

Bus bomb kills 1 in Pakistan

KARACHI, Nov 29: At least one person was killed and 10 others injured when a bomb exploded on a passenger bus in the southern Pakistani city Hyderabad today, police and residents said, reports AFP.

The bomb was planted under a seat and exploded with a deafening blast just as the bus, which was carrying 35 people, arrived at a stop outside the Radio Pakistan building in the city.

Two of the injured were in a critical condition.

Hyderabad commissioner Imliaz Qazi, head of the local administration, said terrorism was suspected.

"But it is too premature to pin the blame on anyone in particular," he said.

Police said the bomb had a timer attached.

People rushed to the scene of the blast to see many passengers trapped inside the wrecked bus and shattered glass lying all around.

There was a man crying in pain because both his legs were trapped under the seat," said Mohammad Ansar, who lives nearby.

Paramilitary troops and police cordoned off the area and bomb disposal experts examined the scene.

Hyderabad, some 160 km northeast of here, is the second largest city of the troubled southern Sindh province, of which Karachi is the capital.

Sindh was placed under direct rule last year by then Premier Nawaz Sharif in an effort to curb lawlessness and terrorism following hundreds of deaths in Karachi.

Sharif was ousted by army chief General Pervez Musharraf on October 12 in a bloodless military coup.

NASA to crash tiny probes into Mars

PASADENA, Nov 29: Two little space probes heading for Mars this week won't float beneath parachutes or bounce to a landing on cushions. Instead, they'll smash into the planet at 400 mph (645 kph), punching into the ground like interplanetary lawn darts, reports AP.

If the drastic landing technique works Friday, the soft-ball-size instrument packages will search for water and test lower-cost technology that could revolutionize solar system exploration.

The Deep Space 2 probes are flying toward the Red Planet along with the Mars Polar Lander.

After they reach Mars, Polar Lander will begin a controlled descent. The probe will follow 18 seconds later, but unlike the lander their 77-mile (124 kms) fall won't be slowed by any expensive parachutes or thrusters.

"We're not your average mission — we're slamming into a planet at 400 mph (645 kph)," said Deep Space 2 project manager Sarah Gavitt at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory.

The 29.6 million dollars Deep Space 2 probes are part of the US space agency's New Millennium programme, a series of inexpensive missions testing untried technology for future spacecraft. Ten systems will be tried out during the Mars mission.

For four years, Gavitt and her team have been throwing models out of airplanes over the Mojave Desert and firing electronic devices out of air guns to find designs and materials that might survive a crash into the surface.



Local women wait in line to cast their votes yesterday at a polling station in Kedah, Malaysia. Voting started throughout Malaysia in a general election seen as a referendum on the 18-year-rule of Premier Mahathir. — AFP photo

Foreign, local observers monitor Malaysia's electoral battle

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 29: Groups of foreign and local observers toured polling centres today to monitor Malaysia's keenly fought general elections and ensure balloting is fraud free, reports AFP.

A group from the Asian Network for Free Election deployed observers to eight of the 13 Malaysian states to monitor conditions at voting centres and promised an initial report a day after the polls.

"A report will be made public Tuesday," Thailand's General Saiyud Kerdphol, who is heading a 13-member team from the network, told AFP.

Observers from the network, a Bangkok-based non-governmental organisation, are from Bangladesh, Canada, Finland, Indonesia, Japan, Thailand, Nepal and the Philippines.

"The election is done in a free manner but we do not know if it is fair or not," Saiyud said when asked about his initial assessment of the polls after touring.

election booths in Kuala Lumpur.

He said there were no reports of violence but was informed that names of some prospective voters were not on the ballot lists at polling centres.

"On the surface, the election is quite fair but we have not looked at it deeply," Saiyud said.

He also said he was impressed by the "friendly" feelings demonstrated by supporters of rival political parties contesting the 10th Malaysian general elections, the full results of which will be known by early Tuesday.

