

40 opposition polling agents abducted in Zimbabwe

AFP, United Nations

Ruling party militia abducted 40 opposition polling agents near Harare early Friday on the eve of presidential elections, the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) told AFP.

Some 60 polling agents were waiting for transport in the Harare suburb of Mbare when they were surrounded by "ZANU-PF militia" and "force-marched to the ZANU-PF offices in Mbare," said MDC spokesman Percy Makombe, adding that 20 had managed to escape. The MDC alerted the police, who then escorted the polling agents to the Harare Central Police Station, Makombe said.

Meanwhile, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan urged voters in Zimbabwe on Thursday to take part in the weekend presidential election and called for a fair vote, free of violence.

In a statement, he encouraged the people "to exercise their democratic right to vote for the candidate of their choice, without fear and in the knowledge that the

ballot is secret."

In Harare, opposition candidate Morgan Tsvangirai said he did not rule out a "stolen victory" by Robert Mugabe, who faces his toughest election in 22 years as president.

"I attach the highest importance to the vote count being completed without interference or manipulation and the result being announced without delay," Annan said.

"A credible and transparent process is the best way to ensure that the result of the election is accepted by all as reflecting the will of the voters."

Annan also said he was "acutely concerned at reports that the elections may be accompanied or followed by violence."

In Harare, the Human Rights Forum, a coalition of rights groups, said 33 people had been killed in the run-up to the election, including two in the past week.

It blamed most of the violence on "youth militia" of Mugabe's ZANU-PF party, accusing them of a terror campaign including abductions and torture.

Milosevic clashes with Kosovo witness

AFP, The Hague

Slobodan Milosevic clashed sharply Friday with a Kosovo human rights activist who gave a grisly catalogue of Serb cruelty at his war crimes trial.

As the trial wound up its fourth week, the former Yugoslav president sparred with Albanian Kosovar Sabit Kadriu in a cross-examination laced with political polemics that drew rebukes from the UN court for both sides.

Clearly frustrated by the tribunal's efforts to rein in his questioning, Milosevic snapped back at Presiding Judge Richard May: "I'd like to ask you not to give me instructions, please."

Iraq, UN talk return of arms inspectors

AFP, United Nations

Iraqi Foreign Minister Najji Sabri and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan held talks Thursday on the possible return of UN arms inspectors to Iraq and agreed to meet again in mid-April.

The UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said they also focused on problems dating from the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, such as missing persons and the return of Kuwaiti property, and that Annan found the talks "both frank and useful".

Arafat asks Fatah to stop attacks inside Israel

REUTERS, Ramallah

Yasser Arafat has said armed groups linked to his Fatah movement must stop carrying out attacks inside Israel, Palestinian sources said on Thursday, but the gunmen said they would continue regardless.

Officials in Fatah said Arafat had met senior members of the movement several times this week to press the point that shooting and suicide bombings that target civilians damaged the Palestinian cause and played into Israeli hands.

"He gave his instructions that they should be stopped," Hussein al-Sheikh, a senior Fatah official who attended one meeting on Tuesday, told Reuters.

"He said (Israeli Prime Minister Ariel) Sharon exploits these attacks to escalate his aggression against the Palestinians," Sheikh said.

Fatah, the main faction in the Palestine Liberation Organisation, draws a distinction between civilians within Israel's pre-1967 borders and soldiers and Jewish settlers in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, an armed group set up by young Fatah radicals, has claimed several fatal attacks in the occupied territories --



A Palestinian woman sits on the floor as an Israeli soldier searches her residence in the Tulikarem refugee camp on the West Bank on Thursday. Israeli troops, backed up by helicopter gunships, started a "cleanup" operation overnight in response to recent terror attacks in Israel.

India mulls relaxing curbs on Hindu activists in Ayodhya

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian government said Friday it was considering relaxing strict curbs on the movement of Hindu activists in the flashpoint town of Ayodhya who want to build a temple on the site of a razed mosque.

Junior Home Minister I.D. Swami also said an order diverting all trains carrying Hindu activists to Ayodhya would end "in a day or two", according to the Press Trust of India (PTI).

Last week police sealed off train and road routes into the town after

sectarian violence in the western state of Gujarat triggered by an attack, believed to be by Muslims, on a train carrying Hindu activists returning from Ayodhya which killed 58 people.

