

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 at an election rally in India's northern heartland was struck by lightning Thursday, killing a policeman, reports AP.

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 (US\$2,580) 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 AP.

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 activities in his land of the militant Palestinian movement Hamas, the Yediot Aharonot 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 co-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 AP.

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 AP 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 AP.

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 prosecutor's 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-one in a 12-story 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, reports AP.

Major General Jongrak Chutanond, deputy metropolitan police commander told AFP the men stormed the high-walled embassy just before midday (1100 BST).

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

Dozens of armed police wearing black 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.

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.

Prime Minister Chuan Leekapi earlier told reporters the armed group had demanded to see an exiled student leader being held at the interior ministry's detention centre south of the capital.

"They are only demanding to see the leader of the exiled students in Rachburi, which we are still mediating," he said. Witnesses said at least 10 shots had been heard from inside the compound and the attackers had removed the

Myanmar flag, replacing it with the red and gold fighting peacock banner of the student pro-democracy movement.

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," the statement received here 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 activist 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 Thailand-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

RAWALPOT, 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 Rawalakot 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.

Pakistan advised the group

last week to call off the march, saying the move could lead to Indian firing and bloodshed.

The call came in response to an Indian statement that Pakistan would be responsible for the LOC crossing.

Khan, speaking by telephone from an unknown hideout, told Reuters on Friday that the JKLF would consider calling off the march only if the United Nations, India, Pakistan and the G8 group of industrialised countries pledged that the LOC would not be made a permanent international border and the Kashmir dispute would be settled according to the wishes of the Kashmiri people.

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

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 AP.

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. We have to frankly admit that," Chief Cabinet Secretary Hiromu 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.

Three workers from the plant, which is 120 kilometres (75 miles) northeast of Tokyo, received heavy doses of radiation and were in a serious condition in hospital.

In total 39 workers at the plant were exposed, together with seven residents and three staff from the rescue services.

Mid-afternoon Friday, some 29 hours after the leak, the government decided it was safe for the 320,000 residents living near the site to leave their homes, where they had been sheltering in fear of radiation.

But a 250-metre exclusion order was maintained around the site.

Human error was quickly pinpointed as the cause. Workers added 16 kilograms (35 pounds) of uranium into a settling tank, when the maximum permitted limit was just 2.4 kilograms (5.3 pounds).

"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 either 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 millisievert 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 AP.

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 hoisted 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 seal using paper-mache fans.

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Jiang emerged to review the military for three kilometres (two miles) along the adjoining Changan Boulevard -- repeatedly shouted slogans over a microphone.

"Hello Comrades" and "Comrades Have Worked Hard", he called out, to replies of "Hello Leader" and "It Was To Serve the People" from the troops -- navy in white, airforce in blue, army in green and female militia in red.

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.

BJP may win 12 seats above majority in polls

NEW DELHI, Oct 1: India's Bharatiya Janata Party-led alliance is expected to win 12 seats more than the 272 required for a parliamentary majority in the ongoing elections, according to an opinion poll published today, reports Reuters.

"According to the Timespoll survey, the alliance is projected to win 284 seats, only 12 seats above the strength required to remain in power," said the poll, published in the Times of India newspaper.

It said the Congress party and its allies were expected to win 179 seats in the 545-member lower house of parliament. Congress alone is likely to win 150 seats, more than the 141 it won in the outgoing lower house.

"It is certain that the BJP will remain the single largest party, with an estimated strength of 182 seats," the poll

said. The BJP-led alliance has been widely expected to win the elections, but markets have been concerned about the margin of victory. The government may prove unstable or short-lived if the BJP alone gets less than 200 seats, analysts say.

The poll said the BJP and its allies were expected to get 41 per cent of the votes, an improvement of three percentage points from the last elections. Congress would get 35 per cent of the votes, an increase of six percentage points.

This points to the emergence of a bipolar polity, with the unattached third parties losing voter support and seats," the poll said.

