

US looking for new ambassador to Pakistan

AFP, Washington

The US State Department is looking for a candidate to replace its ambassador to Pakistan, after she concluded that she could no longer be separated from her two young daughters, a senior official said Wednesday.

Wendy Chamberlin has just flown back to Pakistan after returning to Washington to look for alternative employment, said a senior US official.

"We are looking to arrange an assignment for her in Washington to resolve her family situation. At this point I can't tell you how long she'll be back in Pakistan," the official said on condition of anonymity.

Pilot killed as Philippine jet hits school

REUTERS, Manila

An ageing Philippine air force jet on a training exercise with U.S. anti-terror forces crashed into a school north of Manila on Thursday, killing the pilot and injuring 16 other people on the ground.

Six rooms at the school in Mababac town were levelled by the plane, but a greater disaster was avoided because it was closed for the summer holidays.

At least 16 people, including a teacher, the school janitor and two children, were taken to a local hospital, rescue officer Daryl Manalang told Reuters. Three of them were treated for serious burns, he said.

Bombs go off in Karachi: Boy killed

AP, Karachi

Two bombs exploded Thursday, rocking the restive port city of Karachi for a second day. The latest blasts killed a 12-year-old boy and wounded six other members of his family as a strike shut most markets and businesses here, police said.

During the night groups of masked men stopped at least 32 vehicles, including five passenger buses, ordered everyone outside and set the vehicles on fire, police said.

Gusmao meets with Megawati

REUTERS, Jakarta

East Timor's president-elect Xanana Gusmao met the leader of old foe Indonesia on Thursday, saying he expected President Megawati Sukarnoputri would attend the territory's independence celebrations this month.

"I came here to invite (her) personally on behalf of East Timor. We believe Mrs. President will go in May," said Gusmao after meeting Megawati for about 30 minutes at her residence in the plush, central suburb of Menteng.

Whether Megawati attends the celebrations or not, the meeting itself was arguably a step toward better relations between East Timor and the country that ruled it -- at times with an iron fist -- for 24 years.

Algerian prison fire kills 19 inmates

AFP, Algiers

At least 19 inmates died and six were injured when a blaze started by prisoners who torched their mattresses ripped through the Sarkadij prison in the Algerian capital, state television said Wednesday, quoting Justice Minister Ahmed Ouyahia.

Angry and shocked relatives of the prisoners besieged the gates of the prison Wednesday morning, many of them wailing women demanding news of their loved ones inside.

Innovative urban revitalisation for Kabul

Aga Khan Cultural Services (Afghanistan), a newly established affiliate of the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, will lead the revitalisation of a significant but currently degraded urban area in central Kabul around the historic Timur Shah Mausoleum, says a press release.

Under an agreement signed in Kabul recently with the Government of Afghanistan and the Municipality of Kabul, the Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC) will help provide area planning, conduct physical and social surveys, mobilise technical and financial support and undertake conservation work on the historic urban fabric of the City of Kabul in District 1, as well as landscaping and environmental improvement.

The Agreement also foresees the provision of micro-credit to the population of the designated preservation zone by a national micro-finance institution being considered by the Aga Khan Development Network.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Members of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's personal security guards celebrate in front of his headquarters in Ramallah, early Thursday. Israeli tanks and troops pulled out of the compound housing Arafat's headquarters, ending a one-month siege of the defiant Palestinian leader.

Hizbul offers truce to Delhi 16 killed in Kashmir clashes

REUTERS, Srinagar

One of the main groups fighting Indian rule in Kashmir said on Thursday it would declare a truce if New Delhi initiated a "genuine" peace process to end the 12-year insurgency in the Himalayan region.

Hizbul-Mujahideen's offer is its second in two years and comes amid a long military face-off between India and Pakistan over the disputed region.

"Once India takes an initiative with good intentions, she will find us 10 steps ahead of her one step. We will at once give up guns and observe a real cease-fire so that a solution-finding path receives headway," Moin-ul-Islam, Hizbul-Mujahideen's deputy commander, said in an article in the area's leading daily, the Greater Kashmir.

Hizbul-Mujahideen declared a cease-fire and started peace talks with India in mid-2000 but they broke down because New Delhi refused to include Pakistan in a three-way dialogue.

Indian authorities say about 33,000 people have died in the rebellion in the mainly Hindu nation's only Muslim-majority state since 1989. Separatists put the toll closer to 80,000.

"Let India bear in mind that unless a genuine peace process precedes, Hizbul-Mujahideen and other UJC constituents would remain wedded to armed struggle," Moin-ul-Islam said.

