

Disguised toxic parcel sent to Blair's home

AFP, London

Disguised packages found to contain fatal toxic substances have been sent to the official residence of British Prime Minister Tony Blair and to a Scottish member of parliament, London police force Scotland Yard said late Friday.

It added that as many as 16 disguised parcels, containing caustic soda, could have been sent to prominent British politicians.

A man claiming to be from the Scottish National Liberation Army, a little known militant group seeking Scotland's independence, telephoned officers on Friday, claiming to have sent 16 packages, a police spokesman said.

Dick Cheney's daughter to work at State Department

AFP, Washington

One of Vice President Dick Cheney's two daughters has been hired to a high-level post at the State Department, officials confirmed.

Elizabeth Cheney is to serve as an assistant to William Burns, the assistant secretary for Near East Affairs, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

A lawyer by training, Cheney's new post concerns economic affairs in the region.

Elizabeth Cheney worked for the State Department and the US Agency for International Development from 1989-1993.

Vice President Cheney, who was US secretary of defense during the 1991 Gulf War and later headed the oil company Halliburton, has maintained close links with the region.

He is to travel later this month to nine moderate Arab countries and to London and Ankara to discuss security in the Gulf region.

Mars life theory gets a boost

AP, Pasadena

NASA's Mars Odyssey spacecraft has found evidence that vast regions of Mars may be abundant in water -- a discovery that bolsters the theory that life once existed on the Red Planet.

The water is believed to be ice mixed in with the dirt, dust and rock that form the top 3 feet (90 centimetres) of the planet's surface, according to initial data released Friday.

The water probably accounts for just a few per cent by mass of the surface of Mars, but covers a vast area that stretches from the frozen southern polar cap northward to about 60 degrees south latitude.

"The signal we have been getting loud and clear is there is a lot of ice of Mars," said William Boynton of the University of Arizona at Tucson. He is chief scientist for the spacecraft instrument that measures the abundance of hydrogen, a likely indicator of the presence of water.

Fresh US raid on al-Qaeda base: AIP

AFP, Islamabad

US planes started intense bombing of a suspected al-Qaida base in Afghanistan's eastern Pakia province early Saturday, the Afghan Islamic Press reported.

Quoting a spokesman for the provincial Shura, or council, it said the jets targeted the Arma hills some 40 km southeast of Gardez, the capital of Pakia.

The new wave of bombing started around 10:00 am (0530 GMT), the Pakistan-based news service said.

It quoted well-informed sources in Gardez as saying that more than 500 fighters of terror suspect Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network were concentrated in the hills of Arma.

Some of the al-Qaida men, including Arabs and nationals of other countries, were believed to be living there with their families, AIP said.

4 detainees fed intravenously at Guantanamo

AFP, Washington

Four hunger-striking prisoners at the US naval base in Guantanamo, Cuba were back in their cells after receiving fluids intravenously for symptoms of dehydration, a military spokeswoman said late Friday.

"All four recovered, did not require follow-on medical care," said Major Rumi Nielson-Green, adding that the prisoners were later returned to their units.

However, some 75 al-Qaida and Taliban detainees again declined dinner Friday in the two-day hunger strike, Nielson-Green said. She said it was unclear whether the protesters included the ones who boycotted lunch, in protest at treatment of a fellow inmate earlier this week.

Riots harden hardline Hindu resolve to build temple

AFP, Ayodhya

India's worst Hindu-Muslim violence in nearly 10 years has hardened the resolve of thousands of Hindu activists gathered in this northern town to build a temple on the ruins of a razed mosque.

Vermillion streaks on their foreheads and saffron and yellow shawls around their shoulders, an estimated 11,000 determined Hindu fanatics are camped out in Ayodhya to pursue what they see as a mission of religious and national identity.

In defiance of numerous court orders, appeals from the central government and the presence of thousands of security personnel, they plan to force their way on March 15 to the rubble of the 16th-century Babri Mosque and start erecting a temple to the Hindu warrior god Ram.

The Babri Mosque was pulled down by Hindu zealots in December 1992, triggering Hindu-Muslim riots that claimed around 2,000 lives.

