

Indian govt confident of winning vote on Gujarat

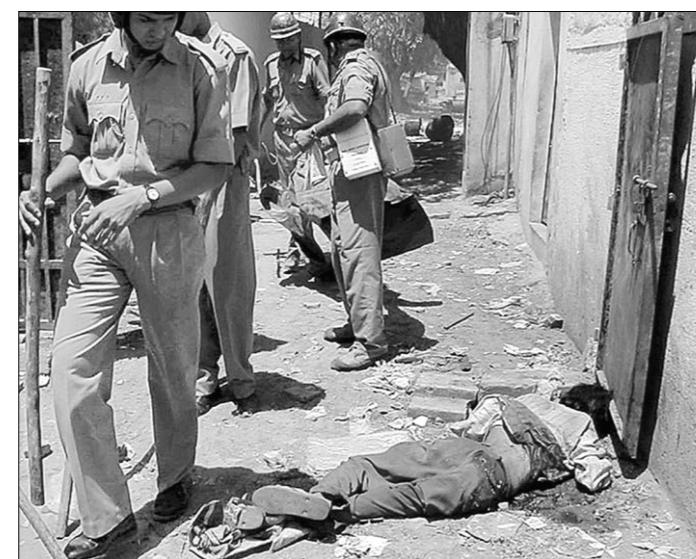
AFP, New Delhi

The Indian government is confident of winning a vote on an opposition motion criticising the government over sectarian violence in Gujarat, its parliamentary affairs minister said Wednesday.

"There is no grain of truth in the opposition claim that we will lose the vote. I am sure our allies will have no problem in voting with the government," Pramod Mahajan told reporters.

The Hindu nationalist BJP party of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had opposed a debate on the Hindu-Muslim violence in Gujarat, which has killed some 850 people, saying it was a matter for the state government.

But the opposition had demanded the legislature discuss



Security forces on Wednesday walk past the body of a stabbing victim killed on Tuesday night in the Khanpur area of Ahmedabad. Seven people were killed on Tuesday in sectarian violence in the western Indian state of Gujarat, bringing to 30 the number of deaths in the past two days.

Maoists burn down country home of Nepal PM

Strike cripples Himalayan kingdom for second consecutive day

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels have burned down the country home of Nepal's Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba, officials said yesterday, as a strike called by the ultra-leftists brought much of the kingdom to a halt for a second day.

Rebels late Tuesday surrounded the prime minister's residence at Assingi, 490 kilometres (300 miles) west of the capital Kathmandu, said Narendra Raj Sharma, the chief administrator of the Dadelkura district.

"A group of Maoist terrorists ordered the housekeeper to go out and then blew up Mr. Deuba's house," Sharma told AFP by telephone.

"We have sent a team of policemen to check the extent of the damage," Sharma said.

The attack came at the start of a five-day general strike the Maoists have called to press Deuba to resume talks, which the rebels hope would lead to the abolition of the constitutional monarchy.

Deuba, whose government held three rounds of fruitless talks with the rebels last year, has ruled out new negotiations until the Maoists lay down their arms.

The prime minister has instead reached out for help from abroad against the Maoists, fashioning the crackdown on the far-leftists as part of the international "war on terrorism."

US President George W. Bush's administration Tuesday said it would ask Congress to provide 20 million dollars in military aid to the Himalayan kingdom.

"We reiterate our support for the right of Nepal to safeguard its citizens against these guerrillas within the framework of its own constitution," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

Most of Kathmandu was shut down for second day yesterday, despite government warnings to residents not to observe the strike.

Streets were deserted, with only some office workers riding bicycles to work and children playing in the streets. Almost all shops and markets remained shuttered.

However, some public transportation resumed service after staying off the roads Tuesday. The government has warned transport operators they could lose their licences if they observe the strike.

Euro MPs tell all about signs of war crimes at Jenin camp

AFP, Jerusalem

The spokesman for a group of 19 Euro MPs visiting the West Bank said on Tuesday that the Israeli army's assault on the Jenin refugee camp "shows all the signs of a war crime."

Francis Wurtz (Group of the European United Left), who heads a delegation from nine parliamentary blocs representing 10 European Union (EU) countries, said the situation was "totally intolerable."

He said the group had come to the West Bank to show that a "majority of the European Parliament and of European public opinion

harshly criticize the policy of (Israeli Prime Minister Ariel) Sharon."

He said: "I believe that Sharon is a great misfortune for the Palestinian people and the Israeli people. He promised peace and security and he has led to war and insecurity."

Another member of the group, Swedish MEP Per Gahrton described the camp, devastated during a nine-day battle earlier this month, as "ground zero; there is nothing left."

The delegation condemned the "systematic destruction" of the infrastructure in the occupied Palestinian territories, "the humani-

tarian tragedy" and the gravity of the situation in the region, calling for an peacekeeping force to be deployed there.

They also denounced as "illegal" the arrest last week of Marwan Barghouti, the West Bank chief of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement and a leader of the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation.

