

Lankan PM's plane makes emergency landing

AFP, Colombo

An aircraft carrying Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe made an emergency landing in Dubai Saturday following engine trouble, his office here said.

The Airbus A-340 aircraft belonging to SriLankan airlines, which is partly owned and fully managed by Emirates of Dubai, was unable to make the full journey from Colombo to London because of the engine problem, officials said.

Wickremesinghe, who is due to meet British Prime Minister Tony Blair in London, was transferred to another flight to Zurich.

Most Americans think Sept 11 warnings were incomplete

AFP, Washington

A majority of Americans believe possible warnings of deadly September 11 suicide attacks were too incomplete and reject the idea warnings of new terror attacks are designed to draw attention away from the controversy, according to a poll released Friday.

The Time magazine/CNN poll of 1,007 adults was taken Wednesday and Thursday.

Sixty percent of those polled believed the administration of President George W. Bush was unable to act on possible warnings of the attacks because the information available was incomplete, versus 34 percent who said the administration failed to act.

Pak national, army employee detained for spying

AFP, Jodhpur

Indian police have arrested a Pakistani national and an employee of the Indian army in the northwestern state of Rajasthan on charges of spying, a senior police official said Saturday.

Arun Kumar Duggar, additional director general of police, told AFP that Pakistani national Asghar Ali, who was living in Rajasthan's Bikaner town under the assumed name of Vijay Sagar, had been giving sensitive information to Pakistan via the Internet.

He said investigations had revealed that he had been colluding with a member of the Indian army cleaning staff, Satinder Singh, and five other people to obtain military information.

Troops-militants battle claims 7 in Kashmir

AFP, Jammu

Seven people, including five suspected Islamic militants and two Indian security personnel, were killed in a shootout early Saturday in the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir, police said.

Acting on a tip-off, Indian police and troops late Friday surrounded an area where a group of militants were believed to be hiding in Kashmir's Rajouri district, about 150 kilometres (90 miles) from the winter capital Jammu.

When Indian troops cordoned off the area the militants opened fire on them, prompting retaliatory fire from the security forces, a police spokesman said.

Five militants, a policeman and a soldier were killed in the ensuing encounter which ended Saturday morning, he said.

Some of the militants managed to escape into the nearby forests.

Seoul asks Beijing to hand over N Korean defectors

AFP, Seoul

The South Korean government on Saturday asked China to send three North Koreans who have taken refuge in its consulate in Beijing to Seoul, news reports said.

"We conveyed our position to the Chinese side that the incident should be dealt with in a humanitarian manner like the recent cases involving other foreign diplomatic facilities," an unidentified government official was quoted as saying by Yonhap news agency.

"We'll continue having active negotiations with Chinese authorities," he said.

The foreign ministry made no official comment in an apparent bid to keep a low profile on the incident, which has put China in a dilemma because of its close ties with South Korea's rival, North Korea.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani troopers shout slogans during the visit of Vice Chief of Army Staff General Muhammad Yusuf Khan at the frontline near Muzaffarabad, capital city of Pakistan-administered Kashmir on Friday. Khan visited the frontlines and addressed the soldiers in which he said "we do not want war but if the enemy ventures an aggression, we will respond with our full might. India and Pakistan, both armed with nuclear weapons, have been lurching towards war in recent days over the disputed Himalayan state of Kashmir.

No sign of let up as Indo-Pak troops keep on artillery duels

Indian shelling toll rises to 30

AFP, Jammu

Indian and Pakistani troops exchanged fire Saturday across their borders in the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir for the ninth consecutive day, officials said here.

Pakistani shelling was reported from the southern zone of Indian-administered Kashmir, in the districts of Poonch, Rajouri, Kathua and Samba throughout Friday night and early Saturday, an army spokesman said.

"Most of the firing was concentrated along the international border in southern Kashmir," the spokesman said.

"As seen in the past two or three days, it was a mix of small arms, mortar and heavy machinegun fire, to which the Indian army effectively retaliated," he added.

The situation in northern Kashmir along the Line of Control, the de-facto border, was calm, he said.

"There are no reports of any one being injured in these areas as the

villagers have already fled to safer places," an army spokesman said.

