



A paramilitary personnel (C) gets out of a vehicle while another one (L) armed with a teargas gun stands guard on a street of Ayodhya on Friday. Ten thousand police and paramilitary personnel are prepared for a showdown in upholding the Supreme Court order to prevent any religious activity in Ayodhya near the site of razed Babri Mosque.

NZ PM calls for Zimbabwe's suspension from C'wealth

Australian PM to visit London for talks

AFP, Sydney

New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark called Friday for the suspension of Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth group of nations following the re-election last week of Robert Mugabe.

"I must say that the Commonwealth observer report has come in stronger than I expected," Clark told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

"However the report has come in saying this was not a free and fair election, and on that basis, I hope that (Australian Prime Minister) John Howard does end up getting support from the other two leaders that are part of the troika" to suspend Zimbabwe from the Commonwealth.

Howard, along with South African President Thabo Mbeki and Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, were appointed by leaders attending the recent Commonwealth Heads of Government summit in Australia to determine

whether or not Zimbabwe should be suspended for state-sponsored human rights abuses.

Clark said the Commonwealth's credibility was at stake over the issue.

"We have a clear range of actions which the Commonwealth can take if (its) principles are breached. Not to take them in the case of Zimbabwe ... would be ridiculous," she said.

Meanwhile, Australian Prime Minister John Howard Friday described a key observers' report as "very critical" of Zimbabwe's election and said he would fly to London for talks on Harare's continued membership of the Commonwealth.

"The report that I've read is critical, very critical, of the process," Howard said.

"I'll be putting out a statement later indicating that I'll be going to London next Monday afternoon to have a meeting the following day with the president of South Africa and the president of Nigeria to

discuss this report."

The Commonwealth observers' report issued Thursday found that incumbent President Robert Mugabe had been returned to office amid a "climate of fear".

Howard, along with South African President Thabo Mbeki and President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, constitute a troika appointed by leaders attending the recent Commonwealth Heads of Government (CHOGM) summit in Australia to determine whether or not Zimbabwe should be suspended for state-sponsored human rights abuses.

"I don't want at this stage to preempt that discussion by saying publicly what my view is," the Australian leader said.

Australia, New Zealand and Britain led the pro-sanctions lobby at the CHOGM but were outmanoeuvred by African and Asian states opposed to the imposition of pre-poll penalties on Harare.

US indicts abductor of Daniel Pearl

AFP, Washington

The British-born Islamic militant blamed for the kidnap and murder of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl was indicted Thursday by the United States, which demanded Pakistan turn him over to US authorities for judgement.

With his public announcement of the indictment, US Attorney General John Ashcroft made clear the need for Pakistan to cooperate with the eventual extradition of Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, known as Sheikh Omar, who holds both British and Pakistani passports.

"We are collaborating with the Pakistanis and informing them of our interest, and we expect them to be cooperative," Ashcroft told reporters in announcing the charges of "kidnapping and murder" for which Omar, 29, could receive the death penalty.

Nepal appeals to ex-army men to help fight Maoists

AFP, Kathmandu

A recently created police unit battling Nepal's Maoist rebels Friday called on former army servicemen to join the force.

The Nepal Armed Police Force, formed just over a year ago to fight the Maoists, appealed for 2,000 ex-army men to join on two-year contracts.

The Armed Police Force had called for applications February 26, but received few candidates because of the escalating violence between the insurgents and the government.

N Koreans en route to Manila

AFP, Beijing

Twenty-five North Koreans who sought refuge in the Spanish embassy in Beijing were to leave China for Manila Friday after a deal was struck to end the stand-off, officials and diplomats said.

The North Koreans -- who included 11 children and had earlier threatened to kill themselves if they were sent home -- left the embassy for Beijing airport where they were to take a plane to Manila, a Spanish foreign ministry spokesman in Madrid told AFP.

Alberto Aza said the deal was part of a "humanitarian settlement" worked out by all parties. He did not give further details.

Pakistan must act quickly to halt AIDS spread: UN

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan must act quickly to halt the spread of AIDS or risk going the way of neighbouring India, where infection rates have escalated dramatically in the past five years, the United Nations cautioned Friday.

"This situation we're in now... a situation of low prevalence but high risk, presents a window of opportunity," Kristan Schoultz, country adviser to the UN HIV/AIDS Programme, said at the launch of the UN Statement on HIV/AIDS in Pakistan.

"This country if it acts now can halt the spread of HIV/AIDS... Unfortunately I think this window of opportunity is probably very short."

The statement, sponsored by 14 UN agencies here, is intended as a show of UN support for Pakistan's efforts to fight the epidemic, Schoultz said.

'If dead can get visas, dogs can vote'

AFP, San Francisco

Four days after US immigration officials got a black eye for delivering upgraded visas to dead hijackers, it was the turn of election officials in California to explain themselves for registering a dog as a ... voter.

