

'Major terrorist attack on West a certainty'

AFP, Rome
A major terrorist attack is certain to hit the West sooner or later, Italian Defence Minister Antonio Martino said Tuesday, in a declaration which was heavily criticised by the opposition and a police union.

"We know for certain that a terrorist attack of major proportions will sooner or later hit the West. We do not know where, nor which shape it will take," Martino said.

He said there was no clear indication of where precisely the target of an attack would be.

"The United States? Europe? Italy? And if it is Italy, where and when? There are too many things that we do not know," he said.

"Personally, I fear the threat of a bacteriological attack, which the West is still underprepared to handle," the minister said, speaking at an academic conference on the military.

Spain moves to ban ETA

AFP, Madrid
The Spanish senate on Tuesday overwhelmingly passed a law that will clear the way to ban Batasuna, the political wing of the militant Basque group ETA fighting for an independent Basque homeland.

The bill, overwhelmingly approved by a 214 to 15 vote, is "a concrete tool to make illegal and dissolve those parties like Batasuna which belong to terrorist movements," Justice Minister Angel Acebes said.

The measure has been a key part of the campaign by Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar's conservative government to fight terrorism, which Madrid has made a cornerstone of its almost-concluded stint as EU president.

15 detained in Morocco for al-Qaida link

AFP, Rabat
Five Saudi nationals and three Moroccans have been arrested in Morocco in connection with a suspected al-Qaida cell, bringing the total of arrests in a security operation to 15, the local press reported Wednesday.

The five Saudis were arrested on Sunday for suspected links to three Saudi nationals and four Moroccans already arrested in mid-May in connection with the Islamic extremist movement of Osama bin Laden, the newspaper Aujourd'hui le Maroc reported.

Security services then dismantled an alleged al-Qaida cell accused of preparing attacks against Morocco and on NATO ships in the Straits of Gibraltar.

Judge enters not guilty plea on Moussaoui's behalf

AFP, Alexandria
A US federal judge entered a not-guilty plea Tuesday on behalf of French national Zacarias Moussaoui after he refused to answer to charges he conspired in deadly September 11 terror attacks.

US District Court Judge Leonie Brinkema also refused Moussaoui's request to move his upcoming trial to Colorado.

Moussaoui, 34, dressed in a green prisoner's uniform, was in court to answer to a new indictment dropped him in which authorities dragged accusations he sought information about crop-dusting aircraft for terror attacks.

The French citizen of Moroccan descent was defiant, saying he refused to recognise the court's authority.

Cross-border firing disrupts Kashmir pilgrimage

AFP, Jammu
An annual pilgrimage in Kashmir attended by several thousand Indians hoping to cure their skin diseases has been disrupted by dangerous cross-border firing between India and Pakistan.

Hindu, Muslim and Sikh devotees have already started arriving in Samba, 45 kilometres (28 miles) south of Jammu, Kashmir's winter capital, to attend a ceremony at the tomb of local saint Baba Chambalalayal who lived 200 years ago.

He was said able to cure people of skin disease, which was rife in the area, by rubbing them with local clay. He was murdered by doctors who thought he was taking away their business.

Bush's ME peace plan meets resistance at G8 summit

REUTERS, Calgary

Holed up in the Canadian Rockies, the leaders of the world's richest countries begin a two-day summit on Wednesday on a peace plan for the Middle East, the fight against terrorism and aid for Africa.

Far out of reach of protesters who disrupted last year's summit in Italy, the Group of Eight leaders are meeting in the secluded mountain resort of Kananaskis, protected by tanks and missiles in Canada's biggest ever security operation.

Host Prime Minister Jean Chretien is determined to keep a clear focus on poor countries in Africa, but President Bush thrust the Middle East to the forefront when he unveiled long-awaited policy just two days before the summit.

While many welcomed U.S. engagement in the Middle East, Bush's call for the removal of Palestinian President Yasser Arafat as a likely condition for Palestinian statehood met with ambivalence almost as soon as the U.S. president arrived.

