

Indian shelling kills 6 in Pak Kashmir

AFP, Muzaffarabad

Six people, including four from the same family, were killed and 11 others injured in overnight Indian shelling in Pakistani Kashmir, officials said Tuesday.

The casualties came despite indications that tensions between the two nuclear-armed rivals were easing.

Officials said all the deaths occurred in Samahni and Chamb sectors in southernmost Bimberh district.

Samahni sector has been subjected to an unrelenting bombardment from Indian troops across the Line of Control - the de facto border dividing the disputed Himalayan region -- since the artillery duels erupted in mid-May.

Rockets miss US troops in Pakistan

REUTERS, Miranshah

Two rockets have been fired at a building in western Pakistan housing U.S. personnel hunting for vanquished Taliban and al Qaeda fighters but both missed their targets, according to witnesses.

Residents of Miranshah, headquarters of the semi-autonomous North Waziristan tribal region where Pakistani law does not apply, were awakened early on Tuesday morning by explosions heard all over the town, a witness said.

Fresh turmoil taunts Nepal's ruling party

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's ruling party was in fresh turmoil Tuesday as a faction moved to block caretaker prime minister Sher Bahadur Deuba from holding a convention before early general elections.

The Nepali Congress party leadership, headed by Deuba's arch-rival and predecessor as premier Girija Prasad Koirala, issued a statement Tuesday calling the convention a breach of its statutes because Deuba has been expelled from the party until 2005.

Long life is a family affair

AFP, Washington

Siblings of centenarians have an increased chance of breaking the century mark, according to a study published on Monday, reinforcing the idea of a longevity gene.

The brother of a centenarian is 17 times more likely to reach 100 than the average American, according to information collected from 444 families where at least one family member reached 100, and released in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

The sister of a centenarian is eight times more likely to reach 100, and 50 percent more likely to outlive the average American.

US claims averting al-Qaida's 'dirty bomb' attack

Saudis arrested in Morocco for preparing to strike

AFP, Washington

Investigators thwarted a plot to detonate a radiation-laced dirty bomb in the United States by arresting a US "terrorist" linked to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network, Attorney General John Ashcroft said Monday.

"I am pleased to announce today a significant step forward in the war on terrorism," said Ashcroft in a television address live from Moscow.

"We have captured a known terrorist who was exploring a plan to build and explode a radiological dispersion device, or 'dirty bomb' in the United States."

Ashcroft said Abdullah al-Muhajir, 31, a US citizen born in New York as Jose Padilla, who was allegedly plotting the attack, was arrested at Chicago's O'Hare international airport on May 8, after flying in from Pakistan.

"We know from multiple, independent and corroborating sources that Abdullah al-Muhajir was closely associated with al-Qaida and that as an al-Qaida operative he was involved in planning future terrorist attacks on innocent American civilians in the United States."

A radioactive or dirty bomb is a conventional explosive device containing

radioactive material toxic to humans, that can be fatal to people in the vicinity of the blast. It is also seen as an effective weapon for disseminating panic.

Top law enforcement and military officials said they foiled the plan before a target was selected.

"It was still in the initial planning stages, it certainly wasn't at the point of having specific targets," said Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, who appeared at a press conference with Federal Bureau of Investigation chief Robert Mueller.

Al-Muhajir did however have some knowledge of the Washington area, Wolfowitz said, adding that he had researched nuclear weapons and received training in wiring explosives while in Pakistan.

Moreover the Moroccan intelligence service has arrested five Saudis linked with al-Qaida and suspected of preparing a terrorist attack in Morocco, a police source said here late Monday.

The five were arrested on May 11, said the source who asked to remain anonymous.

The leader of the group, Abdallah el-Gareh, 32, was picked up at Casablanca airport, the source said. Gareh was still being questioned by police.

Delhi backs talks with Tigers

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh on Tuesday assured Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe that India stood squarely behind his peace initiative at home with the Tamil Tiger rebels.

"India has been entirely and fully supportive of the peace process. We have encouraged it all along," Singh told reporters, after a meeting with Wickremesinghe.

"There are constant consultations with India. Not just by Sri Lanka, but also by Norway. So we have no reason to be dissatisfied by the progress made so far," he added.

The Sri Lankan prime minister is due later Tuesday to meet Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee and other top Indian officials to seek their support for the Norwegian-backed peace process.

Wickremesinghe, who is in India on a five-day visit, said Sunday his peace process would not succeed without India's help.

