

Arafat fears 'imminent' Ramallah occupation

PA evacuating its offices there

AFP, Ramallah
 The Palestinian Authority on Thursday asked its employees to evacuate their offices in the West Bank city of Ramallah in anticipation of possible Israeli retaliation for a suicide bombing, Palestinian officials said.
 The warning was given to all civil and security employees after a Palestinian suicide bomber killed himself and 20 other people in Netanyahu's late Wednesday.
 Many schools also ordered their pupils to return home, officials added.
 Some Palestinian officials were also leaving offices in Gaza City, although they said they had not been ordered to.
 Gaza employees of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, UNRWA, also said they had been told to go home.
 Meanwhile, at the Arab summit in Beirut, top Palestinian official Faruq Qaddumi said his leader, Yasser Arafat, feared an "imminent" occupation of the West Bank town of Ramallah.
 Qaddumi said Arafat "fears an imminent re-occupation of Ramallah," which the Palestinian leader said was "besieged by 150 Israeli tanks."
 Earlier, senior Arab official said Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat feared for his own personal security.

He told AFP that Qaddumi, the head of the Palestinian delegation to the Arab summit in Beirut, "received a telephone call from Yasser Arafat while meeting Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri."
 "Arafat told him that he feared for his personal security and that the Israeli army is preparing to re-occupy completely Ramallah," Arafat's headquarters in the West Bank, he said.
 Moreover, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called Thursday for an "immediate" ceasefire between the Palestinians and Israel, which was reportedly besieging the West Bank city of Ramallah, a UN statement said.
 "I have just spoken to both Prime Minister Sharon and Chairman Arafat," Annan said in the statement. "I urge the leadership of both peoples to stay the course and continue the quest for peace."
 "The essential first step is an immediate ceasefire."
 Annan also condemned "suicide bombings against Israeli civilians as morally repugnant. Last night's heartless and indiscriminate attack in Netanyahu was an especially appalling example of this phenomenon."
 "This is terrorism, and it greatly damages the Palestinian cause," he said.

Nigerian SC overrules parliament on local polls

AFP, Abuja
 Nigeria's Supreme Court on Thursday ruled that the parliament had overstepped its constitutional powers in extending to next year the tenure of local councils.
 The decision implied that local council elections must take place this year and cannot be postponed.
 In a lengthy ruling read out to reporters, Supreme Court Justice Idris Legbo Kutigi said the two chamber National Assembly had overstepped its constitutional powers.
 Parliament last year pushed through legislation extending the mandate, set out in the 1999 constitution, of the country's 774 local governments from this May until early next year.
 "The National Assembly has no power to make laws on the tenure of local government councils," the judge said.



Indian opposition leader and Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi (L) is greeted by supporters at her residence in New Delhi on Thursday. The Congress Party inflicted a humiliating defeat on the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) after winning 107 seats in the elections to the municipal corporation of Delhi.



Foreigners with coloured faces take part in the colourful festival, Holi, at a tourist centre in Thamel in Kathmandu on Thursday. Holi festival, observed in a cheerful way all over Nepal, incorporates people smearing different coloured powders on others' faces and throwing coloured water, all done in fun.

States turn their backs to POTO

AFP, New Delhi
 Political opposition to India's tough new anti-terrorist law could result in as many as half the country's 29 states exerting their constitutional right not to implement the legislation.
 Several states in India's insurgency-racked northeast, which would have been a prime testing ground for the new bill, have already said they will not enforce its provisions which critics say violate individual liberties and open the door to political abuse.
 "We are not going to enforce the new law as existing legislation in the state is enough to deal with the insurgency here," Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi told AFP.
 "There is more possibility of the law being misused by security forces and hence, nothing doing," Gogoi said. Assam has been driven by a raft of insurgencies for decades.
 While the central government can invoke the law anywhere in India through the offices of federal security agencies, states controlled by opposition parties can opt to deny their own police forces the sweeping powers of arrest and interrogation allowed by the legislation.
 More than half of India's states are ruled by opponents of the Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's ruling Hindu nationalist BJP party.
 The anti-terrorist bill was forced through a rare joint session of the Indian parliament on Tuesday.
 The government insists its tough measures are needed to combat terrorism in regions like Kashmir as well as the northeast, where some 30 rebel groups are active in five of the seven states bordering Bhutan, Bangladesh, China and Myanmar.
 More than 50,000 people have lost their lives to insurgencies in the northeast since India's independence in 1947, but the state authorities do not believe the new law is the answer.
 "The question of enforcing the new legislation does not arise in my state", Nagaland Chief Minister S.C. Jamir said from the state capital of Kohima.

Regional governments in Manipur, Meghalaya, and Marxist-ruled Tripura have also decided against enforcing the law.
 "There would be more rights violations if it is enforced and we don't want to do that," Manipur Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh said.
 "We want the Indian government to adopt a sincere attitude and start peace talks with the militants in the northeast rather than trying to solve the problem by using military might," he argued.
 Frontline separatist groups in the region have also dismissed the new legislation.
 "Black laws, including this new one, cannot undermine our struggle and they would prove futile in the long run," the banned United Liberation Front of Assam said in a recent statement.
 State administrations run by Sonia Gandhi's main opposition Congress party -- which has described the law as "unacceptable" -- are also weighing their options, party sources said in New Delhi.

