

Kashmir CM favours LoC to be turned into int'l border

AFP, Jammu

The chief minister of India's Kashmir state took issue with the country's prime minister on Monday, arguing that formally splitting Kashmir with Pakistan was the only viable solution to the bloody dispute over the divided region.

Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah said the UN-monitored Line of Control (LoC) currently dividing Indian and Pakistan-controlled Kashmir should be turned into the accepted international border.

"I see only one solution -- that part is Pakistan and this is India," Abdullah told reporters here.

4 Palestinians killed in Gaza blast

AFP, Gaza City

Four Palestinians were killed and one seriously wounded Monday when their car exploded in the Gaza Strip, in a blast blamed on Israel, hospital and security sources said.

Three of the dead were named as Majid Moamer, Aiman El Bugdaree and Ibrahim Jarbuwa. The identity of the fourth man killed was not immediately known.

One man was also critically injured and one slightly hurt, the hospital officials said.

CPP dominates Cambodian polls

AFP, Phnom Penh

Major political parties were bracing for change Monday as scrutineisers finalise the results of Cambodia's historic local elections which look set to deliver overwhelming victory to the Cambodian People's Party (CPP).

Early results show the CPP -- party of Prime Minister Hun Sen -- has romped home in Sunday's commune elections, winning a majority of districts in all 22 provinces. However, the opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) polled surprisingly well.

World Social Forum renews peace calls

AFP, Porto Alegre

Strident criticism of the United States dominated the World Social Forum's Peace Conference, which drew to a close Sunday urging that a democratic mediation mechanism be created to deal with conflicts.

"The inauguration of terror as countries' way of relating was what happened in response to the September 11 terrorist attacks," read the peace conference manifesto released at the conclusion of the forum.

S Korean FM replaced

AFP, Seoul

President Kim Dae-Jung on Monday dismissed Foreign Minister Han Seung-Soo as part of a cabinet reshuffle, officials said.

The presidential office said Vice Foreign Minister Choi Sung-Hong will replace Han who was returning Monday from talks in Washington with US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

News of Choi's promotion was released before Han even got back to Seoul.

Media reports said Han had become a victim of the growing war of words between the United States and North Korea.

President George W. Bush's condemnation of North Korea as being part of an "axis of evil" has increased concerns in Seoul about relations with its communist neighbour.

Manila warns Muslim rebels over threat to Americans

AFP, Zamboanga

Armed attacks against US troops in the Philippines will bring swift retribution, the Philippines military warned Monday as the two allies mounted a joint anti-terror operation in a Muslim guerrilla zone.

The 12,500-strong Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), the country's biggest Muslim separatist group, had warned on Sunday that its fighters would shoot American soldiers who strayed into their areas on Basilan island.

Officials have said the object of the joint operations was to crush the Abu Sayyaf, a small group of Islamic militants linked to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida terror network and holding a US couple and a Filipina nurse hostage on Basilan.

West Bengal to crack down on madrassahs

AFP, Kolkata

The Marxist-ruled Indian state of West Bengal plans to regulate Islamic schools, or madrassahs, in the wake of last month's attack outside the American cultural centre in Kolkata, in which five policemen were killed.

The leaders of West Bengal's ruling left-wing coalition, headed by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), are due to meet this week to discuss what steps could be taken to strengthen control over madrassahs, officials said Monday.

"There are intelligence reports that suspected Islamic extremists are taking refuge in the madrassahs, whose numbers are growing fast in the villages near the border with Bangladesh," State Minister for Minority Development and Welfare Mohammad Selim told AFP.

The Marxist government in West Bengal has always prided itself on its secular credentials and resisted any policies that could alienate the state's large Muslim population.

However India's current stand against Islamic extremist groups operating out of Pakistan and the January 22 attack outside the American centre have forced a more interventionist line.

"Madrassahs in the Muslim-dominated villages of nine districts along the border have been put under close surveillance. The teaching of terrorism under the cloak of religion in such schools cannot be accepted," Selim said.

"We have also decided to check the growth of madrassahs and mosques in villages and scrutinise those that have already been set up."

