

Carnage at Lankan carnival

Blast kills 11 during open-air concert at stadium

AFP, Colombo

A bomb ripped through a crowded open-air stadium in north-western Sri Lanka yesterday, killing at least 11 revellers and wounding more than 200 others on the final night of a carnival, police said.

The musical evening had been organised as part of a grand carnival arranged by a local radio and television group, the E. A. P. Network, with the participation of two Indian singers and a host of local artists.

Police said eight people were killed immediately by the blast and the stampede when tens of thousands of people scrambled to get out of the esplanade where the carnival was held at Kurunegala.

By noon Sunday, another three people died from their injuries. Some of the victims were burnt.

"During the show, there were some clashes between two groups from rival villages of Kurunegala," a local police official said. "We suspect the bomb attack had something to do with that."

A local police official said a major investigation was underway and they had reason to believe that the man who may have brought the locally-made explosive device may have also died in the explosion.

Investigators were puzzled as to how the explosives could have been smuggled in as all fans were subjected to body searches before being allowed into the grounds where the show was staged.

Police rushed anti-riot squads to Kurunegala shortly after the bombing as

tension gripped the area. Residents of Malkaduwa and Samanpura villages were believed to be involved in the brawl that resulted in the carnage.

Local officials said they had no immediate reason to suspect the involvement of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who are known to have carried out much more devastating bomb attacks in the past.

The LTTE has announced it is observing a unilateral truce since Christmas eve in a bid to boost Norway's attempts to broker peace in the island where more than 60,000 people have been killed in separatist violence.

The latest blast went off at the Kurunegala town, 90 kilometres (60 miles) north of Colombo where the E.A.P. Network was organising the carnival to mark this month's traditional Sinhala and Tamil New Year.

Witnesses said crowds had also been lighting flares and initial reports suggested several victims had burns injuries.

An Indian singer, Rithika (Eds: one name) of Bombay had just finished singing and her colleague Shamila was about to sing when the bomb went off about an hour after midnight. The singers were unhurt.

About 200 people sought treatment following the blast and about half of them were admitted to hospital for further treatment. The wounded were rushed to four hospitals.

The carnival had been taking place for eight days and Saturday night was the grand finale.



A police investigator looks at the debris after a bomb attack yesterday on a carnival in north-western Sri Lanka where at least 11 people were killed and about 200 were wounded. Police say the blast was related to clashes between two rival groups in the area.

UN HR envoy to make first trip to Myanmar

AFP, Bangkok

The United Nations' new human rights envoy is to visit Myanmar for the first time this week, in a new sign of the junta's willingness to begin cooperating with the outside world.

Brazilian academic Paulo Sergio Pinheiro received the green light to fly into Yangon just weeks after his appointment, while his predecessor Rajsoomer Lallah quit last year after never visiting the military-run country.

Diplomats have hailed Pinheiro's visit as another indication that a remarkable political shift is underway in Myanmar, where the generals have begun meeting behind closed doors with democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

"This is a very positive sign," said one observer. "They need to normalise their relations with the international community."

Better late than never

AP, Springfield

A World War II Army veteran has finally received his Bronze Star 56 years after he parachuted into France on D-Day.

Francis Lamoureux, 81, was among the members of the Army's elite 82nd Airborne Pathfinder Team that flew into France on June 6, 1944, 30 minutes before the main airborne invasion and five hours before the Normandy landings.

The unit's objective was to mark a "drop zone" with lights and radar-guidance equipment so the main force would know where to land.

"The night of June the 5th, 1944, the Pathfinder Team took off in a plane from England," Lamoureux said. "Our mission was to get on the ground and give the signal. But when we were in that plane, we encountered anti-aircraft fire things were exploding all around us, and we had to jump. We just wanted to get out of there as fast as we could."

All his fellow Pathfinders received Bronze Stars for bravery during the mission. But Lamoureux missed the ceremony and did not get his medal.

Lamoureux, of Ludlow, Massachusetts, received the award Saturday at a book signing to promote Patrick O'Donnell's "Beyond Valor: World War II's Ranger and Airborne Veterans Reveal the Heart of Combat." The book includes Lamoureux's account of his wartime experiences.

Howard rules out early polls in Australia

AP, Canberra

Prime Minister John Howard said yesterday there was no chance his embattled conservative government would call an early general election.

Some business leaders have called for elections, due in November or December, to be brought forward, saying squabbling between the government and the opposition is damaging the economy.

