

Kashmir attack heinous crime: Vajpayee

US calls for an end to infiltration

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee Wednesday said an attack by Islamic militants on a bus and army camp in Kashmir which killed 34 people was a "heinous crime".

Vajpayee told the lower house of parliament: "The whole House is one on the issue... This was a heinous crime... We have to condemn it."

He offered to call an all-party meeting to discuss Tuesday's attack in which three Muslim militants opened fire on a civilian bus in Kashmir and then stormed the residential quarters of a nearby Indian army camp.

The dead included 18 women and children who were killed at the camp near Kashmir's Hindu-majority winter capital Jammu, besides seven bus passengers and the three rebels.

The attack, the deadliest against the army in Kashmir in the past year,

came just hours after US Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca arrived in New Delhi to urge the Indian leadership to cool tempers with Pakistan.

Meanwhile, a senior US official Wednesday warned infiltration by Muslim militants into Indian Kashmir must stop, as Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes visited the site where 33 people died in a gruesome attack.

Rocca, who was due to head to Islamabad later Wednesday after a two-day visit to India, said Tuesday's assault on a bus and army post in Kashmir was a "barbaric" attack.

"Acts like this are intended to undermine peace in the region. I think acts that occurred in Jammu are terrorism. No matter what the levels are, infiltration must stop," Rocca told a press conference.

"Terrorism is something that is unacceptable whether in India or Pakistan. This is absolutely unacceptable," she added.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani Foreign Secretary Inamul Haq (R) receives US Assistant Secretary of State Christina Rocca for talks in Islamabad on Wednesday. Rocca arrived in Pakistan for talks on the military standoff with New Delhi a day after a bloody militant attack on Indian forces in Kashmir. At left is US Ambassador to Pakistan Wendy Chamberlin.

India gives nod to army regiment to operate Agni

AFP, New Delhi

India said Wednesday it had given the green light to set up an army regiment to operate the intermediate-range nuclear-capable Agni ballistic missile.

"The government has approved 'in principle' the raising of an Agni Missile Group for the army," Defence Minister George Fernandes told MPs in a written statement in the upper house of parliament.

The Agni, or Fire, missile can deliver a one-tonne nuclear warhead to a distance of up to 2,500 kilometres (1,550 miles) and can be launched within 15 minutes.

Last year, the defence ministry approved a variant of the Agni missile to be mass produced for induction into the Indian army.

Bush names Clinton to lead team to E Timor inauguration

AFP, Washington

President George W. Bush announced Tuesday that he had named his predecessor, Bill Clinton, to lead the US delegation to the inauguration of East Timor's first president, Xanana Gusmao.

"Former President Bill Clinton, will serve as the leader of the delegation," the White House said in a statement.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan will swear in Gusmao and declare the territory independent in a ceremony on the night of May 19 as the clock strikes midnight.

The US delegation will also include the former US ambassador to the United Nations, Richard Holbrooke; Assistant Secretary of State for Asian Pacific Affairs James Kelly; Karen Brooks, National Security Council Director for Asian Affairs.

UN hails polls in Sierra Leone

AFP, Freetown

The United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) on Tuesday hailed landmark elections in the war-ravaged country west African country as "exemplary."

Stressing that no violence and a high turnout marked Sierra Leone's presidential and parliamentary polls -- the first elections since the end of a brutal 10-year civil war -- UNAMSIL chief Oluyemi Adeniji said everything had gone off smoothly.

"Our consensus is that the organisation of the elections had been extremely well done in all the areas," Adeniji, Special Representative of UN, told a news conference here.

Pakistan plotted N-strike against India in '99: US

AFP, Washington

The United States had evidence the Pakistani military was preparing a nuclear strike against India in 1999, as the two nation's armies were locked in a pitched battle in the disputed region of Kashmir, a former White House official acknowledged.

The revelations by Bruce Riedel, a former special assistant to former president Bill Clinton, also leave open the possibility these preparations were being made behind Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's back by then-armed forces commander General Pervez Musharraf.

In an academic paper prepared for the Center for the Advanced Study of India at University of Pennsylvania, Riedel described Musharraf, the current Pakistani president, as a man who "seemed to be in a different mold" than Sharif.

