

11 of a family killed in Punjab

AFP, Multan

A revenge killing in Pakistan's eastern Punjab province yesterday left 11 members of the same family dead, police said.

Four women and three children were among those killed in Vehari, 100 km east of Multan, they said.

There were few details about the killing, but police said it appeared to be in retaliation for a killing several days earlier in the same village.

In rural Pakistan feuds are often settled by retaliatory killings that include women and children.

An investigation has been ordered, but police say so far they have not made any arrests.

Surrender or die, Arroyo tells Muslim kidnappers

AFP, Jolo

Philippine President Gloria Arroyo yesterday warned Muslim gunmen holding an American to surrender or die as she launched a second wave of military offensives.

Emerging from a conference with the military brass in the southern island of Jolo, Arroyo told reporters she had ordered troops "to fight to the finish" after a seven-month campaign against the Abu Sayyaf.

The Muslim gunmen are holding US national Jeffrey Schilling and Filipino Roland Ullah somewhere in this remote and impoverished island on the southern tip of the Philippine archipelago.

Arroyo rejected any negotiations with the Abu Sayyaf, who last week called off a threat to behead Schilling to mark the president's birthday.

"The Abu Sayyaf are not political rebels, they are terrorists, and that's the way we will deal with them," she told reporters in Zamboanga city Tuesday on her way back to Manila.

16 killed in Taoist temple stampede in China

AFP, Beijing

Sixteen people were stampeded to death as tens of thousands of worshippers tried to pack into a Taoist temple fair in northern China's Shaanxi province, state press said yesterday.

Six others were seriously injured in the accident Sunday morning as worshippers tried to get through a tunnel leading to the Yuquan Temple near Shaanxi's Huayin city, the China Daily said.

Huayin city had sent about 50 police to the area to control crowds, but they failed to control the rush of worshippers who annually come to the fair, the report said.

The injured were undergoing emergency treatment in local hospitals as provincial authorities launched investigations into the tragedy, it said.

The temple lies in a valley running to the Hua Mountain scenic area, a traditional centre of Taoist learning that lies near the Yellow River border with neighbouring Shanxi and Henan provinces.

Taliban chief slams UN

AFP, Kabul

Afghan Taliban chief Mullah Mohammad Omar has slammed the United Nations as a western tool and urged resistance from a united Muslim front, state radio reported yesterday.

"The infidel world is not letting Muslims form a government of their own choice," the fundamentalist militia supremo was quoted as saying in a message to an international conference of Islamic clerics in Pakistan.

"They want to resist jihad (holy war) and destroy the Islamic system," Omar said, accusing western powers of using the UN to achieve their ends.

LDP race to replace Mori picks up steam

REUTERS, Tokyo

The race to select a successor to unpopular Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori entered high gear yesterday as a leadership battle moved from cosy backroom deals in the public.

Veteran politician Shizuka Kamei, policy chief of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), declared his candidacy for president of the LDP, adding momentum to the April 24 poll for a post that effectively brings with it leadership of the country.

"I will run with my own policy," Kamei, a proponent of public spending to prop up economic growth, told the gathering of his faction, the third largest in the pro-business LDP.

Israel pounds Gaza amid US push for talks

Palestinians term strikes all-out 'declared war'

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli anti-tank missiles blasted Palestinian targets in the Gaza Strip yesterday in retaliation for a spate of mortar attacks, killing one Palestinian and injuring another 14, Palestinian sources said.

The bombardment came amid a US push for a resumption of security talks between Israel and the Palestinians to try to bring a halt to the bloody tide of violence that has swept across the region for more than six months.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was quoted Monday by public television as saying that Israel was set to retaliate without compromise to Palestinian attacks which have gone beyond "the limits of what can be tolerated."

Palestinian officials slammed the "tyrannical" missile strikes and renewed their demand for international protection.

The strike on the Palestinian naval headquarters north of Gaza City and the military police station at Deir al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip came only hours after three mortars fell on the Jewish settlement of Kaif in the south.

Wail Khuweita, a military doctor who held the rank of lieutenant, was killed when the naval medical clinic was hit, medical sources said, while another 14 Palestinians were injured there and in Deir al-Balah.