The riots claimed more than 600 lives and the authorities feared the violence could spread to Ayodhya.

"People are facing inconvenience because of these restrictions. The government of India is concerned over the hardships being faced by the people and is considering easing these restrictions," PTI

quoted Swami as saying.

In 1992, 2,000 people were killed in riots after Hindu zealots pulled down a 16th century mosque in Ayodhya, claiming it had been built over a temple to the Hindu warrior god Ram.

The radical Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP - World Hindu Council) has been spearheading a campaign to build a temple over the mosque ruins beginning March 15 -- in defiance of court orders -- and last week thousands of Hindu activists had gathered in the town.



PHOTO: AFP

Foreigners and Nepalese participate in the International Women's Day rally in Kathmandu on Friday. Women from different walks of life and volunteers of non-government organisations took part in the peace rally. The 92nd World Women's Day was observed through out Nepal with the theme "Women's Rights for Peace and Development".

'One woman dies every minute in childbirth'

AFP, United Nations

Every minute of every day, a woman dies in pregnancy or childbirth, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said in a statement to mark International Women's Day, Friday.

"It is unacceptable that in the year 2002 so many women die in the basic act of giving life," UNICEF director Carol Bellamy said.

"We must commit ourselves to addressing this fundamental aspect of the gender gap, keeping prospective mothers healthy and alive."

The United Nations plans to mark International Women's Day with a ceremony including Laura Bush, wife of US President George W. Bush.

There will be a panel discussion on the theme "Afghan Women Today: Realities and Opportunities" at which ex-queen Noor, widow of Jordan's king Hussein, will speak. Other panellists include Thoraya Obaid, director of the United

Nations Population Fund.

Bellamy said it was estimated that 515,000 women die every year in pregnancy or childbirth, almost all of them in developing countries.

The probability of dying in childbirth in a developed country is one in 4,100, but in a developing nation it is one in 13.

"There has been no significant decline in maternal mortality since the early 1990s, and that is a tragedy," Bellamy said.

"We know how to prevent most of these deaths. Political commitment, and the resources that follow, have just not developed on this issue. We have to see that as part of a broader tableau of discrimination against women. And that must end."

The low social status of many women limits their access to basic education and healthcare and thus deprives them of information which would enable them to make the best decisions on child-bearing, health and nutrition, she added.

"Governments and communities must see this, not as an 'extra' but as a fundamental component of women's health, child health and family health," she said.

Bellamy noted that "a child's chance of survival drops dramatically when deprived of a mother's care."

The UN General Assembly is due to hold a special session on children from May 8-10 to review progress since the first world summit on children in 1990.

Bellamy said she would tell the Assembly that maternal mortality is almost the only area in which no progress has been made.

One of the most important factors in preventing deaths is access to emergency obstetric care, but available data indicates that only 55 percent of births worldwide are assisted by a skilled attendant, Bellamy said.

'Pakistan ready to reciprocate lifting of travel ban'

AFP, Islamabad

President General Pervez Musharraf here on Thursday said "Pakistan is right now ready to lift restrictions on reciprocal basis on travelling between Pakistan and India including ban on flights."

This gesture came from the President when he was answering questions of Indian journalists at the end of inaugural session of the SAARC Information Ministers Conference.

Referring to the Bangladesh Information Minister's proposal at the inaugural session for promoting easy travelling facilities in the region, the President said Pakistan is ready to remove such restrictions. "It is not of our making". Apologizing the inconvenience caused to the Information Ministers of SAARC after travelling many hours to reach Islamabad to attend the conference, the President said "I offer this gesture in presence of Indian Information Minister Sushma Swaraj."

To another question about Pakistan's desire to create conge-

rial atmosphere, the President said "Pakistan wants peace, harmony, de-escalation and tension free relations."

Pakistan had extended friendship hand to India in Kathmandu and extends it now to resolve all outstanding issues between both the countries. De-escalation and then proceeding further to resolve issues is the policy of Pakistan, he said.

When asked about visa restrictions on Indian journalists, he said Pakistan is ready to lift such restrictions on reciprocal basis. Open visa policy should be both ways.

The President said he will welcome mediators from India or any other group. "I want to talk to them". After Agra, he has not seen mediators from India. The issue can be resolved on mutually agreed policy.

