

Kashmir officials exhume bodies of 5 victims for DNA tests

SRINAGAR, India, Apr 8: Kashmir authorities have exhumed the bodies of five Muslims killed by Indian security forces to test if they were separatist rebels or innocent civilians, an official statement said today reports AFP.

Following an order from Kashmir chief minister Farooq Abdullah, senior officials had exhumed all the bodies by late Friday.

A communiqué from the Kashmir government said DNA tests would be carried out to confirm their identities. Medical experts took samples from the bodies, which were sealed in the presence of officials and the relatives.

The relatives identified the bodies by the teeth, rings and pieces of cloth still remaining on the charred bodies.

Khurshid Ahmed Ganai, divisional commissioner of Kashmir, told AFP: "All the five bodies have been recognised by the family members. The government is waiting for tests to be conducted before saying anything on the issue."

Indian security forces have said the five were "foreign" Muslim separatist militants involved in the massacre of 36 Sikh villagers in Kashmir on March 20.

However, all the five bodies were claimed by villagers as those of local civilians, who had gone missing after their supposed arrest by the security forces after the massacre of Sikh villagers.

Pakistan denies link with radioactive material

ISLAMABAD, Apr 8: Islamabad today denied reports radioactive material recently seized in Uzbekistan was destined for Pakistan, reports AFP.

"The government of Pakistan has nothing to do with this episode. We are not in any way connected with this shipment," a foreign office spokesman Tariq Altaf told reporters.

"This is obviously an attempt to falsely implicate Pakistan, which we condemn," he said.

Authorities in Uzbekistan last Sunday seized 10 small containers of radioactive material from a car on the border with Kazakhstan, an Uzbek customs spokesman said.

Akhmadjon Djumaniazov said the radioactivity of the material, valued at more than 18,000 dollars, was 250 times the legal limit.

The Iranian driver of the car was trying to get the material to Pakistan via Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Iran. It was destined for a Pakistani company, Djumaniazov said, without elaborating.

Pak lawyers boycott court

KARACHI, Apr 8: Lawyers wore black arm bands and boycotted courts in the southern port city of Karachi today to protest the killing a day earlier of a prominent Shiite Muslim attorney, reports AP.

On Friday, unidentified gunmen killed Waqar Hussain Naqvi, secretary of Tehrik-e-Jaifria, an organisation for Shiite Muslim law in Pakistan.

Naqvi's 18-year-old son and their driver also was killed in the attack.

No group claimed responsibility for the attack, but police suspect extremist Sunni Muslims may be involved in the shooting which occurred on the first day of the Islamic month of Muharram.

In recent years, there have been bloody incidents of violence between militant Shiite and Sunni Muslim groups during Muharram.

Extremist Sunni Muslim groups want Shiite Muslims declared non-Muslims.

Tamil Tigers sink navy gun boats

COLOMBO, Apr 8: Tamil Tiger guerrillas destroyed two navy gun boats in northern Sri Lanka where heavy fighting raged with casualties mounting on both sides, the defence ministry and the rebels said today, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said the two Dvora-class gun boats were hit by artillery fire near the coast of Nagar Kovil in the Jaffna peninsula on Friday evening.

"Following the incident a sea battle raged and continued for several hours," the LTTE said in a statement sent here from its London office.

The defence ministry in a statement admitted the two craft were lost in a rebel attack and said a rescue operation giving details.

The ministry also said two soldiers and seven Tiger rebels were killed in ground battles in the Jaffna peninsula on Friday.

Government troops are battling to recapture territory lost to Tamil rebels in northern Sri Lanka.

The army used artillery fire to neutralise Tamil Tiger positions near Thananklappu, the defence ministry said.

Even as the fighting which began more than 12 days ago raged in the north of the island, aid agencies expressed concern for civilian safety.

Pakistan accuses India of fuelling tensions

ISLAMABAD, Apr 8: Pakistan today accused India of fuelling regional tensions "high" and waging a propaganda war against it after New Delhi rejected an offer for the violent rivals to sit down and talk, reports AFP.

Tensions over the Kashmir remain "high" despite recent visits to India and Pakistan by US President Bill Clinton, who urged the neighbours to start a peace dialogue, foreign office spokesman Tariq Altaf said.

Rival troops continue to trade fire across the disputed border in the Himalayan state of Kashmir, divided between the two nuclear-armed neighbours and claimed by both.

