

Indian film star Amitabh Bachchan looks on during a ceremony for the International Indian Film Academy Awards (IIFA) in New Delhi on Tuesday. The IFA Awards will be held at the Genting Highlands resort area in Malaysia on April 6.

More accolades for Indian film in France

Hindi blockbuster "Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham" bagged five of the nine awards, including for Best Film and Best Actress, at the 13th Valenciennes International film festival in France that concluded last Sunday.

The movie won the specie Jury award for Best Film, the Audience Jury award for Best Film, the student Jury award for Best Film, Best Actress award for its heroine Kajol and Bleu Nord Radio award under which free promotion of the film's songs would be broadcast on French radio.

The film's producer Yash Johar received the awards at the presentation ceremony at Valenciennes on March 24, sources close to the filmmaker told PTI here Tuesday.

'Kissing Rally' fails to draw crowd in Kolkata

A 'Kissing Rally' to demand a 'Free Lovers' Zone' at the city park here fell flat when objections were raised to a middle-aged person kissing a 14-year-old girl.

The brainwave of 'Lovers' Organisation for Voluntary Exhibition (LOVE) of Rupak Manus, the organisers also abandoned their plan to march to the Kolkata Municipal Corporation headquarters on SN Banerjee road Tuesday fearing the wrath of police.

An onlooker said two elderly couples kissed each other "at the instance of Rupak Manus in full public view" but when a sobbing 14-year-old girl climbed the dais along with his elderly brother-in-law objections were raised.

Thailand seals Myanmar border after clashes

Thailand has sealed off part of its northern border with Myanmar and sent in several hundred troop reinforcements after a series of clashes with ethnic fighters, military sources said Wednesday.

The Third Army, which patrols Thailand's troubled far north region, closed the border Tuesday in Wieng Heang district in a bid to wipe out rebel forces that sparked two bloody firefights over the past week, they said.

"It was a temporary closure, but there is no schedule to reopen it yet," the military source told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Tribal militants kill magistrate in Arunachal

Tribal militants shot dead a magistrate in India's northeastern state of Arunachal Pradesh as hundreds of villagers fled their homes due to fierce gunbattles between two rival separatist groups, officials said Wednesday.

A police spokesman said heavily armed militants of the outlawed National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) killed the magistrate on Tuesday night at Namtok village, 900 km east of Arunachal Pradesh's capital Itanagar.

Floods kill 28 in Philippines

Twenty-eight people were killed and two others were missing after flashfloods triggered by heavy rains swept through two southern Philippine provinces, disaster response officials said Wednesday.

A tropical depression dumped heavy rains over Surigao del Norte and Surigao del Sur provinces in the south late last week, the Office of Civil Defense said, citing belated reports from the field.

Arab summit opens in Beirut with record absence

'Israel's ban on Arafat from attending the summit was a mistake'

AFP, Beirut

The Arab summit, slated to adopt an initiative for peace with Israel, opened here Wednesday with the record absence of more than half the heads of state, including those of heavyweights Egypt, Jordan and the Palestinian territories.

Jordanian Prime Minister Ali Abu Ragheb, whose country hosted the last Arab summit, inaugurated the session at 11:30 am (0930 GMT) by calling for an end Arab-Israeli violence and a return to the negotiation table.

Topping the summit's agenda are Saudi proposals for a lasting peace with Israel in what organizers had hoped would be a rare show of Arab unity. The absences bring to a record 12 the number of heads of state of the 22-member Arab League who are not attending the highly anticipated two-day event, dubbed the "summit of Arab rights."

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who has been bottled up in his West Bank Ramallah headquarters by the Israeli army for the past four months, is not attending after Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said the time was not ripe to ease travel restrictions on him.

Jordan's King Abdullah II and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak are not

taking part for "security reasons," Arab League officials said earlier Wednesday.

The other absent leaders were those of Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, United Arab Emirates, Mauritania, Sudan and Libya.

