

## 45 Afghan refugees killed in bus crash

AFP, Islamabad

At least 45 Afghan refugees died and five were injured when a bus taking them home from Pakistan plunged into the Kabul river east of the capital, the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) reported Saturday.

The incident occurred on Thursday near Sarobi, on the highway between Kabul and the eastern city of Jalalabad, the Pakistan-based private news agency said.

The Afghan families were returning from the southern Pakistani port city of Karachi, it said.

AIP said a dozen bodies had been recovered from the river, several kilometers (miles) away from where the bus fell.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that 900,000 refugees have returned to Afghanistan since March, in the largest and fastest movement of refugees home since the Kurds went back to Iraq in 1991.



Indian soldiers dig a trench around a field gun in an undisclosed area near the international border with Pakistan some 30 km from Jammu on Saturday. The Indian government is expected to take de-escalation steps very soon in a bid to ease the tension along its international border with its arch South Asian rival Pakistan.

PHOTO: AFP

# Threat of war with India 'minimal': Musharraf

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has described the threat of war with India as "minimal" but called for flexibility to break the deadlock over Kashmir, a report said Saturday.

"I think the chance of war is minimal. I think leaders in both countries need to be sensible enough to work on the path of peace," he told Malaysia's New Straits Times in an interview in Islamabad.

"Nobody, no leader in Pakistan can put the Kashmir dispute on the sidelines. Every individual of Pakistan is concerned about Kashmir. We seek justice on Kashmir," the general said.

"We are not demanding anything unjust and the world must understand. But the only way we can solve this problem is through flexibility from stated positions on both sides."

The Himalayan territory of Kashmir, divided between India and Pakistan and claimed by both, has already sparked two of the rivals' three wars and is once again the focus of tension between the nuclear-armed countries.

India has demanded a crackdown following several attacks mounted by what it says are Pakistan-based militants in Kashmir and elsewhere in its territory.

The situation remained tense Saturday as Pakistan shot down a pilotless Indian spy plane which had allegedly entered its airspace.

Musharraf also told the Malaysian newspaper that he was ready to hand over day-to-day running of the government to the new prime minister after a general election planned for October.

The army chief, who took power in a 1999 coup, dismissed suggestions that he was "interested in concentrating power within myself" but said there had to be unity in Pakistan's leadership.

"Without that unity, you cannot run a government effectively. There can't be two men sharing power, so the real power should be with the chief executive," he said.

"That is what I am going to shed in October. There will be a PM and I will shed this function of running the government which is the real power. What I will retain is the president's authority to make sure that the PM is governing well."

"I don't call that power. To oversee is the only power that I will have."

Musharraf, who named himself president in June last year, won another five years as head of state in a referendum in May. He has announced he will hold parliamentary elections over 7-11 October to restore democracy.

## Shan rebels take 21 Myanmar troops hostage

AFP, Chiang Mai

An ethnic Shan rebel group said Saturday it was holding 21 Myanmar troops prisoner as fierce fighting continued along the Thai border, and said it wished to hand them over to an international agency.

"We are holding 21 people, including two women, prisoner after the Shan State Army captured Burmese (Myanmar) outposts late last month," Shan State Army (SSA) spokeswoman Nam Kher Hsem told AFP by telephone in Chiang Mai.

She said the group, which has been engaged in fierce clashes in recent days with more than 500 Myanmar soldiers and their ethnic Wa allies, had unsuccessfully attempted to contact the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) in order to hand over the prisoners.

"We are worried for their safety as the security situation here is very serious," she said.

She said the ICRC and other agencies could not be reached as the border with Thailand had been sealed.

## UK has no plan to send troops to Kashmir: Hoon

REUTERS, London

Sending British troops to patrol the disputed Kashmir border could help defuse tensions between India and Pakistan, but there are no plans to do so as yet, Defence Secretary Geoff Hoon says.

British media have speculated in recent days that the United States, preparing a diplomatic offensive to avert war between the two nuclear-armed neighbours, might propose a joint Anglo-American military monitoring force for Kashmir.

Hoon told BBC radio on Saturday that the government had no immediate plans to send troops to patrol the militarised Line of Control that divides the Kashmir region between India and Pakistan. "But obviously we are looking at every option," he said.

