

11 killed as bldg collapses in Peru

AFP, Lima

Eleven people died and around 30 were injured Friday when a three-story building being used for classes collapsed in the southern city of Puno, Peruvian police said.

Authorities said the building was being used as an unauthorised school, preparing students for entry to the University of Puno, located some 1,200 km southeast of Lima.

Excess weight on the second floor of the building, built partly of adobe, contributed to the collapse, authorities said.

No equipment was available to lift the fallen walls from the victims, according to Puno fire chief Rolando Benavente.

US de-mining team in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

A US state department team of de-miners arrived in Sri Lanka Saturday to begin a four-month clearing operation, officials said.

The 26-member team left for the northern peninsula of Jaffna, 400 km north of the capital Colombo, to clear landmines and unexploded ordnance in the war-ravaged region.

US ambassador to Sri Lanka Ashley E. Wills said Friday he hoped the team would be able to make large areas of land for safe civilian use and help the residents of Jaffna return to normal life.

"This humanitarian de-mining team is a tangible expression of the United States' strong support for the current peace effort underway in Sri Lanka," Wills said.

'Terrors may pose as journalists to kill king'

AFP, Bagram Air Base

Terrorists posing as journalists could try to assassinate former Afghan king Mohammed Zahir Shah, a British military spokesman warned Saturday following intelligence reports that al-Qaeda extremists were plotting to kill the ex-monarch.

"There has been intelligence that an assassination squad posing as media could threaten the king," Lieutenant Colonel Paul Harradine told a press briefing at this base north of Kabul.

Harradine urged reporters to be

Leader, activists of pro-Taliban group jailed in Pakistan

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan has jailed the leader of a banned pro-Taliban militant group and 29 colleagues for seven years for sending fighters to Afghanistan, a government official said on Saturday.

Sufi Mohammad, leader of the Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat Mohammadi (TNSM) was sentenced last month after a trial held in jail in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) town of Dera Ismail Khan, deputy jail superintendent Bin Yamin told Reuters.

Kashmir CM slams attack on civilians

AFP, Srinagar

Indian Kashmir Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah Saturday condemned a recent spate of gun attacks on civilians and warned the culprits will face harsh punishment.

"All such culprits will be brought to book and handed down such a punishment that they will think twice before indulging in such activities again," Abdullah said in a statement.



PHOTO: AFP

A Palestinian girl cries as she sits on the rubble of her home at the Jenin refugee camp on Friday. Much of the camp was completely destroyed by the Israeli military and Palestinians accuse Israel of perpetuating a massacre in the northern West Bank refugee camp. Residents have braved the Israeli military cordon around the camp to return to their homes and search for survivors and the dead.

Arafat offers to try Israeli minister's killers

REUTERS, Ramallah

Yasser Arafat offered Friday to put the suspected killers of far-right Israeli Tourism Minister Rehavam Zeevi on trial in a Palestinian court, an aide to the Palestinian leader said.

"The Palestinian side accepts and welcomes the call by President Bush to submit those accused of killing Zeevi to the Palestinian justice (system) since they are subject to Palestinian jurisdiction under Oslo peace accords," Mohammed Rashid, an Arafat adviser, told Reuters.

Rashid, speaking from Arafat's besieged headquarters in Ramallah, said the suspects had been moved to the presidential compound from a prison in Nablus in February for investigation.

Israel has said the army will besiege Arafat's headquarters until the suspects are handed over, along with a Palestinian official suspected of involvement in an intercepted Iranian arms shipment Israel says was for the Palestinian Authority.

Bush said on Thursday Zeevi's suspected assassins, who belong to the radical Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, should be brought to justice, but did not say whether they should be tried in a Palestinian or an Israeli court.

Meanwhile, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's offer to try the killers of an Israeli cabinet minister in a Palestinian court is unacceptable, a spokesman for Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said Saturday.

"It's out of the question," the spokesman Ranaan Gissin told AFP.

"They will surrender, or we will take them one way or the other," he said.

Arafat wrote to the US administration saying he was ready to "immediately" put on trial the killers of Israeli tourism minister Rehavam Zeevi as soon as the situation in Ramallah was "normalised," a senior Palestinian official told AFP Friday.

The letter said the killers "are under inquiry now and we will present them immediately to the court in

Ramallah after the situation in Ramallah becomes normal."

But Sharon's spokesman insisted the killers be tried in an Israeli court.

White House spokesman Ari Fleischer told reporters Friday that Washington wanted the five, suspected in Zeevi's October assassination, brought to justice -- but not necessarily turned over to Israel.

The move was presented by Washington as a way of hastening the end of the Israeli siege on Arafat's headquarters in Ramallah.

The Palestinian official argued that bringing Zeevi's killers to justice before lifting the siege, would only give Israel a further excuse to attack Arafat's headquarters.