Meanwhile, Israel "made a mistake" by not letting Palestinian leader attend the Arab summit in Beirut, Israeli Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer said, quoted in Wednesday's edition of the daily Maariv.

"This decision will provoke an escalation in terrorism," said the Labour party minister, whose words were plastered across the mass-circulation tabloid's front page.

"Israel has made a mistake by not permitting Arafat to leave for Beirut. It had everything to gain by Arafat going. In any case, Arafat will be there, even if not in person, and will be the focus of all attention. What will we gain from that?" he asked.

He stressed that Israel's chief ally, the United States, had been urging Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to let Arafat go to the summit, where the Saudis are to unveil a potentially ground-breaking land-for-peace proposal between Israel and the entire Arab world.



Dilhani Weerasooriya (C), wife of Sri Lankan High Commissioner to Pakistan General Serilal Weerasooriya (R), arrives to attend a reception of Bangladesh High Commission using a crutch in Islamabad on Tuesday. Weerasooriya was injured last week in a deadly church attack in which five people including two Americans were killed and 46 others injured.

Hindu Kush world's most active corners for quakes

AP, Denver

Earthquake experts aren't surprised to see faultlines popping like firecrackers beneath Afghanistan's Hindu Kush mountain range. Powerful earthquakes happen by the handful there every year.

But scientists at the National Earthquake Information Center in Golden, Colorado, say the magnitude 6.1 quake Monday night in northeastern Afghanistan was destructive because it was so shallow.

It triggered less than three miles (five kilometers) below the surface, and with little surrounding bedrock to absorb the energy, flimsy mud-brick villages were flattened. At least 1,800 people were killed.

It was followed by at least seven significant aftershocks, they said.

All the aftershocks occurred about six miles (nine kilometers) below the surface, or slightly deeper than the primary quake. They ranged from magnitude 4.4 to 5.0 and rattled off and on for about eight hours, including three within the first hour after the initial jolt, the NEIC reported.

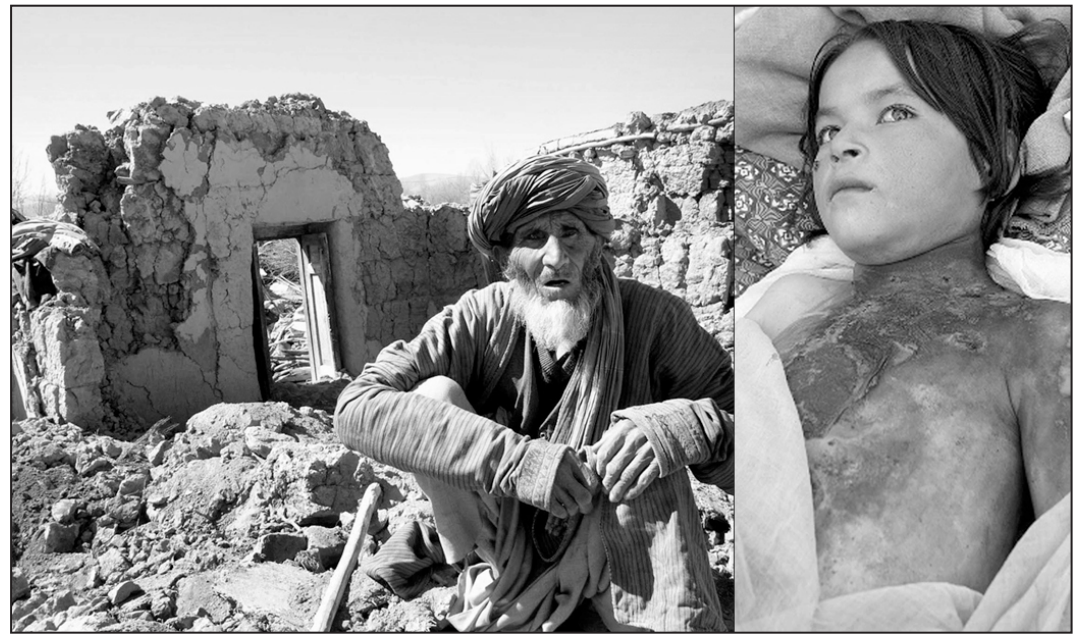
The shallow primary earthquake

occurred near the boundary of the Eurasian and Indian tectonic plates within the Earth's crust. The area is deeply riddled with underground faults. The plates constantly grind against one another, and the Eurasia plate overrides the Indian plate.