Madrassahs traditionally provide free education, food and board to poor children whose parents cannot afford to pay normal school fees.

Education focuses on teaching of the Quran, but there are allegations that some madrassahs are fuelling an extremist form of Islam with connections to terrorist activities.

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There are more than 500 registered madrassahs in West Bengal, but the president of the State Madrassahs Board, Abdus Sattar, acknowledged that the number of schools working without official sanction was unknown.

"We do not have the exact number of unrecognised madrassahs," Sattar said, adding that a committee had been set up -- headed by a former West Bengal governor -- to conduct a count and review the curricula currently in use.

"If any recognised madrassahs is found indulging in anti-national activities, it will be immediately shut down", Sattar said. "West Bengal will not fund madrassahs which teach children to fight for Islam."

Indian intelligence officials accuse the Pakistani ISI intelligence agency of securing a foothold in West Bengal through the infiltration of extremists over the porous Bangladesh border.

Indian police say two Pakistani nationals shot dead by security forces last week in the eastern state of Jharkhand had confessed before they died to participating in the American Centre attack.

Gunmen on motorcycles had driven up to the centre in the early morning and opened fire on policemen who were changing shift outside the building. Four policemen died on the spot, while a fifth succumbed to his wounds in hospital.

At a recent public meeting, West Bengal Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya expressed grave concern over growing ISI activities in border districts.

India also blamed Pakistan-based militant groups for carrying out the December 13 attack on the Indian parliament in New Delhi.

Since then, the two rivals have massed an estimated 800,000 troops on their common border where they remain locked in a tense military stand-off.



PHOTO: AFP

Residents of the village of Cay walk over the rubble and ruins of houses after an earthquake hit the western Turkish province of Afyon on Sunday. Two powerful earthquakes rocked western Turkey killing at least 45 people, while another 111 people were injured, and authorities said they feared the death toll would keep on rising.

Turkish quake victims sleep in cold amid aftershocks

AFP, Cay

Hundreds of people spent the night outside in sub-zero temperatures in western Turkey after a powerful earthquake left 45 people dead and hundreds more injured.

As aftershocks continued to jolt the region following Sunday's quake, which measured 6.0 on the Richter scale, many gathered around bonfires and huddled under blankets to keep themselves warm in the face of temperatures as low as minus five degrees Celsius.

Some people were lucky enough to get one of the thousands of tents sent by aid agencies, while others crafted impromptu shelters by covering the back of a truck with a blanket.

One such couple were Salih Kocer, a night watchman, and his wife Selma, whose house in the small town of Cay suffered significant damage.

"We are afraid to go into our houses. There have been tremors continuing throughout the night,"

S'pore suspends 2 school girls for wearing headscarf

AFP, Singapore

Singapore on Monday suspended two Muslim schoolgirls for wearing Islamic headscarves at their schools after a government deadline for them to remove the headgear in compliance with school rules.

The education ministry said in a statement that Nurul Nasihah and Siti Farziwah, both aged seven, were suspended. A third school girl, Siti Amir, was absent from class and a fourth was given until next Monday to comply.

Mohamed Nasser, the father of Nurul, told AFP her daughter cried on being informed it would be her last day at the Whitesands Primary School.

The four schoolgirls had been threatened with suspension on Monday if they continued to violate a government ban on headscarves in school in a rule designed to promote racial harmony.

The fourth schoolgirl Khairah Faroukh was given a later date to comply because she started wearing the headgear, or tudung, only on January 14, a week after the three others.



PHOTO: AFP

A Singaporean Malay Muslim pupil, Nurul Nasihah, 7-yr-old, (L) with her mother leaves the Whitesands Primary School in Singapore on Monday. Nurul was suspended for continuing to wear her Islamic headscarf despite a deadline set by the government to remove it, her father said.

Nepal seeks extension of emergency for 3 months

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Home Minister Khum Bahadur Khadka has said a state of emergency declared by the government in November needs to be extended by three months to crush a Maoist insurgency.

"If the state of emergency is extended for three more months, I am confident of solving 75 percent of the terrorism problem," Khadka told reporters late Sunday.

The government, led by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, declared