

Governor recommends president's rule for UP

AFP, Lucknow

The Indian government was Thursday considering requests for federal rule to be imposed in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh after elections last month threw up a hung assembly.

Uttar Pradesh governor Vishnu Kant Shastri sent a special envoy to New Delhi late Wednesday evening suggesting "presidential rule" as no political party was in a position to muster "a working majority."

Elections to Uttar Pradesh — India's most populous and politically most prestigious state — were held in February, but no single party got close to the 202 seats required to secure a majority in the 403-member legislature.

UK's top cop slams criminal justice system

AFP, London

Britain's top police chief has launched a scathing attack on the country's criminal justice system, urging it undergoes "sweeping reform" for shielding offenders at the expense of victims.

Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir John Stevens, head of the London force, said criminals were effectively above the law, while judges, defence lawyers and court administrators rode roughshod over the rights of terrified victims and intimidated witnesses.

His attack came late Wednesday in an address to students at Leicester University, central England, in a speech to mark the institution's 80th anniversary.

Strike to slam Gujarat killings cripples Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

The summer capital of Indian Kashmir was shut down Thursday by a one-day strike in protest at last week's revenge killings of Muslims in the western Indian state of Gujarat.

The strike, called by over a dozen trade, transport, industry and tourism groups, closed down shops, offices and schools in Srinagar, witnesses said.

Streets were virtually empty of traffic in the city of more than a million people.

The only people in Lal Chowk, the usually bustling commercial centre, were India's Border Security Force soldiers on patrol.

More than 600 people, believed to be mainly Muslims, died in Gujarat in communal rioting triggered by a Muslim attack on a train carrying Hindu activists on February 27, which killed 58.

Quake death toll rises to 15 in Philippines

AFP, Manila

The death toll from a powerful earthquake that hit the southern Philippines rose to 15 on Thursday as disaster officials asked more than 27,000 displaced people to return home, saying the danger has passed.

People who fled coastal areas in fear of tsunamis, or tidal waves, were told several hours after the 6.8-magnitude quake at dawn on Wednesday that "the worst is over" said Melchor Rosales, administrator of the civil defence office.

But "apparently not all of them have gone back to their homes," he said over ABS-CBN television.

The quake exacted the heaviest toll on tiny towns around the Rio Grande river basin on Mindanao island, near the epicenter of the quake. It also caused widespread power outages affecting many of the island's 18 million people.

Rescuers on Thursday reported four new fatalities from the quake, raising the total to 15.

Burqa in banditry

AFP, London

A gun-wielding Arab and a woman both adorned Arab-style burqas as they stole 200,000 pounds (285,000 dollars) worth of gems from an exclusive London jewellers, police said Thursday.

They entered Ramot, in Knightsbridge, west London, on Wednesday disguised in the all-encompassing garments.

Once inside the store, the robbers lifted their veils before locking staff in a back room and making off with "unique" jewellery in a Mercedes Benz, police said.

Police described the man as white and aged around 25. No description was given for the woman.

Muslim leaders reject VHP's compromise plan

Gujarat riot toll rises to 650

AP, New Delhi

In a move likely to revive religious tensions, influential Muslim leaders on Thursday rejected a compromise plan aimed at preventing Hindu hard-liners from building a temple on a site held holy by both religions.

The compromise was hastily crafted and proposed on Tuesday ahead of the militant World Hindu Council's plan to bring pillars from the proposed temple to the disputed site in the northern town of Ayodhya on March 15. The site is where a 16th century mosque once stood before it was destroyed by Hindu militants in 1992.

It was feared that the council's actions on March 15 would explode into another round of religious riots like the violence in the western state of Gujarat last week that left more than 650 people dead.

The compromise was devised by a respected Hindu ascetic, who is not a member of the World Hindu Council, known by its Hindi acronym as VHP. He proposed that the Hindus be allowed on March 15 to bring the pillars to an adjacent government-owned plot that is not under dispute.

But the All India Muslim Personal Law Board said Thursday it does not want the VHP to bring the pillars to the undisputed land, either.

"The government should stop VHP from going ahead with its plan, the board's convener, SQR Ilyas, was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India news agency.