At least 36 people have been killed in the ongoing shelling -- 26 Pakistanis and 10 Indians, according to police on both sides of divided Kashmir, the bone of contention between India and Pakistan.

The fighting has triggered an exodus of people from border areas, with officials estimating that up to 40,000 people had shifted to makeshift refugee camps across Kashmir.

On Friday, top army sources said that Pakistani gunners had opened up with large-calibre artillery around Siachen glacier in the Himalayas for the first time since the exchanges began on Friday last week.

"The two sides also exchanged small arms fire near Kargil," one official said of the strategic peaks where India and Pakistan lost 1,000 armed personnel during a full-scale military conflict in 1999.

Indian soldiers are at an advantage on the 21,000-foot (6,363-metre) Siachen and the officials said the incoming ordnance from

Pakistani posts was falling harmlessly into the snow.

The rival gunners in Kashmir have been attacking each other since Friday last week following an attack three days earlier by Islamic militants on a bus and an army camp outside Jammu which left 35 people dead.

Meanwhile, four more people have been killed by Indian shelling of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, taking the toll in the past week to 30, an official said Saturday.

A man and a woman died in the Khairatta and Charoi sectors of Kotli district and two men were killed in Samahni sector, Bhimbher district, on Friday, said the deputy inspector general of police, Faheem Ahmed Khan.

Artillery duels across the de facto border in disputed Kashmir, which began this month after New Delhi blamed Pakistan-based militants for an attack that killed 35 people, continued for the eighth straight day Saturday.

EU ratification to bring Kyoto Protocol into force

AFP, United Nations

Members of the European Union are due to ratify the Kyoto Protocol on global warming here on May 31, triggering its entry into force 90 days later, the UN spokesman's office said Friday.

Germany, Ireland, Spain and Sweden, as well as the EU itself, have made appointments with the treaty section of the UN's legal department to deposit their instruments of ratification simultaneously, the office said.

Pak heatwave toll rises to 100

AFP, Multan

A blistering heat wave has killed 96 people in central and southern Pakistan over the past three weeks, health officials said Saturday.

More than 250 people had been hospitalised over the past two days in the worst-hit areas in central Punjab province and southern Sindh, they said.

Russia invites both India, Pakistan to peace meet

Islamabad to consider invitation to peace talks

AFP, Saint Petersburg

Russia has invited the leaders of India and Pakistan to attend a meeting in early June to prevent an escalation of the conflict over Kashmir, Russian President Vladimir Putin told Interfax Saturday.

"I hope they will come, so that we can discuss the matter here and prevent the further escalation of the conflict," Putin said during a visit with US President George W. Bush to the northern city of Saint Petersburg.

"Russia regrets that, in the context of the conflict," missile tests were being carried out, Putin added in an allusion to Pakistan's test-firing Saturday of a nuclear-capable missile.

Putin's unilateral move to broker peace talks came on the second day of a landmark summit meeting with Bush, but even so is a gamble that risks flat rejection from the two South Asian rivals.

India, a long-time Russian ally, rejected calls on Thursday to engage Pakistan in talks over Kashmir, while President Pervez Musharraf said Saturday that his country was ready for war.

Pakistan and India have around a million troops massed on their border and have been exchanging bellicose statements and fighting artillery duels in the disputed Himalayan state of Kashmir for the past week.

The stand-off began in December when India blamed Pakistan for an attack on the Indian parliament, and escalated on May 14 when 35 people were killed in a massacre in Kashmir, which New Delhi again blamed on

Islamabad.

Pakistan is under intense political pressure to clamp down on Islamic militants blamed for the attacks on India, as the United States is particularly keen to avoid any conflict which could weaken the international coalition against terrorism.

Pakistan has played a key role in supporting the US-led campaign in neighbouring Afghanistan but is reported already to be withdrawing some troops from its western borders to face any military threat from India in the east.

Meanwhile, Pakistan would consider an invitation from Russian President Vladimir Putin to attend peace talks with India, a senior government official said Saturday.

"We have said that Pakistan has always called for dialogue and talks to resolve all outstanding issues with India, including the core issue of Kashmir, and the invitation from President Putin when received will be considered in the same context," the official said on condition of anonymity.

