

Kashmiri leaders released from house arrest, curfew lifted

AFP, Srinagar

Indian-controlled Kashmir was calm Tuesday after the security forces lifted a five-day curfew and released Kashmiri separatist leaders from detention or house arrest.

Shops, businesses, banks and government offices in the summer capital Srinagar also opened for the first time in days and shoppers were seen on the streets where the security forces were also out in strength.

"No untoward incident has happened since the morning in any town of Kashmir so far," a police official told AFP.

Indian-held Kashmir has been rocked by some of the biggest civil unrest for years during the past week as crowds took to the streets across the region to protest after troops opened fire on a crowd of mourners, killing four people.

For five days stone-throwing Muslim youths fought pitched battles with the security forces around Srinagar and other areas.

The Indian military issued an unprecedented apology for the shooting on February 15 at Haigam.

Sanctions on Iraq to stay: Britain

AFP, London

Sanctions against Iraq should remain in place despite widespread condemnation of US-British bombing raids on sites near Baghdad, a spokeswoman for Britain's foreign ministry said on Tuesday.

Leaders in the Arab world, Russia, France and Turkey have lined up to criticise the strikes against six air defence sites on Friday.

The attacks have prompted several MPs of Britain's ruling Labour Party to express their misgivings at the effects of the trade blockade on the Iraqi people since it was put in place at the end of the Gulf War in 1991.

India, Pakistan lock in war of words over Kashmir

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan were Tuesday locked in a war of words over Kashmir, as a deeply-divided Indian Cabinet agonised over whether to extend its unilateral ceasefire against Muslim militants in the region.

New Delhi's suspension of combat operations in the Indian-controlled sector of Kashmir expires on February 26, and a special security cabinet is to meet in the next few days to decide whether the truce should be renewed.

Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee, with the backing of the military, is reported to be pushing for an extension to keep the fragile peace process in the disputed region alive.

But reports say he faces opposition from the home ministry and intelligence services which have been alarmed by a series of spec-

tacular militant attacks and believe the truce is giving the rebels an opportunity to re-group.

Ahead of the crucial meeting, Indian President K.R. Narayanan on Monday issued a stinging attack on Pakistan which he accused of undermining the ceasefire and doing nothing to rein in Pakistan-based militants.

Pakistan, which controls the northern third of Kashmir, replied that India had kept up a "campaign of terror and repression" throughout its ceasefire and it pointed to widespread protests against Indian rule.

India also said late Monday its forces had opened fire on two Pakistani planes over Indian-held Kashmir, an allegation immediately dismissed as "false" by Pakistan.

Indian-controlled Kashmir has been rocked by some of the largest civil unrest in eight years after Indian troops opened fire on a crowd of

mourners on February 15 in the town of Haigam, killing four people.

For five days stone-throwing Muslim youths have fought pitched battles with the security forces around the capital Srinagar, while crowds of up to 25,000 have taken to the streets to mourn the dead.

The Indian military issued an unprecedented apology for the shooting and promised a full inquiry.

The situation in Indian Kashmir was calm Tuesday as police lifted a five-day curfew and released detained leaders from the All Party Hurriyat (Freedom) Conference, an alliance of Kashmiri separatist groups.

The APHC, which has accused India over only paying lip service to the ceasefire, in turn called off a region-wide strike.



PHOTO: AFP

Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus (2nd from R) shakes hands with his Indian counterpart K.R. Narayanan (3rd from L) as Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R), Usha Narayanan (2nd from L) and Alma Adamkiene (L) look on, during an official welcoming ceremony at the presidential palace. This is the first visit to India by a Lithuanian head of state.

Pakistan to watch Jihadi groups more closely

4 militant groups closed

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's interior ministry has vowed to make militant groups account for huge amounts of public donations collected in the name of Kashmiri refugees, officials said Tuesday.

Ministry public relations officer Tahir Khushnood said the government was concerned that the money, collected from donation boxes placed in shops and markets throughout Pakistan, was not being spent on refugees.

"It's the recent thinking of the government that there should be some kind of check and they should not be able to collect funds so freely and openly," he said.

"Nobody knows where that money comes from, where it goes and who spends it."

Pakistan hosts dozens of militant Islamic groups who raise funds for a

range of causes, especially the separatist Muslim insurgency in Indian-controlled Kashmir.

"It has been decided that they will have to register with the government if they say they are working to help refugees. Then they will have to account for their expenditure," Khushnood said.

Four little known militant groups based in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir said Monday they had been asked to close their offices, but this has not been confirmed by the authorities.

The groups were named as the Mujahideen Jammu and Kashmir, Karwan-e-Khalid, Zarb-e-Momin and Zarb-e-Islami, some of the more than a dozen militant outfits fighting against Indian rule in divided Kashmir.

Taliban deny offer to hand over Bin Laden to Riyadh

AFP, Kabul

Officials from Afghanistan's Taliban militia Tuesday denied reports that they were set to hand over alleged terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden to Saudi Arabia for trial.

"This is totally untrue. The Islamic Emirate policy on Osama has not changed," said Abdul Hanan Hmat, chief of official Bakhtar news agency.

A Pakistani newspaper Monday quoted a "high-level" but unnamed source as saying Taliban supreme leader Mulla Mohammad Omar made the offer to visiting Pakistani Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider earlier this month.

But Hmat said bin Laden was not discussed during Haider's two-day visit, which focused on Islamabad's request for the extradition of 60 Pakistani fugitives.

'Palestinians determined to resist Israeli aggression'

AFP, Gaza City

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said late Monday in Gaza City that the Palestinians were "determined to resist the Israeli aggression".

"The five-month aggression against our people, the blockade on our towns in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the attacks by Jewish settlers backed by the Israeli army only strengthen our determination to resist," Arafat was quoted as saying by the official Wafa agency.

"Hardships only strengthen the people determination to achieve their national goals, such as an independent state with Al-Qods (Jerusalem) as its capital," he said.

On Wednesday, the Israeli authorities imposed a land, sea and air blockade on the West Bank and Gaza Strip following a bus attack in Tel Aviv in which eight Israelis were killed.

The blockade was partially lifted in the Gaza Strip on Monday.

The death of a Hamas activist on Monday brought to 416 the number of people killed in the wave of Israeli-Palestinian violence that exploded across the region almost five months ago, most of them Palestinians.

Meanwhile, eight people were injured Monday after the Israeli military shelled areas in the West Bank, Palestinian witnesses and medical officials said.

Israeli troops also fired rubber-coated steel bullets at Palestinian youths who threw stones at them in protest of the army's shelling, which damaged two homes in the village of al-Khader near Bethlehem, witnesses said.

Three of the stone-throwers were lightly injured, Palestinian medical officials said.

The Israeli army said shots were fired at its positions near al-Khader and that its soldiers had returned but that there were no injuries or damage.

Three more Palestinians were also injured and four houses heavily damaged when the Israeli army fired anti-tank rockets on a building from which Palestinians were shooting, in the autonomous Palestinian town of Beit Jala in the West Bank, witnesses and hospital sources said.

A grenade was also thrown toward an army post near Khan Yunis and shots were fired at positions near Neve Dekalim, in the Gush Katif settlement bloc of the Gaza Strip, the Israeli military said.

EU team in China to fight illegal migration

AFP, Beijing

A team of European Union officials began meeting with Chinese officials Tuesday to discuss ways the two sides can cooperate to stem the flow of illegal immigration from China to Europe.

The nine officials, who arrived in China Sunday for a six-day visit, are meeting with officials from China's foreign ministry and ministry of public security.

They hope to come up with practical ways European countries and China can work together, such as sharing information and developing a speedy way of repatriating immigrants caught in Europe.

The visit marks the second round of EU-China consultations which began after the deaths of 58 Chinese who suffocated in a lorry while being smuggled into Britain in June.



PHOTO: AFP

A Chinese paramilitary police officer keeps an eye on the group of people queuing up outside the consular section of the German embassy in Beijing on Tuesday, to apply for various visas to go to Germany and Europe. A team of European Union officials began meeting with Chinese officials to discuss ways the two sides can cooperate to stem the flow of illegal immigration from China to Europe.

