

Pak heat wave claims 29

AFP, Multan

At least 29 people have died in a heat wave in central and southern Pakistan over the past week, police and hospital officials said Sunday.

Dozens of people, mostly schoolchildren and the elderly, fainted as temperatures in several places soared up to 50 degrees Celsius (122 Fahrenheit), they said.

Health officials said 11 people died and 37 fainted in different cities of the central Punjab province on Saturday.

Police said two commuters died when they collapsed at a bus stand in the industrial city of Faisalabad, where a woman beggar also died in the sizzling heat.

A devotee at the shrine of a Muslim saint died in the central city of Multan, they said.

Hospital officials said seven others died of heat stroke in Punjab during the past six days while in southern Sindh province four people died in Nawabshah district and three in Dharki town.

Broken track switch blamed for British train crash

AFP, London

As officials blamed a broken track switch for causing a British train crash that killed seven people, newspapers Sunday reported vandalism or poor maintenance may have been responsible for the fault.

John Armit, chief executive of Railtrack which runs the country's track network, said a junction had moved as the passenger express passed over it at high speed, sending parts of the train off the rails Friday.

One carriage careered into the Potters Bar station north of London, killing seven people and injuring dozens of others in the latest of a string of fatal accidents on the country's dilapidated rail system.

Pakistan, Afghanistan resume air services

AFP, Islamabad

An Afghan Ariana airline plane touched down at Islamabad airport yesterday to mark the resumption of commercial flights between the two countries after a break of 23 years, officials said.

The Ariana flight, carrying an official delegation including two ministers from Afghanistan's interim administration, was welcomed by Minister of State for Commerce Tariq Ikram and other Pakistan government officials, witnesses said.

The Ariana Boeing-727 was the first to land at the Islamabad airport since the air service between the neighbouring countries was suspended in December 1979 following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Carter takes on US-Cuba relations

AP, Havana

Former President Jimmy Carter, who has worked to improve U.S. relations with Cuba for more than two decades, will give it another try when he arrives Sunday at the invitation of Fidel Castro the communist leader who has been in power twice that long.

As president from 1977-81, Carter helped re-establish diplomatic missions in both countries and negotiated the release of thousands of political prisoners. He also made it possible for Cuban exiles to visit their relatives on the island and, for a short time, for other Americans to travel here freely.

But a U.S. trade embargo is still in place after four decades and relations are as chilly as they've ever been.

Australia to unveil 5-yr plan to stem illegal immigrants

AFP, Sydney

Australian treasurer Peter Costello plans to bring in a five-year plan to stem the flow of illegal immigrants when he announces the federal budget next Tuesday.

Costello said Sunday the spending would include a major new detention centre on the Australian Indian Ocean territory of Christmas Island to handle illegal immigrants who arrive by boat from the Indonesian island of Java.

He said the budget provision would secure Australia's borders.

"It's going to lay down in quite some detail some new measures and initiatives to help," he told



PHOTO: AFP

Israeli Peace Now activists demonstrate in Tel Aviv on Saturday in Tel Aviv under the slogan, "Get out of the occupied territories." Tens of thousands of people took part in the demonstration with Jewish and Arab Israeli leaders speaking against a possible Israeli army action in to the Gaza Strip.

10 killed in Indian train crash

AFP, Lucknow

At least 10 people were killed and around 100 injured Sunday when a passenger train derailed near the northern Indian city of Jaunpur, officials said.

Twelve carriages and an engine came off the tracks while the train was on a bridge over a dry canal, an official from the Jaunpur district magistrate's office told AFP.

"So far, we have been able to identify only one man and one woman among the dead. Around 100 people have been injured," he said, adding that some of the carriages had fallen into the dry canal.

The high-speed passenger train, the Shramjeevi Express, was travelling between New Delhi and Patna,

capital of the eastern Bihar state, when the accident took place at around 3:30 am (2200 GMT).

The train was not on its usual route as it had been diverted because of the derailment of a goods train a few days earlier.