"The president talked about perhaps it would be better to replace Mr. Arafat. I don't have a specific point of view on that," Chretien told reporters as he met Bush on Tuesday night.

The summit is a difficult group for Bush to win over. It brings together the industrialised Group of Seven -- Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy,

Japan and the United States -- plus Russia.

U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, a guest for the last part of the summit, has also expressed skepticism, saying premature Palestinian elections could bring radicals to power.

About 1,000 protesters, who say rich-country policies hurt the poor, held a largely peaceful demonstration in Calgary, the nearest city, late on Tuesday, with more planned for Wednesday.

In the Canadian capital, Ottawa, authorities snuffed and boarded up the Centennial Flame, which commemorates Canadian confederation, and erected barricades in anticipation of possible violence.

At last year's summit in Genoa, one protester died in clashes with Italian police. Among other demands, the protesters want the rich to forgive poor country debts and offer more cash to curb the spread of AIDS.

This year's summit site, under the shadow of snow-covered peaks, was protected by dug-in tanks and missiles in a huge display of strength against the threat of both the protesters and terrorism.

Access to the resort was closed to all but authorised traffic; the air space above was closed, and even the local grizzly bears were fitted with radio transmitters to avoid any nasty surprises for the troops on guard.

10 Pak troops killed during raid on suspected al-Qaida hideout

100 extremists detained

AFP, Islamabad

Ten Pakistani troops were killed during an overnight raid on a suspected al-Qaida hideout in the tribal territories bordering Afghanistan, an interior ministry official said Wednesday.

"Ten members of our law enforcement agencies were killed during an exchange of fire at a suspected al-Qaida hideout last (Tuesday) night," Brigadier General Javed Cheema, head of the interior ministry's national crisis cell, told AFP.

One of the "foreigners" targeted in the raid in southern Waziristan district, some 25 kilometers (15 miles) from the Afghan border, was also killed, Cheema said.

US and Pakistani agents in western Pakistan's tribal belt have

been jointly hunting al-Qaida and Taliban fugitives who are believed to have slipped over the border to escape the US-led military campaign in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Pakistani police have arrested almost 100 members of banned extremist organisations this week as officials investigate suspected links with Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network, government and police sources said on Wednesday.

No exact figures have been released but police told AFP around 95 extremists from banned Sunni militant groups Sipah-e-Sahaba of Pakistan (SSP) and Lashkar-e-Jhangvi (LJ) have been rounded up nationwide in the past three days.

Investigators believe al-Qaida and local extremists are teaming up to attack Western targets with the

aim of destabilising their common enemy -- the Pakistani government run by President Pervez Musharraf.

"The present crackdown is a sequel to the massive terrorist attacks in Karachi and as a result of leads provided through investigations," Interior Secretary Tanseem Noorani told AFP.

"It is part of an ongoing process to prevent such incidents," he said.

Some members of outlawed Kashmir militant group Jaish-e-Mohammad have also been rounded up.

The crackdown, which includes the arrest of two suspected LJ hitmen in the volatile southern city of Karachi last week, follows the June 14 car bomb attack outside the US consulate there in which 12 people were killed.

PML takes graduates-only polls rule to court

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's surprise ban on non-graduates from contesting the upcoming general election is unconstitutional, a party challenging the controversial new rule told AFP.

A spokeswoman for the pro-government Pakistan Muslim League (PML) said the party had mounted a legal challenge to the new decree, announced on Sunday, which will eliminate a swathe of politicians from the October polls.

Outraged opposition groups have slammed the decree as a "violation of human rights".

"We have filed a petition before the Supreme Court under articles on fundamental rights challenging President (Pervez) Musharraf's order," PML spokeswoman Begum Aida Hussain told AFP.