Voting has been completed for 418 of the lower house of parliament's 545 seats. On October 3, in the fifth phase of the general elections, 118 constituencies will go to the polls.

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 political void created by the East Timor crisis, reports AP.

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 to assist the police and military in making sure that no public demonstration disrupted the meeting.

Some 200 pro-democracy students and some 25 street singers, held a peaceful demonstration at a roundabout in central Jakarta in front of a hotel where MPs were accommodated.

This general assembly all important positions must not be taken over by elements of the (former ruler Suharto's) New Order or the military," one protester, Sugeng, said.

In a symbolic break with the past, the 500 members of the lower house, the People's Representative Council (DPR), were sworn in separately from the 200 appointees who make up the remainder of the assembly.

The DPR comprises 462 members elected in the June 7 polls and 38 appointees representing the armed forces. The other 200 MPs are drawn from the regions and various interest groups.

In another break from tradition, the legislators were not asked to stand when Habibie entered the convention hall. Some boos were heard from the floor.

Peacekeepers in E Timor launch major offensive

DILI, East Timor, Oct 1: Australian troops launched a major offensive close to the border with Indonesian West Timor Friday in what senior officers described as a decisive phase of the campaign to secure East Timor, reports AP.

International peacekeepers (Interfet) belonging to the 2nd battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment, in armoured personnel carriers, naval landing craft and Blackhawk helicopters met no resistance in their thrust towards the western towns of Batugada and Balibo.

Operation Laverack was aimed at restoring peace and security to support humanitarian operations in the western areas of East Timor most vulnerable to militia domination.

The operation, described by Interfet spokesman Colonel Mark Kelly as "a significant event" and a successful deployment was the second major Interfet operation out of Dili within three days.

It followed a skirmish Thursday in which British Gurkha troops fired the first shots of the campaign and captured three militiamen in the far-eastern town of Com.

The militiamen were among a gang of 10 to 12 who had been holding more than 2,000 internally displaced persons captive with automatic weapons.

The incident happened as the Gurkhas escorted a humanitarian convoy of 29 trucks towards Los Palos after overnighting under the protection of Interfet forces based at Baucau.

Lieutenant Colonel Lillington-Price, the commander of the second Royal Gurkha rifles told reporters his troops received a rousing reception as they arrived with the aid convoy in the eastern town of Los Palos.

NTV television meanwhile cited Russian defence sources as saying that a separate column had crossed from Ingushetia to Chechnya's west and was moving towards the town Bamut about 30 kilometres (18 miles) southwest of the capital Grozny.

The Russian defence ministry in Moscow refused to either confirm or deny the troop movements.

"Right now we are delivering air strikes against the republic, but there can be no talk of attacks against Chechen civilians," a defence ministry spokesman said by telephone.

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 strike 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.

Dr Duane Alexander, director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, which helped pay for the work, called the discovery "a definite turning point, which we hope will soon lead to better diagnosis and, ultimately, treatment for this disorder."

The gene, called MECP2, lies on the X chromosome. Males have only one copy of that chromosome per cell, and if it carries a defective MECP2 gene, they die before birth or shortly after. Girls have two X chromosomes, one inherited from each parent.

Bar members may be barred from politics in Malaysia

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 1: The Malaysian government is considering whether lawyers should be barred from doubling as politicians as they practice the law, a news report said Thursday, reports AP.

The government had received many queries from the public wondering whether lawyers who were also Members of Parliament were "abiding by their profession." Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Ibrahim Ali, was quoted as saying by the national Bernama news agency.

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

Kazakhstan Prime Minister Nuralin Abilgambayev resigned today during a ministers' meeting, Russian news agencies reported, AFP reports from Moscow.

The name of his replacement was not immediately known. The spokesman said Abilgambayev's resignation was motivated by "personal reasons." Foreign Minister Kasymzhomart 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.