"If there were to be a very small number of British international troops assisting India and Pakistan along the Line of Control to reduce tension that might be a way forward...but...there are no specific plans to do that at this stage."

He added that ultimately this would be a matter for India and

Pakistan to decide.

"What we are saying to both India and Pakistan is that they must not take steps that could lead to that ultimate appalling eventuality (of a nuclear war)," Hoon said.

He said Britain was "determined to play whatever part we can in allowing India and Pakistan to step back from the brink".

The Independent, quoting defence and diplomatic sources, reported on Thursday that U.S. Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld would propose the Anglo-American monitoring force during a visit to the region next week.

The newspaper said about 500 helicopter-borne troops could patrol the disputed border.

India has long said militants infiltrate its part of Kashmir from the Pakistan side. But Pakistan has rejected an Indian proposal for joint Indian-Pakistani patrols.

The dispute has brought the neighbours close to war, which it is feared could spill over into nuclear conflict. India and Pakistan have fought two of their three wars since independence in 1947 over Kashmir.

## 10 killed in fresh Indo-Pak shelling

REUTERS, Sialkot/Jammu

Three Indian soldiers are among 10 people killed in a firefight and heavy shelling from both sides of the tense India-Pakistan border, according to witnesses and an official.

The soldiers were shot dead when troops intercepted suspected militants infiltrating into disputed Indian Kashmir from Pakistan, an Indian army official said.

Scores of people have been killed on both sides since tension between the nuclear-armed neighbours increased late last year and the two countries amassed more than a million soldiers along their frontier.

The gunbattle in Poonch, 150 km (95 miles) north of Jammu, winter capital of India's Jammu and Kashmir state, raged on through the morning, the Indian official said.

Witnesses in the Pakistani city of Sialkot said six people were killed -- including four from one family -- and four wounded in Indian attacks.

India said earlier one woman civilian was killed and three people were wounded by fire from Pakistani troops in the same border area.

Indian police said the villagers were caught in heavy machinegun fire from Pakistani troops near the town of Arnia.

Mirza Mohammad, a resident of Sialkot, in Pakistan's Punjab province, said the firing started at around 6:30 a.m. (12:30 a.m. British time) and intensified throughout the morning.

Indian shells fell on several villages including one that killed the four family members, he said.

The firing coincided with a Pakistani military statement saying it shot down an unmanned Indian spy plane late on Friday. India merely said a spy plane had gone missing after a routine flight near the border.

In India, police said four village defence committee members were killed late on Friday night by suspected separatist guerrillas in Mahore village, 40 miles (65 km) east of Jammu.

Hindu-dominated India accuses Pakistan, an Islamic nation, of training and sending militants into the Muslim-majority Kashmir region to stoke a separatist movement there.

## US sees significant slowing of Kashmir infiltrations

AFP, Washington

The United States said Friday it had seen a significant decline in incursions by Islamist guerrillas into Indian Kashmir, but could not yet certify they had halted completely.

"We have growing indications that infiltration across the Line of Control is down significantly," said State Department spokesman Richard Boucher.

"We can't, at this point, say that this change has been done on a permanent basis. That's what (Pakistani) President (Pervez) Musharraf has promised; that's what we're looking for."

"We continue to look at all possible information on what's going on, and that is our, sort of, snapshot assessment of where things stand at the moment."

The issue of incursions across the line separating Indian-ruled Kashmir from Pakistani-ruled Kashmir is key to easing the crisis threatening to erupt into war between the two nuclear armed neighbours.

Boucher declined to say where Washington had come by its information, but it has said it will make its

own assessments on the situation in Kashmir -- a statement often taken to mean that it has an intelligence capability there.

Once the incursions have halted permanently, Washington will be looking for concessions from India, to lower regional tensions, he said.

"With an end to infiltration across the line. We'll be looking for reciprocating steps by the Indian government."

"We look forward to India taking these kinds of steps at the appropriate time."

Disputed claims over the Himalayan region have already sparked two of the three wars fought by the two sides since independence from Britain in 1947.

India has demanded a crackdown following several attacks mounted by what it says are Pakistan-based militants in Kashmir and elsewhere in its territory.

