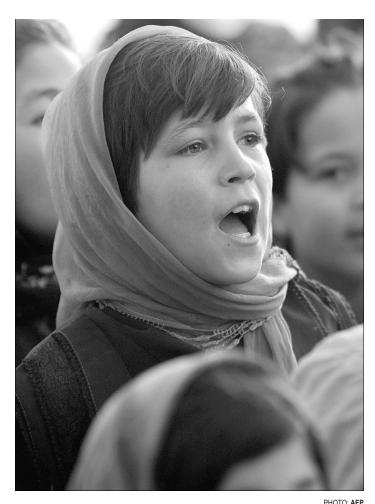
INTERNATIONAL



An Afghan girl participates in a class session on the first day of winter classes at the Alfat-Ha school in the Afghan capital of Kabul on Sunday. Afghan girls are back to school, for the first time in five years after they were banned from schooling by the Taliban regime. The school has twelve grades with a mixture of ages in each grade. In war-torn Afghanistan, students who

are in their 20's are seen in the same class with much younger kids.

Afghan girls flock to school after 5 years of deprivation

Afghan girls flocked in their thousands to winter school yesterday, many attending classes for the first time in five years after being kicked out of the classrooms by the former Taliban regime.

The classes, which run each day from 8:00 am until noon, prepare children for the start of the new school year in March

During the rule of the hardline Taliban, only boys were allowed to go to school although many girls were educated surreptitiously at

On Sunday, the girlssome as old as 19 and 20 -- made up for the wasted years and rushed to

At one school, Alfat-Ha, 750 of the 850 children who turned up for classes were girls, according to director Subhanula Nassrat.

Said teacher Nargess Marege: "Our main work with these girls will be to teach them the school rules because many of them have never been in a classroom. Others haven't been to school for five years."

Malalai Hamid, 16, managed to get some schooling while her family lived as refugees in the Pakistani city of Peshawar.

However, since they returned to Afghanistan two years ago, she has

received no education at all. Malalia said she was "really really happy" finally to be sitting behind a desk again.

Her classmate, Sereshk Reha, 17, was also beaming with delight. "I'm happy to be back, to get to know other girls ... I am happy about everything," she said with a big

"During the time of the Taliban, was was taught clandestinely in some houses. After that my father taught me at home every day for one-and-a-half years. Now at least we are back to school," she said.

Taking the shine off the occasion, however, was the derelict state of the school.

The Taliban, toppled earlier this month by opposition forces backed by a relentless US bombing campaign, pumped little money into education and did not pay teachers for the last five months of their strict Islamic rule.

All the teachers at the school now are women. While some of them taught boys during the Taliban era, most were forced to stay at

"There is no glass in the windows, the walls are crumbling and there is no heating," said Saleha Yadgar, a 38-year-old teacher.

Indo-Pak cross-border fires go on amid war of words

2 Indian soldiers killed in Kashmir while 2 Pak civilians injured

India said two of its border troops were killed Sunday in Pakistani firing in disputed Kashmir, as the two countries remained on high alert amid Indian demands that Pakistan act against Muslim militants on its soil

The two Indian soldiers were killed and three more injured when they came under Pakistani fire while on a "routine patrol" in the Samba sector, 50 km south of Kashmir's winter capital Jammu, a spokesman for India's Border Security Force

He said Indian troops opened fire in retaliation. India has been demanding a Pakistani crackdown on two Pakistan-based Muslim militant groups fighting New Delhi's rule in Kashmir which it holds responsible for a December 13 attack on India's parliament that left 14 dead, including the

With tensions rising between the nuclearcapable powers. Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said India was ready for any eventual-

"Peace is India's ideal goal and we pursue it zealously. But if crisis knocks on our door the country will not shy from its duty," Vajpayee told a music awards ceremony late Saturday.

"The world should know that although we pray for peace we are well-versed in the art of war," he

In Pakistan, all air force bases were put on nigh alert, Air Marshal Syed Qaiser Hussain, deputy chief of the air staff, was quoted by

Associated Press of Pakistan as saying. "If India commits aggression, the country's land, air and naval forces will be fully prepared to

defend the country." Hussain added. "In the prevailing circumstances, an Indian attack against Pakistan cannot be ruled out, and if it indulged in this foolish act it will encounter a befitting reply from Pakistan," Hussain told reporters.

He said the air force "is fully capable of defending every inch of the country and is ready to react to any external aggression

Pakistan had Saturday accused India of moving troops to the border "in a very aggressive posture." India replied that its movements were only in response to Pakistan's "heavy build-up."

On Friday, India recalled its ambassador to Islamabad for the first time since the 1971 war with Pakistan that led to the creation of Bangladesh, formerly East Pakistan.