"I mean, people are never satisfied," Howard told Nine Network television.

"Why would I bring the election forward? What is to be achieved by that?" he added.

Howard's coalition is trailing far behind the opposition Labour Party and is given little chance, at this point, of winning a third term.

21 vice-ministers replaced in ROK Cabinet reshuffle

AP, Seoul

Following a large-scale Cabinet reorganisation this past week, President Kim Dae-jung yesterday replaced 21 vice-ministers, filling the posts with technocrats.

The latest appointments were a follow-up to Monday's reshuffle in which nine of 22 ministers were replaced in an effort to allay public concern over government policies including economic reforms and engagement with communist North Korea.

Critics, however, denounced the Cabinet shakeup as a maneuver by Kim to consolidate his political base.

Four of the nine new appointees were political allies. There were from his ruling party's coalition partner and another was tapped from a splinter opposition party.

No politicians were included in Sunday's reorganisation.

"To raise the morale of public servants, 14 of 21 appointees were promoted from within their ministries," said Park Joon-young, a presidential spokesman, in a nationally televised news briefing.

The cabinet shuffle was a sign of how much Kim, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to reconcile with the North, is struggling to shore up support at home.

DPRK moves to deploy missile on ROK border

AFP, Seoul

North Korea has moved forward the deployment of its ground-to-air missiles along the border with South Korea, prompting a close watch from South Korea, reports said yesterday.

The advance deployment of North Korea's "SA-2 missile units" along the border came on the heels of the communist country's anti-US tirade, said the South's Yonhap news agency.

An unnamed South Korean government official told Yonhap: "We are closely watching the advance development of North Korean missiles along the demilitarized zone (DMZ)."

The DMZ, which divides the Korean peninsula, has been heavily militarized since the 1950-53 Korean War was ended by a fragile armistice.

"The reason is not clear. But we believe the North's military movement might have been linked to its propaganda war against the United States," he was quoted as saying.

North Korea has made angry attacks on the United States since President George W. Bush took office in January and effectively froze contacts with the Communist state.

But Pyongyang has generally eased its propaganda war against the rival South since a historic summit between their leaders last June.

North Korea pulled out of ministerial talks in March and last week canceled a planned joint team at the world table tennis championships in Japan later this month.

General Thomas Schwartz, commander of US troops in South Korea, said last week in Washington that the North had stepped up military drills since last June's summit.

"The (military) threat is more serious today than it was last year when I testified," Schwartz told a US Senate committee.

North Korea blasts alleged espionage by US spy planes

AFP, Seoul

North Korea yesterday accused US spy planes of stepping up espionage against the communist country since US President George W. Bush took office this year.

The North, through its official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), said US reconnaissance planes staged 180 cases of aerial espionage against North Korea in March.

The agency quoted a military source as saying: "Involved in them were strategic and tactical reconnaissance planes and commanding planes with various missions deployed in their overseas bases and South Korea."

Such aerial espionage is getting more frequent "against the backdrop of the present US ruling quarters' call for a hardline policy" towards North Korea, it added.

Sharon rejects peace plan of Jordan, Egypt

Israeli police chief calls for separation

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has rejected a proposal put forward by Egypt and Jordan aimed at halting the deadly tide of Israeli-Palestinian violence and resuming peace talks, Israeli radio reported yesterday.

The radio, quoting senior sources in Sharon's office, said the Palestinians had transmitted to Israel the proposal, which focuses on stopping violence, resuming security cooperation, implementing a third Israeli troop withdrawal from the West Bank and renewing talks for a final status agreement.

But Sharon has rejected the plan, viewing it as an "attempt to drag Israel into negotiations under fire," the radio said.

It said that senior Israeli officials insist that negotiations will not be resumed until quiet is restored after more than six months of violence that has killed more than 460 people, most of them Palestinians.

Israel will only agree to negotiate an interim agreement and talks on a final agreement are not under consideration, the radio quoted the senior officials as saying.

Meanwhile, Israeli police chief Shlomo Aharonishki has warned of a likely intensification in "terrorism" following a spate of attacks and called for a separation between Israel and the Palestinians, media reports said Sunday.

"The nightmare will continue, and there is a need for separation," Aharonishki was quoted as telling Israeli television.

"The potential for more terror attacks is very large, and prospects of preventing the attacks in a sweeping fashion are limited," he said.

"There's no way of giving a guarantee that terror strikes can be prevented over a long period. The moment the other side has heightened motivation, it becomes very hard to thwart attacks."

