

Manipur mulls truce with rebels

AFP, Guwahati

The government in India's north-eastern state of Manipur on Tuesday said it was considering a package of measures including suspending military operations against separatists in order to bring them to the negotiating table.

"We are contemplating offering certain relaxation in a bid to send a gesture of goodwill to enable the militant groups to come to the negotiating table for peace talks," Manipur Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh told AFP in Guwahati, the capital of the neighbouring state of Assam.

"The modalities and the nature of the relaxations are being worked out although we cannot say at this moment whether it would be a ceasefire or suspension of military operations."

There are at least 19 rebel groups operating in Manipur, with demands ranging from secession to greater autonomy and the right to self-determination.

Maoists bomb govt buildings in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist guerrillas in Nepal Tuesday bombed four government buildings in Kathmandu, a home ministry official said.

They attacked a state-run dairy which is close to the royal palace and British embassy, a telecoms office and two other government offices with home-made bombs.

"In these series of petrol bomb attacks, some vehicles were damaged but no one was killed or injured," the official said.

The attacks follow the recent arrest of two Maoist leaders who were on the army's "most wanted" list.

Female Maoist leader Rekha Sharma and her husband Krishna Dhoh Khadka were arrested after being discovered by the army in a house on the outskirts of Kathmandu.

Karzai moves to escort Afghan king back home

AFP, Kabul

Afghan interim leader Hamid Karzai left here for Rome Tuesday with a group of leading ministers to finally escort former king Mohammed Zahir Shah back home after 29 years in exile, officials said.

The 87-year-old's return has already been delayed twice, but Karzai's presence in the Italian capital will increase the likelihood that this time there will be no last-minute hitches.

Karzai was understood to have been accompanied by six cabinet members including Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah and Interior Minister Yunus Qanooni.

They will fly back with Zahir Shah on Wednesday, according to deputy Italian foreign minister Margherita Boniver.

7 schoolgirls burned to death in KSA car crash

AFP, Riyadh

Seven Saudi school girls were burned to death after their car was crushed by a runaway truck in the southern province of Assir, newspapers reported Tuesday.

The bodies of five girls were charred, two more died on the road to hospital while an eighth was in critical condition in hospital, Okaz daily said.

The car driver was also killed and the truck's driver, a Nepalese, and his assistant from Turkey, were badly injured.

The girls were heading to school in Rijal Almaa, some 1,000 km southwest of the capital Riyadh, on Monday when the out-of-control truck ran over their car.

Charles gets Sun certification to marry Camilla

AFP, London

Hailing what it said would be a "perfect match," Britain's tabloid Sun daily called Tuesday for Prince Charles finally to marry his long-term partner Camilla Parker Bowles.

In a front-page editorial, the Sun, the country's biggest-selling daily newspaper, said the time was now right for the heir to the throne to marry Parker Bowles.

"Britain has changed since the tragic death of Princess Diana," his former wife, the Sun said, adding that it sensed a shifting public mood.

"Camilla has been the rock to which Charles has clung in the dark days since the Queen Mum's death.



PHOTO: AFP

This picture released by the Israeli army shows Marwan Barghuti, head of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah faction in the West Bank, being arrested by Israeli soldiers in the West Bank city of Ramallah on Monday. Barghuti, one of Israel's most wanted men, is suspected by Israel of heading the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigades, an offshoot of Fatah which has claimed numerous suicide and other attacks against Israel.

Cracks in Indian coalition

AFP, New Delhi

The political fallout of sectarian riots in India's Gujarat state has opened a rift between the ruling Hindu nationalist BJP party and its coalition allies, but analysts say talk of the government's collapse is premature.

The focus of the confrontation is the Gujarat chief minister, Narendra Modi, who some of the BJP's key allies want sacked, accusing him of failing to curb the Hindu-Muslim violence that has claimed more than 800 lives.

The regional TDP party -- the coalition's largest ally -- has so far stopped short of withdrawing support from the government, but reiterated Monday its demand for Modi's dismissal.

Modi had tendered his resignation to a BJP leadership conclave at the weekend, but the offer was rejected with the party executive directing him to seek a fresh mandate through snap elections.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's government has the support of about 310 MPs in the 545-member lower house of parliament, and the loss of the 28 TDP votes would be a severe test of its majority.

The sectarian violence in Gujarat was triggered by the torching of a train carrying Hindu activists by a predominantly Muslim mob in the town of Godhra on February 27, which claimed 58 lives.

While Vajpayee described the consequent riots as a "disgrace" to the country and rebuked Modi's administration, his refusal to sack the chief minister has been angrily denounced by the BJP's political partners.

That anger was further fuelled at the BJP conclave when Vajpayee dropped his moderate Hindu nationalist mask and embarked on an astonishing tirade against Muslims, saying they were unable to live in

peace with others.

