

Myanmar junta frees 5 NLD members

AFP, Yangon

The Myanmar junta said Friday it had freed five members of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), as hopes grew the opposition leader herself might soon be released from house arrest.

More than 250 political prisoners have been released from the nation's jails since the military embarked on secret talks with Aung San Suu Kyi in October 2000, one month after confining her to her lakeside home.

A total of 43 NLD members have been freed since mid-February when the pace of the releases stepped up.

"Today five NLD members were being released from Monywa and Pyaw correctional institutions," a government spokesman said in a statement.

Hizbul won't lay down arms

AFP, Srinagar

Kashmir's main Muslim rebel group said Friday it would not lay down its weapons, clarifying remarks attributed to one of its senior leaders proposing a ceasefire with India.

"The armed struggle will continue until Indian forces vacate Kashmir," Salim Hashmi, the spokesman for Hizbul Mujahedin, told local media.

"Our armed struggle can go side by side with dialogue," he said.

Hashmi's remarks came a day after Hizbul's deputy supreme commander Mo'in-ul-Islam was quoted as saying separatist militants were ready to give up their arms if India took steps to resolve the Kashmir dispute.

Pearl murder trial resumes

AFP, Hyderabad

The trial of four men accused of the kidnap and murder of US reporter Daniel Pearl resumed at a new prison venue here Friday amid fears of a terrorist attack.

The men arrived at a jail in Hyderabad, 160 kilometres (100 miles) north of Karachi, under armed guard on Thursday after the trial was shifted due to security concerns.

The accused, including alleged mastermind Sheikh Omar, face charges of murder, kidnapping and terrorist activities. If convicted they could be executed.

UN warns of double threat to press freedom

AFP, Geneva

The United Nations warned on World Press Freedom Day Friday that media independence worldwide faces a double threat from terrorism: extremist violence and intimidation on the one hand and government restrictions on the other.

In a joint declaration, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson and UNESCO chief Koichiro Matsuura said reporters and publishers faced a growing threat from acts of terrorism, including bombings, assassinations and abductions.

EU adds Aum Shinrikyo, 2 Sikh groups to terrorist list

AFP, Brussels

The European Union extended its black list of terrorist groups and individuals Friday by 18 names, adding from Asia the Japanese doomsday sect Aum Shinrikyo and two Sikh organisations.

The list - published in the bloc's Official Journal, following approval by the 15 member states - also includes for the first time the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which has fought for a Kurdish homeland in southeastern Turkey.

Under EU rules, members states are required to freeze the assets of "persons, groups and entities involved in terrorist acts" and to cooperate when prosecuting criminal cases that may implicate them.

Kosovo leader testifies in Milosevic trial

AFP, The Hague

Kosovo's president, Ibrahim Rugova, took the stand at the war crimes trial of Slobodan Milosevic here Friday, and described how the province's ethnic Albanians suffered under the former Yugoslav president.

The man who for decades led the non-violent movement for Kosovo's independence from Serbia spoke about the Serbian repression of ethnic Albanians in the 1980s and 1990s and about his party's fight for independence.

Israel makes fresh incursion while US plots peace move

Arafat ready to take part in peace confce

REUTERS, Nablus

Israeli forces killed two Palestinians in clashes during a five-hour raid in the West Bank city of Nablus on Friday as the United States announced plans for a Middle East peace conference this summer.

In Washington, Secretary of State Colin Powell said the United States was preparing for a Middle East peace conference to capitalize on a "window of opportunity" presented by the end of a month-old Israeli siege on Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in his Ramallah headquarters.

On the ground, the adversaries remained locked in confrontation at Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, where a siege of Palestinian militants who burst into the shrine to hide from Israeli troops entered its second month with no resolution in sight.

In the latest in a series of Israeli raids into Palestinian areas, soldiers killed a Palestinian policeman and another unidentified man in a firefight.

The army said the action was intended to prevent militant attacks and destroy what it called the "terror infrastructure."

Residents said armor and troops thrust deep into the city's old quarter, where they cordoned off several buildings and conducted house-to-house searches. About 15 people, mostly suspected Islamic militants, were

detained, they said.

Human Rights Watch, a human rights watchdog, said in a report published on Friday that it had found no evidence to back charges that hundreds of Palestinians were massacred at the Jenin refugee camp, but said the Israeli army may have committed war crimes there.

