

## Omar, 10 others charged with US journalist's murder

AFP, Karachi

British-born militant Sheikh Omar and 10 accomplices were Friday charged with the murder and kidnap of US reporter Daniel Pearl and ordered to stand trial in a Pakistani court.

"The formal trial will commence on March 29," chief prosecutor Raja Qureshi told reporters, after filing an interim charge sheet with the anti-terrorism court listing Omar as the chief accused and 10 others as co-accused.

All 11 suspects have been charged with murder, kidnap, demanding ransom, the chief police investigator Manzoor Mughal told AFP.

If convicted all 11 could face the death penalty.

## Germany set to open doors to skilled migrants

AFP, Berlin

Germany's parliament was set to hold a final vote on Friday on an immigration bill designed to open the door to skilled foreign workers, with Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder trying to push the law through over opposition from conservatives.

Debate opened in the upper house of parliament, the Bundesrat which represents Germany's 16 states, with uncertainty about how the swing state of Brandenburg would vote.

Schroeder's centre-left government has a majority in the lower house of parliament, the Bundestag, which approved the immigration bill on March 1. Neither Schroeder's Social Democrats nor the conservative opposition has a majority in the Bundesrat.

## US missile hits targets in test

REUTERS, Washington

A high-velocity missile designed to be part of the Bush administration's controversial missile defence programme hit its target during a test in New Mexico on Thursday, the US Army said.

The upgraded Patriot PAC-3 missile, made by Lockheed Martin Corp. LMT, N, intercepted and destroyed a ballistic missile target at White Sands Missile Range, the Army said.

A PAC-3 missile had failed to hit its target in the first operational test of the system, conducted in February. But company officials were buoyed by the results of Thursday's test, calling PAC-3 a "success story."

Two more operational tests are planned through May.

## Biswa-Bharati to open branch in Japan

PTI, Kolkata

The Biswa-Bharati is planning to open a branch of the university in Japan to teach Indian culture and history.

The branch would be opened at Ujiie town where short courses in music, dance, drama languages, Indian history and culture would be taught, the Biswa-Bharati Vice-Chancellor, Sujit K Basu, said here Thursday.

To prepare the groundwork, two teachers of the university would visit Ujiie in May, he said.

The effort was part the programmes being undertaken to celebrate the centenary of friendship between Japan and Santiniketan and also the 50th anniversary of India-Japan diplomatic relations.

The academic and cultural projects would continue in Santiniketan and Japan for a year beginning on March 23 with the inauguration of Japan Festival.

## 38 killed in Colombian clashes

AFP, Bogota

The Colombian said nearly 500 people have been killed throughout the country since the start of the year, as the latest surge in violence claimed 38 lives in two days of government-rebel clashes near Venezuela.

Intensified fighting here since early January has left 483 people dead, including 21 leftist rebels and 17 army troops killed in two days of violence on the border with Venezuela, according to a new army report.

Of the total, some 246 Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) rebels have died since the start of the year.