Their convergence generates extraordinary stresses that result in faults slipping, as well as the gradual uplifting of the Himalayas and other mountain ranges. Scientists said they were still examining data to determine which of the area's major faults might've been responsible for the earthquakes.

"The Indian and Asian plates approach each other here at roughly 4 centimeters (1.6 inches) per year," said University of Colorado geophysicist Roger Bilham. "Unlike other parts of the Himalayan collision, this region of convergence is quite narrow, about 1,448 kilometers. So the seismicity is quite high."

On average, according to the US Geological Survey, there are at least five earthquakes annually with magnitude 5.0 or greater that occur within a 161-kilometer radius of this latest epicenter.



Mohammad Anwar sits in front of his house destroyed by an earthquake on Monday evening at Hafiz Bachah Valley in Northern province of Baghlan on Wednesday while a young girl who was seriously wounded by the quake lies in an emergency medical centre set up at the town of Nahrin in Northern province of Baghlan. Some 2,000 people were feared killed by the earthquake, which measured 6.0 on Richter scale.

Landmines hinder Afghan quake relief efforts

Afghan interim leader flies into quake zone

AFP, Nahrin

Landmines are hindering relief and rescue operations for thousands of victims of the powerful earthquake in northern Afghanistan, UN officials said Wednesday.

Farhana Faruqi, United Nations regional coordinator, said rescue teams had been unable to survey some villages for fear of landmines.

"This is a complex emergency operation. Several areas are inaccessible due to heavy mining," she told AFP as international relief operations gathered steam in this remote farming community.

Most of Nahrin, lying on the northern foothills of the massive Hindu Kush mountain range in Baghlan province, was destroyed when the quake measuring 6.0 on the Richter scale struck on Monday evening.

The area had been a front line between the Taliban militia and Northern Alliance opposition forces when the Taliban advanced north

during a major offensive in 2000. No one known how many people have died in the quake, but interior ministry officials said here Wednesday the toll could reach 3,000 as more bodies are found amid the ruins of mud-brick homes.

Some 20,000 people have been made homeless, according to the UN.

Faruqi said 760 bodies had been recovered at last count, but more were expected to be found as locals and foreign rescue workers sifted through the debris and reached outlying villages.

The British-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) based in Kabul has sent a Norwegian demining team along with a group of British engineers to help with the aid effort, ISAF officers said.

One British Royal Engineer told AFP that teams had been assessing the damage in outlying areas.

"We went down (the road) for nine km where 90 percent of the

buildings were on the floor," the engineer said.

Meanwhile, Afghan interim leader Hamid Karzai flew in by helicopter Wednesday to remote northern Nahrin district, where an earthquake has left thousands dead and around 20,000 homeless.

Karzai had earlier postponed an official visit to Turkey to deal with the crisis, the latest catastrophe to hit his troubled country after more than 20 years of war and three years of devastating drought.

Addressing hundreds of the victims after talks with Interior Minister Yunous Qanooni and Health Minister Suhaila Sidiq, Karzai repeated his plea for international assistance.

"I appeal to the international community for more help to this area and for other villages that have been destroyed," he said, adding that he had already been inundated with offers of help from foreign governments and international aid agencies.

Passage of POTO spells victory for Vajpayee

AFP, New Delhi

Photographs of a beaming Indian prime minister flashing a victory sign dominated the front pages of newspapers here on Wednesday after the government managed to pass a tough anti-terrorism law through a rare joint session of Parliament.