"He was said to be a hardliner on Kashmir, a man

some feared was determined to humble India once and for all," Riedel said.

The publication of the paper came amid a new flare-up of tensions between the perennial rivals which have fought two war over Kashmir since 1947.

Thirty-three people were killed early Tuesday as three Muslim separatists opened fire on a civilian bus in the Himalayan region and then raided a nearby Indian army camp.

US Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith renewed warnings Monday that the current standoff between the two countries could escalate into a nuclear war.

According to Riedel, the Clinton administration became seriously concerned about that prospect in June 1999, when India was trying to dislodge Pakistani troops from Kargil, where they took up positions after crossing the line of control separating Kashmir.

Bush praises Mahathir's role in anti-terror fight

AFP, Washington

Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad Tuesday made a strong pitch for US support after talks with President George W. Bush, papering over previous differences with a strong endorsement of Washington's anti-terror campaign.

Mahathir and Bush cast aside historic tensions over human rights and the alleged role of US finance firms in the Asian economic collapse, pledging to work together to combat international terrorism in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

The veteran Malaysian leader,

who has presided over the arrest of more than 60 militants allegedly linked to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network, said that terrorists would find no haven in his country.

"We do not tolerate their presence. We give them no rest, no quarter, no place to hide," he declared at a dinner attended by policy makers, academics and business leaders.

"We have adequate laws and capacity to deal with such threats and we have much expertise in this field," he added.

Mahathir's visit is a sign of the changes wrought in US foreign policy by the September attacks --

and Washington's desire to engage nations seen as crucial to its anti-terror campaign.

"I've been looking forward to this visit to publicly thank the prime minister for his strong support in the war against terror," Bush told reporters during a joint press availability in the Oval Office.

"We share a deep concern about terror -- what terror means to our respective countries, what it means to our peoples," said Bush, sketching over concerns about Malaysia's human rights record.

"Mr. Prime Minister, I want to thank you for your friendship, and thank you for your leadership."

Arafat bows to int'l pressure, calls for PA overhaul

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat on Wednesday bowed to international pressure and called for a complete overhaul of his Palestinian Authority, while personally shouldering the blame for unpopular deals to break the Israeli siege of his compound.

"I will present a new formula for the administration of the Palestinian Authority and its ministries and security apparatus in order to rebuild it on a firmer basis," he told a special parliamentary session.

"We want to totally separate the judicial, executive and parliamentary branches," he said.

"We must prepare for elections and prepare for reforms. But let me have some time to prepare for that," he said.

Arafat said he was still dedicated to peace as a strategic option.

"Peace was and will remain our strategic option. I will never give it away ... between us and the Israelis, because peace is in our joint interest," he said.

Arafat, speaking on the 54th anniversary of the creation of the state of Israel, a day known as the "catastrophe" to Palestinians, also took personal responsibility for highly unpopular deals that ended the sieges at his offices and Bethlehem's Nativity Church by the Israeli army.

"I am fully responsible -- do not blame anyone but myself. But whatever happened, happened based on international guarantees," he told the assembled deputies.

But he said reforms, already called for by the international community,

Israel, and many of his own ministers and security chiefs, were much needed to in the current crisis.

"We are now badly in need of re-evaluation of our policies and our plans, in order to repair our errors, to correct our march toward independence," which remains the Palestinian goal, said Arafat, speaking in a measured tone and occasionally laughing. Palestinian ministers have been increasingly calling for an overhaul ever since the end of Israel's devastating invasion of West Bank towns and cities throughout April in the wake of a series of bloody Palestinian suicide bombings.

The operation rocked the Palestinian Authority to the core, after its security forces proved incapable of offering any sustained resistance and its administration all but collapsed.

The United States has been calling for reforms, in particular to bring the various sprawling security branches under a unified control.

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, who addressed his own parliament the day before, said there could be no peace talks with the "corrupt and dictatorial" Palestinian Authority until it carried out fundamental reforms.

Israel says the PA is riven with corruption and alleges that documents it seized during its invasion of Ramallah show direct links between the authority -- and Arafat himself -- and radical groups which have persistently attacked Israel.

Sharon presented the documentation to US President George W. Bush during a state visit to Washington a week ago.

Israel's initial reaction to Arafat's speech was dismissive.