Meanwhile, AFP adds: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat said Friday he was ready to take part in an international peace conference on the region sponsored by the "quartet" of the United States, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations.

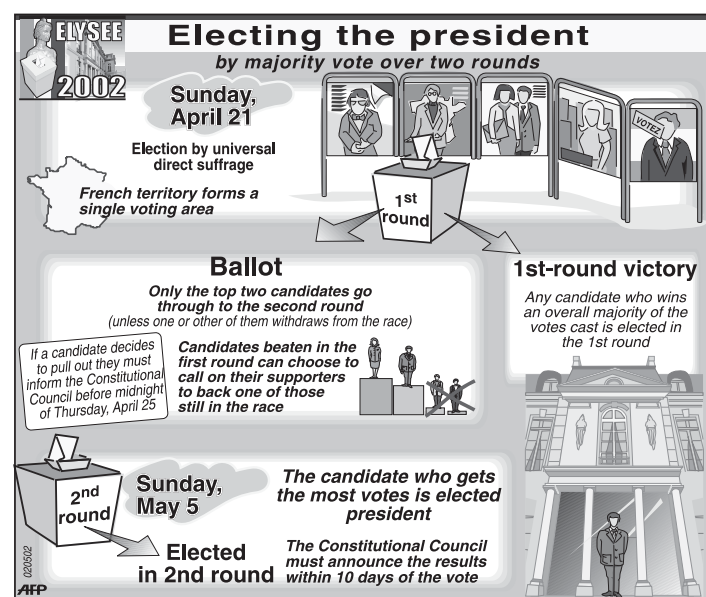
"We accept the idea of the international conference," Arafat told reporters at his Ramallah headquarters, adding that "any political solution should be based on international law."

US Secretary of State Colin Powell said Thursday the group would work with Israel, the Palestinians and other nations, to hold a conference early this summer to promote "serious and accelerated negotiations toward a settlement."

Powell stressed that details about when and where the meeting would be held as well as who would participate had not been finalized, but said the quartet was determined to build on recent diplomatic progress in the Middle East.



US Secretary of State Colin Powell (C) holds a joint press conference with Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov (L), United Nation's Secretary General Kofi Annan (2nd L), European Foreign Policy Chief Javier Solana (2nd R) and Minister of the European Union Josep Pique (R) at the State Department on Thursday in Washington, DC.



Chirac set for record win in French presidential polls

AFP, Paris

If the latest opinion polls are proved correct, and Jacques Chirac is re-elected president of France on Sunday with something approaching 80 percent of the vote, it would represent a democratic record.

Giant May Day demonstrations across France Wednesday against Chirac's far-right challenger in the poll, Jean-Marie Le Pen, appeared to leave little doubt that the conservative incumbent is headed for a massive landslide.

While presidents in the former Soviet bloc and other one-party states across the developing world

could at times boast scores passing 90 percent of the electorate, there is no record of a crushing 80-20 per cent victory in a major democracy.

The closest anyone has come is Belarus president Alexander Lukashenko, re-elected last year with a contested first round score of 75.6 percent.

Former Solidarity union leader Lech Walesa in 1990 won the Polish presidential election with 74.25 per cent of the poll over returning Polish-Canadian businessman, Stanislaw Tyminski, in a disappointing turn-out of 53.4 per cent of the electorate.

135 Maoists killed in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

At least 135 Maoist rebels were killed when Nepalese security forces stormed two guerrilla training camps, a home ministry official told AFP Friday.

"More than 100" of the rebels were shot dead Thursday in the Lisne area of Rolpa, some 298 kilometres (184 miles) west of Kathmandu, the official said.

Another 35 rebels were killed in a clash at Boktang in Doti district, 398 kilometres (246 miles) west of the capital, he said.

The assault was one of the deadliest battles in the Maoists' six-year campaign to topple the constitutional monarchy.

Fifty armed rebels were killed in

the area. Four policemen were also injured in the incident, they said.

The latest attack comes ahead of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's forthcoming visit to the United States beginning Tuesday, where he will discuss with President George W Bush ways to curb the Maoist insurgency, his political advisor Prakashsharan Mahat said.

