



Young Pakistani women dance to the beat of a drum during the colourful spring festival locally known as "Bassant" in Lahore on Sunday. Thousands of kite lovers celebrated the famous and traditional Bassant Festival in Lahore by arranging parties and musical shows.

Gold from sea water!

PTI, Chennai

Scientists are skeptical about claims by a Chennai based chemical engineer of having a technology to commercially extract gold from sea water and say such tall claims should have been scientifically examined before aired in public.

In various interviews to the media, JP Agarwala had claimed that gold present in 10 parts per million (PPM) can be recovered using carrier mediated liquid membrane technology that he developed and tested while working as Assistant Professor at the Indian Institute on Technology in Karagpur (IITK) during 1995-2001.

US 'forgets its friends' after victory: Mikhail Gorbachev

AFP, Moscow

Former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev has accused the United States of forgetting its friends after the victory against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the Russian news agency Interfax reported Sunday.

"Whenever it (the US) gains a victory, it falls into euphoria and starts forgetting its friends," Gorbachev was quoted as saying.

Gorbachev added his voice to growing criticism by western politicians who are concerned by the United States to widen the war against terrorism to include other countries.

Doctors await tests of plague in north India

AFP, New Delhi

Doctors in the northern Indian state of Himachal Pradesh were awaiting definitive test results Monday from cases of a mystery disease that bears plague-like symptoms and has already killed four people.

Blood and sputum samples of victims have been sent to the New Delhi-based National Institute of Communicable Diseases (NICD) from a remote village in the hilly state.

George is a monkey: Laura Bush

AFP, Tokyo

US First Lady Laura Bush, accompanying her husband on an Asian tour, visited an elementary school here Monday, reading a "Curious George" story to second graders.

Laura Bush visited the public Akashi Elementary School with 125 pupils in central Tokyo, while US President George W. Bush was having talks with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.

"George is a monkey," the former school teacher told a class of 25 second graders aged eight-to-nine, while asking whether they had ever read "Curious George" stories.

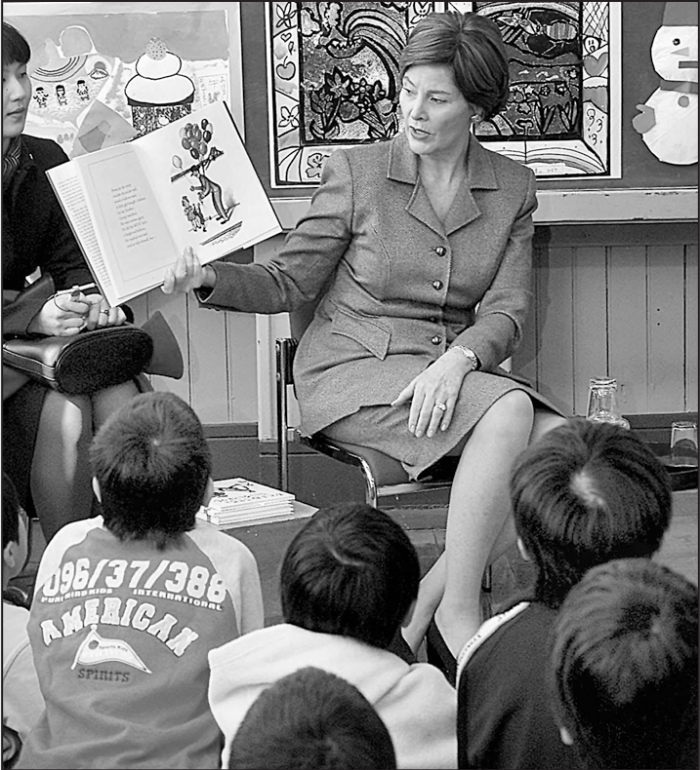
She read the book to the children for about 10 minutes through an interpreter, Akashi school principal Iekado Chiba said.

Laura Bush, 55, was accompanied by Princess Hisako, wife of Prince Norihito, who is a cousin of Emperor Akihito.

The First Lady smiled as Hisako explained to the children: "George is the same name of the president, and the book is about a smart monkey."

"She is a very warm and gentle lady," Chiba said.