India last week turned down Pakistan's formal offer to resume their dialogue, saying there must first be an end to its

"cross-border terrorism" -- a charge consistently denied by Islamabad.

"We think by rejecting dialogue, they are going against the trend of the times and against the will of the international community," Altaf told a press briefing.

India's purpose "is to continue to drum up propaganda against Pakistan as a smoke-screen to divert international attention from their atrocities against the Kashmiris by their armed forces," he said.

New Delhi blames Islamabad for the long-running unrest in its zone of Kashmir, where a Muslim separatist campaign has left more than 25,000 people dead since 1989.

Pakistan calls the campaign an "indigenous" struggle for

self-determination for which it vows open political and moral support.

The dispute over Kashmir has caused two wars between Pakistan and India since 1947. Fierce battles in the Kargil area of Kashmir last year brought the two countries dangerously close to another all-out conflict.

"Parroting allegations of infiltration (from Pakistan) will take them nowhere," Altaf said, renewing a Pakistani proposal to create a mutual mechanism to monitor the dividing Line of Control in Kashmir.

Responding to questions, the spokesman voiced suspicion of India's involvement in three bomb explosions in Pakistan on Friday which left more than 20 people injured.



Muslim protesters try to flee a Srinagar street after police fired tear gas canisters near a main mosque on Friday to disperse the group. Several thousand Muslims protested against the shooting down of eight Muslim demonstrators in Anantnag. — AFP photo

Isolation of Russia over Chechnya growing: US

WASHINGTON, Apr 8: The United States said on Friday Russia's suspension from Europe's oldest club of democratic governments showed its actions in Chechnya were isolating it from the international community, reports Reuters.

"We understand the concerns that motivated the council of Europe to suspend Russia's voting rights — only the second such move in its 51-year-old history — was a reflection of Russia's increasing isolation."

"Hopefully that will help ... make the Russian leaders see the danger of continuing on their current course," he said.

"The war continues. It's now moved from cities to a guerrilla operation with no end in sight. The world is increasingly concerned and hopefully at some point the calculus in Moscow will change and the political solution we've been calling for will become more possible."

Rubin played down comments by Portuguese Foreign Minister Jaime Gama that President-elect Vladimir Putin was considering a political solution to the conflict.

"We are not yet convinced that the necessary steps are going to be taken," he said.

Gama, whose country holds the rotating presidency of the European Union, told a news conference in Moscow earlier that Putin had spoken during a meeting at the Kremlin of his intention to propose a political solution.

The United States has repeatedly urged the Kremlin to find interlocutors in the region, address the social and economic concerns under lying the conflict and give full access to international organisations to work in the region.

"We continue to remain open to hearing additional information suggesting that such a political solution is imminent," Rubin said.

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Nepalese Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala (R) calls on visiting Chinese chief of the general staff of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), General Fu Quanyou (L) in Kathmandu on Friday. A nine-member military goodwill delegation led by General Fu arrived in Nepal on Thursday on a five-day visit. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Blast kills 3 in Chechnya: A gas explosion in Sernovodsk, in western Chechnya, killed three people and wounded several others, the Russian government office in Chechnya told the ITAR-TASS news agency Saturday, AFP reports from Moscow.

Early inquiries into Friday's blast showed that two adults and a child died. The authorities spoke of injured but did not say how many.

Annan to visit 5 African states: UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan will pay official visits to five West African countries between April 25 and May 2, a UN spokeswoman said on Friday, Reuters reports from United Nations.

Annan, currently on trip to Europe and Cuba, will be back at UN headquarters for about a week before leaving for West Africa. His first African stop will be in Senegal, from April 25 to 28. The other countries on his itinerary are: Gambia, Gabon, Central African Republic, and Cameroon.



Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) shakes hands with EU High Commissioner for Foreign Relations and Security Javier Solana (L), as Portuguese Foreign Minister Jaime Gama (2nd R) looks on, during their meeting in the Kremlin in Moscow on Friday. The meeting with a senior EU delegation comes one day after the Council of Europe invoked procedures to suspend Russia's membership in the 41-nation rights and democracy body over Moscow's crackdown in Chechnya. — AFP photo

85 anti-nuclear activists detained in Turkey

ANKARA, Apr 8: Police in the southern Turkish city of Mersin on Friday detained 85 anti-nuclear activists protesting the planned construction of a nuclear plant in the region, the Anatolia news agency reported, says AFP.

The detentions came ahead of a government announcement, expected later Friday, of the tender winner to construct the plant.