Zeevi was assassinated last October in an east Jerusalem hotel in retaliation for the murder in August of Abu Ali Mustapha, the radical secular leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

FBI warns of possible terrorist attacks on US banks

AFP, Washington

The US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has issued a new security alert warning banks in the northeastern United States that they could be the targets of an imminent, but unspecified, terrorist attack.

"The United States government has received unsubstantiated information that unspecified terrorists are considering physical attacks against US financial institutions in the Northeast -- particularly banks -- as part of their campaign against US financial interests," the FBI said in a statement Friday.

"While the FBI has no information about any specific plot or threats to any specific institution, out of an abundance of caution, an alert has been transmitted to law enforcement and to financial institutions."

It was the second warning of its kind made by federal officials this week. The first was prompted by an anonymous telephone call received Sunday from the Netherlands through Canada, which later turned out to be a hoax.

The alert focused on Washington and the states of Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont and Virginia.

The FBI said the decision to issue the alert followed was made after if consultations with the Department of Justice, the Office of Homeland Security and the Treasury Department.

Attorney General John Ashcroft explained the US government was not asking the banks to close, or urging people to stay away from them.

"We are alerting law enforcement, financial institutions, and the American people to be vigilant, and to be aware of anything that appears suspicious," he said in a statement.

The attorney general said he was not aware of any specific threat to any financial institution in particular, but he pointed out that during the war against terrorism, the United States had developed numerous sources of new information and was constantly analysing and assessing intelligence received from them.

Ashcroft did not disclose what these sources of new information were. But a US official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said the information that prompted the warning came in part from Abu Zubaydah, the suspected chief of al-Qaida operations, who was captured in Pakistan and turned over to US authorities earlier this month.

The official emphasised, however, that the FBI was accurate in qualifying the information it had received was unsubstantiated.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said last week Zubaydah was "a fountain of knowledge" about al-Qaida's operations.

Meanwhile, FBI Director Robert Mueller, speaking at a gathering Friday in San Francisco, said that in the wake of the September 11 terror attacks on US targets, the bureau has wrestled with whether and how to issue alerts to local law enforcement.

"The last thing we want to do in any shape or form is have the public more distressed about the possibility of an attack," he said.

Mueller said a terrorist threat against West Coast suspension bridges last winter came from a person who walked into an overseas embassy, telling what ended up being a fabrication.

Mueller said the threat in early November said the bridges would be bombed or attacked in the next 36 hours by terrorists who were using a university as a launching pad.

Fernandes tours relief camps in Gujarat

AFP, Ahmedabad

Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes Saturday visited several relief camps in the riot-hit western state of Gujarat, local officials said.

Fernandes, who arrived here for a four-day visit on Thursday, is preparing a report on the relief and rehabilitation measures being implemented by the Gujarat administration and voluntary agencies, to be submitted to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

Around 97,000 people are living in 101 relief camps in the state following recent Hindu-Muslim riots.

Many lost their homes through arson attacks and others are refusing to return home for fear of further attacks.

The violence was triggered by an attack on a train carrying Hindu activists by a 1,000-strong mob -- believed to be predominantly Muslim -- in Gujarat's Godhra town on February 27.

Fifty-eight people were killed in the train attack, while more than 800 people -- mostly Muslim -- died in the ensuing riots, according to

government figures.

But voluntary agencies have put the death toll between 2,000 and 3,000.

During his visit to Gujarat Fernandes was also expected to visit Godhra.

On Saturday police said the situation in Gujarat was "improving" with no incidents of violence reported during the past two days.

Local authorities holding examinations for school children said higher attendance was recorded on Saturday than during the past two days.

Muslim students had said they were too scared even to attend their exams, fearing further mob violence.

"We have reported higher attendance by the Muslim students today (Saturday)," Gujarat's Education Minister Anandiben Patel told AFP.

On Friday Fernandes said soldiers deployed in the state to curb the riots would stay as long as they were needed by the state government.



PHOTO: AFP

Two sex-workers shout slogans against Chief Minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, during a demonstration in Kolkata on Saturday. More than one thousand sex-workers from different "red light" areas of the city marched on the streets demanding immediate removal of Modi allegedly responsible for the sectarian violence in Gujarat state.

Indians afraid of me: Musharraf

'Referendum is not election, only endorsement'

PTI, Islamabad

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has said Indians are afraid that he will become stronger with the referendum to be held later this month and maintained that the border tension could be de-escalated only by New Delhi with the withdrawal of its troops.

"Indians are definitely worried over the government in Pakistan getting stronger. They think I will become stronger, hence, their intentions against me. But they would never succeed," Musharraf said making a brief reference to India during an interview to the 'News' published in Islamabad on Saturday.

