

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 temblors 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'n 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, Thamsherku 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 conqueror Thubten Sherpa.

Their expedition leader was Frenchman Pertrand 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

Israel, on alert for attack one year after it pulled out of Lebanon, shot down a civilian Lebanese plane yesterday, raising cross-border tensions while violence in the Palestinian territories showed little sign of abating despite international calls for a ceasefire.

A Lebanese trainee pilot was killed when Israel F-16 warplanes downed the two-seater Cessna near the Mediterranean coast south of Haifa after the army said he ignored repeated warnings that he was in Israeli airspace.

But Lebanon's Transport Minister Nagib Mikati charged the Israeli jets had intercepted the plane before escorting it into Israeli airspace.

Lebanese aviation officials said the 43-year-old pilot, Estephan Nikolian, had taken off from Beirut

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-rule 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.

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

Severe cyclone may hit Gujarat today

AP, Ahmadabad

Still suffering from a massive earthquake authorities in the western state of Gujarat yesterday alerted the armed forces to prepare for a severe cyclone building up in the Arabian Sea.

Authorities began evacuating nearly 15,000 salt mine workers along the western coast as the cyclone with a speed of 140-160 kph was expected to hit the shore today, said Girish Murmu, Gujarat state relief commissioner.

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

dilapidated structures," Murmu said.

"The storm has intensified into a very severe cyclonic storm over the Arabian Sea, 550 kilometres south of Veeraval. It is likely to intensify further and move in a northerly direction and cross the Gulf of Cambay," JM Motwal, an officer at the Ahmadabad Weather Bureau, said.

Veerawal is 1,000 kilometres northwest of Bombay.

"We have arranged wireless, ham radio and satellite phones so that communication do not get disrupted," said Murmu.

Strong winds and rain were expected to hit the coastal areas later Thursday.

South Asia is prone the natural disasters such as cyclones.

A killer cyclone in eastern Orissa state in October 1999 killed more than 10,000 people.



PHOTO: AFP

A cyclone warning flag flutters as a local fisherman waits for the sea to calm, on a beach in Goa yesterday. The cyclone which was predicted to hit the Goa's coast has drifted towards the Gujarat region of western India.

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, troops belonging to the Indian army cordoned off a village in Langet district, 70 km north of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, and shot dead the six rebels, he said.

India on Wednesday announced it was scrapping its six-month-long suspension of combat operations against Muslim guerrillas as violence continued unabated in Kashmir.

"Hereafter security forces shall take such action against terrorists as they judge best," Singh added.

Following New Delhi's announcement, senior security personnel on Thursday were redefining their strategy to deal with separatist militants, a senior police official said.

"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-

comed New Delhi's decision to end its unilateral ceasefire in Indian-administered Kashmir.

The decision would remove a "psychological barrier" that had restricted troop action, said the inspector general of Kashmir's paramilitary Border Security Force, G.S.Gill.

"There was a psychological, mental barrier that put restrictions on our troops from acting ... This has been removed with the end of the ceasefire.

"Now our troops feel more relaxed while carrying out operations," Gill said.

"One thing is sure -- we will be very active again ... and continue our actions against terrorist outfits. But as usual we will always be soft while dealing with the public," he said.

Kashmir police chief Ashok Suri echoed Gill's view.

Militants had taken advantage of the ceasefire to regroup and spread their operations into urban pockets of Kashmir, he said.

"Civilian and mainstream political activists were being targeted by the militants to terrorise the locals. Now we can take quick decisions and react," Suri said.

An officer in the Indian army, fighting insurgency in Kashmir for the last seven years, said the "ceasefire had tied our hands."

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 reconsidering his stand.

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.

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).

China, US agree on return of spy plane

AFP, Beijing

China said yesterday it had agreed to a US proposal to dismantle the US spy plane stranded on the southern island of Hainan and to ship it back to the United States.

However, the US embassy here declined to confirm any agreement and said discussions were continuing on how to get the EP-3 surveillance aircraft, which is packed with high-tech eavesdropping equipment, out of China.

"The US side submitted a proposal to take apart the US aircraft and to transport it back," foreign ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao told reporters.

"The Chinese side has agreed to that and the two sides will continue to have consultations on the technical aspects," he added.

The EP-3 has been sitting on the tarmac at Lingshui airbase on Hainan, off the southern Chinese coast, since it made an emergency landing on April 1 following a collision with a Chinese fighter jet.

The Chinese pilot was killed in the incident and the Chinese authorities held the US plane's 24 crew for 11 days before releasing them, putting Sino-US relations under severe strain.

The United States has repeatedly stressed that it believes the simplest way to return the 80-million-dollar aircraft is to repair it on the ground and then fly it out of China.

Chinese officials say that if the plane were allowed to fly out of China after carrying out its spying mission, it would hurt the dignity and feelings of the Chinese people.

"We do not agree to flying this airplane out of China. That is impossible. We agree to the plan of taking the plane apart," said Zhu.

Zhu said discussion on the technical details of getting the plane out of China would continue and no precise plan had yet been worked out.

A US embassy official in Beijing declined to comment directly on Zhu's words.

"We are continuing our discussions in Beijing with the Chinese side

regarding the return of our aircraft. I don't want to speculate about possible arrangements for the return of our aircraft," he said.

A five-member team of contractors from Lockheed Martin inspected the plane on Hainan earlier this month and said it could be made worthy.

US officials have said it would take a team of 15 to 25 technicians two to three weeks to repair the aircraft, and that it would take 30 to 40 days to dismantle the plane and ship it home.

China has blamed the United States for the incident, saying the EP-3 deliberately rammed one of two fighter jets shadowing its movements, and it has demanded an end to surveillance flights off the Chinese coast.

However, the United States has blamed reckless flying by the Chinese pilot Wang Wei, who has been lionised as a revolutionary martyr in China since his death.

The US military also re-started surveillance flights off China earlier this month, drawing a sharp response from Beijing.

The row over the spy plane is just one of a series of incidents that have stretched Sino-US relations to breaking point since US President George W. Bush took office in January.

Other tricky issues are Bush's decision to sell Taiwan sophisticated new weapons, US criticism of China's human rights record and the arrest of half a dozen Chinese-American scholars in China.

Foreign ministry spokesman Zhu said Washington had taken a host of actions since the spy plane incident which had "endangered" Sino-US relations.

"The US side has taken incessantly some actions on the question of Taiwan, Tibet and religious affairs, and interfered in China's internal affairs," said Zhu.

China Wednesday summoned the US charge d'affaires over Washington's decision to give a visa to Taiwanese President Chen Shui-bian. It has also objected to Bush's meeting with the Tibetan spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama.