

Nepali Maoists bomb minister's residences

AFP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels have bombed two country residences of Nepal's Home Minister Khum Bahadur Khadka in the southwest of the kingdom, police said Thursday.

The leftist guerrillas attacked the houses Tuesday night in the Dang district, completely destroying one and damaging the other, police said.

The rebels also set fire to nearby government vehicles.

No one was injured and Khadka was in the capital Kathmandu at the time.

The Maoists had already damaged one of Khadka's houses at Sabariya on April 11 when they mounted a massive assault on police posts in Dang district that left at least 164 people dead.

Police detain LeT leader

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani police have arrested the founder of an outlawed Islamic militant group linked to a bloody attack in Indian-controlled Kashmir this week, official sources said Thursday.

Hafiz Mohamad Saeed, former leader of the hardline Lashkar-e-Taiba group, was taken into custody Wednesday under laws that allow for suspects to be detained under suspicion of planning to create unrest, they said.

The move, also confirmed by Lashkar-e-Taiba spokesman Yahya Mujahid, came after Indian Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani accused the group of involvement in the attack in Kashmir Tuesday which killed 34 people.

The group, known for suicide bombings, was also one of two militant outfits which New Delhi blamed for an assault on the Indian parliament in December which led to a tense military standoff between India and Pakistan.

US plane sparks Sydney Sept 11 scare

AFP, Sydney

Office workers in Sydney were terrified on Thursday when they saw what appeared to be a large airliner shadowed by a military jet bank over city skyscrapers.

The two planes circled the city several times for 15 minutes before flying off.

"It looked horribly like a re-run of September 11," said office manager Jennifer Thornthwaite.

"They kept banking and flying over the tops of office buildings. After September 11, anybody's entitled to be frightened."

Democrats win Dutch polls

AP, Amsterdam

Dutch voters veered to the right after eight years of unchecked liberalism, giving a surprisingly wide victory to the opposition Christian Democrats and a new anti-immigration party whose charismatic leader was murdered last week.

With the vote count completed, the Christian Democrats won 43 seats a gain of 14 seats in the 150-member parliament followed by 26 for the upstart party founded by the assassinated populist Pim Fortuyn.

The outcome of Wednesday's vote was a stinging defeat for Prime Minister Wim Kok's Labor Party and its two coalition allies, which dropped from a total of 97 seats to 54.

Jan Peter Balkenende, a 46-year-old professor of Christian philosophy who has voiced distaste with the Dutch policies allowing euthanasia, gay marriages and tolerance of soft drugs, was likely to be the next prime minister.

Sierra Leone's president poised for reelection

AFP, Freetown

Sierra Leone's President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah and his SLPP party was poised to win his country's historic post-war elections, according to preliminary results emerging Thursday.

"Kabbah is leading" in the presidential elections, Commissioner Walter Nicol told AFP, adding that the president's party had a bigger edge in the parliamentary elections.

"In the south and south east, there is no doubt that the SLPP (Sierra Leone People's Party) is leading substantively," the polls chief said.

Nicol, however, warned that it was too early to get any clear picture from Tuesday's elections -- the first polls since the end of a brutal 10-year civil war. He said nationwide results would be ready three days after the polls.

Bush had warning about plane hijackings before Sept 11

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush had general warnings prior to September 11 that terrorists, including those led by Osama bin Laden, could hijack American passenger planes, the White House admitted.

The disclosure late Wednesday marks the first time White House officials acknowledged they knew that terrorist organisations such as al-Qaida had targeted US airlines weeks before the deadly strikes that left about 3,000 people dead.

"There was a general awareness of Osama bin Laden, as well as long-standing speculation about hijackings in the traditional sense," White House spokeswoman Claire Buchan told AFP.

She said that prior to September 11, the president and his aides had been receiving information from intelligence agencies about possible attacks on US planes and bin Laden's terrorist activities -- and sharing it with domestic security organisations. But none of the reports contained specific warnings about the plots targeting the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon building here, the spokeswoman pointed out.

"The information was about the hijackings and Osama bin Laden's threats around the world in the traditional sense, but not involving suicide bombings," Buchan stressed.

"There was no specific warning in terms of time, or place, or method of

the attacks," she said.

A Central Intelligence Agency spokesman refused to disclose if the information about these possible terror attacks had been relayed to Bush during his daily intelligence briefings.

"I'm not at liberty to speak on that issue," said the spokesman, who asked to remain unidentified.

But other officials pointed out the briefings had been most likely the source of the warnings.

The revelation came amid signs of growing frustration in Congress with US intelligence and law enforcement agencies, which some lawmakers blame for either failing to discern red flags ahead of the catastrophe or act upon them.

Federal Bureau of Investigation Director Robert Mueller admitted last week, for instance, that the bureau largely ignored a July 2001 appeal from its field office in Phoenix, Arizona, to investigate suspicious pilot training by Middle Eastern men.

Some of the September 11 hijackers, who flew the planes into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon studied flying in the United States.

A declassified portion of the Phoenix memorandum, made public earlier this month, contained a general proposal for FBI headquarters to discuss the pilot training "with other elements of the US intelligence community."

India 'surveying locations of ULFA camps in Bhutan'

AFP, Guwahati

A separatist group on Thursday accused the Indian government of flying reconnaissance missions over its camps in neighbouring Bhutan in the guise of recovering a missing MiG-21 jetfighter.

The outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA), fighting for an independent homeland in India's northeastern state of Assam, alleged that reports of an Indian Air Force jet crashing into the jungles inside Bhutan last month were false.

"The reports of the MiG-21 crash was indeed a blatant lie fabricated precisely by the Indian intelligence agencies to carry out reconnaissance of the ULFA bases along the international border without any

diplomatic hindrance from Bhutan," the ULFA said in its mouthpiece, Freedom.

The ULFA operates out of well-entrenched bases inside southern Bhutan to carry out hit-and-run guerrilla strikes on federal soldiers in Assam.

Indian air force officials said the jet disappeared mid-air on April 20 during a routine training flight.

The jet, with a squadron leader and flying officer aboard, took off from the Saloniabir airbase in northern Assam for a routine training exercise over the Indo-Bhutan border, according to officials.

The air force believes the MiG-21, along with two crewmembers, crashed over the Himalayas and fell inside thickly forested Bhutan.

Carter calls for US-Cuba friendship

AP, Havana

As the current U.S. president moved toward a tougher line in the 40-year embargo of communist Cuba, former president Jimmy Carter called for "cooperation, friendship and love" between peoples of the two countries.

Carter, a Bible school teacher back home in Plains, Ga. took to the pulpit of a small Havana church on Wednesday to bear witness to the power of God in his life and to appeal for understanding between

Americans and Cubans.

Speaking in Spanish, Carter referred to St. Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, saying "the things that are most important of all in life" are "the things that cannot be seen, that cannot be measured."

"It is not education. It is not electricity in the house, it is not money in the bank," he told the congregation at Havana's Ebenezer Baptist Church. He urged "justice, peace, humility, service, compassion. These are very simple things, but the most important."



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani (M), Jammu and Kashmir Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah (L) and Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes (R) attend a top ministers and army commanders' meeting at Home Ministry office in New Delhi on Thursday to draw up a response to a bloody Islamic separatist attack in Kashmir that New Delhi has blamed on Pakistan. As the United States sought to defuse tensions between the two nuclear-armed South Asian nations, Pakistan detained the founder of the outlawed Islamic militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba, which Indian officials linked to the attack that killed 35 people.

India weighing response to Kashmir attack

Bush condemns 'terrorist attack'

AFP, New Delhi

Top Indian ministers and army commanders were meeting Thursday to draw up a response to a bloody Islamic separatist attack in Kashmir that New Delhi has blamed on Pakistan.

As the United States sought to defuse tensions between the nuclear-armed South Asian nations, Pakistan detained the founder of the outlawed Islamic militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba, which Indian officials linked to the attack that killed 35 people.

Hafiz Mohamad Saeed, former leader of Lashkar-e-Taiba, or the Army of the Pure, was taken into

custody Wednesday under laws which allow for suspects to be detained on suspicion of planning to create unrest, official sources said in Pakistan.

Lashkar-e-Taiba is known for its suicide bombings and is also blamed by India for a December attack on its parliament that sent tensions on the subcontinent spiraling.

But Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani said Thursday that Pakistan has not done enough and lashed out at Washington for its support of President Pervez Musharraf, a key ally in its war on terrorism.

Meanwhile, US President George W. Bush on Wednesday

denounced what he branded a "terrorist attack" in Kashmir and vowed to keep working to ease tensions between nuclear-armed rivals India and Pakistan.

"The United States condemns the terrorist attack carried out by militants in Jammu and Kashmir yesterday," Bush said in a statement after discussing the strike by telephone with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

Separatist militants disguised as soldiers Tuesday opened fire on a bus, killing seven passengers, and then stormed the residential quarters of a nearby Indian army camp, Indian officials said.

War cloud over S Asian sky

REUTERS, New Delhi, Islamabad

Indian and Pakistani newspapers said on Thursday the threat of war was growing with New Delhi expected to retaliate for a deadly raid in Kashmir blamed on Pakistan-based militants.

"War clouds gather," read a headline in India's Asian Age.

"We'll take action," said another in the Hindustan Times.

The Pakistani paper, Dawn, said the fear was that the Kashmir attack "could provide India with the pretext for an armed adventure that could trigger a full-scale war" between the

nuclear-armed neighbours.

Tuesday's raid on an army base in the disputed Himalayan Indian state of Kashmir killed 34 people, mainly wives and children of soldiers.

The two countries have massed a million men along their border since December in a confrontation over Kashmir, the trigger of two of their three wars.

That build-up in turn was triggered by a December suicide attack on India's parliament, which New Delhi also blamed on Pakistani-based Kashmiri rebels.

