



President of the Hindu Hardline Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), Vishnu Hari Dalmia (2nd-L) poses with other hardline Hindus prior to a meeting with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee outside his residence in New Delhi on Sunday. Leaders from different Hindu organisations met with Vajpayee to announce a date for the construction of a Hindu temple on the ruins of the Babri Mosque razed by zealots in 1992 in Ayodhya.

VHP pushes Vajpayee to build temple on Babri Mosque ruins

AFP, New Delhi

Members of a hardline Hindu outfit Sunday met Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to push their demand to build a temple on the ruins of a mosque razed by Hindu zealots in 1992.

The meeting at the prime minister's residence in New Delhi was scheduled to last one hour, but lasted three hours, officials said.

In December 1992 the 16th century Babri Mosque, situated in the northern town of Ayodhya, was destroyed by Hindu zealots and sparked some of India's worst ever Hindu-Muslim violence in which some 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed.

Hindu hardliners believe the mosque was built over the birthplace of the Hindu god Ram and have given the government until March 12 to signal the green light for the construction of a temple on the site.

At Sunday's meeting a delegation of Hindu holy leaders demanded that the government allow them to begin the building of

the temple.

One of the sadhus (holy men) who was at the meeting said: "We have not reached a decision and we will leave only after a decision is taken."

Vajpayee has called on all parties in the dispute to shelve the issue given a current military stand-off on the border with Pakistan.

On Saturday, the prime minister held an unscheduled meeting of members of his federal coalition - the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) - to seek their approval on whether he should meet the delegation.

Official sources said all the representatives of two-dozen parties agreed the prime minister should do so in order to resolve the issue amicably.

Following the meeting, the Hindu holy men were due to address a rally in the Indian capital.

"Around 6,500 saints will attend the rally. It will be the biggest rally of saints so far," said Rajendra Singh Pankaj, a member of the VHP, a hardline Hindu outfit which is organising the rally.

Last year, a similar congregation of saints on the sidelines of a Hindu festival gave the government a deadline of March 12, 2002 to decide on handing over the disputed site to them.

At Sunday's rally, an announcement of the date when construction will commence is expected.

The VHP, which has close links with Vajpayee's ruling BJP party, has stepped up its rhetoric since the announcement of assembly elections in the key northern state of Uttar Pradesh next month.

The most populous state in India, Uttar Pradesh represents the "Hindu heartland" of India. State elections are often seen as a referendum or acid test for the federal government of the day.

It is currently controlled by the BJP, which spearheaded the campaign that led to the demolition of Babri Mosque in 1992.

Several of Vajpayee's cabinet ministers, including Home Minister L.K. Advani, are still facing charges for their alleged role in inciting mobs to pull down the mosque.

Israel won't allow Arafat to attend EU FMs' meet

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel will not allow Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to attend an EU foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels on Monday, said Raanan Gissin, spokesman for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, on Sunday.

"Arafat cannot take part in the meeting of the European foreign ministers' meeting in Brussels which is set for Monday. He will not leave because he has to prove he is acting against terrorism and arrest the killers of Rehavam Zeevi," Gissin said.

Afghan king to return in Mar

AFP, Rome

Exiled former Afghan king Mohammed Zahir Shah is preparing to return to Afghanistan in mid-March and the interim head of government there will accompany him home, the king's son said Saturday.

"He is planning to return to Afghanistan for the middle of March, before the 21st of March, to be there for Newroz (the Afghan New Year)," Mirwais Zahir told AFP.

Beatles to be on stage together for Queen

AFP, London

Former Beatle Paul McCartney and Rolling Stone Mick Jagger will cast aside old rivalries to perform on stage together for the first time ever at Queen Elizabeth's Golden Jubilee, the Sunday Telegraph reported.

Billed as "the world's greatest-ever supergroup," McCartney on bass and Jagger on vocals will be joined by former Genesis front man Phil Collins on the drums, the paper said.

The trio will head a list of rock luminaries including Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder and Bryan Adams performing to over 12,000 fans and the entire royal family at the lavish concert at Buckingham Palace scheduled for June 3.

Palestinian-US ties hit new low

Palestinians rally in support of beleaguered Arafat

AFP, Jerusalem

Relations between the United States and the Palestinians hit a new low Sunday after President George W. Bush's scathing criticism of Yasser Arafat, while Israel watched with satisfaction and tightened the noose around the Palestinian leader.

Trapped in his Ramallah headquarters for almost two months and more isolated than ever after Bush said he was "very disappointed" with him, Arafat urged Washington to stop taking Israel's side in the blistering 16-month Palestinian uprising or Intifada.

