

International

Lightning hits Vajpayee's rally site: One killed

AMETHI, India, Oct 1: A wooden stage from where Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee was scheduled to speak in India's northern heartland was struck by lightning Thursday, killing a policeman, reports AFP.

Seventeen other people died in lightning strikes in four other places across the country's most populous Uttar Pradesh state on the same afternoon, and 12 others were injured, officials said.

Lightning coursed down toward the thunder-lashed field in Amethi town where Vajpayee was scheduled to speak at an election rally. Policeman Harpal Singh, who was standing close to the stage, was killed instantly. Hundreds of people raced for cover.

Vajpayee had not arrived at the rally site, and the meeting was called off. The prime minister later announced compensation of 100,000 rupees (dr 2,380) for the policeman's family.

The northern constituency of Amethi, where Sonia Gandhi is a candidate of her Congress party, was the battleground Thursday for rival election rallies by Vajpayee and Sonia, both possible contenders for the prime minister's position after India's ongoing parliamentary elections.

Thousands sat drenched and spellbound as Sonia spoke at a rally that was lashed by a thunderstorm.

Secret anti-terror pact between ME peace partners

JERUSALEM, Oct 1: Israel, its three Arab peace partners and the United States have secretly agreed to work together against Islamic terrorism in the Middle East, an Israeli newspaper reported Friday, reports AFP.

The decision followed top-level secret contacts over the past two weeks initiated by Jordan's King Abdullah II, who last month clamped down on the activities in his land of the militant Palestinian movement Hamas, the Yediot Acharonot said.

Yediot said King Abdullah first approached Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who then discussed the idea with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and US President Bill Clinton.

Under the proposals, the secret services of the five countries would work closely together, particularly in the exchange of information.

Yediot said the security operation started during the investigation into the botched car bomb attacks in northern Israel last month by militants allegedly linked to the Islamic Movement in Israel and Hamas.

Palestinians say no deal yet on safe passage

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Oct 1: A Palestinian official denied Friday that a deal had been reached with Israel on the opening of a "safe" passage for Palestinians to travel between the West Bank and Gaza Strip, reports AFP.

Israeli radio, quoting military sources, had reported earlier that negotiators had agreed the corridor -- one of the outstanding provisions of the Sharm el-Sheikh peace accord -- would be opened on Sunday.

But Palestinian civil affairs minister Jamil Tarifi told AFP that no agreement had been reached and that the two sides would meet again late Saturday.

However, he said he believed the route could nevertheless be opened on Sunday. "We can open it any minute ... From our side, there is no problem. If Israel wants to implement the Sharm el-Sheikh agreement, we can open it now."

Taiwan quake 62 implicated in faulty construction

TAIPEI, Oct 1: Sixty-two people have been implicated as the government intensifies a campaign to prosecute constructors of buildings which collapsed in last week's earthquake that claimed nearly 2,200 lives, reports AFP.

Among them, 10 have been held on charges of involuntary manslaughter and endangering public safety, said Vice Justice Minister Tseng Yung-fu.

"We have ordered local prosecutors' offices to step up efforts to bring others suspected of constructing faulty buildings under custody," he said.

Forty-six have been barred from leaving the country pending further investigation and others were released on bail, Tseng said.

Some 1,000 engineers and architects examining damaged premises across the island found walls and pillars in high-rises stuffed with plastic bottles, metal buckets, and bundles of newspapers instead of bricks, Tseng said.

One building in central Taichung county was flattened in the 7.6-Richter scale tremor leaving at least 140 people dead. Eighty-seven residents were killed in a 12-storey construction which collapsed in Taipei.

Tseng said investigators were also questioning government officials who authorised construction of the faulty buildings, but no one had been arrested.

Myanmar embassy in Bangkok stormed

Armed group take 20 staff hostage, demand talks

BANGKOK, Oct 1: A group of 12 armed men stormed the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok Friday, taking the 20 staff hostage, and demanding that the country's military rulers open talks with the opposition.

The junta in Yangon is condemned internationally for alleged widespread human rights abuses including the systematic rape and torture of ethnic minorities, the use of slave labour and political imprisonment.

It is also vilified for ignoring the results of a 1990 election won in a landslide by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) opposition party.

Police said shots had been heard inside the building, and all the hostages were believed to be safe.

Dozens of armed police wearing flack jackets cordoned off the section of Sathorn Road surrounding the embassy and sniffer dogs were being used to search the area, an AFP reporter on the scene said.

And snipers took up positions on surrounding rooftops.

In a statement obtained by AFP the group called for the Myanmar junta to enter into talks with the opposition National League for Democracy and for the release of all political prisoners.

In the statement faxed from inside the embassy, the group said the hostages were unharmed, but that the attackers were willing to "die in action" unless their demands were met.

Police said all the shots so far had been fired by the hostage takers.

Hostages inside the embassy compound in Bangkok told friends by telephone that they feared for their safety.

One man with a gun is below our flat and I am stuck inside," a friend quoted the wife of a diplomat saying.

"I am worried about my husband. I heard some shots before, but I only know what I can see on television," she said.