"However, if today India begins a genuine process of settlement and peace, we will not wait till tomorrow, we will give up our defensive operation right now."

Meanwhile, twelve rebels and four civilians have been killed in separatist violence in India's revolt-racked Jammu and Kashmir in the past 24 hours, police said on Wednesday.

The disputed Himalayan region is at the heart of a tense military standoff between nuclear rivals India and Pakistan, sparked by an attack on India's parliament in December which New Delhi blames on Pakistan-based guerrilla groups.

One civilian was killed and four injured on Wednesday when militants lobbed a grenade near Bijbehara town about 40 km south of Srinagar, the state's summer capital.

Annan aborts Jenin mission

REUTERS, United Nations

U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan's decision to disband his fact-finding mission into Israeli military actions at the Jenin refugee camp threw the Security Council into disarray early on Thursday.

Arab delegates, shortly after midnight, tried to push through a resolution requesting Annan proceed with the mission Israel had rejected and demanding that Israel cooperate.

But Syria and Tunisia withdrew their draft shortly after announcing a vote would take place because of lack of support from the required nine out of 15 council members.

The session, after seven hours of on and off negotiations, was adjourned to be resumed in the morning.

Annan announced on Wednesday he would disband the team because of Israeli objections to the mission which Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's cabinet believed was prejudiced against the Jewish state. The team was to investigate the killings and destruction from Israel's attack on the Palestinian camp, part of a larger military operation in the West Bank.

Palestinians had accused the Israeli army of a massacre during eight days of fierce house-to-house fighting. Israel denies the allegation and says it was rooting out a "terrorist network" and that Palestinian gunmen were the main victims.

In a three-page letter to the U.N. Security Council, Annan said he regretted aborting the mission because "the long shadow cast by recent events in the Jenin refugee camp will

remain."

Senior U.N. officials said Annan gave a 24-hour delay to disband the team, now gathered in Geneva, as a courtesy to the Security Council. But they said the mission would be ended.

"With the situation in the Jenin refugee camp changing by the day, it will become more and more difficult to establish with any confidence or accuracy the 'recent events' that took place there," Annan said in the letter.

"For these reasons, it is my intention to disband the fact-finding team tomorrow," he wrote on Wednesday.

Israel's Cabinet on Tuesday again failed to give approval to the U.N. team, after agreeing two weeks ago to the mission. It insisted on an overhaul of the team's procedures and said the mission's final report should omit conclusions.

Washington had been instrumental in getting Israel to accept the mission in the first place and hoped until the last minute it would go ahead. The White House expressed regrets.

"The United States and other U.N. Security Council members worked to facilitate an agreement concerning Secretary-General Annan's initiative. We regret that it did not work out," said Sean McCormack, spokesman for the National Security Council.

Nasser al-Kidwa, the Palestinian U.N. observer, said Israel was trying to hide its crimes in Jenin "and beyond."

"They fired missiles from helicopter gunships at densely populated areas ... bulldozed structures while people were

inside and prevented humanitarian and rescue workers from getting into the camp," he told reporters.

"So we know that war crimes were committed in Jenin and other places," he said. "What is left to be known is the scope of the willful killing of civilians and whether this would constitute a massacre or not."

Palestinian medics in Jenin have so far recorded 53 corpses, including 21 civilians, and U.N. officials have estimated 22 other people are missing.

Defending his country's position, Israeli U.N. Ambassador Yehuda Lancry said the mission originally had been conceived as a small one, without Security Council involvement.

In view of reports of a massacre, Lancry said Israel had wanted to set the record straight.

"We were sure there was no massacre. We were sure of the facts. We were there," he told reporters.

But then the problems mounted, from Israel's initial objections to the composition of the team to anxiety its final report might expose soldiers to prosecution.

Both sides, however, have serious complaints against the United Nations. Israel has had a stormy relationship with the world organisation and complained frequently that it did not react when Israelis were killed, only Palestinians.

Al-Kidwa, however, said that only Israel could rebuff the secretary-general and the Security Council, whose decisions can be mandatory, without heavy censure because of its protection by the United States.

US troops deployed near Pak-Afghan border

REUTERS, Washington

The United States is deploying several hundred troops and helicopters to the eastern Afghan mountains near Pakistan to support British and other Western forces hunting Taliban and al-Qaida fighters, U.S. officials said on Wednesday.

One senior official, who asked not to be identified, said about 200 soldiers from the U.S. 101st Airborne Division would join several hundred British Marines, Canadian troops and others already involved in an operation near the city of Khost.