"It is happening in Indonesia, Malaysia, everywhere. They (Muslims) stay by threatening and frightening others," Vajpayee said.

The media slammed the prime minister's comments and the Times of India went on to describe his party's refusal to dismiss Modi as a "snub to the allies that 'Big Brother' BJP will not allow itself to be arm-twisted on an important political decision." Political analysts, however, said the BJP's partners were unlikely to go so far as to pull out of the coalition.

"The coalition is not as fragile as we think it is," said Kiran Saxena, a professor of political sciences at Jawaharlal Nehru University -- a sentiment echoed by Subhash Kashyap, an analyst from the Centre for Policy Research.

"The federal coalition as it exists today can be described as a marriage of convenience," Kashyap said.

India to begin clinical trials of anti-AIDS vaccine in 2003

AFP, New Delhi

India announced Tuesday that the first phase of clinical trials for an anti-AIDS vaccine being developed specifically for Indians could start in New Delhi in late 2003.

J.V.R. Prasada Rao, chief of the state-run National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO), said India had entered into key partnerships to ensure it was on a "path to developing a low-cost and effective" India-specific anti-AIDS vaccine.

"The Indian vaccine will counter the strain of HIV sub-type C that is prevalent typically in India. If all goes well, we are expecting to start the first phase of clinical trials in India by late 2003," said Rao.

"Developed countries like the United States are putting their resources into developing their own vaccines to combat the HIV virus sub-type A found com-

monly in their population.

"So we have to do everything in our power to win the race against time to come up with our own indigenous anti-AIDS vaccine."

India announced in March that it had 3.97 million HIV-positive cases, the largest HIV-positive population in the world after South Africa. Unofficial estimates put the figure at closer to five million.

Last year the health ministry and the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR), signed a pact with the US-based International AIDS Vaccine Initiative (IAVI), to develop an anti-AIDS vaccine appropriate for use in India.

"Dr Shekhar Chakraborty of the ICMR is working with Theron Biologicals in the United States to develop the construct of the six genes specific to the Indian AIDS virus," said Aman Gupta of the IAVI.

Global strategy for plant conservation adopted

REZAUL KARIM, The Hague

Delegates participating in the two-week Convention on Biological Diversity has adopted the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation and invited concerned international and regional organisations to endorse the strategy and to contribute to its implementation in order to promote a common effort towards halting the loss of plant diversity.

The strategy prepared by working group-1 emphasised that the targets should be viewed as a flexible framework within which national or regional targets may be developed, according to national priorities and capacities taking into account differences in plant diversity between countries.

The main objectives of the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation is to halt the current and continuing loss of plant diversity, provide a framework to facilitate harmony between existing initiatives aimed at plant conservation, to identify gaps where new initiatives are required and to promote mobili-

sation of the necessary resources.

It invited parties and governments to develop national and regional targets, and, as appropriate, to incorporate them into relevant plans, programmes and initiatives, including national biodiversity strategies and action plan. It stressed the political role of the strategy in contributing to poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

The meetings of the delegates emphasised the need for capacity building, particularly in developing countries, small island states, and countries with economies in transition, in order to enable them to implement the strategy.

It invites parties, other governments, the financial mechanism, and funding organisations to provide adequate and timely support to the implementation of the strategy, especially by developing country Parties with economies in transition, and in particular least developed countries and small island developing states.

It decides to review, at its eighth

and 10th meetings, the progress made in reaching the global targets and provide additional guidance in light of those reviews, as necessary, refinement of the targets.

It further decides to consider the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation as a pilot approach for the use of outcome targets under the Convention within context of the Strategic Plan and, also consider the wider application of approach to other areas under the Convention.

It requests the subsidiary body on scientific, technical and technological advice: (a) to take the targets into consideration in its periodic reviews of the thematic and cross cutting programmes of work of the Convention, (b) to develop ways and means within the Convention's thematic and cross cutting programmes of work for promoting implementation of the global strategy for plant conservation and for monitoring and assessing progress and to report to the next meeting of the Conference of the Parties.

Alarming rise in child prostitution in India



PHOTO: AFP

A young prostitute is checked for anaemia at a clinic in Kolkata on Tuesday. A sharp rise in the number of young village girls and boys being tricked into prostitution and slavery with false promises of good jobs in Indian cities is ringing alarm bells among child rights activists.

AFP, New Delhi

A sharp rise in the number of young village girls and boys being tricked into prostitution and slavery with false promises of good jobs in Indian cities is ringing alarm bells among child rights activists.

Jyotsna Chatterji, of the Delhi-based Joint Womens Programme, which is conducting a survey of victims of sexual exploitation, told AFP that anywhere up to 12 percent of children living in slums in Indian cities were sexually exploited.

"While interviewing children living in the slums we found that a vast majority of them had come from small Indian villages to the big cities looking for jobs," said Chatterji.