But the victorious image was accompanied by sharp criticism of Atal Behari Vajpayee and his government for the way it forced the bill through after it was initially rejected by the upper house.

The Prevention of Terrorism Ordinance (POTO) was passed late Tuesday evening by a comfort-

able majority of 425 votes to 296 after an acrimonious debate in what was only the third joint session of parliament since India's independence in 1947.

The opposition, led by Congress party leader Sonia Gandhi had slammed the bill's draconian provisions, saying they ignored fundamental human rights and could be used against the country's Muslim minority.

Last week, the lower house approved the bill, but it was rejected by the upper house three days later.

The government's response was to call the first joint session for 23 years, knowing that it could count on a comfortable majority

once the votes of both houses were merged.

"It is not a happy day for Indian democracy when the government, in its questionable wisdom, decides to convene a joint session to pass a draconian law," said the Asian Age newspaper in an editorial.

"Parliament has certainly not added to its dignity and repute by passing the law which seeks to oppress rather than enhance genuine democracy," it added.

The India Express said the joint session was a "negation of the principle underlying the bicameral system" that India had chosen after independence from British rule.

Nepal tops the world in jailing journalists

AFP, Paris

Nepal detains more journalists than any other country in the world and has sometimes tortured reporters in custody as it tries to quash a Maoist uprising, Reporters Without Borders said Wednesday.

The Paris-based media watchdog said more than 100 journalists have been arrested since the government imposed a state of emergency November 26, two days after the Maoist rebels broke a four-month ceasefire in their armed campaign to topple the constitutional monarchy.

"Nepal, with at least 30 media professionals (still) locked behind bars, is, without a doubt, the largest journalist jail in the world," the report said.

Gunman kills 8 in Paris

AFP, Nanterre

A lone gunman apparently bearing a political grudge killed eight people and wounded around 20 others early Wednesday in a shooting rampage at a town hall meeting in a Paris suburb, emergency services said.

The gunman opened fire with an automatic pistol as the meeting ended at around 1:15 am (0015 GMT) in the suburb of Nanterre, methodically shooting at council members and reloading several times before being overpowered and arrested, witnesses said.

He was identified as Richard Durme, a 33-year-old man who lives in Nanterre with his mother. Police said he was a sports shooting enthusiast who owned the guns legally and had no criminal record.

There was no clear motive for the attack, but witnesses said that Durme was known to members of the council as an environmental activist and had in the past displayed signs of psychological problems.

Green party councillor Christian Demercastel denied that Durme was a party member, but said: "he was a sympathiser of left wing and ecological causes ... he told us that he thought there was a problem with democracy at the town hall."

Within hours both Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, Interior Minister Daniel Vaillant and President Jacques Chirac visited the scene in Nanterre, a working class suburb with a large university student population northwest of the capital.

Troops called out as fresh violence hits Gujarat

AFP, Ahmedabad

Indian troops were called out in the western state of Gujarat on Wednesday amid fresh incidents of Hindu-Muslim violence one month after the eruption of India's worst sectarian bloodshed in nearly a decade.

A curfew was imposed in one district of Gujarat's commercial capital Ahmedabad after a house was burned down by a mob on Wednesday morning.

Troops were also called in to patrol the area and disperse crowds of stone-throwing youths.

In another incident in Viramgam, some 60 km from Ahmedabad, a

75-year-old woman was burned alive at her home late Tuesday night, police officials said.

Almost daily incidents of communal violence have been reported in Gujarat ever since a Muslim attack on a train carrying Hindu activists on February 27 sparked a Hindu backlash that claimed around 700 lives across the state.

Gujarat's beleaguered Chief Minister Narendra Modi, who has been severely criticised for failing to contain the violence, held talks in New Delhi on Wednesday with Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to review security in the state.



Britain's Queen Elizabeth II receives the High Commissioner for Bangladesh Sheikh Razzak Ali (R) at Buckingham Palace, London, on Tuesday.