Early bird may have been even earlier

AFP, Paris

The first known bird may have flown more than 50 million years earlier than thought, according to an enigmatic set of fossilised footprints uncovered in northwest Argentina.

The earliest bird identified as such is a specimen dubbed Archaeopteryx, dating back 150 million years, to the Late Jurassic period.

It, like all birds, is suspected to be a descendant of small, feathery dinosaurs that probably took to the trees for safety and food.

But the discovery of 50 bird-like footprints found in a rock formation in La Rioja Province, could, if other evidence backs it up, dump Archaeopteryx from the top of paleontology's pecking order.

The imprints, about four centimetres (2.5 inches) across, look remarkably like those of modern waterbirds or waders, with three long, slender forward claws without webbing.

UN warns of Afghan disaster

AFP, Islamabad

The United Nations is warning that Afghanistan risks becoming the world's next great humanitarian disaster if an urgent plea for food and funds is not answered soon.

World Food Programme (WFP) spokesman Khaled Mansour said the country could soon be inhabited by "walking skeletons" as the UN agency's new boss toured this Afghan refugee camp in northwest Pakistan.

"The most important thing for us is not to wait for the CNN factor, where you see people completely wasted and stunted and dying (on television) so they decide to give the food or money," Mansour told AFP.

"Regrettably we have to wait until

we have walking skeletons before we get the money. We hope this doesn't happen in Afghanistan.

"It hasn't happened so far but malnutrition rates are rising. If this is continuing for months and months, you can definitely have walking skeletons.

"People are dying not only because of starvation but also because of malnutrition," Mansour said. "It's getting bad."

Aid workers have already warned Afghanistan's meagre resources are being stretched to the limit by the returnees, with around 1,090,000 -- more than a million from Pakistan alone -- signing up to head home in less than four months.

Arizona now disaster zone

AFP, Show Low

Firefighters were Tuesday locked in a feverish battle to save a US town facing a 50-50 chance of destruction by a raging wildfire, as President George W. Bush declared a state of emergency.

The sea of flames around the threatened mountain retreat town of Show Low, Arizona, grew to cover 150,000 hectares (375,000 acres) after destroying 390 homes and 18 businesses and forcing 35,000 residents to flee for their lives.

The town was abandoned Saturday by its 8,000 residents when the fire breached a last line of defences. It was lying under a thick cloak of acrid black smoke as winds whipped up the fire nearby.

Fire crews were desperately

slashing, burning and bulldozing firebreaks near a highway running south from the town, warning that if they did not manage to contain the flames at that line, the town could burn.

"We're not saying it's over," said US Forest Service deputy fire information officer Chadeen Palmer.

"But last night we were feeling a lot better because it did hold in these (fire) lines. Fire crews are putting their lives on the line."

Palmer said the chances of the town surviving through Wednesday were now just 50 percent.

The 2,300 firefighters frantically clearing new fire breaks around the menaced town had won a break from the weather in recent days when temperatures dropped, winds died down and humidity in the area rose.

'Bush ME peace plan may spark off more violence'

AFP, Dubai

US President George W. Bush's vision for peace in the Middle East could lead to just the opposite outcome, Arab newspapers warned Wednesday.

Bush, in a long-awaited speech Monday, told the Palestinians to vote out leaders "tainted by terror," a clear allusion to Yasser Arafat, and said that if so they could expect US support for an independent Palestinian state within three years.

Daily newspaper Al-Bayan, owned by the Dubai government, said Bush "has shown he is totally aligned to the positions of Zionist terrorism."

"Bush's speech does not promote peace in the Middle East. On the contrary it incites war. And (Israeli Prime Minister Ariel) Sharon confirmed that by broadening his attack just a few hours after the speech," it said.

In Saudi Arabia, Jeddah's Al-Madina said that, "despite the positive points, particularly on the establishment of a Palestinian state, the need to halt settlement and the withdrawal of the Israeli army ... the Bush speech includes numerous other points which require

clarification.