"She was a good reader, very good at catching children's attention," he told AFP, adding the children could tell how the story developed even though they did not understand English.



US First Lady Laura Bush reads "Curious George" book for second grade school children through an interpreter, (L, unidentified), at Akashi Elementary School in Tokyo on Monday. The First Lady is accompanying US President George Bush on a three-nation East Asian tour.

UN HR envoy meets Suu Kyi

AFP, Yangon

United Nations human rights envoy Paulo Sergio Pinheiro met with Mynamar democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi Monday at her lakeside residence where she has been detained for more than a year, witnesses said.

The Brazilian academic, who is on his third mission to Myanmar, also met with the Nobel peace laureate during his other visits to the military-run country over the past 10 months.

Myanmar's ruling junta last week released five members of pro-democracy parties including Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), in an apparent goodwill gesture timed to coincide with Pinheiro's visit.

Earlier Monday Pinheiro met with members of the Human Rights Commission headed by Home Minister Colonel Tin Hlaing, then had separate talks with Police Chief Soe Win.

On the weekend he held talks with officials in the prisons department, after returning to the capital Yangon from a side-trip to Kachin State where he inspected jails.

Saved from hangman's noose

AFP, Suva

Fiji coup leader George Speight was saved from the hangman's noose Monday when a death sentence for treason imposed hours earlier was commuted to life imprisonment by President Josefa Iloilo.

Speight pleaded guilty to treason and wept uncontrollably when he was ordered to hang but the sentence was commuted to maintain security in the small island nation.

The charges arose out of the coup in May 2000, when Speight and his henchmen kept the then prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his cabinet hostage for 56 days in the parliament building.

Crucial Indian state polls enter second phase

AFP, Lucknow

The second stage of elections in India's most populous state Uttar Pradesh got underway Monday, with pundits still divided over the probable result and its impact on the federal government in New Delhi.

Around Pradesh -- also known as India's "Hindu heartland" -- is far and away the most politically important state, and elections here are traditionally viewed as a popularity test for the federal government of the day.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayndu nationalist BJP party in New Delhi to start searching for greener political pastures.

The BJP had been expected to lose control of the state, but exit

TB may kill 1 lakh Asians in 5-yr

AFP, Tokyo

Up to three million more people in East Asia could become infected with tuberculosis and 100,000 of them die over the next five years because of a lack of funding to control the disease, the World Health Organisation warned Monday.

"We have to strengthen funding and political commitment to stop TB (tuberculosis)," said Dr. Shigeru Omi, the WHO's regional director for the Western Pacific at a meeting of international tuberculosis experts in Osaka, some 400 kilometres west of Tokyo.

Maoist rebels trying to force Nepal govt into talks

AFP, Kathmandu

Frustrated by months of deadlock, Maoist rebels have resorted to a high-risk strategy by launching their deadliest attack in their six-year rebellion in a bid to force the government to the negotiating table, observers said Monday.

But the tactic could have backfired with the government sounding more determined than ever to crush the insurgency by force.

The weekend offensive by the rebels left more than 130 people dead -- mostly army and police personnel -- in three separate attacks in rural areas of western and southern Nepal.

The attacks came just before Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba was due to ask parliament to approve an extension to the three-month state of emergency imposed in November to combat the rebellion.

Just last week the leader of the Maoists, Pushpa Kamal Dahal, alias Prachand, had hinted strongly that he might be willing to enter into peace negotiations.

"The Maoists have never closed the door for peace talks with the government," he said in a statement marking the seventh anniversary of the 1996 launch of the insurgency to topple the constitution monarchy.

Kapil Shrestha, of the Nepal Human Rights Commission, said the attacks were designed to show the Maoists were still a force to be reckoned with.

"These attacks have come at a good time to put pressure on the Deuba government to come to the negotiating table by showing that the rebels are still strong even after three months of emergency measures against them," he said.

He said security forces, including the army which

'All options' on table on Iraq, Iran, North Korea: Bush

US dismisses critics of 'axis of evil' rhetoric

AFP, Tokyo

US President George W. Bush said Monday he told Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi he hopes to resolve differences with Iran, Iraq and North Korea "peacefully" but will keep "all options" on the table.