Three days of horrific sectarian violence that claimed more than 300 lives in the western state of Gujarat was sparked on Wednesday by a Muslim massacre of 58 train passengers -- most of them Hindu activists returning from Ayodhya.

For the devotees gathered here, violence seems little more than an occupational hazard. "Now we have decided to die," said Laxmi

Das, who hails from Gujarat and whose commitment to the temple-building campaign has deepened as a result of the unrest in his home state.

"See, see this is my child. She is my wife and this is my other child. We will all die now if anyone comes in the way of the temple construction," Das said, pointing to the members of his family he had brought with him to Ayodhya.

"Now no power on earth can stop the temple," agreed Mahesh Bai, another Gujarati. "The Muslims will be taught a lesson."

The Hindu claim to the disputed site in Ayodhya is based on the historical assertion that the Babri Mosque was built by the Mughul emperor Babar over an earlier Ram temple.

The temple campaign is being led by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP - World Hindu Organisation) -- a militant organisation known for stirring up sectarian hatred against India's religious minorities.

The VHP encampment in Ayodhya is a small marvel of organisation, with tents and food provided for all the Hindus gathered here.

The roads to the encampment are lined with colourful shops selling religious books, cassettes and clothes, while makeshift studios offer photographic souvenirs of the devotees' visit.

The music blaring from numerous cassette

shops leaves little doubt as to the allegiance of the customers they serve.

"Sons of Babar go back, we swear by Ram we will make the temple." "Clear all roads, in the name of Ram clear all roads, we are coming Ram" are two of the more popular numbers on offer.

Other keenly sought items are photographs of the Babri Mosque's destruction in 1992.

"Only five rupees sir, it has picture of the mosque coming down, in three stages," shouts a young boy running alongside the car of a potential customer.

The stereotype of the grassroots VHP foot soldier is that of a poor, uneducated villager. But not all fit the mould.

Gangadas Bhosle from the western state of Maharashtra is studying for his masters degree in Human Resource Management at Amravati University.

"Yes, I am educated. So what?" said Bhosle.

"Are people in America not educated? Still they go to church on Sundays. Are people in Islamic countries not educated? Still they go to mosque on Fridays.



Activists of Vishwa Hindu Parishad(VHP), World Hindu Council, scuffle with police as they try to board a train at Mumbai's main railway station on Saturday. Eighty-one activists including eight women attempting to make their way to Ayodhya were detained by the police as part of a nation-wide crackdown on VHP activists. India's worst Hindu-Muslim violence in nearly 10 years has hardened the resolve of Hindu activists to build a temple on the ruins of the razed Babri Mosque in Ayodhya.



Australian Prime Minister John Howard (L) and Commonwealth Secretary General Don McKinnon (C) welcome Bangladeshi Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia (2nd-R) to the opening ceremony of CHOGM in Coolom on Saturday. The four-day biennial meeting of Commonwealth heads will continue till March 5.

Dancers herald wind of change for Commonwealth

AFP, Coolom

As Queen Elizabeth II listened on, Commonwealth Secretary-General Don McKinnon charted a new activist role Saturday for the organisation that rose from the remnants of the old British Empire.

The formal opening of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) here Saturday began with dancers performing against a backdrop of local scenes, including a Willi Willi, or mini tornado, sweeping through fire-charred bushland.

The only anthem sung, however, was not 'God Save the Queen', but 'Advance Australia Fair'.

The queen, dressed in flame red, even smiled when Australian Prime Minister John Howard -- an avowed monarchist -- appeared to mistake King George V for the Queen's father, George VI, in his welcome speech.

In between the key addresses, Aboriginal performers from the local Gubbi-Gubbi tribe took the stage, charting a progression from traditional dance to one in which they donned skin-tight catsuits sprayed with Aboriginal designs.

The message was consistent with that proffered by both McKinnon and later the queen that times are changing and the Commonwealth "family" established in 1931 must adapt and modernise its role in the 21st century.

This being an Australian coastal resort town, there were performers celebrating the deeds of lifeguards, surfers and sporting heroes, and a rendition of Waltzing Matilda. On a big screen, there were scenes of bushfires and beaches and the Outback.

As representatives of the 50-plus Commonwealth states entered the big-top style tent in which the cere-

mony was held, they were preceded by flag bearers.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Nigerian President Olesugun Obasanjo entered together, despite their differences over whether or not to expel Zimbabwe over government-sponsored human rights abuses.