Afghan quake relief reaches devastated villages: UN

AFP, Nahrin
 International aid has begun reaching thousands of homeless and hungry families in isolated villages devastated by Afghanistan's deadly earthquake, UN officials said Thursday.
 Up to 3,000 people are feared to have died in the quake on Monday night in the remote Hindu Kush region, although the final toll will not be known until a thorough search of villages has been completed.
 UN humanitarian coordinator's office spokeswoman Stephanie Bunker said indications from some of the villages reached for the first time overnight was that the death toll might not be as high as initially feared.
 "From what we know now the original estimates were too high and we hope that will remain the case," she said, without giving an estimated number of dead.
 Interior ministry officials who arrived here Tuesday said they believed the death toll was "definitely more than two to three thousand."
 But an assistant to the United Nations' special envoy on Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, late Wednesday put the toll at between 800 and 1,000.
 "Six hundred people have been buried and 200 are awaiting burial," Brahimi's assistant, Nigel Fisher, told journalists in the Afghan capital after a meeting of relief agencies and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which is helping with the relief operations.
 UN officials here have said six outlying villages had been completely destroyed and aid had only begun to reach those areas overnight.
 Bunker said the relief effort was "proceeding pretty well" and 100 tonnes of food had arrived at Nahrin and another 1,900 tonnes were on the way.
 She said 4,000 families had already received aid but up to 20,000 were believed to be in desperate need.
 Most of the buildings that collapsed in remote villages were single-storey, reducing the likelihood of people being trapped undetected for days at a time, UN officials said.
 "From all the villages, we are being told that there's no one missing. That's the reason why people are not urging us for rescue," said Farhana Faruqi, the UN's regional coordinator for northern Afghanistan.
 Instead the focus was now on getting aid such as blankets, tents, food and medicine to the living. More ambulances are being sent out to the villages in order to either treat victims on site or take them to hospital.

US airman found guilty in Okinawa rape trial

AFP, Naha
 A US airman was found guilty on Thursday of raping a Japanese woman in a parking lot last year and sentenced to two years and eight months in prison by a court here.
 US air force staff sergeant Timothy Woodland, 25, was convicted of raping the woman in the early hours of June 29 on the hood of a car in a parking lot of American Village, a shopping and amusement emporium, near the Kadena US Air Base in Okinawa where he was stationed.
 Woodland had admitted having sex with the woman in her 20s but had insisted it was consensual.
 "The victim's mental and physical suffering is so great, even after the crime the defendant continued to hurt her feelings. His conduct was nothing but rape," said presiding judge Soichi Hayashida, in his ruling at the district court in the capital of the sub-tropical Japanese island.
 "The victim cried so hard and expressed strong anger but the defendant forced her to lie down on the hood of the car and continued raping her," he said.
 Woodland, wearing glasses and dressed in a dark beige suit, white shirt and brown tie, with slippers on his bare feet, was led into court wearing handcuffs.
 While the verdict was being read out he stood motionless at first, but towards the end of the ruling, he appeared to feel faint, and asked the judge through his interpreter if he could sit.

Laden, Omar not in Pakistan Arabic newspaper receives e-mail from Osama?

REUTERS, Islamabad
 Pakistan's government said on Wednesday it was confident that Osama bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Mohammad Omar were not in the country, and it would not allow US troops to look for them there.
 Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider told Reuters in an interview that Pakistan had good control of its western border with Afghanistan and good cooperation with the semi-autonomous tribesmen living there.
 As a result, neither bin Laden, blamed by Washington for the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States, nor his former Afghan host, Mullah Omar, could have found refuge in Pakistan, he said, rebutting suggestions US troops might need to cross into Pakistan to look for them or their supporters.
 "The Pakistani tribesmen living on this side of the Pakistan/Afghan border are very clear. They are cooperating with us and they are acting in a very responsible manner. They will not like to take the risk of harbouring anybody, not at all."
 Pakistan, a key partner in the US-led war on terror in neighbouring Afghanistan, has fanned troops out along the long border, which weaves its way through rugged mountains, to keep out fighters from bin Laden's al Qaeda network and the Taliban.
 Meanwhile, an Arabic newspaper said on Wednesday it had received an e-mail claiming credibly to be from Osama bin Laden, attacking a Saudi peace plan for the Middle East and urging the region's Muslims to revolt against their leaders.
 Abdel-Bari Atwan, editor of the London-based al-Quds al-Arabi newspaper, who met bin Laden in 1996, told Reuters that he thought the e-mail was "most likely" genuine.
 Atwan said it conformed to the style and language of other statements his newspaper had received in the past from bin Laden and his al-Qaeda group.
 The e-mail gave no clue to the whereabouts of bin Laden, blamed for the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington and hunted for months by US forces in his former Afghan cave bases.

