

Pakistan frees militant wanted by India

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistani authorities have released a Kashmiri militant who features on a list of India's most wanted people, party officials said on Monday.

The release of Hafiz Mohammad Saeed, founder of now outlawed Lashkar-e-Taiba group, followed a decision by a court in Lahore to refuse a government bid to extend his detention.

"He was released after midnight," Saeed's spokesman Yahya Mujahid told Reuters by telephone from Lahore.

Saeed quit the leadership of Lashkar-e-Taiba shortly after India blamed it and another militant group, Jaish-e-Mohammad, for a December 13 attack on the Indian parliament.

China's spacecraft returns to earth safely

AFP, Beijing

China's third unmanned space craft returned successfully to earth Monday after a week-long mission which marked another step in Beijing's plan to put an astronaut into orbit, state media said.

The Shenzhou III (Divine Vessel III) space capsule returned to earth in central Inner Mongolia at 4:51 pm (08:51 GMT), the Xinhua news agency said.

The mission, the third test flight of China's fledgling space program, took off from the Jiuquan launch center in northern Gansu province late on March 25, making it the longest flight in the series.

Laden deputy believed captured

AFP, Washington

US authorities are holding a man captured in Pakistan who is believed to be a key deputy of suspected terror mastermind Osama bin Laden, a senior US official said Sunday.

"It appears that he is Abu Zubaydah but we're not 100 percent certain of that at this point," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

"The individual is now in US custody."

Some 60 people, including 29 mostly Arab and Afghan militants linked to bin Laden's al-Qaida network were arrested in raids overnight Wednesday through Thursday by Pakistani and US law-enforcement officers, senior Interior Ministry official Brigadier Javed Iqbal Cheema.

High-tech uniforms for future soldiers

AFP, New York

Soon, US soldiers will be able to wear uniforms that protect them from bullets and poison gases, save their wounds, make them nearly invisible or allow them to jump farther, according to the scientists developing the innovative clothing.

Thirty-five professors and 100 students -- armed with 50 million dollars from the Pentagon after winning a competition for the contract -- will begin to develop the new uniforms next month.

"Our government decided that they need new technologies for the soldiers," said Timothy Swager of the new Institute for Soldier Nanotechnologies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology which is developing the new gear.

Communists take early lead in Ukraine polls

AFP, Kiev

The Communist party and reformist opposition gained an early lead in Ukraine's parliamentary poll Monday after more than a fifth of votes were counted, electoral officials said.

However, analysts said candidates of the pro-Kuchma For United Ukraine party were likely to make a strong showing as the results continue, and could end up as the largest single block with around 150 deputies in the 450-member parliament.

The Communist party was ahead with 20.15 percent of the proportional votes, which elects half of the seats in parliament, the Central Election Commission (CEC) said after counting 21.92 percent of ballots cast.

Israeli military action dragging region towards all-out war: OIC

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Islamic foreign ministers warned of "all-out war" in the Middle East as the September 11 attacks on the United States were sidelined at an Islamic conference on terrorism here Monday.

"Israel's terrorist actions and aggressive practices, posing a threat to international peace and security, and dragging the region towards an all-out war, necessitate immediate action by the UN Security Council to apply Chapter VII of the UN Charter," the ministers said in a statement.

Under a clause in this section, the UN Security Council can order the use of force to maintain international peace and security if all other means are deemed to have failed.

The statement was made unanimously by 53 members of the 57-nation Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) represented at a special three-day meeting on terrorism here.

The conference was called in the wake of the September 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington, but concern over that atrocity was mostly blown aside by Israel's latest actions in the Palestinian territories.

The ministers' statement described the Israeli action in Palestinian areas and against the headquarters of Yasser Arafat as "a violation of all international norms and laws and the culmination of state terrorism as practised by Israel".

The conference opened earlier with the prime minister of host country Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad, controversially including Palestinian suicide bombers in his definition of "terrorists".

But his call for a globally acceptable definition of terrorism as "attacks

against civilians" -- and joint action against it -- was soon swamped by condemnation of Israel.

And, because of President George W. Bush's support for the Israeli action, the United States, which sees itself as the victim of terrorism, was lumped with the perpetrators.

Mahathir's description of Palestinian suicide bombers as "terrorists" was immediately challenged by Qatar Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad Jassim.

"No. They are not terrorists. It is the Israelis who are terrorists but not the Palestinians because they are fighting for their land," he told AFP, expressing a widely-held belief in the Islamic world.

Iran called on members of the OIC to cut all negotiations with Israel over its latest crackdown on Palestinians.

Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi told the OIC conference that a "catastrophe" was unfolding and said Palestine had become the "big Israeli killing field of the brave and innocent".

Kharazi criticised the United States, saying it had "severely damaged this international momentum against terrorism through a series of unilateral actions, short-sighted policies and arrogant statements".

Mahathir said in his opening address that "we cannot hunt down terrorists until we agree who they are and we cooperate in the hunt".

The three-day conference was originally designed to bring Muslim states into the mainstream of the global debate on terrorism, and Mahathir, while objecting to the linking of Islam to terrorism, called on Muslims everywhere to "condemn terrorism once it is clearly defined".

