

Mahathir calls for 3rd party mediation in Indo-Pak row

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad called Monday for third party intervention to help avert war between nuclear-armed rivals India and Pakistan.

"We don't agree with war, we don't approve of confrontational methods. So I appeal to them (India and Pakistan) to negotiate.

"And if it cannot be resolved between the two of them, there should be a third party that can help make the decisions," said Mahathir, declining to say who would be most appropriate for the role of mediator.

Pakistan claims arrest of 4 Indian spies

AFP, Multan

Pakistani authorities have detained four suspected Indian spies from the Cholistan desert region in central Punjab province, military and local sources said Monday.

Law enforcement officials said they seized sensitive documents, maps, a radio set and a transmitter from the four who were posing as shepherds.

"A message was detected... which was being transmitted to a neighbouring country in code-words. Then two teams started their search for spies who were working in the desert in the guise of shepherds," the official said.

3 killed in UP gas cylinder explosion

AFP, New Delhi

Three people were killed and 17 hurt Monday when a gas cylinder exploded and flattened a plastics factory in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, the Press Trust of India reported.

The report quoted Umesh Kumar Shrivastava, the local superintendent of police, as saying the explosion shattered the factory windows and started a fire which brought the building down in the industrial town of Ghaziabad.

The debris has been cleared and all the injured workers rushed to hospital, added Shrivastava.

Helicopter crash kills 19 in Angola

AFP, Luanda

The Angolan army said Sunday 19 people, including nine high-ranking officers, died in a helicopter crash east of the capital Luanda.

An earlier report by the Portuguese news agency Lusa had said 25 people had died, while Angolan state radio said six people had been seriously injured.

The army statement did not say why the crash occurred, although both Angolan state radio and Lusa said it was due to bad weather.

Lanka eyes UN top job

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka is keen to contest the United Nations secretary general's post and the government will launch a campaign shortly to drum up international backing, officials said Monday.

The Indian Ocean island is to put forward its Foreign Minister Tyrone Fernando as a candidate to replace Secretary General Kofi Annan whose terms ends in December 2006.

"We believe it is going to be Asia's turn to elect a Secretary General and Sri Lanka should stand a very good chance," a government spokesman said.

Jiang names 7 new generals

AFP, Beijing

A move by Chinese President Jiang Zemin to promote seven senior military officers to the rank of general is aimed at boosting his influence ahead of a crucial communist party meet, analysts said Monday.

The title was conferred over the weekend to a series of officers who are currently either commanders or political commissars of several large Chinese military regions, the state media said.

It took place at a ceremony in Beijing's secretive Zhongnanhai government compound, at which Jiang was assisted by Vice President Hu Jintao, his presumed successor.

Hu is widely expected to take over most of Jiang's functions during the 16th party congress set for this autumn and the annual full meeting of the national parliament in March 2003.

Vajpayee, Musharraf feel weight of int'l pressure

AFP, Almaty

Intense international diplomatic efforts were underway in Almaty Monday to bring Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf to the negotiating table during a regional summit in the Kazakh economic capital.

Vajpayee arrived in Kazakhstan Sunday for the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-building measures in Asia (CICA) having already ruled out face-to-face talks with Musharraf.

But Russian President Vladimir Putin, due to arrive later Monday, will be exerting pressure on the two leaders during bilateral meetings to make some kind of contact and ease fears of a military conflict. Chinese President Jiang Zemin will also be meeting Vajpayee and Musharraf separately.

The Indian premier on Monday held an hour of talks with summit host Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who is also keen for peace moves to be initiated during the conference.

"Naturally we discussed the tension in south Asia created as a result of trans-border terrorism. We have the same view that we should firmly confront terrorism," Vajpayee said subsequently at a press conference.

"Those who believe in terrorism and religious extremism should not receive support," he said.

In the talks Nazarbayev "expressed the hope that India and Pakistan, which are owners of nuclear weapons, refrain from action which could escalate the conflict and that they find possibilities to reduce tension and resolve it by peaceful means", a statement from the president's office said.

The Indian ambassador to Almaty, Vidya Sagar Verma, said Sunday there "would be no talks or secret meetings at any level" between India and Pakistan during the summit.

Indian officials were equally insistent that Vajpayee and Musharraf would not meet when they attended a regional conference in January in Nepal when tensions were also high but in the end secret meeting between officials did take place.

Evacuations a way of putting pressure on both: Diplomats

AFP, Islamabad

The dramatic pull-out of families of UN personnel and withdrawal of foreigners from India and Pakistan is part of the international community's efforts to put "concerted pressure" on the nuclear-armed rivals, a high-placed diplomatic source said.

