

## Iran rules out easing of ties with US

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mohammad Khatami on Wednesday ruled out talks with Washington or any easing of ties, accusing Washington of adopting a "bellicose" stand toward Tehran, Iranian television reported.

"When a power ... uses a bellicose and threatening tone toward us, the possibility of talks cannot be considered, nor even the slightest easing in relations," Khatami said in a meeting with MPs.

"We want peace," he said, adding however that softening Iran's stand "would mean not taking into account the interests of the regime."

"All those who speak of discussions with the United States must submit to the policies of the regime

and not do anything that goes against the national interest and honour," he added.

Parliamentary sources told AFP on Wednesday that US Secretary of State Colin Powell asked Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus on April 15 to help facilitate a US-Iranian political dialogue despite their differences.

Assad passed the message on to Khatami, who rejected it, the sources said.

Foreign ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi would not comment on the report, but said it was "nothing new".

"In view of America's behavior, all negotiation between the two governments is out of the question," he said.

## Bomb attacks on buses in Gujarat: 12 hurt

AFP, Ahmedabad

Three bombs planted in separate buses rocked the commercial capital of the riot-hit western Indian state of Gujarat Wednesday injuring 12 people, a police spokesman said.

The bombs were placed under seats in the buses and exploded almost simultaneously, police said.

Another two bombs were found by police at bus stations and defused, he added.

The blasts occurred at peak hour, when the buses were crowded with commuters. Police suspect crude homemade bombs of low intensity were used.

Forensic experts from Gujarat's police force were sent to the sites of the blasts to investigate.

Payal Takkar, 26, a commuter in one bus, said the explosion took place around 10:00 am (0430 GMT), just as the vehicle was about leave the bus station.

"I was sitting in the seat behind the driver when there was a loud explosion," said Takkar, who works for a local courier company.

"The bus was immediately filled with dense smoke and fumes and everyone tried to run out of the bus in panic," she said.

The back portion of another bus was wrecked in the blasts while some rear seats of a third bus also suffered damage, witnesses said.

Alerted by the explosions, the police launched a search of all buses and bus stations in Ahmedabad and recovered another two bombs hidden in lunch containers, the spokesman said.

The two bus stations were immediately evacuated and bomb disposal squads sent in to defuse the devices, he said.

Gujarat has been ravaged by a series of sectarian clashes in which more than 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, have been killed since February.

## Indo-Pak teams begin talks over Indus water treaty

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan on Wednesday began a meeting here over the Indus water-sharing treaty despite the heightened tensions between the two nuclear rivals, an official said.

He said the meeting was a routine one and dismissed reports that the crucial water treaty would be

scrapped.

The two sides are expected to exchange data relating to flood forecasts and other administrative issues in accordance with the 1960 treaty.

The Indian delegation is headed by Indus Commissioner A.C. Gupta, while the Pakistani team is led by his counterpart M. Mammen, the official said.



PHOTO: INTERNET

Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi addresses hundreds of supporters at a meeting of her National League for Democracy (NLD) in Yangon on Monday. Suu Kyi said in a newspaper interview published on Wednesday that she was planning to publish an opposition newspaper.

## Suu Kyi plans to publish opposition newspaper

AFP, Bangkok

Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi has unveiled plans by her National League for Democracy (NLD) to launch a newspaper in the military-ruled state, reports said Wednesday.

"Regarding the dissemination of information, we will apply for the right (to publish a party newspaper)," the Nobel peace laureate said in an interview published in the Nation daily.

"We have a plan (to do so).

We'll see whether this will be allowed," she said in the interview which originally ran in Irrawaddy Magazine, published by Myanmar exiles in Thailand.

"We have already accepted that there must be freedom of expression and (dissemination of information through media) to bring about a democracy," Aung San Suu Kyi was quoted as saying on Irrawaddy's website.

All media in Myanmar are tightly controlled by the junta.



