

## US, India to conduct joint war games

AFP, New Delhi

India and the United States will conduct their first military manoeuvres in 39 years to mark a milestone in cooperation between the two largest democracies, whose relations had remained strained during the Cold War era.

The defence ministry unveiling the event overnight said an elite brigade of Indian paratroopers will take part in joint exercises with US Pacific Command special forces in mid-May, not far from the world-famous Taj Mahal.

Air forces from the two sides will back the exercise, codenamed "Ex-Balance Iroquois".

## UN seeks cash to push for Lankan peace

AFP, Colombo

A United Nations mission is seeking increased foreign financial help for war-battered Sri Lanka in a bid to boost Norway's attempts to broker peace in the island, diplomats said.

The UN will ask the World Bank-arranged Sri Lanka Development Forum, the consortium of donor countries, meeting in June to step up aid, a UN diplomat said.

"There is a shift in the UN approach," the diplomat said. "Rather than wait for a final settlement, the UN feels that the international community can play a role in supporting peace moves by starting rehabilitation work immediately."

The head of the UN "Needs assessment team", Edouard A. Wattez, told reporters at the end of a two-week tour of the island Friday that the team was making a case for starting immediate relief work.

## Fire in US jail claims 8

AFP, Washington

At least eight inmates died and 13 other people were injured in a fire in a county jail in the US state of North Carolina, local authorities said Saturday.

The fire erupted in the Mitchell County jail in Bakersville, in the western part of the state, shortly after 10:00 pm Friday and spread so fast that rescuers were unable to unlock all the cells in time, according to local officials.

Most of the victims were trapped in their locked cells and are believed to have died of asphyxiation.

## African space tourist lands back on Earth

AFP, Arkalyk

South African space tourist Mark Shuttleworth arrived back on Earth Sunday, when a landing capsule carrying the computer millionaire and his two companions descended at 0351 GMT Sunday near the town of Arkalyk in north-western Kazakhstan.

Rescue experts helped Shuttleworth and his two teammates, Russian flight commander Yuri Gidzenko and Italian engineer Roberto Vittori, climb out of the module on to the sun-drenched green grass of the Kazakh steppe.

## Civilian death toll rises to 108 in Colombian fighting

AFP, Bogota

The civilian death toll from this week's fighting between leftist rebels and right-wing paramilitaries in Colombia has risen to at least 108 people, local authorities announced Saturday.

"Information coming from the community of Bojaya indicates that they have already identified 68 bodies and 40 other are awaiting identification," William Halaby Cordoba, governor of Choco department, told local radio.

## 5 Asians killed in 'horrific' road accident in Kuwait

AFP, Kuwait City

Five Asian workers were killed and 17 others seriously injured in a head-on collision on a road in Subhan, south of Kuwait City, the Arab Times newspaper reported Sunday.

The five, who were travelling home from work Saturday in a minibus, died when a speeding juggernaut smashed into them at an intersection, said the English-language daily, quoting a witness who described the scene as "horrific".

The 17 injured workers were rushed to nearby hospitals, some in critical condition. Their nationalities were not given.

# Deal in sight to end siege of the Church of Nativity

## Sharon plots peace sans Arafat

AFP, Bethlehem

Hopes of an imminent end to a month-long Israeli army siege of Bethlehem's Nativity Church were raised on Sunday, as EU and US diplomats looked to finalise a deal to transfer four wanted Palestinian militants to international custody.

In a move shadowing the ground-breaking accord which last week ended the siege at Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Ramallah headquarters, a British negotiator late on Saturday received a list of the 200 or so Palestinians inside the besieged church from a priest.

The diplomat was then expected to hand it to the Israeli army, a senior EU official said, after which four of the men most wanted by the Jewish state -- and who are thought to be inside -- would be transferred to international guard within the coming days.

The European official quoted a senior Palestinian as saying the crisis at Jesus Christ's birthplace could be resolved by Sunday, the Orthodox Easter.

Less than an hour before the handover, Bethlehem's Mayor Hanna Nasser said he expected a deal to end the siege within 24 hours.

"There is no reason not to suppose that an agreement won't be reached tonight or no later than Sunday morning," Nasser told AFP late on Saturday.

Nasser said his confidence stemmed from "international pressure and particularly American pressure on Israel."

The handover of the list was confirmed by Palestinian Bethlehem negotiator Salah Taamari.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon flew Sunday to Washington to present a plan for Middle East peace which hinges on removing Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat from the process.

To press home his point, Sharon took with him a 100-page file attempting to prove that Arafat's Palestinian Authority is financing terror attacks out of its own budget, which is funded in large part by the European Union and the Arab world.

But Israeli officials agreed that President George W. Bush was likely to bend to pressure from Arab states as he forges a new US Middle East policy, and urge Sharon to accept Arafat at least in the short term.