"We demand they stop judging the situation in the territories, based on their relationship with the Israelis," Arafat told the Qatari-based news channel Al-Jazeera.

The Hebrew-language daily Maariv for its part reported Sunday that US envoy Anthony Zinni dubbed the Palestinian Authority "the Mafia" and its leader Yasser Arafat "the Godfather" at a private dinner in Washington over the weekend.

But he did not stint on compliments for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, a former general like the US envoy, whom he affectionately termed "daddy bear", Maariv said.

While Israel voiced its satisfaction that Bush had backed its tough attitude to Arafat, the Arab world warned of the dangers of Washington, the main mediator in the Middle East peace process, leaning toward one side over the other.

"The Israeli government is continuing its aggression, which unfortunately is getting the support and consolidation" of the Americans, said Arab

League Secretary General Amr Mussa. Washington has rebuffed Palestinian pleas to send Zinni back to the region to help relaunch the peace process.

Thousands of Palestinians rallied across the weekend in a show of support for their leader, while chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erakat said that Bush's comments were "unacceptable."

At the same time, Sharon, while riding high on US backing, faced stinging criticism from Israeli peace activists, 1,000 of whom held sit-ins in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem accusing the right-winger of leading the country to disaster.

Slogans condemning the tit-for-tat spiral of "Israeli liquidations and Palestinian suicide attacks" were chanted during the protest, called for by the Israeli rights group Peace Now.

"We do not want to kill or be killed for the (Jewish) settlement" of the Palestinian territories, the demonstrators said.

Meanwhile violence continued on the ground, with a Palestinian civilian shot dead late Saturday while trying to skirt an Israeli roadblock near Ramallah in the West Bank.

The Israeli army also fired four rockets Saturday night on the Palestinian town of Beit Hanun in the northern Gaza Strip, Palestinian security sources said.

In a separate incident, Israeli tanks opened fire from the Jewish settlement of Gadid near the autonomous town of Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip, sources from both sides said without reporting any injuries.

An Israeli military spokesman said the tanks opened fire "towards two suspects" approaching the settlement's electric fence.

Hundreds of migrants join hunger strike in Australia

AFP, Woomera

Hundreds more asylum seekers joined a hunger strike Sunday as the pressure mounted on Australia to resolve an escalating crisis.

Refugee groups said detainees had resorted to drastic action to highlight their plight and warned that further instances of self-harm were inevitable unless authorities acted.

The immigration department said 162 men, 14 women and five children, mostly Afghans, were refusing to eat for a 12th day at the Woomera Detention Centre in southern Australia, although a lawyer representing them said Sunday the figure had swelled to 370.

The asylum seekers are upset at delays in processing their asylum claims and the conditions in which they are being held.

Across the country, protests escalated with at least 20 asylum seekers going on hunger strike at two detention centres in Western Australia.

The Refugee Action Collective said 35 people inside Melbourne's Maribyrnong Detention Centre were refusing food, although they were accepting fluids.

Noisy demonstrations in support of the hunger strikers were staged outside the Port Hedland detention centre in Western Australia, Melbourne's Maribyrnong and the Villawood Detention Centre in Sydney.

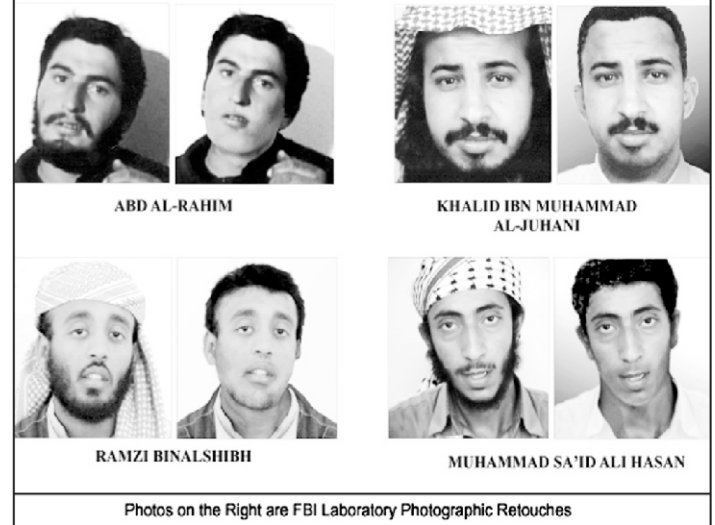
On Saturday, there were violent disturbances at Woomera, in the baking South Australian desert, when a man seriously injured himself by diving into a razor wire fence in an attempt to escape.

