

US mulls DNA databank of terror suspects

AFP, Washington

US authorities are considering creating a DNA databank of terrorism suspects by analysing blood samples from thousands of detainees being held in Afghanistan and Cuba, the New York Times reported Sunday.

The move is prompted by a frustration by US officials as they attempt to identify captured al-Qaida and Taliban fighters, federal authorities told the daily.

Officials told the newspaper that the DNA database could help in tracking terrorism suspects in the future and could also play a role in some current investigations.

The DNA database has been proposed by officials at the US Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) and is being reviewed at the Justice Department.

India bans PTV for fanning riots in Gujarat

AFP, Ahmedabad

Indian authorities in the western state of Gujarat said Sunday they had banned Pakistan's PTV channel for broadcasting what they termed provocative reports of the sectarian violence which has claimed nearly 500 lives here.

"PTV has been banned from today (Sunday) and it will be banned until the situation improves," Gujarat Home Minister Gordhanbhai Zadafia said.

Accusing the PTV reportage of fanning the communal flames in Gujarat, Zadafia said, "Sometimes authorities have to take certain actions in the interests of society at large. Such telecasts have spread violence."

Cholera kills 400 in Congo

AP, Kinshasa

More than 400 people have died from cholera in the southeastern province of Katanga in Congo since the beginning of the year, the head of a national crisis group said on Saturday.

Mampunza Mamiezi told The Associated Press that 4,876 other people were known to be suffering from the disease. He said he believed the number of victims could rise.

Katanga province is split in two, with the south controlled by the central African state's government and the north held by Rwandan-backed rebels. The region is regularly shaken by fighting.

"These figures only refer to the part (of the province) which is under government control," said Mamiezi, who is a doctor.

'No spies among Iraq arms inspectors'

AFP, Dubai

There will be no spying for anyone if UN arms inspectors are allowed to return to Iraq, UN disarmament chief Hans Blix vowed in an interview published Sunday.

"We are determined not to be spies for anyone. We are inspectors for the UN Security Council, that's all," Blix, head of the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC), told Al-Hayat newspaper.

Iraq accused UNMOVIC's predecessor, the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM), of being riddled with spies and it was disbanded after inspectors fled Baghdad in December 1998 on the eve of a punitive US-British air campaign.

New solar telescope unveiled

AP, Stockholm

The Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences on Saturday unveiled what it called the world's second largest optical solar telescope.

The telescope on the Spanish island of La Palma will allow scientists to explore magnetic fields in the sun's atmosphere and spots on its surface at a greater resolution than previously possible, academy spokesman Jonas Foerare said.

Foerare said viewing through the telescope will be "like taking a picture of a quarter from a distance of 50 kilometers (30 miles)."

The high resolution is made possible by a new type of mirror that corrects the blurring caused by the Earth's atmosphere, he said.

The telescope sits atop a 2,400 meter (7,900 feet) peak on La Palma, in the Canary Islands, a Spanish island group off the north-western coast of Africa. The location was chosen because of its stable, thin air, which provides optimal viewing conditions, Foerare said.

China kicks off legislative session with call for unity

AFP, Beijing

China kicked off its annual legislative session Sunday with a call for Communist Party unity ahead of a key generational leadership changes slated for later this year.

Over 2,000 delegates of China's nominal lower house, the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), opened their annual meeting in the Great Hall of the People in central Beijing.

Ye Xuanping, CPPCC vice chairman, in his opening report to the session, stressed the importance of uniting under the theories and policies of Chinese President Jiang Zemin ahead of leadership changes that will take effect this fall.

Ye urged delegates to study Jiang's theories on reforming and "building" a party in the 21st century capable of responding to China's ever-changing needs.

Jiang, "the core of the third

generation" communist leadership is expected to give up his post as party boss this fall and step down from his position as state president during next year's legislative session.

His expected resignation will also usher in the retirements of other key party and state leaders including Premier Zhu Rongji and parliamentary head Li Peng, all of whom are well into their seventies.

Ye's call to support Jiang's policies appeared as an attempt to bolster the president's prestige as Jiang seeks to wield power and influence behind the scenes as former "core" leaders Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping did after they "officially" retired, analysts said.

The CPPCC is the lower branch of China's rubber stamp National People's Congress whose 3,000 delegates will open their annual two week session on Tuesday.

Although many of the CPPCC

and NPC delegates are not Communist Party members, the annual sessions work to emphasise the dominating role of the party in all affairs of state, including legislative affairs, the analysts said.

Ye further called on the CPPCC to continue to put forward official proposals to the government, especially in the areas of economic development, poverty alleviation, education, and state enterprise and financial reform.

