



Denise M. Quinones August (R), Miss Universe 2001, crowns 24-year-old Oxana Fedorova of Russia as the new Miss Universe 2002 at the end of the LIVE CBS Television Network broadcast of the 51st annual Miss Universe competition in San Juan, Puerto Rico on Wednesday. The first Miss Russia to win the title of Miss Universe, Fedorova, a post-graduate student and lecturer, will spend her year travelling and promoting HIV/AIDS awareness.

'War on terror weakens US influence on India'

AFP, Perth

The war on terror has complicated Washington's ability to defuse tensions between India and Pakistan, the head of an international think-tank said here Thursday. Colonel Terence Taylor, executive director of the Washington arm of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said the leaders of India and Pakistan would have to draw on their leadership skills and strategic vision to end their dispute over Kashmir. He was speaking here after presenting a seminar about stability in nuclearised South Asia after the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States. US warnings about showing restraint were unlikely to carry as much weight with India as they might have done pre-September 11, he said. Before then, US President George Bush had named India as America's strategic partner in the region. But since then, the war against terror, and America's subsequent need to develop close ties with

Pakistan, had weakened US influence with India -- which now felt it could also fight terrorism outside its borders. "I think the complication for the US is that it requires a closer relationship with Pakistan," Colonel Taylor told reporters. "This makes it a little difficult to deal with India," he said. Now was the time for Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to show outstanding leadership and strategic vision, he said. "I don't think the outside powers can do very much except encourage a bilateral arrangement at the moment, just a temporary one, just to get over this bump in the road." Despite the two leaders' rhetoric, nuclear war was unlikely -- barring misunderstandings or the intervention of a maverick, he said. "I think both leaderships will do everything possible to avoid the use (of nuclear weapons)." However, he believed there was little chance of concessions being made in the current climate, and some non-nuclear conflict was likely.

Intense shelling rages on India-Pakistan border

AFP, Jammu

Heavy cross-border shelling, mortar and gunfire raged across the India-Pakistan borders overnight and early Thursday, with the district of Poonch becoming one of the main flashpoints, a defence spokesman said. For the first time since the 1971 war between the two nuclear rivals, Poonch town came under Pakistani shelling, with at least seven people killed in a fierce artillery duel that continued deep into the night, the spokesman said. Seven villagers were also feared killed in another attack elsewhere in Poonch, around 240 kilometres (150 miles) west of Jammu, the winter capital of Indian Kashmir, other officials said. "Last night and early morning intense shelling took place (at Poonch) and Indian soldiers retaliated," the defence spokesman said. "One of the main posts of Pakistan's 15 Northern Light

Infantry was destroyed." Newspaper reports said the town of Poonch was plunged into darkness following the attack and power lines were yet to be restored. "The woman and children were seen crying in panic while men were seen shifting them to safer places," the Indian Express said quoting witnesses. "Most of the residents in the town have already constructed underground bunkers." The spokesman said that along the international border, Pakistani troops shelled the Samba, Arnia and R.S. Pora regions in Indian-administered Kashmir. On the Line of Control, a de facto line separating Indian- and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir, firing and shelling were continuing Thursday morning, he said. According to a tally of police figures, the latest confirmed deaths bring to 24 the number of Indians killed in the shelling, which was sparked by a massacre in southern Kashmir on May 14 India

blames on Islamic militants sponsored by Pakistan. On the Pakistani side, police and residents told AFP late Wednesday 12 people were killed and 14 injured as Indian shells rained down on towns and villages in eastern Pakistan and Pakistani-administered Kashmir. The toll included five people killed and eight wounded by Indian shelling in the village of Bajra Garh in the Sialkot district of Punjab province. Another five people were killed and three injured late Wednesday as Indians bombed a market in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. Police officer Raja Ghu Lam Farwar said: "The shells hit the town of Hajira in the southern Poonch district at 7:45 pm (1345 GMT)." Resident told AFP by telephone that one of the shells landed on a jeep parked at the market, killing both the driver and a passenger. Three more were killed and

three injured by further shelling, shopkeeper Mohammad Rashid told AFP by telephone. A political analyst described the current flare up as "serious" as tempers were running high on both sides. "It is not Poonch alone that is a flashpoint," said political analyst Balraj Puri. "The whole of the border is tense. Both the sides are suffering heavy casualties." Puri said international pressure on both the rivals might help avoid a war. "The US and Britain and other nations have called on India and Pakistan to avoid restraint. It may result in finding a face-saving measure for either India or Pakistan or a de-escalation on the borders," Puri said. The United States warned India and Pakistan that "irresponsible elements" in the two countries could spark a war if the two nations allowed their relations to further deteriorate.