A spokesman for Myanmar's military government said in a statement that ambassador Hla Muang was safe and had not been in the embassy compound when it was stormed.

"He is working together with the Thai authorities to secure the release of the hostages," he said.

Police at the scene earlier said the group of 12 men was armed with AK-47 assault rifles and grenades.

According to witnesses, two

men at the scene, both believed to be Burmese, had so far been detained for questioning.

A number of exiled Myanmar activists groups use Thailand as the base for their efforts to topple Yangon junta, making regular calls for democracy and the convening of a parliament elected in 1990 polls.

A spokesman for the Thai-based All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) on Friday denied any involvement in the embassy storming.

"The ABSDF is not involved in violence, and we call on all sides to resolve this in a peaceful way," spokesman Naing Aung told AFP.

US Secretary of Defence William Cohen voiced Washington's support for the Myanmar pro-democracy opposition led by Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, but opposed the use of violence.

The United States has indicated that we have been supportive of her efforts to bring about change in Burma (Myanmar), he told reporters at the end of a brief stop-over in Thailand.



Thai riot police patrol outside the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok yesterday after some 12 armed gunmen seized control of the embassy after firing shots. The group has taken more than 20 hostages, including the Myanmar ambassador to Thailand. — AFP photo

Pakistan cracks down on Kashmiris to stop suicide march

JKLF firm to go ahead

RAWALPINDI, Pakistan, Oct 1: Pakistani authorities have detained dozens of Kashmiri activists to stop what a minister called a suicide march into Indian-ruled Kashmir, political and police sources said today, reports Reuters.

Police said they had detained the activist overnight in Pakistan-ruled Kashmir and were conducting further raids on Friday to stop the march, which the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) is staging to oppose the existence of the military Line of Control (LOC).

But the pro-independence JKLF faction headed by Amanullah Khan said it would go ahead with its plans to cross the ceasefire line on Monday despite warnings by India and Pakistan against the move. Hundreds of JKLF followers

demonstrated on Friday to protest against the crackdown, witnesses said.

The heavily militarised 720-km (450-mile) LOC stands between the Pakistani and Indian armies in the disputed Himalayan region over which the neighbours have fought two of their three wars.

Ishaq Zafar, acting prime minister of Pakistani-ruled Kashmir, told Reuters the state administration could not allow people to cross the LOC because Indian forces would shoot the marchers. "We cannot allow them to commit suicide," he said.

Witnesses in Rawalpindi town said police raided a JKLF "central command room" set up to oversee preparations for the march on Thursday night and several activists were arrested. But group chief Khan escaped.

Pakistani authorities have used force and brought land-slides on roads by dynamiting hills to stop several previous attempts to cross the UN-monitored LOC, including two by the JKLF.

Eight of the group's members were killed when troops fired to stop a march on February 11, 1992.

Indian troops shot dead three people when a Kashmiri student group tried to cross the LOC on February 11, 1990.

New Delhi says all of Kashmir is an integral part of India. Pakistan says Kashmir must decide in a UN-mandated plebiscite whether to join it or India, while India wants to resolve the issue through talks with Pakistan.

The JKLF, one of several groups fighting Indian rule, seeks to reunite Kashmir into an independent state — an idea opposed by both India and Pakistan.

India rules about 45 per cent and Pakistan just over a third of the former princely state. China controls the remainder.

Japan's worst N-accident leaves 49 exposed to radiation

TOKAIMURA, Japan, Oct 1: Japan admitted Friday it was slow to react to the country's worst nuclear accident, which left 49 exposed to radiation and 320,000 people sheltering in their homes, reports AFP.

The critical reaction at the uranium plant in this small town, the heart of Japan's nuclear industry, ran for more than 20 hours and stopped only at 6:15 a.m. Friday (0315 BST).

For several hours after the incident ministers continued to play down its severity.

"Our recognition of the seriousness of the incident was poor," he said. "We have to frankly admit that," Chief Cabinet Secretary Hiromi Nonaka told a news conference in Tokyo.

"But this does not mean concerns about our country's entire nuclear programme arise."

Japan, which has limited natural energy resources, places a huge dependent on nuclear power which provides a third of the country's electricity.

"I think it was caused by human error on the part of plant employees," said Moriki Aoyagi, president of Sumitomo Metal Mining Co. Ltd., the parent firm of the company running the site.

Aoyagi apologised at a news conference, bowing deeply before an audience of reporters. There was no pressure on workers to hurry, he insisted.

"We never directed the company to hurry up or boost production," he said.

Staff reported seeing a blue flash at the time of the accident, a sign of a reaction going critical, when it becomes self-sustaining.

Radiation readings near the plant had climbed to a high of 4.5 millisieverts of neutrons an hour immediately after the accident, said a science and technology agency official.

That was up to 20,000 times the normal level of radiation, experts said.

China celebrates 50 years of communism with military spectacular

BEIJING, Oct 1: China celebrated 50 years of Communist rule on Friday with a spectacular choreographed parade by 500,000 patriots in Beijing's Tiananmen Square which glorified the nation's military might, reports AFP.