Mahathir said, however, that Muslims had grievances which were "real and truly unbearable, beyond mere understanding and tolerance".

Biting for bribe

AFP, Kolkata

A policeman in Kolkata has been suspended for allegedly biting a minivan driver who refused to hand over a bribe, a senior police official said Monday.

Nirmal Chandra Seal was suspended from duty after the incident on Sunday, in which he allegedly stopped the minivan driver and demanded a 750 rupee (\$15 dollar) on-the-spot "fine".

"We got a complaint that Seal had sunk his teeth into the driver's hand and have started an inquiry to verify if he was trying to extort money," said Harman Preet Singh, deputy commissioner of the Kolkata police.

Laden wanted to kill me, says Clinton

AFP, Washington

Former US president Bill Clinton said suspected terror mastermind Osama bin Laden was conspiring to kill him and was training hitmen for that purpose.

"And we know at the same time he was training people to kill me. Which was fair enough -- I was trying to get him," Clinton told Newsweek magazine in an interview due on newsstands Monday.

The Saudi-born radical is blamed for masterminding the September 11 attacks on the United States as well as the 1998 US embassy bombings in East Africa.

Clinton said that in the fall of 2000, US intelligence had learned with a certain degree of accuracy where bin Laden would spend the night.



PHOTO: AFP

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad (L) delivers his opening speech while 9th Islamic summit chairman, Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim (R), and Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) Secretary General Abdelouahed Belkeziz (C) look on, during the first day of the OIC conference on terrorism in Kuala Lumpur on Monday. Foreign ministers from 57 Islamic states are holding the biggest Islamic conference on terrorism since the September 11 attacks on the United States.

Iraq urges Arabs to use oil weapon against Israel, US

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's ruling Baath party on Monday called on Arab countries to use petrol as a "weapon" against Israel and the United States to ensure the liberation of Palestinian land.

"Use oil as a weapon in the battle ... otherwise it will become a burden which will lead to (more) humiliation," the party's national command said in a statement.

Arab oil producers, who account for half of world supplies, have not used the oil card since the 1973 crisis, despite repeated calls by Iraq

and others to do so.

The statement branded the United States "an enemy and a partner of Zionism," and alleged that the Israeli military offensive in the Palestinian territories "was mounted in joint agreement with the American administration."

The statement called for the "liberation of Palestine from the Mediterranean sea to the Jordan" and the expulsion of all settlers, a much harder line than the Arab peace initiative adopted last Thursday which calls for Israeli withdrawal from land occupied in

the 1967 war.

Iraqi President Saddam Hussein said Sunday that Arabs could halt Israel's military push in the West Bank by threatening economic sanctions on the United States.

"If just two Arab countries used the economic threat against a part of the world which only understands the language of its own interests, the Israeli army would immediately withdraw from autonomous areas", Saddam was quoted as saying by state television.

Nepal sends envoy to US to seek aid against Maoists

AFP, Kathmandu

Foreign Secretary Madhu Raman Acharya left Monday for Washington on the highest-level trip by a Nepalese official to the United States since a Maoist rebellion broke out six years ago.

Acharya will meet with members of President George W. Bush's administration to seek more military and economic assistance, officials here said.

The trip follows a visit to the Himalayan kingdom in January by Secretary of State Colin Powell, who voiced strong support for Nepal's crackdown on the rebels but stayed mum on what assistance Washington would provide.

Nepal has requested from the United States a small number of advanced bullet-proof helicopters equipped with night vision to battle

the rebels, who broke a four-month ceasefire with the government in late November.

The US State Department on Friday called on the Maoists to end their "brutal and senseless" attacks after 30 people, including school children, were wounded by a bomb in Kathmandu.

Acharya will also appeal for support during his week-long trip during stops in London and Moscow.

British assistant minister of state Ben Bradshaw visited Kathmandu on February 20 and said Britain was ready to help Nepal fight terrorism.

Acharya will also brief US, British and Russian officials on Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's visit last month to India, which by treaty is Nepal's chief military supplier.

Musharraf asks India not to treat Pakistan like 'scum'

AFP, New Delhi

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf on Monday warned India against treating his country like "scum" and called for a UN role in de-escalating military tensions which left the South Asian nuclear rivals on a war-footing.

In a lengthy interview with the Hindu newspaper, Musharraf blamed Indian intransigence for the continued border face-off and confessed he could see no way out of the current impasse.

India and Pakistan have massed hundreds of thousands of troops on

their common border since an attack on the Indian parliament in December, which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based militant groups.

India has ruled out any immediate troop withdrawal, saying Pakistan must first curb "cross-border terrorism" and hand over 20 alleged criminals named in an Indian government list.

Musharraf slammed India's attitude as "offensive" and said Pakistan would never accept being treated "like dirt, as if we are some kind of scum, a very weak country, which cannot handle itself."

India has justified its tough stance as part of the international war against terrorism -- a position Musharraf described as unacceptable.

"Neither are we Afghanistan nor should India think it is the United States," he warned.