Election Commission Chairman Omar Hashim described voters' turnout Monday as good and predicted that at least 70 per cent of the 9.5 million registered voters would vote.

Kamar Anisah Kamaruzaman, president of a local polls-monitoring group Malaysian Citizens Election Watch,

claimed there were irregularities in the voters' list.

"Some of the complaints relate to names missing from the electoral list and the existence of dead people's names on the list," she said.

Worried such irregularities would influence the outcome of the elections, Kamar had urged the Election Commission conducting the polls to address these concerns.

Some 2,000 volunteers from her group have been mobilised nation-wide to monitor the elections, she said, adding that "we have not received any reports of trouble."

The opposition Alternative Front claimed on Saturday that at least 200,000 voters were holders of fake identity cards and called for an immediate probe.

It charged that the suspected fake voters were discovered in 12 of the 193 parliamentary constituencies.

Half the world's rivers in peril: Report

WASHINGTON, Nov 29: More than half the world's major rivers are going dry or are polluted, a panel studying global water problems reported today, says AP.

The fouling of the waterways and surrounding river basins contributed to the total of 25 million environmental refugees last year, for the first time exceeding the world's 21 million war-related refugees, said the World Commission on Water for the 21st Century.

The findings are part of a report the commission expects to complete at a two-day meeting beginning Monday at The Hague, Netherlands. The panel — headed by the World Bank and United Nations agencies on children, development, the environment and other issues — has been charged with finding a way to ensure there is enough water for the world's growing population in the next century.

"We have to pay attention to how the world manages its water," said Arieane Naber, a geologist who is a commission consultant.

"Production has to be increased, quality improved... to guarantee that we can meet the water needs of all the people on earth and protect the environment," she said in an interview.

The commission gathered information on the river portion of the study from specialists around the world and an analysis of existing material.

It concluded that of the 500 major rivers in the world, the Amazon in South America and the Congo in sub-Saharan Africa are the healthiest. Both have few industrial centres near their banks, the report noted.

By contrast, overuse and misuse of land and water resources in river basins elsewhere has "seriously depleted and polluted" them, the commission said. That, it said, is "degrading and poisoning" the rivers surrounding ecosystems, "threatening the health and livelihoods of people who depend upon them for irrigation, drinking and industrial water."

The main reason is lack of coordinated management of watersheds, which often cross national boundaries or — as in the case of the Colorado River in the United States — several state boundaries.

"All the success stories show that cooperation leads you everywhere," Waber said. The commission will recommend comprehensive regional planning and saving the environment, she said.

The final commission report and an action plan is to be presented for consideration to a world forum of government ministers and others, in March in the Hague.

Among other findings in the report: The Yellow River in China's most important agricultural region is severely polluted and ran dry in its lower reaches 226 days out of the year in 1997. Health problems are growing because of poor water quality.

— Amu Darya's and Syr Darya's flow into the Aral Sea in Central Asia has been reduced by three-quarters and has caused a catastrophic regression in sea levels — 53 feet between 1962 and 1994. The region suffers the highest rate of infant mortality of all regions of the former Soviet Union because poor water flow and fertilizer runoff have fouled the seabed.

— The Colorado River in the United States, irrigating more than 3.7 million acres of farmland, is so exploited and polluted by agriculture that little is left to protect the ecosystem downstream, which has turned from lush green to salty and desolate marshes.

— More than 90 per cent of the natural flow of the Nile River in Africa, the longest waterway in the world, is used for irrigation or is lost through evaporation, primarily from reservoirs. What reaches the Mediterranean Sea is heavily polluted with irrigation drainage and industrial and municipal waste.

Palestinians threaten to quit talks

SHORESH, Israel, Nov 29: Chief Palestinian negotiator Yasser Abed Rabbo warned Monday the Palestinians may pull out of final status negotiations if Israel continues its settlement activity in occupied territories, reports AFP.