Ilyas said the Muslim board will petition the Supreme Court if the government does not stop the VHP, PTI said. The court has earlier said that the land the government acquired around the disputed site should not be given to either side until the case is settled.

The compromise plan has been threatened by the VHP, also.

The VHP had earlier said it would wait for a Supreme Court decision on the fate of the disputed land. On Wednesday, VHP vice president Giriraj Kishore said: "There is no question of giving and undertaking that we will accept the court verdict."

AFP adds: The official death toll in India's recent sectarian violence has topped 650 people, including those killed when a Muslim mob burnt 58 mostly Hindu activists aboard a train, police said on Thursday.

A police official told AFP the estimated death toll has shot up from Wednesday's figure of around 600 people with the police recovering a large number of bodies overnight.

"There have been no fresh killings," he said.

The estimated number of dead is now 665, including the victims of the train massacre.

The sectarian violence was triggered on February 27 when a mob in the Muslim dominated western Indian town of Godhra descended on the train carrying Hindu activists and set four coaches on fire.

US-led troops move cave to cave to pursue al-Qaida remnants

AFP, Gardez

US-led forces moved from cave to cave in eastern Afghanistan early Thursday in their effort to drive al-Qaida and Taliban hide-holes from one of their last strongholds.

At least half of an estimated 600-

700 al-Qaida and Taliban fighters in the Arma Mountains have been killed since the largest air and ground offensive of the war was launched Saturday, operation commander Major General Frank Hagenbeck said Wednesday.

"The results so far speak for

themselves — several hundreds of al-Qaida and Taliban terrorists are no longer with us to terrorize our citizens or those citizens throughout the world," Hagenbeck told reporters at Bagram Air Base. "We truly have the momentum at the moment."

Eight US servicemen were killed and over 50 wounded in the rugged mountains bordering Pakistan, where 2,000 allied troops wage "Operation Anaconda," so-named for the snake that engulfs then crushes its prey.

A punishing US-led air bombing of the mountains' cave complexes resumed Wednesday afternoon after a break of a few hours, witnesses said.

According to Abdul Matin Hassan, a US-allied Afghan commander at Gardez, south of the Arma range, "the Taliban and al-Qaida fighters are no longer in control of as much ground as they had."

Investigation of Clinton costs 70 million dollars

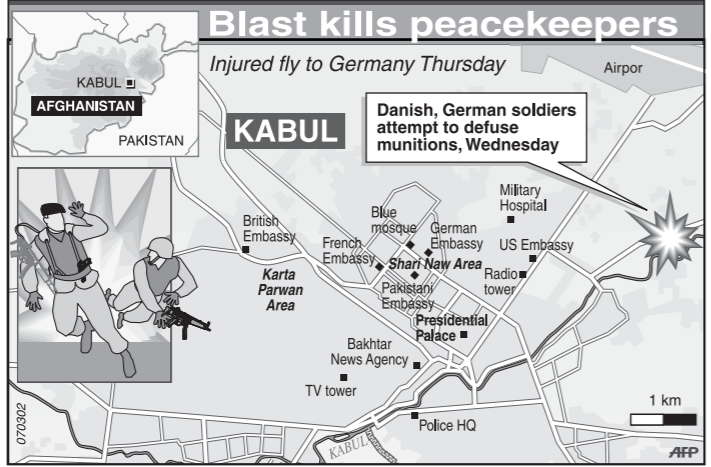
AFP, Washington

Investigations of former US president Bill Clinton and his wife, Hillary, by two special prosecutors cost 70 million dollars, including 12 million spent on the Monica Lewinsky probe, according to an official report released Wednesday.

The report by Robert Ray, the successor to Kenneth Starr, details the expenses from the investigations, lasting between August 1994 and March 2001, of various aspects of the Clintons' activities.

The Whitewater probe, which focused on a real estate development in Arkansas followed by the bankruptcy of a bank in the 1980s, proved to be the most expensive.

Although the former first couple was cleared of any wrongdoing in that matter in September 2000, the investigation cost the US taxpayer 42 million dollars.



Arundhati released from jail

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy was released from jail Thursday after paying a 2,000 rupee (40 dollar) fine imposed by the Supreme Court for criminal contempt.

Roy had spent the night in Tihar jail after the court on Wednesday handed down a "symbolic" one-day prison sentence and the accompanying fine.