The United States is at the centre of efforts to bring the rivals back from the brink of a confrontation that many observers fear could spark the world's first nuclear conflict.

Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage has spent the last two days in face to face talks with

leaders in Pakistan and India, and pronounced himself satisfied that neither side wanted war.

He said Musharraf had promised to work for a permanent end to incursions by Islamic rebels over the Line of Control.

"The commitment of President Musharraf to the United States was to end cross-border infiltration permanently," Armitage said.

But he had less success in getting the two sides to agree to a verification mechanism.

"Both here and Islamabad, I did have discussions on the modalities of monitoring the Line of Control to check cross-border infiltration, but no decision has been taken," he said in New Delhi.

Armitage is due to head home from South Asia this weekend -- but will take advantage of a refuelling stop in Estonia to brief Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, who is due to head to the region next week, Boucher said.

Despite hopes that the US initiative was making ground, the situation in Kashmir was more tense than ever.



## Lopez to go lonely

AFP, Los Angeles

US songstress and actress Jennifer Lopez and her dancer husband Cris Judd have separated after just eight months of marriage, a source close to Lopez said.

"Jennifer and Cris have separated amicably," the source said on condition of anonymity, adding that the pair had no immediate plans for divorce.

A spokesman for the 31-year-old New York-born star, who is also known to her fans as J.Lo., declined to comment on the separation.

"I have absolutely no comment on these reports," her publicist Alan Nierob said.

## 17 more Maoists killed in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Seventeen Maoist rebels were killed by Nepal's security forces in clashes in the west of the kingdom, state radio said Saturday.

It said the guerrillas were shot dead in four separate battles Friday but gave no further detail.

The radio, quoting defense officials, did not report any casualties on the government side.

Officials estimate more than 4,200 people have died in Nepal since the Maoists launched a "people's war" in 1996 to topple the constitutional monarchy.

## UN welcomes US food aid to North Korea

AFP, United Nations

The United Nations welcomed the US offer Friday of an extra 100,000 tonnes of food aid to famine-hit North Korea.

"This generous contribution by the government of the United States will help to remedy an anticipated break in July of the World Food Programme's food aid pipeline" for North Korea, UN emergency relief coordinator Kenzo Oshima said.

## Arafat's ouster a prerequisite for lasting ME peace: Barak

### 8 killed in new fresh Israeli-Palestinian violence

AFP, Washington

Peace is unlikely to come to the Middle East so long as Yasser Arafat is at the helm of the Palestinian Authority, former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak wrote in an editorial appearing Saturday in a US newspaper.

"The idea that the Palestinian Authority could conduct an effective anti-terror campaign... and carry out real reform... is an illusion so long as Arafat is in power," Barak wrote in the Washington Post.

"Arafat has tried for 20 months now to dictate to Israel and the world, using suicide bombing as a diplomatic tool. Israel will never yield to this, nor should the United States," Barak's comments continued, inveighing against "quick fix"

plans to resolve the Middle East crisis.

"Arafat needs to recognise that he cannot gain a single inch through his deliberate and conscious turn to mass killing of innocent civilians. It's all about terror," the former prime minister wrote.

While he referred to a peace plan forwarded by Saudi Arabia as "a step in the right direction," Barak wrote that "the devil is in the details," criticising the plan for maintaining 1967 borders, for instance, "rather than secure and recognised ones."

Furthermore, Barak said, the Saudi plan "does not mention recognizing Israel as a Jewish state or acknowledging that the right of return would apply only to the Palestinian state -- not to Israel."

Meanwhile, three Israelis and five Palestinians were killed early Saturday in a new flareup of violence in the West Bank and Gaza Strip as international peace efforts gathered steam in Washington.

The bloodshed broke out hours before Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was to leave for the US capital and crucial talks with President George W. Bush, who was also conferring with his Egyptian counterpart, Hosni Mubarak.

An Israeli man and his pregnant wife were shot dead by two Palestinians who stormed into the Jewish settlement of Karmei Tzur near the southern West Bank town of Hebron and opened fire, the Israeli army said.

## Of surviving on rats & cats

AFP, Buenos Aires

They creep out at night and tear apart garbage bags, feeding greedily on the remains left by those who are more fortunate than they -- those Argentines who have enough to eat.

