

Pak police detain 80 protestors

AFP, Quetta

Pakistani police have detained some 80 people after a protest by thousands of government employees demanding higher salaries, a senior police officer said Tuesday.

"We have taken into custody around 80 people. They were in violation of the law," the officer said, preferring not to be named.

He said government employees from Quetta, capital of southwestern Baluchistan province, went on strike and staged a protest sit-in on main roads Monday.

"They incited the people to stage the demonstration despite an official ban on taking out processions," he said, adding that those detained included some of their leaders who were trying to disrupt law and order.

Pearl murder trial resumes in Pakistan

KARACHI, April 23 (AFP) - The trial of four men accused of the abduction and murder of US reporter Daniel Pearl resumed in a makeshift prison courtroom here Tuesday, officials said.

Journalists were not allowed inside the court for security reasons, but chief prosecutor Raja Qureshi is expected to call more witnesses including police officers.

All four of the accused, including British-born Islamic militant Sheikh Omar, who allegedly planned the crime, pleaded not guilty Monday. Seven other suspects have been charged but remain at large.

Dalit girl gangraped by Brahmins in Rajasthan

AFP, Jaipur

A 14-year-old girl belonging to India's Dalit, or low-caste Hindu community, was gangraped by four upper-caste men from her village in the northern Indian desert state of Rajasthan, police said Tuesday.

Local police official A.G. Ram said the teenager was abducted from outside her home in Guda Vaas village on the outskirts of the state capital Jaipur by four upper-caste Hindu Brahmins.

"The young Dalit girl was kidnapped on the night of April 5 and brutally raped for three days by four upper-caste Brahmins living in her village," said Ram. "They finally

Russian steam roller kills 14 in bus crash

AFP, Moscow

Fourteen people were killed and another seriously injured Tuesday when a steam roller fell on to a bus in the central Russian region of Bashkiria, crushing the passengers to death, Interfax reported.

A truck transporting the steam roller was attempting to overtake the bus on a highway 120 km north of the city of Ufa when the accident occurred.

Kashmir govt bans sale of army uniforms

AFP, Srinagar

The authorities in Indian Kashmir Tuesday banned the sale or production of army clothing apparently in a bid to prevent Muslim militants misusing fake military uniforms.

"No shopkeeper, tailor or any other agency could sell or use material for making army combat uniforms in any form whatsoever," an order by a district magistrate said.

"This order will remain in force for two months with immediate effect," it added.

The ban applies to Srinagar, Kashmir's summer capital, and is likely to be extended to other districts.

Lightning kills 5 in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Five people were killed and seven injured in southern Nepal after being struck by lightning, police said Tuesday.

"At least five people, including a woman were killed, after lightning struck them while they were working in two southern districts," a spokesman said.

"Four people were killed and three others injured when the lightning struck a hut at Arnama in the Siraha district where workers at a local kiln were sleeping on April 21," police said.

On the same night, lightning killed a woman and injured four other people in Hariaun village in Sarlahi district.

'Musharraf assumed power illegally'

Pak SC hearing on referendum resumes

AFP, Islamabad

The Pakistani Supreme Court was told on Tuesday that military ruler General Pervez Musharraf assumed the presidency illegally and was trying to turn democracy on its head.

The court is hearing three petitions from opposition parties and the Supreme Court Bar Association challenging the constitutionality of a referendum due April 30 to extend Musharraf's term as president.

Farooq Hassan, a lawyer for the fundamentalist Jamaat-i-Islami party, told the court on the second day of the hearing that Musharraf assumed the presidency unlawfully after he removed elected president Mohammad Rafiq Tarar in June last year.

"It is a negation of the whole parliamentary democracy when the chief executive comes and assumes the power of the president. He has destroyed the system and buried parliamentary democracy," Hassan said.