India also severed all road and rail links with its estern neighbour.

New Delhi has welcomed calls by the United States for Pakistan to crack down on Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad, the two groups India says were behind the parliament attack, but some officials are calling for tougher action.

Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani, a hardliner who is the cabinet number two, said he would ask Washington to declare Pakistan a "terrorist state" when he travels to the United States next month

"I will obviously communicate our position and the detailed evidence we have. This leaves no doubt that Pakistan is a terrorist state," Advani told the Hindustan Times in an interview published Sunday.

"I feel that the US has a clear choice and it cannot afford to have double standards. All terror-

ists are the same. Advani said he has told US Secretary of State Colin Powell that it was difficult for Indians to understand how Pakistan, like India, could be considered part of the US-led "coalition against

"There is a terrible dichotomy there," Advani In a separate incident in Kashmir, Indian

troops killed two militants at Lavepore village of Bandipore district, about 80 kilometres (48 miles) north of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, an army spokesman said.

One of the dead was identified as Owais, commander in Lashkar-e-Taiba.

Meanwhile, Pakistan said Sunday that two civilians were injured by Indian shells in disputed Kashmir as the two sides exchanged fire at several points along the Line of Control.

India meanwhile said two of its border troops were killed Sunday during the exchanges, as the two countries remained on high alert amid Indian demands that Pakistan act against Muslim militants on its soil.

A police official in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistani Kashmir, told AFP that the firing, with light and heavy weapons, took place Saturday night and Sunday at the de facto border

Floods kill 1 in Malaysia, thousands evacuated

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

One person was killed and thousands evacuated after torrential rain and strong winds hit three states in east Malaysia, reports said Sunday. The official Bernama news

agency said the floods had also disrupted road and rail services to and within the states. Mohamed Zain Mat Taha, eastern region manager of the train

service, said services between

Tumpat in Kelantan state and Kuala

Lumpur had to be stopped as water The dead flood victim was identified as Tang Thie, an 83-year-old man from Kuantan in the capital of Pahang state. His body was found in

floodwaters which had flowed into

"This is the worst flood I have ever seen since I moved here 12 years ago," said 30-year-old G.

New Afghan ministers get down to business

The new Afghan cabinet led by Hamid Karzai on Sunday held its first meeting to discuss the mammoth task of reconstructing the stricken nation.

All 29 of Karzai's ministers -including two women -- were present at the meeting in the Gul Khana presidential palace of the powersharing government, which has been welcomed by the world but has a huge job during its six month

After the downfall of the Taliban, US and Afghan forces are still hunting accused terrorist leader Osama bin Laden in the country, millions of Afghans face food shortages and security has broken down

Presidential official Aziz Karzai told AFP: "As this is the first cabinet meeting, they will be talking about basic subjects of the government." But after taking the oath of office

leader Karzai said the administration's priorities were reconstruction of the central Asian nation and its economy, and bringing "peace and

Residents of Kabul, meanwhile, returned to work in their thousands Sunday after a week of virtual inactivity linked to Eid-ul-Fitr celebrations for the end of the Ramadan fasting month and Saturday's

Hundreds of people staged a pro-government march through the streets of the city, welcoming Karzai's new administration and calling for jobs.

"There are four reasons we are marching," said one of the organisers, Khalil Delawer.

"The first is to welcome the new government; the second is to celebrate the end of fighting (against the Taliban); the third is that armed fighters have been called off the streets, and the fourth is to ask Hamid Karzai to give jobs back to

professionals.'

There were many other signs of changes starting in the post-Taliban

Thousands of girls who were excluded from public schools during the Taliban era registered for classes at private schools on

The classes are aimed at helping children who received no schooling in the past five years prepare for the official opening of government schools next March.

Businessmen were seen in the streets wearing Western-style suits banned by the rigid Taliban regime, which ruled from 1996 until being ousted by opposition forces backed by US warplanes earlier this month.

During the Taliban rule, many professionals were ousted from jobs and replaced by fighters from the hardline militia which attempted to impose the world's purest Islamic

Taiwan calls for dialogue with China

AFP, Hualien

Beijing must reopen talks with Taipei as fundamental changes of bilateral ties are in the pipeline, a top govern-

ment official said Sunday.

The catalysts resulting in the "changes in nature" are Taiwan's December 1 polls and the admission to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) by both Taipei and Beijing, said Tsai Ing-wen, the island's architect of policy towards

"Hopefully the Chinese communist authorities can look straight at the significance stemming from the elections and take a more practical attitude towards the changes of Taiwan's public opinion," said Tsai, the chairwoman of the Mainland Affairs Council (MAC).