"How can the US president call for democratic elections in the Palestinian territories and at the same time repeat the demands of Sharon about the need to push out president Yasser Arafat?" the daily asked.

For Riyadh newspaper Al-Jazira, "the American conditions, which speak of the need to push out the elected Palestinian leader, are very harsh for the Palestinians."

"These conditions are a direct interference" in internal Palestinian affairs, it alleged.

Qatar's Al-Watan said "the US President's speech disappointed all Arabs and Muslims ... because it sets impossible conditions which will not be accepted by the Palestinians."

From Washington's arch-enemy, Baghdad, a leading Iraqi newspaper charged that Bush was trying to deceive the Palestinian people with his Middle East peace initiative.

"As usual, Bush has put forward vague promises about (creating) the Palestinian state," said Babel, run by President Saddam Hussein's son, Uday.

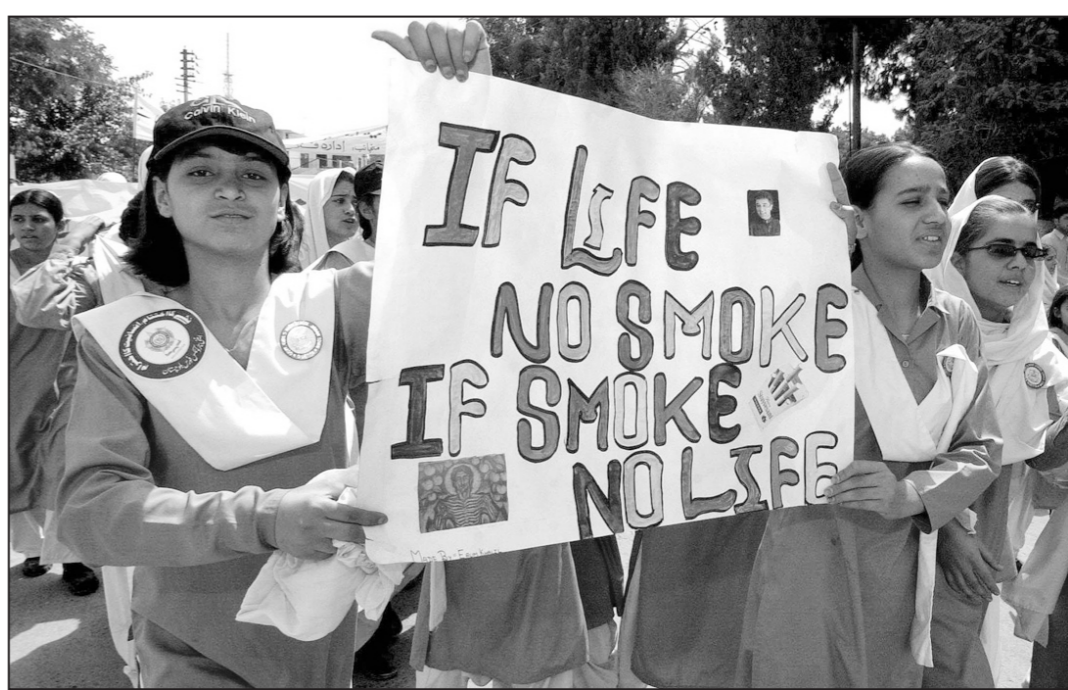
Nepali king urged not to sacrifice animals

AFP, Guwahati

An Indian animal rights group threatened Wednesday to haul Nepal's visiting King Gyanendra before court if he goes ahead with plans to sacrifice animals at a famed Hindu temple.

People for Animals has filed a complaint with police in the north-eastern state of Assam's capital Guwahati to stop the sacrifice from taking place, said a spokeswoman for the group, Sangeeta Goswami.

"We shall take the royalty to the court if they go ahead with the animal sacrifice for religious purposes as this is a crime under Indian wildlife laws," Goswami told AFP.



