

Rebel threats mute Republic Day party in Kashmir, NE India

2 killed in bomb blast at Rishikesh

SRINAGAR, India, Jan 26 : India's 51st Republic Day celebrations today were almost silenced in Kashmir and rebel-torn northeastern states, as militant-called general strikes prompted a massive security clampdown, reports AFP.

The streets of Himalayan Kashmir's summer capital, Srinagar, were all but deserted as local people stayed indoors following a militant order to boycott all republic Day activities.

More than 100,000 army and paramilitary personnel were on alert throughout the state to prevent possible terrorist attacks by Muslim separatists, whose campaign against Indian rule in Kashmir has claimed more than 34,000 lives since 1989.

Police reported two militant grenade attacks in Baramullah

town, around 50 km north of Srinagar.

There were no immediate reports of any casualties, although a police spokesman said one of the attacks against a military checkpoint had evolved into a gun-battle which was still continuing.

A tight security cordon was thrown around Srinagar's Bakshi Stadium -- where the official Republic Day parade was held -- and officials inside the stadium were outnumbered by police and army personnel.

"We have erected a fool-proof security operation," said K. Rajendran, Kashmir's deputy inspector general of police.

Police snipers had taken up positions on rooftops overlooking vital installations and residents near the stadium were not allowed to open their windows.

Security forces patrolling the

streets were seen advising people to stay indoors till the parade was over.

"This is the first time that I have seen such strict security measures in our area," said one resident, Majeed Wani.

"Even milk vendors have been kept off the streets. It is an extreme form of curfew."

An estimated 50,000 federal troops were on alert in India's seven northeastern states to foil possible rebel attacks.

In the capital of Assam state, Guwahati, shops and business establishments were closed and there were few people on the streets.

"We are not less patriotic, but we prefer to stay indoors in view of the threat from rebels," said Guwahati trader Anjan Barua.

Assam Governor S.K. Sinha presided over the main Republic Day function, with army helicop-

ters circling overhead.

In neighbouring Meghalaya state, on the border with Bangladesh, the police Friday announced a cash reward for anyone providing information on the whereabouts of 10 rebel leaders belonging to the Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC).

The HNLC, fighting for a separate homeland, has come up with a hit-list of senior Meghalaya police officers, the police said.

Meanwhile, at least two people were killed in a bus bomb blast in the northern Indian holy town of Rishikesh today as the country was celebrating its 51st national Republic Day, the Press Trust of India reported.

Police official S.S. Baghel said the bus conductor and driver were killed instantly in the 2:00 am (2:30 BST) bus explosion.



India's indigenously built ballistic missile 'Prithvi' on display during Republic Day Parade in New Delhi yesterday to mark India's 51st anniversary of its transition to a republic. The Indian capital, where the main celebrations were held was turned into a virtual fortress after Muslim militants threatened to stage rocket attacks and target leading politicians.

-- AFP photo

Chronology of India's major earthquakes

NEW DELHI, Jan 26 : A chronology of India's major earthquakes, according to the Seismological Department here:

June 16, 1819: Kutch peninsula in western state of Gujarat, 8.0 on Richter scale, 2,000 dead.

June 12, 1897: Shillong plateau in the eastern state of Meghalaya, 8.7 on Richter scale, 1,542 dead.

April 4, 1905: Kangra valley in northern state of Himachal Pradesh, 8.0 on Richter scale, more than 20,000 dead.

January 15, 1934: Indo-Nepal border, 8.3 Richter, more than 10,000 dead.

August 15, 1950: Northeastern state of Assam, 8.5 Richter, 532 dead.

August 21, 1988: Indo-Nepal border, 6.5 Richter, about 1,000 killed.

October 20, 1991: Himalayan foothills of northern Uttar Pradesh state, 6.6 on Richter scale, 768 killed.

September 30, 1993: Western state of Maharashtra, 6.3 Richter, 7,601 dead, 15,846 injured.

May 22, 1997: Central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, six on Richter scale, 40 dead, 500 injured.

March 29, 1999: Northern state of Uttar Pradesh, 6.8 on Richter scale, more than 100 dead.

January 26, 2001: Western state of Gujarat, 6.9 on Richter scale, more than 220 dead.

Anti-Wahid protests in Indonesia

JAKARTA, Jan 26 : Students protested in at least two Indonesian cities including the capital on Friday demanding that President Abdurrahman Wahid resign and answer charges that he was involved in two financial scandals, reports AFP.

