

Most of the statues destroyed in Afghanistan

AP, Kabul

Most of the ancient Buddhist relics, including the head and legs of two soaring statues of Buddha in central Afghanistan, have been destroyed, despite internal pleas to save the priceless treasures, a Taliban official said Saturday. What hasn't been destroyed will be destroyed on Sunday and Monday, the Taliban's Information Minister Quadratullah Jamal told The Associated Press. "Two-thirds of all the statues in Afghanistan have already been destroyed, the remaining will be destroyed in the next two days," he said. "The head and legs of Buddha statues in Bamiyan were destroyed yesterday," he said. "Our soldiers are working hard to demolish their remaining parts. They will come down soon. We are using everything at our disposal to destroy them."

The two Buddhas, 52.5 and 36 meters (175 and 120 feet) tall, are hewn from the side of a mountain in Bamiyan located roughly 130 kilometres northwest of the Afghan capital Kabul.

The tallest statue is thought to be the world's tallest of a Buddha standing rather than sitting.

The Taliban troops used heavy explosives and rockets to destroy the statues carved in the third and fifth centuries, relics of Afghanistan's pre-Islamic past. Both the statues were already damaged by artillery fire during Afghanistan's protracted civil war.

Jamal did not have details about which statue was targeted first and whether the heads of both statues had been removed or of only one.

On Friday Taliban officials said preparations were underway but that

demolition had not begun. Jamal said his information was from Taliban troops in Bamiyan. The destruction was being carried out in keeping with an order issued Monday by the Taliban's reclusive supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, to destroy all statues in Afghanistan, including the soaring Buddha statues. He said they were idolatrous and offensive to Islam.

The order generated international outrage. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York offered to take the statues and preserve them. The Taliban have not responded to that offer.

The Taliban Islamic militia, which rules 95 per cent of Afghanistan, including Kabul, adheres to a strict brand of Islamic law. Their interpretation has been questioned by Islamic scholars in other Muslim countries and Islamic institutions.

The Taliban have been unmoved by international appeals to save the statues as historical artifacts. Some Islamic countries have called the Taliban order to destroy the historical relics embarrassing to Islam.

Even the Taliban's closest ally, Pakistan, joined the international appeal to save the statues.

An estimated 6,000 statues were housed in the Kabul Museum. It's believed most have been destroyed, although the Taliban have refused to allow anyone inside the war-ravaged building.

In Europe, Paris-based UNESCO sent a special envoy to negotiate with Taliban leaders. The UNESCO office in Pakistan said attempts were being made to set up meetings with Taliban leaders.



Chinese President Jiang Zemin (L), along with the National People's Congress (NPC) Chairman Li Peng (R), listen to CPPCC Chairman Li Ruihuan (C) addressing the opening of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) in Beijing's Great Hall of the People yesterday. The CPPCC, China's top advisory body to the development of economic and social policy, held its opening session with the crackdown on the spiritual group Falungong and Taiwan taking center stage.

New treatment for malaria

XINHUA, United Nations

A new treatment for malaria which affects at least 300 million people every year may be made available next year, the World Health Organization (WHO) said Friday. The new product, known as LAPDAP, combines two existing anti-malaria compounds of chlorproguanil and dapsone and is a potential life-saving medicine. WHO said in a press statement released in New York. WHO and a private company named GlaxoSmithKline have agreed to develop the drug as an oral treatment for uncomplicated malaria, primarily for use in sub-Saharan Africa. The drug, to be sold at a preferential price, is entering its final phase of development and could reach some African countries as early as next year, WHO said. Malaria is a parasitic infection transmitted through the mosquito bite. Besides millions of infections occurring every year, more people are at risk of the disease, according to WHO. GlaxoSmithKline is a leading research-based pharmaceutical manufacturer which was also involved in a UN polio vaccination programme last year.

Don't derail peace process, Lanka urges LTTE rebels

XINHUA, Colombo

Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar appealed on Friday to separatist Tamil Tiger rebels not to derail Norwegian-brokered peace process in the country. Speaking at a press conference Kadirgamar said that the British ban on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has no logical connection to the peace process in the war-torn country. Britain on Wednesday included LTTE in the list of 21 world groups as "foreign terrorist organizations" under its new anti-terrorism law which went into effect on Feb 19. Kadirgamar urged the Tiger rebels not to view the ban as an attempt to derail a Norwegian-brokered peace initiative in the country. He called on LTTE rebels to give up violent actions and join with Tamil people in bringing peace to the country.