Citing an earlier court ruling, he

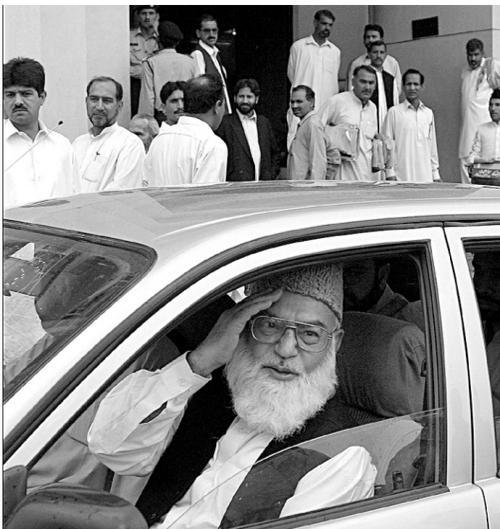
said "any attempt to dislodge a constitutional functionary under the garb, pretext, device or strategy of law would be guilty of treason".

"So far the culprits have escaped punishment. There must be an end to this," he said, referring to repeated military intervention in Pakistani democracy.

Musharraf was the chief of the armed forces when he toppled then prime minister Nawaz Sharif in a coup in October 1999, promising sweeping reforms to end corruption and revive "genuine democracy".

He has promised to abide by an earlier supreme court ruling that he hold general elections by October this year and restore parliamentary rule, but he insists that he must remain president to ensure that Pakistan does not again come under the rule of corrupt politicians.

In a nationally televised press conference last week, Musharraf quoted article 48 of the constitution which states that the president can call a referendum to decide "any matter of national importance".



Qazi Hussain Ahmed (C), Chief of Pakistan's main religious-political party Jamaat-i-Islami (JI), waves to supporters while leaving the Supreme Court building on the second day of the hearing in the petitions challenging presidential referendum in Islamabad on Tuesday. The country's Supreme Court began hearing three petitions to decide whether President Pervez Musharraf's referendum to extend his term of office is unconstitutional.

US ponders next steps in ME

Senate shows rock solid support for Israel

AFP, Washington

The United States on Monday pondered next steps in its Middle East peace efforts as President George W. Bush prepared to meet two influential Arab leaders this week after Israel's withdrawal from most Palestinian areas.

Washington kept its comments to a minimum: again calling for Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to do more to quell violence and urging Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to complete the troop pullbacks.

The State Department noted that William Burns, the top US Middle East diplomat, remained in the region after Secretary of State Colin Powell's visit there last week but declined to say what specifically he was doing.

"Burns is ... following up for the secretary's mission, talking about the withdrawals, the need for

Palestinian action against terror and violence," spokesman Richard Boucher said.

"What we've been looking for from both of the parties is for the Israelis to proceed on this path of withdrawal and we're pleased that they've been doing so," he told reporters.

"We also think there's more that Chairman Arafat can do, even now, with the institutions under his control," Boucher said after Burns met with the Palestinian leader at his besieged headquarters in Ramallah.

One of Burns' goals is mediating an end to the two remaining stand-offs between Israeli troops and Palestinians, the first at Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity where some 200 Palestinian gunmen have been held up for 21 days and the second at Arafat's Ramallah headquarters where Israel is

demanding the surrender of people linked with the October killing of its tourism minister.

Boucher said the United States understood both sides' positions.

"I don't have an answer for you, but those things need to be resolved," he said. "We understand the positions that both sides have taken in that regard, but this is clearly an issue that needs to be resolved."

Aside from those remarks and welcoming the creation of a UN team to investigate this month's fighting in the Palestinian refugee camp at Jenin, the United States had little of substance to say about the Middle East.

Boucher said the United States regarded the work of the three-person UN panel as important to clear up the facts surrounding the battle at the camp.

"We do think it's important to

support the secretary general's initiative in cooperation with the government of Israel and Palestinian Authority to develop accurate information about the situation in Jenin," he said.

Meanwhile, US Senate leader Tom Daschle warned Yasser Arafat on Monday that a Palestinian state could never be founded on blood spilled by suicide bombers, reflecting rock solid congressional support for Israel.

In a speech to members of the powerful US-Israel lobby, Daschle accused Arafat of doing too little to thwart radicals behind suicide attacks in Israel, and voiced doubts whether he could ever again be seen as "a partner for peace."