'Sept 11-- an assault on whole civilised world'

AFP, Washington

US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz said Wednesday before leaving for a trip to Asia that he would stress that the September 11 attacks were an assault on the whole civilised world -- not just the United States. Wolfowitz will attend a defence and security conference in Singapore and then travel on to the Philippines to meet President Gloria Arroyo, who has won frequent US plaudits for her support in the US campaign against terrorism. He told reporters that he wanted to use the talks, sponsored by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), to focus not just on the short-term requirements for the campaign but the future strategic shape

of East Asia. "It is also important for our Asian friends to understand that these terrorist attacks are not just attacks on the United States but are attacks on all of us," Wolfowitz said. He stressed that Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network operates in more than 60 countries -- some of which are in East Asia. In its annual "Patterns of Global Terrorism" report issued last week, the State Department showered praise on Arroyo and Malaysia's Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad for their anti-terror efforts following the September 11 attacks. And China, a frequent target of US criticism, was conspicuously praised for helping to meet the threat from Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network.

Kashmiris want decisive war

AFP, Srinagar

Some residents of Indian Kashmir are drumming for war between nuclear rivals India and Pakistan saying an all-out conflict can only douse Islamic militancy in the picturesque Himalayan state. "It is good to have a war to attain permanent peace in the region," said Inayatullah Bhat, a government employee in Srinagar, Kashmir's summer capital and the urban hub of a Muslim secessionist campaign in the northern Indian state. Bhat has lost his younger sister and father to the 13-year-old Islamic insurgency that has also left more than 35,000 people dead. "We die hundred times a day because of the ongoing insurgency," said Bhat. "Fear haunts every soul, and no one can concentrate on work. I seriously think war is the only

solution to the Kashmir problem... And those who survive the war will live a peaceful life," he argued. The scenic Himalayan region has been the subject of two of the three wars between India and Pakistan since their independence from Britain in 1947. British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, winding up a visit to New Delhi on Wednesday, described the tensions between India and Pakistan as "dangerous" but said war was not inevitable between. "The situation is dangerous, but war is not inevitable. We have to continue with consistent diplomacy," Straw said amid stepped-up artillery clashes between the rival gunners in Kashmir. Other Kashmir residents seem not to care if the standoff is resolved through peaceful means or war. They just want it to end. Khazir Ahmed, who rents horses

to the few holidaymakers who still come to the Kashmiri resort of Gulmarg, said the conflict had made his life a "burden." "Before the outbreak of (separatist) violence in 1989 I was earning a decent living as a tourist used to ride my horse," said Ahmed. "Today hardly any tourist comes and the state government is indifferent to our plight," he said. "If the two countries resolve the issue peacefully, that is good, and, if not, let them go for a decisive war." The two countries have amassed a million troops along their borders since an attack on India's parliament in December that New Delhi blamed on Pakistan based rebels. Tensions re-erupted on May 14 when armed Muslim militants attacked a bus and an army camp that left 32 people dead near Jammu city.



A Kashmir woman takes out her belongings to flee the village at the Line of Control, the de facto border between Pakistan and India, for a safer place in Samani sector of Pakistan-administered Kashmir on Wednesday. Twelve people have been killed and 14 injured as Indian shells rained down on towns and villages in eastern Pakistan and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir. Wednesday's deaths bring to 62 the number of people killed on the Pakistani side since artillery duels began this month.

UNHCR starts ferrying Lankan refugees

AFP, Colombo

A United Nations agency has begun repatriating Sri Lankan refugees from neighbouring India as government forces and Tamil Tiger rebels observe a truce, officials said Thursday. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) said three elderly Tamils returned Wednesday -- the first refugees that wanted to return under an organised system since 1995. The UNHCR spokesman here, Mike DeSisti, said that the three returnees, two women and one man, were selected for quick repatriation as they were elderly and required special medical attention.

There was speculation in the local media that Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran's parents, who are refugees in South India, were among the trio who had returned Wednesday. But the UNHCR discounted the press reports while airport and airline officials confirmed that Prabhakaran's parents were not among those who returned. Reports from India had suggested that Prabhakaran's father Thiruvenkatan Velupillai and mother Vallipuram Parvathy had applied for permission to leave India after a truce went into effect in Sri Lanka on February 23. Prabhakaran's parents have been living in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu since 1990.