"Coaches of the goods train were still lying on the tracks so this train had to be diverted," he said.

The accident took place between Khetasrai and Mehranwa stations, said Om Prakash, an official at the railway station in Lucknow, capital of Uttar Pradesh, around 175 kilometres (108 miles) from Jaunpur.

"Most of the casualties and injured are from the general (unreserved) carriages," he said.

A large number of poor people travel in the unreserved sections of

Indian passenger trains.

"The injured have been admitted to Jaunpur district hospital," Prakash added.

Railway Minister Nitish Kumar told India's Zee News channel that relief work was in full swing.

"The accident relief train has already left for the site," Kumar said.

"As per preliminary reports, the train is pulled by two engines (and) derailed when the second engine went off the tracks. The train was not at a high speed when the incident occurred," he said.

The minister said sabotage was a possibility. "Some fishplates have also been found unscrewed. Sabotage cannot be ruled out," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Two Madagascan women walk on a flooded street in Toamasina, the Indian Ocean Island's main port on Saturday. A cyclone that has ripped through Madagascar has killed two people and left much of Toamasina under water.

Mafia don plans strikes to avenge Gujarat rioting

AFP, New Delhi

A fugitive wanted by Indian police for a series of deadly bomb blasts in 1993 may be planning terror attacks to avenge the slaughter of Muslims in Gujarat, reports said Sunday.

Dawood Ibrahim built up an alleged mafia empire in the western commercial hub of Bombay before he fled to Dubai in the mid-1990s.

The Muslim underworld boss is charged by the Indian government of organising the bomb attacks in Bombay in 1993 in reprisal for the destruction of an ancient mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu zealots.

The Hindustan Times newspaper, quoting intelligence sources, said Ibrahim had been in Pakistan for more than two months and was planning "revenge" strikes on vital installations and against "Hindu militant leaders" in the western state of Gujarat.

Gujarat's Hindu nationalist BJP government is accused of turning a blind eye to rioting that has left almost 1,000 people, mostly

Muslims, dead since February 27 when 58 Hindu activists were burned alive in a train.

The activists were returning from Ayodhya, where they were trying to launch the construction of a Hindu temple on the site of the razed mosque.

Indian Home Minister L.K. Advani indicated the existence of a revenge plot during a meeting with parliamentary colleagues on Friday.

"There are reliable reports -- including intercepts -- that speak of underworld elements being in touch with their mentors in Pakistan regarding retaliatory actions in Gujarat and even in parts of Maharashtra," the state of which Bombay is the capital, Advani said.

New Delhi has claimed that Ibrahim works in close coordination and often at the behest of Pakistan's secret service, Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and lives a lavish lifestyle in the Pakistani port city of Karachi.

His name is on the top of a list of 20 "terrorists and criminals" wanted

by India from Pakistan. Islamabad, however, denies it is providing sanctuary to Ibrahim.

The Pioneer newspaper said meanwhile a massive manhunt had been launched for Mohammed Sharif Khan, an alleged Muslim gangster in Gujarat.

It said Khan had struck a deal with gunrunners in South Africa, on behalf of Ibrahim, to offload explosives and arms at Kandla port in Gujarat.

"The terrorist hardware in a container was shipped from South Africa and was supposed to reach a godown (warehouse) at Kandla," the newspaper said, quoting a home ministry report.

"However, the ship is yet to anchor at Kandla. The consignee firm is a shadowy import and export company dealing in foodstuffs and raw textile materials. The company was set up on behalf of Sharif Khan."

Mini Arab summit rejects all forms of violence

Israelis rally for pullout from West Bank, Gaza

AFP, Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt

The leaders of Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia said here Saturday the Arabs were determined to make peace with Israel and rejected "all forms of violence."

The statement comes after the Saudis this week spoke of mutual US and Arab responsibilities toward stopping the 19-month-old spiral of Israeli-Palestinian violence and reviving moribund peace negotiations.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Syrian President Hafez al-Assad and Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah bin Abdel Aziz ended their three-hour summit in the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh with the new appeal for peace.