Shortly afterwards, the rain came down outside, a tropical storm pelting an Australian military honour guard outside.

The queen listened as McKinnon used the opening ceremony to deliver a warning about the threat posed by poverty to member states.

In doing so, the secretary-general also redefined the organisation, discarding the usual definition listing the Commonwealth's member states and offering in its place a new focus on the people it represents.

"Poverty means disease, hun-

ger, no clean water, limited commu-

nication -- it is deeply destabilising and one of the greatest threats to democracy," McKinnon said.

"The test of successful development is not the bureaucratic approval of a project, it is not the measurement of outcomes, it is not the returns on capital.

"It is ultimately the smile of a child ... This should be the measure of our success.

"No-one in the world can have a secure future, when half the world has no future at all."

The queen appeared to signal her approval, urging the Commonwealth to adapt its role in order to survive.

CHOGM "must deal with the challenges facing the organisation," she said.

"You also face the challenge of defining its longer-term future ... The Commonwealth must move with the times if it is to remain relevant to all generations."

PA snaps contacts with Israel

US reiterates call for restraint

AFP, Jerusalem

Contacts between the Palestinian Authority and Israel remained suspended on Saturday after the Israeli army pursued its bloody crackdown on two Palestinian refugee camps to growing international concern.

The Palestinian Authority announced the suspension late on Friday in response to incursions by the Israeli army inside the Balata and Jenin camps, which have left a total of 19 Palestinians and two Israeli soldiers dead since they began last week.

In a sign of continuing violence

medical sources said Saturday Israeli soldiers had shot and killed one Palestinian in the northern Gaza Strip overnight.

"There will be no contacts, neither security nor political ones as long as the destructive Israeli aggression continues against our camps," Palestinian official Ahmad Abdelrahman told AFP on Friday.

He added that there were "no security or political contacts with the government" of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, "which invades our camps and cities and imposes a blockade, killing our children."

The incursions are the first by the Israeli army into the camps since the

beginning of the 17-month-old Palestinian uprising or intifada and have prompted a chorus of international concern.

Tel Aviv says the West Bank camps are rife with terrorist suspects.

The Israeli army called Jenin "a central location for terrorist members who have carried out attacks causing the murders of dozens of innocent Israelis."

Meanwhile, the United States Friday repeated its call on Israel to use "utmost restraint" and protect civilians during a crackdown in two Palestinian refugee camps.

C'wealth refuses to readmit Pakistan

AFP, Coolom

Commonwealth leaders Saturday refused to readmit Pakistan, suspended from the 54-nation body after the 1999 military coup, officials said.

"They noted the progress that has been made by General (Pervez) Musharraf, but Pakistan is still suspended," said conference spokesman Joel Kibazo.

He was speaking after the first session of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting which opened Saturday in the eastern Australian town of Coolom.

Kibazo also noted that India had

not raised the issue of Pakistan in relation to terrorism.

It had been expected that the Indian delegation led by Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh might use the talks to press accusations against Islamabad of encouraging cross-border terrorism.

"There was discussion but it was not in the context of terrorism. The debate on Pakistan was in the context of a return" to the Commonwealth, Kibazo said.

Pakistan was suspended from the Commonwealth after the coup, but President Musharraf has pledged elections in October and outlined a road map to democracy.



German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder (C) among members of parliament as the lower house of parliament approves a path-breaking immigration bill designed to control the entry of foreigners while opening the door to qualified workers in fields like information technology, in Berlin on Friday.

Pakistan hopes Indian riots won't spill over its borders

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan is keeping a close eye on the communal bloodbath in India, hoping the violence will not spill over its borders while pressing New Delhi to act more aggressively to quell it.

Pakistani officials have stayed largely mum on India's worst communal fighting in nearly a decade, saying only that Islamabad "regretted" the orgy of violence that has claimed more than 300 lives in the western state of Gujarat.

Analysts say the reticence shows Pakistan, already in a tense border standoff with its arch-rival,

has enough on its plate.

