

Assam on high alert for ULFA's 23rd birthday

AFP, Guwahati

Federal troops in India's northeast-ern state of Assam were put on maximum alert Saturday on the eve of a possible violent day of protest called by an outlawed separatist group, officials said.

The United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), fighting for an inde-pendent homeland carved out of the oil- and timber-rich state, is observ-ing its 23rd birthday Sunday.

Police said ULFA militants made an abortive bid to blow up a crude-oil pipeline Friday night in western Assam.

"Troops have been put on a state of high alert, apprehending attacks by ULFA rebels on vital installations like crude-oil pipelines and railway tracks as a protest to mark their foundation day," a police spokes-man told AFP.

In the past, ULFA militants have blown up pipelines and attacked security personnel on or before the anniversary.

Thousands on queue to pay homage to Queen Mother

AFP, London

A queue two kilometres (more than one mile) long stretched along the banks of the Thames at sunrise on Saturday as thousands of people waited to pay their individual respects to the Queen Mother and file past her coffin lying in state in Westminster Hall.

Braving the early morning chill, the queue built up during the two hours the medieval hall in the Palace of Westminster was closed to the public in the early morning.

Authorities had originally planned to close it at 6.00pm (1700 GMT) on Friday, but changed their minds because of the number of people who were still waiting.

Fresh Kashmir violence leaves 12 dead

AFP, Srinagar

Eight Muslim militants, two security personnel and two civilians were killed in separatist violence in Indian-administered Kashmir overnight and Saturday, police said.

A separatist Muslim militant and an army soldier were killed during a seven-hour gunbattle at Wagub village near Sopore town, 55 kilo-metres north of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar, a police spokes-man said.

A civilian also died in the fighting, and one residential house was reduced to rubble in a fire set off during the encounter that ended Saturday morning.

Police said the militant was a Pakistani working with Lashkar-e-Taiba, one of the two Pakistan-based groups India blames for a December 13 attack on its parli-ament that killed 14 and sent tensions between the nuclear powers spiral-ing.

US wants due process in Pearl murder trial

AFP, Washington

The United States wants due process for the 11 people accused of kidnap-ing and murdering US reporter Daniel Pearl, the State Department said Friday.

"We will be following the trial closely. We expect there will be due process to the proceedings, in spite of quite understandable security concerns," State Department spokesman Philip Reeker said.

"We agree with the Pakistanis that justice must be done in this case, and we have been working together all along to assure that this objective is achieved. And we have had excellent cooperation with Pakistan on this."

Asia pledges close ties with EU to fight migration

AFP, Costa Teguisse

With more and more Asians expected to come to Europe, the 15-nation European Union and 10 east Asian nations are pledging closer cooperation in the fight against illegal immigration.

But exactly how they might be able to turn the human tide -- which in June 2000 cost the lives of 58 Chinese stowaways on the docks of the English Channel port of Dover -- remains to be determined.

In a landmark statement Friday at a meeting of interior ministers and senior officials in Spain's Canary Islands, the two regions called illegal immigration "a com-mon challenge" to be tackled through "partnership".

Palestinians ask Arabs to break ties with Israel

Israeli offensive may end next week: Peres

AFP, Cairo

The speaker of the Palestinian parliament in exile, Salim Zaanoun, called on Arab countries on Saturday to "break diplomatic, economic and cultural relations" with Israel.

The Palestinians want Arab countries "to break diplomatic, economic and cultural relations with the occupation government in Israel and to stop all forms of normalisation with it," Zaanoun told Arab parliamentarians shortly before the start of an emergency meeting of Arab foreign ministers.

Palestinian international cooperation minister Nabil Shaath told the ministers later that Arab leaders should spurn US Secretary of State Colin Powell if he refuses to meet Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat during his tour of the region.

Egypt, Jordan and Mauritania have diplomatic ties with Israel. Egypt and Jordan have said they do not plan to break their ties because they have obligations under the peace treaties with Israel, while Mauritania says it does not want to be the only Arab country to take such a decision.

Before the peace process was derailed by the Palestinian uprising that erupted 18 months ago, other Arab countries such as Morocco, Oman and Qatar exchanged trade and other ties with Israel.

Morocco last month received a delegation of Israeli members of parlia-ment.

Oman closed the Israeli trade office in Muscat shortly after the Intifada

erupted, but it was not immediately clear whether Qatar had actually closed a similar one in Doha after having announced it was closed in November 2000.

An employee said last May there were still Israeli staff there.

