

## Abul Kalam NDA's first choice for presidency

PTI, New Delhi

The name of eminent scientist APJ Abdul Kalam was on Monday emerging as NDA's candidate for the office of the President in the absence of a consensus over the name of Maharashtra Governor PC Alexander, who appeared to have been the first choice.

Highly placed NDA sources said the name of Kalam, who is regarded as the father of Indian missile technology, would be considered at a meeting of the ruling alliance later this evening.

## France backs Chirac camp

REUTERS, Paris

French President Jacques Chirac's conservatives look set to win a powerful parliamentary majority next week after thrashing the left in the first round of elections and a far-right flop, according to polls.

The mainstream right's strong showing -- 43.7 percent to 36.8 percent for the left, according to the polling group Ipsos -- meant Chirac can expect unfettered power for the next five years rather than "cohabitation" with the left as in the past.

## Indian court quashes petition against Hinduja brothers

AFP, New Delhi

Bribery charges at the centre of the infamous 1986 Bofors arms scandal involving the British-based billionaire Hinduja brothers were quashed by an Indian court Monday due to legal technicalities.

The Hinduja had asked the Delhi High Court to scrap the charge sheet on the grounds that federal detectives from the Central Bureau of Investigation had ignored procedure by not seeking government permission before filing charges.

However, the charges can be refilled provided procedures are adhered to.

## 5 more N Korean asylum-seekers enter embassies in Beijing

AFP, Beijing

Five more North Koreans entered foreign missions in Beijing over the weekend, bringing to ten the total number known to be waiting for a ticket to freedom, diplomats said Monday.

Three North Koreans -- two women in their 20s and a two-year-old boy -- managed to enter South Korea's consulate in the Chinese capital Sunday at about 4:30pm (0830 GMT), a South Korean official said.

They joined five other North Koreans, including a former military officer, who are already holed up inside the consulate.

## 9 killed as rains lash China

AFP, Beijing

Nine people were killed and seven were missing as torrential rains lashed large parts of China over the weekend, the official press said Monday.

Six people were killed in northern China's Shaanxi province where a 150-metre long bridge near the ancient imperial capital of Xian was destroyed.

Xinhua news agency said the loss of the bridge stranded 300 trains with some 10,000 passengers on board. But the agency did not specify the circumstances in which the six deaths occurred.

## S'pore shines in making 'human spare parts'

AFP, Singapore

A group of professors in Singapore are among the few in the world who have developed the capability to create "human spare parts" using the principle of engineering.

Professor Nhan Phan-Thien, who is among the group of professors working together to create human tissue using weaving and scaffolding techniques, told AFP Monday that South Korea and the United States were working on similar projects.

"We engineer tissue for repair. For example, we take tissue from a person, grow it and put the new, healthy tissue back into the body," said Professor Nhan Phan-Thien, from the Department of Bio-engineering.

# Chances of war still high, warns Musharraf

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on Monday warned the chance of war with India remained high as long as the two countries' armies stood ready for action on their common borders.

Musharraf said there would be no meaningful lowering of tensions until India pulled its troops back, according to comments reported by the state news wire.

"As long as the forces remain deployed and as long as there is a capability, capability of their forces on the borders to change their opinion and change their intention and take action at a short notice, the danger is not over," Musharraf said according to APP, before boarding a flight to the United Arab Emirates.

Meanwhile foreign office spokesman Aziz Ahmed Khan said there had been a "discernible" improvement in relations with India but repeated his leader's line that the situation was still volatile.

"The first step to de-escalate the situation would be to disengage the forces from the border," he told a regular press conference.

"India has massed almost one million troops in a very offensive posture along the international border as well as the Line of Control," he said, referring to the de facto border which divides disputed Kashmir into Pakistani- and Indian-controlled zones.

"Pakistan has been forced to move its forces in a defensive posture. The forces of both sides are in an eyeball-to-eyeball position -- anything can lead

to a very dangerous situation."

He added: "A certain decrease is discernible but the only meaningful reduction of tension would be when India starts withdrawing its forces to peace-time positions."

