

Senior Muslim leaders prepare for a meeting on Sunday in New Delhi to discuss a compromise formula offered by a hardline Hindu group to resolve an explosive dispute over the site of the razed Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. The radical Vishwa Hindu Parishad offered a deal under which it would give up its controversial plan, if the government gave it land adjacent to the heavily-guarded patch where the mosque stood, for a religious ceremony on March 15 to mark the construction of a temple.

Muslims consider deal to resolve Ayodhya dispute

One Hindu zealot killed in West Bengal

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Muslims met on Sunday to discuss a compromise formula offered by a hardline Hindu group to resolve an explosive dispute over the site of the razed Ayodhya mosque.

Hindus and Muslims both claim the site where Hindu zealots pulled down the 16th century Babri Mosque in 1992, claiming it had been built over a temple to the Hindu warrior god Ram.

That incident led to communal violence which claimed 2,000 lives and the dispute was also a factor in this month's sectarian bloodletting in Gujarat state, where nearly 700 people have died.

The radical Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP - World Hindu Council) has been spearheading a campaign to build a temple on the site of the mosque on March 15 -- in defiance of court orders.

But last week it offered a deal under which it would give up its controversial plan if the government gave it land adjacent to the heavily-guarded patch where the mosque stood for a religious ceremony on March 15 to mark the construction of a temple.

The All India Muslim Personal Law Board, a lobby group for India's 125 million Muslims, met to consider the proposal here on Sunday.

However, halfway through the meeting, one of the members Syed Shahabuddin stormed out and told reporters "a positive response" to the Hindus is unlikely.

"There is nothing new in the VHP proposal," Shahabuddin told reporters. "This has been their position since 1989. The general feeling at this stage is that we may not be in a position to give a positive response."

A formal decision was expected to be announced in the evening.

Myanmar set to purge army ranks after 'coup attempt'

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's junta is readying to mount a purge of its ranks after announcing it had foiled a coup plot orchestrated by four relatives of former dictator Ne Win, diplomats and observers said Sunday.

The regime said Saturday that the son-in-law and three grandsons of 92-year-old Ne Win, who ruled Myanmar between 1962 and 1988, were seized Thursday while discussing the takeover with a former military commander.

"The four have been arrested for attempting to seize power from the current leadership," deputy intelligence chief Major-General Kyaw Win told reporters, adding that the conspiracy was scuttled "in the nick of time".

Ne Win's family, which had long enjoyed special privileges that allowed them to build a sizeable business empire, had grown unhappy with the lack of favours now being extended to them, he said.

Shortly after, the nation's chief of police, Police General Soe Win, air force chief of staff Myint Swe and

military commander Brigadier General Chit Than were given their marching orders, said a source close to the junta.

"They have been sacked because of their association with Aye Zaw Win," he told AFP, adding that they were friends of Ne Win's son-in-law Aye Zaw Win, who is married to the ageing autocrat's favoured daughter Sandar Win.

Observers said they expected more high-profile sackings to be announced in coming days as the junta combed through the ranks looking for traitors.

"There are supposedly more arrests in the offing, perhaps bigger names than have been announced so far," one Yangon-based diplomat told AFP Sunday. "It seems it could be a purge."

However, many analysts remained deeply suspicious of the junta's explanation for the conspiracy, and said the events had renewed talk of a split within the regime.

"The comments about the family and why they got engaged in this business, well no one really believes that. It's still not clear to us

Record holder plant

AFP, Imphal

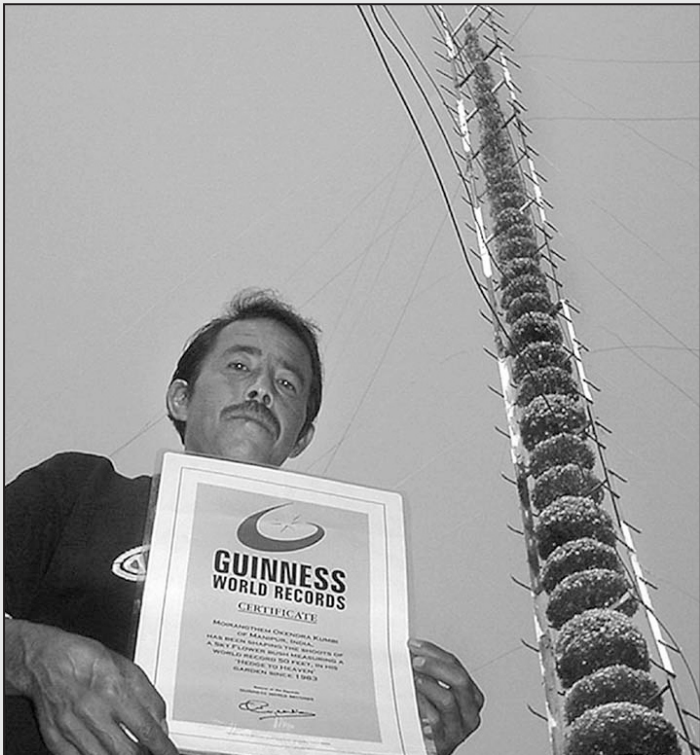
Two hundred litres of water, residues of animal blood, nutrients and bug killers -- quite a daily diet for a 21-year-old darling who has made the Guinness Book of World Records.

