

Rebels blow up railway track in Assam

AFP, Guwahati

Six people were injured Friday when tribal militants blew up a section of railway track in India's northeastern state of Assam, railway police said.

Around 1,500 passengers were on board the Kanchenjungba Express when members of the outlawed National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) detonated an explosive device at Sirampur, 370 kilometres west of Assam's provincial capital Guwahati, a railway police spokesman said.

The train was travelling between Guwahati and Sealdah in neighbouring West Bengal province.

"The blast occurred as the train's last compartment was crossing the tracks where the explosive was planted," the spokesman said, adding that the explosion had not caused any of the coaches to derail.

Gunbattle leaves 15 dead in Philippines

AP, Davao

At least 10 communist rebels and five army soldiers were killed and seven troops were wounded in a firefight in the southern Philippines, an army general said yesterday.

The battle, which erupted late Thursday between Compostela Valley and Davao Oriental provinces, continued Friday with government forces backed by MG250 helicopter gunships, said Brig. Gen. Felipe Berroya, commander of the 701st Brigade.

In an interview with government radio station DXRP, Berroya said about 60 troops from the 60th Infantry Battalion were sent to check reports that regional communist and New People's Army leaders were holding a meeting outside of Boston, in Davao Oriental. The NPA is the Communist Party's military wing.

Top US diplomat to visit India, Pakistan

REUTERS, Washington

A top US diplomat will visit Pakistan and India next week to discuss the war on terrorism and regional issues, a US official told Reuters on Thursday.

The official said Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca would leave this weekend, visiting Pakistan and then its neighbour India, two countries locked in a bitter military standoff over the disputed Himalayan territory of Kashmir.

Rocca's last trip to the region was to bring home the bodies of the wife and daughter of a US diplomat killed in a grenade attack last month on a Christian church in Islamabad.

No one claimed responsibility for the attack but the spotlight has been on hard-line Islamic groups opposed to Pakistan's support for the US-led war on terrorism and its clampdown on Muslim militants.

Indian SC orders diesel-run buses to stay off Delhi roads

AFP, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court Friday threw out a petition seeking more time for public transport operators in New Delhi to phase out their diesel-run buses in favour of ones running on environment-friendly compressed natural gas (CNG).

Last year the court had set January 31 as a deadline for bus operators to convert their petrol and diesel-run buses to CNG in an effort to control pollution in the capital.

However the Delhi government filed a petition in the Supreme Court on behalf of transporters requesting an extension to the deadline.

On Friday the Supreme Court also imposed a retrospective fine of 500 rupees (10 dollars) for each day that bus operators used diesel buses after the expiry of the deadline, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported.

40,000 march in Luanda to mark truce

AFP, Luanda

Some 40,000 Angolans took to the streets of Luanda on Friday to celebrate a historic ceasefire deal signed one day earlier by the army and rebels.

The crowd, dressed in white and carrying lit torches, first gathered in a stadium before marching down the capital's main avenues and then gathering at Heroine's Plaza.

The march, which included students, teachers, youth, and senior government workers, was organised by the "Spontaneous Movement," a group close to President Jose Eduardo dos Santos.

Some legislators and clerics joined the demonstration, where people chanted slogans in favour of reconciliation.

Bush calls for Israeli withdrawal

Israel defiant amid int'l call for pullout, truce

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush warned Israel and the Palestinians Thursday to step up peace efforts and announced a mission to the region by Secretary of State Colin Powell, as Israeli tanks surged deeper into the West Bank.

Powell will go to the Middle East next week to try to hammer out a ceasefire between the two sides, Bush said. According to officials, he may stop over in Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories.

But in an apparent shift in Bush's much-criticised Middle East policy, the US president called on Israel to withdraw from newly occupied lands taken in a seven-day campaign.

His request drew a cool response from Israel, with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon saying the week-long military siege in Palestinian towns would continue, Israel's private television Channel Two reported.

