

Four killed in Kashmir landmine blast

AFP, Srinagar, India

At least four people, including two suspected Muslim guerrillas, were killed in an overnight landmine explosion in the northern Indian state of Kashmir, the police said here yesterday.

They said the explosion occurred late Saturday night while the two suspected guerrillas were preparing a landmine in a house in the village of Safapora, some 40 km north of Srinagar city.

A villager and his son also died in the powerful blast, a police spokesman said in Srinagar, the summer capital of India-administered Kashmir.

Two women living in the house where the landmine exploded were injured.

14 die as bus crashes in Portugal

AP, Lisbon

A packed tour bus careered off a highway in northern Portugal and plunged into a ravine Saturday, killing at least 14 passengers and injuring 22 others, news reports said.

A woman was still inside the wreckage but it was not known if she was alive, state radio RDP reported.

The bus came off a highway near Santa Comba Dao, a rural town about 200 kilometers north of Lisbon, TSF radio reported.

The bus, believed to be carrying local people, was returning after dark to the city of Viseu after a day trip to a Roman Catholic shrine at Fatima, the report said.

The 22 injured passengers were taken to hospital, rescue coordinator Joaquim Marinho told TSF. Marinho said 120 rescue workers with 32 ambulances were at the scene.

Officials could not immediately be reached for comment.

The single-deck bus crashed off the highway after heavy rain, and the vehicle fell into the garden of a house at the bottom of a ravine about 30 meters (100 feet) deep, according to TSF.

Sharon rejects blame for Palestinian uprising

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon yesterday rejected blame for the Palestinian uprising and vowed that Israel would not stand trial before the world as he prepared to meet with a US-led commission probing the six months of deadly Israeli-Palestinian violence.

Clashes erupted after then opposition leader Sharon made a controversial visit September 28 to Jerusalem's al-Aqsa mosque compound, a site holy to both Muslims and Jews.

"It is clear today to everyone that there is no relation between my visit and the wave of terrorism," Sharon said. "Everyone knows that it was a strategic decision by (Palestinian leader) Yasser Arafat, who believed he could put pressure and obtain more from Israel and prompt international intervention in the conflict."

The prime minister was due to meet with the five members of the fact-finding commission, led by former US senator and Northern Ireland peacebroker George Mitchell, yesterday.

Sharon also made clear that Israel, accused by international human rights groups of using "excessive force" to quell the violence, rejects efforts to prosecute it internationally for its actions during the intifada.

"No one, and I mean no one, has the right to bring Israel and the Jewish people before a court of the world's people," he said.

Sharon said the decision to agree to the fact-finding committee, set up at an October summit at the Egyptian resort of Sharm el-Sheikh that included

then US president Bill Clinton, was a "historic error" by his predecessor Ehud Barak.

"But under the current circumstances, there is no choice other than to meet with the commission," Sharon said.

A total of 444 people have been killed in the six-month tide of violence, most of them Palestinians, but Sharon has put the blame squarely on Arafat's shoulders and is adamant that peace talks will not resume under fire.

On the ground Sunday, an Israeli was injured in a shooting attack while he was driving near a Jewish settlement south of the northern West Bank town of Nablus, military sources said.

The army also reported that three mortars were fired by Palestinians on a military base at the Gush Katif settlement bloc in the southern Gaza Strip overnight, but no one was injured.

Marwan Barghout, the West Bank chief of Arafat's Fatah faction regarded as a key leader of the intifada, last week announced a change of strategy aimed at reviving a more widespread participation among Palestinians.

Thousands marched in protest at the weekend against the crippling Israeli closure on the Palestinian territories and further demonstrations have been called to coincide with the Arab summit in Amman that opens Tuesday.

Arab foreign ministers were meeting Sunday to prepare for the gathering of heads of state that is expected to deliver a strong condemnation of Israel.

Macedonia launches assault on Albanian rebels

AFP, Tetovo, Macedonia

Macedonian troops began a fierce gunbattle with rebels on the heights above Tetovo yesterday after launching an offensive backed by the fiercest artillery barrage of the campaign so far.

Some 250 troops armed with assault rifles and mortars and backed by more than a dozen armoured personnel carriers were locked in battle with ethnic Albanian guerrillas near the hilltop village of Gajre just over a mile outside the city, an AFP photographer at the scene reported.

The assault was preceded by a two hour barrage of heavy artillery and rocket fire, as T-55 tanks and troops deployed in the town, replacing police special forces units at key firing positions.

At least two helicopters were involved in the operation, which followed an overnight attack by Macedonian helicopter gunships on suspected rebel positions, the first

use of air power by the government.

Rebel rifle fire and mortar rounds also hit the town itself, two shells damaging shops and smashing windows. An AFP reporter saw a column of infantry attempting to climb a track towards Gajre to reinforce the assault, before it was pinned down by rebel fire.

Defence ministry spokesman Georgi Trendafilov said: "The operation announced by the government within the ultimatum issued to the terrorists aimed at expelling them from the territory of Macedonia in order to protect the integrity of the country is underway."

There was no early indication of how many casualties may have been suffered by either side in the fighting and the dawn barrage, which began at 7:00 am.

Explosions and plumes of flame erupted on a ridge-line north of the town from which rebels had launched an attack last week and which has since become a favoured target of government troops and

special police.

There were reported sightings overnight of unmanned "drones", spy planes which send live images to computers, which could have given the Macedonian forces the necessary intelligence to launch the offensive.

German, US and French forces based with NATO-led peacekeepers in Kosovo have based such spy planes on the frontier of the disputed zone and the allies have promised to share intelligence with Skopje.

The guerrillas, who style themselves the National Liberation Army (NLA), have taken control of a string of villages north of Tetovo towards the frontier with UN-administered Kosovo, where 44,000 NATO-led peacekeepers are based.

A small contingent of German peacekeepers, running a logistics depot for the Kosovo force (KFOR), is based in Tetovo but has taken no part in the fighting.

Cleopatra was short, fat and plain!

REUTERS, London

Cleopatra, the queen of ancient Egypt, who has been portrayed on the silver screen by some of Hollywood's most beautiful women, was actually short, fat and plain, Sunday Times newspaper said.

Screen sirens Elizabeth Taylor, Vivien Leigh and Sophia Loren are among those to have starred in films as the queen, who ruled Egypt in the first Century BC. Historians say she used her beauty to seduce Roman Emperor Julius Caesar and his leading general Mark Anthony.

But a new exhibition at the British Museum in London next month, which features 11 statues previously thought to portray other queens, will show Cleopatra as plain-looking, about 5-foot tall and apparently plump.

"Sadly for those who seek the secret of her personal allure, the more we study Cleopatra's surviving images, the less certain we may be of her looks," Susan Walker, curator of the exhibition, told the paper.



Russian President Vladimir Putin (R) and Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori (L) exchange documents after signing a statement on the continuation of talks on a peace treaty between Russia and Japan after their talks in the East-Siberian city of Irkutsk yesterday.

Putin, Mori agree to work towards peace

AFP, Irkutsk, Russia

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Japan's embattled Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori agreed at a summit yesterday never to abandon hope of one day signing a peace treaty ending World War II.

However as the summit drew to a close it became evident that such a day may still far away.

Putin told Mori at their long-delayed meeting in the Siberian city of Irkutsk that Russia and Japan "must confirm our desire to continue work towards reaching a peace deal."

"This is one of the main signals that must be sent to the Russian and Japanese people," Putin said in televised remarks.

"My talks with Mori were distinguished by openness and trust," he added after the meeting, adding optimistically that the two neighbours' relations had reached "a new level at which they had not been for a long time."

Mori for his part said that he and Putin had "energetically discussed all the questions" that stood in the way of signing a peace treaty that would formally end hostile relations stretching from World War II.

"The dialogue was very open, as between friends," he said, noting that the two leaders agreed to address each other by their first names.

"I noted a deep mutual understanding never before achieved at the level of leaders," said Mori.

But it was clear from their joint statement signed after the meeting that the two leaders made little to no headway in solving their decades-old territorial dispute, or arranged any particular time frame for a peace treaty dialogue.

The two sides "agreed to lead future peace negotiations based on previously agreed-to documents," the joint statement said -- a phrase that featured in almost every other such statement issued by the two sides over the years.

The two nations must "cooperate" in the process of striking a peace deal, according to the statement, which added that the two wanted to "intensify" the process.

The closed-door talks, which went ahead despite uncertainty hanging over the Japanese premier's future, were aimed at ironing out Tokyo's demands that Moscow hand back four tiny Pacific islands -- known as the Kurils in Russia and the Northern Territories in Japan -- claimed by the Red Army in 1945.

A post-war truce was signed in 1956, in which Russia pledged to return at least two of the islands after a peace treaty was signed. A final pact was due to have been signed by 2000, but the two sides failed to meet the deadline.