The Israeli army said it fired the missiles as part of its continuing operations against "Palestinian Authority elements which are not acting to stop firing against Israel."

"The Israeli army will not permit attacks against our civilians or our soldiers and will take the necessary measures to ensure security and peace," the army said in a statement.

"The army demands that the Palestinian Authority act to bring about an immediate halt to the firing," it added.

Israeli forces have struck back forcefully several times against Palestinian targets in the West Bank and Gaza Strip since late March, when Sharon decided to adopt a "gloves-off" policy after a string of deadly anti-Israeli attacks.

Chinese-US leaders talk tough on spy plane row

AFP, Hainan

China raised the stakes in the 10-day spy plane crisis yesterday with a blunt rejection of US expressions of regret as Washington signalled growing impatience with Chinese intransigence.

But while the US and Chinese presidents traded barbed comments, US diplomats trying to secure the release of the 24 crew of a spy plane detained on the southern Chinese island of Hainan were cautiously upbeat.

The two sides have held four rounds of talks to find a face-saving solution to the stand-off which was caused by the April 1 collision between an EP-3 Aries surveillance plane and a Chinese fighter jet off Hainan.

US officials have said discussions were making progress but a spokesman for Chinese President Jiang

Zemin, who is on a state visit to Argentina, firmly rejected US efforts to resolve the situation.

"We are extremely unsatisfied by statements made thus far by the United States," foreign ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao told a press conference in Buenos Aires Monday.

"The United States should apologise," he added. "If not, it is going to make it more difficult to find a solution to this very serious incident, in which China is the victim."

Zhu went on to raise the spectre of an investigation into the collision under Chinese law with the participation of the US crew.

China has blamed the US plane for the collision in international airspace, which caused the fighter jet to crash into the sea and the probable death of the pilot, and wants nothing less than a full apology.

attacks.

Since the start of the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation in September, 471 people have died as a direct result of the violence, 386 Palestinians, 71 Israeli soldiers and Jewish civilians, 13 Arab Israelis and one German.

The new bombardment came after Washington said Monday that Sharon and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat had agreed "in principle" to continue security talks despite the postponement of a meeting Monday.

"The secretary had discussions over the weekend with both Prime Minister Sharon and Chairman Arafat to encourage the two sides to continue their bilateral security discussions that began last week," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

Meanwhile, Palestinian presidential secretary Tayeb Abdel Rahim on Tuesday described Israel's strikes on targets in the Gaza Strip which left one person dead as all-out "declared war," and renewed demands for international protection. "Today's strikes are declared war with no red lines and no limits, targeting the Palestinian Authority and every Palestinian citizen," Abdel Rahim told AFP after anti-tank missiles killed a Palestinian military doctor and injured 17 other people.

"This requires the international community to provide urgent protection to the Palestinian people from this aggression," he said, urging the United States to pressure Israel to stop its attacks.

"We will defend ourselves on our land as long as the occupation fights us on our land," he said, calling on Israel to return to the negotiating table and implement signed agreements.

The Israeli army said the missile strikes came in retaliation for a series of Palestinian mortar attacks on Jewish settlements in the Gaza Strip in the escalating uprising against Israeli occupation.

Palestinian general security chief for the Gaza Strip Abdel Razeq al-Majida said on Palestinian television: "We need to defend ourselves. This strike is part of a chain of continuing Israeli tyrannical aggression."

Vajpayee in Tehran

AFP, Tehran

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee arrived in Tehran yesterday in the first such visit by an Indian premier in seven years, state radio reported.

Vajpayee, who is to hold four days of talks on bilateral relations accompanied by a political and economic delegation, was welcomed by Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi before heading to meet First Vice President Hassan Habibi.

Vajpayee is also to meet with other high-ranking Iranian officials, including President Mohammad Khatami and Defence Minister Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani for talks on regional, international and bilateral ties, radio said.

50 arrested in Sindh during protest over water shortage

AFP, Karachi

Pakistani police yesterday arrested about 50 protestors and political leaders demonstrating over water shortages in the southern province of Sindh, the police and witnesses said.