Three children involved in the Woomera hunger strike were taken to hospital overnight for "observation". One child is already being treated.

Thirty five detainees, including one child, have their lips sewn together, an immigration department spokesman said. So far at least 15 protesters have tried to hang themselves. Others have swallowed shampoo and painkillers.

At the Curtin detention centre in Western Australia six inmates swallowed poisonous liquids on Saturday and were treated in hospital.

SEEKING INFORMATION



Photos on the Right are FBI Laboratory Photographic Retouches

The United States Government is seeking information regarding the identities and whereabouts of the individuals shown above.

This handout released on Friday by the FBI shows retouches of four of the five individuals sought by the United States Government previously released on January 17. These retouches, created by the FBI Laboratory, depict how these other individuals may also look now.

Terror video used to lure UK Muslims

AFP, London

A video showing Islamic extremists murdering and mutilating "infidels" is being circulated around Britain's mosques as part of a recruiting drive for terror suspect Osama bin Laden's network, a British Sunday paper reported.

The video, which was smuggled into Britain days before the September 11 terrorist attacks according to The Observer, shows people having their throats cut and the wholesale slaughter of secular forces.

The video was produced by an Algerian extremist group backed by bin Laden, and circulated by sympathisers based in London, the Observer said.

Maoists bomb home of Nepali police chief

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels in Nepal have bombed the home of the chief of the Armed Police Force, officials said Sunday.

No one was at the residence of Krishna Mohan Shrestha, in the eastern Shankuwa Sabha district, when the explosion occurred on Friday night, police said.

The Armed Police Force was created last year specifically to combat Maoist attacks.

On Saturday police said the guerrillas had bombed the house of former army chief Garud Shumsher J.B. Rana in the southern Bara district, again on Friday, causing extensive damage but no casualties.

The Maoists have been fighting since 1996 to overthrow Nepal's constitutional monarchy and set up a republic. The insurgency has so far claimed the lives of more than 2,300 people.

In November last the government declared emergency rule and deployed the army against the rebels.

Mild quake revisits Bhuj

AFP, Bhuj

Bhuj, the epicentre of a devastating earthquake in the west Indian state of Gujarat, was revisited by a mild tremor on the first anniversary of the temblor, officials said Sunday.

"The quake was of a very mild intensity of 3.6 on the Richter scale," said Rajiv Topno, development officer at Bhuj. "It occurred around 9.45 pm (1615 GMT) yesterday. There was no loss to life and property. In fact, it was so mild that many people are not aware of it."

Topno said the quake was part of the series of aftershocks which continue to rock the region.

"Only last week we had one, it's a regular feature," he said.



Pakistani military spokesman Major General Rashid Qureshi speaks to newsmen after a regular briefing in Islamabad on Saturday. Qureshi said Pakistan has no problems with its defence capability and its "deterrent" is in place.

'Kolkata attack linked with Taliban, ISI'

AFP, New Delhi

The mastermind of last week's attack on the American Centre in Indian city of Calcutta has close links with the Taliban and Pakistan's secret service, a newspaper report claimed Sunday.

The Hindustan Times said Omar Sheikh, one of three people released by India in return for passengers of an Indian Airlines plane hijacked in 1999 from Kathmandu and taken to Kandahar, is said to be behind the Calcutta attack that left four policemen dead and 20 others injured.

Quoting sources, the report says that Sheikh was the brain behind the attack and that he gave the idea of attacking the American facility to Farhan Malik - alias Aftab Ansari - a Dubai-based mafia don who claimed responsibility for the incident.

Farhan is also alleged to have close links to Pakistani secret service Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) and the Harkat-ul-Jihad Islami, a Pakistan-based militant outfit fighting Indian rule in Kashmir.

So far, more than 70 people have been picked up for questioning in the wake of the attack in which unidentified gunmen came up to the Center on a motorbike and sprayed bullets on several dozen police guards changing duty.

Int'l troops pouring into Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

Troops of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) are starting to pour into Afghanistan, with a record 19 flights arriving on Saturday and more expected later Sunday, an official said.

More than half the total expected deployment of 4,500 soldiers from 17 countries are already on Afghan soil with the remainder due by mid-February, British military spokesman Graham Dunlop said.

"As long as the airport remains open and the weather is good, we can maintain this level of incoming flights," Dunlop told AFP Sunday.

Many planes are carrying supplies only, with 210 tonnes arriving on Saturday alone.

Dunlop could not say how many troops were expected to arrive over the weekend. "They are arriving all the time," he said.