Israeli government spokesman Avi Pazner told French television Sunday that Sharon "is going to propose to President Bush to try to find an alternative to Arafat to carry out negotiations."

"But it is very possible that the Americans, the Europeans and everybody will say 'You have to negotiate with Arafat.' Then we will have to decide about this. Till now he has proved to be a very unreliable partner who encouraged terrorism against us," Pazner said.



Picture released by the Palestinian Press Office (PPO) shows Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat (C) holding a meeting with the Palestinian executive committee in the West Bank city of Ramallah on Saturday. A 33-day stand-off between the Israeli army and Palestinian militants holed up in Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity could be resolved "in the coming hours", the town's Mayor Hanna Nasser said.



Nepalese Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba (C) and his wife Arjoo Deuba (R) leave for Washington with Cabinet colleagues at Tribhuvan International Airport in Kathmandu on Sunday. Premier Deuba is scheduled to meet US President George Bush and seek US assistance for fighting Maoist terrorism in his country.

# 550 Maoists killed in Nepal in huge army operation

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal said Sunday that more than 550 Maoist rebels had been killed in a huge offensive by the police and army over the past three days.

Most of the deaths came on Friday and Saturday when security forces targeted a camp in Lisne in the western district of Rolpa where around 800 guerrillas were gathered for training.

"The Maoists' casualty should be between 550 to 600 in surface and air attacks at a training camp where the terrorists had gathered

for training and preparation strategy," said the official, who did not want to be named.

The new figure -- up from at least 350 given on Saturday -- makes the operation the most successful by far by the security forces against the Maoists' six-year insurgency to topple the constitutional monarchy.

"Never before have the security and police forces achieved such a great success as they did this time," the official said.

Hundreds of rebels, along with 20 district level leaders including a platoon commander, deputy platoon commanders and district leaders were attending a meeting at the camp when the security forces struck, the official said.

"Before attacking, the soldiers blocked the outlets of the area which trapped most of the Maoists in the training camp surrounded by difficult terrains and jungle," the official said.

The death toll includes around 50 guerrillas who were killed when security forces attacked a rebel base at Boktang in Doti district, 400 kilometres (250 miles) west of the capital on Thursday.

## Hearing against Ne Win's relatives begins

AFP, Yangon

A Myanmar court has begun hearing a case against the son-in-law and three grandsons of former dictator Ne Win who are accused of plotting a military coup, the official press said Sunday.

The New Light of Myanmar said that "to take action according to the law against them who have been implicated in the cases" four judges in two separate tribunals began hearing the case Friday.

"Tribunal No 1 will hear the cases concerning the plot to seize State power, the matter on enticing a Tatmadaw (army) member into committing high treason and illegal import and possession of communication equipment," it said.

# Situation in riot-hit Gujarat 'exceedingly bad': Top cop

AFP, AHMEDABAD

India's most celebrated police official, K.P.S. Gill, has described the situation in the western state of Gujarat, where Hindu-Muslim riots have killed more than 900 people since February, as "exceedingly bad."

In an interview with the Indian Express published on Sunday, a day after he was appointed security advisor to the chief minister of Gujarat, Gill said his first priority was to "put an end to the violence and then try to bring the two communities together."

"Gujarat is an issue the whole nation is concerned with and on which the government has to deliver," he said.

Gill gained his reputation as a

"supercop" after putting down a bloody Sikh separatist campaign in 1992 that had claimed the lives of around 50,000 people in the northern state of Punjab since 1983.

Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, who is accused by rights groups and opposition parties of inept handling of the communal violence, said Saturday he was glad to have Gill's help.

The riots in Gujarat were sparked by the torching of a train carrying Hindu activists -- by a mob of about 1,000 believed to be Muslims -- in the town of Godhra on February 27.

Fifty-eight people were killed in train attack and about 850 others -- mostly Muslims -- killed in the subsequent communal violence.

Gill said he would "evolve a response to the situation" and described the intelligence network on Gujarat as "poor."

The towering Sikh is known not only for his success in Punjab but also for his role in battling tribal insurgencies in the northeastern state of Assam where he was police chief in the mid-1990s.

He has a fearsome reputation for putting down religious violence with an iron hand and in the shortest possible time with a controversial policy of bullet-for-bullet.

A report in the Hindustan Times on Sunday said senior Gujarat police officials told Gill Saturday that they received orders to go "soft" on Hindu fundamentalists suspected of attacking Muslims in Gujarat in the aftermath of the Godhra train attack.

## World awaits Suu Kyi's release

REUTERS, Yangon

Myanmar's pro-democracy movement kept up a vigil on Sunday waiting for news of their leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, who is expected to be freed from 19 months of house arrest within days.

Political sources in military-ruled Myanmar said the 56-year-old Suu Kyi, winner of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize, was likely to be released on Sunday or Monday.

Senior leaders of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) say she told them she was confident of being freed soon following secret meetings with the ruling junta.