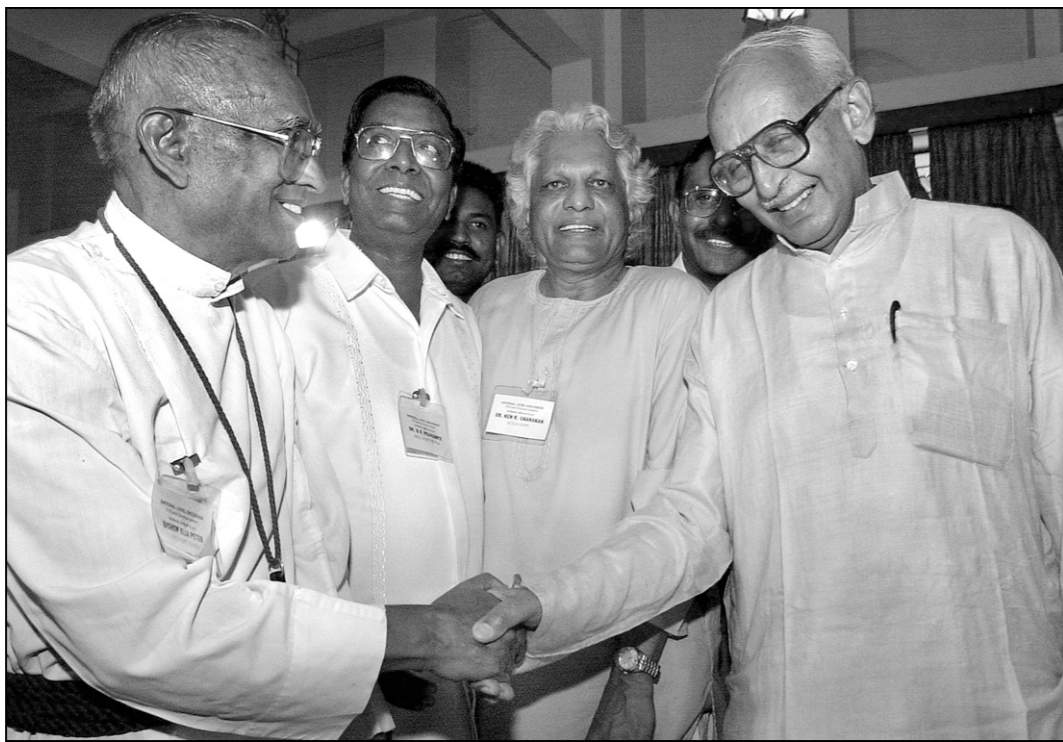


PHOTO: AFP

Archbishop Elia Peter (L) welcomes Rashtriya Swamsevaka Sangh (RSS, national volunteer corps) Chief K.S. Sudershan (R) at a meeting with Christian leaders in Bangalore on Friday. Sudershan attended the sixth round of the national level talks between RSS leaders and Christian representatives to discuss issues such as conversions, violence against Christians and Indianisation of the church. Christians account for about 12 per cent of the billion plus Indian population.

## Riot-hit Muslims still fearful of returning home in Gujarat

### 6 more killed in violence

REUTERS, Ahmedabad

Sama Yasmin Ali counts herself lucky none of her family was killed when hundreds of Muslims were hacked or burnt to death in savage religious violence in India's western state of Gujarat.

But now she faces another problem. She and her five-year-old son cannot return to their home in a Muslim-Hindu quarter in the state's largest city, Ahmedabad, because of intimidation by Hindu mobs.

"I went back last Sunday but a crowd from Hindu houses started shouting and throwing stones so we ran away," said Ali, one of the few Muslims who have dared to try to return.

All went back to a relief camp where she and some 6,000 other riot-affected Muslims have been crammed since India's worst religious bloodshed in a decade early this month.

The problem of assuring the safety of Muslims wanting to go home needs to be resolved swiftly as there are nearly 60,000 people crammed into unhygienic relief camps across this historic city, relief workers say.

More than 700 people, mostly Muslims, died in a wave of revenge killings and Muslim houses and businesses were torched following the burning alive of 58 Hindus in a train attacks in the town of Godhra in Gujarat on February 27.

Packed in with more than 8,000 Muslims in another relief camp, Ameena Abbas said she was threatened when she returned to salvage what she could from her house in Naroda-Pattia in Ahmedabad where nearly 100 Muslims were burnt to death in a few hours.

"The Hindus threatened me and told me never to come back. They have cordoned off the Muslim areas and put out saffron flags," Abbas

said. Saffron is considered a holy Hindu colour.

Ansari Rehman, vice-president of the Gomtipur relief camp, said Hindu mobs, armed with swords and other weapons, have threatened the few Muslim families that have ventured to go back to houses that escaped the mob fury. And even when they reach their homes, they find them looted.

Meanwhile, six people were killed in fresh outbreaks of religious violence in western India, police said on Friday.

Five people were killed in police firing and a sixth was stabbed to death, and 14 were injured in a series of incidents on Thursday which started late in the afternoon in Ahmedabad, commercial capital of Gujarat state.

Police had said on Thursday three people were killed

## BJP faces its worst crisis

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling BJP party is facing its most severe crisis since assuming power almost three years ago as irreconcilable differences emerge between its ideological Hindu mentors and crucial coalition partners opposed to their extremism, analysts said Friday.

The BJP's difficulties have become so serious since its defeat in regional elections last month that some commentators are not ruling out the possibility of early general elections within a year.

On Thursday night, the BJP, which is dominated by Hindu nationalists, suffered a major embarrassment when it failed to push through a controversial anti-terrorism bill in the upper house of parliament.

Many of its coalition partners had openly criticised the Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (POTO) which gives the security forces greater powers of arrest, inter-

rogation and detention.

The setback came less than a month after communal violence in the western state of Gujarat left some 700 people dead, mostly Muslims.

The riots were triggered by an attack on a train carrying Hindu activists which killed 58. And the situation is still tense in Gujarat, with six people dying in rioting on Thursday.

The BJP is caught on the one hand between the demands of militant Hindu groups who are linked to the party and on the other, by its more secular coalition partners who have slammed Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee for being too soft on Hindu extremists.

