

International

Landmine blast kills two in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Dec 4: Suspected Muslim militants staged a deadly landmine blast in Kashmir on the seventh day of an Indian army ceasefire today, killing two people, injuring 10 and destroying three vehicles, police said, reports AFP.

A police official said separatist rebels targeted an army convoy at Shilpura Mandir, near the town of Khanpura, about 58 kilometres north of the state summer capital Srinagar.

The blast took place at around 12:30 pm (1300 BST). It's impact was tremendous and it could be heard around a radius of three kilometres, he said.

One soldier was killed in the explosion while another was critically injured, the official said, adding that six other military personnel and four civilians were also wounded.

However, a medical source said that one of the injured civilians later died of his wounds.

Two army buses and a jeep were damaged in the explosion, police said.

Pakistan agrees to talks between Kashmiri rebels and India

ISLAMABAD, Dec 4: With tit-for-tat cease-fires in effect in the disputed Kashmir region, Pakistan took a second significant step toward peace today by accepting separate talks between Kashmiri secessionists and India, reports AP.

Until now Pakistan had been bitterly opposed to talks between Kashmiri secessionists and India that did not include Islamabad. In an interview with the Associated Press, Pakistan's Foreign Ministry spokesman Mohammed Riaz Khan said the bilateral talks should lead to three-way peace negotiations that would include Pakistan, India and Kashmiris.

The latest concession follows a weekend offer of a truce by Pakistan along the disputed Kashmir border where tens of thousands of soldiers from both countries are deployed.

The opposing armies routinely engage in cross border gunbattles that have left hundreds of civilians dead and entire villages on both sides of the border abandoned.

"All I will say is that this is an important initiative," said Khan. "I won't say anything more than that."

Pakistan's peace overtures were prompted by New Delhi's unilateral cease fire offer in its state of Jammu and Kashmir, where secessionists have been waging a violent insurgency since 1989, demanding either outright independence or union with Islamic Pakistan.

At least 30,000 people have been killed since the outset of the fighting.

India offered a one-month cease fire throughout the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, that began last week. Militant Kashmiri groups, most of whom are headquartered in Pakistan, rejected the truce and are blamed for several attacks since it began.

But India's cease-fire pressed Pakistan to reciprocate. Last weekend Pakistan offered its cease-fire along the border and

on Monday elaborated on its further overture agreeing to accept independent talks between India and Kashmiri separatists.

Khan said Pakistan also wants India to let members of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, an umbrella group representing 23 Kashmiri separatist groups, to travel to Islamabad to hold talks here.

Pakistan wants three-way talks to begin "immediately after Ramadan."

In New Delhi, the chairman of the All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC), an alliance of over two dozen parties in Kashmir, said today he was ready for talks with both India and Pakistan.

"We will talk to the Indians and the Pakistanis," Abdul Gani Bhat told AFP, adding the APHC should not be seen as a "mediator" but as a "party" to the dispute.

Describing a unilateral month-long ceasefire announced by New Delhi as a "pleasing" and "healthy development," Bhat said it generated a "propitious atmosphere" for talks to solve the Kashmir issue.

Bhat advocated a "collective effort" or "a broad gauge dialogue" which would involve India, Pakistan and the APHC.

The chairman of the APHC, who arrived here on Sunday, said he would be in New Delhi for about a week to meet senior Indian officials.

Two other separatist leaders -- Yaseen Malik and Mirwaiz Umar Farooq -- are also in the Indian capital.

Commenting on a Pakistani proposal which suggested the APHC hold separate talks with Islamabad and New Delhi, Bhat said it was "not a bad idea" and hoped India would allow a separatist delegation to travel to Pakistan.

"India should not see us as mediators... we are a party to the dispute," Bhat said.



Veteran politician Nawabzada Nasrullah (L) welcomes Kulsoom Nawaz (R), wife of deposed and jailed prime minister Nawaz Sharif, at a meeting in Islamabad on Sunday. Pakistan's former arch-rival political heavyweights joined forces for the first time to wage a joint but peace efforts to restore democracy in the country. --AFP photo

2 engineers arrested in Calcutta for cyber theft

CALCUTTA, India, Dec 4: Two computer engineers have been arrested for stealing computer data from a private firm in the capital of the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, police said today, reports AFP.

The two engineers have been booked on Friday night on charges ranging from tampering with documents, illegally accessing, copying and damaging data in a computer, Banibrata Basu, head of Calcutta Police's detective unit, said.

This was the first case of a person being booked under the recent Information Technology Act, which deals with cyber crime, he added.

The two engineers, both in their late twenties, were working with a city-based business firm, which compiled medical case histories sent by doctors from overseas over the Internet.

Basu said the engineers had allegedly copied the documents stored in the private firm's computers and then set up a business of their own.