Some 500 students rallied outside the parliament building in Padang, the capital of West Sumatra province, waving posters denouncing the country's first democratically-elected leader.

"There's no more reason to retain (Wahid)," said Muhammad Rizki, chairman of the Andalas University students union, an AFP reporter there said.

In Jakarta, 100 leaders of students unions from at least seven state universities in Java and Sumatra submitted a petition to parliament calling on the legislature to press on with its investigation into two scandals in which Wahid is allegedly involved.



A DC-3 passenger plane from the Venezuelan Rutaca Airline burns after it crashed on Thursday on a shantytown in Ciudad Bolivar, Venezuela, 450 km southeast of Caracas, killing all 24 onboard, according to local media.

--AFP photo

Venezuelan plane crash kills 24

CARACAS, Jan 26 : An airplane taking 12 European, six American and two Venezuelan tourists to a Caribbean island resort, crashed late Thursday in a shantytown in mainland Ciudad Bolivar, killing everyone aboard, officials said, reports AFP.

A young mother and her two children were badly burned when their shack was engulfed in flames from the crash, officials said.

The airplane, a DC-3 of the Venezuelan Rutaca airline, was taking tourists from the Canaima National Park in south-eastern Venezuela to Margarita Island, a tourist enclave off Venezuela's northern coast.

Fifteen minutes after taking off from Ciudad Bolivar, where he made a routine fueling stop, an airport official said, the pilot made a distress call to the control tower, saying one of his engines was on fire and that he was heading back for an emergency landing.

The plane never made it to the

airport. It crashed and burst in an open field in the shantytown, not far from Bolivar's Grand Hotel, said Bolivar state Governor, Antonio Rojas. The time of the crash was around 6:30 pm (4:30 BST).

"Everyone died," he added.

According to a list made public by Rutaca, the victims included five tourists from Holland, six from the United States, four Italians, two Hungarians, an Austrian, and six Venezuelans, including four crew members.

Earlier reports included French, British and Spanish tourists among the group.

The head of Venezuela's Civil Defence, Angel Rangel, said late Thursday that rescuers managed to extinguish the raging flames and pulled out charred remains that could not be immediately identified.

He said Rutaca would be responsible for contacting families of the deceased foreigners and arranging for their remains to be returned to their home countries.

The bodies were sent to two morgues in Ciudad Bolivar and nearby San Felix for identification by forensic doctors, Rojas said.

An investigation will be conducted to determine the cause of the crash, Rangel said.

Witnesses said the plane fell at a sharp angle with one of its engines ablaze, hit a tree and bounced back to the ground in a ball of flames.

Jose Martinez told reporters he was outside his shack when he heard a loud noise of a propeller plane. He said he shouted to his neighbours to run for cover.

"I could see several bodies fall out of the plane when it crashed," he said.

The tourists had completed a tour of Canaima National Park, famous for its numerous waterfalls and unique vegetation, and were heading for Isla Margarita.

Mahathir urges Malays to remain reunited

KUALA LUMPUR, Jan 26 : Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad today urged ethnic Malays to remain united and to continue to support his ruling party to ensure their interest is protected, reports AFP.

"Don't think that because of the success achieved so far, there's no need for us to worry about the future of our grandchildren," Mahathir was quoted as saying by the official Bernama news agency.

Speaking to leaders of his United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in the northern Kedah state, Mahathir reminded Malays to pay attention to their future since they faced many challenges ahead.

"We want our grandchildren to continue to live as free and independent people. We want our religion, race and country assured of a future," he said.

Pakistan calls for talks with India at UN conference

GENEVA, Jan 26 : Pakistan renewed calls on Thursday for India to begin negotiations on disputed Kashmir, reports AFP.

Inamul Haq, a senior Pakistani foreign ministry official, made the call at the United Nations disarmament conference here and also urged New Delhi to negotiate on limiting nuclear and conventional weapons and promoting trade relations.

Haq, who is the ministry's top bureaucrat under Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar, called for the "resumption of high-level talks between India and Pakistan to discuss and resolve the dispute over Jammu and Kashmir, which is the core issue between the two countries."

On Tuesday India announced it was extending its ceasefire in Kashmir by one month.

Haq also said "Pakistan is prepared for reciprocal agreements with India for nuclear and

missile restraint," and added that: "nuclear restraint agreements ... could be accompanied by political and technical confidence-building measures."

Both countries officially tested their first nuclear weapons in 1998.