But the military has made no comment on the expected release. On Yangon's University Avenue, where Suu Kyi has been confined to her home since September 2000, barricades and a "No Entry" sign were still in place on Sunday.

Myanmar has been gripped by feverish speculation for days that Suu Kyi was set to be freed. But as day after day has gone by with no word on her release, growing doubts have emerged.

Suu Kyi has spent years in house arrest since emerging as the figurehead of Myanmar's democracy movement in 1988 after the military bloodily suppressed anti-government protests.

## Musharraf promises to hand over power

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan's military President Pervez Musharraf promised to hand over "the power to govern" to an elected prime minister by October, joking on Saturday that he hoped to have more time to play tennis and golf.

Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999, won a landslide victory in a controversial referendum on Tuesday to extend his rule for another five years, although independent observers say the vote was massively rigged in his favour.

He has promised to obey a

Supreme Court ruling to hold parliamentary elections by October, and said an elected prime minister would have the freedom to govern the country on a day-to-day basis.

But he said he was seriously considering the idea of a National Security Council, which would have the power to dismiss a government, and provide what he calls "checks and balances."

"Power is the power to run a government," he told international journalists. "The prime minister and the cabinet will have that power. The National Security Council... has the power to check wrongdoing."

# Pak tribesmen to wage war if US forces delay pullout

AP, Miran Shah

U.S. Special Forces scouring Pakistan's lawless frontier region for fugitive Taliban and al-Qaida have angered heavily armed tribesmen, who warn they are ready to do battle if the American soldiers don't leave soon.

President Pervez Musharraf said Saturday that the U.S. deployment consists of "hardly a dozen" communications specialists. But tribal leaders say dozens of U.S. forces are involved in the searches, with the main zone of operation apparently being the southern end of Pakistan's North West Frontier Province, a semi-autonomous region along the Afghan border.

"People are very angry. They have closed down the bazaars in Miran Shah before. They don't want the Americans here. Anything can happen," said Farmadullah, a member of a regional security force made up of men chosen and armed by the various tribes. Like many Pakistanis, he uses one name.

The tribes were inflamed by Pakistan's decision a month ago to let U.S. forces join Pakistani forces in the search for Taliban and al-Qaida believed to be hiding in the area, where people practice a deeply conservative version of Islam.

The fact that the Americans would only be part of joint patrols did nothing to mollify the fiercely independent tribesmen, who before the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan had never allowed the Pakistan army into their territory.

"It will be a civil war. It is what the Americans want, to create such a situation to destabilize Pakistan," said Ajab Khan, a 67-year-old owner of a small variety store in Bannu, a tribal town about 25 miles northeast of Miran Shah.

"We're the strongest of all the tribes. Be careful. People are angry and they can do anything," said 28-year-old Waheed, squatting outside a grand mosque with pale pink minarets selling a traditional sweet dish.

Last week's raid by a joint U.S. and Pakistani military force on a religious school, or madrassah, in Miran Shah was a special sore point.

In Mir Ali, another tribal town, barely 10 miles from Miran Shah, Islamic clerics with voluminous turbans and shaggy, unkempt beards Saturday told hundreds of men with ammunition gunbelts strapped to their chests, and rocket launchers and machine guns by their side, to be ready to do battle if another madrassah is raided by joint U.S. and Pakistani soldiers.

## Afghan jail to free 300 Pak Taliban

AFP, Kabul

Three hundred suspected Pakistani Taliban members are to be released from prison in northern Afghanistan, a spokesman for powerful regional warlord Abdul Rashid Dostam said Sunday.

"This was agreed during General Dostam's recent visit to Kabul when he held discussions with Mr Karzai," Dostam's spokesman Faizullah Zaki told AFP, referring to interim Afghan leader Hamid Karzai.

"It was agreed that a group of 300 should be released. For this to happen the representatives of Pakistan must come here to discuss the issues related to the matter. We are ready any time, any day for them."

The prisoners are among a group of 800 Pakistanis being held at the Sherbarghan prison, near Mazar-i-Sharif, Zaki added.

## US to renounce its role in int'l criminal court

AFP, Washington

The US government will formally renounce any involvement in a treaty for setting up of the International Criminal Court and is expected to declare that the document signed by the Clinton administration is no longer valid, the New York Times reported Sunday.

The "unsigned" of the treaty, which is expected to be announced on Monday, means the United States will not recognise the court's jurisdiction and will not submit to any of its orders.

It also represents a rejection by the current White House of the concept of a permanent tribunal designed to prosecute individuals for genocide, crimes against humanity and other war crimes.



Kalashnikov holding tribesman at Mir Ali, in Pakistan's federally administered North Waziristan Agency bordering Afghanistan on Saturday, about 160 miles to the west of Peshawar, stand in defiance. They were protesting the joint U.S.-Pakistan operations against suspected al-Qaida-Taliban network in the border areas.