Since Kabul International Airport was reopened on January 16 the number of ISAF troops in Afghanistan has increased dramatically.

When the deployment began just before the inauguration of the new interim administration on December 22, all flights had to use the former Soviet air base at Bagram, about 50 kilometres (30 miles) north of the capital.

India vows to uproot terror

REUTERS, New Delhi

India vowed on Sunday to crush terrorism, saying there had been no change on the ground in the rebellion-torn region of Kashmir despite Pakistan's promise to crack down on Islamic militants.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, who has ordered the biggest military build-up in decades along the border with Pakistan, said terrorism directed against India would not be tolerated.

"To make us a target of terrorism, and we do not give an appropriate response, that is not possible," he said. "We will uproot terrorism from our soil," he said in a speech to the National Cadet Corps, where school students are given basic military training.

The country's hardline Home (interior) Minister Lal Krishna Advani said he had not seen any change in Kashmir since Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf's landmark speech on January 12 denouncing terrorism in all its forms.

"It has been 15 days now, we have not see any

evidence on the ground so far as India is concerned and so far as Jammu and Kashmir is concerned," he told Star Television network.

The Indian leaders' comments came a day after Musharraf called for talks to end the military standoff on the borders stretching from the disputed region of Kashmir to the Arabian Sea.

Musharraf, greeting Vajpayee on India's Republic Day anniversary on Saturday, said Pakistan was ready to begin a serious and sustained dialogue with its giant neighbor.

India, incensed by an attack on its parliament last month which it blamed on Pakistan-based guerrillas, has said Islamabad must cut off support to rebels fighting its rule in Kashmir before a de-escalation could take place on the borders.

"We are faced with the challenge of terrorism from outside, and from within the country, we have to defend our internal security, we have to make our borders inviolable," Vajpayee said.

Romance gets a boost in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

Love is in the air in Kabul as young Afghans find a new world of romance and sexual freedom now the fundamentalist Taliban is out and a sense of freedom is in.

In the strict Muslim country where a woman's virginity is her most prized contribution to marriage, single Afghan teenagers would not dare to make love.

But with the flight of the Taliban - and its police from the Ministry of Repression of Vice and Promotion of Virtue - they are taking liberties they never thought possible before.

"We can walk, talk and if we can find some where quiet then we may start lip kissing or I may fondle her

breasts," said 19-year-old Nesar Ahmad.

Throughout Kabul, young couples can be seen walking together, a far cry from the Taliban years when women were forbidden to be out in public without the presence of a male relative.

"Nobody asks us what relation she is to me," said Mohammad Karim, 23, out strolling in devastated west Kabul with his girlfriend Touba. "Even if they ask, it will be quite good to answer that I love her and she loves me."

They walk boldly now, just a few months after risking a public flogging if caught in one of their secret rendezvous in the ruins of the western districts or at a cemetery, their favourite meeting places.

"Most of the Taliban were religious people from the countryside. They thought we were visiting the graves of our relatives." Karim said with a laugh.

Strictly built into Afghan tradition is the requirement for women to be virgins on their wedding night.

"If we had sex now, and Touba eventually married someone else then her husband would not keep her," Karim said.

Touba, 17, said she liked being with Karim because she loved him, but she did not say if she thought their relationship would be permanent.

"It is natural for youths to have friendly relation with the opposite sex and confide in each other," she said.

Nepali PM wages war against racism, caste system

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepalese Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba Sunday declared a fight against racial discrimination and the caste system that deems some people as "untouchables".

"Racial discrimination and untouchability are social crimes we have been involved in for thousand of years and now we must join our hands to fight against it," Deuba told a seminar organised by the National Human Rights Commission (HRC) of Nepal.

Deuba said society could not "proceed on a progressive path" until both social evils were eroded in the Hindu kingdom.

Untouchables, known as Dalits, are the lowest rung in the Hindu caste system. Although caste was officially abolished in Nepal in the 1960s, lower castes, espe-

cially Dalits, still suffer economic and social discrimination.

The HRC said around 35 percent of the 23 million people in Nepal were classified as Dalits.

"Tailors, cobblers and others are traditionally termed as untouchable in the Hindu religion and upper caste people do not even touch them or even let them sit in the same rank despite the fact the constitution has provided equal rights to all people," a HRC spokesman said.

Dalits are prevented from entering many Hindu temples in remote parts of the country, while inter-caste marriages are still taboo.

Last year Deuba announced radical social and economic reforms to end inequalities based on caste.

Two bills on the welfare of Dalits and the establishment of a Dalit Commission are in the process of being passed by the lower house of parliament.