The three key Arab leaders "restated the Arabs' sincere determination to achieve peace and their rejection of all forms of violence," according to the statement read by Egyptian Information Minister Safwat al-Sherif.

The US government has repeatedly called on Arab leaders to seek an end to Palestinian suicide bombings against Israeli civilians, while the Arabs expect Washington to force Israel to halt its military assault on the Palestinians.

Palestinian international cooperation minister Nabil Shaath, who was

here for talks with top Egyptian and Saudi diplomats, said the Palestinians were "very serious" about stopping suicide bombings against civilians in Israel.

Reuters adds: Tens of thousands of left-wing Israelis rallied on Saturday night to call for an Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian territories in what organizers said was the biggest peace demonstration for 20 years. The protest was organized by the Peace Now movement, which has been marginalized of late by public outrage over Palestinian suicide bombings which have killed scores of Israelis in an uprising against occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Police estimated the crowd at about 50,000. Peace Now put the figure at above 100,000, calling it the biggest peace rally since some 200,000 people turned out in 1982 to call for an Israeli military pullout from Lebanon.

Opposition politicians and artists addressed a throng waving a sea of banners saying "Leave the territories for the sake of Israel" and "Two states for two peoples."

Crowds spilled out of Rabin Square, named after late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin shot dead by a Jewish extremist after addressing a peace rally there in 1995, two years after forging an interim peace deal with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

6 killed in 'suspicious' house fire in England

AFP, Huddersfield

Six people, including five sisters aged between six months and 13 years, died early Sunday in a "suspicious" fire at a house in Huddersfield, northern England, police said.

Police inspector Diane Booth said four adults managed to escape from the house and officers and forensic teams would be at the scene throughout the day looking for evidence.

No speeches in front of home, says Suu Kyi

AFP, Yangon

Aung San Suu Kyi will not be giving any speeches outside her famous lakeside villa because she has been granted full freedom to travel across Myanmar at will, the recently-freed opposition leader said in an interview over the weekend.

"I have no such plans (to give speeches) because I can now go to our township offices," she told the Oslo-based Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB). "In short, our people do not need to come to me because I can go to them."

The pro-democracy leader, released from 19 months under house arrest by the country's ruling military junta last week, gave speeches every Saturday and Sunday to supporters who thronged outside her home in the months following her first release from house arrest in 1995.

Musharraf to stay at home to keep on fighting terror

Pakistan seeks US help to modernise police

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has called off a visit to Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia to personally direct the fight against terrorism, the government announced late Saturday.

Musharraf has ordered a major crackdown on extremist groups in Pakistan in the wake of a car bomb blast in Karachi on Wednesday which killed 11 French nationals and three Pakistanis.

The president decided to postpone the visit, "to provide personal guidance and leadership to the

nation's fight against terrorism, both international and domestic," a government statement said.

He was "determined to protect the life and property of every Pakistani and of every foreigner living in Pakistan," the official Associated Press of Pakistan quoted the statement as saying.

PTI adds: Pakistan has sought help from the United States for modernising the country's "beleaguered police force" to enable it fight terrorism.

Islamabad has asked the US for resources and training to modernise the country's "beleaguered

police force," Pakistan Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider, who is here on an official visit, told the Washington Post on Friday.

The Pakistani police, Haider said, "lack the capability to be effective dealing with the terrorists."

The terrorists, he said, are adept at using computers, cell phones and other sophisticated devices while many police stations in Pakistan, by contrast, do not have cars, and the country still rely on outmoded paper filing and fingerprinting systems rather than on computer systems.

Israel for political settlement with Palestinians: Peres

AFP, Washington

Israel's military acts against terror are not intended to forestall political agreement on an eventual Palestinian state, Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said Saturday as his nation's forces massed outside the Gaza Strip held off on a threatened strike.

"We are not looking for a plain military victory. We are looking for an opening of a political road," Peres told CNN in an interview from Rome.