Police arrested several leaders of Karachi's ethnic-based Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) party soon after they arrived to stage a hunger strike outside the Karachi Press Club.

Witnesses said several women including MQM women's wing leader Nasreen Jalli were dragged along the ground by female police before being bundled into a police van.

Senior police officer Majeed Dasti said the protestors were picked up for violating an official ban on rallies and demonstrations.

The hunger strike was planned by the MQM in collaboration with Sindh nationalist group Jeay Sindh Mahaz to protest against water shortages in the province.

"Water shortages are not a political but a human issue as the people of Sindh are not getting water," MQM deputy chief Afaf Sheikh said before police whisked him away.

Siamese twins separated

AFP, Singapore

A team of Singapore surgeons early yesterday successfully completed the separation of a pair of Siamese twins whose brains were enmeshed, in a marathon operation which stretched more than 90 hours.

"The operation was a success, and the babies are stable," a spokeswoman at Singapore General Hospital told AFP.

Nepalese-born twins Ganga and Jamuna Shrestha, who turned 11-months old on Monday, were joined at the head and their brains had become enmeshed where they shared the same cavity.

The operation began at 4:00 pm Friday and was expected to take up to 36 hours, but the meticulous separation and reconnection of blood vessels took considerably longer than anticipated.

"They finished the operation early this morning," the hospital spokeswoman said Tuesday, without confirming the exact time.

After intensive plastic surgery to cover the hole in her skull, Jamuna was the first of the babies to leave the theatre. She was taken to the hospital's intensive care unit at 11:10 am, more than 91 hours after the operation began.

Ganga was expected to join her mid-afternoon, the hospital spokeswoman said.



Singaporean Surgeon wheels-off one of the Nepalese Siamese twins, Jamuna out of the operating room yesterday at the Singapore General Hospital. A team of Singapore surgeons successfully completed the separation of a pair of Siamese twins, Ganga and Jamuna Shrestha, whose brains were enmeshed, in a marathon operation that lasted more than 80 hours. Both twins are reported as being stable after the marathon operation.

Nepal may mobilise army to control Maoist rebels

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal may mobilize the army in remote districts of the Himalayan kingdom to control a Maoist rebellion which has left more than 1,600 dead, Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala said yesterday.

"Mobilisation of the army is being planned," Koirala told reporters Tuesday.

"If Nepalese soldiers can be deployed at the frontier to control smuggling across the border and be used to maintain peace under the UN peacekeeping assignments, then why cannot they be sent to curb the Maoists to maintain peace and security in their own country?" he asked.

But asked what was preventing him from deploying the army, he refused to be drawn, saying: "I don't want to discuss this matter."

He assured reporters however that the capital Kathmandu was safe

from attack and added his government was in touch with the Maoists.

"The Maoists may decide to hold a dialogue with the government after they get tired of the whole thing," he added.

A committee of the ruling Nepali Congress Monday strongly suggested Koirala should mobilise the army to control the Maoists and halt the killings of policemen and civilians.

Sources close to the central secretariat said Koirala met with King Birendra late Monday to discuss the political situation and last week's rebel offensive which left 72 policemen dead.

Asked about an inter-party quarrel about his position in the government, Koirala said: "I cannot talk about myself but I can assure you that democracy is safe in the country."

Meanwhile, police said the Maoists and the police clashed at

Nanglebhire police post, manned by 35 policemen, 35 km outside Kathmandu late Monday.

No one was killed and after an hour-long encounter, the Maoists fled into the jungle, police said.

The Maoists launched their People's War in 1996 aiming to replace the constitutional monarchy with a communist state.

Meanwhile, the effect of Nepal's five-year-old Maoist insurgency has spread throughout almost all the country, a national human rights group has said.

The group, which surveyed the numbers of people killed by both police and rebels during clashes, said the balance had shifted in favour of the Maoists.

In 2000, 493 people were killed either by rebels or security forces during clashes, the non-governmental Informal Sector Service Centre (INSEC) reported Monday.

Estrada fears arrest after immunity plea thrown out

AFP, Manila

Ousted Philippine leader Joseph Estrada fears being thrown in jail after the Supreme Court rejected his last-ditch bid for presidential immunity, one of his lawyers said yesterday.