At a joint press conference, the visiting US leader told reporters: "I will keep all options on the table."

"We want to resolve all issues peacefully, whether it be Iraq, Iran or North Korea," said Bush, who has lumped those countries together in what he has termed the "axis of evil," language that has riled US allies.

Responding to a reporter's reminder that France's Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine had called Bush's phase "simplistic", Bush dismissed US allies' chilly reception to his rhetoric as an attack of the "vapors."

"I understand what happens in the international arena; people say things. But the leaders I've talked to understand, exactly, what needs to happen," Bush said.

"They understand that our commitment is no just in Afghanistan, that history has given us a unique opportunity to defend freedom ... I'm confident nations will come with us," he added.

Meanwhile, President George W. Bush said "nations will come with us" if the US-led war on terrorism moved beyond Afghanistan, as he dismissed critics of the "axis of evil" label he has stuck to Iran, Iraq and North Korea.

During a joint press conference with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro

Koizumi, Bush renewed his pledge to thwart terrorist groups who want to "mate up" with those regimes in hopes of acquiring weapons of mass destruction.

"People who love freedom understand that we cannot allow nations that aren't transparent, nations with a terrible history, nations that are so dictatorial they're willing to starve their people, we can't allow them to mate up with terrorist organisations," said the US leader.

Asked about French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine's criticism that the "axis" remark was "simplistic," Bush referred reporters to US Secretary of State Colin Powell's recent suggestion that the official was suffering from the "vapors."

"The Secretary of State had, I thought, an interesting reply to the French foreign minister. And you might want to ask him afterwards what he meant by vapors," the president said with a grin.

Powell, who was accompanying Bush on a week-long trip that will also take him to Seoul and Beijing, clarified that his message in a Financial Times interview last week had been: "Let's not swoon."

"People say things, but the leaders I've talked to fully understand exactly what needs to happen. They understand the resolve of the United States," Bush told reporters after a bilateral meeting with Koizumi.

"History has given us a unique opportunity to defend freedom. And we're going to seize the moment," he said. "I'm confident nations will come with us."

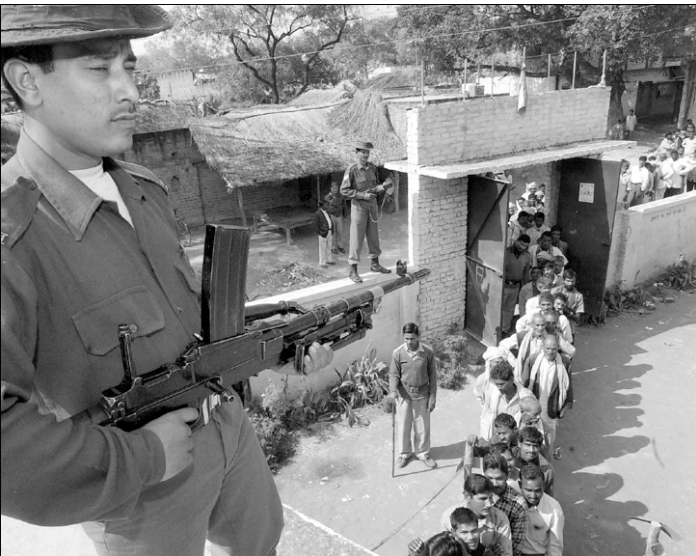
17 indicted in E Timor for crimes against humanity

AFP, Jakarta

International prosecutors in East Timor on Monday indicted nine pro-Jakarta militiamen and eight Indonesian soldiers for crimes against humanity in the territory in April 1999.

Among them is notorious militia gang leader Eurico Guterres, who faces five counts including two of murder.

Prosecutors have sought arrest warrants for the 17, all of whom are believed to be living in Indonesia, the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor



An Indian Border Security Force (BSF) soldier stands guard at a polling station in Jaheta village in Kakori, 30 km from Lucknow on Monday in Uttar Pradesh state. Uttar Pradesh is holding the second day of polling for the state assembly elections. Around 35 million people were eligible to vote in the second phase for 145 assembly seats from 28 districts.