He would not, however, rule out a future strike on the densely-populated strip.

"I wouldn't like to make any commitment publicly about some-

thing which is purely professional. But I repeat what I am saying, we don't have in mind to conquer cities. We have in mind to prevent terror," Peres said.

The Israeli pause, combined with an earlier pullback from Bethlehem, meant an end to more than five weeks of occupation of Palestinian-controlled towns, a key Palestinian demand for restarting stalled peace talks.

"I believe that there is no real answer to the terror and the war by building walls or building fences or having trenches. We must arrive at an agreement, to a solution," Peres said.

"I believe that the Palestinian state is inevitable, and to my taste, it should happen as soon as possi-

ble, the earlier the better."

Peres, considered a moderate in Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's hardline cabinet, said Israel would be willing to discuss dismantling its settlements on the West Bank and Gaza Strip when negotiations restart, while admitting that would be politically difficult to carry out.

Palestinians have complained the growing Israeli settlements thwart their goal of an independent state by fragmenting the territory they control and have demanded they be dismantled. More than 200,000 Israelis live in some 250 settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, while another 200,000 Jews live in occupied and annexed east Jerusalem.

Sierra Leoneans hope polls will usher in lasting peace

AFP, Freetown

Sierra Leoneans are hoping that Tuesday's landmark elections will definitely turn the page on 10 years of brutal civil war and usher in peace and prosperity to the world's poorest country.

"The hope and aspiration of the nation is that we are at the turning point," Information Minister Cecil Blake told AFP.

The elections are the first since a January peace pact brought a formal end to a war that claimed up to 200,000 lives.

Thousands of civilians had their limbs amputated or were kidnapped, raped or forcibly enlisted to fight during the war, launched in 1991 by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF).

The former rebels, who started disarming last year, are contesting the elections as the RUF Party (RUPF), fuelling hopes that they are finally serious about joining the democratic process.

The RUPF leadership has vowed never to resort to violence

again, the RUPF leader Issa Sesay saying the ex-fighters were now like sitting ducks as they had "disarmed down to even pistols."

"They (the government) can come and kill us if they want," he said.

RUPF presidential candidate Pallo Bangura stressed the need for the healing process to continue.

"No matter who wins, there has to be a broad-based and all-inclusive government. Once that is formed we should have a consultative conference on the way forward. Society is divided and we have to be united," he said.

Despite a relatively peaceful run-up to the presidential and parliamentary polls, fears persist that intimidation and foul play may spoil the exercise or its aftermath.

For the war has left deep scars. Lamin Jusu Jarka, chairman of a camp for amputees in Freetown's Murray Road, dispassionately recounted how rebels chopped off both his arms when they invaded Freetown for a second time on January 6, 1999.



PHOTO: AFP

A batch of freed teenaged Pakistani prisoners sit at the airport of Pakistan's northwestern city of Peshawar after their arrival from the northern Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif on Saturday. Thousands of volunteers from Pakistan went to fight alongside the former Taliban regime as it faced an onslaught by a United States-led coalition after the September 11 terror attacks, and many were captured when the regime fell.

Lankan PM to visit India ahead of talks with Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe will meet Indian leaders next month ahead of crucial talks with Tamil Tiger rebels in Thailand, officials said Sunday.

Wickremesinghe is expected to meet Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in New Delhi on June 11, and is also expected to travel to Britain and Belgium next month to drum up support for the Norwegian-backed peace process, officials said.

Wickremesinghe came to power after elections in December promising peace and revived Oslo's peace initiative, which had been put on

hold in June last year by his political rival, President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

The Colombo government and the LTTE, which has been fighting for an independent homeland for the island's Tamil minority, have been observing an open-ended bilateral truce since February 23.

The prime minister is not due to attend the initial political negotiations to be held with the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Thailand later next month. "What will take place in Thailand will be the arranging of an agenda for talks and the prime minister will not be involved at that early stage," an official source said.