Musharraf and Khan's comments come after a recent improvement in South Asian relations after weeks of warlike rhetoric. The dispute centres on India's claim that Pakistan is sending militants over the Line of Control.

Hopes have been high of a breakthrough with New Delhi reported to be preparing a series of measures to defuse the situation and US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld expected on a peace mission later this week.

Meanwhile, India's expected package of measures to ease tensions with Pakistan is not likely to include any military steps at this stage, a defence ministry source said Monday.

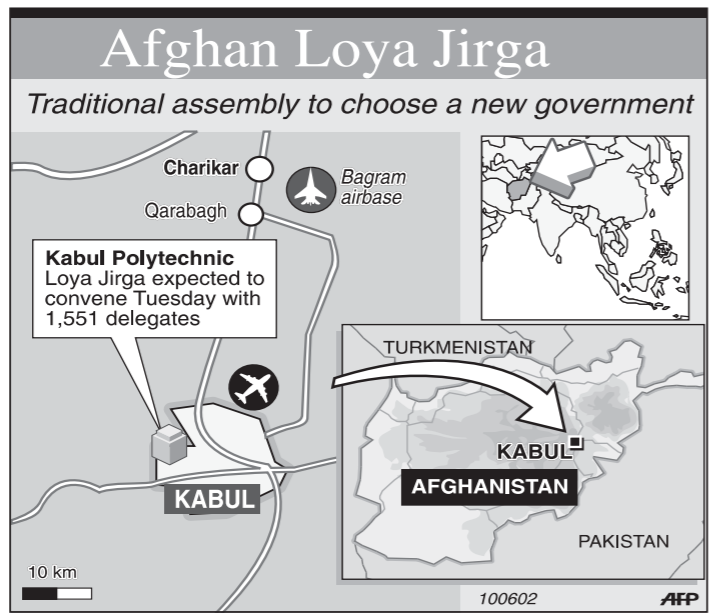
The source told AFP that any let up of military pressure would only be instituted once India has verified claims by Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf that he has reined in Islamic militants New Delhi claims are responsible for murderous raids on Indian targets, including its parliament last December.

"There is no point in suddenly letting go of all the military pressure which has been built up over months without evidence of gaining something substantial," the source said.

US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage at the weekend announced that India would shortly unveil a package of measures designed to ease tension in South Asia, including "military gestures."



Women participants of a peace rally release doves for peace in Lahore on Monday. Dozens from all walks of life marched through the streets in a peace rally and asked India and Pakistan to solve their disputes through dialogues but not with war. The troops of two nuclear arch-rivals India and Pakistan still facing each others at the borders as tension remained high amid diplomatic efforts of international community.



## Afghan Loya Jirga

Traditional assembly to choose a new government

Kabul Polytechnic Loya Jirga expected to convene Tuesday with 1,551 delegates

Spokesman Omar Asamad quoted on Monday the head of the Loya Jirga Commission as saying the start of the Loya Jirga had been delayed for 24 hours, but no reason was given.

A U.N. official told reporters the commission would make an announcement later.

Afghan and foreign sources said General Arif, the intelligence chief in

## Squabbles delay Loya Jirga

### King makes way for Karzai

REUTERS, AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's grand assembly of tribal elders, charged with forming a government after 23 years of conflict, has been delayed until tomorrow, according to the interim government's foreign ministry.

The Loya Jirga, an Afghan decision-making institution that has been around for 1,000 years, had already been delayed several hours by disagreements between the Northern Alliance faction in the government and supporters of former king Mohammad Zahir Shah.

Afghan and foreign sources said an apparent deal reached late on Sunday between the two groups

had collapsed by Monday morning. Meanwhile, Afghanistan's former king Mohammed Zahir Shah has no intention of standing against interim leader Hamid Karzai for head of state at the Loya Jirga grand assembly which convenes here Monday, his spokesman said.

The 87-year-old ex-monarch, due to inaugurate the grand assembly at around 3:00pm (1030 GMT), was expected to come under pressure to stand for the post in a scenario which would see him given a purely ceremonial role and allow Karzai to continue as head of government.