"Negotiating before terror is subdued will only lead to its continuation," said Sharon. The operation has seen Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat surrounded by Israeli troops at his headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

"The storms of violence cannot go on ... Enough is enough," Bush said, a week after the launch of Israel's campaign when the US leader said he accepted Israel's right to defend itself against terror attacks.

His speech in the White House Rose Garden, with Powell at his side, came on the seventh day of a blitz across the West Bank aimed, says Israel, at rooting out terror and isolating Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Intensified action Thursday saw Israeli forces push through fierce fighting to the centre of Nablus, leaving only two more key West Bank towns outside Israel's grip.

The Israeli crackdown on the Palestinians, in the face of numerous suicide attacks on Israeli targets, has drawn outrage around the world.

Powell, meanwhile, is expected to see Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz -- currently in Morocco -- Jordan's King Abdullah II, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, as well as Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon.

"They will all be on the schedule," a senior official, speaking on condition of anonymity, told reporters at the White House.

He may also meet with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, according to the official.

Bush sought to soften his remarks on Israel by saying he spoke as a "committed friend." In a first reaction, Israeli Finance Minister Silvan Shalom said that violence on the ground first must stop.

"If there is a ceasefire, there's no reason to stay in the Palestinian territories. But a ceasefire requires both sides," said Shalom.

The US president's words for Arafat, meanwhile, were harsh, accusing him of having betrayed the Palestinian people and of being responsible for his predicament.

Meanwhile, US President George W. Bush's Middle East peace initiative drew a defiant response from Israel, but international leaders warmly welcomed his promise of deeper US engagement in the growing crisis.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon appeared to defy Bush's call Thursday for an end to Israel's operations in the West Bank, which have left Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat surrounded by Israeli troops at his headquarters in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

Sharon vowed that the military siege in Palestinian towns would continue, Israeli private television reported.

Strike in Kashmir to protest POTA

AFP, Srinagar

Businesses in Kashmir's main cities closed Friday and traffic slowed to a trickle during a one-day strike called to protest against India's new controversial anti-terrorism law, residents said.

The action was organised by Kashmiri militants angered by the Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), which came into force on March 26 and gives the police sweeping powers to arrest, interrogate and detain suspects for up to 90 days without trial.

It also allows police to intercept suspects' communications.

Opposition parties and human rights groups said the law could be misused, especially against the country's Muslim minority, but it was pushed through by the government in a rare joint session of parliament.

Kashmiri separatist leaders feel POTA will be used against them to suppress their struggle against Indian rule.

Jamiat-ul-Mujahedin, a Kashmir-based militant group, organised the action with support from another Kashmiri militant group, Al Umar Mujahedin.

Residents said shops and businesses across Srinagar, Kashmir's summer capital, were closed and traffic was minimal. Most government offices, educational institutions, banks and post offices were also closed.

Witnesses said the strike also closed down shops and businesses in other important towns in Kashmir, including Baramulla, Sopore, Pulwama, Shopian and Kupwara.

The Indian government on Monday declared Jamiat and Pakistan-based group Al-Badr terrorist organisations.

Jamiat responded by saying they were not terrorists, but freedom fighters and would continue their operations in Kashmir.

Huge funeral procession to honour Queen Mother

AFP, London

Almost a week after her death at the age of 101, Britain was Friday to pay tribute to the Queen Mother with a royal funeral procession that will be the largest for half a century.

It will be the grandest funeral pageant seen here since that held for wartime prime minister Winston Churchill in 1965.

Thousands of well-wishers are expected to line the route, with television coverage giving a close-up view to millions more.

Measured in pomp and pageantry, the event will be bigger than the emotionally-charged funeral for Diana, Princess of Wales five years ago, although her sudden death inspired a far greater level of public mourning.

Dedicated supporters of the Queen Mother, who died Saturday, hope for a prime view of the ceremony after keeping an all-night vigil opposite historic Westminster Palace.

Although the Queen Mother's actual funeral is not until Tuesday, Friday is the main ceremonial event, a one-mile (1.5 kilometre) royal procession through central London.

