



PHOTO: AFP
Picture taken from the Iraqi TV shows Iraqi President Saddam Hussein addressing the nation on Sunday. Saddam gave a speech to mark the 81st anniversary of the formation of Iraqi armed forces.

Saddam predicts failure of any attack on Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

President Saddam Hussein on Sunday predicted failure for any US-led attack on Iraq and saluted "Mujahedin" fighters everywhere in the world.

"As your debased enemies failed in the past, so will any aggressor, if he lets himself be seduced into committing an evil act against your trust," said the 64-year-old Iraqi strongman, in power for 31 years.

"He will be shamed by Allah and will be thwarted in his base aims," Saddam, wearing a dark blue suit and tie, added in a rambling tirade broadcast on state-run radio and television to mark the 81st anniversary of the founding of the armed forces on January 6, 1921.

Washington has pointed a finger at Iraq as a possible next target after Afghanistan in the war on terror.

McCartney Britain's first ever pop billionaire

AFP, London

Former Beatle Paul McCartney is Britain's first ever pop billionaire, according to a newspaper survey of the country's 300 wealthiest people, published on Sunday.

McCartney has amassed a fortune of 1.1 billion pounds (1.59 billion dollars) more than 30 years after the Beatles split up, according to the Sunday Express's "Rich List" for 2002.

But the pop star's healthy bank balance is not enough to make him Britain's richest person -- with pole position held by Formula One boss Bernie Ecclestone who sits on a reported 3.2 billion pounds, an increase of 700 million pounds in the past year.

McCartney must settle for being Britain's eleventh richest person, 34 places above the nation's wealthiest woman, Queen Elizabeth II, who is worth 450 million pounds, up 50 million pounds on 2001.

Pakistan detains 240 Saudis fleeing Afghanistan

AFP, Riyadh

Pakistan said Sunday it had detained around 240 Saudi nationals suspected of being Afghan Arabs who fled Afghanistan after the crushing defeat of the Taliban militia by US-aided forces.

Pakistani Interior Minister General Mueen Haider told the Riyadh-based Okaz newspaper that Islamabad would hand over any Afghan Arab, regardless of nationality, to the United States if they were found to belong to Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaida terror network.

"We have (arrested) a number of Afghan Arabs after crossing into Pakistan from Afghanistan. There are 240 Saudis as well as Yemenis and other Arab nationals. They are being interrogated" in Pakistani jails, Haider said.

Nepal hopes summit will lessen Indo-Pak tension

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba Sunday said contact between the leaders of India and Pakistan during a South Asian summit here could help lessen tensions in the region.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee shook hands during the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) summit which ended Sunday.

Musharraf told reporters that he had met Vajpayee informally on the sidelines of the two-day summit, although Vajpayee said the two leaders had merely exchanged courtesies.

"Both the leaders came here to attend the SAARC summit and during the summit there was a brief meeting between the two when they shook hands and I hope this will help lessen tension in the region," Deuba told a post-summit press conference.

Both India and Pakistan have been amassing troops along their shared border since a December 13 attack on New Delhi's parliament which India has blamed on Pakistan-based militants fighting its rule in Kashmir.

A declaration issued before the summit ended called on the member countries to introduce legislation to speed up the enactment of a 1987 convention against terrorism.

Deuba, who took over as chairman of SAARC on Saturday, said: "All the member countries have already

agreed to have a time frame for the legislation in their respective countries.

"I am fully confident that all the SAARC member countries will cooperate as all of them have agreed to cooperate and I do not think there will be any problem on this."

Referring to SAARC's failure to implement economic cooperation in the region and a delay in drafting the South Asian Preferential Trade Agreement (SAPTA), he said: "It hope the SAPTA will be implemented within 2002."

SAARC groups Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

On domestic matters, Deuba said Nepal was still fighting a Maoist rebellion. In November his government declared a state of emergency to combat the rebels after they broke a four-month ceasefire with attacks on security forces.

"We had tried our best to solve the Maoist problem through dialogue but even after three rounds of peace talks they continued to attack army and police posts" he said.