PHOTO: AFP

A Royal Nepal Army soldier inspects the weapons and ammunitions they seized after clashes with Maoists fighters in Khara village, 320 km southwest of Kathmandu. Fierce fighting between the government soldiers and the Maoists left more than 100 Maoists, five army soldiers and ten civilians killed, army official said.



PHOTO: AFP

British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw (L) gestures during a press conference as his Indian counterpart Jaswant Singh (R) looks on, following talks at Hyderabad House in New Delhi on Wednesday. Jaswant Singh again signalled India's growing impatience with Pakistan, saying President Pervez Musharraf had been given plenty of time to crack down on terrorism.

## Israel keeps up Bethlehem raid after 4 Israelis killed

AFP, Jenin

At least four Israelis and two Palestinians were killed on Tuesday as Israel continued to mount raids on West Bank towns, arresting scores of suspected militants.

The Israeli army continued to occupy Bethlehem for a second day running, after declaring it a "closed military zone", banning journalists from entering, setting up roadblocks around the town and imposing a curfew.

And on Tuesday night, Israeli troops moved into the West Bank city of Ramallah and conducted house-to-house searches as they hunted for a local Hamas leader, a Palestinian security official said.

Israeli security forces were put on high alert in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv after a Palestinian suicide bomber killed an Israeli toddler and her grandmother outside a mall near Tel Aviv on Monday.

The latest hostilities came as the Palestinian intifada, or uprising,

entered its 21st month and two senior US officials prepared to head for the region in yet another bid by Washington to get the peace process moving again.

They also coincided with word that Yasser Arafat plans to shake up the Palestinian leadership within 10 days and hold presidential and legislative elections in December.

Three Orthodox Jewish students and a Palestinian were killed in a shoot-out on Tuesday evening in the Jewish settlement of Itmar near the West Bank town of Nablus and one other settler was lightly injured, settlers there said.

They said the Palestinian was shot dead by an Israeli security guard after infiltrating and attacking the settlement.

A Palestinian was killed in Jenin when shooting broke out as Israeli tanks, backed up by helicopters, rolled into the town, security officials said. The army withdrew around midday (0900 GMT).

And an Israeli was killed as his

## Firing goes on across entire Kashmir border

AFP, Jammu

Indian and Pakistani troops have been trading heavy fire across the entire stretch of their border in disputed Kashmir for the past two weeks, officials said Wednesday.

This includes the Line of Control, the 745 kilometre (460 miles) de facto border, and the 190 kilometre (117 mile) long stretch of international border in Kashmir.

Pakistani shelling became more pronounced after an Islamic militant attack on a civilian bus and an army camp near Jammu on May 14, an Indian army spokesman in Delhi said.

"They are now targeting locations along the Line of Control as well as the international border, which is a new thing," the spokesman

said on condition of anonymity.

The shelling continued through the night and into Wednesday, a police official said in Jammu, Kashmir's winter capital.

"Overnight and early (Wednesday) morning there was shelling in the Poonch sector. Shelling also took place in Nowshera and Samba region," he added.

Nowshera is situated 150 kilometres (93 miles) west of Jammu while Poonch falls 240 kilometres (150 miles) to the west.

"Pakistani soldiers fired mortar and artillery shells in Poonch and Indian soldiers retaliated. Some houses in Poonch were damaged due to the attack," the official said.

"Three military posts of the Indian army came under artillery shelling in the Poonch region,"

the police official said.

Indian troops have been massed along the borders which separates Indian- and Pakistan-controlled Kashmir and other western Indian states from Pakistan since early this year.

The military build-up followed an attack by Islamic militants on the Indian parliament in December 2001, blamed by India on two Pakistani-backed militant groups.

On Wednesday, the army claimed a further nine Pakistani soldiers had been killed and 31 injured during Indian retaliatory fire.

Meanwhile, at least five people were killed and eight others wounded as border villages in eastern Pakistan came under intense shelling by Indian troops overnight, police said Wednesday.