Arroyo orders ceasefire with Muslim rebels

AFP, Manila

President Gloria Arroyo marked her first month in office Tuesday by ordering a ceasefire with Muslim separatist insurgents in the southern Philippines in a bid to reopen peace talks.

Arroyo said she hoped the unilateral ceasefire would last "for a very long time" as it was aimed at setting the stage for peace talks with the main Muslim rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

Her ceasefire proposal, cautiously welcomed by the rebels, was a sharp departure from her predecessor Joseph Estrada's policy of military offensives against the rebels fighting for a separate Muslim state.

Asia faces threats from within

AFP, Singapore

Major problems in leadership and governance have emerged as the most immediate threats to Asia's political stability as the dangers from military flashpoints have eased, a veteran US diplomat said Tuesday.

How these political crises in key Asian countries and the forthcoming leadership succession in China play out will determine the region's political landscape in the near term, Stanley Roth told a business forum here.

The former US assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs said potential threats from the Korean Peninsula, the Taiwan Straits and the Kashmir region between India and Pakistan have eased because of various diplomatic efforts.

Tensions in the South China Sea involving China and four Southeast

Asian countries have also been reduced, and while the issue is far from resolved, "it does not look at all like this issue will descend into the use of force in the short term."

"So overall, the environment (in the region) is pretty benign in terms of war and peace," he said in a speech to business executives here.

"To me, the real threat to peace and stability in the region is not between but within countries," he said.

Asia is confronted by "major problems in leadership and major problems in governance," he noted.

Roth cited the leadership crisis gripping Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid and the recent army-backed civilian uprising in the Philippines that toppled president Joseph Estrada.

In Japan, Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori's grip on power is weakening

with surveys showing his popularity tumbling one of the lowest levels for any leader in post-war history.

Despite winning the 2000 Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to draw Stalinist North Korea into the diplomatic field, South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung is facing declining popularity at home, which could affect the implementation of reforms.

Economic reforms that have brought prosperity to China are unlikely to be reversed by the next leadership, Roth said.

But it was likely the Chinese military would take advantage of the succession issue to get concessions from top political leaders courted its support.

This would give the military leverage in pushing for a tougher stance on the question of Taiwan's reunification with the mainland, he added.

Prison riot ends in Brazil

AFP, Sao Paulo

A simultaneous rebellion in 29 prisons across Brazil's largest state that left 16 inmates dead also soiled Brazil's international image, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso said Monday.

"We are more indignant than anyone," Cardoso said after authorities put down a rebellion of some 13,000 inmates at 29 prisons in Sao Paulo state rioted and freed more than 5,000 hostages.

It was the biggest uprising in Brazilian prison history.

Sixteen inmates were killed, and 50 people were wounded in simultaneous mutinies orchestrated from Carandiru, Latin America's largest prison, which holds 9,700 inmates.

"The uprising is over at Carandiru prison," Daniela Cecilia Silva, a coordinator of jail religious services, told AFP by phone earlier Monday.

The entire system was brought under control later Monday, as rebels at the Pirajui and Ribeirao Preto penitentiaries in central Sao Paulo state finally capitulated.

Estrada gets 30-day reprieve

AFP, Manila

Ousted Philippine leader Joseph Estrada won a 30-day reprieve from possible arrest Tuesday after the Supreme Court barred government lawyers from laying corruption and other charges against him.

Estrada, who was due to be indicted next week, also secured a Supreme Court order barring prosecutors from commenting on the cases they planned to file against him, court officials said.

He now hopes to build on the two restraint orders to get the court to recognize him as the legitimate president and ultimately restore the legal immunity from prosecution which is given to incumbent presidents. The former actor was ousted in a military-backed popular revolt last month.

Supreme Court officials said the 15-member tribunal made it clear that "no cases will be filed" against the 63-year-old during the one-month period.

Yemenis go to polls

AFP, Sanaa

Yemenis voted Tuesday in the first local elections since the country was unified in 1990 and in a referendum to extend the mandates of the president and MPs after bloody violence marred campaigning.

Small queues had formed outside polling centres in Sanaa the capital before they opened at eight am (11:00 BST), a correspondent reported.

Around 5.6 million people over the age of 18 have the right to vote before the polls close at 1500 GMT on Tuesday which has been declared a national holiday.