Israel was rocked by three bomb attacks last week that killed two Israeli teenagers and two suicide bombers and left dozens of people injured, the latest in a string of attacks during the six-month Palestinian intifada or uprising.

Clinton tops list of 'most foolish'

AFP, Washington

The United States suffers fools gladly, it seems, as Bill Clinton, who served two presidential terms and left office with a 65 per cent approval rating, was voted the Most Foolish American in an April Fool's Day survey.

In the second-annual telephone survey conducted by New York-based public relations consultant Jeff Barge, 85 per cent of the 1,046 people contacted said the former president had "done something foolish" in the past year.

Clinton also topped the list last year, though his score in 2001 increased by five points, giving him a commanding 16-point lead over his nearest rival, actor Robert Downey Jr (69 per cent), who was arrested on drug charges while on probation for a previous drug offense.

Another highly ranked fool in this year's poll was the Reverend Jesse Jackson, a Clinton adviser whose admission that he fathered a former staffer's child out of wedlock while counselling the former president at the height of the Monica Lewinsky scandal garnered him 67 per cent of the votes cast.



Serbs jubilate in Belgrade after the arrest and incarceration of ex-Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic was announced yesterday. Milosevic was driven to Belgrade Central Prison after a more than 24-hour standoff with authorities who had surrounded his suburban villa and attempted at least one armed intervention.

World sees Milosevic arrest as good news, wants justice now

AFP, Paris

World leaders joined in a chorus of approval at the arrest of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic yesterday, hailing it as a breakthrough for Belgrade's fledgling democracy but insisting he be brought to trial by the international war crimes tribunal.

While US authorities said they were waiting for official confirmation of the arrest before commenting, France said it was delighted with the reported detention, and Britain welcomed what it said was good news for the Balkans.

The incarceration of Milosevic was "very welcome news to all those who have struggled so long to bring peace and justice to the Balkans," said British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook.

The ousted leader was arrested early Sunday at his Belgrade home after a tense standoff between Yugoslav security forces and armed loyalist bodyguards.

However, for many, his arrest on charges of corruption and abuse of power is only a first step on what they insist must be an extradition process to see Milosevic face trial before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

"It is another important step towards bringing Milosevic and his cronies to book for their crimes against humanity," Cook for one stressed.

Milosevic has been indicted by The Hague-based court for war crimes and crimes against humanity allegedly committed in Kosovo in 1999.

"NATO expects that the arrest of Milosevic is the first step on the road which will take him to The Hague to answer war crimes charges," a spokesman for the military alliance said on Sunday.

And in The Hague, the tribunal's Chief Prosecutor Carla Del Ponte was quoted by her spokeswoman as saying:

"The arrest is a positive sign on the part of the Yugoslav and Serbian authorities. It will facilitate his delivery to The Hague and Yugoslavia's respect of its international obligations."

Milosevic, she added, "is no longer a fugitive from justice."

Germany for its part welcomed the arrest as a positive sign from the new authorities in Belgrade, who took over from Milosevic last October.

"The attitude shown by the Yugoslav government shows that Yugoslavia's democratically elected forces are determined to impose the rule of law," Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said, also adding that it was a first step to bringing Milosevic to account.

Parachuters' plane crashes in Texas with 22 on board

AFP, Washington

A DeHavilland plane used for parachute jumping crashed Saturday in the southwestern US state of Texas with 22 people on board, according to the US Federal Aviation Administration.

Six people have been injured in the crash between Decatur and Denton, Texas, but there have been no reported fatalities and nobody is thought to have been seriously wounded, an FAA official told AFP via telephone, declining to be identified.

The extent of damage to the aircraft is unknown at this time, the official said, adding that FAA inspectors are currently on the scene investigating the incident.

Aircraft such as the DeHavilland plane do not regularly contact the FAA prior to, during or after their flights, so authorities do not yet know much about the crash, the official said.

US aircraft damaged after Chinese interception

AFP, Washington

A US navy aircraft was damaged after it was intercepted by two Chinese fighter jets during a surveillance mission over the South China Sea and forced to make an emergency landing, the navy said yesterday.

"At approximately 8:15 pm Eastern Standard Time (6:15 BST), Saturday, March 31 ... a US Navy EP-3 maritime patrol aircraft on a routine surveillance mission over the South China Sea, was intercepted by two People's Republic of China (PRC) fighter aircraft," US Pacific Command said.