About 25 were killed in an encounter in Boktang in Doti district, 398 kilometres (246 miles) west of Kathmandu, Kandel said.

Another 40 were killed in the Lisne area of Rolpa district, 298 kilometres (184 miles) west of here.

"We are waiting for a detailed account on these clashes when the exact number of deaths can be substantiated," he said.

Oct polls will be beginning for Pak democracy: Rice

AFP, New Delhi

October parliamentary elections in Pakistan will be the "beginning" of the country's return to democracy, despite a referendum this week that extended President Pervez Musharraf's term by five years, US national security adviser Condoleezza Rice said.

"We have made very clear to President Musharraf that we expect that he will carry through on his promise to hold parliamentary elections in October that are consistent with international standards," Rice told Indian newspaper The Hindu.

"I've myself been in the meetings with President Musharraf and we've made very clear that the parliamentary elections are not the end but the beginning of putting Pakistan back on a democratic path," she said.

General Musharraf secured an overwhelming 97.5 percent of some 43.9 million votes cast in Tuesday's poll, but the referendum was mired in allegations of fraud and vote-rigging.

Musharraf, who ousted the civilian government in a bloodless 1999 coup, says he needs an extra five years in power to see through wide-ranging reforms.

US warns Tigers against running guns

AFP, Colombo

The United States Friday warned Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger guerrillas against scuttling the "best chance" for a permanent peace in the embattled nation by smuggling weapons.

US Ambassador Ashley Willis said he hoped there would be no repetition of the gun battle Wednesday between navy gunboats and a Tiger flotilla suspected to be smuggling arms and ammunition to the island's east.

The defence ministry said one boat blew up just before the navy could board it for a search and that among the debris were several

heavy mortar bombs and rocket-propelled grenades. One rebel craft was sunk by the navy.

There has been no reaction from the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to the military's version of events, but a pro-rebel website said Thursday that the navy had hit fishermen.

"I can't make a formal comment on the incident itself because I don't have the details, but we are concerned about military confrontation while a ceasefire is in effect," Willis said.

US calls for probe into Gujarat rioting

AFP, New Delhi

US national security adviser Condoleezza Rice called for a "clear investigation" into the anti-Muslim riots in the western Indian state of Gujarat that have left more than 900 people dead, in an interview published Friday.

Speaking to The Hindu newspaper, Rice said: "There needs to be a clear investigation of those events and the right thing needs to be done."

"We believe the (Prime Minister Atal Behari) Vajpayee government will do the right thing and we'll encourage them to do the right thing," she said.

The Indian government has come under fire from human rights groups and opposition parties over the riots in Gujarat, in which Hindu nationalists linked to Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party allegedly took part in attacks on the Muslim minority.

The attacks on Muslims broke out after a Muslim mob torched a train of Hindu hardliners on February 27, killing 58 people.

Asked why the United States has been largely reticent over the riots while the European Union has expressed concern, Rice said: "Because we believe that India is a great democracy, that the Vajpayee government is leading India well and that it will do the right thing when it comes to investigating the violence and the acts of violence."

Rice said the United States believed India was "a good partner."

18 militants, 2 civilians killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops gunned down 18 Muslim rebels in Kashmir overnight and Friday, while two civilians also died in separatist-linked violence, police said.

The Indian army shot dead seven Pakistani militants in south Kashmir early Friday as they tried to cross over the disputed border with Pakistan, police said.

The troops had spotted the militants at Bimbergali in the Rajouri area, 150 kilometres (93 miles) northwest of Kashmir's winter capital Jammu.

Police said a gunbattle broke out between the two sides and Pakistani troops provided covering fire to the militants, but that their attempt to get back failed.

Troops managed to recover five bodies, but two were still lying on the Line of Control -- the de facto border dividing Kashmir between India and Pakistan -- as heavy firing by the Pakistanis was making it difficult to approach, police said.

The Indian army recovered six AK-47 rifles, a pistol and some ammunition from the bodies of the militants.

Six more militants were shot dead by the Indian army in the Surankote area of adjoining Poonch district late Thursday, police said.

"The six were killed during an encounter sparked by a cordon and search operation of the army," a police spokesman said, adding the six belonged to the Jaish-e-Mohammad militant group.