It is Wickremesinghe's second visit to India in six months. Shortly after coming to power at the December parliamentary polls, he travelled to New Delhi before entering into a truce with Tamil Tiger guerrillas.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who were initially armed and trained by New Delhi in the 1980s, were outlawed in May 1992 after the outfit was held responsible for the slaying of former premier Rajiv Gandhi.

Sri Lanka is set to lift the domestic ban imposed on the LTTE since 1998 as a key concession to the LTTE before entering into formal face-to-face talks in Thailand later this month or in early July.

Sri Lanka's Constitutional Affairs Minister G. L. Peiris said Friday that Colombo may announce the formal description of the LTTE after Wickremesinghe's return from New Delhi.



Sri Lankan Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe (R) and Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee make their way to a photo call before talks at Vajpayee's residence in New Delhi on Tuesday. Wickremesinghe is in India on a five-day visit aimed at boosting bilateral economic relations.

Arabs are furious at US surveillance of visitors

AFP, Cairo

Arabs are reacting angrily to a US program to increase surveillance of foreign visitors, accusing Washington of discrimination and "totalitarian practices" in its war against terrorism.

"This system emits an ugly smell of racial discrimination, which the world experienced only in the shadow of totalitarian regimes," editorialist Salama Ahmed Salama wrote Monday in a column of the Egyptian government newspaper Al-Ahram.

Salama was astonished at the "silence of Arab countries before such arbitrary measures," which he said "exceed the limits (...) under the pretext of fighting terrorism."

US Attorney General John Ashcroft announced last Wednesday that individual visitors

deemed to fall into categories of "elevated national security concern" will be required to submit to a three-part immigration exercise, or risk arrest.

Such visitors will be fingerprinted and photographed at the border, be required to register "periodically" if they stay in the United States for 30 days or longer, and be subjected to exit controls.

Ashcroft declined to answer questions on whether emphasis would be placed on particular nationalities.

A justice official, speaking privately, said visitors who were likely to be particularly targeted were nationals of Sudan, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Libya -- which, along with North Korea and Cuba make up the US State Department's list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Villagers turn to god following green rains

AFP, Kolkata

Green and yellow pre-monsoon rains have lashed a village in the West Bengal for four days in a row, sparking fears among the villagers that the gods are angry, according to a government official.

Sutanu Prasad Kar, a local administrative official, told AFP that residents of Sangrampur village, 50 km east of the state capital Kolkata, were unnerved by the phenomenon.

"The coloured rains, which started on Friday, have created great fear among the god-fearing villagers. They think they have incurred the wrath of the Hindu gods and goddesses. They are flocking to the temples to pray," said Kar.

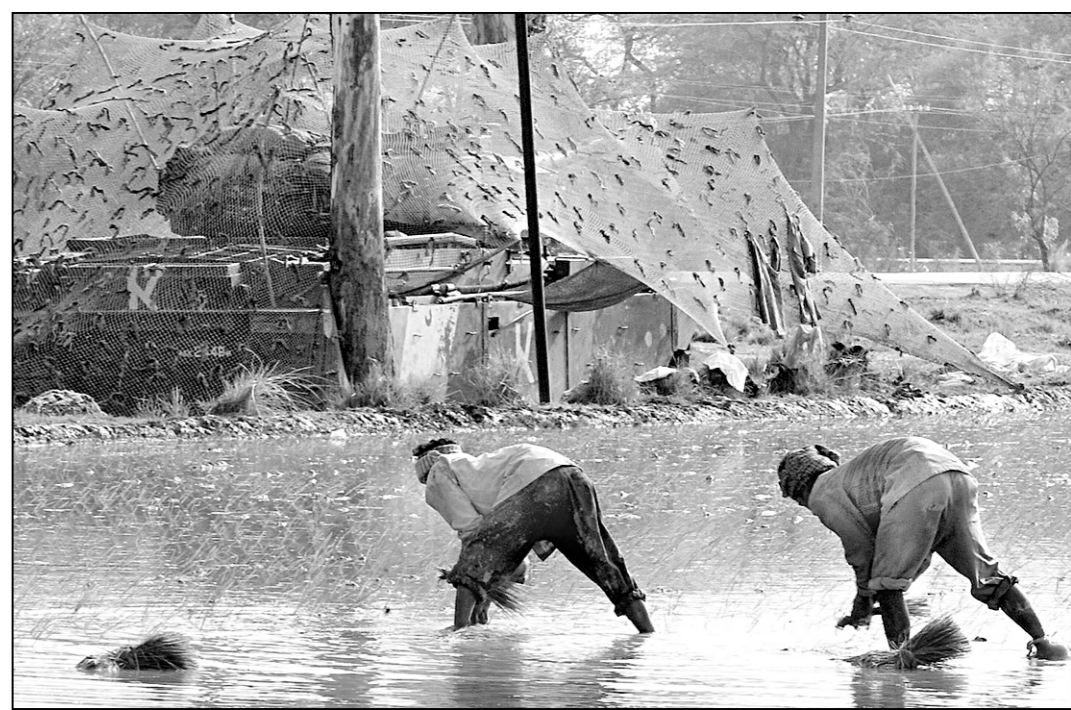
He said the government had asked the state pollution control