"There was contact between one of the Chinese aircraft and the EP-3, causing sufficient damage for the US plane to issue a 'Mayday' signal and divert to an airfield on Hainan Island, PRC," it said in a statement.

The US plane issued a mayday signal and diverted to an airfield on Hainan Island to make the emergency landing, according to the statement, issued from Camp Smith in Hawaii.

None of the 24 crew were reported to have been injured.

Scientists warn of dangers of cloning humans

AFP, Washington

A group of well-known scientists has embarked on a crusade against human cloning, a procedure that had a staggeringly high failure rate when conducted on animals and which, even if it were to overcome the incredible odds, would rear a race of severely deformed and mentally impaired children, they say.

Testifying this week before a congressional committee examining the human cloning issue, the experts sounded the alarm against their colleagues' quest to bring the first human clone into the world.

They said the myriad difficulties scientists encountered in trying to clone animals -- including miscarriages, premature delivery, physical deformities and still births -- illustrate that the chances of successfully cloning a human being are virtually nil.

"The many problems seen in cows and sheep that have been cloned, while unfortunate in animals, would be a disaster in human beings," insisted Michael Soules, president of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, adding that the medical community must not ignore a tenet integral to its Hippocratic oath: "First, do no harm."

Dalai Lama wants to preach Buddhism in China

AFP, Taipei

The exiled Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama said yesterday that he would like to teach Buddhism in mainland China when Beijing becomes more open-minded.

"As a Buddhist monk, there is no national boundary," the Nobel Prize winner said at a Q&A session following his two-hour speech on "Ethics in the New Millennium" at the Linkou Stadium, in northern Taoyuan county.

In his first public speech on the second of a nine-day visit to Taiwan, the Dalai Lama revealed: "As a matter of fact, I already received some Buddhist invitations from mainland China."

"So in the future when the minds of the People's Republic of China government have changed and become more open, more realistic, then of course, everything would be easier," he said.

The Dalai Lama has adopted a conciliatory approach by dropping calls for Tibetan independence, instead demanding large-scale autonomy for the region. He fled Tibet following an anti-China uprising in 1959 and has lived in exile in northern India ever since.

But Beijing has insisted that his words are "insincere" and has branded him a tool of anti-China forces in the West, especially the United States.

China on Friday accused Taiwan and the Dalai Lama of plotting to "split the motherland" on the eve of his second visit to the island.

US steps up training for Lankan troops

AFP, Colombo

The United States has stepped up military training for Sri Lankan security forces who are locked in combat with separatist Tamil Tiger guerrillas, a press report here said yesterday.

The US navy conducted a Joint Combined Exercise last month at a location in the south of the island and talks were underway for another similar program, the Sunday Times newspaper said.

"A US military team on Friday concluded talks with their Sri Lankan counterparts for a further upcoming Joint Combined Exchange Training program," the newspaper said.

It said the Sri Lankan navy's Fast Attack Flotilla division benefited from the latest training program.

There was no immediate reaction to the report from the Sri Lankan military or US Embassy.

However, there has been stepped-up military co-operation between the two countries since Washington banned Sri Lanka's separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) guerrillas as a foreign terrorist group in October 1997.

In December, the US Defence Institute of International Legal Studies held a seminar here on human rights law for 39 military officers, police and representatives from the local Human Rights Commission.

"We regard this as perhaps the most important military training we offer to Sri Lanka," US ambassador Ashley Wills said at the time.



A little girl, on the shoulders of her father, is all smiles as she catches cherry blossom at the Ueno Park in Tokyo yesterday. Millions of people enjoyed fully bloomed cherry blossoms on the bright Spring day.

French Speaker calls embargo on Iraq 'very stupid'

AFP, Cairo

French parliamentary speaker Raymond Forni on Saturday called the decade-long embargo on Iraq "very stupid" and described the situation between Israelis and Palestinians as "dangerous," Egyptian state media said.

The National Assembly speaker, who arrived in Egypt on Tuesday, said the embargo on Iraq imposed since its 1990 invasion of Kuwait was "very stupid", as it only "aggravates (the Iraqi people's) punishment and poverty."

Philippine army shells Muslim rebel positions

AFP, Zamboanga

Philippine troops shelled encampments of Muslim insurgents in the southern Philippines in response to an attack on an army outpost as sporadic clashes erupted ahead of peace talks, the military said yesterday.

Troops fired rounds of mortars towards Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) rebel positions in the town of Barira in Maguindano province late Saturday, regional army spokesman Colonel Fredesvindo Covarrubias said.