He also urged the delegates to support government efforts to reunify Taiwan and to crackdown on ethnic and religious separatism in Tibet and Xinjiang, as well as a crackdown on the banned Falungong spiritual group.

"We must firmly uphold the banner of opposing ethnic splitism, religious extremism, violent terrorism and the organized destructive activities of the 'Falungong'," Ye said.

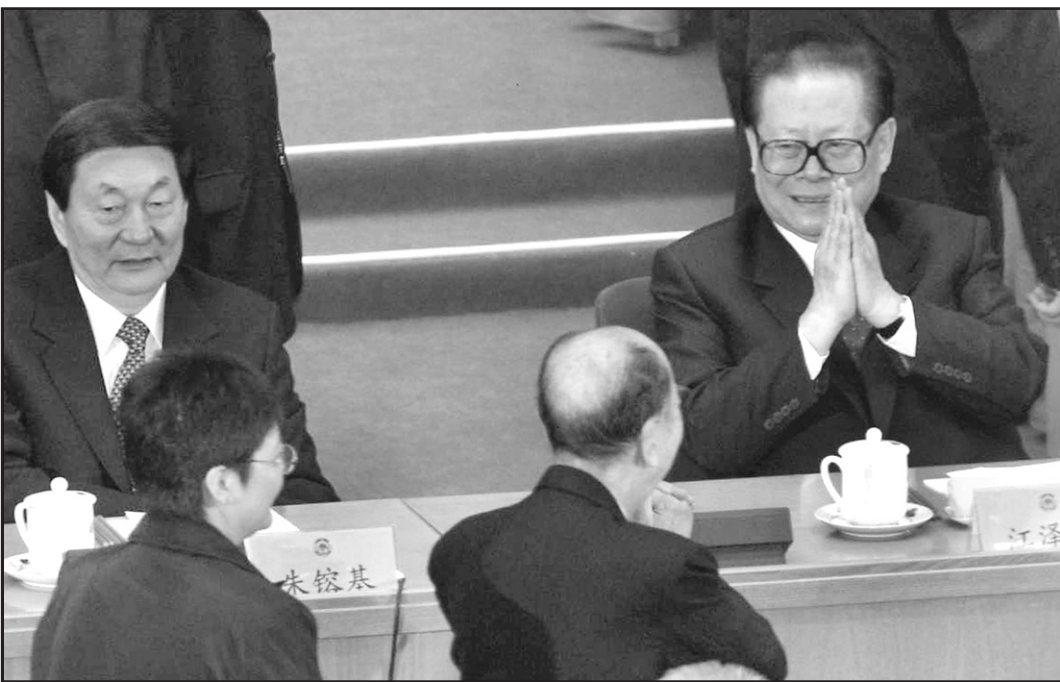


PHOTO: AFP

Chinese President Jiang Zemin (R), together with Premier Zhu Rongji (L), greet delegates prior to the opening session of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on Sunday. China kicked off its annual legislative session with a call for Communist Party unity ahead of key leadership changes slated for later this year, as more than 2,000 delegates of China's nominal lower house, the CPPCC, opened their annual meeting in the Great Hall of the People in central Beijing.

Rioting deals a body blow to shaky Vajpayee

AFP, New Delhi

An eruption of Hindu-Muslim blood-letting in India has posed a major challenge to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, whose authority has already been weakened by a series of political setbacks.

The sectarian riots in Gujarat state, which were triggered by an attack Wednesday on a train carrying Hindu activists and claimed hundreds of lives, came just days after Vajpayee's BJP party was routed in crucial state elections.

To make matters worse, the government in Gujarat -- one of a handful of states still under BJP control -- was widely criticised for

failing to take swift and sufficient action to curb the violence.

Vajpayee described the riots as a "disgrace to the nation" but his own government has been accused of contributing to their outbreak.

The activists on the train that was attacked Wednesday were returning from Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh state where thousands of right-wing Hindus have been gathering to build a temple in defiance of court orders on the site of a 16th century mosque razed in December 1992.

Prior to the attack, opposition parties had been demanding that Vajpayee clamp down on the temple construction drive on the grounds that it was fuelling communal ten-

sions to dangerous levels.

"The pressure on Vajpayee at the moment is enormous", said Kiran Saxena, a professor of political sciences in New Delhi's Jawaharlal Nehru University.

With the violence in Gujarat on the wane, the problem remains of what to do about the Hindu activists in Ayodhya, who have threatened to start building their temple on March 15, even if it means a confrontation with the security forces.

"Vajpayee today is in no position to impose a solution. Neither is he in a position to contain headline Hindu groups," said Saxena's colleague, Balveer Arora.

Riots point dangers of extremism: Musharraf

AP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf expressed dismay Saturday over the bloody Hindu-Muslim violence in India, saying it underscores the dangers of "extremism and terrorism."

