

One killed as quake hits China

AFP, Beijing

At least one person was killed and 27 injured when an earthquake struck the southwestern Chinese province of Yunnan early yesterday, a government official told AFP.

Officials are still trying to confirm the number of dead and injured in the remote and mountainous area where the quake struck, an official at the Ninglang County Civil Affairs Bureau said.

The quake occurred at 5:10 am (0310 BST) in Yongning Township, Ninglang County, causing 185 houses to collapse and more than 600 cows and sheep to go missing, the official Xinhua News agency reported.

The total economic loss caused by the quake is estimated at 120 million yuan (14.5 million dollars), the agency added.

The area is populated by large numbers of China's Yi ethnic minority people.

Earthquakes are extremely frequent in the Yunnan region, which has suffered 11 tremors measuring more than 6.0 on the Richter Scale over the past 50 years.

Two quakes measuring 5.9 and 6.5 on the Richter Scale struck the Yao's district, west of the regional capital Kunming, within an hour of each other in January last year, killing five people and injuring more than 1,500.

Former Pak Navy chief extradited from US

REUTERS, Lahore

Pakistani authorities brought back an arrested former navy chief on Wednesday from the United States to face corruption allegations, witnesses said.

Reporters saw security men whisking away retired admiral Mansurul Haq in a car after he arrived at Lahore airport on a Pakistan International Airlines flight from New York.

Haq has lived for the past two years in Austin, Texas, where a court ordered his extradition earlier this month at the request of Pakistan's military government.

Officials said Haq would be taken later to Rawalpindi, near the capital Islamabad, for questioning over allegations he received kickbacks in a submarine deal with France in the 1990s.

Under a controversial anti-corruption law decreed by military ruler General Pervez Musharraf, a military-led National Accountability Bureau can keep a person in custody for up to 90 days without bringing formal charges.

Tsheri youngest climber to conquer Everest

AFP, Kathmandu

A 15-year-old schoolboy, who last year lost three fingers on a failed mission to conquer Mount Everest, has become the youngest person to reach the world's highest peak, his expedition's sponsors said yesterday.

Temba Tsheri, a Nepalese high-school student, reached the 8,848-metre (29,028-foot) summit on Wednesday morning, Thamserku Trekking managing director Sonam Sherpa told AFP.

Sonam said the expedition's base camp at 8,300 metres had called his office Thursday to confirm Tsheri reached the summit with three-time Mount Everest conquerer Thubten Sherpa.

Their expedition leader was Frenchman Bertrand Roche, who first climbed Mount Everest in 1990 aged 17, Sonam said.

Tsheri's climb was his second attempt to become the world's youngest person to conquer Mount Everest.

Tsheri got to within 22 metres of the summit in May last year but had to turn back suffering severe frostbite and snow-blindness.

He later had three fingers amputated because of the frostbite.

But before leaving for Mount Everest in March, Tsheri told AFP last year's ordeal had not destroyed his ambition.

"My dream of conquering Mount Everest had failed last year after reaching close to the world's tallest summit due to soreness in my eyes," he said.

"I want to climb the world's tallest summit for national vanity and for the pride of young people in the world to show that we are also capable of doing the hard job as done by elder people."

The previous youngest climber to conquer Mount Everest was a 16-year-old Nepalese boy, Shambhu Tamang, who reached the summit in 1973.



PHOTO: AFP

US President George W. Bush (R) welcomes the Dalai Lama (L) at the White House on Wednesday over Beijing's stern objections. Bush "declared his strong support for the Dalai Lama's tireless efforts to initiate a dialogue with the Chinese government," Bush spokesman Ari Fleischer said in a statement after the half-hour meeting.

Israel shoots down Lebanese plane: Pilot dead

AFP, Jerusalem

without permission, leaving his instructor on the tarmac.

Israeli army spokesman Brigadier General Ron Kitrey said the pilot had failed to heed repeated warnings, leaving the army with little choice but to shoot down the plane.

"We signalled to the pilot with internationally recognised signals, tried to contact him via emergency frequencies, and even fired warning shots," he told army radio.

Israeli troops are on high alert for possible attacks by the Lebanese Shiite Muslim Hezbollah to mark the anniversary of Israel's May 2000 troop withdrawal after 22 years of occupation.

"This comes against the backdrop of serious threats in recent days to carry out terror attacks against Israel. We are also on alert for the danger of suicide aircraft," the army said in a statement.