Kashmiri militants to step up attacks on Indian forces

20 policemen killed in Jammu

AFP, Muzaffarabad, Pakistan-controlled Kashmir

A multi-party alliance of Kashmiri militant groups Saturday vowed to intensify operations against Indian forces in Kashmir under a new strategy. "We have decided to speed up target-oriented actions against the occupation forces to break New Delhi's haughtiness and achieve the goal of freedom at the earliest," Mutaahidda (United) Jihad Council spokesman Ishtiaq Hameed said. He said the alliance had earlier held an extraordinary meeting in Muzaffarabad attended by commanders of all its 15 component groups. The alliance rejected a three-month extension in New Delhi's so-called ceasefire in the Indian zone of the divided Himalayan state, he said.

Muslim militant groups believed that the extension of the ceasefire was part of India's "advertisement campaign to paint itself as a peace lover and thus mislead the world community." "The fact is that the Indian troops are carrying on their killing spree in the occupied territory with the full backing of the government in New Delhi," he said. "The whole world is witnessing Indian troops committing war crimes in Kashmir. In these circumstances, we are left with no choice but to speed up our operations against them." In Jammu, suspected Muslim militants on Friday ambushed a police patrol in the Jammu region of Indian Kashmir killing about 20 policemen, Jammu Inspector General of Police R.V Raju told AFP. Raju said the police party had

gone to Kalaband village in Surankote district, some 170 km northwest of Kashmir's winter capital Jammu on Thursday on a tip-off that militants were hiding in the area. After visiting the area, the policemen were returning to Jammu when they were ambushed near the village, said Raju. "A team of heavily-armed militants hurled grenades, rockets and opened automatic gunfire on the police patrol. We expect the casualties to be high. We have recovered 15 bodies, six people are injured and five missing," said Raju. Abu Osama, spokesman of Kashmir's dominant pro-Pakistan Lashkar-e-Taiba guerrilla group, told AFP in Srinagar that the attack was "a joint operation" between them and the Hizbul Mujahideen, Hizbi Islami and Jashe-Mohammad outfits.

Tom cruise tops Forbes Celebrity 100 list

DPA, New York

"Mission Impossible" star Tom Cruise is the brightest star of our fast-paced age, at least this week, according to the 2001 Forbes Celebrity 100 list released online Friday. Next in the big name line-up, that factored in income and media exposure, came golf sensation Tiger Woods, followed by the Beatles, pop singer Britney Spears and movie tough guy Bruce Willis. Other names to make it onto the list were German Formula One racer Michael Schumacher, US Secretary of State Colin Powell and best-selling horror author Steven King. Forbes calculated a star's celebrity, which is called "the ultimate asset," by factoring in their income, number of magazine cover stories, total mentions in newspaper, radio and television reports and Internet presence.

Rebels ambush convoy in Tripura: 17 killed

AFP, Guwahati

At least 17 people, including 12 paramilitary troops, were killed yesterday when separatist rebels ambushed a convoy in India's insurgency-hit northeast, police said. "Twelve soldiers died on the spot," D. Gautam, Tripura Police Superintendent, told AFP from the provincial capital Agartala. "We are awaiting further details as the ambush took place in a very remote area surrounded by thick forests," he said. A police spokesman said tribal militants from the outlawed National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) ambushed the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) convoy near Amarpur, 75 km south of Agartala. The ambush happened around 8:00 am Saturday. The NLFT is fighting for a separate tribal homeland. Meanwhile, in another incident on Friday, five militants were killed

in an encounter between the NLFT and its rival rebel group, the All Tripura Tiger Force (ATTF), at the village of Sidhai 45 km west of Agartala. "The fight between the two groups was primarily for territorial supremacy and such internecine clashes take place regularly," Gautam said. Several rebels were reported to have sustained bullet wounds during the gunbattle. The ATTF is also fighting for a separate tribal homeland. Tribal insurgency has resulted in some 25,000 deaths in five of the seven northeastern states since India's independence in 1947. Over 10,000 people are estimated to have been killed in Tripura alone, a hotbed of insurgency since the early 1980s. The target of the rebel groups has been the predominantly non-tribal Bengali population, numbering about 2.76 million.