But "she" is not some overweight apple of her father's eye. "Sky Flower" is a 61-foot topiary plant rooted in a narrow alley in Imphal, the capital of India's northeastern state of Manipur.

"I never imagined that the potted plant I nurtured since 1981 would set a world record," said her owner Moirangthem Okendra. "Now I am convinced my plant, which is like my daughter, will one day touch the sky."

The diminutive Okendra climbs up an iron ladder twice a day to reach the top of his "darling" to bathe her, apply a coat of insecticides and give her a gentle prune.

"Two hours in the morning and one hour in the evening is my daily routine. I climb the ladder to nurture and take care of my darling daughter," said Okendra, an assistant agricultural officer in the state's horticultural department.



Moirangthem Okendra, 42-year-old, holding a Guinness certificates poses next to his 21-years-old and 61-feet tall "Sky Flower" (R) in Imphal, the capital of India's northeastern state of Manipur, on Saturday. The Sky Flower, the botanical name being Duranta Repens Linn, forms a canopy with odd numbers of rounded shape flowers and is worshipped in Manipur by the majority Hindu Mtei community as Umang Lai or the God of Forests.

27 rebels killed in Nepal

XINHUA, Kathmandu

At least 27 Nepali anti-government guerillas were killed by the government security forces in some districts in Nepal, an independent English daily The Kathmandu Post said on Sunday.

At least 15 guerillas including a commander and a bomb maker were gunned down Saturday night by the government security forces in Bardia district in the west of Nepal while 12 others were killed Saturday morning in various parts of the country, the daily said, quoting a press release issued Saturday night by the Nepali defence ministry.

Bush Senior gets HR award

AP, New York

Former President George Bush and former first lady Barbara Bush were honored at a human rights award dinner hosted by the spiritual leader of the Greek Orthodox Church in the United States.

The former first couple received the Athenagoras Human Rights Award Saturday at a ceremony at a midtown Manhattan hotel.

Mayor Michael Bloomberg praised the Bushes before they received the honor.

"Americans came to know the Bushes as caring and decent people whose call for a kinder, gentler nation reflected their true nature," Bloomberg said.

Sex workers' meet ends with pledge to fight for rights

AFP, Kolkata

A South Asian sex workers meet ended Sunday in the east Indian city of Kolkata with pledges to intensify a movement to get trade union rights and social respectability for the trade.

"The nine-day meet of the sex workers in South Asia has adopted a resolution to approach the International Labour Organisation for granting trade unions rights to the sex worker," said Smarajit Jena, convener of the conclave.

"We will send a copy of the resolution to the ILO by the end of this month," Jena said, adding the conference also vowed to flush out criminal elements associated with the profession.



Liz Taylor tops list of world's most beautiful women

AFP, London

Rich, famous and glamorous, and often dead -- the world's most beautiful women appear to be actresses of a bygone era, according to a list compiled by Britain's Sunday Express.

Top of the "300 most beautiful women" is the actress Elizabeth Taylor, 70, followed in rapid succession by other screen stars Audrey Hepburn (died 1993), Grace Kelly (died 1982) and Ava Gardner (died 1990).

In fact actresses make up 18 of the top 20 women, the rare exceptions being Princess Diana (died 1997, in 14th place) and model Kate Moss (16th).

Two Muslims have been arrested in West Bengal for selling cassettes praising terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden, police said Sunday.

According to police superintendent Pankaj Dutta of Nadia district, 300 km north of the state capital Kolkata, the two men -- Abdul Hannan and Babul Sheikh who are Indian nationals -- were caught Saturday while vending cassettes promoting the ideas and actions of bin Laden.

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi stressed that he

Al-Qaida resistance drops in Afghan mountains: US

AFP, Bagram Air Base

The US-led coalition said Sunday there had been less resistance from al-Qaida militants in Afghanistan's Arma mountains as forces pushed on with an aggressive assault.