"This obliged us to take up a stern action through the declaration of a state of emergency.

"The emergency in Nepal is only to control the Maoists while the Nepalese press is free to criticise me," he added.

The rebels have been fighting for a republic state in Nepal since 1996 and the insurgency has so far claimed the lives of over 2,300 people.

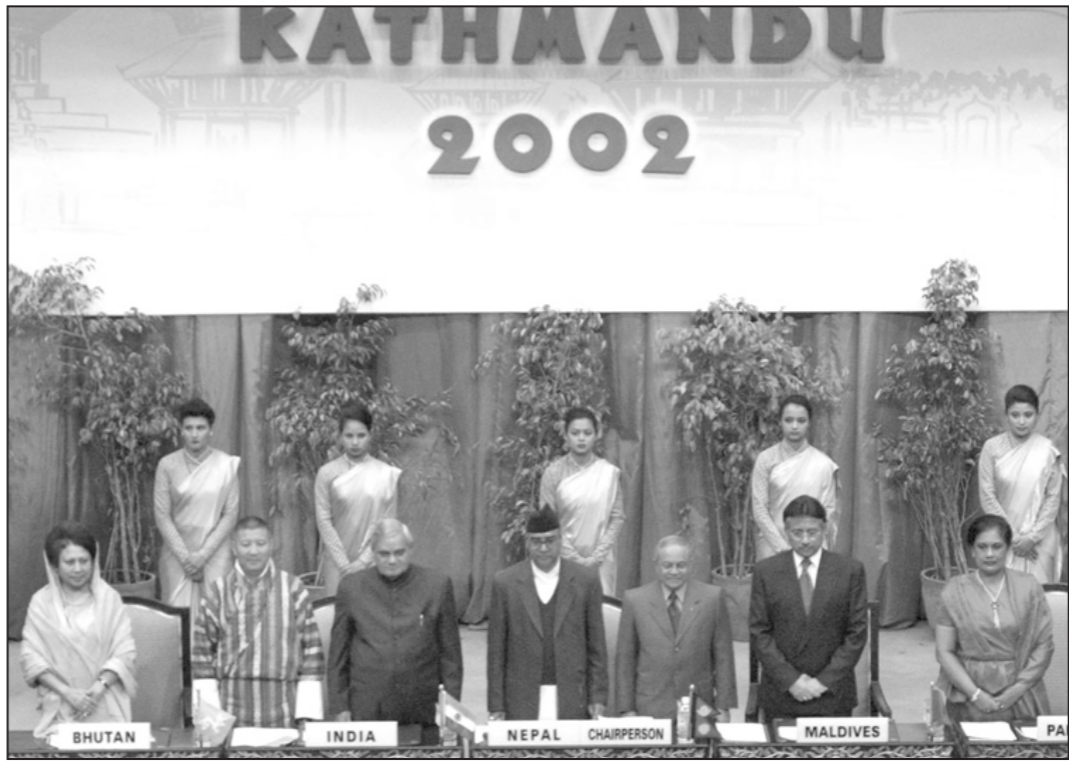


PHOTO: AFP
From left to right: Bangladesh Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, Bhutanese Prime Minister Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuk, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, the Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, and Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga pose for a group photo at the conclusion of the 11th SAARC Summit in Kathmandu on Sunday. Focus on the India-Pakistan crisis has shifted to their heavily militarised borders after the two leaders failed to resolve their differences at the summit.

Indo-Pak fire continues with no let up in sight

AFP, Jammu

India and Pakistan exchanged mortar and small arms fire for a second straight day Sunday as tensions on their heavily militarised border showed no sign of abating in the wake of a South Asian summit in Nepal.

A child was killed and a woman injured in the zone of Malaviya, 35 km from Jammu, the winter capital of Indian Kashmir, police officials said.

"The firing is not as intense as Saturday but both sides are keeping their heads down," a police official said from the southern Kashmiri town of Akhnor, the main supply line to India's Malaviya military sector.

Indian army posts in the towns of Samba, R.S.Pora, Kathua and Palanwalan reported exchanges of more than 15,000 rounds of small arms fire.