The court also rejected a second Estrada plea to stop a lower court from hearing corruption charges against him.

The two rulings removed legal barriers for the Sandiganbayan graft court to issue a warrant for Estrada's arrest if it determines there is probable cause for him to stand trial for plunder, court sources said.

Estrada was ousted by a military-backed popular revolt in January and was indicted last week on the charge of plunder and seven related cases. Plundering the state is non-bailable and punishable by death.

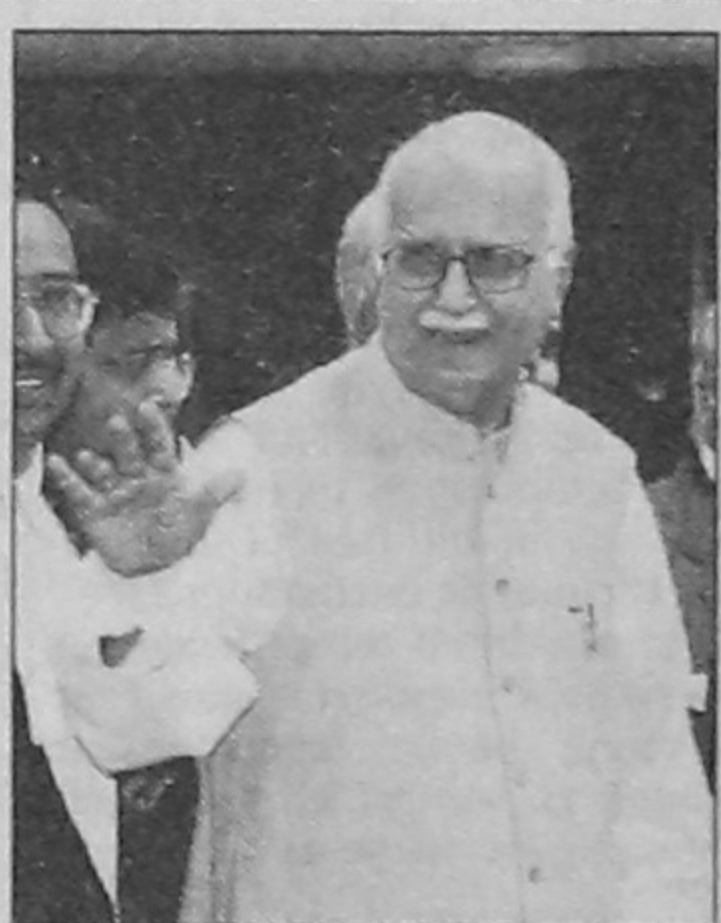
"What would be a matter of concern for us is the plunder case,"

Estrada lawyer Raymond Fortun said in a television interview.

His arrest "is really a possibility because the determination of the existence of probable cause is really dependent upon the discretion of each and every justice of the Sandiganbayan," he said.

Sandiganbayan presiding judge Francis Garchitorena on Tuesday ruled out an immediate arrest warrant against Estrada, saying members of the special court were still reviewing the corruption charges against him.

He did not say when the court would decide. The judiciary and the rest of the government shuts down Thursday for the Easter holidays. Prosecutors have charged Estrada with amassing 3.2 billion pesos (64.7 million dollars) in assets by taking bribes from gambling bosses, embezzling state funds and taking kickbacks from stock transactions using state-run pension funds.



Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani arrives at a court in New Delhi yesterday to face charges against the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. The 16th century mosque was razed in December 6, 1992 by Hindu zealots and sparked India's worst Hindu-Muslim violence in which 2,000 people were killed. Advani and other ministers stand accused of inciting crowds to tear down the mosque.

Benazir urges both countries to put hatred in cold storage

PTI, London

Former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto on Monday favoured creation of a climate of confidence by both India and Pakistan to put the feeling of hatred behind them.

Both countries should start talking about safe and open order across Kashmir, allow people to cross over, get to know each other and build confidence, Benazir said answering questions from listeners of Sunrise Radio, Asia's largest private network here.

I hope we can have successful negotiations with Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee for a better future, she said.

Asked how she proposed to tackle the ticklish Kashmir issue, Bhutto said Kashmir dispute has led to four wars and troops have been killed. I am now asking both India and Pakistan to help create a climate of confidence building.