PHOTO: AFP

Heatwave kills 178 in Andhra Pradesh

REUTERS, Hyderabad

A heatwave has killed at least 178 people in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh and the toll is expected to rise, officials said on Wednesday.

The temperature in the worst-hit district along the Bay of Bengal coast has hit a high of 48 degrees Celsius (118 degrees Fahrenheit) in recent days compared with an average temperature of 40 to 45 Celsius.

"We are advising people to stay indoors between noon and 4 p.m.," D.C. Rosaiah, the state's relief commissioner, told Reuters.

"Those who venture out should cover their heads with white cloths and take water with them."

Th heatwave is the worst in four years and comes ahead of the annual monsoon rains.

Most of the victims are from the rural belt where farmers and street hawkers have suffered heatstroke and dehydration.

"The forecast is that heatwave conditions will prevail in the coastal districts in the next 24 hours and abate thereafter," C.V. V. Bhadram, director of the Indian Meteorological Centre in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh's state capital, said late on Tuesday.

The first monsoon rains normally fall in the southern coast of Kerala state in early June and then fan out over the subsequent three months.

Honeymoon turns sour in 2 days

AFP, London

A 75-year-old British pensioner deserted his 23-year-old wife just two days after they married, The Sun newspaper reported Wednesday.

Laura Griffiths managed to contact her wheelchair-bound husband Richard by phone, but he appeared to be with another woman, the tabloid said.

Laura told the paper: "He handed the phone to some girl I had never spoken to before in my life. She told me I had married him for all the wrong reasons and hung up."

The jilted wife, who wheeled her groom down the aisle in Wrexham, north Wales, Friday, insisted she was not a "gold-digger" as it was her elderly husband who proposed marriage.

UNSC reforms Iraq sanctions

Russia's stance remains unchanged

AFP, United Nations

UN Security Council members voted unanimously Tuesday to free up delivery of humanitarian supplies to Iraq, but remained at odds over the future of their 12-year-old sanctions regime.

The council adopted a goods review list (GRL) to replace the cumbersome vetting procedures of the UN's oil-for-food lifeline, which has for five and a half years enabled Iraq to import basic necessities despite the trade embargo.

Speaking to reporters later, the US ambassador to the United Nations, John Negroponte, emphasised the 15-0 vote, reached after a delay from Monday, when Syria seemed ready to abstain.

In a rare display of unity on the subject of Iraq, all five permanent council members -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States -- co-sponsored the text, adopted as Resolution 1409.

Negroponte said the GRL would make it harder for Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to blame sanctions for the collapse in his people's living standards.

The main reason for their poverty was "the refusal of the Iraqi regime to spend its own resources" on importing goods permitted by oil-for-food, he said.

Iraq's complaints "will even have less strength now, because humanitarian goods will be allowed in automatically and so will the lion's share of civilian products," Negroponte added.

Meanwhile, the UN Security Council's unanimous adoption of reformed sanctions on Iraq Tuesday makes no difference to Russia's demands the sanctions be completely lifted, Russia's foreign ministry said.

"This program is a temporary measure and cannot be an alternative to the full-fledged development of Iraq, which is impossible until the sanctions are lifted on specified conditions," the ministry said in a statement early Wednesday.

Carter pushes Cuba for israel committed torture in West Bank: AI

AFP, Havana

Former US president Jimmy Carter made a bold push for democratic opening in communist Cuba Tuesday, urging President Fidel Castro to let the UN human rights chief visit and calling attention to an unprecedented dissident bid for political change.

With Castro looking on and millions of Cubans likely tuned in, Carter said he had learned of the Varela Project, a defiant challenge to the only communist government in the Americas presented to the National Assembly last week, backed by more than 11,000 signatures, seeking broad political and economic reforms.

"When Cubans exercise this freedom to change laws peacefully by a direct vote, the world will see that Cubans and not foreigners will decide the future of this country,"

Carter said in a 20-minute speech in Spanish. Few Cubans previously had heard of the initiative.

Minutes after Carter's speech, the official news agency Prensa Latina for the first time mentioned the initiative by name, noting "Cuban officials have described the project as a product engineered from outside the country which is seeking a referendum on reforming the Constitution in effect since 1976."

