

Journalist jailed in Iran for 'spreading lies'

AP, Tehran

An outspoken journalist has been sentenced to nearly two years in prison for 'spreading lies against Iran's Islamic establishment,' his wife said yesterday. A Press Court found Ahmad Zeidabadi guilty of insulting Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and publishing lies against the Islamic establishment for the purpose of disturbing public opinion, his wife, Mahdiyeh Mohammadi, said.

Bush asks Arafat to act as UN demands access to Jenin

Israel army kill 9 more Palestinians during Hebron incursion

AFP, Crawford

US President George W. Bush issued a stern warning Sunday to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat as he welcomed Israel's lifting of a siege on Arafat's Ramallah headquarters, saying "now is the time for him to step up." Even as he welcomed a US-brokered deal to free Arafat from the month-long restrictions placed on him by Israel, Bush warned that much work needed to be done, particularly by the Palestinian leader, if peace is to be achieved. "Chairman Arafat must now seize this opportunity to act decisively in word and deed against terror directed at Israeli citizens," Bush said. "This is a time for all of us to commit to fight terror and to promote peace in the Middle East."

on Saturday," the spokesman said in a statement. He said the operation would be "limited in time" and was "not aimed at the Palestinian Authority but only at the terrorist infrastructure in this town." The overnight occupation was completed by dawn. Some 20 Palestinians suspected of taking part in anti-Israeli attacks were rounded up and the town was placed under curfew. Palestinian security officials in Hebron said seven people had been killed and some 20 other Palestinians wounded in the operation. Meanwhile, nine Palestinians were killed by the Israeli army during its occupation early Monday of the autonomous West Bank town of Hebron, Palestinian security officials said. One of the dead was Rajai Abu Shami, an activist of the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, the principal armed group connected to Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, the sources said. The others were policemen or unarmed civilians but could not be precisely identified because they could not be recovered. Around 20 other inhabitants of Hebron, the largest city in the southern West Bank, were wounded in exchanges of fire between troops and Palestinians.



Motor cycle riders pass by huge portraits of Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf on the eve of the Presidential referendum in Lahore on Monday while a man takes away ballot boxes on his shoulder to get to polling stations ready for Tuesday's referendum in Karachi. Preparations for 30th April referendum of Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf are going on despite protests from opposition parties across the country.

Gulshan Kumar's killer gets life-term

AFP, Mumbai

A Mumbai court handed down a life sentence Monday to a hired gunman who shot dead Indian music mogul Gulshan Kumar five months ago. Judge M.L. Tahaliyani sentenced Abdul Rauf Dawood Merchant on five separate counts connected to the gunning down of Kumar in August 1997. Merchant had been convicted last week, following a four-year trial. He belonged to an underground gang contracted to kill Kumar. Tahaliyani had acquitted all 18 other accused in the case for lack of evidence, including Ramesh Taurani who owns an audio cassette manufacturing firm. Police had alleged that Taurani was involved in the murder because of his business rivalries with Kumar. Kumar, who was shot in broad daylight outside a temple in suburban Bombay, held sway over the "Bollywood" film industry and produced a number of successful Hindi movies in the early 1990s.



Bahuja Samaj Party (BSP) leader in Uttar Pradesh state, Mayawati (L), talks with Uttar Pradesh Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Governor Vishnukant Shashtri (R) in Lucknow on Monday. Mayawati said as per the broad agreement reached between the BSP and BJP for government formation in Uttar Pradesh, a coordination committee would be set up under the Chairmanship of the Chief Minister.

BJP-led govt faces censure motion today over Gujarat

REUTERS, New Delhi

India's embattled Hindu nationalist-led government faces a crucial parliamentary vote Tuesday over its handling of the country's most religious violence in a decade. Defeat on the opposition-sponsored censure motion would not force the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government's resignation as it is not a confidence vote. But it would be another embarrassment for the BJP, still smarting from a string of regional election defeats and increasingly worried about the damage to its international image caused by the violence, analysts said. The vote also comes as India remains locked in a tense military border standoff with nuclear-foe Pakistan that military analysts say could still erupt into conflict.