Iraq promises not to invade Kuwait again

AFP, Beirut
 Iraq pledged in writing never to invade neighboring Kuwait again, in the final resolution of the Arab summit in Beirut, Iraqi Foreign Minister Najib Sabri told AFP on Thursday.
 The document stipulates that "Iraq respects the independence and the sovereignty of Kuwait and the respect of its security, which will guarantee avoiding anything that can lead to a repetition of what happened in 1990," he said.
 Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait in August 1990, only to be driven out by a US-led coalition at the beginning of the following year.
 "We have expressed clearly, at their (Kuwait's) request, our respect of their independence and sovereignty," he said.
 The final resolution also expresses the "respect and the cooperation of the two parties on the lingering issues, particularly concerning the missing," both Kuwaitis and Iraqis, said Sabri.
 A compromise agreement in the draft of final resolutions to be adopted at the closing of the Arab summit later Thursday was "balanced," he added.
 "It answers the demands of the two parties and expresses the will of the two countries to move forward" and turn the page on the past, he said.
 This was the first time that Iraq agreed to voice such a pledge.
 Meanwhile, Kuwaiti newspapers cautiously welcomed on Thursday a document accepted by Kuwait and Iraq at the Arab Summit that could re-establish relations between the two Gulf War foes.
 "Iraq commits itself not to repeat invasion ... The formula was born," read Al-Rai Al-Aam's front-page main headline.
 "After difficult mediations and negotiations," Iraq has finally agreed on "committing itself not to repeat its invasion" of Kuwait, the daily said.

US resists greater role in Afghan peacekeeping

AFP, Washington
 Washington has so far resisted pressure to play a greater peacekeeping role in Afghanistan, preferring instead to focus on building a national army.
 US officials on Wednesday joined their fellow UN Security Council members in agreeing to extend the mandate of the International Security Assistance Force when it expires in June.
 However, Washington still refuses to participate in the force, and the Security Council's decision did not provide for an expansion of the force's mandate beyond the Afghan capital of Kabul, despite intense lobbying by Afghan interim leader Hamid Karzai and UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.
 The Pentagon said Monday that 125 to 150 American instructors would begin training an Afghan national army in the next four to six weeks, and President George W.

Following fathers' footprints



An undated handout photo released on Wednesday shows Jamling Norgay (L), Brent Bishop (C) and Peter Hillary (R) standing outside Namche en route to the Everest, where they will follow their famous fathers' footsteps when they attempt to climb the world's highest mountain in May. In May 1953, Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay were the first to conquer the world's highest peak.

Killer of Paris carnage commits suicide

AFP, Paris
 Richard Durn, the 33 year-old loner who killed eight local councillors in a Paris suburb, committed suicide Thursday by leaping from a window in the room where he was being interviewed by police, police said.
 Durn jumped from a fourth floor window in Paris police headquarters in central Paris at around 10:15 a.m. (0915 GMT), having previously told investigators that his attack at the town hall in Nanterre had been planned some weeks in advance.
 An hour later his body was lying in an inner courtyard, and police had sealed off the area.
 Durn opened fire early Wednesday morning at the end of a council session, killing eight councillors and injuring around 20 others.
 The former school monitor shouted out "Kill me, kill me!" when he was eventually overpowered.

Nepal to seek support for Maoist crackdown in US, UK

AFP, Kathmandu
 Foreign Secretary Madhu Raman Acharya is to visit the United States, Britain and Russia to muster international support for Nepal's fight against Maoist rebels, officials said Thursday.
 Acharya will leave by the end of the month for Washington, where he will ask for more US assistance to Nepal, a foreign ministry official told AFP.
 The trip follows a trip to the kingdom in January by Secretary of State Colin Powell, the highest-ranking US official to visit the Himalayan state in 30 years.
 Nepal has requested from the United States a small number of advanced bullet-proof helicopters equipped with night vision to battle the rebels, who have been fighting to overthrow the constitutional monarchy since 1996.
 Powell during his visit voiced support for the crackdown on the Maoists, who broke a four-month ceasefire in November, but stayed mum on what military assistance the United States would provide Nepal.

Curfew imposed in Gujarat after fresh violence

AFP, Ahmedabad
 Fresh curfews were imposed in areas of India's riot-hit Gujarat state on Thursday after overnight sectarian violence in which mobs set fire to a hotel and attacked shops in the commercial capital Ahmedabad and elsewhere.
 The privately-owned hotel and more than 10 houses belonging to both Hindus and Muslims were burned down in Sarkhej on the outskirts of Ahmedabad late Wednesday and firefighters struggled throughout the night to bring the blaze under control.
 Police said they had resorted to firing several live rounds to disperse the rioters carrying out the arson attacks.
 Police also recovered a dismembered corpse from a drainage ditch behind a fire station in the area.
 Ahmedabad bore the brunt of India's worst Hindu-Muslim clashes for nearly a decade which erupted across Gujarat following an attack on a train carrying Hindu activists on February 28.
 Meanwhile, the US government warned of further communal violence in the western Indian state of Gujarat and advised Americans to avoid the area.
 In a public announcement, the State Department said Wednesday that there was a potential for unrest throughout the state, and that the risk of violence in Ayodhya and the surrounding areas remained high.