UK troops to patrol Pak border

AFP, Bagram Air Base

The decision to deploy hundreds of British troops around the Afghanistan-Pakistan border underlines the US-led coalition's belief that al-Qaida and Taliban forces are operating across the porous frontier at will. Around 300 Marine commandos are taking part in Operation Buzzard in eastern Khost province, a mission which is expected to last for some weeks. The deployment comes as the commander of coalition forces in Afghanistan expressed fears that hundreds of extremist fighters now based in Pakistan were plotting fresh attacks in Afghanistan. The Pentagon has also said it is worried about the impact of the crisis between India and Pakistan on US efforts to root out al-Qaida and Taliban fighters from the border area. "It's got us concerned," admitted

Upmarket grocer Fortnum and Mason has even brought out a new brand of tea to mark the occasion. For the first time the queen will open the gardens of Buckingham Palace in the centre of the capital for a classical concert Saturday featuring cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, followed Monday by a pop concert starring Paul McCartney, Eric Clapton and Elton John. The celebrations will include a display of traditional royal pomp of the kind Britain excels at when on Tuesday the queen and her husband Prince Philip, accompanied by 1,000 musicians, take part in a procession from Buckingham Palace to St. Paul's Cathedral for a thanksgiving service. Royals are eager to see huge participation in the celebrations, indicating that Britons still regard the monarch as being at the heart of national life.

Air Force Brigadier General John Rosa, deputy director of operations of the Joint Staff. There are fears that Pakistan troops based in tribal areas will be pulled out as tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad continue to fester. "If in fact, forces are moved away from that border, which I'm not confirming or denying force movements -- but if they do, it obviously would have some type of impact," said Rosa. The decision to send in the British troops was taken by Major General Frank Hagenbeck who earlier this week said al-Qaida and Taliban leaders were in western Pakistan plotting terrorist attacks across the border to disrupt next month's selection of a new government in Afghanistan. "We know that they are there and have a capability to do harm to this

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country," he told the New York Times. British spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Ben Curry, when announcing the launch of Operation Buzzard on Wednesday, said extremists were known to be ferrying weapons across the border in Khost. "We have had intelligence assessments to suggest that the area of Khost has been an area (where there has been) smuggling of weapons backwards and forwards across what is a very porous border." A senior British source earlier said there was a network of mountainous trails in Khost and a preponderance of tribes who paid scant regard for international borders. "These forces transcend these borders so it's quite natural for them to ebb and flow across the border as they go about their business," he told reporters.

land for the island's Tamil minority for three decades, has raised de-proscription as a key issue before political negotiations begin. Last month, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said he was willing to consider lifting a ban on Tamil Tiger rebels in order to clear the main hurdle for Norwegian-backed peace talks and find a permanent solution to the island's drawn out ethnic conflict. The government was prepared to discuss the matter in parliament and lift the proscription in a manner that would not affect the international ban on the rebels who are outlawed in the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and India.

Violence mars Algerian polls: 23 nomads killed

AFP, Algiers

Algerians tricked out to vote Thursday in parliamentary elections overshadowed by 10 years of civil war and economic hardship, and with the large Berber minority calling for a boycott. Just hours before some 38,000 polling stations opened around the country at 8:00 am (0700 GMT), officials reported that an armed group had killed 23 nomads west of the Algerian capital. The nomads were burnt to death near the town of Chlef, in an area 200 kilometers (120 miles) west of Algiers where the Armed

Islamic Group (GIA) is known to operate, the officials said. Attacks by the GIA and another hardline Islamic group, the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), have been on the rise since President Abdelaziz Bouteflika set May 30 as the date for legislative elections, the first since he took power in 1999. Both extremist groups are opposed to Algeria's secular government and have rejected a reconciliation policy proposed by Bouteflika to end their insurgency, which has claimed some 150,000 lives since 1992.

Poor nations rising up for compensation from rich

REZAUL KARIM, Bali, Indonesia

Friends of the Earth International is mobilising support for developing countries rich in natural resources to demand compensation from the developed countries and their companies that have exploited the natural resources of the poor nations for years. Aurora Donoso of the Friends of the Earth, said on Wednesday that developed countries and their corporations owed a huge "ecological debt" to developing and poor countries whose natural resources

they had extracted and exploited for their own consumption. Ecological debts of northern developed countries to southern poor nations have been mounting since the Rio declaration in 1992, Donoso said. "The overuse and overconsumption of natural resources on the part of developed countries had caused harm and poverty to Third World countries," said Donoso, a member of Accoion Ecologica, Friends of the Earth Ecuador. She said the process of extraction and exporting the natural

resources such as oil, minerals, forest, marine and genetic resources from Third World countries had destroyed the ecosystem which had affected the life and posed a danger to the survival of the peoples of the Southern countries. "The concept of ecological debt for us lies on the responsibility of Northern industrialised countries, their industries, overexploitation of natural resources, human labour, and looting of resources," Donoso said.