Zaanoun, the speaker of the Palestinian National Council, told the Arab Parliamentary Union inside the Egyptian parliament in Cairo that the Arabs were "not up to the demands" of the crisis they face.

Meanwhile, the Israeli army's offensive in Palestinian-controlled areas of the West Bank could end as early as next week, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said in an interview published here Saturday.

Peres told the Figaro newspaper that US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who embarks on a Middle East peace initiative on Sunday, would not arrive in Israel until the second half of next week.

Asked why the Israeli army was continuing its West Bank offensive despite a call by US President George W. Bush to withdraw its forces from Palestinian areas, Peres replied: "He (Bush) didn't say that the army had to withdraw immediately. He said he wanted it to withdraw, but he understood the need for Israel to defend itself.

"And the Secretary of State, Colin Powell, will not come here until the second part of next week," Peres told the Figaro daily.

Zimbabweans rally against Mugabe defying ban

AFP, Harare

Hundreds of Zimbabweans on Saturday defied a police ban on public demonstrations and took to the streets of the capital and other major cities to demand constitu-tional reforms.

To bypass the police ban on the demonstration, organised by pro-democracy group the New Constitutional Assembly (NCA), the protestors gathered in small groups in several different parts of Harare.

When the police dispersed the various groups, they simply reformed in another location, where their demonstration was again broken up by the security forces.

China demands clarification over Bush's 'Republic of Taiwan' remarks

AFP, Beijing

China has demanded clarification from Washington after US President George W. Bush publicly called Taiwan a country by the name of "Republic of Taiwan," a Chinese foreign ministry official said Saturday.

"We have asked the United States for a clarification," the official told AFP, adding the request was made Friday to the US embassy in Beijing.

In a speech Thursday at the State Department, Bush referred to Taiwan as a country while commend-ing US efforts in bringing China and Taiwan into the World Trade Organisation.

UK troops in Kabul come under fire

AFP, Kabul

British troops patrolling Kabul came under fire from a vigilante group Saturday in the second armed attack in less than a week, a spokes-man said.

The troops from the Royal Anglian regiment were patrolling in the west of the city at around 2:30 am (2200 GMT Friday) when they were fired upon from the top of a building, Lieutenant Tony Marshall said.

"We then returned fire and threw a cordon around the building," Marshall told reporters.

"The local police force was then called and they themselves cor-doned off the building and then went in and arrested two men from inside.

Muslims accepts talks with Tigers after apology

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main minority Muslim party Saturday accepted talks with Tamil Tiger rebels, who have apolo-gised for the ethnic cleansing of thousands of Muslims in their bid to create a separate state.

The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) said it was willing to engage in "constructive dialogue" with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) as part of Norway's initiative to broker peace on the island.

The Tamil Tigers have been fighting for an independent home-land in the island's northeast and evicted an estimated 100,000 Muslims from the northern penin-sula of Jaffna in 1990.

Since then, there had been bitter acrimony between the Tamils and Muslims, the two main minority

groups in this Sinhalese-majority country.

SLMC leader Rauff Hakeem said his party welcomed the shift in the LTTE's policy and was ready to open negotiations with the guerrillas next week to resolve their differ-ence.

"A change of heart on the part of the LTTE is very welcome," Hakeem said. "We are willing to engage in a sincere dialogue with the LTTE."

Hakeem said all previous attempts to politically end the blood-shed in the island failed because Muslims were ignored, but he hoped they would be consulted this time.

The SLMC in a statement Saturday announced Hakeem had been invited for a round of talks with the LTTE's chief negotiator Anton Balasingham next week to resolve their differences.

Americans fear ME crisis will hamper war on terror

AFP, Washington

A majority of Americans are con-cerned that the escalating Israeli-Palestinian conflict will hamper the US-led war on terror launched in the wake of September 11, accord-ing to three opinion polls made public Friday and Thursday.

But respondents offered no clear roadmap for a US role in quelling Mideast violence and restoring the shattered peace process in the region.

A Fox News/Opinion Dynamics poll showed 54 percent of those surveyed believed the United States needed to find a way to stop the Israeli-Palestinian bloodshed as part of its effort to win the war on terror.

A CNN/USA Today/Gallup survey produced a similar result: Fifty-four percent of those polled said the Israeli military offensive in the West Bank would make winning the war on terror more difficult, while 35 percent disagreed.