At least three civilians were injured Sunday as Pakistani gunners targeted Poonch, 240 kilometres (150 miles) northwest of Jammu, a police spokesman said.

On Saturday, the rival armies fired up to 2,500 mortar shells at each other in Poonch, triggering a fresh exodus of civilians from the area.

Twenty Pakistani bunkers were hit and an equal number of troops reportedly killed in Saturday's firing, Indian officials said.

An Indian bunker and a military vehicle were destroyed in Pakistani fire and an Indian soldier was killed in Poonch on Saturday.

Indian army spokesman Lieutenant Colonel H.S. Oberoi said Indian troops used mortars, grenade launchers and rifles against Pakistani fortifications.

India and Pakistan have massed troops on their border following last month's attack on the Indian parliament which New Delhi blames on Pakistan-based militant groups.

Landmine blast kills 14 soldiers in India

REUTERS, New Delhi

Sixteen people, 14 of them soldiers, were killed when a landmine accidentally exploded in India's north-western state of Punjab close to the border with Pakistan, a security official said on Sunday.

"A mine, which was being carried to the border, accidentally exploded killing 16 people and injuring 17," a senior official of the Border Security Force (BSF) told Reuters.

He said the incident occurred late on Saturday close to the border town of Amritsar.

India and Pakistan have had their biggest military build up in 15 years on their border and the stand-off between the two nuclear capable South Asian giants has sparked fears of a full-blown war.

The crisis was triggered by a deadly attack on India's parliament on December 13 which New Delhi blames on Pakistan-based militants.

Indo-Pak conflict back in focus

AFP, Kathmandu

The crisis between India and Pakistan was shifting focus Sunday back to their heavily militarised border, as the rivals' leaders prepared to leave a regional summit here that saw low-key talks and an appeal for dialogue by Pakistan's president.

Leaders of the seven South Asian countries were due to close the two-day summit Sunday after adopting a declaration expected to focus on the social woes afflicting the world's poorest region.

The summit, held two years late due to Indian-Pakistani squabbling, came after relations between the arch-rivals sunk to a new low in the wake of a December 13 attack on the Indian parliament which New Delhi blames on Pakistan-based militants.

India had publicly ruled out any bilateral dialogue until Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf cracked down harder on anti-Indian hardliners, but the two countries' foreign ministers held talks Saturday at their hotel, diplomatic sources said.

Indian officials downplayed the

talks, saying there was no "separate substantive meeting" and the discussions were "in the context" of the regional bloc, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

The meeting between Pakistani Foreign Minister Addul Sattar and India's Jaswant Singh took place after Musharraf used the summit's opening session to prove his willingness to talk, walking over to Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and thrusting his hand into his.

To the applause of the crowd, Musharraf said he was extending "a hand of genuine, sincere friendship."

"Let us together commence a journey of peace, harmony and progress in South Asia," Musharraf said, in the two leaders' first handshake since a failed July summit in the Taj Mahal city of Agra.

Vajpayee smiled and held Musharraf's hand as he rose in his chair.

When the Indian leader took the podium later, he said he was "glad he extended his hand of friendship to me."

But he added: "Now President Musharraf must follow this gesture by not permitting any activity in Pakistan or any territory in its control today that allows terrorists to perpetrate mindless violence in India."

Vajpayee cited his experience after peace summits in Lahore in 1999 and in Agra.

"I say this because of our past experience. I went to Lahore with a hand of friendship. We were rewarded by aggression in Kargil (in Kashmir) and the hijacking of an Indian Airlines aircraft from Kathmandu," he said.

"I invited President Musharraf to Agra. We were rewarded with a terrorist attack on the Jammu and Kashmir assembly and last month on the parliament of India."

The latter attack has pushed India and Pakistan into an intense standoff, with New Delhi withdrawing its ambassador from Islamabad for the first time since their last full-blown war 30 years ago.

The two sides have also been deploying military units to their common border. Indian officials said villages came under intense mortar

Pakistan welcomes US envoy to region

AFP, Kathmandu

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said Sunday he would welcome a US envoy to the region to defuse military tensions with rival India.

