia, Sept 9: The United Nations said Thursday it had postponed for 24 hours plans to pull out of East Timor as fears grew in Dili that 2,000 refugees sheltering in its besieged compound could be massacred, reports AFP.

Indonesian Defence Minister General Wiranto had sought the postponement so that security could be tightened. The BBC quoted a spokesman for UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan as saying:

"The Indonesians appealed to us to give them a little bit more time to let the martial law go to work so that they can restore peace and security in East Timor, and we felt we could use the extra time to plan the evacuation a bit more carefully," UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said.

News of the postponement came as Australia promised to help in an evacuation of the 2,000 refugees. Preparations are being made in Darwin to receive them during the next 48 hours.

UN officials here indicated Thursday that around 500 people would be involved in the evacuation.

But International Federation of Journalists official Heather Patterson said from Dili the UN staff there had signed a petition opposing the evacuation because they feared for the safety of the East Timorese refugees.

Patterson, who was inside the

compound when the news came through, said the staff were outraged about the decision, feeling that they were being asked to betray the people they had hired to work with them.

"The UN staff here are mortified by the news," she told ABC radio. "There's a petition going around, people are signing it, against their forced evacuation from Dili."

They are horrified by what's going on and horrified at what could happen... the word is there will be a massacre."

Fears for those remaining in the compound intensified following reports of massacres, including the murder of 100 people in a church in Suai. Three Catholic priests are believed to have been among the victims.

There were 2,500 refugees crammed into a church compound there," said David Wimhurst, spokesman for the UN Assistance Mission to East Timor (UNAMET), here. "It now appears that the massacre we had reported to us of 100 people dead is now true."

Wimhurst appealed for support from UN member countries.

He said the international community sent the UN into East Timor to organise an electoral process which at the time seemed impossible.

"It is obvious to us that the

international community that sent us in there to do this job that we have now completed must protect the fruit of that work."

The UNAMET evacuation was announced late Wednesday as provisions for its besieged compound ran out. Attempts to load food at a UN depot for staff and refugees had to be aborted on Wednesday morning because of threats by pro-Jakarta militia.

Wimhurst said the evacuation had been delayed after talks between the chief of the UNAMET Ian Martin and Indonesian commanders in Dili, including two army generals.

The UN says Dili is now totally devastated with all or most of its main buildings burnt out, shops destroyed or looted by military and militia and hundreds of vehicles destroyed.

Tens of thousands, and possibly hundreds of thousands of East Timorese have been deported by truck and ship to the Indonesian territory of West Timor.

The Australian government was still trying Thursday to build support for an international peacekeeping force to which it will commit 2,000 troops.

The troops, who would lead a UN force of up to 7,000, remained on a high state of readiness.



Indonesian presidential hopeful Megawati Sukarnoputri plays with refugee children from East Timor during a brief visit to a camp at Noetaki in West Timor yesterday. At least 60,000 East Timorese have fled the territory either voluntarily or forcibly in the wake of violence by rampaging militias after the self-determination referendum overwhelmingly supported independence from Indonesia. — AFP photo

Israel frees Palestinian prisoners

NAHALOZ, Israel, Sept 9: Israel began releasing around 200 Palestinian prisoners from its jails on Thursday, the first concrete step under their landmark peace accord signed less than a week ago, reports AFP.

A first bus carrying around 40 people arrived at around 8:30 a.m. (06h30 GMT) at Nahaloz crossing near Gaza City, one of several crossing points between Israel and Palestinian territory.

Many knelt and kissed the ground as they left the bus, to be greeted by scores of relatives, friends and Palestinian officials as a band played national Palestinian songs.

"It's a great day but tinged with sadness, because many of our soldiers are still behind bars," said Suflan Abu Zyada, one of the Palestinian negotiators involved in the release.

"We will continue the fight for their freedom," he told AFP.

A total 97 prisoners from the Gaza Strip were released during the morning, including 47 members of Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction, 35 from the opposition Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and 15 from other groups, said Jabir Wishah, head of PFLP military operations.

At least two were taken to

hospital in the Gaza Strip.

Another 102 are to be released at four crossing points between Israel and the West Bank: Tarqumiya, near Hebron in the southern West Bank, Tulikarem and Nablus in the north and Beitunia.

Before being released, the prisoners were due to sign letters in which they undertook "not to engage in terrorist activities."

A total of 200 prisoners had been due to be released Thursday under Sunday's Sharm el-Sheikh accord which also provides for further Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank and a timetable for a final peace settlement with the Palestinians.

