

International

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 Hymnertre National Liberation Council (HNLN).

The HNLN, 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.

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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, turned into a virtual fortress after Muslim militants threatened to stage rocket attacks and target leading politicians.

-- AFP photo

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.

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 shanty 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 southeastern 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.

Residents said this volatile southern port city was tense as religious zealots prepared to take to the streets after Friday prayers despite the heavy police presence.

"We have already arrested 100 people from different parts of the city and there can be more if they decide to take off the rally," Karachi police chief Tariq Jamil said.

"Police and paramilitary forces have been deployed in the city in large numbers as a protective measure. No one will be allowed to defy the ban."

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, more than 100 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.

100 Pakistanis arrested ahead of pro-Taliban rally

KARACHI, Jan 26 : Extra police and paramilitary forces were deployed here today as Islamists vowed to defy a ban on public rallies to protest against UN sanctions on Afghanistan, police said, reports AFP.

Residents said this volatile southern port city was tense as religious zealots prepared to take to the streets after Friday prayers despite the heavy police presence.

"We have already arrested 100 people from different parts of the city and there can be more if they decide to take off the rally," Karachi police chief Tariq Jamil said.

"Police and paramilitary forces have been deployed in the city in large numbers as a protective measure. No one will be allowed to defy the ban."

Angolan army chief of staff sacked

LUANDA, Jan 26 : Angolan President Jose Eduardo dos Santos sacked his army chief of staff today, bringing further uncertainty to the region after the killing of the Democratic Republic of Congo's president Laurent Kabila, reports AFP.

No explanation was given for the sacking announced in a presidential decree, of General Joao Baptista de Matos.

The decree said deputy defence minister Armando da Cruz Neto would replace him.

De Matos had held the army's top job since 1992.

The Angolan government, along with Zimbabwe and Namibia, has been supporting Kabila's government in a war against Ugandan- and Rwandan-backed rebels which erupted in August 1998, and fighting UNITA rebels at home.

UN pays out \$1.4 b more to Gulf War victims

GENEVA, Jan 26 : The UN's Gulf War compensation commission said Thursday it had recently paid out 1.4 billion dollars to victims of the 1991 conflict, including one billion dollars to people and organisations in Kuwait, reports AFP.

The payment brings the compensation paid to individuals, companies, countries and international organisations to 11 billion dollars since the end of the war.

The money comes from sales of Iraqi oil which have been authorised specially for the purpose, under an embargo slapped on the country after the war.

Broken down by country of destination, in addition to Kuwait, the latest pay-out included 65 million dollars for Turkey, 61 million for the United States, 53.6 million for Jordan, 41 million for Russia, 40 million for Bosnia, 29.3 million for South Korea, 24.5 million for the Netherlands and 20.8 million for France.

Top Russian politician hospitalised

MOGUL, 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.

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

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."

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.

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"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 hardline opposition leader Ariel Sharon would be "bad

news" for their side, while a peace deal 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 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 poll.

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.

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