## Archaeologists set to search for hidden Buddha statue

AFP, Kabul

Archaeological experts are set to search for another giant statue thought to be buried close to the world famous Bamiyan Buddhas which were blown up by the Taliban, the UN cultural office said Monday.

The hidden statue, dubbed the Reclining Buddha, is thought to be even bigger than the two 1,800-year-old monuments which were destroyed by the fundamentalist Islamic militia in March 2001 on the grounds that they were idolatrous.

Delegates from around the world gathered here Monday for a seminar hosted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) on the revival of Afghanistan's cultural heritage.

UNESCO has drawn up a policy document for the three-day conference which details a 200,000 dollar project to begin searching for the Reclining Buddha.

"Archaeological soundings should be carried out in order to identify caves presently hidden by the debris (of the other two Buddhas) and the exact location of the hidden Reclining Buddha," the document said.

The UNESCO document said the Buddha was "several hundred meters long". The other two were 55 meters (181 feet) and 38 meters (125 feet) tall.

Many scholars believe that a third Buddha was buried at Bamiyan in central Afghanistan, possibly by an earthquake in the 10th century, although there are conflicting views over whether it can be found and what condition it might be in.

Paul Bucherer-Dietschi, of Switzerland's Afghan Museum in Exile, carried out a survey of the site on behalf of the Afghan government earlier this year.

He said there was little doubt the Reclining Buddha could be found but criticised the rush to raise the

issue.

"There are dangers in making the public aware of the existence of this statue," he told AFP.

"It could have remained covered up for maybe five or six years. Now they must seal the site off.

"We know exactly where it is. It is written down already."

But Jean-Francois Jarrige, director of the National Museum of Asian Art in Paris, added there could be no way of knowing for sure if the Reclining Buddha could be unearthed.

"An archaeologist should never begin a project by saying I am going to find this treasure," he told AFP after recently returning from Bamiyan.

"Maybe it exists or it has been destroyed forever. The textual evidence (over where it is located) is far from being clear. There are different interpretations.

"Probably this Buddha has existed but what impact time and erosion has had we do not know."

## Blair names new transport secretary

AFP, London

Prime Minister Tony Blair named Alastair Darling as Britain's new transport secretary Wednesday, in a cabinet reshuffle sparked by the sudden resignation of previous holder Stephen Byers.

The moves also saw Paul Boateng, a junior Treasury minister, elevated to a new post that makes him Britain's first black cabinet minister.

Darling, currently the minister for work and pensions, is being replaced by Andrew Smith, whose own post as chief secretary to the Treasury will be taken by Boateng.

The reshuffle follows the resignation Tuesday of Byers following months of controversy during which he was accused of misleading parliament and fumbling the supervision of Britain's creaking privatised railway network.

Darling, 48, is regarded as a close ally of finance minister Gordon Brown, who himself is seen as notably more cautious than Blair on British membership of the European single currency.

## Nepal TV puts Maoist death toll at 152

REUTERS, Kathmandu

Nepali troops killed 152 Maoist rebels in a counter-attack after their military camp in the west of the Himalayan kingdom was raided overnight, state-run Nepal television said on Wednesday.

Nepal TV said "155 terrorists were killed in the attack on the army camp in Rukum," about 600 km (375 miles) west of the capital, Kathmandu.

It said thousands of Maoists had attacked the army camp and showed footage of dozens of bodies of guerrillas lying in open fields.

The Maoists are battling to install a communist republic in the impoverished country, sandwiched between India and China.

## Last WTC steel beam removed from Ground Zero

REUTERS, New York

With bagpipes skirling, the last steel girder still standing at "ground zero" was cut down on Tuesday night, bringing a symbolic end to more than eight months of grueling recovery work at New York's World Trade Center site.

The 36-foot (10-metre), 58-tonne girder -- column 1001 B of the southeast corner of the south World Trade Center tower -- was taken down as four workers bathed in floodlights and welding torches applied the last cuts, sparking a crowd of 1,000 workers and uniformed officers to chant "USA, USA, USA."