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Pak opposition seeks Musharraf's exit for forging nat'l unity

IPS, Islamabad

The threat of war with neighbouring India has not softened the stand of an ever-fierce opposition in Pakistan, which wants the country's military ruler to step down and hand over power to an independent caretaker set up as the only way to forge national unity.

This sentiment can be seen in a resolution filed by more than 15 mainstream political and religious-political parties in Lahore this week, which said: "Musharraf should immediately resign from all his de facto positions and hand over power to a neutral caretaker government which should unite the nation, face the challenge posed by India and hold fair and free election".

But at the same time, the opposition is making it clear that it is against Musharraf and not the military itself -- in an apparent move to capitalise on anti-Musharraf sentiment said to be simmering within military ranks because of his political ambitions.

"We have full confidence in our military capabilities and preparedness, but Musharraf stands discredited and lacks the stature and moral authority to deal with the current threat to national security and territorial integrity of Pakistan," said a spokesman for the Pakistan People's Party, led by former premier Benazir Bhutto.

Critics also say Musharraf has pit himself against domestic forces over the years -- most recently though the Apr. 30 referendum that extended his rule but was roundly criticised at home. This has made it difficult for him to have enough political standing to pursue dialogue with India, they added.

The opposition conference by the All Parties Conference in Lahore came just days before Musharraf's consultative meeting with politicians on tensions with India, which rose after last week's attack in Indian-administered Kashmir that New Delhi blames on Pakistani militants.

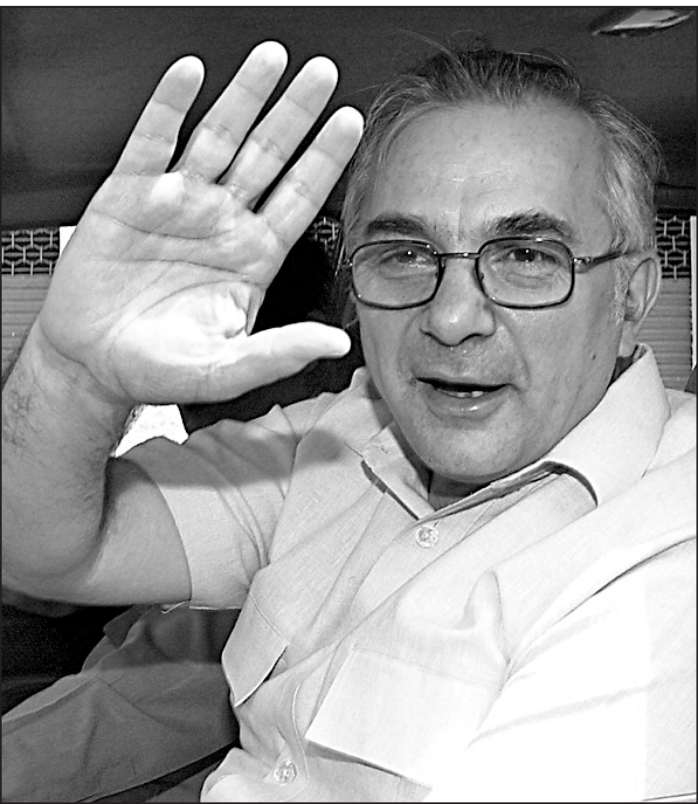


PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani High Commissioner Ashraf Jehangir Qazi waves upon arrival at the New Delhi domestic airport on Saturday ahead of his departure from the Indian capital for Pakistan following his expulsion by the Indian government last week. Qazi took a flight from New Delhi to the northern Indian city of Amritsar from where he was due to drive across the border into Pakistan.

Norwegian team in Lanka to review peace bid

AFP, Colombo

Norwegian peace brokers arrived in Sri Lanka Saturday to review a truce they arranged between government forces and Tamil Tiger rebels and prepare the ground for political talks, officials said.

Norwegian deputy foreign minister Vidar Helgesen started his second visit to the Sri Lankan capital in as many months as the bilateral truce entered its fourth month.