"Israel has always had fair-weather friends. But what it needs now is four-week friends, and as long as I'm the majority leader of the United States Senate, we will be a friend to Israel in fair weather and in

Musharraf to quit if he loses referendum

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's military ruler General Pervez Musharraf, who is seeking five more years in office through a controversial referendum, said on Monday he would not stay in power against the wishes of the people.

"If the people don't want me, I will go tomorrow, there is no question," he said in an interview with a private Pakistani television channel, Indus Vision.

Musharraf, who has said he is confident he will win the April 30 referendum, made the statement when asked whether he might follow the example of previous military rulers who broke their pledges and clung to power.

Musharraf seized power in an army coup in October 1999. He said he had not broken any promise so far and would stick to his word in the future.

A week ago, he had declined to say whether he would step down if he lost the referendum, which most of Pakistan's political parties

oppose and has been challenged before the Supreme Court.

"Let us see the result ... then you will see action," he told an April 16 news conference, when he also said he had taken a calculated risk he would not have done if there was a risk of losing.

He said on Monday the main question in the referendum was whether Pakistanis wanted him to stay in power.

His critics say the referendum would go against a Supreme Court ruling that he hand over to an elected government by next October.

"I have never broken my promise even once till now," the general said. "I have tried not even to deviate by a day on whatever I say."

He said he had fulfilled his promise to set up local councils by last August and would hold parliamentary elections in line with the Supreme Court deadline by October.

The general, whose support for the US-led international coalition

against terrorism won him praise in the West, also denied that Washington was influencing his policies, including key military appointments.

"Not at all, I don't think (there is) any interference from the United States in our policies," he said.

"Not once, and you have to believe me, not once has anyone told me who you are making as the vice-chief of army staff, or chairman (of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee) or the air chief or the naval chief."

Musharraf removed or sidelined several army general when he supported US-led military strikes in Afghanistan last year after the September 11 attacks on the United States.

"I am doing it on my own," he said and called accusations of US interference a fallacy.

"We are looking after our own interests here. We are doing things which are in the interest of Pakistan," he said.

India warns foreign missions not to meddle in Gujarat affairs

HINDUSTAN TIMES, New Delhi

India will lodge official complaints with the governments of countries whose missions here have been leaking to the local Press selective contents of their diplomatic telegrams on the Gujarat riots.

"Gujarat is our domestic issue and no country should use the media to pander to domestic lobbies back home," Nirupama Rao, the spokesperson for the Ministry of External Affairs said. "While diplomats of foreign missions are free to write their reports based on their impressions, the practice of leaking is not acceptable," she said.

While Britain has tactfully

avoided confirming reports based on a leak of its telegram on Gujarat meant for its foreign office in London, the delegation of the European Union has denied the contents of a "report" attributed to it in a national daily on Monday. A spokesman said: "The contents of the newspaper report is solely the responsibility of its author."

Rao did not elaborate on what she meant by "domestic lobbies" being pandered by these governments. However, sources said the Blair Government had used the leak to placate its Asian-origin constituents of its interest in the welfare of people of a particular community.

South Block was particularly

peevish by the interview given by the Finnish Foreign Minister, Erkki Tjomoja, who, in an interview to a paper on Saturday, expressed concern at the developments in Gujarat. He enjoined the official EU view and disclosed that he had personally asked External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh about it.

Government sources said the Vajpayee Government has been stung by international criticism for its handling of the Gujarat problem. It has instructed the MEA to keep daily contact with the Gujarat Government so that its point of view gets better representation in the international media.

6 out of 23 Serb war crimes suspects to surrender

AFP, Belgrade

Only six of 23 Serbs wanted by the UN war crimes tribunal agreed to surrender to Yugoslav authorities by a Tuesday deadline, the government announced.

The six did not include the two suspects most wanted by the UN court in The Hague: Bosnian Serb wartime leader Radovan Karadzic and his military commander, Ratko Mladic, who now face arrest and extradition along with the other 15 fugitives.