The Washington Post reported on Wednesday that up to 1,000 U.S. soldiers could join the operation near Khost just 20 miles from the Pakistan border.

But both the U.S. Central Command based in Tampa, Florida, and the senior U.S. official disputed that figure.

"The number is high. But certainly a large number are being moved," the official told Reuters.

The Pentagon believes hundreds of al-Qaida fighters of fugitive Osama bin Laden, blamed for the September attacks on America, and their Taliban allies could be gathered in the area.

One U.S. official confirmed the Post report that the United States had also moved AH-64 "Apache" attack helicopters to a U.S. special forces base near Khost.

U.S. and Afghan troops conducted a major two-week operation in the mountainous region around Gardez in early March. American warplanes dropped more than 2,500 bombs in "Operation Anaconda," reportedly killing hundreds of regrouping al-Qaida and Taliban.

Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declined to confirm or deny the troop movements, but told reporters at a briefing that al-Qaida were still hiding in Afghanistan and over the border in Pakistan.

"There is no question but that in the two locations I've said -- in the country and over the borders -- there still are a nontrivial number of those folks that would very much like to take back the country," he said.

"It is our task to see that that doesn't happen," Rumsfeld added. He said he did not personally know of any "actionable" intelligence reports suggesting that bin Laden or other leaders of al-Qaida were hiding on either side of the border.

Musharraf's victory gets tacit US approval

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf's victory in a referendum that gives him five more years in power has been given tacit approval by the United States, but domestic opponents on Thursday dismissed the poll as deeply flawed and accused the army general of being a dictator.

Official results show Musharraf took more than 97 percent of what election officials said was the biggest poll turnout in the country's history to secure a landslide victory.

But opposition politicians scoffed at the outcome.

"It is a naked fraud with the world, in general, and with the Pakistani nation in particular," said Zafar Ali Shah, senior vice president of the Pakistan Muslim League, the party of ex-premier Nawaz Sharif who was ousted by Musharraf in a blood-letting October 1999 coup.

"It is a big joke... There has never been turnout in Pakistan more than 32 percent," he said.

"A drama was staged... to produce 97 or 98 percent results," said Nawabzada Nasrullah Khan, head of the 15-party Alliance for Restoration of Democracy (ARD).

"Such results are common throughout the world where there is dictatorship."

The United States, which has wooed Musharraf as a key ally in its war on terror since the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, has diplomatically refrained from criticizing the result.

"As we've said all along, its really for the Pakistani people to judge what the referendum means in terms of returning the country to democratic civilian rule," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said in Washington.

"President Musharraf has promised to bring Pakistan back to democratic rule," he said. "He has moved in that direction. So as long as this course is followed and the elections proceed as planned, we would consider that to be a movement toward a return toward democracy."

After being outcast as an international pariah after seizing power, Musharraf has become a darling of the West since throwing his weight behind the U.S.-led war on terror.

The referendum was supposed to give him a popular mandate to continue his economic and political reforms, and to remain in power after parliamentary elections promised for October.

Opponents say rather than the 70 percent turnout reported by election officials, ballot boxes were stuffed by government officials and some people voted more than once.

Some analysts say the controversy could weaken Musharraf's position as he was now seen as no different from the scheming civilian politicians he overthrew.

Although an official roll does not exist, there are an estimated 62 million voters in the country of 140 million people, but Pakistanis can be apathetic at the polls. Turnout at the last parliamentary election, in 1997, was under 36 percent.

Opposition censure motion against NDA falls flat

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Predictably, the Lok Sabha (lower house of Indian Parliament) on Wednesday defeated an opposition-sponsored censure motion against the government of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on the issue of communal violence in Gujarat by a comfortable margin of 94 votes.

While 276 members voted against the motion, 82 voted for it after a 16-hour debate that began yesterday afternoon and concluded in the wee hours of today without a break.

The debate, originally scheduled for eight hours, was at times marred by mud-slinging between the treasury and opposition benches and personal attacks that generated so much heat and turmoil that the proceedings were delayed.

The trading of personal vibes at once staged former Prime Minister and veteran parliamentarian Chandrashekhar to wonder if parliamentary decorum was being given a go-by and that there is no place in the House for people like him.

Though the government succeeded in defeating the motion voting on which was considered a trial of strength of sorts for it, it suffered the embarrassment of finding some of its key allies including Telugu Desam Party (TDP), Farooq Abdullah-led National Conference and Trinamool Congress, attacking the BJP government in Gujarat and Vajpayee dispensation for "failing" to contain the violence in the western state.