Artilery duels across the Line of Control which divides Kashmir fell silent Monday but three people were injured on the Pakistan side in overnight shelling, officials said. A woman and two men were injured before dawn in Samahni sector in southernmost Bhimber district, local official Mohammad Khalid said.

Samahni sector has faced unrelenting fire from Indian troops positioned across the Line of Control since tensions rose between the two rivals in mid-May.

However, officials in Pakistani Kashmir said that elsewhere along the de facto border the situation was relatively calm.

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## All quiet on Kashmir front

AFP, Muzaffarabad

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## Americans apathetic to world

AFP, Washington

Short of wars or major crises, international news stories still largely fail to pique the interest of Americans, despite the superpower status of their country, according to a survey made public Sunday.

And the September 11 suicide attacks, which have shown that conflicts overseas could now easily boomerang against the United States, appear to have changed little in that attitude, according to the study by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press.

"There is no evidence its (the public's) appetite for international news extends much beyond terrorism and the Middle East," said the authors of the study who polled 3,002 adults between April 26 and May 12.

The survey had a margin of error of plus or minus two percentage points.

The researchers have detected only a modest rise in the percentage of Americans who follow international news very closely since 2000 - from 14 percent to 21 percent.

Meanwhile, a solid 61-percent majority continued to follow international news only when people saw events they deemed relevant to them.

To be sure, 39 percent of those surveyed paid very close attention to the war in Afghanistan and 38 percent followed Middle East violence.

But from there, it was practically all downhill.

The recent pilgrimage to the Vatican by US cardinals to confer with Pope John Paul II on the paedophile scandal rocking the US Catholic Church was followed by 27 percent of Americans, according to the survey.

When tensions between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan flared up for the first time in January, only 23 percent of the public cared enough to pay heed.

The political convulsion in France triggered by the success of ultra-right-winger Jean-Marie Le Pen in the first round of the presidential elections was hardly a blip on the US public's radar screen -- only six percent said they paid attention to it.

A dramatic attempt to overthrow Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez last April fared as badly. Among the major news stories, only Argentina's economic and political meltdown got less attention -- it was followed by a paltry five percent of Americans.

## World has no time to waste in fight against hunger: Annan

AFP, Rome

World leaders have no time to waste if they are to achieve the goal of halving the number of the world's hungry by 2015, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan warned Monday as he opened the World Food Summit here.

Annan called on leaders and officials from more than 180 states gathered in Rome to agree "concrete action" at the four-day summit hosted by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO).

"We have no time to lose if we are to reach our goal," said Annan.

"Every day, more than 800 million people worldwide -- among them 300 million children -- suffer the gnawing pain of hunger, and the diseases of disabilities caused by malnutrition. According to some estimates, as many as 24,000 people die every day as a result."

Annan said "a comprehensive and coherent approach that addresses the multiple dimensions

of hunger" was needed if current trends were to be reversed and the target set at the last food summit in 1996 reached.

"Hunger is one of the worst violations of human dignity. In the world of plenty, ending hunger is within our grasp. Failure to reach this goal should fill every one of us with shame," he said.

The tide can be turned by improving agricultural productivity, giving subsistence farmers and rural communities -- 70 percent of the hungry and poor of the developing world -- greater access to land, credit and technology and the know-how to help them grow more resistant crops.

Priority should be given to the role of women, Annan said. "They are involved in every stage of food production, working far longer hours than men, and are the key to ensuring that their families have adequate supplies of food."

Italian President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi said the four-day summit

"will only achieve success if we allow everyone access to sufficient and safe food."

To achieve this, he said, "north-south dialogue is essential. To reduce poverty and hunger we need a more substantial flow of funds from north to south."

FAO chief Jacques Diouf, of Senegal, had Sunday criticised the fact that so few leaders of rich industrialised countries were attending the summit, while those of the poorer states are here in force.

He said the rich countries "transfer more than 300 billion dollars to their agricultural sectors, which means that they directly support each farmer to the tune of 12,000 dollars per year."

"In contrast, those same countries provide the developing countries with an estimated eight billion dollars per year, which works out at six dollars for each farmer."