The flap erupted after the Superior Court of Contra Costa County, in the San Francisco Bay area, summoned a certain Barnabas Miller for jury duty for later this month.

It turned out, however, that Mr. Miller was not in a position of handing down verdicts because he is a toy poodle, according to his owner and local officials.

Donald Miller, 78, who owns the dog, told reporters he had registered Barnabas to vote to illustrate how flawed the system was.

"If I can register my dog, then anybody can register," he said. "You're supposed to be a citizen. He doesn't even have a driver's license."

US calls for complete retreat of Israeli forces from WB, Gaza

Arafat to submit 'Palestinian plan' to Zinni

AFP, Washington

The US State Department Thursday called for the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from Palestinian controlled areas, saying the move "would greatly facilitate" the US special Middle East envoy Anthony Zinni's mission.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Washington wanted Israeli troops out of both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, particularly the town of Ramallah where Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat is now.

"We do expect a complete withdrawal from Palestinian controlled areas, including Ramallah and the other areas, that the Israeli Defense Force has recently entered," Boucher said.

"Such a withdrawal would greatly facilitate the work of General Zinni," said Boucher. "That's what we want to see, that is the kind of step we've been urging them to take."

Zinni, a retired Marine Corps general, arrived Thursday in the area on a difficult peace mission that will begin with a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

Ahead of Zinni's arrival, Sharon ordered the army to begin withdrawing from Ramallah, but soon after the Israeli army announced it had killed a Palestinian militant in a helicopter strike in the West Bank.

Boucher said Washington had taken note of Sharon's decision to rede-

ploy Israeli forces in Ramallah, but stressed that the United States wanted a "complete withdrawal" from all the Palestinian areas.

"A complete withdrawal would facilitate the work of General Zinni and we think it's important that they do that too in order to create environment for the Zinni mission to succeed."

In addition, he called for Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to continue to take steps to rein in the anti-Israel violence that prompted Sharon to open the largest military campaign in the Palestinian territories since capturing the land in the 1967 Middle East war.

Meanwhile, a second crack Israeli Merkava battle tank was destroyed this month by Palestinians in a Gaza Strip attack claimed by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) that killed three of its crew.

Palestinian security sources said later that two Israeli tanks had been hit by anti-tank missiles in separate areas of Ramallah.

Sharon's redeployment decision followed US President George W. Bush description of the incursion into Ramallah as "not helpful" to peace efforts and a quiet lobbying campaign to press for an Israeli withdrawal.

A senior State Department official said that US ambassador to Israel Daniel Kurtzer had asked Sharon on Wednesday to withdraw his troops, particularly from Ramallah, before Zinni's arrival.

US may abandon nuclear test moratorium

AFP, Washington

The United States may have to abandon an international moratorium on nuclear testing to make way for development of a new generation of bunker-busting nuclear weapons, according to excerpts from a nuclear posture review made public here Thursday.

The review, which also raises the possibility of US nuclear strikes against presently non-nuclear nations pursuing weapons of mass destruction, has been widely publicised by the media and commented on by administration officials over the past week.

But its publication on the Internet by GlobalSecurity.org, a Washington think tank, marks the first time the document has been presented to the public in its raw, albeit abridged, form.

"While the United States is making every effort to maintain the stockpile without additional nuclear testing, this may not be possible for the indefinite future," warned Defence Department strategists, who called for a new nuclear triad "to

meet the nation's defence goals in the 21st century."

They pointed out that some problems in the US nuclear stockpile due to ageing and manufacturing defects of the weapons have already been identified.

"Increasingly, objective judgements about capability in a non-testing environment will become far more difficult," pointed out the authors of the review that the Pentagon submitted to Congress in January.

The United States has maintained a moratorium on nuclear tests since 1992, along with Britain, China, France and Russia.

Only India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons in 1998, signalling their entry into the "nuclear club."

With US planes pounding suspected al-Qaida-occupied caves in Afghanistan, the document reveals the Pentagon's concern that an increasing number of countries and hostile groups rely on deep underground facilities to hide their weaponry and command posts.

According to the Defence Intelligence Agency, at least 10,000

such bunkers currently exist in over 70 countries.

More than 1,400 of them are used as strategic storage sites for weapons of mass destruction, concealed launch pads for ballistic missiles as well as leadership or top echelon command and control posts, the DIA estimates.

"At present the United States lacks adequate means to deal with these strategic facilities," the review admits.

The answer, in the US military's view, lies in developing and testing a new generation of smaller but more effective nuclear weapons, capable of destroying these underground facilities.

"Today's nuclear arsenal continues to reflect its Cold War origin, characterised by moderate delivery accuracy, limited earth penetrator capability, high yield warheads, silo and sea based ballistic missiles with multiple independent reentry vehicles, and limited retargeting capability," the authors of the review lament.