The People's Liberation Army wheeled out the pride of its arsenal -- including nuclear-tipped missiles -- as the country ground to a standstill while the huge procession wound through central Beijing.

The military parade featuring hundreds of tanks and 12,000 troops high-stepping across the square in perfect unison was followed by a colourful procession showcasing the regions of the huge nation.

The totalitarian set piece was aimed at showing the Communist Party's firm grip on power, while also presenting China's aspirations to be a modern economic superpower.

President Jiang Zemin, in a speech from atop Tiananmen Gate where Mao Zedong declared the People's Republic of China on October 1, 1949, pledged to push ahead with socialism and reunify with Taiwan.

"Practice has fully proved that socialism is the only way to save and develop China," said Jiang, speaking over a huge portrait of the Great Helmsman Mao.

He paid tribute to the economic reform process started by late patriarch Deng Xiaoping, and hammered home the message that the reforms would continue -- under the firm hand of the Communist Party.

"We will continue to adhere to the Party's basic theory, basic line and basic programme and ... go on achieving fresh successes in building socialism with Chinese characteristics in the coming new century," he said.

The Chinese leader notably refrained from issuing new threats to use force against the nationalist island of Taiwan, but promised reunification.

"We will continue to pursue the policy of peaceful reunification and one country, two systems and ultimately accomplish the national reunification of Taiwan," he said.

A 50-cannon salute echoed around the vast 128-acre pink granite square to formally start the celebrations, and a goose-stepping honour guard then marched across the esplanade.

The red Communist flag with five yellow stars was hauled high over the mass ranks of soldiers, students and party faithful and the hundreds of thousands in the square formed into the red and gold national emblem using paper-mache.

Jiang's return to the square signalled the start of a two-hour parade led by the imposing sight of columns of tanks, five abreast and belching clouds of fumes, rolling into the square -- where the same PLA tanks crushed pro-democracy protests in 1989 leaving hundreds dead.

More than 100 fighter jets -- including the home-made Flying Leopard -- screeched overhead accompanied by helicopter gunships.

Scientists identify gene that causes mental retardation in girls

NEW YORK, Oct 1: Scientists have identified a faulty gene that causes Rett syndrome, one of the most common causes of mental retardation in females, reports AP.

The discovery should help doctors better diagnose the disease, which can be confused with other conditions, and find out what goes wrong in the brain. That might lead to a treatment.

Rett syndrome almost invariably strikes girls. They develop normally until age 6 months to 18 months, then gradually lose the ability to speak, walk and control their hands. They withdraw from contact with other people and develop repetitive hand-wringing and seizures. No cure is known.

The syndrome probably affects 8,000 to 10,000 girls and women in the United States, said Dr Alan Percy, chairman of the professional advisory board of the International Rett Syndrome Association.

The search for the gene has been hampered because Rett only rarely runs in families. The vast majority of the time, it strikes just once, apparently because of a one-time genetic mutation in an egg or sperm.

The discovery of the gene that becomes mutated was reported in the October issue of the journal *Nature Genetics* by Dr Huda Zoghbi of the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston and the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, Dr Uta Francke of Stanford University, and the Hughes Institute, and others.

Scientists do not know yet whether it is the only gene that causes the disorder. But it probably is at least the main gene, said Eric Hoffman of Children's National Medical Center in Washington.

Ibrahim said lawyers who held political posts while handling cases involving politicians were breaching the law.

"One day we wear the lawyer's shoes and another day we wear the politician's shoes ... so there will be problems particularly when cases are conducted in court," he was quoted as saying.

BRIEFLY

Kazakh PM resigns: Kazakh Prime Minister Nurlan Balgimbayev resigned today during a ministers' meeting, Russian news agencies reported. AFP reports from Moscow.

The spokesman said Balgimbayev's resignation was motivated by "personal reasons." Foreign Minister Kasymzhan Tokayev, a key player in President Nursultan Nazarbayev's cabinet, was tipped as the next prime minister, although his appointment has yet to be confirmed.

Haiti to try ex-military leader: Raoul Cedras, the military leader whose brutal regime prompted the US invasion of Haiti, will be tried for a 1994 massacre, Haiti's justice minister said, AP reports from Port-au-Prince.

Justice Minister Camille Leblanc announced the trial in a radio interview broadcast Thursday, the eighth anniversary of the coup that Cedras led against democratically elected President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Cedras will likely be tried in his absence, since he now lives in Panama as part of a US deal aimed at preventing bloodshed during the invasion. Leblanc did not cite a date for the trial.

New national assembly session begins in Jakarta

JAKARTA, Oct 1: Indonesia's new national assembly, convened for the first time since historic free elections in June, began work Friday under pressure to quickly appoint a new government to fill the void created by the East Timor crisis, reports AFP.

The new assembly must also decide whether to ratify East Timor's August 30 vote to sever its ties with Jakarta.

The 700 members of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) were sworn in amid tight security and opposition calls for an early decision on a successor to President B.J. Habibie.

Muslim organisations deployed hundreds of members on the streets of the capital