## Arafat unveils his new Cabinet

AFP, Ramallah

Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority (PA) announced Sunday a sweeping reorganisation of its cabinet aimed at silencing criticism at home and abroad that it was corrupt and inefficient. The moves to restore international confidence in the Palestinian leadership came as Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was in the United States trying again to dump Arafat as a player in the peace process.

The reorganisation cuts the number of cabinet posts from 31 to 21 and taps a respected Palestinian general as interior minister to be pointman in the drastic overhaul of the authority's unwieldy and controversial security forces.

The revamp also brings in fresh blood to the key finance portfolio, officials said.

"This transitional government will have the task of

preparing the municipal, legislative and presidential elections, slated for the end of 2002 and the start of 2003," information minister Yasser Abed Rabbo told a news conference.

But there was no sign the 72-year-old Arafat, who has led the Palestinian movement for three decades, was ready to step down as head of the PA that has been devastated by the Israeli military in recent months.

Saeb Erakat, chief Palestinian negotiator who retained his post as minister of local affairs, brushed off speculation Arafat could be given a purely ceremonial job. "That's not being discussed," he told CNN.

Among the new offices to be created was the ministry of interior, at the head of which will be General Abdel Razak al-Yahiya, a former negotiator with Israel, who will spearhead the reform of the Palestinian Authority's many police and intelligence services.

## Rumsfeld hopes to see Saddam toppled

REUTERS, Kuwait

Donald Rumsfeld says he hopes Iraqi President Saddam Hussein will be toppled during his time as U.S. defence secretary.

"Oh, I would certainly hope so," Rumsfeld said when asked if he would see Saddam's downfall while still in office. "The world would be a better place without that regime."

"The solution in Iraq would be regime change," said Rumsfeld on Monday when told by a Kuwaiti journalist that his countrymen were "fed up" with the Iraqi leadership and threats from Baghdad.

On his first visit to Kuwait since becoming defence secretary last year, Rumsfeld dismissed an Arab summit attempt in March to recon- cile Kuwait with Iraq, Kuwait's occupier during seven months ended by the U.S.-led Gulf War in 1991.

Arab states, including Kuwait, have collectively opposed fresh military action against Iraq.

The United States has accused Iraq of developing weapons of mass destruction and sponsoring terrorism, prompting speculation it might mount some type of military action against Baghdad.

## ASEAN inks world's first environmental accord

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Southeast Asia claimed an environmental world first Monday, signing a regional agreement to tackle costly cross-border pollution caused by land and forest fires.

Environment ministers from the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) inked the treaty on "transboundary haze pollution" at a ceremony in the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur.

It binds member states to cooperating in preventing haze by controlling fires, establishing early warning systems, exchanging information and technology and providing mutual assistance.

The agreement is part of a Regional Haze Action Plan adopted by ASEAN after serious smoke pollution in 1997 and 1998 cost some nine billion US dollars in economic losses in areas including agricultural production and tourism.

first such regional arrangement in the world which binds a group of contiguous states to tackle land and forest fires and its resultant transboundary haze pollution," the group said in a statement.

ASEAN secretary general Rodolfo Severino said the agreement signalled a major step forward in acknowledging the importance of regional cooperation in coping with the fire hazards.

"ASEAN considers this event as extremely important. It is one of ASEAN's most significant agreements," he said in an opening address to a World Conference and Exhibition on Land and Forest Fire Hazards here.

Severino said the agreement mapped out obligations over monitoring and coordinating action and outlined procedures for transport of personnel and materials in response to forest fires.



Southeast Asian Nations Environment Ministers and representatives sign the environmental agreement during the World Conference and Exhibition on Land and Forest Fire Hazards in Kuala Lumpur on Monday. Southeast Asia claimed an environmental world first Monday, signing a regional agreement to tackle costly cross-border pollution caused by land and forest fires.



UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan (L) sits next to FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf on Monday during his opening speech of the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) summit in Rome. The FAO summit involves leaders and officials from 180 nations, who are to work on a project to reduce by 50 per cent the number of hungry people in the world by 2015.