"There is concerted pressure," the diplomat told AFP on Sunday after a wave of Western nations announced at the weekend they were telling their citizens to get out of India, just a few days after similar warnings over Pakistan.

"To a certain extent we have been taken hostage by the decision of the secretary general (Kofi Annan), probably under the influence of the United States and Great Britain," a UN employee said on condition of anonymity.

"We were ordered to send our

families home and I'm not sure this decision needed to be taken so urgently," he said.

Fears of attacks on foreigners at least justified the pull-out from Pakistan.

There have been three high-profile attacks on Westerners this year alone: the abduction and murder of US journalist Daniel Pearl in January, the bombing of an Islamabad church in March which killed two Americans and the attack which killed 11 French nationals in Karachi last month.

But the reason given for leaving India, which is home to tens of thousands of Western expatriates, is the tense border situation with Pakistan and the risk of war breaking out between the two nuclear-armed powers.

Diplomats pointed to the fact that five or six countries made their announcements "in just a few hours

on Friday evening. That cannot be a coincidence -- it's a concerted initiative".

UN Secretary General Annan followed almost instantly, telling the families of its staff in both India and Pakistan -- home also to the families of UN personnel in Afghanistan -- to get out.

"It's very hard on India," said a diplomatic source, adding that travel warnings against the two countries would hit tourism-reliant India the hardest.

"The balance of pressure", which had previously weighed on Pakistan alone, would cost India dear, sources said.

"(India) has become a pariah in recent days," he said.

However India and Pakistan have a chance to redeem themselves when the leaders of both countries turn up for a regional summit in Almaty on Monday.

Chavez faces rout on home front

AFP, Caracas

Marisabel Rodriguez de Chavez, wife of Venezuela's flamboyant president, disclosed Sunday she planned to divorce her husband because she did not want to be "a martyr of the revolution."

"I believe its not a secret to anyone anymore that the president and the first lady are in the process of separating and have moved from resolving personal issues to a legal settlement," Rodriguez de Chavez told the newspaper El Universal.

She said she expected President Hugo Chavez to soon file divorce papers on the couple's behalf.

The first lady said that in making this decision she was driven by the best interests of the couple's daughter.

But she pointed out she was not a political foe of Chavez and wanted him to have more latitude for political manoeuvre.



Kamli Devi carries a sewing machine as she salvages goods from her house destroyed by a Pakistani shell at Manihari village, 85 kms south of Jammu yesterday.

India dismisses N-war fears Delhi categorically rules out use of N-arms

AFP, Hong Kong

Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes dismissed fears of a nuclear war between India and Pakistan in an interview published on Monday, saying neither country would be "imprudent" enough to use the weapons.

"I don't agree with the idea that India and Pakistan are so imprudent and excitable that they'll forget what nuclear weapons can do," Fernandes told the International Herald Tribune.

"I think it should be accepted that in South Asia there are responsible leaders. They may be belligerent and not fulfill their promises. But on nuclear matters, the subcontinent is alive to the implications.

"If the Western powers and China know how to keep their nuclear capabilities under control, the same holds good for India and Pakistan," he said.

Fernandes recalled India's pledge never to be the first to use nuclear weapons. "We look at our nuclear weapons purely as a deterrent," he said.

"Pakistan's President General Pervez Musharraf did say recently, in trying to raise the stakes, that he could use his nuclear weapons if India attacked.

"I made the point at the time that no man in his senses would ever mean this.

"I also said in response to his sabre ratting that if he should finally take that kind of step, perhaps out of

desperation, he should realise that India can survive a nuclear attack, but Pakistan cannot," Fernandes said.

The defence minister went on to note that in an interview with CNN "General Musharraf ruled out the use of nuclear weapons."

Asked how close India and Pakistan are to war, Fernandes said: "For over five months, we have been in an eyeball-to-eyeball situation on our common border. There must be half a million troops on either side. But in this period there has been no major military incident."

Asked whether another terrorist attack by infiltrators from Pakistan could spark a conflict, Fernandes said: "How we respond depends on the circumstances of the particular situation.

"The fact that we have deployed our troops in such large numbers shows that we are serious about protecting our borders and the lives and property of our people," he said.

He reiterated Indian demands that Pakistan halt assistance to Muslim separatists battling Indian troops in Kashmir.

"Our aim is to see that the situation is brought under control, that cross-border terrorism is put to an end, and that whatever issues that exist between India and Pakistan are solved through dialogue," he said.



Video grab taken from Sky News of the fire that broke out at the loft of the West Terrace of Buckingham Palace on Sunday.

Israel detains 400 during raids at West Bank camp

AP, Nablus

Israeli troops raided a West Bank refugee camp Monday and rounded up about 400 Palestinians, as CIA chief George Tenet was en route to the West Bank for talks on restructuring the Palestinian security services.