"The government at the moment is not looking for trouble with India. They are sitting on top of an awkward law and order situation," M.A. Niazi, an editor at The Nation newspaper, told AFP.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has pledged a domestic crackdown on Islamic extremists blamed for the grisly slaying of American journalist Daniel Pearl and the massacre of 11 Shiite Muslims at a mosque.

Niazi said India's riots were unlikely to have immediate repercussions here, as Pakistani

Muslims had few direct ties with Gujarat, despite the geographic proximity.

However, the situation could change if the violence spreads north to Uttar Pradesh, home of the demolished Babri Mosque where hardline Hindus want to build a temple on what they believe is the birthplace of the god Ram.

A significant number of Pakistanis are descendants of Muslims who emigrated from Uttar Pradesh after the subcontinent was partitioned in 1947 between Hindu-majority but secular India and the Muslim homeland of Pakistan.

Jaya back in power

AFP, Madras

Former actress Jayalalitha Jayaram was Saturday sworn in as chief minister of southern India's Tamil Nadu state, just five months after she was forced to step down from the post over corruption charges.

Jayalalitha took her oath of office in a colourful ceremony at the demolished Babri Mosque where hardline Hindus want to build a temple on what they believe is the birthplace of the god Ram.

The controversial Jayalalitha was forced to step down as chief minister in September on the grounds that she was not a sitting member of the state legislature.

She had been barred from contesting elections in Tamil Nadu last May -- in which her party swept to



power -- because of her corruption convictions, relating to her previous 1991-1996 tenure as chief minister.



Queen Elizabeth II (C), Australian Prime Minister John Howard (L) and Commonwealth Secretary General Don McKinnon (R) laugh during the opening ceremony for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Coolom on Saturday. Representatives from 51 countries, including 35 heads of state, are assembled for the four-day biennial summit being held.

Move with times to stay relevant, queen tells C'wealth leaders

AFP, Coolom

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II appealed to Commonwealth leaders Saturday to strive to embrace reform and bridge cultural differences to meet new challenges and counterterrorism.

As she opened the 35th Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) here, the queen also made a strong plea for greater racial and religious tolerance saying it was its diversity that made the 54-nation group relevant in the 21st century.

But she added: "The Commonwealth must move with the times if it is to remain relevant to all generations."

Dressed for a colourful ceremony in flame-red with a matching

hat, the queen also used her speech to underline the need for a continuing effort to reach consensus in a summit which looks set to be overshadowed by differences over Zimbabwe.

She told the 900 guests, including the leaders of 35 governments, the Commonwealth, established in 1931, was an organisation which had defined its own values and ideals through its particular focus on issues important to it, notably sustainable development and good governance.

"It has also developed its own style of informality, tolerance and an insistence on bringing all along together on the sometimes difficult path of building consensus."

This tradition of consensus was in spite of the remarkable variety of

its membership with every region of the world represented, every size of nation at all stages of development and all the great religions.

"I also believe it is this very diversity which makes the Commonwealth so increasingly relevant in our 21st century world," she said.

"The events of 11th September have reminded us all of the need to build bridges between different cultures based on greater knowledge and understanding of our differences."

Few of the countries of the Commonwealth were homogenous and most had different traditions and cultures, she said.

"National success can often be judged by the success with which we deal with difference."

Norwegian general starts monitoring Lankan truce

AFP, Colombo

A retired Norwegian army general arrived in Sri Lanka Saturday to start monitoring a ceasefire between government forces and Tamil Tiger rebels, officials said.

Trond Furuhoedve went into talks with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe shortly after landing here Saturday, officials said.

They said Furuhoedve has already had talks with the London-based chief negotiator of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Anton Balasingham, on starting their monitoring mission.

Norway brokered an open-ended bilateral truce between the Sri Lankan government and the LTTE to clear the way for political talks aimed at ending decades of ethnic bloodshed in the island.

Under the ceasefire deal, both sides must stop their offensive operations and allow their respective combatants access to each other's territory while out of uniform and without their weapons.

The 16-member ceasefire monitoring team headed by Furuhoedve will be assisted by eminent Sri Lankans nominated by the Colombo government and the Tamil Tigers.

The truce deal has wide international support but Wickremesinghe is facing intense opposition from his political rival, President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who says Furuhoedve's role threatens the island's sovereignty.