It was an emotional end to a herculean task -- the grisly search for human remains and the clearing away of mangled debris and ash seven stories high and eight stories underground left when the 110-storey twin towers collapsed after being hit on Sept. 11 by hijacked airliners.

Workers cleared some 1.8 million tonnes of rubble and steel from the site in more than 108,000 truckloads, according to Deputy Commissioner Frank McCarton of the Office of Emergency Management, which oversaw the recovery efforts.

More than 19,000 body parts

were also recovered.

The beam, a makeshift shrine to the more than 2,800 people killed in the attacks, bore the numbers of dead from each of the city's uniformed services, had personal messages scribbled on it and pictures glued to the surface.

Representatives of all the groups of workers involved in the recovery including engineers, carpenters, iron workers, plumbers and construction workers were on hand.

"The workers who dedicated themselves to this effort are on the verge of completing an enormous job," said Mayor Michael Bloomberg. "In many ways this is their night to reflect and remember."

Iron worker Joseph Alba brought a special perspective to the ceremony. He was a member of the first crew that erected steel on the site of the World Trade Center in 1967 and on Tuesday was a member of the last work crew.

"We are just workers," said the 60-year-old Alba, wearing a starched denim shirt and denim pants to his last shift at ground zero.

"I'm glad it's over," said Alba, who said he was working at the nearby South Ferry terminal on Sept. 11 when the planes hit.



PHOTO: AFP

A couple (R) pause and look at the last steel beam that was standing from one of the World Trade Centre towers, just before it was lifted from the ground on Tuesday in New York. Workers painted the numbers of several New York Fire Department and Police units on the beam, which will be ceremoniously driven away on May 30 during a service marking the end of the recovery efforts and the start of reconstruction of the site.

## EU hopes progress on all points at Russia-EU meet

AFP, Moscow

European Commission President Romano Prodi said Wednesday he hoped the ninth Russia-EU summit opening in Moscow would lead to significant progress in bilateral relations between the two sides.

The EU president said he and Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar would "discuss all the strategic issues in cooperation between Russia and the Union" and hoped for "progress on all points" in their talks later with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"Our relations began 11 years

ago. Over the course of these 11 years, Russia has changed radically for the better," he noted, speaking at the inauguration of the new European Commission premises in Moscow, accompanied by Russian Deputy Prime Minister Viktor Khristenko.

The European Union envoy to Moscow, Richard Wright, noted that with a 118-strong staff, the EU representation to Russia was the largest in the world and indicated the importance the European Union accorded to its relations with Russia.

## Libya offers \$ 2.7 b to families of Lockerbie blast victims

AFP, Washington

The government of Libya has offered to pay 2.7 billion dollars in compensation to the families of the victims of the 1988 bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, a senior US official said.

"As I understand it, it's an offer Libya has made to the families through their lawyers and it's up to the families to decide whether they want to accept it or not," the official told AFP Tuesday on condition of anonymity.

The families of each of the 270 victims of the bombing -- the 259 passengers and crew on board the plane and 11 people on the ground in the Scottish town in December 1988 -- would receive 10 million dollars, according to the official's account of the Libyan offer.

Under the offer, the money is to be paid in installments, spread out over time based on the lifting of certain sanctions imposed against Libya, the official said.

Leading US dailies on Wednesday said 40 percent of the money would be paid when the United Nations lifts its sanctions on Libya; another 40 percent when US sanctions are lifted.

The final 20 percent would be paid when the US State

Department removes Libya from its list of nations that sponsor international terrorism.

The offer does not include an admission of responsibility of the 1988 bombing by Libya, the dailies said, but the United States, Britain and Libya are negotiating a statement to that effect and are scheduled to meet again in June in London.

The senior US official said Washington would not likely take a position on the offer -- which has been negotiated without the government's participation -- but said Washington would not be bound by a private agreement.