PHOTO: AFP

US President George W Bush (C) waves with British Prime Minister Tony Blair (R) along with First Lady Laura Bush (L) as Blair arrived at Bush's Prairie Chapel Ranch on Friday in Crawford, Texas. The Blairs joined the Bushes at their ranch for the weekend where they are expected to discuss the ongoing violence in the Middle East and the war on terrorism.

Use of N-arms against India a possibility: Musharraf

ANI, Islamabad

In a chilling admission of intent, Pakistan President General Musharraf has warned that he is prepared to use nuclear weapons against India in the event of war.

In an interview to a German magazine Der Spiegel to be pub-lished on Sunday, Musharraf made the startling comment that if the pressure on Pakistan becomes too great then "as a last resort, the atom bomb is also possible", says a report in the Guardian.

He blamed India for harboring a "superpower obsession" and "ener-getically arming itself". Both states tested nuclear weapons in 1998, the

first time Pakistan admitted its nuclear capability.

Musharraf's words about nuclear weapons are likely to cause con-ernation in New Delhi. Since mid-December the two countries have remained on a full military alert with thousands of troops deployed along their borders and diplomatic ties cut to a minimum.

In the run-up since the attack on the Indian Parliament, which New Delhi blames militants based in Pakistan, Washington has applied heavy pressure on India to stop its military from launching punitive strikes against Pakistan in retalia-tion.

Then in a groundbreaking

speech in January, Gen Musharraf appeared to appease India by pledging to curb Islamic militancy and to promote a moderate state. In recent days, however, his tone has shifted dramatically.

In another interview earlier this week with The Hindu newspaper, the general said that the military situation on the border was "extremely explosive". With unusu-ally frank language he warned the Indians not to treat his nation "as if we are some kind of scum, a very weak country which cannot handle itself".

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

Koreas agree to normalise frozen relations

AFP, Seoul

North and South Korea announced Saturday they had agreed to revive peace talks in a bid to put their relations back on track.

"Both sides agreed to bring back on track the inter-Korean relations that had temporarily been frozen," they said in a joint press statement carried by the North's official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

"Both sides agreed to respect each other and strive not to create tension, guided by the basic spirit of the historic June 15 North-South Joint Declaration."

The statement was released after South Korean presidential

special envoy Lim Dong-Won returned home from Pyongyang, where he met with the North's leader Kim Jong-Il and delivered a letter from President Kim Dae-Jung.

"Chairman Kim said he wanted to visit Seoul and meet President Kim again but there was no concrete agreement on this issue," Lim told reporters.

The statement also said the two Koreas will resume the reunions of families separated by the division of the Korean peninsula at the North's scenic Mount Kumgang on April 28.

They agreed to rejoin their severed cross-border railways and roads. Agreement was also reached

on building as early as possible new railways and roads along the east coast in addition to the already-agreed Sinuiju-Seoul railway link and the Kaesong-Munsan road.

"Both sides agreed to actively pursue inter-Korean dialogue and cooperation. It was agreed to hold the second meeting of the North-South committee for the promotion of economic cooperation in Seoul from May 7 to 10," it said.

The statement said the North had decided to send a delegation to inspect South Korean industrial facilities in May as already agreed upon.

US too busy to take on Saddam

AP, Washington

Forcing out Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has become a tricky propo-sition for the United States because of the war on the West Bank.

Just weeks ago, the Bush admin-istration was talking as though Saddam was a new target in the war on terrorism, and military action was an imminent possibility.

But the violence between Israelis and Palestinians has thrown the region into turmoil and further polarised the Arabs, which makes an American military move against

Iraq politically more unlikely, many analysts say.

Nevertheless, President Bush said in an interview Friday with a British television network that he is confident he can build a coalition to "deal with Saddam Hussein." He and British Prime Minister Tony Blair will discuss all options during Blair's weekend visit to Bush's Texas ranch, the president said.

"I made up my mind that Saddam needs to go," Bush said on the first day of talks with the British leader.

Blair was expected to press for

diplomatic rather than military action.

"It is absolutely not viable in the near future," for America to launch an attack on Iraq, said retired Rear Adm. Eugene Carroll, now an independent analyst in Washington. "The small region simply cannot contain two conflicts at the same time."

Even if the warfare between Israel and the Palestinians is contained, Carroll said, "keeping the peace will remain a top priority. An attack against Iraq could throw another match on the kindling."

