

5 policemen killed in Kashmir blast

AFP, Jammu

Five Indian security personnel were killed and three others injured yesterday in Indian Kashmir when their vehicle was destroyed by an explosive device planted by Muslim separatists, officials said.

The explosion, triggered by remote-control, was claimed by the Hizbul Mujahideen outfit in telephone calls to news organisations, including AFP.

"Our fighters carried out the attack in Jammu on Friday killing five policemen. It is our response to the end of the so-called unilateral ceasefire by the Indian government," Hizbul spokesman Salim Hashmi told AFP.

The attack occurred less than 48 hours after India announced it was resuming offensive operations against Muslim guerrillas in the part of Kashmir under its control.

The explosion took place in Udhampur district, 70 km east of Kashmir's winter capital Jammu, while a team of the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) was on a routine patrol, a senior security official said.

Former Mexican governor held on drug charges

REUTERS, Mexico City

A former Mexican governor accused of working with one of the country's leading cocaine cartels was arrested by police on Thursday after spending more than two years on the run.

Attorney General Rafael Macedo de la Concha said Mario Villanueva had been arrested in the Caribbean resort town of Cancun and would be transferred to a maximum-security prison outside Mexico City.

Villanueva is accused of having had close ties with the infamous Juarez cartel of cocaine traffickers and allowing them to operate freely in the southeastern state of Quintana Roo during his term as governor.

Villanueva disappeared in March 1999, just days before his six-year term came to an end and as federal agents prepared to arrest him.

Quake jolts Japan

AFP, Tokyo

A powerful earthquake measuring 6.6 on the Richter scale was recorded in the Pacific Ocean off Japan's northern island of Hokkaido yesterday, Japan's Meteorological Agency said.

The intensity of the quake was put at 7.0 on the Richter scale by China's earthquake monitoring network, according to the country's state Xinhua news agency.

There were no immediate reports of casualties or damage.

The epicentre of the quake, which occurred 9:41 am (0041 GMT), was located some 100 km southeast of Etorofu Island, one of the four Russian-held islands claimed by Japan, the agency said.

Wahid offers power sharing with Megawati

AFP, Jakarta

Embattled Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid yesterday offered to give his deputy Megawati Sukarnoputri some of his power to resolve a dragging leadership crisis, but the vice president asked for time to consider it, a minister said.

"The president offered handing authorities to Megawati but the vice president said she wanted to study it (the offer) first," Cooperatives Minister Zarkasih Nur told journalists after a cabinet meeting.

Both Megawati and Wahid separately walked out of the cabinet meeting, during which a team of seven ministers were to submit recommendations to Wahid on ways to solve the crisis, involving a power-sharing deal between the two leaders.

Megawati had been in the meeting for only 15 minutes before leaving alone without comment, an AFP reporter said, adding that she looked tense.

Wahid, who is fighting off efforts by a hostile parliament to initiate impeachment proceedings against him, left 15 minutes later, and again denied reports that he was planning to declare a state of emergency on Friday night.

"No, there's no such thing," he said. When journalists asked "Not tonight?" Wahid replied: "Not tonight."

Asked why Megawati left the meeting, Wahid said: "Madam Mega is going to attend a PDIP (Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle) meeting."

Nur denied that Megawati had walked out to attend a party meeting. But he did not elaborate.

Megawati, the daughter of the country's founding president Sukarno and the leader of the largest party in parliament, stands to succeed Wahid should he be impeached or stand down.

Wahid has raised the possibility of calling a state of emergency -- which would enable him to dissolve parliament -- but the proposal was strongly opposed by the armed forces last week.

The cabinet meeting which started at 2 pm, broke up shortly before 5 pm.

Chief security minister Bambang Susilo Yudhoyono, the head of the Team of Seven, said he would report first to the president before briefing journalists.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri seats next to President Abdurrahman Wahid (L) at the start of a crucial cabinet meeting at Jakarta's presidential palace yesterday. Megawati and Wahid both separately walked out of the key meeting on the country's political crisis.