Had Roy refused to pay, she would have been kept in Tihar for another three months.

"The fine was not in lieu of an apology. The fine was a punishment," Roy told reporters after her release.

"I am obviously appalled by the verdict and I stand by everything I said," she added.

The contempt charges had arisen out of Roy's criticisms of a Supreme Court judgement in October 2000 that gave the go-ahead for the building of a controversial dam in the Narmada River

valley in central India. Roy won the Booker Prize in 1997 for her debut novel, "The God of Small Things".

Tihar Jail was surrounded Thursday morning by a large crowd of supporters, as well as photographers and reporters who were waiting for Roy's release.

Since her success with "The God of Small Things", Roy has concentrated on social and human rights issues, publishing a scathing condemnation of India's 1998 nuclear tests and teaming up with environmentalist Medha Patkar to oppose the Narmada dam.

Activists say the dam project will create a huge artificial lake swamping 248 villages and destroying fragile eco-systems, fertile farmlands and forests in western and central India.

The government has maintained that all displaced people are being re-housed and the project will help irrigate parched lands.

Prabhakaran praises Lankan truce accord

REUTERS, Colombo

The reclusive leader of the Tamil Tiger rebels said on Thursday that an "historic" ceasefire agreement he signed with the government had laid a base to end Sri Lanka's nearly two decade-long ethnic war.

Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) chieftain Velupillai Prabhakaran also praised the role of Norway, under fire from nationalist and Buddhist groups in the south, for bringing the two sides closer to the negotiating table.

The ceasefire agreement signed last month "laid a strong foundation for the peace process and negotiated political settlement," Prabhakaran was quoted as saying by the pro-LTTE Tamilnet website.

Prabhakaran met on Wednesday night with retired Norwegian General Trond Furuhovde, the head of a Scandinavian monitoring mission set up by the truce agreement, in Kilinochchi in the rebel-held Wannai territory in northern Sri Lanka.

It is one of the very few times Prabhakaran has met a foreigner since he began fighting for a separate Tamil state in the north and east of the island in 1983.

Furuhovde leads a team of 18 monitors from Norway, Sweden, Denmark and Finland who will monitor the ceasefire as the two sides move towards their first peace talks in seven years to end the fighting that has left 64,000 dead.

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe told parliament this week he hopes the talks begin within three months.

Four previous serious peace bids all ended in bloodbaths. Prabhakaran also asked the monitors to help speed up the opening of the northern end of the A-9 highway to enable Tamils to travel from Jaffna peninsula to Colombo, the national capital.

That section of the highway passes through the famed Elephant pass, the Tiger-controlled access point to the peninsula.

Zimbabwe opposition fears Mugabe may 'steal' victory

AFP, Harare

Zimbabwe's opposition presidential candidate Morgan Tsvangirai said Thursday his party was preparing for all possible outcomes to the weekend poll, including a "stolen victory" by longtime ruler Robert Mugabe.

"It's an uncertain outcome," he told a news conference at which party officials blasted irregularities in Zimbabwe's constantly changing electoral system.

"People will have to prepare in all different scenarios," Tsvangirai said, referring to his supporters. "In the event of a stolen victory ... they know what to do."

But Tsvangirai said it was "premature to announce a definitive stand" on the reaction of his Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) if Mugabe were to win.

The 49-year-old former labour leader poses the most serious threat ever to Mugabe's 22-year rule, but his supporters have suffered more than two years of politically motivated attacks by militia operating with the government's tacit support.

At campaign rallies last weekend, Mugabe said in his speeches that he had ordered police not to interfere with the militants who have set up bases on white-owned farms around the country.

The MDC says 107 of its mem-

bers have been killed during the last two years, while thousands more have suffered beatings, torture and other intimidation.

"The ruling party has crafted and implemented every possible trick to assist its fortunes in this election," he said. "The ruling party has been changing goalposts, disregarding court rulings and setting new rules, all aimed at inconveniencing and deterring people from voting."

Priscilla Mushonga Misiha-irabwi, an MP from Harare, told the press conference that MDC has been allowed to examine only a preliminary version of the voters' roll, and found irregularities that included the listing of dead people as voters and the unexplained removal of voters from some constituencies.