When it gets underway at 11:30 am (1030 GMT), the Queen Mother's coffin will be borne on gun carriage, pulled by four black horses.

Behind it will walk her four grandsons, along with nine other male members of the royal family.

They will include princes William and Harry, which might revive memories of their procession behind their mother Diana's coffin five years ago.

Texan to die for killing Indian

AFP, Washington

A jury in Dallas County, Texas, handed down the death sentence to a local worker who killed an Indian-born gas station attendant in retaliation for the September 11 terrorist attacks, The Dallas Morning News reported Friday.

Mark Anthony Stroman, 33, was put on trial for three days and sentenced to die for the October 4 robbery and slaying of Vasudev Patel, a 49-year-old naturalised US citizen who was born in India, the report said.

Stroman "attempted to say he was a patriot," Prosecutor Greg Davis is quoted as saying. "He was anything but a patriot. What he is, is just a common vigilante."

Koreas near accords to revive peace process

AFP, Seoul

North and South Korea on Friday moved closer to agreement to revive their warring rapprochement process, including more reunions of long-lost families, officials said.

The progress came after the reclusive North Korean leader Kim Jong-il met South Korean presidential envoy Lim Dong-Won in Pyongyang late Thursday.

Lim, who flew to Pyongyang on Wednesday for a three-day visit aimed at reviving peace talks between the communist state and South Korea, the United States and Japan, was due to return Friday afternoon.

South Korean unification ministry spokesman Kim Hong-Jae said that working-level negotiators from both Koreas were putting together a

joint press release on the results of Lim's visit.

"They are reaching accords on some issues, likely to include the family reunions and the resumption of economic cooperation talks," he told AFP.

"The envoy will return to Seoul by land through the inter-Korean border village of Panmunjom this afternoon."

Both Koreas arranged reunions of families separated for decades by the Cold War frontier after their leaders held a summit two years ago. But the humanitarian project was halted last year amid rising tension.

The economic cooperation committee meeting is the main inter-Korean channel set up after the summit to discuss aid from the South to the North.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani and foreign journalists stage a token sit-in protest as they were denied entry into a makeshift court at the Karachi central jail hearing case of US journalist Daniel Pearl's kidnap and murder on Friday. The trial began behind closed doors on Friday and only close relatives of the accused were permitted to enter the makeshift courtroom in Karachi jail.

Pearl murder trial begins behind closed doors

AFP, Karachi

The trial of 11 people accused of kidnapping and murdering US reporter Daniel Pearl began behind closed doors Friday at a prison in this southern Pakistani port city, officials said.

Only close relatives of the accused were permitted to enter the makeshift courtroom in Karachi's Central Prison, and journalists were kept waiting outside under armed guard.

British-born Islamic militant Sheikh Omar, the prime suspect and self-confessed kidnapper, entered the courtroom through a back entrance amid tight security.

He appeared along with three other suspects -- Sheikh Adil, Salman Saquib and Fahad Naseem -- accused of sending e-mails showing pictures of the Wall Street Journal reporter with a gun to his head.

Seven other accused are still at large.

All the accused have been charged with murder, kidnapping for ransom and terrorist activities, which carry a maximum penalty of death.

Minutes after the proceedings began, the trial was adjourned until April 12, but not before Saquib told the court he was tortured while in custody.

"I have made sacrifices for Pakistan. I have done jihad in Kashmir but when I was arrested I was tortured, I was not allowed to sleep, I was slapped 100 times and today I have hepatitis C," he told the court, according to defence lawyer Khawaja Naveed.

Naveed told reporters outside the court that he had protested about the trial being held in camera.

"I did protest about why journalists were not allowed but there was no reply," he said.

The Sindh High Court on Thursday dismissed a petition from Omar's defence team to have the trial held in a normal courtroom, saying security was the paramount concern.



PHOTO: AFP

A partial view of two wrecked trains which collided on Thursday in Lousa, central Portugal. Five people died and nine were injured when a passenger train collided head-on with a rail company staff train near the central Portuguese town of Lousa, Portuguese media reported.