But Abu Zyada said one prisoner refused to leave jail, and Israel would not allow another detainee to take his place.

An Israeli prison official said that one of the prisoners would not sign the letter, but gave no reasons.

The issue of prisoner releases was one of the main sticking points in the three weeks of talks which culminated in the signing of the Sharm agreement on Sunday.

Israel agreed to release 350 prisoners in two batches, a first of 200 and a second of 150 on October 8. Further prisoner releases are to be negotiated by a special joint committee.

Israel later listed the prisoners to be released as 150 detainees who had killed Palestinian collaborators with Israel, 17 involved in lightly wounding Israelis and 33 others sentenced for various unspecified crimes.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak insisted that the Israelis would not release prisoners who are members of groups that reject the Oslo peace process or who had been involved in killing or wounding Israelis.



A Palestinian prisoner displays his handcuffs while flashing V-sign as he and another detainee cheer their friends and relatives from an Israeli prison bus at the Nahal Oz crossing point between Israel and the Gaza Strip yesterday. Israel began releasing around 200 Palestinian prisoners from its jails, the first concrete step under their landmark peace accord signed in Egypt on September 5. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

5 Palestinians wounded in gunfire:

Five Palestinians were wounded on Thursday by rubber bullets fired by Israeli soldiers in the West Bank town of Bethlehem, witnesses said, AFP reports from Bethlehem.

Clashes erupted when several thousand Palestinians heading to work in Israel were stopped by Israeli army roadblocks following a decision to seal off the West Bank and the Gaza Strip from midnight Wednesday. Palestinians hurled stones at the Israeli soldiers who responded with teargas and rubber bullets, the witnesses said.

Fresh tremor hits Turkey:

An earthquake measuring 4.9 on the open-ended Richter scale shook towns on Turkey's northern Aegean coast Thursday, the Kandilli Observatory seismological centre in Istanbul reported, AFP reports from Istanbul.

It said the tremor, at 11:15 a.m. (0815 GMT), was epicentred in the Aegean Sea, west of the Turkish island of Gokceada, about 50 kilometres (32 miles) off the Turkish coast. It was felt in Canakkale, on the Dardanelles straits, in Ayvalik, across from the Greek island of Lesbos, and on the islands of Gokceada and Imroz. An earthquake measuring 5.9 struck Athens on Tuesday, killing 73 people according to the latest official tally. Kandilli said, however, that Thursday's quake was "isolated" and not related to the Greek and Turkish quakes.

Hearing of Suharto case against Time delayed

JAKARTA, Sept 9: The central Jakarta district court on Thursday postponed until October 14 the first hearing of a 27 billion dollar damages suit filed by former Indonesian president Suharto against Time magazine, reports AFP.

Chief Judge Sihot Sitompul said the delay in the trial, which was scheduled to start Thursday, was necessary because not all of the defendants had been properly served with legal notices.

Suharto's lawyers, headed by Juan Felix Tampubolon, sued Time here for a story in its May 24 edition claiming that the Suharto family was sitting on a 15 billion dollar fortune.

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journalists on the scene soon after the explosion spoke of a strong smell of gas, fuelling speculation that a gas leak was the most likely cause of the tragedy.

Putin said a gas leak was the probable cause of the blast but he cautioned that authorities "are verifying all leads to shed light on the cause of the incident," ITAR-TASS reported.

The prime minister briefed President Boris Yeltsin and Moscow leaders who conveyed their condolences to the families of the victims.

Two eight-storey sections of the prefabricated housing estate, a total of 72 apartments, were totally destroyed, leaving an adjoining section exposed to the night, the wall caved in by the blast.

FSB investigators were on the blast site, which was visited by Interior Minister Vladimir Rushtailo and Luzhkov, having opened a criminal probe into the disaster.

NY City continues war on mosquitoes

NEW YORK, Sept 9: Helicopters and health teams sprayed pesticide over parts of New York Wednesday, in an escalating fight against mosquito-borne encephalitis which has claimed at least two lives here, reports AFP.

The latest targets were non-residential areas of the Bronx, where crews sprayed in the parks and highways, and in Queens.

At least two people in Queens -- an 80-year old man and an 87-year old woman -- have already died from the disease, known as St. Louis encephalitis.

Doctors are trying to determine whether another person who died Tuesday in Flushing, Queens, was also a victim of the disease.

Officials say there are some 40 other suspected cases.