She said part of the blame for the hate relationship lay in the cold war situation and on the leadership of the two countries.

Asked what new programme she would put forth for the people if voted to power, Bhutto said her topmost priority would be to ensure peace within the country and peace within the region.

It is very important to look at the issue in context. Is it one of concessions or is it one of understanding each others points of view, Bhutto said.

I think it would be wrong if I expected India to concede or India expected Pakistan to concede (on Kashmir). What we need to do is to think of Kashmiri people, think of peace, think of how we can make South Asia a great market that can compete in the 21st century with other markets.

Laden urges Islamists to back Afghan Taliban

AFP, Peshawar

Indicted terrorist Osama bin Laden yesterday implored a massive and at times emotional conference of international Islamists to unite behind the fundamentalist Taliban regime in Afghanistan.

The Saudi millionaire and alleged US embassy bomber said Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar deserved the backing of the Muslim world for his efforts to create a pure-Islamic state.

"I call upon Muslims all over the world to support him because he is the only person who has established a truly Islamic state," bin Laden said in a message read out to a crowd of some 200,000 people in this north-western Pakistani city, near the Afghan border.

"Muslim states are not coming up with the kind of support the Afghans require," he added as he appealed for money to reconstruct war-ravaged Afghanistan.

Several other speakers on the second day of the international conference of conservative Sunni scholars and clerics called for greater solidarity to fight "western aggression against Islam."

Amid emotional chants of Allah-o-Akbar (God is the greatest), Libyan scholar Mohammad Abdullah demanded a "jihad (holy war) against anti-Muslim forces."

Most speakers condemned United Nations sanctions against Afghanistan over the Taliban's refusal to deliver bin Laden for trial in the United States, where he has been indicted for allegedly plotting twin US embassy bombings in East Africa in 1998.

The Taliban, which seized Kabul in 1996 and rule most of Afghanistan with an iron-fisted version of Islamic law, are sheltering bin Laden as an honoured "guest" and hero of Islam.

Bin Laden recently pledged allegiance to Omar, the Doha-based Al-Jazeera satellite television channel said Monday.

The three-day conference opened here Monday to mark the 150th anniversary of the founding of the prestigious Sunni Muslim seminary of Deoband.

LTTE sends suicide squad to hit targets in Colombo

Lanka set for truce, opposition boycotts banquet

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger guerrillas have sent a fresh batch of suicide bombers to carry out attacks in the capital Colombo, a press report said yesterday.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had trained 27 suicide bombers known as Black Tigers who had a "passing out parade" two weeks ago. The Island newspaper reported.

Police had obtained information about suicide bombers from a woman Black Tiger arrested recently, it added.

Sri Lankan police occasionally issue alerts about suicide bombers who have been a trademark of LTTE in its two-decade conflict which has left more than 60,000 dead.

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka is set to see a limited weekend truce in its Tamil Tiger conflict to mark the traditional Sinhalese and Tamil New Year, official sources here said yesterday.

Government forces would most likely be asked to halt their offensive operations from April 13 to 16 to respect the traditional New Year, the sources said.

In the past, the military has ceased offensive actions to mark key religious and cultural occasions.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

(LTTE) have been holding their own one-sided truce since Christmas, but the government has refused to reciprocate until the rebels enter Norwegian-backed peace talks.

Sri Lanka's main opposition boycotted a banquet hosted by President Chandrika Kumaratunga in a sign of growing problems for her government ahead of a crucial parliamentary vote, officials said Tuesday.

The opposition United National Party (UNP) and the Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, stayed away from Monday's dinner as a sign of protest, the two parties said.

The UNP said they had never been invited to such a banquet by Kumaratunga in the past six years and felt it was a thinly disguised attempt to garner their support for Wednesday's key vote on the budget.

"Every time the president opens her mouth, she attacks us," UNP chief whip Tyrone Fernando said. "We don't think the invitation to us was extended in the right spirit."

State media reports said Monday intelligence agencies had uncovered a plan to bribe ministers and backbenchers and topple the government which has a slender four-seat majority in the 225-member assembly.