Turkish, Swiss observers shot dead in West Bank

AFP, Jerusalem

Two international observers, a Turkish man and a Swiss woman, were shot dead in the southern West Bank late Tuesday, becoming the latest victims of the bloody 18 month Middle East conflict.

Another member of the Temporary International Presence in Hebron (TIPH) was wounded in the shooting near the Palestinian village of Halhul, north of the Hebron, the Israeli army said.

The observers were "mistakenly" targeted by Palestinian gunmen near a road used by Jewish settlers, Israeli television quoted military sources as saying.

The wounded observer, Huseyin Ozarslan, recounted the attack to Israeli public radio as he was being taken to hospital in an ambulance.

"I saw him, he was wearing a Palestinian police uniform. He was carrying a Kalashnikov. We told him that we were from TIPH but he didn't care. He finished his magazine and he escaped," he said.

A military spokesman confirmed the account and told AFP that a military doctor had treated the wounded observer on the scene.

"Palestinian terrorism continues to kill Israeli civilians and also international observers in Hebron," said Lieutenant-Colonel Olivier Rafovitch.

India cannot rule out war with Pakistan: Fernandes

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes on Wednesday refused to rule out the possibility of war with Pakistan and dismissed the prospect of pulling back troops from combat positions on the border.

"Our forces are facing each other eyeball to eyeball. In a situation like this, one should not overlook any possibility," Fernandes told the Press Trust of India news agency.

India and Pakistan have massed 800,000 troops along their shared border in a tense military standoff since a December 13 attack on

India's parliament which New Delhi blames on Pakistan-based Islamic militant groups.

"There is nothing that can be interpreted as a desire on Pakistan's part to end terrorism. There is no tangible change on the ground," said Fernandes.

"Unless there is a positive response and Pakistan puts an end to cross-border terrorism, one will have to keep troops massed on the border."

India accuses Pakistan of arming, training and funding militant groups operating in Kashmir and other sensitive regions of the coun-

try. Pakistan denies the allegations but extends open moral and diplomatic support to what it calls the Kashmiris' just struggle for self-determination.

Fernandes also said he was worried that Taliban and al-Qaida fighters hiding in safe havens in Pakistan might try to cross into India-controlled Kashmir.

"There is enough evidence that al-Qaida and Taliban fighters have found shelter in Pakistan. One need have no doubt that there could be incursions into Indian territory by these elements," said Fernandes.

Colombo-LTTE talks in May

Thailand could be the venue for peace making

AFP, Colombo

The Sri Lankan government said Wednesday it would hold its first face-to-face talks with Tamil Tiger rebels in May under a deal brokered by Norway.

The announcement came after Norwegian diplomats held discussions with the Tamil guerrilla leadership at a rebel-held area of the island's north on Tuesday to push forward the peace process.

"The government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE (the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) are keen to proceed with the face-to-face discussions," Justice Minister G. L. Peiris told reporters.

"Both sides agree that the time is opportune for the negotiations... We should rapidly commence the talks and our expectation is that it will be possible within the period of about six weeks."

Peiris said Norwegian Deputy Foreign Minister Vidar Helgesen was expected in Colombo by the middle of

April to prepare the ground for the landmark talks "to be held at an Asian venue."

Peiris declined to confirm the venue. But official sources said Thailand would almost certainly be the host for the historic negotiations.

In Bangkok, Thai officials and Sri Lankan diplomats said they were discussing a proposal to hold the talks there.

"There has been no confirmation, it is a very sensitive issue," the Thai foreign ministry's South Asia division director, Thawatchai Kupirom, told AFP in Bangkok.

Peiris said the initial talks could focus on preparing an agenda to the substantive negotiations on political issues to end the two-decade-old conflict, which has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

"What we will have first will be the talks about talks. It will be to prepare an agenda and decide on the sequence of the discussions as to what will be taken up first and so forth."