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Tornadoes kill 5 in US

REUTERS, Washington

Several towns across the eastern United States were clearing up debris on Monday from a swarm of tornadoes that killed at least five people, injured dozens more and left a trail of destruction in their wake. More than 15 tornadoes were spawned on Sunday by a series of powerful spring thunderstorms that drenched states from Kentucky in the south to New York in the north, and from Missouri in the west to Maryland in the east. In one of the worst-hit towns, La Plata, Maryland, about 20 miles (32 km) south of Washington, two people died and more than 70 were injured as a twister touched down on Sunday evening, ripping roofs off homes and stores, obliterating some houses, tearing down power lines and toppling trees. Authorities imposed an overnight curfew on the small town of 6,500 people as emergency crews searched homes for trapped residents amid splintered homes, overturned cars and downed power lines. "There are sections of downtown La Plata that are wiped out," said local fire department official Marc Bashoor, who added that there was significant damage in the downtown area and in a residential community. "There are literally houses destroyed, businesses torn apart," he said.

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Anti-Muslim riots pre-planned by BJP: HR Watch

AFP, New Delhi

Members of India's ruling BJP party were directly involved in the killings of hundreds of Muslims in the western state of Gujarat, which were pre-planned and could spread throughout the country, Human Rights Watch charged Tuesday. The New York-based rights group said the state government of Gujarat, led by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party, was engaged in a "massive cover-up" to hide its role in two months of communal violence that has left at least 900 people dead. "What happened in Gujarat was not a spontaneous uprising; it was a carefully orchestrated attack against Muslims," Smita Narula, Human Rights Watch's senior South Asia researcher, said in the 75-page report. "The attacks were planned in advance and organised with extensive participation of the police and state government officials," she said. Police officials who sought to protect Muslims were removed from their positions, while some police even led distraught victims directly into the hands of their killers, the rights group said.

At the height of the riots between February 28 and March 2, thousands of saffron-clad Hindu hardliners descended on Muslim neighborhoods "guided by voter lists and printouts of addresses of Muslim-owned properties - information obtained from the local municipality." "This is a crisis of impunity," Narula said. "If charges against members of these groups are not investigated and prosecuted accordingly, violence may continue to engulf the state and may even spread to other parts of the country." The rights body said mass graves have been found around Gujarat and that the death toll from the riots could be as high as 2,000. Human Rights Watch quoted a woman at a mass grave in Gujarat's commercial capital Ahmedabad who washed female victims' charred and mutilated bodies before burial. "Some bodies had heads missing, some had hands missing, some were like coal - you would touch them and they would crumble. I washed 17 bodies on March 2; only one was completely intact. All had been burned, many had been split down the middle," the woman said. Mansoori Abdulbhai, a 53-year-

old resident of Ahmedabad's Gulmarg Society neighborhood, said 19 members of his family were killed. "First they cut people so they couldn't run and then they set them on fire. One or two women were taken inside and gang raped. After five hours the police came and brought us here (to a mass grave site). It was so well-planned," he said. Citing witnesses and police reports, Human Rights Watch said the BJP was directly involved in the anti-Muslim violence along with several affiliated Hindu revivalist groups, including the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council), Bajrang Dal and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. The riots broke out February 27 after a Muslim mob torched a train carrying Hindu hardliners, killing 58 people. Most of the victims since have been Muslims, up to 100,000 of whom languish in displacement camps. Opposition parties have been demanding that Gujarat's Chief Minister Narendra Modi be sacked, but the BJP has refused to accept his resignation, calling on him instead to seek a new mandate in early elections.

1.85b-yr-old volcano found in Amazon

AP, Rio de Janeiro

Scientists from the University of Sao Paulo discovered a giant extinct volcano in the middle of the Amazon rain forest. O Folha de S Paulo newspaper has said. Satellite images led to suspicion that the 22-kilometre diameter area surrounded by 500-metre-high hills could be the remains of a giant extinct volcano crater. Caetani Juliano form the university's Astronomy Institute told the newspaper. Mineralogical samples confirmed that the crater close to Itaituba in Para state, about 3,200 kilometres northwest of Rio de Janeiro, is Brazil's oldest volcano.