"If the two sides can't talk to each other, then it is all right for a third party, whatever you call it, for facilitation or mediation to defuse tension," Musharraf told reporters at the close of a seven-nation regional summit in Nepal.

India's Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh on Saturday said a US envoy was not necessary.

Musharraf was responding to a question on whether Washington should send an envoy to the region, which has been tense since an attack on New Delhi's parliament which India has blamed on Pakistan-based militants fighting its rule in Kashmir.

Musharraf said he would punish any Pakistanis who may have been involved in the attack, but ruled out handing them over to India.

Small plane flies into Florida building

AFP, Washington

A small airplane piloted by a 15-year-old student crashed into an office building in Tampa, Florida, under bizarre circumstances, setting off alarms in several key US government agencies.

Although terrorism was discounted in the Saturday crash, investigators wondered what could have motivated the youngster to fly the plane without authorisation -- even flying into restricted airspace over the US command that directs the war in Afghanistan.

"Absolutely not. Terrorism is not suspected at this point," Tampa police spokeswoman Kate Hughes told AFP by telephone.

But details of the incident, which killed the young pilot -- identified as Charles Bishop of Palm Harbor, Florida -- raised more questions than answers.

The episode, eerily reminiscent of the September 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon outside Washington, prompted a swarm of US government agencies, including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, to join the probe.

Libya lashes out at US

AFP, Tripoli

Libya on Saturday denounced a decision by President George W Bush to extend US economic sanctions slapped on Libya in 1986 following terrorist attacks on Americans.

"Libya expressed its surprise and its rejection of the unilateral American decision which ignores the principle of international relations which consists of settling differences with dialogue," Hassuna

al-Shawush, a high-ranking foreign ministry official, told AFP.

Shawush said the policy of sanctions was "outmoded" and called on Washington to "give up (policies of) bargaining, domination and provocation."

"Libya would have hoped for a more courageous decision from the American administration which would have ended these sanctions to allow a normalisation of relations and the clearing of lingering files," he said.



PHOTO: BBC
A small plane piloted by a 15-year-old student crashed into an office building in Tampa, Florida. Picture shows the plane left dangling from the building.

US to continue push for ME peace

AFP, Jerusalem

US special envoy Anthony Zinni was to hold a three-way security meeting with the Israelis and Palestinians Sunday after his ceasefire efforts were knocked by Israel's seizure of a major arms shipment apparently headed for the Palestinian Authority.

Zinni, who has said he was "encouraged" by the progress already made in two days of separate talks with Israeli and Palestinian leaders, was due to host a meeting designed to examine practical steps to bolster a fragile truce and wind down 15 months of bloodshed.

But the much-anticipated meeting of senior officials has been overshadowed by the row over the seizure of a ship which Israel said was carrying 50 tons of arms destined for the Palestinian Authority.

The Palestinian Authority has denied any link to the shipment, although the Israeli army said the Karine A, intercepted by Israeli navy commandos on Thursday, was captured by a member of the Palestinian navy police, to which also belonged three crew members.

And military sources said the 4,000-tonne freighter was bought around a year ago in Lebanon by Adel Moghrabi, allegedly in charge

of arms deals for the Palestinian Authority.

The boat took on 50 tonnes of mainly Iranian weapons at the Gulf island of Kish, near the Iranian coast, an Israeli military report said.

The sources said the arms were stocked in 80 containers especially built in Iran and destined to be floated into the Gaza coast, or to El-Arish in Egypt to be smuggled into the Palestinian territories.

Israel intercepted the ship around 500 kilometres (310 miles) from its coastline in the Red Sea's international waters between Sudan and Saudi Arabia.

Taliban envoy in US custody

REUTERS, Washington/Kandahar

The US military took into custody on Saturday the former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan even as its primary targets, Taliban supreme leader Mullah Mohammed Omar and Osama bin Laden, eluded Afghan and US forces.

Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef, the Taliban's principal spokesman during the war in Afghanistan and the vanquished movement's highest-ranking official to be captured joined hundreds of detainees facing interrogation by US officials seeking intelligence for their war on terrorism.