board to investigate the cause of the coloured rain and try to calm the villagers.

"We have assured them that the authorities will take all the necessary steps to find out the environmental reasons behind the unusual rains," said Kar.

"The rains have left a definite coloured imprint on leaves and outdoor plants. We have asked the West Bengal Pollution Control Board and the state environment ministry to take note of it."

Deepak Chakraborty, the chief scientist of the West Bengal Pollution Control Board, who visited Sangrampur village, said they would need to carry out a detailed investigation before pinpointing the environmental factors behind the coloured rain.



Farmers work in a paddy in front of an Indian tank under camouflage netting near Wagah, close to the India-Pakistan border 20 km west of Amritsar on Tuesday. The farmers are returning to work as the Indian government began taking steps to deescalate tensions with Pakistan.

Arafat bottled up in HQ while Sharon gets pat on his back

AFP, Ramallah

The Israeli army pursued Tuesday its occupation of Ramallah, keeping Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat bottled up in his headquarters, after being given a virtual free hand by US President George W. Bush to continue its crackdown on Palestinian militants.

Following talks in Washington with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Bush endorsed Israel's latest military action in Palestinian-held lands and dismissed Arafat's political reforms as inadequate.

He also backed away from a proposed Middle East peace conference, saying "the conditions aren't there yet" for holding it.

"The meeting was good, friendly and, even more, we obtained what we want," an Israeli official quoted Sharon as saying.

The official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Sharon was

particularly pleased with the "tightening of the bonds of friendship" with Bush and of the US president's agreement on the need for reforming the Palestinian Authority.

"No one has confidence in the emerging Palestinian government," Bush said after Israeli forces again besieged Arafat's headquarters, forcing him to cancel the first meeting of his new cabinet.

"Israel has a right to defend herself," he said.

Even as Bush spoke, Israeli army bulldozers were using rubble and car wrecks to seal off Arafat's compound, ostensibly to prevent militants from hiding there.

Israeli Defense Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer told state radio the troops "will stay there a day or two," but added that the Israelis had no intention of entering the compound.

The minister said the operation was "in conformity with our decision

to go into (Palestinian autonomous zones) each time we have solid information" about a threatened attack on Israeli territory.

The army said 31 arrests had been made, including the local head of the radical Palestinian group Islamic Jihad, which claimed a suicide bombing on a bus in northern Israel on Wednesday which killed 17 Israelis.

The army also said it had found two booby-trapped cars containing 60 kilograms (132 pounds) of explosives destined for attacks on Israel, as well as five Kalashnikov assault rifles and false Israeli papers.

"Our understanding is that the Israeli operation is limited in duration, and it's to go after specific terrorist targets and, given that understanding, the United States has said before Israel has a right to defend itself," said Bush spokesman Ari Fleischer.

Loya Jirga opens in Kabul

'Ex-king forced to back out', Rabbahi steps aside for Karzai

AFP, Kabul

Afghanistan's Loya Jirga traditional assembly, charged with selecting a new government for the war-torn nation, opened here on Tuesday with a speech from the head of the organising committee.

"I would like to welcome you to this historic and destiny-making Loya Jirga," said the head of the Loya Jirga commission Ismael Qasimyar.

A verse of the Koran was then recited to the more than 1,500 delegates who have journeyed from across Afghanistan and beyond to attend the meeting.

The nation's former king, Mohammed Zahir Shah, who spent

three decades in exile in Italy, is scheduled to deliver an inaugural speech before delegates begin the task of selecting a new transitional government.

Rebel warlord Padsha Khan, who has warned that Afghanistan will face more fighting if Mohammed Zahir Shah is not named head of state, said Tuesday that the former king was forced into ruling himself out of the post.