"This issue is seriously threatening our current negotiations," Abed Rabbo said after the sixth round of talks with Israel aimed at reaching a comprehensive peace deal between the two sides by September 2000.

"It is a clear message: we cannot continue negotiations while settlement activity is going on at the same time," he told reporters.

"If settlement activities continue and we do not get a clear position from the Israeli government about settlements, we will face a real crisis for sure."

The future of around 140 Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is one of the core issues to be tackled in negotiations to determine the final status of the Palestinian territories.

Abed Rabbo was speaking after around two and a half hours of talks with chief Israeli negotiator Oded Eran in Shores, a village south of Jerusalem.

West Bengal govt to cooperate with centre despite differences: Basu

CHINSURA, West Bengal, Nov 29: The West Bengal government would cooperate with the centre despite political differences, Chief Minister Jyoti Basu said yesterday, reports PTI.

The state government, which was all for West Bengal's development, would positively respond to any constructive move of the centre, Basu said at a meeting in Tarakeswar, in Hooghly district.

The CM was addressing the meeting after unveiling the bust of former state minister Ram Chatterjee.

Industrial units could be set up in West Bengal only after the abolition of licensing system, he said, adding the Congress government at the centre had discriminated against the state when licensing system was in vogue, allowing many other states to prosper.

Russia bombs main Chechen towns

GROZNY, Russia, Nov 29: Russian forces blasted the main towns in breakaway Chechnya overnight today and federal troops and Chechen fighters clashed near Grozny, which rebel commanders said was 80 per cent destroyed, reports AFP.

Grozny, Urus-Martan, a strategic stronghold 20 km southwest of the capital, and Argun, 10 km east of Grozny were pounded by heavy artillery and Grad multiple rocket-launchers, the Chechen military said.

Fierce clashes erupted around Aleroi, some 50 km east of Grozny, with both sides taking losses, the Chechen military said.

Fierce exchanges also erupted around Alkhan-Yurt, a village at the southwestern gates of Grozny, disrupting efforts by local elders to negotiate

the entry of Russian troops into the settlement, the Russian military news agency AVN reported.

Russian warplanes meanwhile bombed the Itum-Kalinskaya district near the Georgian border, and Shatoiskaya, also in the south, killing up to four people and wounding a dozen others, Chechen officials said.

Grozny and Urus-Martan, which guards one of the main escape routes from Grozny to the mountainous south, have been 80 per cent destroyed by the punishing Russian ground offensive, now in its ninth week.

Civilians have been the main victims of the incessant artillery, warplane, tank and rocket barrage, with few losses among Chechen fighters, officials here say.

Grozny's mayor Lesha Dudaev said Saturday that at least 260 people had been killed in the capital in the preceding 48 hours.

Russian launched its air campaign against the rebel republic on September 5, sending in ground forces on October 1 to crush Islamic militants and "bandits" blamed for a September apartment bombing campaign which killed 292 people, and two summer incursions into southern Russia.

Russian generals said last week they had now entered the third and decisive phase of their campaign to destroy "terrorists," vowing to bring most of the republic to heel by the end of the year.

Meanwhile, the Russian defence ministry on Monday confirmed that Chechen troops had seized the village of Novogrozny at the weekend.

Nagaland CM escapes assassination bid 2 bodyguards killed

GUWAHATI, India, Nov 29: The Chief Minister of Nagaland escaped an assassination bid by tribal separatists today that left two of his bodyguards dead, police officials said, reports AFP.

The ambush posed a serious threat to the fragile two-year ceasefire between the tribals and government forces in the state.

Members of the outlawed National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) ambushed Chief Minister C Jamir's convoy at 6:00 am (6:30 am BST) near Phepima village, some 20 km outside the state capital Kohima.

The militants lobbed grenades and strafed the convoy with automatic weapons fire, killing two security personnel and injuring four more, a police spokesman told AFP by telephone from Kohima.