"It is an extremely fluid situation. The government is after all a loose federation of many groups, each of which wants to assert their role," said S.R. Maheshwari, political analyst and fellow of the Indian Council of Social Research.

# Musharraf lobbies parties to support his referendum plan

AFP, Islamabad

President Pervez Musharraf has embarked on a new round of talks with Pakistan's political parties in what observers said Friday was a drive to hold a referendum to prolong his unelected presidency for another five years.

"In the next few days the president will meet all the political parties," Musharraf's spokesman Major General Rashid Qureshi told AFP.

"The president has begun a new round of consultations to discuss the political environment, law and order and other issues in the context of general elections due in October," Qureshi said.

Musharraf has been canvassing the views of several parties over the past three days on a referendum in April or May to affirm his presidency, the parties who have met him have said.

Since Wednesday he has held talks on a possible referendum with a faction of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML-QA), the Millat party of former president Farooq Leghari, and the Pakistan Awami Tehreek party led by Tahirul Qadri.

Musharraf raised the idea of a referendum in talks with a PML-QA delegation on Wednesday, PML-QA senior vice president Ijaz ul-Haq told AFP.

"He is seriously thinking of holding a referendum to ensure continuity," Ijaz said Thursday.

An aide to Musharraf said that a "referendum remains an option," but denied the idea had come from the president, saying the politicians had raised it themselves.

"The president is a keen listener. He gets views but responds with a smile without declaring his intent when the referendum idea is put to him by

interlocutors," the aide, who did not want to be named, told AFP.

"No decision has been taken. If it is finalised, the president himself will announce it," he said.

Musharraf, the country's military chief, dissolved parliament and declared himself president in June 2001, 21 months after seizing power and suspending the legislature in a bloodless coup against the elected government of prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

Analysts said Musharraf was leaning towards the safest of two options to affirm his presidency.

The suspended constitution provides for the election of a president by an elected parliament and Pakistan's four provincial assemblies. It also allows for a referendum on vital national issues, but not for presidential elections.

"He has chosen a more assured way of getting legitimacy and being elected, by opting for a referendum," political analyst Khalid Mahmood at the Islamabad's Regional Institute of Studies told AFP.

"This is a feeler. General Musharraf wants to remain in power for another five years and he thinks this is his best option," Mahmood said.

"A referendum will suit him more because opposition parties are likely to boycott it."

The referendum proposal has already triggered heated debate.

The main opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of former prime minister Benazir Bhutto has vowed to oppose any such referendum.

"This is a repeat of military dictator General Zia's antics," PPP spokesman Farhatullah Babar told AFP Thursday, referring to General Mohammad Zia ul Haq's referendum in 1984 to affirm his own unelected presidency seven years after seizing power in a coup.

## Zinni goes into talks with Arafat

### US puts pressure amid fresh suicide bombing

AFP, Ramallah

US Middle East envoy Anthony Zinni began new talks here Friday with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, as tentative peace efforts continued to be threatened by the attacks of radicals.

The meeting came as Washington ramped up pressure on Arafat to quell anti-Israeli violence after a deadly suicide bombing in Jerusalem Thursday killed three Israelis.

Israel responded by cancelling a meeting of senior security officials of both sides and chaired by Zinni, which aims at reaching a ceasefire after nearly 18 months of violence and warning that its patience was limited.

And Washington is placing the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, an offshoot of Arafat's Fatah movement which claimed responsibility for Thursday's attack, on its list of foreign "terrorist" organizations.

Moreover, a Palestinian suicide bomber killed at least three people and wounded more than 40 others on a busy street in central Jerusalem Thursday, scuttling a round of Israeli-Palestinian ceasefire talks.

Security officials from both sides said new high-level talks scheduled to be held later the same day with US envoy Anthony Zinni were postponed after the bombing.

But Israel's security cabinet, chaired by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, opted for "restraint", rather than the usual policy of swift retaliation, to give a chance to the US ceasefire efforts, public television reported.

Meanwhile, US officials Thursday ramped up pressure on Yasser Arafat to quell anti-Israeli violence after a deadly suicide bombing, placing the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, a group claiming responsibility for the attack, on its list of foreign "terrorist" organizations from next Wednesday.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat prepares to speak to the press in his office in the West Bank town of Ramallah on Thursday. Arafat denounced a suicide bombing in Jerusalem which killed three people saying, "we strongly condemn this attack in west Jerusalem on innocent Israeli civilians," vowing to, "take immediate and necessary measures to stop this kind of attack and arrest those behind them, and we will not waste time doing so." With Arafat are Palestinian spokesman Saeb Erekat (C) and Arafat's spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina.