Lanka mounts recruitment drive amid peace moves

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka Monday announced its first major military recruitment drive since reviving a Norwegian-backed initiative to end the island's decades-old war with Tamil rebels. The army's deputy chief of staff, Major General Lohan Gunawardena, said it hoped to enlist 5,000 men during a one-month period from May 8 as part of a plan to rebuild depleted units of the military. It will be Sri Lanka's first nationwide recruitment campaign undertaken during a ceasefire with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who have been fighting government forces for decades. Gunawardena said the prospect of peace was expected to attract

larger numbers to the army unlike in the past when recruitment drives failed with no sign of an end to the bloodshed. He said the 5,000 men will fill vacancies and that amnesties were being considered for thousands of deserters to bring the army up to its full strength of 120,000 men and women as approved by parliament. "Earlier a lot of parents did not want their children to join the army," Gunawardena said. "With the ceasefire and a prospect of peace, we think we will get more young men who want to have a career in the military." The military is also raising the educational qualifications and reducing the upper age limit for new recruits as part of a plan to raise standards within the army, Gunawardena said.

Geelani stays away from Hurriyat meet

PTI, Srinagar

In the back-drop of heightened war of words between senior leaders of the Hurriyat Conference, the executive committee of the conglomerate met on Monday to "iron out the growing differences" among the various constituents of the 23-party amalgam through fire-brand Jamaat-e-Islami leader Syed Ali Shah Geelani was "conspicuous" by his absence. Though the exercise was seen as an attempt by Hurriyat Conference Chairman Abdul Gani Bhat to "keep his flock" together,

he termed the meeting as "informal" which was convened to discuss the prevailing situation in the Jammu and Kashmir. "There are differences among Hurriyat leaders but once we sit together differences will be sorted out," Bhat told reporters before the commencement of the meeting at the Hurriyat headquarters. The meeting is seen as an attempt to defuse the war of words between two former amalgam Chairmen Mirwaiz Umer Farooq and Geelani over the participation in a meeting at Sharjah by the former along with another senior Hurriyat leader Abdul Gani Lone.

Iraq vows to defend itself against US offensive

REUTERS, Baghdad

Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister Tareq Aziz said Monday Iraq was ready to defend itself against any U.S. attack on the country. It seems they (U.S.) want to resume their wide aggression against Iraq and commit another crime as the (one) they committed in 1991, Aziz told reporters in Baghdad. "The Iraqi people and Iraqi leadership are prepared to defend themselves," he said during a tour of a Baghdad shelter bombed during the 1991 U.S.-led war that ended Iraq's seven-month occupation of Kuwait. The New York Times reported Sunday that Washington was contemplating a major air campaign and ground invasion early next year to topple the government of President Saddam Hussein.

The White House said President Bush has no military blueprint on his desk for toppling Saddam, but that the ouster of America's Gulf War nemesis is a top policy goal. White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said the Pentagon had "multiple contingency plans" for dealing with Iraq but that Bush had made no decisions on what course of action to take. Bush has made no secret of the fact that he intends to move against Saddam at some point, publicly branding Iraq part of "an axis of evil," together with North Korea and Iran, countries he says could form a deadly alliance with terrorists by sharing weapons of mass destruction. Iraq says it has no weapons of mass destruction. Iraqi authorities brought five days of celebrations for Saddam's birthday to a climax Sunday with massive parades designed to show his popular support.

Chechen rebels confirm Arab warlord's dead

AFP, Moscow

A radical wing of the Chechen rebel leadership confirmed Monday that the notorious Arab warlord Khattab was dead, in a statement to the separatist news agency Kavkaz-Center. "The death of the Chechen commander has been officially confirmed," the news agency said, citing the "command headquarters of the Chechen Mujahideen," adding that Khattab was poisoned by a letter delivered to him on March 19. Russia's intelligence agency FSB, the former KGB, said last week it had killed the shadowy guerrilla leader, believed to have been born in Jordan or Saudi Arabia and known by only by the single name Khattab, during an undercover operation.