Gusmao wins East Timor election

AFP, Dili

Independence hero Xanana Gusmao has won East Timor's first presidential election, figures released Tuesday by election officials show.

The officials released figures from 12 of the territory's 13 voting districts showing Gusmao with a total of 267,615 votes to 57,536 for his sole challenger Francisco Xavier do Amaral.

Chief Electoral Officer Carlos Valenzuela announced the figures but said the result "cannot be considered final or official" until the Independent Electoral Commission's board has verified them.

"A vast majority of these street children admitted they had been sexually exploited. Contractors bring little kids from remote villages to the cities and use them for hawking newspapers and magazines... eventually they force them to sell themselves."

Chatterji said worsening economic conditions had left many families struggling, fuelling a supply of children into the sex trade.

"Young girls are most vulnerable, but so are boys," she added.

The state-run Central Social Welfare Board surveyed prostitution in India's six largest cities of Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta, Madras, Bangalore and Hyderabad and found an alarming 15 percent of prostitutes were children.

AFP, Jerusalem

US Secretary of State Colin Powell, set to begin a new round of talks with Israeli and Palestinian leaders on Tuesday, said he was making "progress" in working out an elusive Middle East truce.

"I think we're making progress and I look forward to furthering that progress over the next 24 hours," Powell told reporters as US and Palestinian officials worked on hammering out some form of a truce agreement.

He said the word "ceasefire" might not be included in the final statement, implying that it could be a less-formal non-aggression or cessation of hostilities pact.

"I'll be discussing all these issues with both sides in the next 24 hours," Powell said, hinting he could wrap up his peace mission in the same period.

But Israeli forces made new raids on Palestinian areas early Tuesday, storming into a Palestinian refugee camp in Nabulus and making a lightning in-and-out incursion in Tulkarem, a West Bank town Israel withdrew from last week.

Powell was to meet with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon

later Tuesday, and was expected to see Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat on Wednesday.

The Palestinians have insisted that there can be no truce deal until Sharon ends his army's assault on the Palestinians, launched March 29 in what he calls a campaign to crush the "terrorist infrastructure."

Sharon told US President George W. Bush on Monday evening that he would pull back his troops from some parts of the West Bank within a week.

But he warned it could take longer in Ramallah, where Arafat has been pinned down in his compound by troops and tanks, and Bethlehem, where around 200 Palestinian gunmen are holed up in one of Christianity's holiest sites.

Bush told Sharon that the withdrawal would "increase the prospects" for peace.

During a 15-minute telephone call to Sharon, Bush also "urged the prime minister to consider the human dimensions and to improve human conditions throughout the West Bank," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said.

Sharon had earlier told CNN: "In some towns we might be finished in two days, in another within a week."

Death toll in Indian sectarian riots could be 2,000: NGOs

AFP, Ahmedabad

Non-governmental organisations said Tuesday that the death toll from sectarian riots in the western Indian state of Gujarat could be as high as 2,000 -- far more than the official government figure of 850.

"From the figure that we have gathered from the various camps and other sources, we can easily quote a figure of minimum 2,000 dead in the recent riots," said Cederic Prakash, a Christian priest, who runs a Gujarat human rights NGO named Prashant.

"These of course would include those missing who are presumed dead," he said.

Some western diplomats in New Delhi said the death toll in the Hindu-Muslim riots could be even higher with the number of dead and missing nearing 3,000.

The riots broke out after a 1,000-strong mob -- believed to be Muslims -- torched a train carrying Hindu activists in the town of Godhra in Gujarat on February 27, killing 58.

In subsequent violence around 800 people have died, according to the local administration.

The National Human Rights Commission and opposition parties have charged the state government with failing to prevent revenge attacks in the immediate aftermath of the train attack.

The army was sent in to control the violence, but police said more reports of violence and arson were coming in every day with 10 deaths recorded on an average each week. More dead bodies were being recovered everyday, relief workers said.

Achut Yagnik, who works with a voluntary organisation engaged in relief work in Gujarat, said the number of dead was more than 1,000.

Government officials attributed the discrepancy in the death toll figures to the number of people missing.

"Those listed as missing in our list are considered dead by the voluntary agencies," said an official. "That is where the discrepancy comes in."

Salimbhai Sindhi, the elected head of Kediya village, more than 200 km from Gujarat's commercial capital Ahmedabad, said some of the dead may never be accounted for.

"When we went to Kediya village to look for the missing, all we found was burnt down houses.



PHOTO: AFP

Chinese investigator team leader Luan Dao search the mountain where an Air China jet crashed killing at least 124 people on Tuesday. Chinese and South Korean teams ordered the crash site to be cordoned off as rescuers struggled through burned wreckage to find clues while South Korean family members of victims of Flight CA129 (R) wait for news of their loved ones at Gimhae City Hall.