Iraq calls Bush a 'criminal'

AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan Thursday called US President George W. Bush a "criminal", the day after Bush said he was deeply worried by the situation in Iraq.

"The American president is a criminal, a man known throughout the world for his threats and aggressions against this and that country after his election as head of the American administration," Ramadan said.

Ramadan was speaking as he received his Vietnamese counterpart, Nguyen Thi Binh, who is on a visit to Iraq.

On Wednesday, Bush said he was "deeply concerned" about Iraq, adding that all freedom-loving peoples should be equally worried.

"I'm deeply concerned about Iraq, so should the American people be concerned about Iraq, and so should people who love freedom be concerned about Iraq," Bush said.

"I will not allow a nation such as Iraq to threaten our very future by developing weapons of mass destruction," he insisted.

Iraq is rumoured to be the next target in the US-led war on terror.



Visiting Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (R) and his wife Sahba admire a miniature of the Edo Castle at the Edo-Tokyo Museum, an exhibition of the historical heritage of ancient Tokyo, on Friday. Musharraf concluded his four-day official visit to Tokyo on Friday.

US, Norway call on Colombo, Tigers to forge peace

AFP, Washington

The United States and Norway issued a joint appeal on Sri Lanka and the Tamil Tiger rebels Thursday to turn a truce in their bitter conflict

into permanent peace.

The appeal came after Norway's Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen met Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, who has in recent months held his own consul-

tations with senior Sri Lankan officials.

The Tigers and the government have observed unilateral ceasefires since Christmas, but Norway arranged a formal truce which went into force on February 23, as a first step in ending a war which has claimed 60,000 lives.

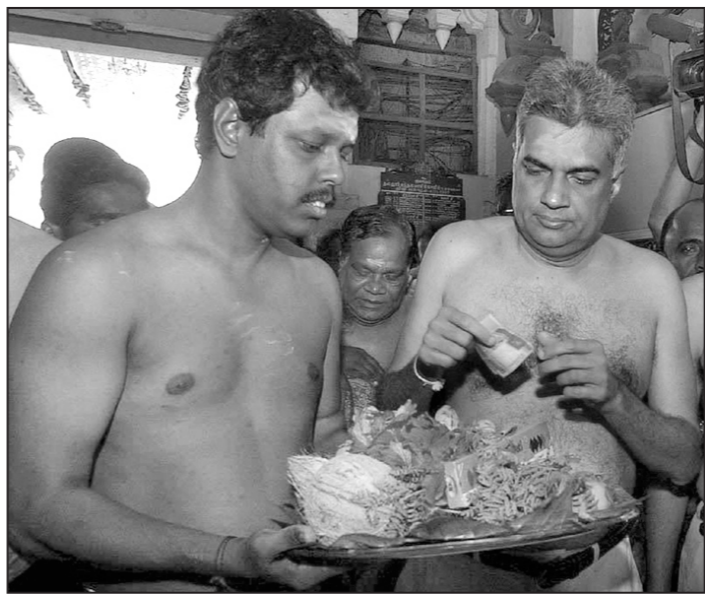
"Mr. Armitage expressed full support for Norway's efforts," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said in a statement.

Armitage and Helgesen agreed that "the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) need to grasp this opportunity to end Sri Lanka's tragic conflict and forge a durable peace."

Meanwhile, the Roman Catholic Bishop of this embattled northern Sri Lankan town, a truce between government troops and Tamil rebels has brought the luxury of silent nights.

Bishop Thomas Saundranayagam told Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who spent the night here Thursday, that when darkness fell, guns and rockets no longer kept the anxious population here awake.

"The guns are silent and we can sleep in peace at night," the Bishop told Wickremesinghe, who is the driving force in Sri Lanka's revived bid to end decades of ethnic bloodshed that has claimed 60,000 lives.



Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe (R) makes an offering of cash at the sacred Nallur Kandaswamy Temple in the northern peninsula of Jaffna on Thursday. Wickremesinghe is the first Prime Minister to visit the war-ravaged Jaffna town in 20 years.

Estrada blasts judges

AFP, Manila

Deposed Philippines president Joseph Estrada had a face-to-face confrontation Friday with judges trying him for corruption after he dared them to send him to the gallows.

Spurning legal advice after firing his lawyers late last month, Estrada told the three-judge special court that he no longer intended to play any part in his corruption hearings.

His unorthodox defence bought him time, as the court decided to reschedule until April 12 his scheduled arraignment Friday on a lesser charge of perjury.

Gusmao kicks off presidential campaign

AFP, Dili

East Timor independence hero Xanana Gusmao Friday launched his campaign for the presidency of what will be the world's newest nation calling for peace and reconciliation after 24 bloody years under Indonesian rule.

"The spirit of unity that galvanised us together in the difficult and long 24 years of resistance must continue to guide us," he told a cheering crowd of more than 1,000 in a Dili gymnasium.