

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 Kanchenjunga Express when members of the outlawed National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) detonated an explosive device at Srimampur, 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 fire fight 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 Berroa, commander of the 701st Brigade.

In an interview with government radio station DXRP, Berroa 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.



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

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 Saqib 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.

Naved 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

Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (L) lights a lamp during the inaugural session of The National Conference on Panchayati in New Delhi on Friday. While Rural Development Minister Venkaiah Naidu welcomes opposition leader and Congress president Sonia Gandhi with a bunch of flowers. Sonia Gandhi delivered the keynote address at the conference attended by nearly 1500 delegates from all States and Union Territories besides Rural Development and Panchayati Raj State Ministers from all states.

Asia, EU finalise joint stance on illegal immigration

AFP, Costa Teguise

The European Union and 10 east Asian nations were preparing Friday to issue their first-ever joint declaration aimed at stemming the flow of illegal immigrants from Asia into Europe.

Interior ministers and senior officials were finalising the statement at a two-day meeting in this seaside resort on Lanzarote, one of Spain's Canary Islands.

"There is broad agreement between the Asian and EU countries on four basic principles," Spanish Interior Minister Mariano Rajoy told reporters late Thursday, as talks continued behind closed doors on the details.

Those principles include Europe asserting that it welcomes foreigners "seeking an honourable life and ready to contribute to growth," the promotion of legal immigration, better efforts to integrate immigrants to Europe, and the need to combat illegal immigration and those who profit from it, he said.

The joint declaration was expected to be issued late

Friday, Spanish officials said, following three plenary sessions focusing on all aspects of immigration policy.

Spain is hosting the meeting of interior ministers and senior officials as part of its turn at the EU presidency, and in the run-up to the biannual ASEAN summit of EU and Asian leaders in Copenhagen on September 22-24.

The Canary Islands, about 100 kilometres off the coast of southern Morocco, are a magnet for sun-seeking tourists, mainly from Britain and Germany, and see few if any illegal immigrants from Asia.

But they are a prime target for North and West Africans who regularly land on its resort-lined shores in small, fragile boats, hoping to continue on to the European mainland.

"Immigration is one of the big challenges that confront all countries at this time," the Canary Islands' governor Roman Rodriguez said in a keynote address.

"The success of our migration policies depends in large part on our ability to cooperate and to act together," he said.

The joint declaration was expected to be issued late

Strike in Kashmir to protest POTA

AFP, Srinagar

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.

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

Huge funeral procession to honour Queen Mother

AFP, London

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.



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.

Suu Kyi-junta talks nearing landmark stage: NLD

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's democratic opposition said Friday it was optimistic that 18-month talks between its leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the ruling junta are nearing a landmark stage where they will begin discussing a political transition.

Western governments have grown increasingly frustrated with the slow pace of the military regime's contacts with National League for Democracy (NLD) figurehead Aung San Suu Kyi, which began in October 2000.

NLD secretary U Lwin said that the talks, which have been stuck in a confidence-building phase, were

about to progress to a full-blown dialogue when they were derailed by the regime's announcement last month that it had foiled a coup plot by relatives of former dictator Ne Win.

"I think that it was about time that we might be able to go for the dialogue, then unfortunately we had this coup attempt," he told AFP in an interview at the party's ramshackle Yangon headquarters.

"Although the regime said there would be no problem, it really disturbed everything here. But anyway, the reconciliation process must go on."

U Lwin said that he and the rest of the NLD's Central Executive

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 ailing 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

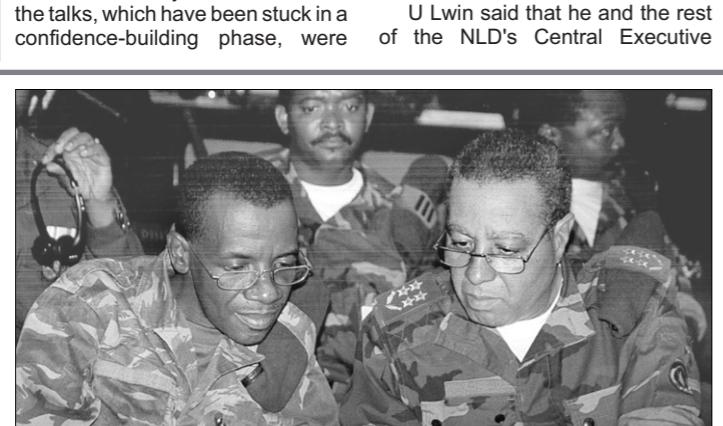


PHOTO: AFP

Armed forces chief General Armando da Cruz Neto (R) and UNITA chief-of-staff General Abreu Muengo Ukwachitembo "Kamorteiro" sign the peace accord at the National Assembly in Luanda on Thursday. Angolan President Jose Eduardo dos Santos and interim rebel leader Paulo Lukamba "Gato" witnessed the signing.