But Mullah Omar, the reclusive cleric who once ruled over almost all of Afghanistan, and bin Laden, accused by Washington of plotting the September 11 attacks that killed some 3,000 people, remained at large. According to a report from the southern Afghan city of Kandahar, Mullah Omar escaped on motorcycle as anti-Taliban forces closed in on a mountainous area in southern Afghanistan where he was believed hiding.

The new US envoy to Kabul, Zalmay Khalilzad, said the US bombing campaign, launched on October 7, would not end until its aims were met, despite concern among Afghanistan's new anti-Taliban leaders at civilian casualties in recent strikes.

SAARC scores high marks for its failure

AFP, Kathmandu

South Asian leaders wrap up a summit in Nepal Sunday after unleashing unprecedented criticism against their regional body, with one head of state warning it would take a Himalayan effort to make the group a success.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which began nearly two decades ago with ambitious plans for collectively becoming the world's next economic powerhouse, is today fighting for survival.

Leader after leader castigated the regional body on Saturday, when the summit bringing together the group's leaders opened two years behind schedule thanks to bickering between the two big members -- India and Pakistan.

Meeting in the Nepalese capital of Kathmandu, the summit saw leaders agree on one thing: as an organisation, SAARC has failed



PHOTO: AFP
Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (L) shakes hands with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf at the conclusion of the 11th SAARC Summit in Kathmandu on Sunday.

the 1.3 billion people living in the world's poorest region.

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, of the low-lying Indian Ocean atoll nation of Maldives, took the high ground at Kathmandu, saying he had a right to speak "freely and frankly" on SAARC as he had attended all its 11 summits.

"I believe that we are going through a traumatic phase in regional co-operation," Gayoom said.

"It will take a great deal of energy, persistence and commitment, indeed a Himalayan effort, to restart what has become a stalled process."

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf was even more blunt in his critique.

"SAARC's performance so far, in comparison with other regional organisations, has been dismal," Musharraf said.

"While SAARC limps along, organisations like the European Union and ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) have

galloped ahead."

India's prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, lamented that an ambitious poverty alleviation plan proposed 10 years ago in Bangladesh was never implemented in a region where more than 500 million people get only one meal a day.

"I believe that we owe it to our people to make another sincere attempt," Vajpayee said.

"Let us this time show greater commitment to making our cooperative mechanisms work."

Bhutan's prime minister, Lyonpo Khandu Wangchuk, chided the organisation and said the countries should be ashamed the bloc had been slow to act against the trafficking of women and children within the region.

"In a region known to be the cradle of ancient civilisations and great religions, it is a cause of deep shame that, within and across our borders, our women and children are traded like commodities," Wangchuk said.

Residents cool as fires rage

AFP, Sydney

It takes a lot to ruffle Sydneysiders who have been through a bushfire or two.

So when blazes threatened the Sydney suburb of Pymble last week, Ray and Claire Bennett got their priorities quickly in order and sat down on their patio to have a gin and tonic.

"It's not that they were taking the situation lightly but this time they were confident that things were under control."

In 1994 when the bushfires swept past their home, nestled in bushland, it was a different story.

"It was panic stations then, we didn't know what to do," Bennett said. "We'd never encountered anything like that before and I rushed home to evacuate."

"This time we were much better prepared."

"It is bloody scary but there is so much help this time."

Fire crews were helped out by a giant water-carrying helicopter,

nicknamed Elvis, flying sortie after sortie to attack the flames.

But residents had also done their bit, dousing their homes and removing flammable materials from their yards according to instructions from authorities.

John Galluzzi, armed with a garden hose, saved his petrol station in the remote town of Lawson in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney.

He had fought identical battles in 1974, 1977 and 1994.



PHOTO: AFP
Local residents clear up the dead leaves and branches around their houses in the small town of Bowen Mountain in the Blue Mountains 120 km west of Sydney on Sunday as cooler than predicted weather enabled fire crews to put in containment lines around some of the 80 fires burning.