Pakistani students walk in a protest march against the use of narcotics while holding placards to mark the Anti-Narcotics day in south western city Quetta on Wednesday. Pakistan marked the World Day Against Drug Abuse and Trafficking by organising rallies and setting confiscated drugs in different raids on fire.

Asia marks anti-drugs day with executions, drug burn

AFP, Hong Kong

China executed at least 50 drug criminals and Myanmar, the world's largest opium producer, torched narcotics it said were worth more than a billion dollars as Asia marked world anti-drugs day on Wednesday.

In China 14 people were sentenced to death in Chengdu, capital of southwest Sichuan province, on Tuesday, with nine of them immediately taken to the execution grounds and shot, the China News Service reported.

"In recent years in Chengdu drug crimes have been on the rise and the drug situation is becoming serious as drug criminals are linking up with criminals outside the province," the report said.

Nationwide at least 36 more people have been reported executed in the past week to mark the

United Nations International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking.

Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri also adopted a tough stance, calling for the death sentence for traffickers.

"For those who distribute drugs, life sentences and other prison sentences are no longer sufficient," she said.

"No sentence is sufficient other than the death sentence."

In Myanmar the military junta burned drugs it said were worth more than one billion dollars in its latest bid to convince critics it is committed to eradicating the menace.

Accompanied by a military tattoo, the junta flicked a switch to ignite an incinerator into which workers shovelled bags of heroin bricks and amphetamines.

Senior General Than Shwe, the country's top ruler, and international diplomats attended the burning

ceremony in Yangon. It destroyed 3,027 kilograms (6,650 pounds) of opium, 240 kilograms of heroin, 434 kilograms of marijuana, 34.9 million amphetamine tablets, four million ephedrine tablets and 2,865 kilograms of powdered ephedrine.

"The Myanmar government is totally aware of the scarring threat and is seriously undertaking and trying its utmost best to combat these deplorable drugs as a national duty," anti-drugs official Brigadier-General Zaw Win said in a speech before the display.

US Drug Enforcement Agency officials helped conduct spot checks to verify the destruction.

According to the latest State Department anti-narcotics report, Myanmar is the world's largest producer of illicit opium. It is also the primary source of amphetamine-type stimulants in Asia.

Kashmiri rebel group threatens to sabotage state elections

AFP, Srinagar

Kashmir's top rebel group Hizbul Mujahedin has vowed to "sabotage" elections in the Indian-administered state later this year, local media said Wednesday.

"The elections (will) be sabotaged as people of the state did not offer supreme sacrifices of 85,000 lives for elections," said a Hizbul statement published in local newspapers.

"The people have offered sacrifices for the right to self-determination."

The movement asked Kashmiris not to take part in the vote, which Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah says will take place before October 14.

India says at least 35,000 people have died in Kashmir since an Islamic insurgency erupted in 1989 to end New Delhi's rule in the Himalayan province. Separatists and Pakistan put the toll at least twice as high.

Hizbul Mujahedin, whose leadership is based in Pakistani territory, is the main rebel group made up of local Kashmiri fighters.

The main alliance of Indian Kashmir-based separat-

ists, the All Party Hurriyat Conference, has called for a boycott of the state election and alleged that past votes have been rigged.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in a recent interview to Newsweek magazine reiterated a pledge that this year's vote will be "free and fair".

Hizbul in its statement called on India to initiate measures to find a "permanent, viable and practicable solution to the dispute of Kashmir".

It accused New Delhi of launching a propaganda campaign to smear "the indigenous character of the ongoing freedom movement".

"This is being done to mislead the world," Hizbul said. India accuses Pakistan of arming and training rebels who sneak in across the de facto border in Kashmir to take part in the insurgency.

The dispute is at the heart of a six-month standoff between the nuclear-armed countries, which have deployed one million troops to their common frontiers.

Pakistan denies it gives more than moral, political and diplomatic support to what it calls an indigenous movement in Muslim-majority Kashmir for self-determination.