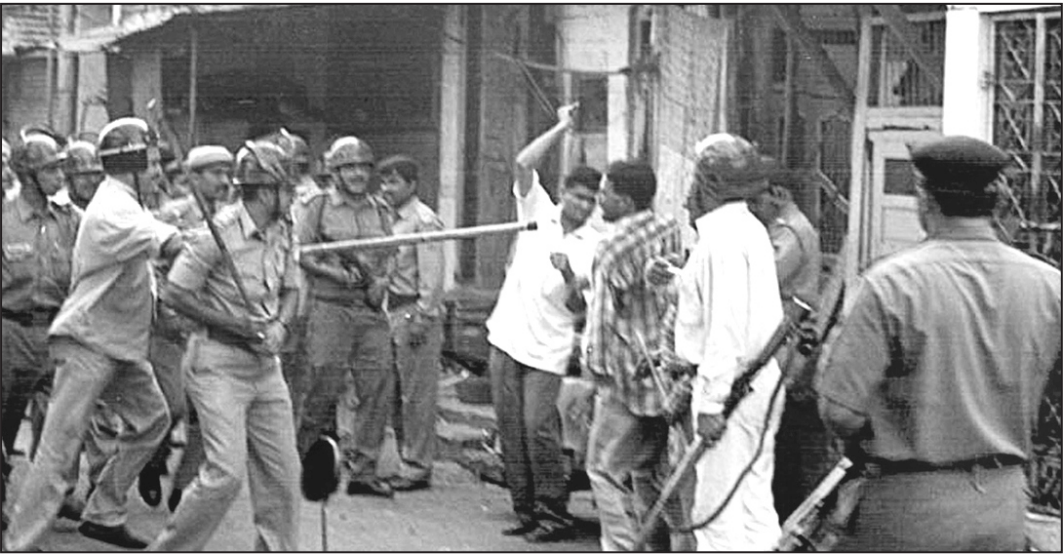


PHOTO: AFP

Indian police clash with rioters in Ahmedabad on Friday. Four people were killed, three in police firing, in fresh violence in the western Indian state of Gujarat following a visit by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee a day earlier.

Gujarat residents blame state govt, VHP for riots

4 more killed in violence

AFP, New Delhi

Two-thirds of residents in the trou-bled state of Gujarat believe the state government and a hardline Hindu outfit collaborated to target Muslims in India's worst communal riots in a decade, a poll said Saturday.

Around 72 percent of the people also said they still felt "unsafe and insecure," according to the poll conducted by Outlook magazine and the Cfore polling agency.

Some 65 percent said the hard-line Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP or city

World Hindu Council) and the state government "connived to target Muslims in the state" and 67 percent said police action was biased.

Gujarat has been a cesspool of communal fighting since a Muslim mob on February 27 torched a train carrying Hindu pilgrims and activists in Godhra town.

Fifty-eight people were killed in the train attack while around 750, largely Muslims, have lost their lives in the subsequent riots. Scattered incidents of violence still rock the state on a daily basis.

PTI adds: Four persons were

killed, three in police firing, in the violence that erupted late on Friday night in Vatva, Sabarmati and Karanj police station areas even as stabbing and arson continued in different parts of the city prompting the authorities to clamp indefinite curfew in Vatva and Sabarmati police station areas after midnight.

Police said on Saturday that five rounds were fired and several teargas shells burst to disperse violent mobs in which two persons were killed and four others injured in the late night incidents in Vatva labour area on the outskirts of the

advance.

"The roadmap did not include provision for such a referendum," said Commonwealth Secretary General Don McKinnon in London, referring to a plan Musharraf announced last year outlining a path to restoring democracy.

"While we are awaiting further details, the holding of a referendum on the extension of General Musharraf's term in office would therefore not appear to be in keep-ing with the roadmap announced by him."

Analysts said Musharraf was confident of his support among ordinary people as well as in the international community, where he has silenced concerns about his military takeover with tough action

against terrorism.

"Musharraf knows that political parties in Pakistan do not enjoy a high rating with the people and after the performance of the previous two governments... many agree that they were corrupt and guilty of mismanagement," said Khalid Mahmood from Islamabad's Institute of Regional Studies.

"He thinks that even if he does not have political support, the major-ity of people are not against him and he has a fairly good chance of winning.

It was to the common people of Pakistan that Musharraf directed his words during his 105-minute speech to the nation late Friday.



PHOTO: AFP

31 year old Akshinthala Sheshu Babu, dressed as India's "father of the Nation" Mahatma Gandhi, stand motionless in New Delhi on Saturday in an attempt to brake the Guinness Book of World Records. Babu, who has already broken the Limca Book of Records by standing absolutely motion-less for 25 hours and 1 minute, goes this time for 40 hours stand, without drinking or even take time off to go to the toilets.