Those who agreed to give themselves up included former Yugoslav army general Dragoljub Ojdanic and ex-Yugoslav deputy prime minister Nikola Sainovic, both charged with

atrocities in Kosovo, according to a government statement sent to AFP.

The others were Milan Martić, Mile Mrksic and Vladimir Kovacevic, indicted for war crimes in Croatia, and Momcilo Gruban, a Bosnian Serb indicted for war crimes committed in Bosnia, it said.

"Those persons must appear before the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague in an agreed period of time," the statement said, giving no precise timetable.

The Yugoslav justice ministry will on Wednesday deliver indictments against those who have refused to "voluntarily cooperate" with the tribunal, opening the way for their arrest and extradition.



French anti-riot policemen try to arrest youths early Tuesday at the Place de la Bastille during riots which followed a peaceful march through the streets by some 10,000 protesters angered and alarmed at the electoral success of far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen.

Pope 'deeply grieved' by sex abuse scandal

AFP, Vatican City

Pope John Paul II told US cardinals Tuesday that he was "deeply grieved" over the paedophile crisis affecting the Roman Catholic Church by which priests have "caused such suffering and scandal to the young".

"People need to know that there is no place in the priesthood and religious life for those who would harm the young," the pontiff said.

Addressing the cardinals during the first session of a two-day meeting to discuss the crisis, the pope said the Church was being viewed with distrust "because of the great harm done by some priests."

He expressed his solidarity with the victims of sexual abuse and their families "wherever they may be".

But he defended the Catholic Church, saying that a "generalised lack of knowledge of the nature of the problem and also at times the advice of clinical experts led Bishops to make decisions which subsequent events showed to be wrong."

He said that the Church must be confident that "this time of trial will bring a purification" to the entire Catholic community.

The 81-year-old head of the Roman Catholic Church said "immense spiritual and social good" of a vast majority of priests in the United States should not be forgotten.

Annan appoints Jenin fact-finding mission

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan named three eminent persons Monday to uncover the facts of the Israeli army's assault on the Jenin refugee camp and said Israel had promised to cooperate with them.

"In my discussions with senior Israeli officials, who say they have nothing to hide, I have been given an assurance that the team will have access to everyone they want to see," Annan told a news conference.

Israel has dismissed as propaganda Palestinian claims that its armed forces massacred about 500 people, half of them women and children, during nine days of fighting

in the camp.

Finland's former president Martti Ahtisaari, who will head the fact-finding team, said: "Hopefully we will be on the spot sometime in the latter part of this week."

He said it was too early to say how long it would take to "develop accurate information regarding recent events in Jenin" -- words used in a UN Security Council resolution on Friday welcoming Annan's decision to set up the team.

The United States agreed to support the resolution on condition the team would report to Annan and not act under a mandate from the council, which Israel regards as biased against it.

Maoists' strike brings Kathmandu to a halt

AFP, Kathmandu

A nationwide general strike called by Maoist rebels Tuesday brought life in Nepal's capital to an almost complete standstill, witnesses said.

Traffic on the streets of Kathmandu was thin despite a government appeal for people to ignore the five-day strike call.

Government offices were open as were some private offices, but many firms closed fearing violent attacks if they did not heed the strike, even though the army was patrolling the streets.

Schools were closed and just a few small shops remained open on the first day of the action, while people walked or cycled to their offices as public transport was largely unavailable.

The few vehicles on the roads had their number plates covered to prevent identification, as rumours were rife that people who defied the strike call and operated cars or buses would be dealt with severely by the rebels later.

The government had warned that public transport operators would lose their permits if they obeyed the strike call and promised compensation if vehicles were damaged by Maoists.

Officials have also said that anyone trying to help enforce the strike would be shot.

Deputy home minister Devendra Raj Kandel said: "Stringent actions will be taken against those who defy the government's order to operate schools and transport services during the strike."



A rickshawpuller (R) takes a nap while armed security personnel patrol the streets on the first day of a general strike called by Maoist rebels in Kathmandu on Tuesday. Business and education sectors were badly affected by the planned five-day nationwide general strike.