After the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva last month voted to encourage Cuba to make progress on human rights, Carter said the International Committee of the Red Cross should be allowed to visit Cuban prisons and UN Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson should be welcomed and permitted "to address such issues as prisoners of conscience and the treatment of inmates."

AFP, Geneva

Israel has come under attack from the human rights organisation Amnesty International, which accuses it of torture and inhuman treatment of Palestinians during the recent Israeli operation in the West Bank.

"During the latest Israeli incursions into Palestinian refugee camps and other residential areas, thousands of Palestinians have been arrested, held in prolonged incommunicado detention and subjected to cruel and degrading treatment," Amnesty said in a briefing submitted Tuesday to the UN Committee against Torture (CAT).

The CAT will on Wednesday discuss the situation in Israel and the Palestinian territories for the second time in six months.

Croatian Serbs surrender to war crimes court

AFP, The Hague

Two ethnic Serbs indicted for war crimes over the Croatian war of the 1990's surrendered to the UN court in The Hague on Wednesday and were placed in detention, a court spokesman said.

Milan Martić and Mile Mrksić were detained after arriving on the same plane from Belgrade to hand themselves in to the court.

Martić, who served as president of the short-lived Serb Republic of Krajina (RSK), is indicted for ordering an attack on the Croatian capital Zagreb, and Mrksić is one of three former officials indicted for the 1991 destruction of the Croatian town of Vukovar.

Earlier report says, Croatian Serb wartime leader Milan Martić and an ex-Yugoslav army officer, both indicted for war crimes committed during Croatia's 1992-95 war, flew out of Belgrade Wednesday on their way to surrender to the UN Tribunal in The Hague.

"I am not guilty, I am going to fight for the truth about my people... I am going there proudly. If that is the court of justice, I will be back here," Martić told reporters before he boarded the plane.

The plane took off from Amsterdam at 6:50 am (0450 GMT).

Lawyer Toma Fila told reporters that his client, Mile Mrksić, an ex-officer in the former Yugoslavia's army, would board the same plane in order to surrender to the UN war crimes tribunal.

Mrksić is the only one of three suspects indicted for war crimes in the eastern Croatian town of Vukovar in 1991 who has decided to surrender.

Martić, 56, is a former police chief who became the head of the break-away Serb republic of Krajina towards the end of the 1991-95 Croatian war.

Myanmar ethnic groups want to join reconciliation talks

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar pro-democracy ethnic groups have called to be included in national reconciliation talks between the military junta and newly freed opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

The ethnic groups, led by the Shan National League for Democracy (SNLD), said they welcomed the May 6 release of Aung San Suu Kyi from 19 months of house arrest.

"We welcome this development and hope that such meaningful dialogue will commence soon," they said in a statement.

"In this period of the dawning of a new day, we, the political parties of the national groups, declare that we will take on any responsibilities assigned to us towards establishing national reconciliation which is inevitably needed.

"Development of national recon-

ciliation will succeed in as much as the tri-partite talks are successful." The SNLD statement represented political parties of the Shan, Mon, Zomi (Chin), Karen and Arakanese ethnic minorities within the country's borders, it said.

Several minority groups have waged armed struggles against Myanmar's four-decade military rule, while many have signed shaky ceasefire agreements with the junta.

The SNLD's chairman, Khun Tun Oo, said it would not be easy to forge a common approach among the various minority groups, some of which are accused of massive drug manufacture and trafficking along the Thai border.

"We national groups intend to meet frequently among ourselves to seek a common ground," Khun Tun Oo told AFP, adding "we foresee a lot of difficulties in this process as our political stances are quite diverse."

12 killed in Colombian firefight

AFP, Bogota

At least 12 people were killed and a child was wounded by a stray bullet during a firefight between leftist rebels and right-wing paramilitaries in northeastern Antioquia department, local officials reported.

"The army and police are making their way to the combat area, but we don't know to which side the dead belong," Antioquia Governor Eugenio Prieto Soto told reporters late Tuesday.

The fighting began Tuesday morning in the rural Campamento township, 512 kilometers (318 miles) northeast of Bogota, the official said.

Beside the 12 people killed in the shootout, a child was "slightly injured by a stray bullet," senior Campamento official Dairo Restrepo said.