Peace hopes dim as Lanka rules out ending ban on Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Norway's bid to broker peace in Sri Lanka has suffered another setback after the government rejected a Tamil rebel demand to lift a ban on them before opening talks, diplomats said Friday.

Oslo's peace bid hit new snags last week when the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) announced the January 1998 ban imposed on them was the "main hurdle" to peace talks and should be lifted.

A state-run daily ended a week of speculation about the government's possible reaction to the demand, termed a "pre-requisite" by the rebels and not a "condition" for entering negotiations.

"The Daily News reliably understands that there will be no lifting of the ban on the LTTE in any form," the state-controlled daily said amid media speculation the government could partially lift it for a limited period.

Norway's special envoy, Erik Solheim, who held talks with Tiger rebels last week, flew to Washington at the weekend to discuss the situation with US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage and other key officials.

Solheim later reportedly said "it was very important that the US ask the parties constantly to find a negotiated settlement" to the conflict which has claimed more than 60,000 lives in the past three decades.

"The situation is difficult, but it is hopeful, not hopeless," Solheim said after talks with Armitage. "We have to honestly admit the situation is difficult, but we have to keep up the spirit and be optimistic."

As Solheim crossed front-lines and returned from a rebel-held area in Sri Lanka's north on Friday, there was an escalation of rebel attacks against security forces that killed 12 troopers within a few hours.

On Wednesday, the rebels blew up a navy bus, killing 14 sailors and wounding 38.

News the government would not lift the ban came a day before a meeting called by a nationalistic organisation to denounce Norway's role and protest against moves to end the proscription of the LTTE.

The National Joint Committee is to hold talks Saturday due to be attended by the country's top Buddhist monks who also oppose Oslo's efforts to broker peace.

The nationalists have accused Norway of supporting the Tamil Tiger rebels, a charge denied by Norwegian diplomats here.

Gujarat remains under cyclone threat

AFP, Ahmedabad, India

A giant cyclone brewing in the Arabian Sea could hit the western Indian state of Gujarat on Saturday evening, an official of the meteorological office said here Friday.

According to the weather office, the cyclone was still about 500 kilometres off the port town of Veraval in southern Gujarat.

"The cyclone is intensifying but not moving fast," a spokesman for meteorological department told AFP.

The cyclone, packing wind speeds of up to 200 kilometres, could hit the state's Kutch region, one of the areas worst affected by the devastating earthquake which struck Gujarat on January 26.

More than 20,000 people were killed and over a million rendered homeless in the January quake.

International aid agencies, still engaged in rehabilitating victims of the earthquake, were keeping a watch on the progress of the cyclone.

"We are following it very closely and are in a state readiness to respond," Patrick Fuller, spokesman for the International Federation of the Red Cross told AFP.

"It is an irony that we are in Gujarat dealing with the earthquake and a drought. It would be the final straw if the cyclone hits," he added.

On Thursday evening, Gujarat's provincial administration reviewed arrangements to minimise threats to life and property.

The authorities evacuated more 10,000 people living along the coast to safer areas.

Li supports Korean reconciliation

REAUTERS, Seoul

Visiting parliamentary leader Li Peng, number two in China's communist party hierarchy, expressed support yesterday for reconciliation between North and South Korea, saying he hoped for further progress on that front.

Li, speaking at a lunch offered by South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, underscored the importance of last year's historic summit between Kim and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il.

"China, which sees the importance of last year's summit, hopes this progress will continue," Li said. "That is why (China) has consistently supported peace and stability on the Korean peninsula."

Kim, according to a statement from his office, urged China to continue supporting his Sunshine policy towards the North.

"The most important issue regarding the Korean peninsula is the establishment of a solid framework for peaceful coexistence and exchange, aiming towards unification," he said.