He said limits on nuclear weapons would have to "be built on a balance in the conventional forces and capabilities of the two countries."

Haq, who was due to travel later to Davos to attend a meeting of world political and business leaders, also called for "high-level interaction for the promotion of trade, transit arrangements, development cooperation and investment generation" between the two countries.

Pakistan's military leader General Pervez Musharraf has regularly made calls for a renewed negotiations with India since he came to power.

In a short response Rakesh Sood, India's new ambassador to the disarmament conference which opened its annual session Tuesday, said his government had already tried to promote dialogue over the issues, notably when Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee visited Pakistan in 1999.

India suspended military operations against Muslim rebels in the Kargil area of Kashmir late last year.

But it maintains that talks are impossible until Pakistan stops supporting "terrorism" in the Indian zone of Kashmir. Pakistan denies backing the separatists but says it offers them moral support.

The 53-year-old row over Kashmir has caused two of the three wars between India and Pakistan since their independence in 1947.

Bald truth uncovered

PARIS, Jan 26 : French doctors reported Thursday they had grown skin with hair follicles using stem cells taken from adult mice, a potential breakthrough for treating baldness, severe burns and skin cancer.

"We grew a piece of skin with hair follicles and sebaceous glands for the first time," Yann Barrandon, a cell specialist at the National Institute for Science and Medical Research (INSERM) and Paris' elite Ecole Normale Supérieure, told AFP.

Stem cells are premature cells that develop into various organs.

The most spectacular are found in embryos at their very earliest days of development. Embryo stem cells can grow into any almost part of the body, a finding which excites hopes they can be eventually be "programmed" into growing replacement limbs or internal organs in a laboratory.

Russia won't accept NATO enlargement

MOSCOW, Jan 26 : NATO enlargement into the former republics of the Soviet Union would be a serious mistake and "unacceptable" to Russia, President Vladimir Putin said today, reports AFP.

"We consider the policy of NATO enlargement to be a mistake and we say that it is unacceptable to us," Putin told Russian diplomats in a major foreign policy speech here.

"The normalisation of our relations with NATO is advancing with difficulty and our relations have moved backwards since the events in the Balkans," he said, referring to NATO's air war against Yugoslavia in 1999.

Russia severed all high-level contacts with the Atlantic alliance in the wake of the Kosovo war and has been cautious in subsequent overtures to NATO.

The Kremlin has further expressed concern about

NATO's plans to expand its membership to include ex-Communist countries in eastern Europe, which Russia has traditionally regarded as its back yard.

However, Putin stressed that it was in Russia's interests to renew full contacts with the alliance and warned NATO chiefs not to undermine the reconciliation process by extending membership too quickly or too far.

"The normalisation of our relations will be a contribution to international stability and to our security," the Kremlin chief added.

NATO Secretary General George Robertson said Thursday the alliance would work in the coming months at improving relations with Russia that still bear the strains of the Kosovo war.

Singer Celine Dion blessed with a son

MONTREAL, Jan 26 : Canadian pop diva Celine Dion, 32, gave birth to a baby boy, her first child, in Florida, her public relations firm said Thursday, reports AFP.

"Mother and baby are doing wonderfully and are in perfect health," said a statement issued here after Dion gave birth at 0600 GMT.

Dion's representatives did not immediately give the name of the baby, who was due February 14 and was conceived by in vitro fertilisation, the singer has said. She lives in Florida with her husband and manager Rene Angeli.

It is her first child, and his fourth.

US court ruling delays payments to ex-Nazi slaves

BERLIN, Jan 26 : Heads of the German foundation set up to compensate former Nazi slave labourers said Thursday they were disappointed a New York court has delayed a ruling that is crucial for the payments to begin, reports AFP.

"We are very disappointed about this development," said Dieter Kastrup, head of the oversight commission for the foundation "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future."

New York judge Shirley Kram Wednesday heard suits against German banks Commerzbank, Deutsche Bank and Dresdner Bank. Instead of dismissing the suits, as the US government has requested, she put off her decision.

German industry wants legal closure against such suits before payments totalling billions of dollars can begin.

ME peace talks in Taba fail to boost Barak's election chances

TABA, Egypt, Jan 26 : Israelis and Palestinians soldered on with their peace talks Friday despite hurdles on security and signs the talks had had little effect on Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's election chances.

The talks restarted Friday morning at the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Taba after an unexpected break late Thursday amid differences on security issues, reports AFP.

Palestinian chief negotiator Ahmad Qorei and Israeli Justice Minister Yossi Beilin had a one-on-one meeting, which were to be expanded later to other members of the delegations, sources on both sides said.

"We are working seriously, and we still have time" to reach an agreement before Israeli elections on February 6, Qorei told journalists.

The Palestinians say a victory by headline opposition leader Ariel Sharon would be "bad

news" for their side, while a peace deal sealed in Taba is widely seen as Barak's only chance of holding onto his job.

Barak himself admitted Thursday that the chances of an accord were slim.

But the negotiating efforts here have yet to change Barak's fortunes, according to the a poll published Friday in the Jerusalem Post newspaper.

Sharon boasted a 16-percentage point lead over Barak, the caretaker prime minister, with less than two weeks to go before the election, the poll showed.

While Sharon counts 44 percent of the voters polled against Barak's 28 percent, the poll also showed that a full 28 percent of voters were undecided, did not intend to vote at all or would not reply to pollsters.

Barak set the stage for the election with his resignation in December after facing a barrage

of criticism over his handling of deadly unrest in the region that broke out in February.

Hopes rise and fall from the negotiations, often in connection with events in the Palestinian territories or Israel.

The Israeli negotiators pulled out abruptly late Thursday and headed home for consultations over apparent "major differences" with the Palestinians on security issues.

A Palestinian delegate said the Israelis had gone back on proposals they had made earlier and then decided to withdraw from the talks early after the Palestinians rejected their new stance.

The differences focused on Israeli demands to install three early warning stations in the Jordan Valley, as well as arms dumps and bases for a rapid reaction force in case of an attack from the east.



Israeli peace activists carry "Peace Now" banners upon arrival on Thursday in the Egyptian Red Sea resort of Taba in the Sinai Peninsula, in a bid to show support for the Palestinian and Israeli negotiators. The Israeli negotiators returned to marathon peace talks with the Palestinians after a two-day suspension and mixed signals about chances of striking an agreement.

--AFP photo

Tight security in Beijing to prevent Falungong protests

BEIJING, Jan 26 : Security remained tight on Beijing's Tiananmen Square today as the Chinese government tried to prevent a repeat of the attempted mass suicide by Falungong practitioners earlier this week, reports AFP.

Entry to the square continued to be controlled, with large groups of police stationed at each entrance, demanding identification from tourists and others and checking bags.

Underground tunnels leading up to the square in central Beijing were also guarded by a line of police officers who questioned anyone they suspected of being a member of the outlawed Falungong sect.

Putin looks to Asia - Pacific for forging partnership

MOSCOW, Jan 26 : President Vladimir Putin signalled today that Russia was seeking to boost cooperation with its partners in Asia and the Pacific, in a major foreign policy speech that delivered stern warnings to the West, reports AFP.

"We must intensify our work to integrate the regional structures of Asia and the Pacific, and we must cooperate with our Asian neighbours," Putin said.

Putin, who has sought to renew links with Russia's Soviet-era allies such as China, India and North Korea since taking power in the Kremlin a year ago, made his remarks in a speech to diplomats at the foreign ministry.

The Russian president is also

due to meet Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori at a summit in the Siberian city of Irkutsk within the next two months.

Putin used his keynote address to warn the United States and NATO that Moscow would not tolerate US deployment of a national missile defence shield (NMD) or the expansion of the Atlantic alliance into former communist states.

Meanwhile, the US deployment of a National Missile Defence shield (NMD) would do "irreparable damage to the architecture of international relations," Russian President Vladimir Putin warned today.

But Putin added that "the latest statements by US President George W. Bush testified to

the fact that a dialogue can be positive."

The Russian president made his comments in a speech to diplomats at the Russian foreign ministry.

"We will have a difficult and delicate task of preserving the 1972 antimissile treaty," the Russian leader said, referring to the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, a cornerstone of current nuclear non-proliferation and disarmament agreements.

Washington would step outside ABM boundaries should it ever construct a nation-wide nuclear defence shield, and has been urging Moscow to agree to amendments to the pact that would allow for the ABM.

Top Russian politician hospitalised

MOSCOW, Jan 26 : Populist Russian politician Alexander Lebed, a former presidential candidate and now Krasnoyarsk governor, was rushed to hospital suffering from "acute hypertension," ITAR-TASS reported today, says AFP.

Doctors reduced his high blood pressure, and Lebed's condition was no longer a cause for concern, a regional spokesman told the news agency.