The police raided the office of the two engineers following a complaint by their former employer, officials said, seizing two computers, some CD ROMs and floppy discs.

Basu said the engineers could be imprisoned for three years and fined up to 100 million rupees (2.2 million dollars) if proved guilty in court.

Life on land a billion years older

LONDON, Dec 4: Life on the land may be more than a billion years older than previously thought, say scientists after discovering organic matter in ancient rocks in South Africa, reports DPA.

Researchers found evidence that primitive life spread from the sea to the land between 2.6 and 2.7 billion years ago. Life is thought to have flourished in the oceans for the past 3.8 billion years, but to have lived on land for less than a third of that time.

Until now the earliest undisputed signs of terrestrial life came from rocks from Arizona, in the United States believed to be 1.2 billion years old.

Scientists believe that ancient rocks from South Africa may be the remnants of micro-organisms which colonized the land as long ago as 2.7 billion years, the magazine Nature reported.

Research was carried out by a team led by Yumiko Watanabe, from Pennsylvania State University.

The primordial organic matter was found in Mpumalanga province in a geological region known as the Black Reef Formation. Analysis showed that it contained tell-tale chemical signatures of life.



US President Bill Clinton (R) and US First Lady Hillary Clinton (2nd-R) welcome the Kennedy Centre Honourees to the White House in Washington on Sunday. The 2000 honourees are dancer Mikhail Baryshnikov, rock-and-roll pioneer Chuck Berry, tenor Placido Domingo (L), actor-director Clint Eastwood (2nd L) and actress Angela Lansbury (3rd L). --AFP photo

Israel to work with inquiry panel on ME violence

JERUSALEM, Dec 4: Israel said on Sunday it would work with an international fact-finding committee due to start investigating this month the wave of deadly Israeli-Palestinian violence over the past nine weeks, reports AFP.

"Israel will cooperate fully with the committee," Gilad Sher, chief of staff of Prime Minister Ehud Barak's cabinet, told public radio.

But Sher added: "We hope that before its arrival, the committee's mandate is clearly defined."

The statement showed Israel was dropping the government's earlier objections to the panel, although one official said there was still resistance from the justice minister and the cabinet's legal adviser.

Israeli Foreign Minister Shlomo Ben-Ami said after the declaration: "Israel sees the panel's action positively and will help it with its work."

Israeli state radio said Barak and Ben-Ami would hold a working meeting on the topic later.

Palestinian officials have said the five-member committee, headed by former US senator George Mitchell, was expected in the region on December 11, almost two months after the Sharm el-Sheikh summit in Egypt in October decided to set it up.

The committee aims to establish the reasons for the Israeli-Palestinian unrest, which has claimed the lives of more than

300 people since late September, and ways to solve it.

Israel had said last month it was opposed to the committee starting its work in the region until the violence dies down.

Sher said Sunday the "violence has diminished in intensity, but not enough for peace negotiations on the key issues to resume."

Besides Mitchell -- previously a mediator in the Northern Ireland peace process -- the commission's members include former Turkish president Suleyman Demirel, Javier Solana, the European Union's foreign affairs representative, Norwegian diplomat Thorbjorn Jagland and Warren Rudman, another former US senator.

Senate orders Estrada aide to testify at corruption trial

MANILA, Dec 4: The presiding judge in Joseph Estrada's corruption trial today summoned an aide of the Philippine president to testify, but blocked prosecutors' bid to search the homes of his alleged mistresses for evidence, reports AFP.

Estrada risks being unseated at the December 7 trial in the Senate, the first for a sitting Asian leader. The House of Representatives impeached him last month on bribery, corruption, betrayal of public trust and culpable violation of the constitution.

Supreme Court chief justice Hilario Davide, presiding officer in the trial, ruled summons for presidential assistant Anton Prieto as well as former Philippines police chief Roberto Lastimoso may be issued for their appearance on the day stated by the prosecutors.

Prosecutors want the two to give evidence on Thursday on the bribes Estrada is accused of receiving from bosses of illegal gambling rackets.

Davide also ordered Yolanda Ricaforte, wife of a senior official at the tourism department, to take the stand on Thursday.

Prosecutors charge she delivered about four million dollars in bribes to a presidential charity.

But Davide denied authorisation for prosecutors to photograph and videolape the interiors of the president's private home, three suburban Manila houses and a resort villa.

Prosecutor Sergio Apostol argued the "appearance and layout" of these houses were material to allegations by prosecution witnesses that couriers of gambling bosses delivered bribes to Estrada at these addresses.

US commission to probe voting irregularities

WASHINGTON, Dec 4: The US agency charged with investigating civil rights violations will examine whether minority voters were intimidated from casting ballots in the controversial presidential election in Florida, reports AFP.