200 armed rebels were involved in the attack, which marked the third failed assassination attempt on Jamir in the past two years.

The ambush was carried out by members of the most militant wing of the NSCN, which had agreed a ceasefire with the government in August, 1997, following five decades of tribal insurgency in Nagaland.

More than 25,000 people had died in a violence linked to the NSCN's armed struggle for an independent homeland for the Naga tribespeople.

The latest round of peace talks ended in Bangkok last month, with both sides agreeing to continue efforts to seek a political resolution to the conflict.

US mission cuts operations in Cambodia amid Laden's threat

PHNOM PENH, Nov 29: The United States embassy in the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh has been forced to scale back its operations amid fears of a terrorist threat from Saudi-born dissident Osama bin Laden, according to a statement received today, reports AFP.

The US embassy has received information of a purported terrorist threat against US diplomatic installations in Phnom Penh allegedly sourced to an Islamic extremist group linked to terrorist Bin Laden, the embassy statement said.

It said while the embassy would "continue to assess the credibility of the threat," it would only remain operational with reduced staffing and "provide only emergency services to American citizens."

The statement did not specify the source of the apparent threat from bin Laden, who is currently residing in Afghanistan and is blamed by the United States for the 1998 bombings of two US embassies in east Africa.

'China building missile base opposite Taiwan'

TAIPEI, Nov 29: China is building a missile base in Fujian province, directly opposite Taiwan, a news report said today, reports AFP.

The base, which will reportedly house short-range M11-Mod2 missiles, is located at Xiyou, the United Daily News quoted "reliable military sources" as saying.

From Xianyou, most of Taiwan would be within the missiles' range of 300 kilometres.

"Eastern Taiwan, even the Orchid Island east of Taiwan, would fall within the shooting range if the missile carries a smaller warhead," one source was quoted as saying.

The sources said the Taiwan military has been keeping a close watch on the construction of the missile base with information collected by Taiwan intelligence agents on the mainland.

The report also said China had built a dummy base at Zhangzhou, also in Fujian province, but Taiwan's military authorities had not been fooled.

The Washington Times reported last Tuesday that China was expanding a missile base at Yangang, Jiangxi province, some 440 kilometres from Taiwan.

It said construction of the Chinese missile base was photographed by US spy satellites in mid-October.

The paper said China would deploy advanced CSS-7 missiles — also known as advanced M-11s — which are capable of carrying several different types of warheads up to about 500 kilometres.

Fresh fighting kills 17 in Lanka

COLOMBO, Nov 29: At least 17 Tamil Tiger rebels were killed in fresh fighting in northern Sri Lanka, while the navy attacked several rebel boats, the defence ministry here said today, reports AFP.

Government troops shot dead 14 members of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in a clash in the Wannu district on Sunday, the ministry said in a statement.

It said another three rebels were killed in two other clashes in the north of the country.

The ministry said the navy attacked several rebel boats over the weekend, but there were no immediate reports of casualties.

BRIEFLY

Pandit Hanuman Prasad dead:

Renowned sarangi maestro Pandit Hanuman Prasad Mishra died at Varanasi Sunday following heart failure, his family sources said. He was 86. PTI reports from New Delhi.

Mishra, recipient of the Uttar Pradesh Sangeet Natak Academy Award and Tansen Award, is the father of eminent Hindustani vocalists Rajan-Sajan.

Violence claims 14 in Colombia:

At least 14 people, including two journalists and three police officers, have died in violent attacks scattered around Colombia, officials said Sunday, AFP reports from Bogota.

Authorities blamed the deaths primarily on leftist rebels groups and right-wing paramilitaries who clash regularly in rural areas of the country, but could not rule out common criminal activity in some cases.



Protesters from the restive province of Aceh drape a large banner reading "There is only one word: Referendum" on the dome of the Parliament building in Jakarta during a rally yesterday, demanding a referendum on self-determination for their home region. — AFP photo

Gusmao blames Wiranto for E Timor destruction

JAKARTA, Nov 29: East Timor independence leader Xanana Gusmao today said former Indonesian defence minister General Wiranto was responsible for the systematic destruction of his homeland, reports AFP.

