

Karachi police on alert after US warning

KARACHI, Apr 1: Pakistani police have adopted strict security measures after a US warning to Americans about a threat to kidnap a US citizen around Karachi, the city's police chief said today.

"We have been conveyed the information from the US embassy and we have taken adequate security measures," Javed Iqbal, told AFP.

"Armed policemen have been deployed outside and in the surroundings of their (American) residences," Iqbal said.

"We have taken other preventive measures as well."

The US State Department said in a statement that the United States embassy in Islamabad "has information regarding a possible kidnapping of an American in or around Karachi between March 31 and April 6."

"Although the information is unconfirmed, it is prudent for all Americans to review their security practices, particularly being aware of their surroundings and varying their travel times and routes," it said.

The warning comes only one week after US President Bill Clinton visited Pakistan as part of his South Asian tour.

Fresh fighting in Lanka: Troops kill 30 LTTE rebels

COLOMBO, Apr 1: Government soldiers killed at least 30 rebels in fresh fighting near a strategic causeway linking the Sri Lankan mainland with the northern Jaffna peninsula, the Defence Ministry said Saturday, reports AP.

A ministry statement said that the guerrillas tried to attack army artillery positions in Iyakachchi, near the Elephant Pass causeway, but were repulsed by the soldiers.

A large number of rebels were killed in the confrontation and troops later found the bodies of 21 guerrillas in the area, the statement said.

The ministry also said that air force jets and artillery had pounded a rebel armored vehicle in the Nagar Kovil area, also in the Jaffna peninsula. It said seven rebels were killed in the same area during skirmishes.

Another two guerrillas were shot dead elsewhere in the north.

The guerrillas launched a fresh offensive last weekend to recapture Jaffna which they had lost to the military in 1996. Jaffna is 300 kilometers (185 miles) north of Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital.

If the rebels succeed in overrunning the Elephant Pass, they could cut off the Jaffna peninsula from the rest of the country and recapture Jaffna, their former capital.

India urges settlement of border row with China

NEW DELHI, Apr 1: India today called on China to improve relations and urged a settlement of a border row which dragged the two Asian giants into a bloody war almost four decades ago, reports AFP.

Indian leaders congratulated China on the 50th anniversary of the setting up of diplomatic ties between the two countries and stressed the need for regional peace and economic partnership.

"We attach importance to the development of friendly, cooperative, good-neighbourly and mutually-beneficial relations with China," Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said in a message to his Chinese counterpart Zhu Rongji.

"With the joint efforts of the two sides, we can build a stable relationship of constructive co-operation into the 21st century and thereby contribute to peace and stability in the Asian region," he said.

India was the first country to accord diplomatic recognition to China's Communist government.

Beijing has also been seeking for the past year to improve ties with New Delhi, which were scarred by a brief border war in 1962 and India's nuclear tests in May 1998, which were strongly condemned by Beijing.

In a sign of the improving Sino-Indian relationship, Indian President K.R. Narayanan is set to visit China in May to attend ceremonies marking the anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties.

Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh in a message to his Chinese counterpart Tang Jiaxuan said it was the responsibility of New Delhi and Beijing to impose a regime of peace



Dai Bingguo (L), Director of the International Department of the Communist Party of China, meets Indian President K.R. Narayanan at presidential palace in New Delhi on Friday. India and China celebrated 50 years of diplomatic relations yesterday. — AFP photo

in the region.

"We must persist with this, even as neighbours, we address ourselves to unresolved issues, for that is our joint responsibility to the future," Singh said without making any direct reference to the unresolved border dispute.

India says China still holds 40,000 square kilometres of its

territory in Kashmir, while Beijing lays claim to a wide swathe of territory in the eastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

Thirteen rounds of talks over the years on the dispute have failed to yield any tangible results on the militarised Sino-Indian borders.

Indian President Narayanan

said Asia's two most populous nations should forge an economic partnership.

"We are engaged in massive efforts for economic development. It is natural that we should work together for prosperity and for peace in Asia and in the world," Narayanan told Chinese President Jiang Zemin in a message.

Cohen defends Taiwan's military

WASHINGTON, Apr 1: US Defence Secretary William Cohen on Friday called the Taiwanese military "very capable" following a secret Pentagon report that said the island was vulnerable to attack from China due to its military's aging technology and lack of training, reports AFP.

Taiwan is vulnerable to attack from China because after years of isolation its military are behind technologically and lack training. The Washington Post said Friday quoting a secret Pentagon report.