India accuses Pakistan of

fomenting rebellion against its rule in its only Muslim-majority state by arming and training militants and sending them across the heavily militarised border.

Pakistan denies the charge.

But the confrontation is entering a critical phase as the Himalayan snow melt, opening up mountain passes and infiltration routes.

Senior Indian security officials led by Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani and Defence Minister George Fernandes were to meet on Thursday to discuss how to retaliate, a Home Ministry official said.

Chandrika calls for 3rd party mediation over Kashmir

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga has called for third-party foreign mediation to resolve the long-running dispute between India and Pakistan over Kashmir, a press report said Thursday.

Kumaratunga said a mediator from outside South Asia should be sought to bring the two bitter foes to the negotiating table, the Daily Mirror newspaper here reported.

The paper quoted Kumaratunga telling the United Nations Correspondents' Association that she supported mediation as both India and Pakistan had failed to resolve their problems on their own.

Kumaratunga was in New York to attend a United Nations summit of children.

"Her logic to support the mediation is simple. 'If two parties involved

cannot resolve it, then what to do," the report said.

India maintains that Kashmir, the scene of a 13-year Islamic separatist insurgency, is an internal matter and refuses to "internationalise" the issue.

Pakistan has long called for outside mediation over the Muslim-majority Himalayan territory, which is claimed by both countries.

Kumaratunga's office said Thursday it was checking with her on the remarks. "It is a very sensitive report and we are trying to check with the president," said the head of her press office, Janada Peiris.

Kumaratunga's comments come amid fresh calls by Indian officials for action against Pakistan after Islamic militants attacked a bus and army camp Tuesday in Kashmir, killing 35 people, most of them civilians.

Iraq accepts new UN sanctions regime

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq accepts UN Security Council Resolution 1409 seeking to free up delivery of humanitarian supplies to the sanctions-stricken population, Information Minister Mohammad Said al-Sahhaf said Thursday.

"Iraq will deal with Resolution 1409 adopted by the Security Council (late Tuesday) with regard to renewing the oil-for-food program for six months," Sahhaf said, quoted by the official INA news agency.

He was speaking after a joint meeting of Iraq's ruling Revolution Command Council (RCC) and Baath Party leadership chaired by President Saddam Hussein.

A statement issued after the meeting renewed Iraq's demand for an unconditional lifting of the sanctions regime and "a halt to the US-British aggression" on the country through the enforcement of "no-fly" zones in the north and south.

"Full lifting of the embargo and a halt to the US-British aggression is the solution that would satisfy Iraq's

people, fulfill their legitimate interests and preserve their sovereign right to their resources, (territorial) waters and airspace," the statement said.

It called for "the aggressors" to drop their "flimsy and transparent pretexts" to perpetuate the sanctions and overflights, affirming that Iraq would "take the decisions and measures that safeguard its rights at the appropriate time," INA reported.

The Security Council voted unanimously to revamp the sanctions regime in force since Iraq's August 1990 invasion of Kuwait.

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.

Until now, all import contracts have been vetted by the Security Council's sanctions committee to ensure that Iraq does not get round an arms embargo enforced with other sanctions when it invaded Kuwait.



PHOTO: AFP

2002 Miss Universe delegates (from L) Diana Kobzanova, Miss Czech Republic 2002; Miss Ireland Lisa O'Sullivan; Aisha Ralph, Miss Antigua & Barbuda 2002; and Nuraliza Osman, Miss Singapore 2002 pose in their swimwear at the Inter-Continental Hotel in San Juan Puerto. These delegates and others from around the world will compete for the title of Miss Universe on May 29.

NATO, Russia seal deal to fight terrorism

AP, Reykjavik

Many rushed to write off the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation after the U.S. military crushed the Taliban with a minimum of help from its allies. But in two days of talks the alliance has fought back.

During the session, which wrapped up Wednesday, NATO foreign ministers sealed a landmark deal with Russia to jointly fight terrorism and other threats, confirmed plans to take on new mem-

bers from eastern Europe and pledged to build up the alliance's military might.

That was followed by talks to intensify cooperation with Ukraine and other former-Soviet states to spread stability in the volatile Caucasus and Central Asian regions.

"NATO has a bright military future ... The alliance is as relevant as it has been in the past," U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell declared.

Mysterious disease infects UK soldiers in Afghanistan

AFP, Bagram Air Base

Six more British military personnel were to be flown out of Afghanistan Thursday amid an outbreak of a mystery contagious disease at this coalition air base, a spokesman said.

Lieutenant-Colonel Ben Curry told reporters 333 military personnel remained under quarantine within the perimeter of 34 Field Hospital but no new cases had been detected in the last 22 hours.

Two patients have already been evacuated, one to Germany and one to Britain.

"We are encouraged that there have been no fresh cases in the past 22 hours," said Curry. "There have been a total of 18 now who have shown symptoms."

"Two patients listed as very seriously ill who were evacuated to the United Kingdom and Germany are stabilising and are in definitive care."