Speaking to foreign journalists here, Gusmao said Wiranto, who was also commander of the Indonesian armed forces, was responsible for the discipline of troops during the runup and the immediate period after the UN-held August 30 pro-independence ballot in East Timor.

"In a small guerrilla army, we have the discipline as our best strength, in a sophisticated army as that of Indonesia, I believe General Wiranto, as minister of defence was responsible for what went on," Gusmao said.

Indonesian army-backed militias launched an unchecked campaign of terror, violence and destruction in East Timor after the results from the August 30 ballot were announced on September 4 showing an overwhelming vote for independence.

Gusmao said the wave of terror across the territory that followed the polls in East Timor was a "systematic, planned destruction."

"I have to say that the Kopassus generals are very, very involved in the destruction," he said.

Kopassus was behind the formation of several militia groups in East Timor longer before Jakarta in January offered the former Portuguese colony it invaded in 1975 the option of independence.

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Pro-democracy candidates suffer defeat in HK polls

HONG KONG, Nov 29: Several high-profile pro-democracy activists suffered surprise defeats today in the territory's first local elections under Chinese rule, reports AP.

With about 80 per cent of the votes counted, the pro-Beijing Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong had clinched majority control in most districts.

Final results were expected later in the day.

The results indicate that pro-Beijing factions are strengthening their grip on power as negative feelings towards China fade, analysts said.

"Instead of just voting for anti-Beijing candidates as the China threat takes a back seat, voters are beginning to look at politicians' track record," said Li Pang-kyong, a political scientist at Lingnan University.

Kong's 18 District Councils, which advise the government on such mundane, local matters as sanitation, the environment and infrastructure. Another 76 candidates ran unopposed.

The council elections were seen as a test of how political factions have fared since the former British colony was returned to Chinese rule in July 1997. Many politicians also used these polls to test their popularity ahead of next year's bigger legislative polls.

"We have to review our strategy, with so many surprise defeats," said Lam Shum-shing, an incumbent Democrat who lost to DAB lawmaker Chan Kam-lam.

On Sunday, about 36 per cent of 2.3 million registered voters cast their ballots, up from 33 per cent in the 1994 local polls, but falling far short of the 55 per cent in last year's legislative election.

27 killed in Algeria

ALGIERS, Nov 29: Twenty-seven people, several of them women and children, were massacred over the weekend in Algeria in two separate attacks at fake road checkpoints, officials and witnesses said Sunday, reports AFP.

A group of 18 people were murdered Sunday by armed Islamic extremists at a roadblock set up in the town of Boumedfaa, in the northwest of the country, the official APS news agency reported.

Another nine people were slaughtered in a similar ambush the day before near Boufarik, just south of the capital, witnesses said. They too, said extremists were responsible.

The killings bring the death toll over the week to more than 50, and to more than 150 so far for November, according to the media.

Last week, an armed group killed 18 people at another fake checkpoint about 30 kilometres from Boufarik.

Taiwan divorce rate highest in Asia

TAIPEI, Nov 29: Taiwan's divorce rate reached a record 0.2 per cent in 1998, topping all other Asian countries, a report said today, reports AFP.

The Ministry of the Interior said 43,603 couples were divorced last year, 4,617 more than the year before.

The divorce rate measures the number of couples who get divorced against the total number of married couples.

The rate in Japan is 0.18 per cent, in Hong Kong 0.16 per cent, and 0.13 per cent in Singapore.

Taiwanese couples married for less than five years had the highest national divorce rate with 34.85 per cent.



Pakistani police bar supporters of deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif from entering the court grounds, where Sharif is appearing to hear witness statements against him and six co-accused in the southern port of Karachi yesterday. — AFP photo