Environmentalists are highly critical of the nuclear plant project as the proposed site, at Akkuyu, lies 25 km from a seismic faultline.

Blairs turn down big money for first baby photos

LONDON, Apr 8: Prime Minister Tony Blair and his pregnant wife, Cherie, have turned down several six-figure offers for the first pictures of their fourth child due in about six weeks, newspapers reported today, says Reuters.

A Downing Street spokesman could not confirm the reports but the Times said the Blairs had decided to hire a photographer to capture the first portrait which would then be distributed free of charge.

Throughout his term at Number 10, the Prime Minister has closely guarded the privacy of his children. Euan, 15, Nicky, 14, and Kathryn, 11, trying to ensure they grow up in as normal an environment as possible.

The Blairs recently won a High Court injunction to stop the tabloid Mail on Sunday newspaper publishing excerpts of a book written by their former nanny.

Blair is expected to take a few days off when the baby is born — his wife is due late May.

China again warns Taiwan leaders

BEIJING, Apr 8: China on Saturday again warned Taiwanese leaders against moving toward independence, accusing Vice President-elect Annette Lu of being an incurable separatist who would come to "no good," reports AP.

Like Taiwan President-elect Chen Shui-bian, Lu has said she would support a formal declaration of independence for the island only if Beijing attacked.

But she has harshly criticised China for threatening Taiwan, and supported a "slow diplomacy" approach to countering China's attempts to isolate Taiwan.

That criticism prompted China's Taiwan Affairs Office to issue as harsh statement, run by the state-run Xinhua News Agency and carried on the front page of Saturday's People's Daily, accusing Lu of using "threats" to incite Taiwanese against unification with the mainland.

"She uses poisonous words plotting to incite Taiwan comrades to hate their compatriots

through religious schools in Pakistan," he said.

"There is every indication that preparations for an organised, large-scale offensive are now well under way on both sides," Renninger said.

The Taliban rule almost 90 per cent of Afghanistan, including Kabul, and have been fighting the opposition on several fronts since they drove the government out two years ago.

Richard Holbrooke, the US ambassador to the United Nations, said the war has exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation.

Taliban leaders have made it difficult for the United Nations and other aid agencies to operate in Afghanistan, complicating relations with the international body.

Women and girls are denied basic health care and education and cannot travel without a male relative.

UN threatens more sanctions against Taliban

UNITED NATIONS, Apr 8: The Security Council threatened further sanctions Friday against Afghanistan's Taliban militia to compel it to agree to UN demands to end fighting and hand over Osama bin Laden for trial in the bombing of two US embassies, reports AP.

In a statement adopted after an open debate on Afghanistan, council members blasted the Taliban for the unabated violence and worsening humanitarian conditions in the country.

They urged the Taliban to stop new offences and resume talks with opposition factions and called on the militia's foreign allies to halt the supply of personnel and weapons to the warring factions.

The council froze Taliban assets in November and imposed an air embargo on the Taliban-run airline to force the militia to deliver bin Laden for trial in the bombings in east

Africa in August 1998. The Taliban have refused, saying he is their guest.

In the statement, the council said it "reaffirms its readiness to consider the imposition of further targeted measures ... with the aim of achieving the full implementation of all its relevant resolutions."

Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy said the council should "consider measures to cut off the supply of weapons to belligerents." Axworthy, who was in New York to chair the meeting, did not elaborate.

Movements of Taliban fighters and equipment in and around Kabul have increased in recent days as they prepare for new spring offensives. John Renninger, head of Asia-Pacific division of the organisation's Department of Political Affairs, told the council.

The militia also has been recruiting non-Afghan fighters

through religious schools in Pakistan, he said.

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Elian's father allowed to take his son back to Cuba

WASHINGTON, Apr 8: The father of Cuban castaway Elian Gonzalez has won the green light to take his son home to Cuba next week, setting the stage for a showdown in the bitter custody battle with his Miami relatives who have refused to turn the boy over, reports AFP.

"I am going to have my child soon," Juan Miguel Gonzalez told reporters after a meeting Friday with Attorney General Janet Reno in Washington.

Reno announced that, early next week in Miami, custody will be formally transferred to the father and his relatives will be given "instructions on when and where" they are to hand Elian over.

"It is time for this little boy who has been through so much to be with his father," Reno told reporters.

"I wholeheartedly reject Cuba's system of government," Reno said. "But it is not our place to punish a father for his political beliefs or where he wants to raise his child."

No date was set for Elian's actual reunion with his father, whom the boy has not seen since his November 1999 rescue at sea, but Reno said she expected the family to comply and quickly wrap up the explosive standoff.

Gonzalez, 31, will be free to take Elian back to Cuba, but Reno added she would talk to Gonzalez about staying until the court case is settled next month, provided the Miami relatives agreed to turn Elian over voluntarily.

Reno noted that the Miami family repeatedly has refused to sign a pledge to turn over Elian voluntarily should they lose their appeal of a January court decision that the boy belongs with his father.

The boy's great-uncle, Lazaro Gonzalez, has been caring for him since Elian was found

clinging to an inner tube off the Florida coast after his mother drowned seeking asylum in the United States.

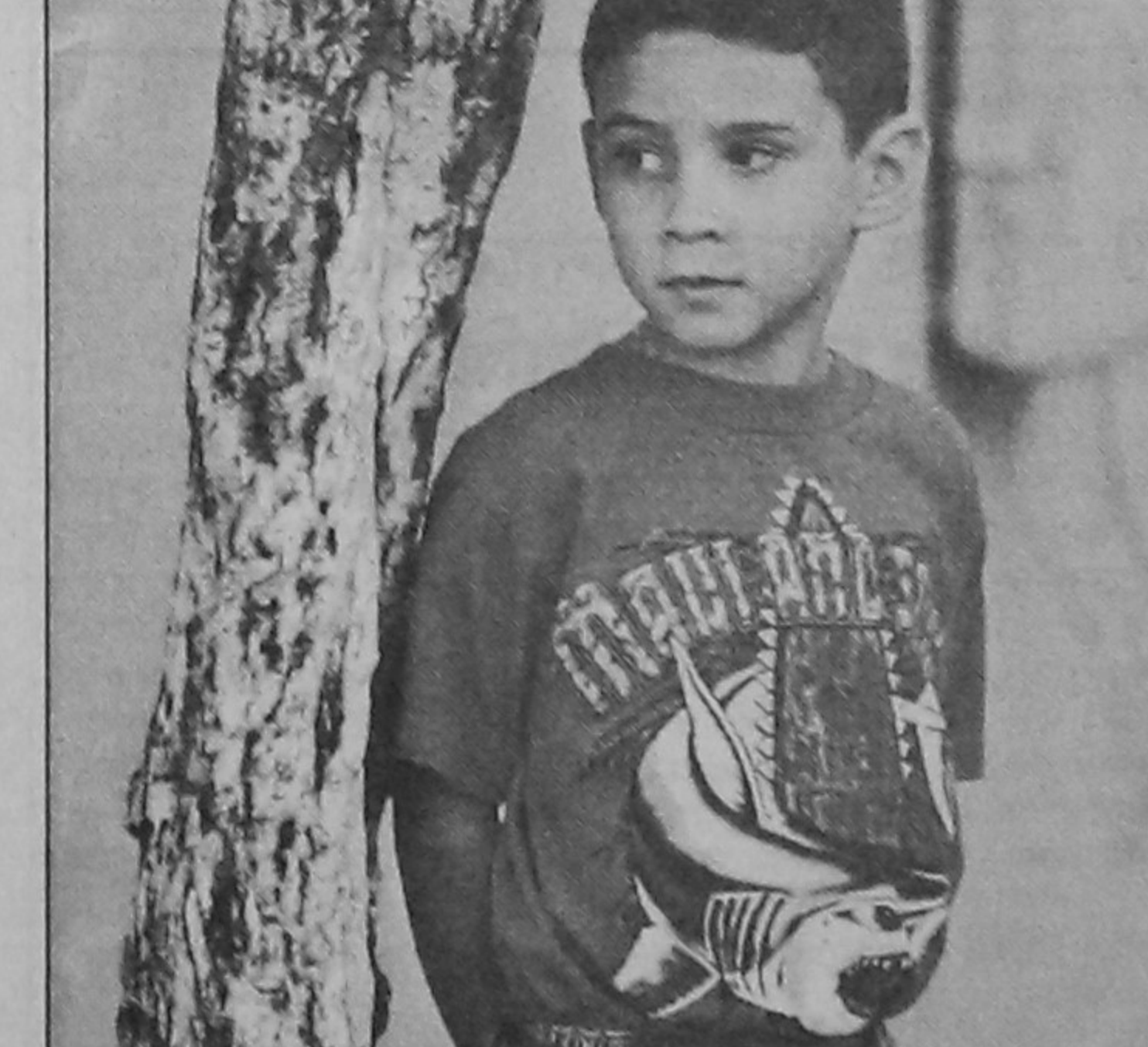
In January, the US Justice Department ruled against the Miami relatives' request to grant Elian a US asylum hearing, arguing that only his father could determine his immigration status.