Their lives, such as they are, depend on the frogs' legs that are delicacies in other countries, horse meat and the armies of rats and feral cats that comb the streets also looking for something, anything, to eat.

Their numbers have multiplied as the country staggers deeper and deeper into recession, and they likely are not long for the world. Their life expectancies top out at 35 -- about half of the average for "other Argentines."

Once, Argentina was the breadbasket of the world. Now there are not even crumbs for the hundreds of newborns in Tucuman, in the country's northwest, whose wan faces beamed into living rooms hearken to the famines that swept through sub-Saharan Africa.



(L-R) Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev, Kyrgyzstan's President Askar Akayev, Chinese President Jiang Zemin, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Tajikistan's President Emomali Rakhmonov and Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov address the press after a meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation at the Marble Palace in St. Petersburg, in Russia on Friday. The summit participants agreed to turn their group into a full-fledged international organisation.

PHOTO: AFP



This undated handout photo taken in Guatemala and released by the UCLA Medical Centre on Friday shows conjoined twins who were born in Guatemala. The twins, joined at the head since their birth on July 25 last year, travelled to the United States, where surgeons hope to successfully separate them.

PHOTO: AFP

## China calls on India, Pakistan to start peace negotiations

AFP, Saint Petersburg

China called on India and Pakistan Saturday to settle their conflict over Kashmir through direct talks after the feud between the nuclear neighbours dominated a Central Asian leaders' summit in Russia's northern city of Saint Petersburg.

"This question must be settled through a direct dialogue between India and Pakistan," Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Kuong Qihuan said at a press conference here.

"Tension between India and Pakistan has reached a very high point and this is very dangerous for South Asia," Kuong added.

While Beijing is a traditional ally

of Islamabad, Kuong insisted China had friendly relations with both Pakistan and India.

"China and Pakistan have friendly relations, and China and India have friendly relations too," he said.

"China has always called on these countries to exert restraint and solve their conflict through peaceful means," he went on.

Russian President Vladimir Putin demanded Friday that Pakistan end "terrorism" in disputed Kashmir, as he joined Chinese counterpart Jiang Zemin and four other Central Asian leaders in urging Pakistan and its nuclear rival India to resolve their dispute peacefully.

## US troops take on Abu Sayyaf

AP, Zamboanga

US-trained troops intensified an offensive to wipe out a Muslim extremist group Saturday after an American and a Filipino hostage died and another American was freed in a rescue mission.

Reinforcements were being sent to aid the 600 infantrymen chasing the Abu Sayyaf rebels now that the group has no more hostages. About 1,000 U.S. soldiers are advising the troops.

"We're now in hot pursuit," said Philippine military Chief of Staff Gen. Roy Cimatu.

Philippine commandos rescued

Wichita, Kan., missionary Gracia Burnham, who was shot in the leg. But her husband, Martin Burnham, and Filipino nurse Ediborah Yap were killed during the gunbattle with the rebels.

The body of Martin Burnham arrived Saturday at Kadena Air Base on the southern Japanese island of Okinawa while Gracia Burnham remained in the Philippines for medical treatment, said Kadena Tech. Sgt. Adam Johnston. It was unclear when they would return to the United States.

Cimatu said the rebels who fled during the raid included senior commanders, giving the military

hope that it can soon crush the group with a decisive battle. Four rebels were killed in the shootout, and troops searching the site found the trademark sunglasses and the backpack of Abu Sayyaf leader Abu Sabaya.

"We are on our way to dismantling the infrastructure of terrorism exemplified by this Abu Sayyaf group," Cimatu said Saturday as he promoted the seven low-ranking soldiers wounded in the shootout.

President Bush said Friday he was assured by Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo that "justice would be done."

## Taiwan to test first 'stealth' missile boat

AFP, Taipei

Taiwan's navy plans to test its first homegrown "stealth" missile boat that could play a major role in any conflict with rival China, it was reported Saturday.

The first stereotype of the "stealth" missile boat, now under construction, will be tested in September and join the navy in April, the Liberty Times said.

Under the "Kuanghwa 6 Project," the navy plans to build a fleet of 30 such missile boats, the paper said.