She says "to some extent, the polls reflected the public desires for stable cross-strait ties while they hope for stable domestic politics."

The pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) emerged as the largest party n the election with 87 seats in the parliament.

Parliament blitz

suspect to

Kashmir

AFP, New Delhi

gunmen.

Police to take

Police are likely to take the sus-

pected mastermind of an attack on

the Indian parliament to Kashmir to

track down others involved in the

Afzal, a Kashmiri militant being held

in New Delhi, has confessed that

key people behind the attack were in

Afzal, who police say is a mem-

ber of the Pakistan-based Jaish-e-

Mohammad militant group, is

accused of masterminding the

December 13 attack that left 14

people dead, including the five

Government ministers and around 300 MPs were in parliament

at the time, but all were unharmed as the attackers were gunned down

before they could gain entry to the

Islamic Jihad

The sources said Mohammed

plot, police sources said Sunday.



Indian film stars Salman Khan (R) and Karishma Kapoor perform on stage on Saturday in Guwahati, in India's northeast Assam state. The event was organised in aide of the Assam Chief Minister's fund. At least 10,000 people attended the show at Nehru Stadium.

Lankan PM in India to hold talks on violence

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe will hold talks with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Monday on his ceasefire with Tamil Tiger rebels,

government sources here said. Wickremesinghe, who arrived in New Delhi late Saturday, will also meet with Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani and Commerce and Industry Minister Murasoli Maran on his three-day visit.

Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) came to power in December 5 elections in which one of his main election pledges was the peaceful settlement of decades of ethnic blood-

Akihito turns

68

AP, Tokyo

Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has since said it ordered its cadres not to carry out any attacks for one month from December 24.

During the election campaign the UNP said it wanted to open talks with the Tamil Tigers, who are waging a drawn out campaign for an independent homeland for minority Tamils in the island's northeast.

The three decades of ethnic bloodshed has claimed over 60,000

India has a large Tamil community but the government has blacklisted the LTTE since the assassina-Gandhi by a Tamil radical in 1991



Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremsinghe (L) shakes hands with former Indian prime minister P. V. Narsimha Rao ahead of a meeting in New

tion of Indian prime minister Rajiv Arafat to attend Bethlehem

mass despite Israeli ban

AFP. Ramallah

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat issued a defiant challenge Sunday against an Israeli ban on his travelling to a Christmas mass in Bethlehem, saying no one can prevent him from attending the

"No one can prevent me from reaching Bethlehem," he told reporters in the West Bank town of Ramallah, where he has been stuck since Israel destroyed his helicop-

Armed with a new weapon that can

turn caves and tunnels into fiery

graves, US-led forces Saturday

combed eastern Afghanistan for

signs of Osama bin Laden as US

officials insisted an air strike on an

The whereabouts of bin Laden

remained a mystery. Pakistan

President Pervez Musharraf told

Chinese state television there is a

strong possibility the Saudi-born

militant was killed in the intense US

Afghan convoy was justified.

ters in a December 3 raid on the Gaza Strip and ringed his offices here with troops

official told AFP there were intense discussions with their Israeli counterparts, who had been informed of Arafat's determination to make the journey despite the Israel security cabinet's decision to prevent him.

A senior Palestinian security

The official said Arafat was prepared to drive to the Israeli army checkpoint at Qalandiya, on the northern edge of Jerusalem, for a

New weapons in Laden hunt

stronghold, while the US-allied

Afghan commander in the area said

bin Laden has probably fled to

bombers that have been pounding

suspected hideouts of bin Laden

and his al-Qaida network will soon

be equipped with a powerful new

"thermobaric" bomb that can suck

were to be shipped to the region

after a successful test last week in

Ten of the laser-guided weapons

the oxygen out of caves.

Pentagon officials said US

public showdown if necessary. And Palestinian cabinet secre-

tary Ahmed Abdul Rahman appealed to Pope John Paul II to intercede on Arafat's behalf to allow him to attend the mass, as he does "I call on the Pope to intervene to

stop this attack on religious traditions and against the Palestinian people. We condemn this very strongly and the Palestinian people are angry," he said.

Each thermobaric bomb -- also

called a fuel-air explosive -- con-

tains two explosive devices and a

highly flammable chemical that

sends a deadly shock wave through

enclosed spaces such as caves and

fuel and two explosive charges. The

detonates. A second charge then

detonates the billowing cloud of fuel.

The warhead is a container of

tunnels without collapsing them.

militants arrested AFP, Gaza City

Two top militants of the Islamic Jihad group, which has refused to suspend suicide attacks against Israel, were arrested Saturday for allegedly opening fire on police during bloody Palestinian clashes which left six teenagers dead.