Shortly after Reno's announcement Friday, a letter from the Miami family's spokesman Armando Gutierrez

was made public, asking to meet with Juan Miguel.

The family said they believe Gonzalez "should meet with the boy in his home in Miami as soon as possible, but as a father, without an entourage, without Cuban military or diplomatic representatives, but with his new wife and Elian's half brother."

The family argues that Juan Miguel Gonzalez is under Castro's influence and that the boy is "afraid" to go home.



Six-year-old Elian Gonzalez watches as visitors leave the home of his Miami relatives in Little Havana on Friday. — AFP photo

Russia may develop stealth jet

WASHINGTON, Apr 8: Russia is pursuing the design and possible development of a "stealth" bomber that would be larger than the radar-avoiding US F-117 fighter and smaller than America's B-2 strategic bomber, according to Aviation Week & Space Technology Magazine, reports Reuters.

In an article to be published on Monday, the magazine said work was under way at Sukhoi aircraft in Russia and suggested it might signal willingness by cash-strapped Moscow to develop expensive new arms.

"The future of the Russian stealth bomber programme will be a significant indicator of the course that a new President Vladimir Putin intends to follow on air force modernisation and issues about the country's ability to wage modern warfare beyond its borders," Aviation Week said.

It called the programme significant because Russia was pursuing not only the new SS-27 Topol ballistic missile but design and possibly prototype work on a new bomber to give Moscow more parity with Washington in nuclear and tactical manned strike aircraft capability.

The aircraft, designated the T-60s and sometimes called the S-60, most likely uses a variable geometry wing but with substantial stealth design characteristics embodied in the overall aircraft shape, the magazine reported.

The Russians also have examined flying-wing stealth bomber concepts for an aircraft that would be smaller than the B-2, it said.

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Palestinians, Israel resume peace talks

WASHINGTON, Apr 8: Israeli and Palestinian negotiators began a week of talks at secluded Bolling Air Force Base in Washington on Friday as the target date approached for an agreement on borders, Jerusalem and refugees, reports Reuters.

But the middle-level negotiating teams, led by Oded Eran for Israel and Yasser Abed Rabbo for the Palestinians, were unlikely to reach an agreement without more talks between their leaders, diplomats said on Friday.

"No single round of talks can be expected to solve all the complex core issues between Israelis and Palestinians," added Israeli embassy spokesman Mark Regev.

"This round must be seen as another link in a process toward reaching a framework agreement by May," he said.

The framework agreement is meant as a step toward a comprehensive agreement by Sept. 13, covering all "final status" issues such as the size and status of the Palestinian territories, Jerusalem, water rights, the fate of Palestinian refugees and Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza.

The same negotiators met at Bolling for one week last month without evidence of either progress or deadlock.

State Department spokesman James Rubin said the negotiators met informally over dinner on Thursday and would have a trilateral meeting with US special Middle East peace talk coordinator Dennis Ross on Friday afternoon.

A Palestinian source said the United States was taking a backseat role in the talks and that the first formal session on Friday was purely bilateral.

Group of 77 holds summit next week

HAVANA, Apr 8: Moammar Gaddafi of Libya and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat are among at least 65 heads of state who will attend the first presidential summit, organised by the Group of 77 developing nations next week, reports AP.

The presidents of Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia have confirmed their attendance. Kim Yong Nam, president North Korea's parliament and the country's ceremonial head of state, will come to Cuba for the summit and an official visit, the North's media reported.

About half of the heads of state will come from African nations that have friendly relations with communist Cuba, including Namibia, Zambia, Angola and South Africa.

Among the main goals of the gathering known as the South Summit will be to promote relations among Third World nations, said Arthur Mbanefo, president of the G-77 and Nigeria's ambassador to the United Nations.

"We have not been able to talk with each other," Mbanefo said. He also said it is important for poor nations of the southern part of the globe to improve relations with richer nations located largely in the North, emphasising another summit theme.

Speaking at a news conference in Havana, Mbanefo announced the attendance of Gaddafi and Arafat. He also said that UN Secretary General Kofi Annan would attend the summit.