In Israel's Cabinet, meanwhile, Prime Minister Ariel Sharon clashed with the head of the Shin Bet security services, Avi Dichter, over army tactics, media reports said. Dichter told ministers Sunday that Israeli troops should remain in Palestinian areas until a buffer zone between Israel and the West Bank has been built. Sharon said Israel's policy of quick incursions into Palestinian towns would continue.

In Monday's raid, tanks surrounded the Ain Beit Ilma refugee camp near the West Bank city of Nablus, as jeeps and armored personnel carriers drove through the main street. Troops using loudspeakers called on all males between the ages of 15 and 50 to come out of their homes. About 400 men were taken away in four buses and two trucks to be questioned at a nearby army base, witnesses said.

The army has been searching for militants in Nablus and another nearby refugee camp, Balata, for the past three days. On Sunday, troops blew up two houses where bomb laboratories were discovered, the army said.

Armored vehicles also entered the West Bank city of Qalqilya on Monday and imposed a curfew, witnesses said. Troops arrested four suspected militants at a checkpoint outside the city and three others at the West Bank town of El Bireh.

In recent weeks, Israeli troops have been entering West Bank towns and villages, usually for short periods, to arrest suspected militants. But the sweep through Nablus was a larger operation with dozens of armoured vehicles involved.

The searches came as Tenet was en route to the region for talks with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat about reforming Palestinian security organisations. The United States has demanded that Arafat's regime become more democratic and that the number of Palestinian security agencies be sharply reduced.

'Millie' wins most Tony awards

AP, New York

An old-fashioned Broadway musical about a small-town girl's quest for love and riches in New York now has a fairy-tale ending for itself and its unlikely young star.

"Thoroughly Modern Millie" won six Tony Awards on Sunday, including best musical and best actress for Sutton Foster, a 27-year-old former understudy in the show who eventually landed the role of Millie, an ambitious 1920s flapper who makes good on her goals.

"To say that this is a dream come true is an understatement," said an ebullient Foster in accepting the award at Radio City Music Hall.

"The Goat, or Who Is Sylvia?" Edward Albee's dark comic drama that provocatively delves into the nature of sex and love won for best

play. It was the second Tony for Albee, coming nearly four decades after his 1963 award for "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf."

Albee, who has won three Pulitzer Prizes, wryly thanked his producers for their "faith, the outrageous faith, that Broadway was ready to see a play about love."

In doling out winners, Tony voters were far more evenhanded than they were last year, when a record 12 of 22 competitive awards went to the smash hit "The Producers." This year's prizes were divided among 11 shows.

Besides best musical and lead actress-musical, "Millie" based on a 1967 movie starring Julie Andrews won for featured actress-musical, Harriet Harris; choreography, Rob Ashford; costumes, Martin Pakledinaz; and orchestrations,

Doug Besterman and Ralph Burns.

Yet while "Millie" took home the most honors, it wasn't a true stand-out. The unconventional "Urinetown," a social satire that emerged three years ago from the New York International Fringe Festival, and which pokes fun at various musical theater traditions, won for best score, book of a musical and best direction.

The last musical to win best book and score and then lose the top prize, as "Urinetown" did, was "Ragtime" which lost to "The Lion King" in 1998.

Alan Bates and Frank Langella who face off in "Fortune's Fool" both won Tonys: Bates as best actor-play for his portrayal of an impoverished nobleman and Langella, in the featured category, for his portrait of an extravagant pop.

Melting Himalayan glaciers spark flood warnings

AFP, Beijing

Global warming is causing Himalayan glaciers to melt increasing the risk of flooding in China, the China Daily warned Monday.

Several Himalayan lakes are rapidly filling up and threatening to overflow and swamp the peoples living below, experts said, quoted by the English-language daily.

Although such flooding has occurred in the past, it has happened more frequently in the recent three decades as the average air temperature has risen by at least one degree centigrade since the 1970s.

China is now planning to share

its aerial data on the evolution of Himalayan glaciers with neighbours Nepal and India, said Ren Jiawen from the Chinese Academy of Sciences.

According to a report by the UN Environment Programme published in April, some 44 glaciers in Bhutan and Nepal could overflow in the next five years.

The China Daily, which did not provide any forecasts for the glaciers situated within China, said 12 such incidents had already happened in Tibet since 1935.

The last such flooding occurred in 1981 when three bridges were swept away temporarily cutting the main road linking China to Nepal.



Iranians check the damage done to a building in southern Tehran after a gas explosion killed at least one person and left others wounded on Monday. The reason for the blast, which wrecked the three-storey apartment building, was not immediately known, but state radio attributed it to a gas cylinder.