Asked if China is now capable of attacking and taking over Taiwan, Cohen said: "What we have said is that Taiwan should not seek independence and that China should seek to bring about a reconciliation through

peaceful means and not through military means."

When pressed further as to whether he changed his assessment that China is not now militarily capable of taking over Taiwan, Cohen said Friday "I'm satisfied that Taiwan is still a very capable — has a very capable military." He left Washington on a tour to the Middle East and Africa.

The 40-page classified report outlines "a host of problems" affecting Taiwan military's ability to defend itself against air, land, ballistic and cruise missiles, the Post said quoting an official familiar with the paper.

"There is no other military in the world that experiences the kind of isolation Taiwan's

does," one administration official told the daily.

"They don't train with anyone. And as warfare becomes more complex, it has become more difficult to handle all these new technologies."

Beijing has warned three nations not to recognise Taiwan, which it considers a renegade province.

China has become increasingly belligerent toward Taipei in the weeks leading up to the island's March 18 presidential elections, won by pro-independence candidate, Chen Shui-bian.

And despite Chen softening his stance on independence, Beijing has yet to ease up on its threats that Taipei reunify with

the mainland or risk a forceful takeover.

That, put together with the Pentagon's latest report, could influence the US administration's decision on what weapons to sell the island of 22 million people.

According to the Post, the administration is due to decide on whether to sell four sophisticated Aegis destroyers and other advanced weapons to Taipei in April — a move that could act as the "last straw" in the already strained US-China relations.

In spite of President Bill Clinton's strong policy of engagement with China, US officials insist the administration will stick by its legal obligation to help Taiwan defend itself in the face of aggression.

10 killed in Kashmir gunbattle

SRINAGAR, India, Apr 1: Ten people, including three Indian soldiers and five separatist guerrillas, were killed in shootouts in Kashmir, police said on Friday, reports Reuters.

Two Indian soldiers, two separatist guerrillas and a civilian were killed in fierce fighting around the village of Shalepora, near the border with Pakistan, on Thursday night.

Five more people died in separate shooting incidents in other parts of the troubled Himalayan region, police said.

News of the latest violence came as shops, businesses and schools across the territory closed in protest against the massacre of 35 Sikh earlier this month.

India has accused two Pakistan-backed separatist groups for the attack. The groups deny the charge and, together with Pakistan, have blamed India for the massacre.

Streets in Kashmir's main city, Srinagar, were deserted

following a strike call by a group of Kashmiri Sikhs, the Kashmiri Sikh Joint Action Committee.

The strike also had the support of Kashmir's leading separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat (Freedom) Conference.

Anger has welled up in Kashmir since the Sikhs were killed on March 20 in Chittisingpora, a remote Himalayan village about 62 km south of Srinagar, the state's summer capital.

Witnesses said at least 5,000 Sikhs from all over the Kashmir valley gathered near the site of the killing in the heavily guarded village to pray for the dead.

India accuses neighbouring Pakistan of supporting some militant groups and provoking violence. Pakistan denies the accusation saying it only gives moral and political support to what it calls Kashmiri freedom fighters.



Evacuees leave Abuta elementary school to another safety city, Toyoura, near Abuta, following the eruption of the Mt. Usu volcano in Hokkaido on Friday. Mount Usu volcano erupted for the third time yesterday. — AFP photo

Japanese volcano erupts for third time

DATE, Japan, Apr 1: Super-heated steam today cracked open a new crater on Japan's Mount Usu volcano in a third eruption that stoked fears of a major explosion ahead, reports AFP.

"A new eruption seems to be occurring on the northwestern side of Mount Usu," said a written statement issued here by the meteorological office on the northern island of Hokkaido.

Massive clouds of choking grey ash and snow belched several km into the air from the 732-metre volcano, which has burst into life for the first time in more than 20 years.

The key fear is an eruption in Usu's main crater, which measures 200 meters by six meters.

"From now on, the possibility of a stronger eruption at the top of the mountain will be very high," said Japanese meteorological agency official Takeshi Hachimine.

"We may have started seeing the beginning of an eruption bigger than ones we have witnessed yesterday and earlier today."

Thousands of people have fled the volcano.

A total of 15,700 people were now at special shelters from three nearby towns — 10,200

from Abuta, 5,000 from Date and 500 from Sobetsu, officials said.

But so far no injuries have been reported.

Huge amounts of volcanic ash were dumped over a hot spring resort by Lake Toya near the mountain, said a government statement issued Saturday.