In a statement to news organizations Musharraf called for better protection for India's Muslim minority and for those responsible for the violence on both sides to be brought to justice.

The bloodshed began Wednesday when Muslims torched a train carrying Hindus returning from the northern town of Ayodhya, where a temple is planned on the site of a 16th-century mosque that was razed by Hindus in 1992.

Fifty-eight people died in the train

fire in the town of Godhra, south of Ahmadabad, sparking a retaliatory rampage by right-wing Hindus against Muslims.

"The attack on the railway train on 27 February which led to the loss of more than 50 lives was deplorable but it could not provide license for the reprehensible brutalities and violence against the Muslim community which has caused hundreds of deaths, destruction of property and desecration of Muslim religious places," Musharraf said.

"The measures taken by the government of India for the protection of its Muslim minority, which is the target of Hindu extremism and terrorism needs to be strengthened," he said. "The carnage must be brought to an end. All those responsible for the violence need to be arrested and punished."

Playing prank with policing

AP, Ahmedabad

A day after 7,000 Hindus rampaged through her neighborhood, Noorjahan Shaikh recalled how police slapped her mother and called her names when she pleaded with them for protection.

What's worse, she said, police stood by and watched as the mob hurled homemade bombs at shops and beat the Muslim residents with sticks.

"We pray to God to help us because we know the police won't," said the 16-year-old one of about a dozen Muslims who sheltered nervously Saturday under the awning of a small hardware store.

Muslims and Hindus have been stunned by three days of religious rioting that has claimed more than 400 lives in the western Indian state of Gujarat.

Many blamed the state and national police -- whose bosses belong to Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's Hindu-nationalist party -- and said the federal

government waited too long to send in the army.

"Instead of protecting us, they were supporting the mob," said Rafi Ahmad, a state insurance officer in Ahmedabad. "The police were just telling us that they were helpless."

The past week's sectarian violence is India's worst since 1992-93, when 2,800 people were killed nationwide. That upheaval was provoked by the razing of a 16th-century mosque by Hindu activists in the northern town of Ayodhya.

Tension between India's minority Muslims and majority Hindus has been building for weeks, as the World Hindu Council insisted that it would begin construction of a temple on the Muslim holy site by March 15. The group believes the site is the birthplace of the Hindu god Rama.

Hundreds of Hindu nationalists were returning from Ayodhya Wednesday when Muslims set fire to their train. Fifty-eight people were killed, including 14 children.

The train fire set off the retaliatory

rampage that as gripped Gujarat, with horror stories surfacing of Muslim families cornered and burned alive by Hindus.

Narendra Modi, Gujarat's top elected official, said police "are taking strict action to control the situation."

Modi was criticised for not containing the violence early.

The state leader said his police were outnumbered and suggested that some Muslims brought the violence on themselves.

Other police officials insist they did the best they could.

"We are only 100 police here," said K K Mysorewala, a police inspector in Naroda Patia, a town south of Ahmedabad where 66 Muslims were burned alive in a shantytown Friday morning.

"First they were beaten and then burned alive," Mysorewala said Saturday. "Three more died today... We tried to save as many as we could."



PHOTO: AFP

Sex workers perform a dance drama during a "Peace Meet" of sex workers in Kolkata on Sunday. Some 20,000 sex workers gathered from five Asian countries are taking part in the week-long carnival where they made an appeal to observe March 3 as "Sex Workers' Rights Day" globally.

African leaders rally round Mugabe

AFP, Cooloom

African leaders rallied to support Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe Sunday, with Tanzania's leader, Benjamin Mkapa, mounting a passionate case for the Commonwealth to abandon talk of sanctions.

President Mkapa dismissed the controversy surrounding the Commonwealth's stand on Zimbabwe, which will hold presidential elections on March 9-10 pitting Mugabe against opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai, as "ridiculous".

He also objected to the way in which Zimbabwe's internal affairs have become fodder for both the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in this tiny Australian resort, and the international media.

"The scene is unfolding in Zimbabwe. It is not unfolding in Cooloom," Mkapa told journalists.

"And unless you are going to

make an intelligent, rational decision, we should let the scene be played out there before we make a judgement.

"You are assuming that if the government wins, the election is not fair -- let's wait and see how people vote."

His comments have been echoed by other African leaders, concerned that Britain is trying to railroad them into taking a headline stand against their neighbor.

Mugabe has reportedly told British Prime Minister Tony Blair "to keep your pink nose out of our affairs," the Sun-Herald reported here Sunday.

"Go to hell," said Mugabe. "Our people have decided and that is what matters to us. It's not their (Britain's) right or responsibility to decide on our elections."