What came out starkly during the debate is that most of BJP's allies were unsparing in their criticism of the BJP government headed by Chief Minister Narendra Modi in Gujarat for its failure to protect the lives and property of the people in the state and demanded Modi's removal.

Members belonging to constituents of the ruling alliance, particularly BJP, targeted on the riots that had taken place during Congress rule, especially the violence against Sikhs after the assassination of Indira Gandhi in October 1984.

A bitter war of words broke out when Defence Minister George Fernandes, during his speech said Congress had presided over many riots in which hundreds of people were killed" and launched an attack on Congress chief and Leader of the Opposition Sonia Gandhi.

Sonia Gandhi, in her speech, demanded immediate removal of Modi and Vajpayee government ask Gujarat government to take effective actions to stop the violence, act against those responsible for riots and undertake massive relief and rehabilitation measures for violence victims.

Countdown for Suu Kyi's release begins

AP, Yangon

The countdown began on Thursday for the expected release of pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi from house arrest amid questions whether her freedom would herald major political changes in military-ruled Myanmar.

The country has been rife with expectations that Suu Kyi would freed soon after 19 months of detention in her lakeside residence from where she has been carrying out un-brokered reconciliation talks with the junta.

Razali Ismail, the special United Nations envoy facilitating the talks, has said major developments are expected soon and has hinted that they would begin with the release of Suu Kyi. Razali conducted his latest negotiations over four days last week.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Britain's Queen Elizabeth II smiles at admirers as she arrives at Falmouth Station on Wednesday for the beginning of her nationwide Golden Jubilee tour. Queen Elizabeth, celebrating 50 years on the throne, began a gruelling Golden Jubilee tour of her kingdom having scotched speculation that she may step aside for her son.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Two close allies of former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, former Yugoslav deputy Prime Minister Nikola Sainovic (L) and former Yugoslav Defence Minister Dragoljub Ojdanic (R), walk together in Piro in this September 1, 2000 file photo. Sainovic, who was Slobodan Milosevic's right hand man for Kosovo, voluntarily boarded a flight from Belgrade on Thursday to face war crimes charges at the Hague tribunal.

Milosevic aid surrenders

AP, The Hague

A top aide to former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic surrendered Thursday to the U.N. war crimes tribunal in the Netherlands to face charges of participating in atrocities against Kosovo Albanians.

Nikola Sainovic, a former deputy prime minister, was accompanied on a flight from the Yugoslav capital, Belgrade, by another Serb, former prison warden Momcilo Gruban, who was wanted for atrocities in Bosnia.

Upon arrival they were whisked to a U.N. detention facility outside The Hague, joining Milosevic and dozens of other suspects from the former Yugoslavia.

"We most welcome their arrival as a necessary development," said the U.N. tribunal's spokesman, Jim Landale.

The latest surrenders came after mounting Western pressure on the Yugoslav government to make sure that about two dozen fugitives indicted in connection with the 1990s Balkan wars face international justice.

Sainovic and Gruban are among several wanted men who opted to surrender voluntarily. Former Croatian Serb rebel leader Milan Martić and former army officers Mile Mrksic and Vladimir Kovacevic are expected to follow suit in the coming weeks.

Another 18 face arrest and extradition, including the most-wanted fugitives former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic and his wartime commander, Gen. Ratko Mladic.

Millions join May Day rally

AFP, Paris

Millions rallied worldwide to mark May Day on Wednesday, while in France the labour holiday turned into a massive but peaceful street protest against the extreme right.

More than one million people demonstrated nationwide in France against far-right leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, four days before a presidential election run-off that pits Le Pen against incumbent conservative Jacques Chirac.

In a show of unprecedented solidarity, citizens rallied against the nationalist, anti-immigrant rhetoric of Le Pen which has sent shudders through the nation since he unexpectedly defeated Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in the first round of the vote and eliminated him out of the race.

Pen launched a scathing attack on Chirac.

Police chief Jean-Paul Proust said 30 people, some of them extremists, were detained in Paris, mostly for carrying illegal weapons, assault and other acts of violence and racist attacks. He did not elaborate.

But there were no reports of serious incidents during the Paris rallies. Around 75 demonstrations were held across Spain, where the centre-right government has proposed unpopular reforms to unemployment benefits.

Berlin saw its worst violence in three years when May Day protesters hurling bottles and rocks clashed with security forces in the early hours and late on Wednesday.

More than 80 police were injured along with a woman who was left in a life-threatening condition. At least 25 people were arrested.

In Italy, where unions are in a bitter fight with Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi's government, half a million people rallied against proposed reforms they say will make it easier to sack workers.