Rumsfeld in Russia for disarmament talks

AFP, Moscow

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld arrived in Moscow on Monday for talks with his Russian counterpart Sergei Ivanov about the anti-terror campaign in Afghanistan and nuclear disarmament. Rumsfeld flew into the Russian capital after a whirlwind tour of four Central Asian states, including Afghanistan, during which he rallied support among the frontline states participating in the US-led military operation. But in addition to briefing Ivanov on the outcome of his four-day tour,

Rumsfeld was expected to discuss a major disarmament deal which US President George W. Bush and Russian leader Vladimir Putin hope to sign at a summit here next month. US Under Secretary of State John Bolton would take part in the Rumsfeld-Ivanov meeting after flying into Moscow late Sunday, the US Embassy here said. The Russian and US negotiators are trying to reach a strategic arms cuts agreement ahead of the May 23-26 summit cutting their nuclear arsenals by a third to between 1,700 and 2,200 warheads by 2012.

6 more killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Five Muslim rebels and a woman were killed in separatist-linked violence in Indian-administered Kashmir, police said Monday. Muslim separatist militants ambushed an army convoy Monday in the village of Chechikote near the highway township of Awantipora, 30 kilometers south of Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar. Army police and soldiers returned fire and a woman was killed and four civilians injured in the gun-battle, police said. The army sealed off the area and launched house-to-house searches for militants. The attack came in the same area where an army convoy was ambushed by a landmine earlier this month. Three civilians were killed and two dozen others injured in that attack. Police said Indian troops shot dead five militants around Kashmir overnight. One of the slain militants was identified as Farman Ullah, the "battalion commander" of Lashkar-e-Taiba, one of the two Pakistan-based groups blamed by India for a December 13 attack on its parliament that sent tensions spiralling in South Asia.

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15 wedding guests killed in E India

AFP, Ranchi

At least 15 members of a marriage party were killed and 12 injured in a road accident in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand, officials said Monday. The accident took place Sunday in Palamu district when a truck carrying the wedding guests lost control and hit a tree. Four women and two children were among the dead. The injured have been admitted to a hospital where the condition of three was stated to be serious.

US in talks to prevent Afghan fighting

AFP, Bagram Air Base

US forces are holding more talks with local leaders in Afghanistan's eastern Paktia province in a bid to prevent another outbreak of factional fighting, officers said Monday. Coalition forces have also uncovered another large weapons cache in southern Afghanistan as they continue their hunt for Taliban and al-Qaeda extremists, they said. But US Major Bryan Hiltfert said "the focus is on Paktia and Paktika provinces" in the eastern mountains bordering Pakistan, where the extremists are believed to be trying to regroup to wage a guerrilla war. He said US personnel were continuing to liaise with officials in the Paktia capital Gardez, where more than 100 people are feared dead or injured after a heavy rocket attack on Saturday. Provincial strongman Padsha

Khan, an ethnic Pashtun militia leader opposed to the UN-backed interim cabinet's choice of provincial governor, had earlier launched a major assault on the town but was pushed back. Afghan officials in the town said Monday a temporary ceasefire had been struck and there had been no fighting since Sunday afternoon. The fighting was the worst outbreak of factional violence in Afghanistan since Khan launched his last failed bid to storm the town in January. US and allied Afghan forces have a small operation base on the outskirts of Gardez, a major staging point for Operation Anaconda against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in March. US Captain Steven O'Connor told reporters a large number of rockets had been uncovered in the south of the country.



East Timor independence leader and president-elect Xanana Gusmao (R) shakes hand with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi (L) during the latter's arrival at Comoro Airport in Dili, East Timor on Monday. Koizumi arrived in the East Timor capital for a brief visit to congratulate the territory on its impending independence on May 20. The Japanese leader is the first foreign head of state to call on president-elect Gusmao since the former rebel leader won a landslide victory in presidential elections on April 14.