The United States and the European Union, meanwhile, kept up pressure on Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to continue his crack down on Islamic militant groups which has angered many Palestinians but not exploded into major violence as some have feared.

The leader of the armed wing of Islamic Jihad for the northern Gaza Strip, Shadi Mohanna, and his second-in-command were caught and taken away by police late Saturday, Palestinian security

Mohanna and his number two Mahmud Jahud fired on police in first charge disperses the fuel as it bloody clashes Friday between police and Islamists during a funeral procession for an Islamic Jihad member in the Jabaliya refugee camp north of Gaza City, they said.

Peres proposes peace plan endorsing Palestinian state its forces out of all the autonomous

Israel's Foreign Minister Shimon Peres has proposed to the Palestinian Authority a peace plan whereby Israel would recognise an independent Palestinian state just eight weeks after signing an accord. an Israeli daily reported Sunday.

But the office of hardline Prime Minister Ariel Sharon reiterated that there would be no political talks until all violence had ceased. Peres proposed the plan to the

Palestinian parliamentary speaker Ahmed Qorei, the daily Yediot

Under the plan, Israel would pull

Palestinian areas it has reoccupied since the Palestinian intifada, or uprising, began in September 2000.

initially exist on all the land under full

The Palestinian state would

or partial Palestinian Authority control, the newspaper said. A total US-sponsored ceasefire would take place in the six weeks following the signing of an accord, with internationally approved peace

plans aimed at defusing tensions

Palestinian police would collect all illegal weapons while Israel would ease the blockade it has imposed on Palestinian towns and

put into effect during that period.

But Sharon said he would stick to his policy of refusing to negotiate until there is a total halt to violence in the region, his office said in a state-

The statement said Sharon "and the whole Israeli government' decided not to hold political talks until the Palestinian Authority arrests "terrorists," their handlers and organisers, smashes "terrorist" organisations, seizes all illegal arms, snuffs out all violence and incitement to violence and takes "effective measures" to prevent attacks on Israel.

Japan calls for vigilance after sinking DPRK boat

Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi called for heightened vigilance Sunday after a suspected North Korean spy ship sank in a rare firefight with Japanese patrol boats in the East China Sea.

The Japanese coastguard was searching for about 15 crew members of the boat and had spotted three bodies by midday Sunday in choppy waters, about 400 km northwest of the Japanese island of Amami Oshima.

"Two male bodies were recov-

ered but a third went under as it did not wear a life jacket," a coastguard

spokesman said

He added: "The life jacket on one of the bodies carried tags in Hangul (Korean) letters. And Hangul letters were also written on a candy wrap paper found in the pocket of the other's wind-breaker.

The premier called the suspect

boat's activities "bizzare." "The situation is deplorable in that armed, suspicious boats are infesting waters around our country in this manner," he told reporters at his official residence.

the official SANA news agency.

He added that his "country will

continue to support the just causes

of the Arabs, in particular the perma-

nent efforts of the Syrian govern-

ment in support of the legitimate

China condemns Israeli 'acts of violence'

Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan on Saturday condemned "the acts of Israeli violence" in the Palestinian territories upon his arrival in Damascus, a report said. "We have strongly criticised the

The Chinese foreign minister is due to hold talks Sunday with his acts of violence carried out by Israel, we are opposed to them and it is Syrian counterpart, Faruq al-Shara, before meeting with President Israel which carries the main Bashar al-Assad, according to a responsibility for the deterioration of the situation in the Middle East." Chinese diplomatic source. Tang said in a statement carried by

rights of peoples," it said.



reporters after he met with Philippine president Arroyo at presidential palace on Sunday. Canadian kidnap

in Philippines A Canadian pensioner seized by Muslim gunmen last month was rescued Sunday by government

victim rescued

after a gunfight that left at least two kidnappers dead, officials said. Pierre Belanger, 50, was seized on November 3, although the authorities previously said they

troops in the southern Philippines

suspected he faked his own abduction for an unknown reason.

thousands of visitors at the imperial palace and expressing concern over the country's protracted economic downturn. Unemployment has risen to a record 5.4 per cent as corporations shed workers in a bid to survive the

Japanese Emperor Akihito marked

his 68th birthday Sunday, saluting

country's decade-long recession, its

worst since World War II

7 infants die in Algeria after measles

vaccinations

AFP, Algiers

Seven infants died and dozens were hospitalised in Algeria after being vaccinated against measles in a town in the northwest of the country, officials said Sunday

Aged between three and 18

months, the victims became sick

shortly after receiving the injections

at a clinic in Oued el Abtal, near Masacara, some 360 km west of Three died immediately, and four more within the hour, witnesses told