Experts said magma had pushed through the mountain and made contact with an underground lake which turned to steam, creating enough pressure to punch through the rock.

A team of four experts and three government officials flew over the volcano in a helicopter and reported no signs of pyroclastic flows — the devastating tides of volcanic debris that can engulf towns.

"We saw trees standing and utility poles as well. If there was any pyroclastic flow, it would have felled trees as a matter of course," said one of the experts, Hokkaido University professor Tadahide Uie.

There were no signs of high temperatures. There was nothing to indicate that snow melted and flowed."

The most likely scenario was that steam explosions would persist, the expert said. There were no fault lines

near the craters, he added.

"But we don't consider that the possibility of eruptions shifting to the mountain peak has been reduced. We need to take measures with that possibility in mind."

Mudslides, another lethal possibility, were not considered imminent, said the Hokkaido meteorological office.

Volcanic steam first ripped through a 100-metre gash on the western side of the mountain at 1.09 p.m. (1009 BST) Friday after days of rumblings which triggered hundreds of quakes an hour.

After quietening down, it jolted back to life at 2.50 a.m. Saturday (1750 GMT Friday) with a fresh steam eruption in a second crater near the original crack.

Just 20 minutes later, the mountain shook violently with a quake measuring 4.8 on the Richter scale, the strongest since it returned to life from 22 years in slumber.

The latest eruption punched its way through the mountain shortly before midday (0900 BST) but details were still sketchy.

The last eruption at Mount Usu was in 1977 and 1978 and did not cause any immediate casualties.

15 diplomats to help reduce Indo-Pak tensions

OTTAWA, Apr 1: Diplomats representing 15 countries and the European Union agreed Friday to step up efforts to try to persuade India and Pakistan to ease tensions along their border, senior officials said, reports AFP.

One of the officials, from the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, said the two-day South Asia Task Force meeting recognised "the trend lines are not reassuring."

Speaking on background, the officials said no recommendations had been made at the meeting to member governments on whether to tighten or relax diplomatic sanctions taken against India and Pakistan following the testing of nuclear weapons by both countries in May, 1998.

The sanctions since 1998 have included Canada's stopping non-humanitarian aid to both countries, halting defence contracts with them and placing limits on ministerial-level contact between Ottawa and either New Delhi or Islamabad.

DiCaprio interviews Clinton

WASHINGTON, Apr 1: Friday was no day at "The Beach" for Leonardo DiCaprio — it was a day at the White House, interviewing the President, reports AP.

The 25-year-old actor, whose latest role was that of an amoral backpacker in search of the perfect beach, assumed the role of journalist to interview President Bill Clinton about the environment. The interview is to air April 22 on the US network ABC for an Earth Day special.

Clinton talked about his policy on global warming and efforts to make the White House more environmentally friendly, said White House spokesman Jake Siewert.

Afterward, DiCaprio walked out of the Oval Office with the president and waved goodbye as Clinton climbed into his limousine and headed for a local golf course.

"The Beach" created a stir among environmentalists while being filmed in Thailand. The moviemakers stripped away native grasses, cleared out garbage and bulldozed Maya Bay beach to make it look a little more "perfect." They also promised to restore the beach to its original condition.

\$6b needed to destroy Russian chemical weapons

THE HAGUE, Apr 1: Some six billion dollars (6.27 billion euros) are needed to destroy Russia's chemical weapons arsenal, Russian General Valery Kapashin told an international disarmament panel here Friday, reports AFP.

JvhJapashin, a specialist with the Moscow defence ministry, was speaking after meeting officials of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), meeting to evaluate Russian progress of destroying chemical weapons.

"So far not a single weapon has been destroyed," Kapashin admitted. "We OKow that we have primary responsibility for destroying these arms. But in view of the economic crisis affecting our country we need international support to achieve our objectives."

General Kapashin said six billion dollars was just a first estimate. In 1997 Russia signed an international convention on destruction of chemical weapons, pledging in principle to get rid of some 40,000 tonnes by 2007.

The Hague-based OPCW will meet in May to discuss a Russian request for a delay.

West Bengal passes bill to ban ragging

CALCUTTA, Apr 1: West Bengal Assembly yesterday unanimously passed a bill seeking to ban ragging in educational institutions and providing for expulsion, besides stringent punishment of two years' imprisonment and a fine of Rs 5,000 as penalty, or both, for erring students, reports PTL.

Members across party lines supported the 'West Bengal prohibition of ragging in educational institutions bill, 2000' and urged the government to strictly implement the provisions on enactment.

The bill said that in view of the spurt in incidents of ragging in educational institutions, the state government was of firm opinion that this social evil should be banned forthwith and any student, guilty of ragging, be appropriately punished.

It said that in view of practice of ragging causing unwarranted and unwanted sufferings, both physical and psychological to the victims, as also the resultant vitiated atmosphere of the educational institutions, the government had decided to put a curb on such acts.

State's higher education minister Satyasadhan Chakraborty admitted that there had been delay in moving such a bill, but said that the government had constituted an anti-ragging committee to monitor implications of the bill in the next academic session.

He called to create mass campaign against ragging for better impact.

HR Watch slates KL ban on public rallies

KUALA LUMPUR, Apr 1: An international human rights group on Saturday condemned Malaysia's recent decision to indefinitely ban outdoor public rallies in Kuala Lumpur after opposition activists organized a street protest earlier this month, reports AP.

The New York-based Human Rights Watch called the ban "an escalating crackdown on opposition speech" and urged the government to lift it. The ban was imposed last Saturday.

"This is not the first time the government has tried to silence outspoken opposition voices," Joe Saunders, deputy director of the group's Asian division, said in a statement.

"The ultimate casualties are Malaysian democracy and human rights," he said.

Public gatherings of more than four people in the Southeast Asian nation require a police permit. Laws also exist that bar student activity in politics. Students caught at street protests or at political meetings could face expulsion.

Police have linked the ban to a rally held at the capital's National Mosque on March 14,

where about 200 people staged a brief, peaceful protest against government restrictions on the country's most popular opposition tabloid, Harakah.

The government drew the ire of activists last month when it ordered the paper to shut publication for a month. Harakah, which is owned by the opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, had been printed twice a week.

Numerous international rights groups have called on Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad to lift the curb and repeal Malaysia's anti-press laws, which require all print media to apply annually to renew their publishing permits.

On Saturday, Human Rights Watch also criticized the government for shutting down an anti-government magazine, Detik, last week by refusing to renew its printing permit.

At its peak, the Malay-language magazine which wrote mainly about domestic politics, claimed to have 80,000 readers. Authorities have also threatened to shut down Detik's sister publication, Al-Wasilah, once its permit expires in August.

Anti-Mugabe demonstration

Street battle erupts in Zimbabwe

HARARE, Apr 1: Riot police fired teargas and military helicopters circled overhead as hundreds of war veterans armed with clubs and rocks attacked thousands of anti-government demonstrators in the centre of Zimbabwe's capital Harare today, reports AFP. The multiracial crowd of demonstrators, including elderly white couples and families marching hand in hand, fled through the city streets as the veterans laid about them with branches torn from trees and hurled rocks.

The veterans of Zimbabwe's 1970s independence war had gathered earlier at the headquarters of President Robert Mugabe's ZANU-PF party before setting off to ambush the march chanting 'Hondo! Hondo! (War! War!)'.

Businessman Tony Warner, bleeding from a blow across his arm, told AFP: "We suddenly saw the war veterans coming. There were about two or three hundred, armed to the teeth."

"I was hit on the back by a rock, and across the arm with a stick. Some shouted racial insults but the war vets attacked us all indiscriminately."

I saw one woman hit in the back and knocked to the ground. I helped her up and we all ran. This was supposed to be a peaceful march."

The demonstrators had earlier defied police to march through the capital denouncing

Mugabe's regime as repressive and lawless.

Riot police tried to disperse the crowd as it gathered in the centre of town, declaring the "Peace March" illegal despite a court order barring police interference, and arrested about five demonstrators.

But the police fell back as the rapidly swelling crowd moved off down Harare's main street, bringing traffic to a halt.

The protesters, marching under the umbrella of the National Constitutional Assembly (NCA), a group of opposition parties and civic organisations, sang, danced and carried posters saying "No to lawlessness, intimidation, violence and military rule."

They circled through the city, with motorists blowing their horns in support and office workers leaning out of windows giving the open-palm salute of the main opposition party, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC).

The demonstration comes against the background of the ongoing occupation of hundreds of white-owned farms by thousands of black squatters led by veterans of Zimbabwe's independence war.

Critics say the government is using the farm invasions and the war veterans as intimidation ahead of parliamentary elections due in May.

Russia urges Y'slavia to be flexible on Kosovo

MOSCOW, Apr 1: Russia urged Yugoslavia on Friday to be flexible in its dealings with the international community over Kosovo, reports Reuters.

Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov made the comment at talks with Borislav Milosevic, who is Yugoslav ambassador in Moscow and the brother of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic. His remarks were summarised in a Foreign Ministry statement.

The meeting followed recent signs of unease in relations between Yugoslavia and Russia, which has historically been the Great Power ally of the Serbs.

Ambassador Milosevic voiced disappointment last week that Russia did not help Yugoslavia more during the NATO bombing. Officials in Belgrade complained this week that Russia had slashed gas supplies without prior notice.

Ivanov said Russia stood by UN proposals for broad autonomy within Yugoslavia for

Kosovo, which has been under NATO control since last year's 11-week air war.

Moscow also believes that Belgrade should be involved in any negotiations on the future of the territory, he said.

"The minister called on the Yugoslav side to display great flexibility and cooperation in relations with the international community with the aim of implementing all articles of UN Security Council resolution 1244," the Foreign Ministry statement said.

"We emphasised that, whatever the circumstances, we want to see Belgrade involved in the process of stabilising the Balkans," it said.

"Without this, a long-term, durable settlement of the situation in the region is not possible."

Russia suspended ties with NATO but gave little direct aid to Yugoslavia during the aerial campaign and helped persuade Milosevic to accept international peace terms.

Ugandan police probe another cult site

SWESWE, Uganda, Apr 1: Ugandan police today began investigating another house used by the doomsday cult linked to the deaths of some 800 members, an AFP journalist on the scene reported.

The bodies of hundreds of murdered members of the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God cult have been found buried on the property of cult leaders since March 17, when around 400 members died in a fire in their headquarters in Kanungu, southwest Uganda.

"There's a place where our sources told us they (the cult members) used to gather so we have to investigate," said Freddy Kayima, Police Commissioner of the Kabarole district, before heading to the property.

The isolated mud and straw house is on the edge of a hamlet called Sweswe, a couple of kilometres' walk from the village of Kyaka, around 100 km east of the town of Fort Portal.

The house once belonged to John Katabalwe, who police say was a senior member of the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God cult.

"This place used to be one of the meeting places of the cult. They used to gather quite often here," Kayima said.

Police were able to enter the house but were not expected to immediately dig up the graves in search of more bodies following a decision Friday to temporarily suspend such activities until the arrival of new equipment.

A special branch police officer, who asked not to be named, said cult members began gathering in the house in 1998. After locals complained, police told them to leave, but they returned in May 1999.

Authorities then arrested three people described as a priest and two nuns and named as Sephas Tibaruka, Hillary Timushabe, and Consulate Kenema. Their whereabouts are unknown.

Aida Kaguzi, a woman in her 40s who lives a couple of kilometres from the house, told reporters she bought the property from Katabalwe a few days before the Kanungu blaze.

She said she paid 45,000 shillings, about 33 dollars for the house.

There have been several reports of cult members selling all their property shortly before the Kanungu blaze.

Kayima said that police believed Katabalwe and several members of his family died in Kanungu.

BRRIEFLY

Megawati re-elected party chief

Indonesian Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri was Saturday re-elected as head of the Indonesian Democracy Party for Struggle (PDI-P), the highest polling party in the 1999 general election, AFP reports from Jakarta.

A plenary session of the PDI-P congress held in Semarang, Central Java, elected Megawati to a five-year term, the Antara news agency said. The PDI-P was founded in October 1998 with Megawati as its first chairperson. The party was formed to contest the June 1999 general elections, the first free and fair elections in the country since 1955.

10 drown in Pak boat capsizes

At least 10 people drowned and 11 were missing after a boat carrying members of a wedding party capsized in Kabul River in Pakistan's North West Frontier province on Friday, local officials said, Reuters reports from Peshawar.

They said the boat carrying 32 people returning from a wedding capsized in the river in Nowshera district because of a storm. The Nowshera deputy commissioner told Reuters that 10 people were confirmed to have drowned, 11 were still presumed missing and 11 had been rescued.

240 rebels give up arms

Some 240 rebels in Sierra Leone turned themselves and their weapons in to UN peacekeepers on Friday, the largest number to date to honour a July peace agreement in the tiny West African nation, a UN spokesman said, Reuters reports from United Nations.

The rebels were all members of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, the military junta headed by Johnny Paul Koroma that ruled Sierra Leone for eight months before being ousted by a Nigerian-led West African intervention force in February 1998.