Khan, who is a delegate at the Loya Jirga grand assembly to choose a new government, has been trying to wrest control of south-eastern Paktia province from sitting governor Taj Mohammad Wardak.

At least 115 people were killed or injured in April when he made a

failed bid to capture the provincial capital Gardaz.

Meanwhile, Afghan ex-president Burhanuddin Rabbani, who had intended to stand against current interim leader Hamid Karzai at the Loya Jirga for the post of head of state, formally stepped aside Tuesday.

"Many delegates have asked me to be a candidate. They are still asking, still insisting, but I've told them that national unity is most important to me," Rabbani told a press conference.

The leader of the Jamiat-i-Islami party, whose decision to withdraw became public late Monday, said he had held talks with Karzai and that the two had come to an agreement.

Opposition talks plan to make 'missile man' Indian president

AFP, New Delhi

India's opposition parties were in talks Tuesday to decide if Abdul Kalam, the architect of the country's ballistic missile program, was a suitable candidate for president after the ruling BJP-led coalition put up his name.

The main opposition Congress party said its first choice candidate would be the incumbent President K.R.Narayanan.

"Unless the president indicates otherwise, he is still our first choice candidate," Congress leader Jaipal Reddy, told reporters.

Two powerful regional parties, the Samajwadi Party and the

Rashtriya Janata Dal, were also in hectic parleys over the issue Tuesday. "We are trying our best to achieve a consensus on a candidate," he added.

Communist parties were also holding talks on the matter.

If India's ruling Hindu nationalist-led BJP coalition and the opposition fail to arrive at a consensus, presidential elections will take place on July 15.

India has a special electoral college that votes for the president, which includes members of state legislative assemblies and the lower house of parliament.

US military key to stability in Asia: Powell

AFP, New York

US Secretary of State Colin Powell called Monday for greater political freedom in Asian countries as he launched a staunch defence of a continued US military presence and alliances in the region.

"Social and political freedom is the only true source of national greatness," Powell said in a dinner speech to the US Asia Society.

"Freedom works like nothing else. Some nations are still afraid of it. Others are determined to control its progress, some backwards," he said.

Powell specifically cited North

Korea, criticising its "dangerously deluded policies" for dragging its people into a "hell of deprivation and oppression."

But he also urged the Chinese government to recognise that economic growth would inevitably bring greater demand for political freedom that could not be ignored.

"The Chinese people want what all people want: respect for their fundamental human rights," Powell said. Freedom was not "an optional piece of software" compatible with some cultures but not with others, he said.

Hailing Asia's post-war economic boom, Powell said it would

never have been possible without the stability provided by the US military presence in the region.

"To this day, Asia's stability depends on our key alliances with Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand and Australia," he said, stressing that security was essential to economic growth and political freedom.

The presence of US troops, he said, had enabled South Korea to develop and made it possible for Japan to limit defence expenditure and concentrate its energy on economic growth.

"We will not yield our strategic position in Asia," Powell pledged.

Israel to start building West Bank barrier

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel will start building a controversial defensive wall the length of its border with the West Bank "in the next few days," a defence ministry spokesman told AFP.

"The construction will start in the next few days before the end of the week or at the start of next week," he said, without elaborating further.

The defence ministry announced last month that the 350-kilometre (220-mile) defensive barrier along the Green Line will cost more than 200 million dollars and that it would be finished within six months.

The project is being pursued with the aim of "preventing the infiltration from the West Bank into Israeli territory of Palestinian terrorists, vehicles and explosives," according to the ministry.

The continuous barrier will be

made up of a combination of fences and ditches, as well as walls in tense areas, and will all be under the watchful eye of sophisticated electronic surveillance.

Similar fences sit on Israel's borders with Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

Construction already started April 15 on creating buffer zones solely around Jerusalem, which Israel claims in its entirety as its capital, but for the West Bank as a whole work had not yet begun.

Most of the new barrier will be in the sectors of Umm el-Fahm-Me Ami, north of Jenin, Qalqilya-Tulkarem in the northwest of the West Bank, and around greater Jerusalem, according to Israeli officials.



West Douglas County firefighter Larry Mullenax turns away from the flames on Monday as he works to defend a home on Highway 67 near Deckers, Colorado. Up to 40,000 were poised Monday to evacuate their homes on the edge of Denver, Colorado as the wildfire that has burned more than 30,400 hectares (75,900 acres) threatened the area, officials said.