She also said that militia bases in several districts had been placed near polling stations, and that some militia members were registered as polling agents.

The government has required the MDC to release the names and addresses of its polling agents, which the ruling party has not done.

Paul Themba Nyathi, an MP from southern Zimbabwe, said MDC polling agents had suffered widespread attacks ahead of the poll, including 22 agents who he said have been abducted and taken to militia bases.



Pakistan's new Information Minister Nisar Memon (R) talks with India's Broadcasting Minister Sushma Swaraj upon her arrival for the participation in a regional meeting of ministers at Islamabad airport on Thursday. Swaraj arrived here to attend the meeting, making her the first Indian government minister to visit Pakistan since a December 13 attack on the Indian parliament in New Delhi sent tensions spiralling between the two countries. The nuclear-armed rivals have massed around 800,000 troops on their common border since the attack, which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based militants.

Israel goes on with deadly attacks on Palestinians

Sharon shoves aside US criticism

AFP, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon shoved aside Thursday rare US criticism of his policies, as his armed forces continued deadly attacks on Palestinian positions across the occupied territories.

Four Palestinians were killed after Israeli tanks, backed up by helicopter gunships, rolled into Palestinian-controlled territory at Tulikarem in the northwestern West Bank overnight, Palestinian security sources said.

Around 50 tanks and armoured vehicles occupied Tulikarem and the nearby Nur El Shams Palestinian refugee camp, and had also completely encircled Tulikarem camp, Palestinian security sources said.

Three people were killed in Nur El Shams, which troops were searching house by house, and one, a member of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, in Tulikarem camp.

Colonel Yair Golan told Israeli public radio that the operation could last "as long as two days" and that it was aimed at "catching as many wanted militants as possible, as well as arms."

Meanwhile, a member of the Islamic Jihad, the hardline Palestinian Islamic group, was shot dead during an Israeli raid in Serris, in the northern West Bank, while two Palestinians were killed in the Gaza Strip.

Another 10 civilians were wounded when an Israeli F-16 warplane attacked the Palestinian police headquarters in the center of Gaza City, Palestinian hospital sources said.

A missile targeted a building that was already empty but nearby civilians were injured by shrapnel.

Earlier F-16s attacked the headquarters of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Force 17 personal guard in the West Bank town of

Bethlehem. Palestinian sources said at least two missiles hit the building, which had already been attacked the evening before. There was no immediate information on casualties.

The attacks followed a day of bloodshed on Wednesday when a dozen Palestinians and two Israeli soldiers were killed.

Late on Wednesday Israeli helicopter gunships rocketed a building next door to the Ramallah offices of Arafat as he was meeting EU Middle East envoy Miguel Angel Moratinos, and speaking on the phone with Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres.

The Israeli army unleashed a deadly wave of attacks on the Gaza Strip, after a home-made Palestinian rocket hit a populated area of Israel for the first time on Tuesday.

Opposition calls for Advani's resignation over Gujarat riot

AFP, New Delhi

Indian opposition parties called Thursday for the head of Home Minister L.K. Advani and the chief minister of Gujarat state for failing to prevent an eruption of sectarian violence that claimed more than 650 lives last week. "If you cannot safeguard the lives of the people, I'm sorry to say Mr. Home Minister you have no moral authority to stay in office," senior Congress party leader Pranab Mukherjee said during a debate in the upper house of parliament.

"There is no doubt that the Gujarat government failed to protect the lives and property of the (Muslim) minorities," Mukherjee said.

The central and Gujarat state governments have been severely criticised for not acting with enough speed or decisiveness to counter the bloody Hindu backlash in Gujarat that followed the massacre by a Muslim mob of 58 Hindu train

passengers.

As well as Advani's resignation, there were numerous calls for the dismissal of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi and his entire administration.

"What were the compulsions that led to the delay in the deployment of the armed forces?" Mukherjee said.

"Did they want to keep their eyes shut? Enough is enough, please realise that you have to shoulder your responsibility. You are accountable to the people of the country and not to only one section."

Troops were deployed in Gujarat after it became clear that the state police were either unable or unwilling to contain the violence.

The row over the handling of the riots had earlier forced the adjournment of the lower house of parliament for the day.

Advani was expected to reply to the debate in the upper house.