Bush's call for Arafat's ouster raises question of succession

AFP, Ramallah

US President George Bush's call for the ouster of Yasser Arafat has put the spotlight on who might eventually succeed the ageing Palestinian leader, a question he has done his best to avoid.

At 72, Arafat has countered Bush's call for his ouster by agreeing to hold elections in January for a successor, who he says will be chosen by the Palestinian people and "no one else".

Palestinian legislator Hanan Ashrawi told AFP that assuming he

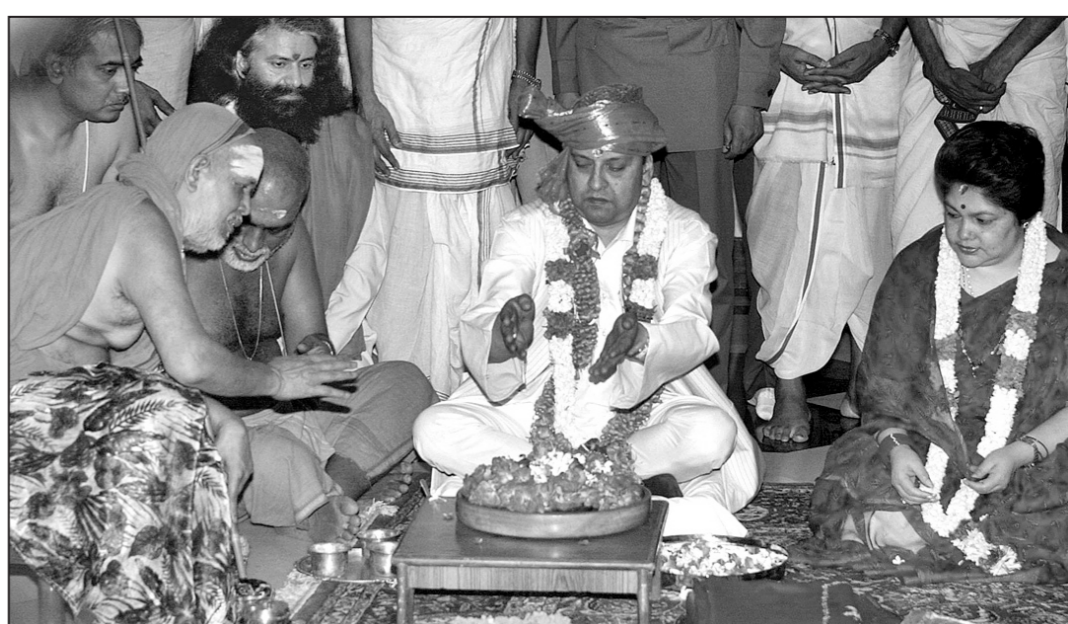
stands -- and the question is not at the moment in doubt -- "Arafat will not have any problems winning". He is still the people's man.

"It's true that Arafat never delegated responsibilities or appointed a deputy but succession now is not the issue. The issue is elections and the right of Palestinians to choose their own leaders," Ashrawi said.

She acknowledged that "there are potential candidates" to replace Arafat, who has been the beacon of Palestinian nationalism and supreme leader for 33 uninterrupted years, but declined to discuss them.

Nevertheless the names of four other potential candidates have been making the rounds and are equally divided between the old and new guard, according to Palestinian analysts and officials in interviews with AFP.

One of them, Marwan Barghuti, is currently in an Israeli jail pending trial for allegedly masterminding anti-Israeli attacks, and it is not known if the Israelis would be prepared to release him to run for the Palestinian leadership.



Nepal's King Gyanendra (C) performs prayers with his wife Queen Komal (R) with the Sankaracharya of Kanchi, Jayendra Saraswati (L), at Sri Devi Kamakshi Temple in New Delhi on Wednesday. India assured Gyanendra of military help including helicopters to help combat the Maoist insurgency in the Himalayan kingdom.