However the only agreement the two sides could come to in Irkutsk was on unspecified "mutual economic cooperation."



Former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic (C) waves to his supporters who came to see him in front of the gate of his house after a demonstration downtown Belgrade on Saturday. More than 5,000 people, mostly supporters of former president Slobodan Milosevic, gathered in Belgrade Saturday in a protest two years on from NATO's bombing campaign against Yugoslavia. Demonstrators gathered at the main Belgrade Square of Republic in a demonstration called by Milosevic's Socialist Party to mark second anniversary of the launch of the bombing campaign.

India set to conduct rocket test for satellite launch

REUTERS, Bangalore

India is set to conduct the first test of a rocket to launch geostationary satellites this week.

If it succeeds, India will join a small club of space power nations and achieve a 30-year dream.

The first test flight of the geosynchronous satellite launch vehicle, GSLV-D1, marks a big threshold for India's space programme and offers scope to cut costs for its satellite launches and start a lucrative business, experts say.

India, which aims to launch a satellite with the GSLV after three successful tests, will join the United States, the European Space Agency, Japan, Russia and China as a member of the satellite launch club if all goes to plan.

Roddam Narasimha, director of Bangalore-based National Institute

of Advanced Studies, a science think-tank, told Reuters that the GSLV would mean the culmination of a three-decade dream.

"Right from then the GSLV had been seen as a goal," he said.

The GSLV-D1 is set to blast off on Wednesday from Sriharikota, about 100 km north from the southern city of Madras, where the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has a space port. A launch window is being kept open till April 3 as a back-up.

The GSLV can carry and deploy a two-tonne payload as deep as 36,000 km in space.

A geostationary satellite orbits the earth with the same rotation as the earth, which means it remains above the same spot above the earth's surface. Powerful communications satellites usually fall in the category.

India has already built a polar satellite launch vehicle (PSLV), which puts satellites in a north-south orbit along the poles. Geostationary satellites move in an east-west orbit.

The PSLV normally hoists a 900 kg satellite in the geosynchronous orbit.

"It is roughly twice the capacity of PSLV," K Kasturirangan, chairman of ISRO, told Reuters on Saturday.

A key aspect of the GSLV is the use of a Russian engine that employs fuel like liquid hydrogen, which has to be stored at very low temperatures.

7 killed, 100 houses torched in Aceh

AFP, Banda Aceh, Indonesia

At least seven civilians were killed and more than 100 houses burned as Indonesian security forces conducted sweeps against rebels in Aceh, activists and residents said Sunday.

The seven civilians, including a 70-year-old woman, were killed when security personnel set fire to houses in the Rantau Panyang village in East Aceh, the local rebel spokesman, Ishak Daud, said.

"Grandmother Maryam was burned to death when her house was torched, five others were killed when the roadside stall they were in was set on fire and another person was shot dead by the security personnel as he attempted to avoid the sweep," Daud told AFP.

He said he believed the soldiers and police were looking for a base of the Free Aceh Movement (GAM), which has been fighting for a free Islamic state in Aceh since the 1970s.

"The thing is we do not have any base there," Daud said.

The chairman of the East Aceh chapter of the Aceh Forum Concerned about Human Rights, Muhammad Yusuf Puteh, said that over 160 houses had been burned in two separate incidents in East Aceh district.

Puteh said that more than 60 houses were burned in Rantau Panyang on Saturday while on Friday, security personnel torched

close to 100 houses in Alue Gadeng Puntong, in the sub-district of Birem Bayeum.

He said that both villages, located west of the district town of Langsa, were intentionally set on fire in what appeared to be a "scorched earth" policy taken by the security forces.

Aceh police spokesman Adjunct Senior Commissioner Sad Harunantyo said that he had yet to receive any report of the burning incidents.

Two soldiers were injured in an attack by armed rebels in Leubok Dalam, in the North Aceh sub-district of Cot Girek on Saturday, North Aceh district police chief Adjunct Senior Commissioner Wanto Sumardi said.

"The attack was launched within the security zone by about 15 GAM members armed with rifles," Sumardi said.

He was referring to a violence-free security zone agreed by the government and the GAM a week ago. Both sides agreed to halt or prevent violence from taking place in the districts of North Aceh and Bireuen starting on March 22.

The local GAM deputy commander, Sofyan Daud, admitted that an exchange of fire had taken place there, but denied that it was intended as an attack on Indonesian security forces.

"We met unexpectedly and if we do not fire first, we would have been shot first," Daud said.