Referring to the tension along the Indo-Pak border due to amassing of troops by the two countries, he said India should de-escalate tension in South Asia as it was responsible for escalation.

Terming the escalation as a "dangerous situation",

Musharraf said he sees a very little softness in New Delhi's intentions as there is no change in the concentration of Indian forces on borders.

On the issue of US intervention in the stand-off between the South Asia nuclear rivals, he said: "The US always deals Pakistan and India diplomatically without giving any warning or threat."

Meanwhile, Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf has said the referendum to be held on April 30 will not be an election but only an endorsement of his stay in power and promised to follow constitutional provisions in the presidential polls after the October general elections.

"Let me take my decision. I think it (referendum) is a constitutional step and the constitutional provisions will be followed on the question of Presidential election," Musharraf, under mounting criticism from home and abroad for his referendum plans, said in an interview to local daily News published on Saturday.

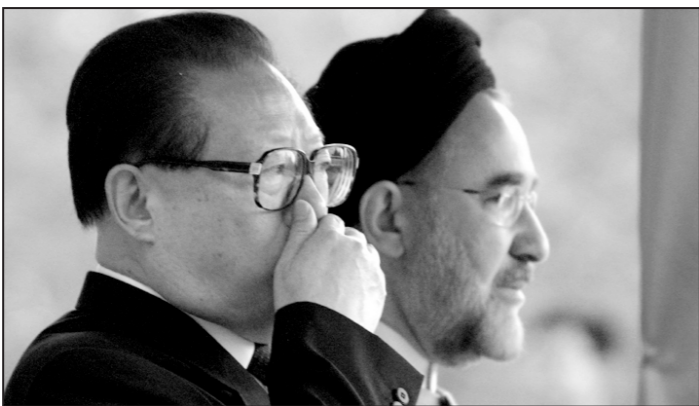


PHOTO: AFP

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami (R) welcomes Chinese President Jiang Zemin in Tehran on Saturday. Zemin is on an official visit to Iran along with 180 delegates, to discuss the political situation in the region and to develop stronger economic ties.

Jiang-Khatami begin talks

AFP, Tehran

Chinese President Jiang Zemin began talks Saturday morning with Iranian President Mohammad Khatami following an official welcoming ceremony at the capital's Saad-Abad palace, officials said.

Jiang arrived in Iran from Tunisia on Thursday night, accompanied by a political and business delegation of 180 people, and spent the day Friday touring.

He is expected to look to boost the two countries' political and economic ties and also to review the volatile situation in the Middle East.

NPT signatories urge India, Pak to join pact

PTI, United Nations

Signatories to the Nuclear non-Proliferation Treaty, preparing for a major review of the document in 2005, have urged India and Pakistan to join the pact while calling on the US and China to ratify the Com-prehensive Test Ban Treaty.

India considers the NPT flawed as it discriminates between nuclear states and non-nuclear states. Besides, it does not give any time-frame for the nuclear states to eliminate such arms.

The Preparatory Committee has also asked Israel and Cuba to become signatories to it. India, Pakistan and Israel will have to give up nuclear weapons if they join the NPT as they are not recognised nuclear weapon states.

Although the US has signed CTBT, the Bush Administration has said it would not send it to the Senate for ratification.

The Committee also expressed concern over the US decision to withdraw from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with Russia. This together with the American decision to build a missile shield could lead to a new arms race, it warned.

A report, approved by the Preparatory Committee after a two-week meeting, urged Iraq, which is a signatory to the NPT, to open the country to the United Nations weapons inspectors.

The meeting was attended by 137 of the 187 state parties. The second session of the Committee will be held from April 28 to May 9 next year in Geneva.

Press slams deadlock at parliament over Gujarat

AFP, New Delhi

Indian newspapers Saturday criticised the government and the opposition after a week when both houses were adjourned for five consecutive days.

A dispute over the strife-torn state of Gujarat has prevented any parliamentary business from being carried out since parliament reconvened on Monday following a three-week recess.

Each day the speaker has been forced to adjourn proceedings after opposition MPs as well as some allies of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's ruling coalition have stormed the well demanding a special debate and a vote on recent sectarian riots in the western state.

They also want the dismissal of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi for his alleged failure to contain the violence that has claimed

more than 850 lives, according to government figures.

A meeting Friday between government and opposition leaders called by the deputy speaker of parliament P.M. Sayeed failed to resolve the deadlock.

The government has refused to allow a vote on the Gujarat issue because it says it is a matter for the state government rather than the federal parliament.

But the Hindustan Times said Saturday that the government did not want a vote in parliament because it was afraid it would lose.

"The Vajpayee government's reluctance to face a censure motion ... is explained by its uncertain hold on the coalition partners," the Hindustan Times said in an editorial Saturday.