Annan calls for global efforts to eradicate poverty

REUTERS, New York

Eradicating terrorism will require more than attacking its sources of funding and support, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said on Wednesday, calling for global efforts to reduce poverty and spur economic growth.

But ambitious plans to prevent wars and other conflicts in this manner are hard to sell to politicians because "their costs are palpable and immediate while the benefits usually and undesirable or tragic event that does not occur are more difficult to convey," Annan said in a speech prepared for the prestigious Council on Foreign Relations.

Indian troops kill 6 militants in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops have shot dead six separatist Muslim militants in Indian-administered Kashmir, a police spokesman said Thursday.

Five of the militants belonged to the dominant indigenous group Hizbul Mujahedeen.

Police said three members of Hizbul were shot dead overnight during a cordon and search operation by security forces in the village of Vilgam in Kupwara district.

Several cows and goats were killed when houses and cattedsheds caught fire during the heavy exchange of fire.

Militiaman jailed for killing NZ peacekeeper

AFP, Jakarta

An Indonesian court Thursday jailed a pro-Jakarta militiaman for six years for the brutal murder of a New Zealand peacekeeping soldier in East Timor in 2000.

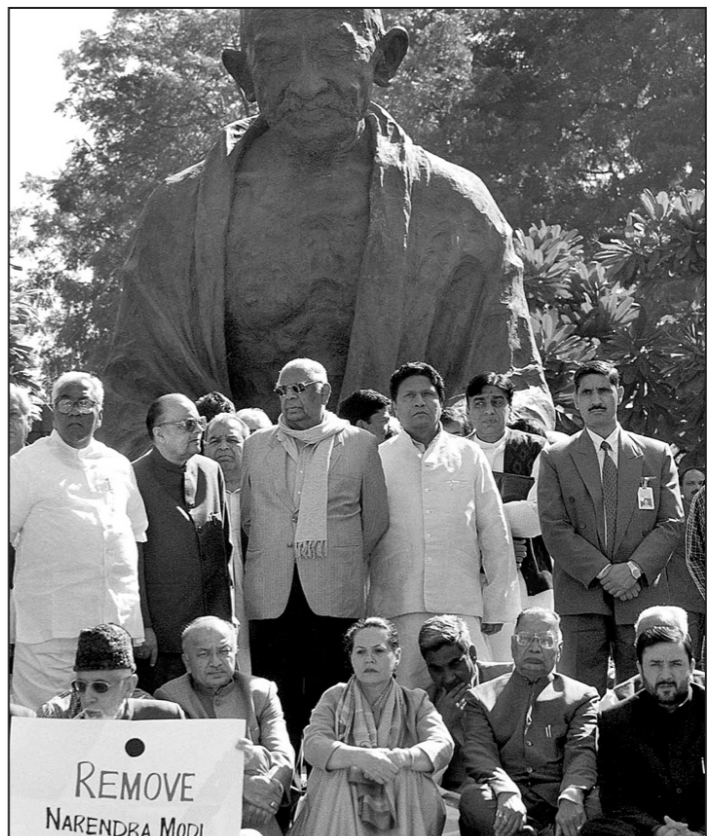
The sentence drew immediate criticism from New Zealand and the United Nations, who urged Indonesian authorities to appeal for a tougher punishment.

Jacobus Bere was found guilty of murdering Private Leonard William Manning, 24, near Suai in East Timor on July 24, 2000.

After Manning had been shot twice, Bere made sure his victim was dead by cutting his throat with a machete and then slashing his ears off.



Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy smiles while holding a bouquet of flowers given to her by supporters on Thursday upon her release from jail in New Delhi. Roy was released Thursday after paying a 2,000 rupee (40 USD) fine imposed by the Supreme Court for criminal contempt. The charges stem from her criticisms of a Supreme Court judgement in October 2000 that gave the go-ahead for the building of a controversial dam in the Narmada River Valley in central India.



Sonia Gandhi (C, seated), leader of the opposition and president of the Congress (I) Party, leads opposition members of parliament in a sit-in under a statue of Mahatma Gandhi outside Parliament on Thursday in New Delhi. The opposition MP's were protesting the government's handling of the outbreak of communal violence in Gujarat state which left over 650 people dead.