Meanwhile, a Greek C-130 plane with 12 rescue workers on board was due to leave Athens for Israel early on Wednesday on an aid mission to Jenin and Nablus in the West Bank, the civil protection services said.

Over 1,000 Indians jailed in Pakistan: Indian FM

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh told parliament Wednesday that 812 Indian civilians and 263 Indian fishermen were in Pakistani custody.

Singh also told the lower house of parliament that 54 Indian prisoners of war were languishing in jails in Pakistan.

"The government has been taking all possible steps for the early release and repatriation of all Indian prisoners in Pakistan's

custody," Singh said.

Relations between India and Pakistan are currently tense following an attack on India's parliament that New Delhi blames on two Pakistan-based Islamic militant groups.

Hundreds of thousands of troops from both sides are massed along their shared borders.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars, two over the disputed region of Kashmir.

No progress in US-Russia disarmament talks

AFP, Moscow

US and Russian negotiators cut short the latest round of disarmament talks yesterday after apparently failing to make significant progress in finalising a key accord due to be signed by presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin next month.

US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control John Bolton left the Russian capital a day ahead of schedule as Deputy Russian Foreign Minister Valery Loshchinin conceded the negotiations were "not proceeding very easily."

Bolton had been expected to hold

a further day of talks with his Russian counterpart Georgy Mamedov aimed at hammering out a major deal to cut each country's nuclear arsenal by a third to between 1,700 and 2,200 warheads by 2012.

The US embassy in Moscow said Bolton had "not precipitately cut short the talks in any way" but conceded that the negotiations were at a "sensitive" stage after the fourth round of discussions since late January.

Bolton voiced hope Tuesday that the disarmament deal would be ready for Bush and Putin to sign at a May 23-26 summit here, but the Russian side warned after his departure that the latest round of talks had failed to settle key disputes.

A senior Russian defence ministry official told ITAR-TASS that the fourth round of talks had "achieved no real progress" over Moscow's insistence that the two sides should not only decommission but eliminate both warheads and delivery vehicles.

"Russia and the United States remain committed to their original positions. We believe that a future strategic arms reduction treaty, just as START-1, should provide for the elimination of both warheads and vectors," the unnamed official said.

Pakistan counts millions as cost of referendum

AP, Islamabad

Gen. Pervez Musharraf's national referendum to extend his presidency by five years is proving a costly exercise for this poor South Asian nation, already burdened by \$38 billion in foreign debt.

Opposition forces describe the outlay for the April 30 vote as wasteful, but Musharraf maintains it is a vital extra step on the "roadmap to democracy" he laid out since seizing power in a 1999 bloodless coup.

Simply organizing 100,000 polling stations will cost more than 1.7 billion rupees (dlrs 28.3 million),

the Election Commission said. That doesn't count the planned massive deployment of security forces, including the army, for which no figure is available. Also unknown is the heavy amounts spent by the government and its supporters for advertising.

Photographs of a saluting Musharraf in a traditional long "kamiz" shirt adorn government-paid newspaper ads saying, "I need your strength, the strength of 140 million people."

Private companies, groups and political parties have placed similar ads. State-run television carries

frequent commercials urging voters to cast their ballots for "real democracy."

Fancy, colorful banners and giant hand-painted billboards showing Musharraf in army fatigues or a western suit line the key roads and markets in every main city and town. Vans mounted with loud speakers urge support for him.

"Such huge expenses on an unconstitutional exercise are a total waste," said Raja Zafar-ul Haq, a leader of ousted premier Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League. "It's a drain on the economy."

Caspian summit ends in failure

AFP, Ashkhabad

A historic Caspian Sea summit ended in stalemate Wednesday as the leaders of the five coastal states failed to sign an agreement on dividing the sea's vast oil and gas riches.

The summit's host, Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov said the two-day talks had foundered on the question of redrawing national boundaries disputed since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 created three new Caspian states.

"There was no concrete decisions on determining the border zones of each state. When we started talking about this, we disagreed. In determining a median line, we also disagreed," Niyazov told a post-summit press conference.

"We could not take on ourselves a decision to sign a resolution," Niyazov told journalists at the end of a summit that failed to settle the decade-long row between Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan.

"Nobody dared to take responsibility and sign some documents," Niyazov said, adding: "We will need to work on the Caspian for a long time yet."

Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev said the five nations had been unable to sign even a declaration because they were completely unable to settle their rival claims to the oil and gas resources, thought to be the third largest in the world.

Two killed in California train crash

AFP, Placentia

Two people were killed and about 265 others injured Tuesday when a one-mile-long (1.6 kilometer-long) freight train ploughed head-on into a crowded commuter train in California, officials said.

The passenger train was heading into a station when it was struck by a freight train," said Sharon Gavin, spokeswoman for the commuter train operator Metrolink.

Witnesses said the three-carriage passenger train had stopped when the freight train slammed into it head-on with devastating consequences, sending bloodied passengers flying through the air.