"We don't crawl. We're not going to crawl," he added.

Musharraf also called for a UN force to be deployed on the disputed Indo-Pakistan border in divided Kashmir to determine the validity of India's claims that Islamabad was continuing to sponsor cross-border terrorism.



PHOTO: AFP

Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri (2nd R) and her husband Taufik Kiemas (L) chat with Indian Minister of State for External Affairs Vasundra Raje (2nd L) upon their arrival in New Delhi on Monday. Megawati is on the last leg of a four-nation Asian tour that included North and South Korea, and China.

Indian FM calls for closer ties with China

AFP, Shanghai

Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh on Monday called on China and India to work together to ensure regional security.

Speaking to the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, Singh said that "cobwebs of doubt and suspicion" between the countries needed to be brushed away.

"Recognition that India and China view their own security and their own interests in a broader framework than the immediate neighbourhood must underpin our new relationship," he said.

Singh arrived in Shanghai late Sunday from Beijing, and began his official visit with a trip to the Shanghai Stock Exchange and the city's Jade Buddha Temple.

He met Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji in Beijing on Saturday, with the two agreeing that the two countries could gain a great deal by boosting economic cooperation.

"India and China have set as principal objectives to remove poverty and increase the living standard of the people," China's state Xinhua news agency quoted Singh as saying then.

The total trade volume between

the two Asian giants stands at less than three billion dollars annually, a tiny fraction of China's total foreign trade of \$10 billion dollars last year.

Bilateral relations have improved recently, after a setback caused by Indian nuclear tests in 1998.

The two countries were particularly at odds in the later part of the Cold War, as India received support from the Soviet Union, China's communist arch rival.

China has also been a long time ally of Pakistan, India's nuclear foe in South Asia.

Bodo rebels seek Delhi's formal peace talks offer

AFP, Guwahati

A powerful tribal separatist group in India's restive northeastern state of Assam said Monday it could be willing to enter into peace talks if the federal government came up with a formal offer.

"If India officially and sincerely approaches us for talks, we may consider the matter," D.R. Nabla, chairman of the outlawed National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), said in an e-mail interview with AFP.

The militant leader said the Indian government had been only making "public statements" concerning unconditional talks, which were a "mere bluff" aimed at hoodwinking the public about its sincerity in resolving the problem.

The NDFB has been fighting for an independent tribal homeland for the Bodo people in Assam for two decades.

The campaign has involved bomb blasts at railway installations, ambushes on security patrols and attacks on non-tribals living in western Assam.

"The NDFB is not interested in meaningless peace talks for the sake of talks if there is no prospect of yield-

ing fruit," Nabla said.

"By 'peace talks' if you mean the NDFB accepting all the dictates of India and laying down their arms to live a peaceful life as obedient Indian citizens, we are certainly against it," Nabla said.

"We know that the struggle for freedom is not a question of days or years but requires decades or even centuries. It demands supreme sacrifice -- sweat, blood and lives -- and the NDFB is prepared for a people's protracted war to achieve their freedom."

The militant leader said the outcome of the ongoing peace talks between the federal government and the outlawed National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) could be a test for New Delhi in showing their sincerity for brokering peace in the region.

Contrary to intelligence reports that the NDFB operates out of well-entrenched bases inside Bhutan, the rebel leader said they don't have any "permanent camps" inside the Himalayan kingdom.

Nabla also dismissed reports of the NDFB trying to shift bases out of Bhutan to Bangladesh or other northeastern states.

Gun salutes for Queen Mother

AFP, London

Britain's royal family entered a new and uncertain era Monday without the Queen Mother, whose death at 101 has broken with an age when the monarchy was shrouded in respect and mystique.

As the royals mourned in private, a series of 41-gun salutes were fired at 12 locations across Britain and Gibraltar as a mark of respect.

At Buckingham Palace, a large crowd watched a sombre changing of the guard ceremony, with soldiers switching duty to mournful music.

A packed Easter Monday programme of sports events was also paying respects, including a minute's silence before all football fixtures and players wearing black armbands.

Hundreds of people continued to sign books of condolence and to leave cards and floral tributes, although the numbers are far below those who grieved the sudden death

of Princess Diana in 1997.

Like then however, the death Saturday of the Queen Mother has also sparked renewed debate about the future of the monarchy.

Mother of the present Queen Elizabeth II, she was seen as a final link with a bygone era of social deference and respect for authority.

She was also the only surviving royal to have played a key part in the last major crisis to face Britain, the 1939-1945 World War II, a role to which she owed much of her enduring popularity.

The Guardian said her funeral would be the "formal laying to rest of an era that in other respects finished long ago and cannot be recreated."

In its place, commentators argue, is a society which has little time for a royal family who can seem out of touch, dysfunctional and extravagant.



PHOTO: AFP

Mourners lay flowers two days after the death of British Queen Mother on Monday outside Clarence House in London. A series of 41-gun salutes were being fired Monday as a mark of respect for Britain's Queen Mother, whose death at the age of 101 has sparked a fresh debate over the future of the monarchy.