Officials said Helgesen and

another Norwegian peace envoy, Erik Solheim, arrived here as Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe left on a five-day visit to Belgium and Britain to drum up foreign support for the peace process.

The Oslo peace mission is aimed at reviewing the progress of a bilateral truce that went into effect on February 23. The terms of the ceasefire are to be implemented in stages, up to a maximum of 160 days.

Rioting rocks Gujarat again

AFP, Ahmedabad

One man died and seven others were injured in fresh violence in Godhra, in India's western state of Gujarat, even as the army was preparing to move towards the border with Pakistan, police said Saturday.

The violence started in Jauharpura area of Godhra when a crude bomb went off, sparking clashes between two groups in the tense city, police said.

Intense stone-throwing and rioting began and the police

responded with tear gas canisters.

Godhra has been at the centre of sectarian violence which has wracked Gujarat since a train carrying Hindu activists was allegedly torched by a Muslim mob in February, beginning a chain of violence in which nearly 1,000 people have died.

The Indian army had been called in to stem rioting in Ahmedabad, the commercial hub of Gujarat, and other major cities of the state, but this week began moving back towards the border as tensions with Pakistan rose sharply.

Peter Hillary conquers Mt. Everest

AFP, Kathmandu

New Zealander Peter Hillary Saturday scaled Mount Everest, 49 years after his father Sir Edmund Hillary was the first to climb the world's tallest peak, organizers of the climb said.

On 29 May, 1953, Sir Edmund and Tenzing Norgay Sherpa were the first climbers to reach the top of the 8,848-metre (29,028-foot) peak. "Peter Hillary scaled Everest Saturday morning at 10.20 am (0435 GMT) via the southeast ridge route," Wangchu Sherpa, managing director of Peak Promotion Trekking Organization said.

"Peter was accompanied by the leader of the National Geographic Everest Expedition Peter Athens and a high altitude Sherpa guide," he said.

"Fifty minutes earlier, four Sherpa (guides) reached the summit of Everest clearing the route for them," he added.



PHOTO: AFP

Newlyweds Norwegian Princess Martha Louise (L) and Ari Behn enjoy the first pieces of their wedding cake after they were married in Trondheim Cathedral Nidarosdomen on Friday. Princess Martha Louise is second in the order of accession to the Norwegian throne.

Israel keeps up WB sweep after suicide attacks

100 Palestinians detained

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel was continuing raids in an autonomous Palestinian area of the West Bank on Saturday, sweeping the town of Tulkarem for militants after a series of suicide bomb attacks earlier in the week.

Palestinian security sources said Saturday that Israel has detained about 100 Palestinians in an incursion into Tulkarem, although the army would only confirm it had arrested four people in its house-to-house search.

The troops have been hunting members of Palestinian militant groups in the area since Friday, with one soldier killed and two others wounded, one seriously.

The soldiers clashed with members of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, an armed offshoot of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Fatah group, at the entrance to the Tulkarem refugee camp, the security sources said.

Six Palestinians, including a woman, were also wounded in the exchange of gunfire, according to Palestinian hospital sources.

Most of the city was still under curfew Saturday, the security sources said.

The Palestinian-controlled town lies on the border

between the West Bank and Israel and is often used as a hub for suicide attacks inside the Jewish state.

The raid comes after a guard at the Studio 49 discotheque in nearby Tel Aviv noticed a suspect car heading for the entrance of the club late Thursday and opened fire on the driver, after which there was a huge explosion.

The occupant of the car was killed and five bystanders injured in the blast, claimed by the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, which has had defied a demand by Arafat to stop attacking Israelis.

A day earlier, a 16-year-old Brigades suicide bomber hit Rishon Letsion, a Tel Aviv suburb rocked by a human bomb only two weeks earlier, killing himself and two Israelis and injuring more than 30.

And it came less than a day after a major disaster was averted when a bomb exploded under a tanker truck at Israel's main fuel depot near Tel Aviv, which has a total capacity of 2,500 tonnes.

The truck burst into flames, but the fire was quickly extinguished and no one was hurt.

An expert quoted by the Haaretz daily said an explosion of the depot could have created a fireball extending out to a radius of 1.7 kilometres (one mile), covering an area with 30,000 inhabitants.