The US Civil Rights Commission said in a statement Sunday that it "will examine allegations of voter intimidation and other voting rights improprieties" in the US presidential election, one day after the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) announced a lawsuit on the matter.

On Saturday, the NAACP alleged that "widespread irregularities" in the November 7 presidential election in Florida denied African American, Jewish and immigrant voters the right to vote.

The civil rights group said in a statement that "voter intimidation, voter eligibility discrepancies

and illegal tactics" had taken place before and during the balloting.

By noon on Election Day, long before we had any idea how the election would turn out, we had over 80 complaints," NAACP President Kweisi Mfume said at a press conference broadcast on C-SPAN television.

In all, the NAACP received more than 486 documented complaints alleging irregularities, including relocating polling places without notice and refusing to allow registered voters to cast ballots.

The association charged that the complaints "point toward the massive, systematic exclusion of black, Jewish and immigrant voters." The group said it would file its lawsuit in the coming week.

The US Commission on Civil Rights said in its statement Sunday that it would decide at its regular monthly meeting here Friday "what, if any, action to take in response" to the suit.

Foreign powers trying to divide Malaysian Muslims: Mahathir

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 4: Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has accused foreign powers of trying to divide the country's majority Muslim population, reports AP.

"We know these outsiders have no kind intentions toward us," Mahathir said while breaking fast during Ramadan, the holiest month in the Muslim calendar.

They let the Palestinians be killed and took no action even when asked to. These people who refused to help the Palestinians are suddenly coming to the aid of the people in our country," Mahathir was quoted as saying by the national news agency, Bernama.

Mahathir did not name the foreign powers, but claimed they were using opposition parties in the Southeast Asian nation to hold street protests and divide

Muslim allegiances.

In recent weeks, Malaysian officials have criticized seven US Congressmen who sponsored a resolution saying that Anwar Ibrahim, a former deputy prime minister and Mahathir opponent, was wrongly convicted of sodomy and corruption and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Anwar claims he was the victim of a conspiracy.

Sympathy for Anwar and disaffection from the long rule by Mahathir's United Malays National Organization has driven many Malay Muslims long the bedrock of Mahathir's support to vote for other parties in recent elections.

"The Muslims in this country are so disunited that some are isolated, detached and refuse to speak to others," Mahathir said. "Muslims are so disunited that we see no way of them coming back together again."

Muslim Malays comprise more than half of Malaysia's 23 million people. The rest are mostly ethnic Chinese Buddhists and Christians and ethnic Indian Hindus.

Mahathir, Malaysia's leader since 1981, has often warned the people not to trust foreign powers, insisting that Western nations are out to recolonize the country, which gained independence from Britain in 1957.

But his political rivals say they must seek outside help, claiming that Mahathir refuses to tolerate democratic reforms. Several opposition officials have traveled abroad repeatedly to criticize Mahathir for his treatment of Anwar.

Mahathir fired Anwar from the Cabinet in September 1998, sparking unprecedented anti-government sentiment that roiled the capital with protests for months.

BRIEFLY

Wahid to visit Aceh: Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid will visit the rebellious province of Aceh on December 15 to inaugurate the imposition of Islamic sharia law there, Aceh Governor Abdullah Puteh said Monday, AFP reports from Jakarta.

Wahid is also scheduled to hand over a humanitarian aid package worth 100 billion rupiah (10.5 million dollars) for the region during the planned visit to the provincial capital of Banda Aceh, Puteh said.

Mayor shot dead in Philippines:

A town mayor, his police escort and his driver were shot dead Monday in an ambush in Bulacan province just outside the Philippine capital, a police spokesman said, AFP reports from Manila.

Esteban Paulino, mayor of Dona Remedios Trinidad town, his police escort and a driver were travelling in a van through the neighbouring town of Angat when unidentified men in a minibus fired on them, killing the three, Senior Superintendent Nicanor Bartolome said. The motive for the killing and the identities of the gunmen remained unknown, Bartolome added.

Four killed in UK air crash:

Four people, including a 10-year-old girl and her father, were found dead Sunday after a small tourist plane crashed near Reading, west of London, according to police, AFP reports from England.

The Piper Arrow plane crashed at around 3:00 pm (1500 GMT) just minutes after taking off from Thuxton in Hampshire with four people aboard for a short tourism flight. According to witnesses, the plane fell apart in mid-air before plunging into woodland, some hundreds of metres (yards) from a group of cottages.

Grandchildren of Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt to meet in April

LONDON, Dec 4: The grandchildren of wartime leaders Winston Churchill, Franklin Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin are set to meet for the first time. The Times reported today, reports AP.