"Playing a strong role in this was the sincere co-operation of you and your government. We urge continued support," he said.

Seoul's efforts at thawing relations with Pyongyang are currently at a standstill although the North's Kim has said that he is prepared for a return summit once the United States has completed a review of its policy towards his country.

U.S. President George W. Bush told the South Korean president in March that missile talks with Pyongyang would not resume in the near future as there was no way to ensure the North would comply with such an accord.

Washington has since softened its stance.

Blind mountaineer conquers Everest

AFP, Kathmandu

A 32-year-old American mountain climber who lost his sight to an eye disease when he was a teenager became the first blind person to conquer Mount Everest yesterday.

Erik Weihenmayer, of Colorado, reached the summit as a member of an expedition which also included a 64-year-old American doctor, Sherman Bull, who became the oldest person to climb the world's highest peak.

Weihenmayer, who lost his sight to a degenerative eye disease known as retinoschisis when he was 13 years old, reached the summit using the traditional south-east ridge route at 10:00 am, the tourism ministry said.

Weihenmayer, who uses a pair of poles as probes and follows another climber as he navigates the slopes, and Bull were members of a 10-man expedition sponsored by the US National Federation of the Blind (NFB).

Bull, a general surgeon in Stamford, Connecticut, and father of six, reached the summit at 8:15 am accompanied by his Nepalese guide Lakpa Sherpa, the tourism ministry said in a statement.

Before Bull, who was born on August 14, 1936, the oldest person to conquer Everest was Toshio Yamamoto, who was aged 63 years and 311 days when he reached the summit from the Tibetan route last year.

Weihenmayer's father, Ed Weihenmayer, told the Everestnews.com web site his son had received a telephone call from US President George W. Bush before setting off for the top of the 29,029-foot (8,848-metre) mountain.



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli rescue workers search for survivors in the west Jerusalem quarter of Talpiot after the roof of a reception hall collapsed on Thursday. At least 25 people died and up to 300 were injured, Israeli military radio reported, quoting hospital sources. Authorities believe the collapse was an accident and not an attack.

Democrats take control of US Senate as Republican quits

AP, Washington

In a seismic shift of power, Democrats gained control of the Senate for the first time since 1994 when Vermont Sen. James Jeffords abandoned the Republican Party and declared himself an independent on Thursday.

He said he found himself increasingly at odds with President Bush and Republican leaders on issues from abortion and education to tax cuts. He said it had become difficult in recent months for Bush and other party leaders "to deal with me and for me to deal with them."

"Looking ahead, I can see more and more instances in which I will disagree with the president on fundamental issues," Jeffords told a news conference in Burlington, Vt.

Jeffords' move not only cost Republicans the fragile control they held over a 50-50 Senate but also the ability to move Bush's agenda through Congress and ratify his judicial nominees.

The 67-year senator said he promised Bush not to make the switch effective until Congress sends the White House a \$1.35 trillion tax cut over 11 years. The Senate passed the measure Tuesday and a compromise with a House version could win approval as early as Friday.

In an attempt to keep Jeffords in the party, Senate Republican Leader Trent Lott had promised more money for Jeffords' favoured education programmes and a waiver of term limits to let him remain chairman of the Education Committee beyond the end of next year.

But Democrats also dangled offers, including the chairmanship of the Environment and Public Works Committee.

With Jeffords' move, Democratic proposals on health care, education, the minimum wage and other issues will now move to the forefront in the Senate. South Dakota Democratic Sen. Tom Daschle will replace Lott as majority leader and Democrats will take all the committee chairmanships away from Republicans, except for the newly independent Jeffords as head of Environment and Public Works.

Jeffords' announcement sent a wave of jubilation through the ranks of Democrats. Sen. Harry Reid of Nevada, the party's whip, encountered Sen. Patty Murray of Washington just outside the Senate chamber. "Congratulations," she said with a smile. He replied with a hug.