Fears have been fanned by

bellicose statements by the leader of Hezbollah, with Israel issuing stern warnings to Beirut's political master Syria that it would retaliate in case of attack.

Since October, three Israeli soldiers have been abducted and three more killed by Hezbollah in the disputed Shebaa Farms area, which Israel captured from Syria in 1967 but which is claimed by Lebanon.

In the Palestinian territories, a Palestinian boy was critically injured by Israeli fire in the Gaza Strip, while the army staged a new raid into self-reliant territory, Palestinian security officials said.

The unrest flared as Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon chaired a cabinet meeting to discuss the situation amid international calls for both sides to halt the deadly eight-month spiral of fighting.

Alerts have been posted at more than 20 ports in Gujarat state, including India's biggest, Kandla Port, which was ordered to evacuate.

Radio messages were being sent to fishermen out at sea to return to shore.

"People living in the coastal areas have been told to stay in their homes, stock up on food and avoid

Bush vows support for Dalai Lama's efforts to start talks with China

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush welcomed the Dalai Lama to the White House Wednesday over Beijing's stern objections and vowed strong support for the exiled spiritual leader's efforts to start a dialogue with China.

Meanwhile, Beijing formally protested "wrongdoing" by Washington in deciding to allow Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian to stop in the United States en route to Latin America. China considers Taiwan a renegade province.

While both US moves appeared likely to further strain Sino-US relations, Bush spokesman Ari Fleischer told reporters that "the president continues to believe that we can work with China on issues where we have agreements, such as trade."

"There will be other areas, such as human rights and religious persecution, where the United States and China will differ, and the president will not hesitate to discuss those differences in an effort to ameliorate them," he emphasised.

While the Dalai Lama's visit appeared to fall squarely in the latter camp, White House officials took pains to describe it as a "private meeting" with a prominent -- not political -- figure, in an apparent bid to mollify China.

"Tibet is a part of China," said Fleischer. "There is no policy change."

Since Bush took office January 20, Sino-US ties have been frayed by a stand-off over a downed US spy plane, US arms sales to Taiwan, the detention of several US-based scholars in China and perennial US criticism of China's human rights record.

After the get-together, which occurred in the presidential residence here, Fleischer said in a statement that Bush had "declared his strong support for the Dalai Lama's tireless efforts to initiate a dialogue with the Chinese government."

He "also reiterated the strong commitment of the United States to support the preservation of Tibet's unique religious, cultural, and linguistic identity and

the protection of the human rights of all Tibetans," said Fleischer.

The religious leader told reporters that he had urged Bush to endorse democracy, human rights, and religious freedom during his October trip to China and had told him he favoured autonomy -- not independence -- for his homeland.

Later, in an interview with CNN, the Dalai Lama said the new US administration may have a different approach to China and Tibet than the administration of Bill Clinton.

"No doubt, the president as well as the secretary of state, I think both have a great sort of enthusiasm ... to make more effective contributions regarding ... world peace and regarding Tibet also," said the Dalai Lama.

Beijing believes the Dalai Lama is a separatist seeking the break-up of China. The Dalai Lama, who fled Tibet after an abortive anti-China uprising in 1959, campaigns around the world for greater Tibetan autonomy.

The meeting came as Beijing celebrated the 50th anniversary of what it calls its "peaceful liberation" of Tibet and promised "no compromise" in the Communists' fight against granting it autonomy.

In Washington, a spokesman for the Dalai Lama, Lodi Gyari, said in a statement that the US administration had offered "moral and material support to help preserve Tibet's unique linguistic, cultural and religious identity."

A White House official, who declined to be identified, said that apparently referred to existing funds, totalling five million dollars, earmarked for a host of programs helping refugees and encouraging Tibetan scholarship.

The exiled leader, who lives in India, had met with previous presidents -- including Bush's father, former president George Bush -- although former president Bill Clinton would only "drop by" meetings with other officials.

The Dalai Lama met with US Secretary of State Colin Powell on Tuesday as well as with the newly named special coordinator for Tibet, Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs Paula Dobriansky.



Mahathir refuses to let Anwar go abroad for treatment

AFP, Putrajaya, Malaysia

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad held an unprecedented meeting yesterday with opposition politicians but stuck to his refusal to let jailed politician Anwar Ibrahim have spinal surgery overseas.

"The prime minister told us that Anwar will not be allowed to go abroad for treatment," said Fadzil Noor, president of the Parti Islam SeMalaysia.

"That's his final decision," he told reporters after the talks at the administrative capital of Putrajaya.

In Kuala Lumpur, hundreds of Anwar's supporters -- shouting "Hidup (long live) Anwar" and "Reformasi" (reform) -- gathered later outside the offices of the human rights commission.

A memorandum demanding overseas treatment was handed in by his wife Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, other politicians and activists.

"His condition is worsening by the day," activist Irene Fernandez told the chanting crowd. "If he arrives at the point of paralysis there is no turning back."

Mahathir's agreement to meet the opposition to discuss Anwar's bid for surgery in Germany had raised hopes he might be reconsidered.

The former deputy premier says he was framed to avert a political challenge to Mahathir, who denies interfering in the judicial process.

Last November, Anwar was transferred from jail to Kuala Lumpur Hospital with a slipped disc. He was moved back to prison on May 10 after he rejected a government offer of spinal surgery at the hospital.

Apart from Fadzil, Mahathir met legislators from the National Justice Party headed by Wan Azizah and the Democratic Action Party (DAP).

The premier further eased gov-

ernment conditions, saying Anwar could be treated in any Malaysian hospital and not just the state-run Kuala Lumpur Hospital as previously stipulated.

But Mahathir, who apparently does not believe Anwar would honour a guarantee to return home to jail, reportedly mentioned extradition difficulties during talks with the three legislators.

"We are disappointed with the outcome of the meeting," Fadzil told reporters. "We were optimistic that Anwar would be allowed to go abroad for treatment."

Anwar, Mahathir's heir apparent until he was sacked in September 1998, is serving a 15-year jail term for abuse of power and sodomy.

The former deputy premier says he was framed to avert a political challenge to Mahathir, who denies interfering in the judicial process.

The ammunition depot -- located where India's recently concluded largest military exercise in 13 years took place -- stores 130 mm long-range shells, grenades, detonators and other explosive materials.

12 immigrants found dead in Arizona desert

AP, Yuma, Arizona

Twelve illegal immigrants died in the Arizona desert after crossing the border from Mexico, and rescuers searched for others who might be stranded in temperatures that climbed as high as 115 degrees Fahrenheit (46 degrees Celsius), the Border Patrol said.

Southern Arizona became a popular crossing point for illegal immigrants after crackdowns in California and Texas during the 1990s pushed more people to try to enter the country through remote and dangerous areas.

Agents reported finding seven bodies about 40 kilometres from the border and four more bodies a few kilometres away. All had died of exposure. A twelfth man died while being taken to a hospital for treatment.

Rescuers had picked up a total of 13 survivors in the area by Wednesday evening, Border Patrol spokesman Maurice Moore said.

"We intend to work this until we've made sure that there's no one left out there," Moore said. "It's in the middle of nowhere there."

Kashmir security forces welcome end of truce Six militants shot dead

AFP, Srinagar

Indian security forces shot dead six Muslim separatist militants yesterday in Kashmir, a day after New Delhi scrapped its ceasefire initiative in the region, a defence spokesman said.

The six militants belonged to the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba armed group, the spokesman said.

Following a tip-off, the troops belonging to the Indian army cordoned off a village in Langate district, 70 km north of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, and shot dead the three rebels.

"We have requisitioned eight army fire engines to battle the blaze. We hope to bring it under control soon. The fire broke out at midday. We are not sure what caused the accident," said Arora.

He said there was no immediate report of casualties in the area, although people from six nearby villages had been evacuated to safer places.

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where India's recently concluded

largest military exercise in 13 years

took place -- stores 130 mm long-

range shells, grenades, detonators

and other explosive materials.

"There were reports of fresh infiltration by militants and now we will be able to chase them," Ramesh Jalla, a police officer posted in Srinagar said.

Meanwhile, counter-insurgency troops and police yesterday wel-

New poll predicts Labour landslide in British election

AFP, London

Tuesday among just over 1,000 people.

No party has ever been in such a strong position in the middle of a general campaign, The Times predicted.

Labour currently has a majority in parliament of 179. It has 417 members of the 659-seat House of Commons, compared with 160 for the Conservatives and 47 for the Liberal Democrats.

Almost every way you looked at it -- from Blair's capability rating to the perceived readiness of the parties for office -- Labour seems assured of a big win, although the party has been cautioning against over-optimism.

The only crumb of comfort for the Conservatives was that the poll confirmed most Britons still support the Tory's strong eurosceptic instincts.