Referring to situation on the borders, he said Pakistan is ready to act positively from tomorrow if there is move from other side. "Indeed it is dangerous situation. There is need to remove root cause of issues."

He said if there is killing on bor-

ders and hatred all along it is not possible to resolve other issues. "I do not believe in artificiality," he said.

To a question about Omar Sheikh's extradition to the US, the President said Pakistan is examining the matter and no decision has yet been taken.

"We have our own laws and we are still examining the matter. We will decide after finalization of the investigation about trial of Omar Sheikh in Pakistan or his extradition."

He said, Daniel Pearl came from Bombay and made intrusion into the areas which are dangerous and he should have avoided it.

The President said that Pakistan Government was very vigilant and has taken all necessary measures to prevent such kind of incidents.

At the end of the talk, President Musharraf invited Indian Information Minister Sushma Swaraj to the rostrum saying "since he has used this forum to comment on Pak-India relationships so she is invited to respond if she likes."

Sonia visits riot sites as death toll reaches 678

AFP, Ahmedabad

The death toll from India's worst Hindu-Muslim violence in a decade reached 678, police said Friday as Opposition Leader Sonia Gandhi visited the areas worst hit by the riots.

Sonia, the Congress party president, led an all-party delegation to Godhra in the western Indian state of Gujarat, where a mob attack on a train carrying Hindu activists last week killed 58 people.

The attack triggered communal rioting across the state that left at least 620 more people dead.

Accompanied by Parliamentary Affairs Minister Pramod Mahajan, she was also due to go to the city of Ahmedabad, which was one of the worst affected by the violence, and visit hospitals and relief camps.

Meanwhile in New Delhi Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani was expected to make a statement in parliament as the political fallout from the riots looked set to intensify.

Opposition parties have called for the resignations of Advani and the Gujarat Chief Minister, Narendra Modi, for failing to prevent the

eruption of sectarian violence.

"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 Thursday during a debate in the upper house of parliament.

The central and Gujarat state governments have been criticised for not acting with enough speed or decisiveness to counter the bloody Hindu backlash following the February 27 train massacre.

The row over the handling of the riots Thursday forced the adjournment of the lower house of parliament for the day and more uproar was expected Friday.

There was no fresh violence in Gujarat, but police said the death toll stood at 620 and was likely to increase because bodies were still being recovered from different areas of the state.

Police said they had launched a massive operation to arrest those responsible for the violence, many of whom were caught on camera as they looted shops and other business establishments.

US tells al-Qaida fighters to give up or face death

AFP, Bagram Air Base

US and allied forces have trapped hundreds of al-Qaida fighters after six days of fierce combat in the eastern Afghan mountains and are prepared to destroy them if they do not surrender, a US military official said Friday.

"We have hurt the enemy. We have disrupted their lines of control. We have clearly destroyed over half of their force and disrupted their lines of supply," said US Colonel Joe Smith, chief of staff for the coalition task force fighting the battle in eastern Paktia province.

"They can either give up or be destroyed."

Smith indicated some senior al-Qaida leaders might be among those caught in the trap, saying intelligence reports have identified "high-value" targets in the area.

He would not, however, speculate on whether al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden was among them.

Bin Laden, a Saudi-born militant, is suspected of

masterminding the September 11 suicide attacks on the United States that killed some 3,000 people and led to the anti-terror war launched October 7.

Smith said US forces also continued to discover and destroy cave complexes in the area and analyze documents found in them for intelligence.

"Most of what that documentation is telling us is this is the hardcore enemy we are looking for," he said.

US Army Colonel Frank Wiercinski, a commander in the offensive dubbed Operation Anaconda, said the enemy forces had been identified as al-Qaeda.

"I don't think you can classify it as anything but al-Qaeda," he said.

Some 2,000 coalition troops -- including more than 1,200 from the United States -- are taking part in the offensive in the Shahi Kot valley, some 50 kilometers (31 miles) south of Gardez, the provincial capital.



PHOTO: AFP

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan (R) and Chief of the United Nations Arms Inspection Commission Hans Blix (L) from Sweden address Iraqi Foreign Minister Najji Sabri on Thursday during a meeting at the United Nations. Sabri, Annan and UN officials met on Thursday to discuss Iraq's refusing to deal with UN arms inspectors.