US Major Brian Hilyerty, a coalition spokesman, said allied forces had secured a "large objective area" held by the enemy.

He added that in the past 72 hours coalition troops had not been met by any "sustained or accurate fire".

"We haven't seen much activity but what we have, we have placed fire on," he said.

"It is hard to tell exactly what that means. I think they could be regrouping. I don't know. Hopefully it means that we have wiped them out but I don't know," Hilyerty said.

US attack helicopters, including Apaches, were seen taking off from Bagram air base Sunday in sets of twos and fours, as the weather warmed up after two days of sub-zero temperatures.

Dense fog and thick clouds had grounded much of the US warplane fleet late last week, although military officials said the bitter cold and rain could put the militants even more on the defensive.

"The weather has obviously cleared (but) I'll tell you the weather does not dictate what we do in this mission here," Hilyerty said.

Nine-day-old Operation Anaconda has left dead eight US servicemen, in the highest US toll since the military campaign in Afghanistan began October 7.

"It was intense fighting the first day and then it dropped off and now it's

dropped off even more," Hilyerty said.

"It might be explained by the fact that we killed them. There are several hundred less than there were nine days ago."

Some 500 al-Qaida and Taliban extremists have been killed in the assault, according to US officials, but Hilyerty declined to speculate exactly how many militants were left.

The commander of Operation Anaconda, Major General Frank Hagenbeck, had last week said some 600 to 700 troops were in the mountains and that half of them were dead by Wednesday.

But Newsweek magazine in its latest issue cited a man who spent a week with the militants who said more than 1,000 al-Qaida fighters remained holed up in the well-stocked caves.

Abdul Rahman Beheshti told the weekly he had provided al-Qaida troops with a satellite dish and receiving antenna, a radio, tea, sugar, candies, flour and fruit.

He said most of the fighters, holed up around the village of Shahi Kot, were Afghans but that the group included many Chechens and Arabs, including a "tall Arab" wearing sunglasses, according to the report.

Newsweek quoted Beheshti as saying the man was not al-Qaida's Saudi-born chief Osama bin Laden, but was being treated deferentially by the others.

Local fighters allied with the US coalition, however, have said that most of militants in the Arma mountains were foreigners, including Arabs, Chechens and Uzbeks.

MDC seeks extension of voting time

US sees 'massive disenfranchisement' in Zimbabwe cities

AFP, Harare

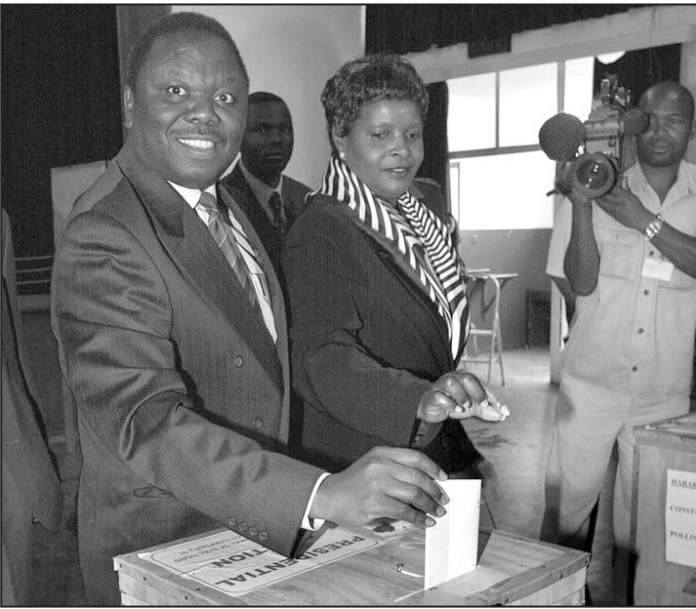
Zimbabwe's opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) on Sunday filed an application with the High Court for an extension of this weekend's presidential election, a lawyer for the party said.

"The court will be hearing the application at 2 pm (1300 GMT)," Innocent Chagonda told AFP.

Hundreds of thousands of urban voters spent long hours in queues on Saturday, the first day of voting, prompting local election observers to appeal for the ballot to be extended.

"We have a crisis on our hands. Many are worried that the situation in Harare especially could explode if we don't take matters in hand," said Reginald Matchaba-Hove, chairman of the 38-member Zimbabwe Election Support Network of civic groups.

The first day of voting in the historic election drew a massive turnout and cries of foul over a government decision to cut the



Zimbabwean opposition candidate Morgan Tsvangirai, leader of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), casts his vote, alongside his wife Sueann on Sunday on his 50th birthday and second day of the country's presidential elections. Tsvangirai poses the most formidable challenge ever to President Robert Mugabe's 22-year reign.