Roosevelt Churchill, Curtis Roosevelt and Yevgeny Djugashvili will attend a symposium in Maastricht, the Netherlands, in April to discuss the far-reaching consequences of the famous 1945 meeting in Yalta where their grandfathers decided Europe's post-war fate, according to the paper.

The meeting at a hotel in the northern Dutch town of Noordwijk will be the first time that Djugashvili, the son of Stalin's eldest son Yacov, travels outside the former Soviet Union, The Times reported.

Stalin's grandson, a retired history professor, has been the leader of the Stalinist Party of the USSR in Georgia for ten years. He told the daily that he was ready to defend the honour of his grandfather and rebut any criticism of the Soviet leader's behaviour at Yalta.

Djugashvili told the paper: "I graduated from an academy, produced a doctoral thesis, am a professional historian and know a lot about the issues."

"As for them, they know far less," Curtis Roosevelt, a former head of the section at the United Nations secretariat dealing with non-governmental organisations, has been involved in conferences recalling the 12-year presidency of his grandfather Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Winston Churchill, a former MP, kept a huge collection of his grandfather's private papers, which were recently bought for the nation with national lottery money, according to The Times.

Pulitzer Prize winner Brooks dead

CHICAGO, Dec 4: Gwendolyn Brooks, who won a Pulitzer Prize for writing candid and compassionate poetry that delved into poverty, racism and drugs among black people, has died. She was 83, reports AP.

Family friend Leroy Bennett said Brooks died after a short illness. Rayner AA & Sons funeral home confirmed her death Sunday night.

Brooks was world renowned for promoting an understanding of black culture through her poetry while at the same time suggesting inclusiveness is the key to harmony.

"I believe that we should all know each other, we human carriers of so many pleasurable differences," she said in a recent interview. "To not know is to doubt, to shrink from, sidestep or destroy."

Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize in 1949 for her second book of poetry, "Annie Allen." She wrote hundreds of poems and more than 20 books and had been Illinois' poet laureate since 1968.



BCIC International Tender Notice

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Astronauts fix giant solar wings on space station

HOUSTON, Dec 4: The crew of the space shuttle Endeavour on Sunday successfully attached two giant solar panels to the International Space Station, giving the station the power it will need to run future laboratories, the US space agency NASA announced, reports AFP.

Canadian astronaut Marc Garneau used the shuttle's robotic arm to maneuver each 74-metre (240-foot) panel into place as astronauts Joe Tanner and Carlos Noriega, floating free in Earth's orbit, fixed them into place during a 6.5-hour space walk.

"You have executed a perfect berthing," NASA ground control's James Hartsfield told them.

The first set of 600-million-dollar panels will power the station and its future space laboratories, providing enough electricity through their 66,000 photovoltaic cells to run 15 homes on Earth, NASA officials have said.

The 17-ton panels are being installed with an eye

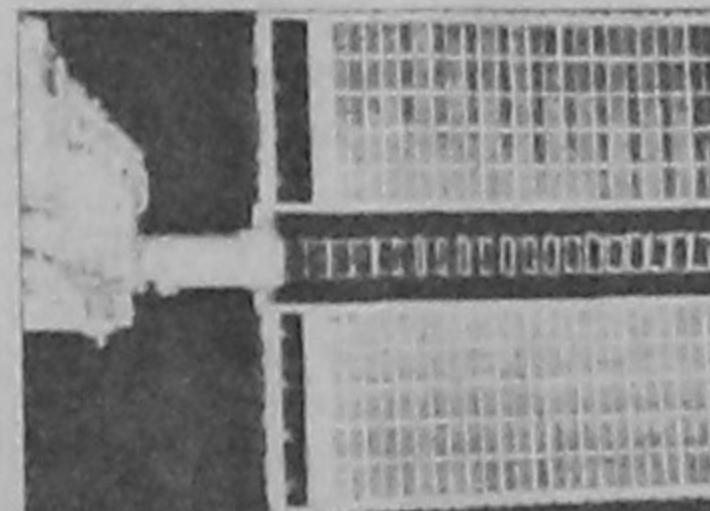
on the future, as the current three-vessel space station campus

can rely on the 10 kilowatts of power generated by mini solar panels already in place.

The space laboratory Destiny, scheduled for arrival in January, will be powered by the new panels, as will the United vessel, dark since the November arrival of "Expedition One" station residents William Shepherd, Yuri Gaidzenko and Sergei Krikaliov.

Endeavour mission director Bill Reeves said the current five-man crew, which includes commander Brent Jett and pilot Michael Bloomfield, as well as Garneau, Noriega and Tanner is "one of the finest crews I have been training with."

For transport and easy installation, the panels were bundled into 4.5-metre (15-foot) boxes. Once they automatically unfold, they will extend to the length of the wingspan of a Boeing 747.



A view from the US space shuttle Endeavour shows the right solar array deployed on the International Space Station.