US police officers survey the wreck of a commuter Metrolink train and a mile-long freight train which crashed head-on during the rush hour on Tuesday morning in Placentia, California. Officials investigating a head-on collision between a commuter train and a freight train in the US state of California said that two people were killed in the crash.

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Pope appeals for end to siege of Bethlehem

AFP, Vatican City

Pope John Paul II made a new appeal Wednesday to Israel and the Palestinians to put an end to an "inhuman" 22-day-old siege of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

"We continue to pray to the Lord so that a solution to this inhuman situation is found, and to reach with everyone's contribution the peace we want by this region which is so dear to the hearts of all the faithful," the pontiff told pilgrims at his weekly audience in Saint Peter's Square.

Both sides were due to meet later in the day to try to negotiate an end to the siege of one of Christianity's holiest sites, after talks broke down on Tuesday.

Malaysia to whip illegal migrants

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia has amended a law to include public whipping for immigrants convicted of entering the country illegally for the first time, a senior official said Wednesday.

Currently, the Immigration Act allows whipping only for those committing the offence for the second time.

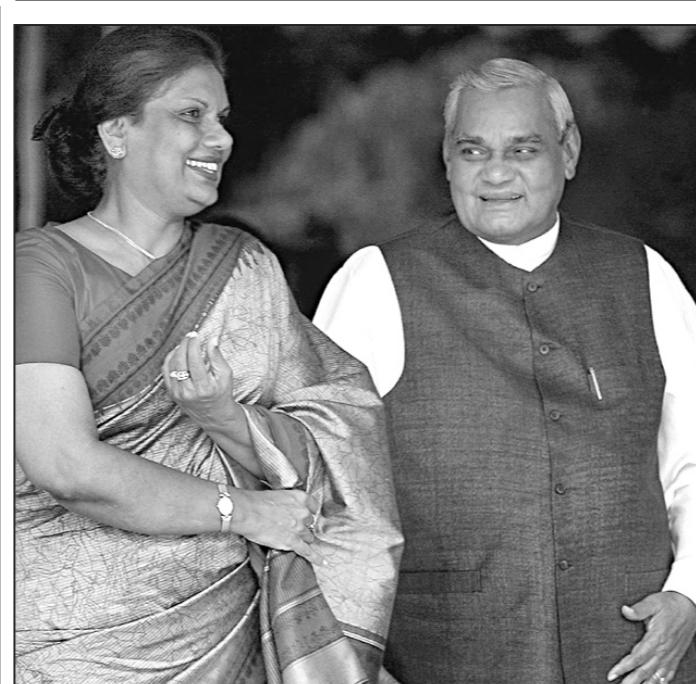
Immigration department director-general Mohamad Jamal Kamdi said a bill to amend the Act to provide whipping for first-time offenders was awaiting royal assent.

UN envoy to meet Suu Kyi

AFP, Yangon

UN envoy Razali Ismail is expected to meet with democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi later Wednesday as pressure mounts for the military regime to release her after 18 months under house arrest.

Razali, a Malaysian diplomat who has acted as the catalyst for a fledgling political reconciliation process in Myanmar, is due to arrive at Aung San Suu Kyi's lakeside residence in the early evening, diplomats said.



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) speaks with Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga (L) before a meeting in New Delhi on Wednesday. Kumaratunga, who is holding talks with Indian leaders, is on a one week-long private visit to India.

Child marriage gets a boost in India

AFP, New Delhi

Nearly 3,000 children have been married off during the Hindu festival of Rama Navami in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh, The Hindu newspaper reported on Wednesday.

Most of the children were between four and 13 years old and did not even know the name of the partners to whom they were being married, it said.

The mass wedding Sunday was brought to light by a human rights organisation, Forum for Fact-finding, Documentation and Advocacy, which visited the area.

State authorities said they were investigating the report as they had heard of the mass marriages in the tribal-dominated areas of the state.

"The girls are sent to their in-laws' houses as soon as they attain puberty," said Subhash Chandra Mohapatra, project executive of the human rights group.

"The child mortality rate is high and women often die of various

diseases," he added.

Although it is illegal for girls in India to wed before the age of 18 and boys before they turn 21, child marriages persist in many parts owing to the force of tradition and social pressure.

According to activists fighting under-age marriages, girls and boys can face deep emotional and psychological damage from the loss of their adolescence and education, and forced sexual relations.

"It is a common practice for children to get married in many rural and tribal areas as it has been continuing down the ages," a senior official in Chhattisgarh told AFP.

"It is very difficult to stop it totally."

But the federal government says it is cracking down on forced marriages of children, a common practice especially among the nomadic tribes in India's desert state of Rajasthan and other tribal and low-caste Hindu communities.



Protestors scuffle with police during an anti-Henry Kissinger demonstration outside the Royal Albert Hall in London, where Kissinger was to address a business seminar on Wednesday. The demonstrators demanded that the former US secretary of state be arrested for war crimes and human rights violations in Latin America and Southeast Asia.

PHOTO: AFP