3.5m yr-old monkey fossil

XINHUA, Addis Ababa

The first monkey fossil in Africa aged 3.5 million years has been discovered in Gasamaitu and Gailla of the Somali State in Ethiopia, local media reported on Friday. Austrian Professor Horst Seidler, head of the international inter-disciplinary research team, said that the team has also collected remains of large mammals like elephants, rhinos, giraffes, antelopes, hyenas, horses and pigs, adding that some of the fossils are as old as about 4 million years. Moreover, remains of fish, turtles, crocodiles and hippos have also been discovered in the area, according to the professor. "It is our expectation that the data which emerges from this ongoing international and Ethiopian collaboration will keep attention focused on Ethiopia and will demonstrate its rich cultural heritage," he added.

Seven die in stampede at Johannesburg railway station

AFP, Johannesburg

Seven people were killed and nine injured when a stampede broke out among passengers trying to reach a platform at Johannesburg central railway station, rail authorities and police said Saturday. The incident on Friday evening occurred when passengers stampeded on a stairway on their way to a platform, while other people headed in the other direction because a gate was closed, police said. More than 100 people were involved in the incident, which killed two children, three women and two men, Willem de Villiers, Johannesburg police spokesman, told AFP. He said that the exact cause of the stampede, which occurred around 7:00 pm (2300 BST) at Park Station in the centre of the city, was still unclear. "It is alleged that the security at the bottom of the entrance (to the platform) locked the gate and it was not possible to get in," de Villiers said. "A sign above the entrance informs commuters that the gates will be locked 10 minutes prior to the train's departure ... Some people pushed up and some pushed down, and seven died."



PHOTO: AFP

A soldier carries a child from his flooded home in Cocorico, to an helicopter on Friday in the southern region of Sofala, Mozambique. Mozambique's emergency management agency wants to evacuate at least 105,000 people from the Zambezi valley, fearing the floods will worsen in the coming days as the wave created by the dam surges toward the river's mouth at the Indian Ocean.

Court upholds legitimacy of Arroyo govt

XINHUA, Manila

Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is the legitimate president of the Philippines, and former president Joseph Estrada has effectively resigned, the Supreme Court announced Friday. The court reached a unanimous decision upholding the legitimacy of Arroyo's presidency, local news channel ABS-CBN reported late Friday. The court also declared that Estrada effectively resigned when he left the presidential palace on January 20, even if he did not sign his resignation letter. Estrada lost not only his presidency but also his immunity from suit. Voting 9-4, the Supreme Court decided to junk Estrada's petition for presidential immunity. The court said in its ruling that Estrada's resignation did not have any legal abstraction because his movements and declarations clearly implied his intent to relinquish his post. "As events approach January 20, we can have an authoritative window on the state of mind of (Estrada). This window is provided in the final days of Joseph Ejercito Estrada," it said. The court dismissed the claim of Estrada that the case is a "political issue" to which the court cannot dip its fingers into. It also ruled that the twin petitions on the constitutionality of the Arroyo administration and the legality of ongoing Ombudsman probe against Estrada are well within its jurisdiction, thus "justiciable." The Supreme Court ruling came 10 days ahead of the March 13 deadline the justices earlier set for the release of the decision. Estrada has 15 days to file a motion for reconsideration with the High Court. The Supreme Court's ruling paved the way for the Office of the Ombudsman to file plunder cases against Estrada before the Sandiganbayan (anti-graft office). Estrada, who was toppled by Arroyo in a military-backed popular uprising, is now face several charges by the Ombudsman including economic plunder which is punishable of death. He filed a petition on February 5 before the Supreme Court saying he is just "merely on a leave of absence from the office of the President," and still enjoys presidential immunity. He urged the court to announce Arroyo as Acting President and stop the ongoing investigation by the Ombudsman on his criminal charges.