Hundreds of city workers were mobilised to distribute leaflets throughout affected areas. Helicopters have been spraying the pesticide malathion across a four-square mile (10-kilometre) area of the city since Friday.

Meanwhile, New Yorkers were complaining to radio talk shows and elsewhere, demanding to know why city officials hadn't acted earlier to prevent the outbreak.

The city ended its fumigation programs back in 1983, when state officials banned the practice due to environmental concerns, said Bronx councillor Fernando Ferrer pointed a finger directly at Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

Symptoms of encephalitis include fever, stiff muscles and headaches. It is fatal in up to 20 per cent of cases involving the elderly.

"They seem to have an increased vulnerability to the virus, perhaps due to a decreased immunity," Dr. Cynthia Harden, a neurologist from New York's Weill Medical College of Cornell University, told WCBS television.

The outbreak has even left a mark on the US Open Tennis Tournament, being played in Queens this week.

City and Open officials have quietly taken steps to safeguard the tournament site, the National Tennis Center, against the disease, with helicopters dousing a park adjacent to the facility with malathion.

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Rebels blow up gas pipeline in Myanmar

BANGKOK, Sept 9: Karen rebels blew up a natural gas pipeline in southern Myanmar, temporarily halting supplies to a number of factories, official and guerrilla sources said Thursday, reports AFP.

The attack, near the town of Bilin in Mon State, occurred Sunday, shutting down supplies for about 24-hour to some industries, including a French-built cement factory and a gas-powered turbine.

"We did it, we are responding with guerrilla operations to our enemy (the junta) which has launched an offensive against the Karen people in that area," Karen National Union (KNU) spokesman Pado Mahn Sha told AFP by telephone from the Thai-Myanmar border.

He said more attacks were planned and accused Yangon troops of looting, killing and raping in villages in Karen State.

Official sources said the attack had taken place but stressed all damage had been fixed quickly.

The KNU is the main ethnic minority rebel group yet to sign a ceasefire with the ruling military in Yangon.

Thais seize missile launchers

BANGKOK, Sept 9: Thai police have seized two surface-to-air (SAM) missiles and a launcher allegedly destined for Myanmar insurgents trafficking drugs along the border, officers said Thursday, reports AFP.

Two Thai men arrested in northern Chiang Mai province said the Russian-made SAM-7s were to be delivered to the insurgent United Wa State Army (UWSA) in Myanmar, they said.

Narin Yuanyong, 29, and Paitoon Phupae, 31, allegedly said they bought the two-metre-long weapons from Cambodian soldiers in the eastern border town of Aranyaprathet.

They paid 150,000 baht (3,800 dollars) for each of the SAM-7s and planned to sell them to the Wa army for between 300,000 baht and 350,000 baht worth of amphetamines each, police said.

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Blast in Moscow kills 15

MOSCOW, Sept 9: Hundreds of rescuers using sniffer dogs and heavy lifting gear searched Thursday for survivors trapped in the debris of a Moscow apartment block that collapsed in a blast that killed at least 15, reports AFP.

Federal investigators said the explosion that occurred shortly after midnight may have been caused by a bomb but Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said a gas leak was the most likely cause.

The extent of the destruction and the number of victims points to the possibility that a powerful explosive device may have been used," a spokesman for the Federal Security Service (FSB) was quoted by ITAR-TASS as saying.

The powerful blast flattened the eight-storey block of flats in the working class Pechatniki district in southeast Moscow as residents slept in their beds.

Some 59 people, including 15 children, were rushed to hospital in a fleet of ambulances following the blast, while scores

more survivors were pulled from the mass of twisted metal and chunks of concrete slabs, the emergency ministry said.

Fire-fighters used ladders to lead some 95 people to safety, ITAR-TASS cited Moscow deputy city fire chief Viktor Klinton as saying. More than 200 people were thought to live in the flats.

Around 250 rescuers using machinery worked to find survivors but rescue official Mikhail Verdenov was pessimistic of finding more people alive.

Seven bodies were visible in a makeshift morgue in the back of a van, with rescue workers warning that there would be "many more."

The explosion came amid heightened security fears across Russia linked to the ongoing crisis in the southern Russian republic of Dagestan and the August 31 bombing of a shopping centre near the Kremlin that left one dead and 40 injured.

Local residents, rescuers and



A rescue worker clammers amid rubble, twisted metal and a destroyed vehicle as search continues for survivors of an apartment building explosion in the Pechatniki district of Moscow yesterday. — AFP photo