Lanka links lifting ban on LTTE to firm dates for talks

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka will consider lifting a ban on Tamil Tiger rebels only after firm dates are agreed for Norwegian-backed peace talks set to take place in Thailand, a senior minister said Thursday. Constitutional Affairs Minister G. L. Peiris said the government could remove the January 1998 proscription against the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) subject to the opening of the talks. "The government's view is that the de-proscription is a matter in respect of which some action can be taken when there is clear agreement about a firm date on which the

talks would commence in Thailand," he told reporters here. Peiris said the government agreed with Norwegian peace brokers that there should be no haste in preparing an agenda for the proposed talks expected to take place sometime in June or early July. "We agree that there should be thorough and meticulous arrangements for the talks," he said, although warned against "unexplained delays" that could "diminish the momentum of the peace process." The LTTE, which has been fighting for an independent home-

land for the island's Tamil minority for three decades, has raised de-proscription as a key issue before political negotiations begin. Last month, Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe said he was willing to consider lifting a ban on Tamil Tiger rebels in order to clear the main hurdle for Norwegian-backed peace talks and find a permanent solution to the island's drawn out ethnic conflict. The government was prepared to discuss the matter in parliament and lift the proscription in a manner that would not affect the international ban on the rebels who are outlawed in the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia and India.

US, EU officials head to ME to cap violence

AFP, Jerusalem

Senior US and European officials headed for the strife-torn Middle East Thursday to push for renewed peace efforts, as Israel stepped up its West Bank raids and Palestinian suicide bombers kept probing Israel's weak points. US Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs William Burns was due to arrive for talks later in the day with Yasser Arafat, following discussions between the Palestinian leader and German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer. Fischer was to meet earlier with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, and also to discuss the situation with

senior Palestinian officials before his session with Arafat. On Friday, their efforts will be bolstered by the arrival of CIA director George Tenet. He visited Israel a year ago to work out a ceasefire plan that never took hold, returning a number of times since in further field efforts. Tenet arrives in Israel on Monday and will hold security talks with both sides, a US official here said. Meanwhile, EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana will fly in on Friday for talks with both sides. Another significant development will be a Friday meeting between Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak's top political advisor,

Osama al-Baz, and Sharon, Israeli public radio said. Baz will also meet Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Defense Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer, the radio added, without giving any details on the talks. Egypt is said to have proposed the security reforms within the Palestinian Authority that Arafat had pledged. Burns, the US administration's top Middle East pointman, met Thursday with Mubarak. He explained the US commitment to "a comprehensive strategy for dealing with the crisis ... which involved movement on three tracks."



Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati (L) offers a bunch of flower to Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee before a meeting in New Delhi on Thursday. Mayawati met Vajpayee for the first time following her election with support of the Prime Minister's ruling party Bharatiya Janata Party.

'Europe's airports vulnerable to illegal immigration'

AFP, Rome

Europe's international airports were more vulnerable to illegal immigration than its land borders, European interior ministers meeting to curb immigration were told here Thursday. Spain's Interior Minister Mariano Rajoy told the meeting 4,500 illegal immigrants had been arrested at 25 European airports over a recent one-month period. He said most of the illegal immigrants entered Europe via airports were Chinese. Rajoy was introducing a survey of airports in the 15 EU member states as well as Norway, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and Latvia, carried out over one month from

April 24. Rajoy said most of the illegal immigrants were "Chinese, but also Ecuadorian, Angolan, Brazilian, Nigerian and Senegalese." The Spanish minister was addressing his 14 EU colleagues as well as their counterparts from the 13 candidate countries for EU membership meeting here to discuss a "Feasibility Study for the Setting Up of a European Border Police Force." The most popular destination airports were Paris, Dublin, London and Madrid, according to the study. "Based on the results of the operation, Beijing, Quito airport, Hong Kong, Rio, Sao Paulo and Lagos airports were the chief airports of origin for the illegals coming

into Europe," said Rajoy, whose country holds the revolving EU presidency and has pledged tougher action against illegal immigration. "Restrictions by airlines must be implemented in a consistent way," the Spanish minister said, highlighting a weakness of Europe's defence against immigration. Italy's minister Claudio Scajola said the one-day meeting in Rome was "laying the cornerstone in the edifice of a new Europe." "It is essential to be vigilant in the control of our external borders," said Scajola, adding that Thursday's meeting was but one step on the road to setting up an integrated police force.