China, Russia not targets of nuke attack: US

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon described as misleading a published report asserting that the White House had directed the US military to prepare contingency plans to use nuclear weapons against China, Russia, Iraq, North Korea, Iran, Libya and Syria.

According to the Los Angeles Times on Saturday, the directive was contained in a classified Pentagon report, presented to members of Congress on January 8 and obtained by the daily.

The classified report detailed three scenarios in which the weapons could be used: against targets able to withstand non-nuclear attack; in retaliation for attack with nuclear, biological or chemical weapons; or "in the event of surprising military developments."

In a statement released following the publication of the story, the Pentagon said it would not discuss classified information "nor will we comment on selective and misleading leaks."

However, Lieutenant Colonel Catherine Abbott, a Pentagon spokeswoman, insisted that the secret report, the US Nuclear Posture Review, contained no directive on targeting of US nuclear weapons.

"This review of the US nuclear posture is the latest in a long series of reviews for the development of nuclear weapons. It does not provide operational guidance on nuclear targeting or planning," she said.

According to the newspaper, the report said the Pentagon should be prepared to use nuclear weapons in an Arab-Israeli conflict, in a war between China and Taiwan, an attack from North Korea on South Korea, or one by Iraq on Israel or another neighbour. And while Russia is no longer officially considered an "enemy," the report said Moscow's 6,000 deployed warheads and some 10,000 smaller "theatre" nuclear weapons, remain a concern.

Benazir to return before Oct polls in Pakistan

AFP, Dubai

Former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto will end a four-year self-imposed exile before October polls to lead her Pakistan People's Party (PPP) to a sweeping victory, a PPP official predicted Sunday.

"Benazir will return to Pakistan come what may" once the ban on political activities in force since President Pervez Musharraf's 1999 coup has been lifted, Qasim Zia, PPP president in Punjab province, told AFP during a brief visit to Dubai.

Zia said the ex-prime minister, who spends most of her time in the Gulf emirate, would go home at a

date set by the PPP's central executive committee.

The Musharraf government has not said when it will allow political parties to campaign for national and provincial elections due in October, but "it is likely to do so three months before the polls," according to Zia.

"We are demanding free and fair elections, and if we do get them, Benazir is certain to lead the PPP to victory by a two-thirds majority and become prime minister for the third time," he contended.

"The PPP has decided that she will come back to Pakistan, even if that means exposing herself to arrest or harassment," Zia added.

Cracks emerges in EU-US ties

AFP, Paris

Six months after September 11, Europe is still backing the US-led war on terror but splits are beginning to show between Washington and its closest allies.

The apparent US determination to topple Saddam Hussein from power in Baghdad, and the latest row over steel tariffs, have strained relations between the coalition partners.

Even strongly pro-US nations like Germany, Italy and Spain have sounded more like Russia or France, two countries which have had their ups and downs with Washington.

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi stressed that he

intended to continue "political dialogue" with Iraq.

His Spanish counterpart Jose Maria Aznar, whose country holds the rotating EU presidency, claimed an attack against "rogue states", a term used by Washington to describe Iraq and other hostile regimes, was "not the same thing as the fight against terrorism."

Meanwhile French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine has blasted what he called an overly "simplistic" US foreign policy and voiced concern over any possible US attack on its old foe in Baghdad.

Only Tony Blair's Britain is showing no qualms in its support for the United States, expressing support for the US intention to "deal with" Saddam.

Israeli crimes against Palestinians can never be forgiven: KSA

AFP, Riyadh

Israeli "crimes" against Palestinian civilians can never be forgiven, the Saudi Defence Minister said as the kingdom's press lashed out Sunday at the United States as well as the Jewish state.

The Israeli "aggression" against the Palestinians is "a crime that can never be forgiven, and we should never forgive those who support it," said Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz, quoted by the official SPA agency.

Arabs and Palestinians accuse the United States of backing Israel in its attacks against unarmed Palestinian civilians.

Prince Sultan's statement came after more than 40 Palestinians were killed on Friday when Israeli

forces occupied Palestinian refugee camps, while F-16s and helicopter gunships attacked targets in the West Bank and Gaza.

Saudi newspapers meanwhile hit out at Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's "murderous" policies, and charged that the visits of US envoys to the region seek to abort the 18-month-old Palestinian intifada, or uprising.

"Two American envoys, Anthony Zinni and (Vice President) Dick Cheney, are coming. They, as reports indicate, represent the mattress and the pillow of the Israeli body, which, like the Palestinian (body), has started to bleed," Al-Riyadh daily said.