US jets pound al-Qaida's mountain stronghold

AFP, Kabul

US warplanes continued Sunday to bombard suspected al-Qaida hideouts in the mountains of eastern Afghanistan, where the United States said it had for the first time dropped a powerful bunker-busting thermobaric bomb.

But a witness said a US-led ground advancement by at least 1,000 Afghan troops has been held up by stiff resistance from the more than 2,000 al-Qaida militants in the Amra mountains.

"The ground advancement has been blocked and stopped," Gilani, the son of local warlord Padsha Khan, told AFP by telephone.

"The Arab and al-Qaida fighters are resisting fiercely. At the beginning we didn't think they would resist so much," he said.

As he spoke by telephone, Gilani said he could see two US military helicopters and two B-52 jets bombarding the area.

He said one American and five

Afghans have been killed while another US soldier was injured but that he did not know how many Afghans were hurt.

The US military has confirmed the death of one American and two Afghans.

Gilani said some Arab and Chechen members of al-Qaida were believed to be living in the mountains with their families.

Taliban and al-Qaida fighters were Sunday also battling forces loyal to the internationally backed interim Afghan leader Hamid Karzai in adjacent Logar province, an official from the state Bakhtar news agency said.

US warplanes carried out raids in Logar on Saturday after a force of between 300 and 500 extremists, led by Arabs and other foreigners, attacked a post of local troops at Charkh, about 25 kilometers (15 miles) southwest of the provincial capital Pul-i-Alam, said Sediqullah Tawhidi, the deputy chief of the agency.

Environmental hazards kill 3 m children a year: WHO

AFP, Bangkok

Three million children die every year due to environmental hazards like unsafe drinking water and indoor air pollution, the World Health Organisation said Sunday at a conference in the Thai capital.

Some 1.3 million children under the age of five died in developing countries in 2000 from diarrhoea-linked diseases caused by dirty water and lack of hygiene, WHO said in a statement.

And it said some 60 percent of the 2.2 million child deaths caused by acute respiratory infections every year are linked with indoor air pollution, usually generated by fuel burning in confined spaces.

"The lost or compromised ability to be active which children suffer from environmental degradation is

vast," it said at the start of the Conference on Environmental Threats to the Health of Children.

"Children are not 'little adults', they are in a dynamic process of growth and development and they are particularly vulnerable to the acute and chronic effects of pollutants in their environments."

More than 300 participants from around the world are expected to attend the conference, which will run until March 7.

They will discuss measures to reduce environmental impact on children, particularly those in Asia-Pacific countries.

WHO said that in Bangladesh and India, arsenic in drinking water is a persistent problem. In other countries, there are concerns about exposure to lead, which is thought to lower intelligence.



PHOTO: AFP

A detainee is walked by two US Army military police on Saturday in Camp X-Ray at the US Naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The detainee is being lead to the Joint Interrogation Facility to be interviewed by government investigators.

Prince Edward, Sophie quit their jobs

AFP, London

Britain's scandal-plagued royal couple Prince Edward and his wife Sophie announced Saturday they would quit their jobs to support Queen Elizabeth II during her jubilee year.

"It is quite obvious that in this year, the Golden Jubilee, we are required more than ever to support the Queen and to help my family shoulder some of the increasing responsibilities and workload into the future," said the prince.

A Buckingham Palace spokeswoman confirmed that they would not be returning to their respective businesses.

Shuttle captures Hubble space telescope

AFP, Houston

The US Space Shuttle Columbia captured the Hubble space telescope early Sunday, NASA officials here announced, in advance of a planned mission to renovate and repair the orbiting telescope.

The Columbia's seven astronauts, under the command of Scott Altman, are scheduled to make five space walks to complete work on replacing solar panels on the Hubble and installing a new camera to increase tenfold the resolution of the telescope's images.

The rendezvous took place at 3:31 am local time (0931 GMT) some 565 kilometers (340 miles) over Australia. Astronaut Nancy Currie maneuvered Columbia's robotic arm to capture the 12.5 tonne Hubble.

US beefs up security against N-terror attack

AFP, Washington

Washington has deployed hundreds of sophisticated sensors to US borders, overseas facilities and choke points around the US capital in recent months to protect against nuclear or radiological attack by terrorists, the Washington Post reported Sunday.

The new radiation sensors are imbedded around some fixed points and temporarily at designated "national security special events" such as last month's Olympic Games in Utah, the Post reported.

The federal government also has placed the Delta Force, the nation's elite commando unit, on a new standby alert to seize control of nuclear materials that the sensors may detect.

The Delta Force has been assigned the mission of killing or disabling anyone with a suspected nuclear device and turning it over to the scientists to be disarmed, according to the Post.