Mayawati sworn in as UP CM

PTI, AFP, Lucknow

A BSP-BJP-RLD coalition government headed by Mayawati was sworn-in in Uttar Pradesh on Friday.

Mayawati was sworn-in along with 19 ministers belonging to BJP, BSP and Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) by Governor Vishnu Kant Shastri at an impressive function at the sprawling La Martinier College grounds.

Of the 19 ministers sworn-in, 10 are from BSP, seven from BJP and two from RLD. Among those who attended the ceremony were Union Ministers Murli Manohar Joshi and Ajit Singh, BSP chief Kanshi Ram and former Chief Minister Rajnath Singh.

The entire ground was packed to capacity by BSP and BJP supporters.

Earlier report says: A woman member of the "untouchables" was set to return to power Friday in India's biggest and politically crucial northern state of Uttar Pradesh with the backing of the ruling Hindu nationalist BJP party. Former school teacher Mayawati

is the leader of the Bhujan Samaj Party (BSP) of the "untouchables", the lowest caste in Hinduism, while Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's BJP has its support base among the upper castes.

A similar alliance governed Uttar Pradesh with Mayawati as chief minister three years ago, but the regional coalition collapsed amid bitter infighting over power sharing between the BJP and BSP.

The old allies have come together for a second crack at power after elections threw up a hung assembly, prompting President K.R. Narayanan to approve direct federal rule in Uttar Pradesh.

No single party in the February state elections got close to the 202 seats required to secure a majority in the 403-member legislature.

The BJP, which had ruled Uttar Pradesh for about five years, was reduced to the second largest party with just 106 seats.

Attack on Iraq would be 'catastrophic': Abdullah

AFP, London

A US attack on Iraq would be "catastrophic" for the Middle East, Jordan's King Abdullah warned Friday en route to talks next week with US President George W. Bush.

In London on a stopover, he said Iraq "really isn't a subject we should be discussing at this time."

"I think the emotion not only in Jordan but throughout the Middle East, the anger and frustration linked to the problems with the Israelis and Palestinians, to then go on and do something with Iraq would be catastrophic throughout the whole of the Middle East," he told BBC radio.

Washington is widely reported to be earmarking Iraq as the next possible target following the success of its campaign against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and the al-Qaeda network blamed for the September 11 atrocities in the United States.

Last weekend, The New York Times reported that Bush's administration was developing plans for a major air campaign against Iraq and a ground invasion early next year.

Abdullah's warning, however, crystallises the fears of sceptics who warn that any lingering Arab support for the anti-terror war would be crushed by any military offensive against Iraq.

The king praised British Prime Minister Tony Blair, one of Bush's major allies, for cautionary advice to the president.

"If the Americans listen to anybody, they listen to England more than anybody else," he said. "Wise wisdom coming from Number 10 (Blair's office) has always been an element of positiveness in the past months on both issues."

"I am very pleased the prime minister is engaging the president in a good way. He understands both the Iraqi and Palestinian positions in the minutes detail and he has been very forceful in passing that on to the Americans."

Symbolic victory for BNP in UK polls

REUTERS, London



Anti-Nazi League militants confront BNP candidates arriving for the local election count in Burnley where the extreme rightwing party are fielding 13 candidates on Thursday. England went to the polls in local elections seen as a test of Prime Minister Tony Blair's five years in office. The ultra-nationalists have tried to consolidate their minority appeal in working-class neighbourhoods increasingly shared by immigrants.

Far-right extremists sent a "chill factor" across Britain on Friday as they claimed a symbolic victory in English elections, winning their first council seats in almost a decade in a northern town dogged by racial tension.

Buoyed by the shock success of France's National Front leader Jean Marie Le Pen in presidential elections, the British National Party tapped into resentment among white communities living side by side with large immigrant populations in Burnley.

Commentators stressed that the BNP's success was tiny - almost insignificant compared with far-right showings in other countries across Europe.

"We really ought to be thankful it is very small beer, very small gains for them compared to the way the extreme right has gained in the Netherlands, in Denmark and in France," said Simon Hughes, home affairs spokesman for the Liberal Democrats, Britain's third party.

But in local elections which delivered a mixed verdict on mainstream parties and on the performance of Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair after five years in power, the BNP's success triggered some deep concerns.