## British woman wins right to die

AFP, London

A severely paralysed British woman won an unprecedented legal battle on Friday for the right to die, defying doctors, after a battle through the courts marked by intense debate on medical ethics.

A High Court judge ruled that the 43-year-old woman, known only as Miss B, had the right to tell doctors to switch off her life-support facilities.

It is the first case of its kind in Britain, as previous right-to-die legal challenges have involved people who were either in a coma without prospect of recovery, or suffering a terminal condition.

## AIDS infections soar in S Asia

AFP, Kathmandu

One young person contracts HIV every two minutes in South Asia with infection rates accelerating on a rising tide of drug use, experts warned at a major regional health conference here.

"As of today, there are over six million people living with HIV/AIDS in South and South East Asia, one third of them are young boys and girls between the age of 15 and 24," Ian MacLeod, UNICEF senior programme officer, said at the conclusion of a four day conference.

"This group is vulnerable to contracting HIV through drug use due to sharing of needles and syringes as well as high-risk sexual behaviour," he added in a statement released late Thursday.

The alarming statistics, a rare assessment in a region where a dearth of reliable data has kept authori-

ties in the dark about actual infection rates, were presented Thursday to some 56 delegates from 11 Asian countries attending the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) event.

At a joint press conference delegates appealed for greater political commitment to tackling Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) and the human immuno-deficiency virus (HIV) that causes it by reducing substance abuse.

The group singled out conference hosts Nepal, urging the government to alter strict laws against drug users to permit the implementation of needle exchange schemes similar to projects already operational in Bangladesh, Pakistan and India.

According to UN figures released at the event, Nepal has more than 50,000 drug addicts, some 20,000 of whom are HIV positive.



PHOTO: AFP

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II (R) receives Australian Prime Minister John Howard at Buckingham Palace in London on Thursday.

## Norway's peace effort gets a boost in Lanka

### Preparations underway for direct talks

AFP, Colombo

Norway's bid to broker peace in Sri Lanka has received a new boost with a top rebel leader planning to return home while preparations are underway for direct talks, Foreign Minister Trynne Fernando said.

Anton Balasingham, the London-based chief negotiator of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), is due in Sri Lanka shortly for talks with his leader Velupillai Prabhakaran ahead of opening negotiations with Colombo, Fernando said.

The government and the LTTE entered into a formal ceasefire on

February 23.

The minister told a meeting of the Foreign Correspondents' Association of Sri Lanka (FCA) late Thursday that the government was sounding out an overseas venue for the face-to-face talks with the Tigers.

Peace broker Oslo would chose the venue acceptable to both sides, but the Colombo government was required to make the formal request to the host nation, he said.

He declined to name the country for the peace negotiations, but there has been speculation here that it could be Thailand or the Maldives, both exotic tourist destinations.

## US Muslims outraged by raids on offices, homes

AFP, Washington

US Muslim groups Thursday expressed their outrage over law enforcement raids on a number of Muslim offices and homes conducted as part of America's post-September 11 war on terrorism.

"This is a great tragedy, not only for the Muslim community but for the American community at large," protested Imam Johari Abdul Malik of the raids that took place in the greater Washington, DC area.

Organizations targeted included the International Institute of Islamic Thought, the Muslim World League and the Fiqh council of North America.

"It seems like the government is declaring open season on Muslim American groups," said Abdulwahab Alkebsi, executive director of the Islamic Institute.

The raids, coordinated by a counter-terrorism financial task force dubbed "Operation Green Quest" were

conducted Wednesday "without incident," according to a US Customs Service statement.

Some 150 agents and officers from customs, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), the US Secret Service, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the FBI, the Immigration and Naturalization Service as well as other agencies and local police participated in the searches.

"Agents and officers conducted the searches without incident and are processing evidence seized from the targeted locations," the statement said.

The affidavits filed in support of the search warrants, 14 in northern Virginia and one in Georgia, are under court seal, so details for the reasons for the raids were not available.

"At this time no further information about the search warrants can be disclosed," the statement said.

## Japan, S Korea seek to bury past animosity

AFP, Seoul

South Korea's President Kim Dae-Jung and Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi vowed Friday to make their joint hosting of the World Cup this year a stepping stone to long term friendship after decades of animosity.

The two leaders held a summit on the second day of a visit by Koizumi, the latest in a bid by the prime minister to ease lingering Korean bitterness over Japan's harsh 35-year occupation until 1945.

The meeting came 10 weeks before the start of the 32-nation football World Cup finals, the biggest global sporting event, which the two countries have spent billions of dollars preparing for.