

India to appoint deputy PM

AFP, Lucknow

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said Friday his BJP party was considering creating a position of deputy premier in a cabinet reshuffle.

"Yes, there is a suggestion from the party for the post of a deputy prime minister and we are considering this," Vajpayee told reporters in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh's capital Lucknow, his home constituency.

Newspapers have said Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani, who is the de facto cabinet number two, will be formally appointed deputy prime minister, virtually setting in motion a succession plan.

Pentagon to start air patrols ahead of July 4

AFP, Washington

The Pentagon will boost air patrols over New York, Washington and other major US cities on fears of a possible terrorist attack on the July 4 Independence Day holiday, ABC reported Thursday.

"The Pentagon is about to dramatically increase to combat air patrols over about a dozen US cities," ABC reported. "This is not because of specific threats."

After the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Centre and the Pentagon just outside Washington, F-16 fighters carried out 24-hour surveillance operations on major US cities, especially on the east coast.

Migrants on run in Australia after mass breakout

AFP, Sydney

A major police hunt was under way Friday for more than 30 illegal immigrants on the run after a mass breakout from Australia's notorious Woomera detention centre.

The runaways, all rejected asylum seekers, were among a group of 39 helped to freedom by refugee sympathisers who tore down part of a razor wire fence around the outback compound in the well-planned breakout late on Thursday.

Four of the runaways were children, police said.

Pledge of allegiance ruling put on hold amid uproar

AFP, Washington

An appeals court judge who ruled that the pledge of allegiance taken daily by millions of US schoolchildren was unconstitutional because it speaks of God stayed the ruling Thursday amid a deafening backlash.

"Judge Alfred Goodwin stopped the resolution ... pending further appeals," said court spokesman David Maden, explaining that the ruling, scheduled to take effect in seven days in nine western states, would be put on hold.

Thousands of Argentines protest riot deaths

REUTERS, Buenos Aires

Thousands of jobless Argentines converged on the presidential palace and Congress in Buenos Aires on Thursday and peacefully protested the deaths of two demonstrators a day earlier in the worst riots since the elected government was toppled in December.

In a demonstration that lasted several hours, an estimated 10,000 civil rights activists and unemployed people chanted anti-government slogans calling for caretaker leader Eduardo Duhalde's resignation.

46 miners killed in China

AFP, Beijing

Forty-six miners died in an explosion at a gold mine in north China after being ordered to continue work even though a fire had broken out underground, a local newspaper said Friday.

Owners of the mine in Fanshi county, Shanxi province, later tried to cover up the blast -- caused by tonnes of explosives stored in the pit -- by secretly removing bodies under cover of night, the Huashang Bao said.

The newspaper's lengthy report, quoting a miner who survived the blast, was reproduced on popular Chinese news website Sina.com and other similar sites on Friday.

US, Europe spar over Arafat

Bush downplays rift over ME at G8 summit

AFP, Kananaskis

The United States and Europe sparred over the destiny of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat Thursday as sharp divisions over President George W. Bush's Middle East policy burst into the open at the Group of Eight summit.

The controversy, exacerbated by Bush's call on Palestinians to ditch Arafat, confounded a bid by host Canada to use its Rockies summit to showcase a new action plan for African development.

Bush downplayed rifts over the Middle East, insisting that the feedback to his plan had been favorable.

"The response has been very positive. And for that, I'm grateful," Bush said, referring to his calls for reform of the Palestinian Authority, as he met Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Some European officials begged to differ, speaking before the summit wound up and the leaders of Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Japan and the United States started to head for home.

"There is a need to reform the Palestinian Authority but that does not mean that Arafat has to go," a European official said on condition of anonymity.

"We are not going to tell Arafat to go."

German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder bluntly made clear that Arafat was in the picture.

"As long as he is the president (of the Palestinian Authority) ... he remains

our interlocutor," Schroeder told German television, the morning after Arafat's fate preoccupied G8 leaders at a working dinner.

Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi however called on Arafat to make a historic gesture.

"Arafat, Nobel Peace Prize winner, could make a generous move by stepping aside," he said.

Bush on Monday warned Palestinians they must replace Arafat with a leadership "not compromised by terror" before they could realise their dream of an independent state.

While they were divided on the Middle East, G8 leaders put new muscle into their anti-terror campaign, pledging 20 billion dollars to secure Russia's excess nuclear stocks from terrorists.

Meanwhile, US President George W. Bush on Thursday downplayed a rift with key allies over his call for the Palestinians to oust Yasser Arafat and sought to soothe world markets roiled by the latest US financial scandal.

Bush said he found fellow leaders at the Group of Eight summit receptive to his call for the Palestinians to enact sweeping political reforms and step up anti-terrorism efforts with an eye on giving them an independent state.

"The response has been very positive. And for that, I'm grateful," Bush said as he met with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the meeting of the world's leading industrialised nations at the nearby Kananaskis resort.



G8 and African leaders smile during the final statement and photo of the 2002 G8 Summit on Thursday in Kananaskis, Alberta, Canada. Left to right are: French President Jacques Chirac, British PM Tony Blair, Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Canadian PM Jean Chretien and US President George W. Bush.

Musharraf sacks general over referendum fiasco

ANI, Islamabad

Heads have begun to roll in Pakistan as evidence mounts about the role of the ISI in the rigging of the presidential referendum. Among the first to be shown the door is Major-General Ehtesham Zamir, head of the political wing of the ISI directorate, who also played a key role in organising the referendum in April which gave General Musharraf 97 per cent of the vote with a huge turnout, says a report in Guardian.

President Gen Musharraf, embarrassed after already being forced to apologise in public after ballot boxes were stuffed with yes votes and government employees ordered to vote, required someone to squarely place the blame on.

The report quoted a source close to the army leadership saying: "He [Gen Zamir] has been made the scapegoat. It was his idea to hold the referendum."

Gen Zamir, who until last August was a divisional commander in Karachi, became a powerful figure and influential aide when he was elevated into the top ranks of the ISI. He was one of a handful of advisers who suggested a referendum would give Gen Musharraf the nationwide endorsement he sought, the report

adds.

In the past 10 months Gen Zamir has secretly tried to engineer an expedient alliance of politicians to support Gen Musharraf in the upcoming elections. But he has failed to create a solid pro-government political platform and opposition parties, particularly Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's party (PPP), remain a significant force.

The Guardian adds that in the days immediately after the referendum Gen Musharraf insisted he had ordered a fair vote.

"The idea was to let it be totally fair and open and impartial and those were the instructions," he said.

But in a nationally televised speech a month later, the ashen-faced general admitted he had been told about cases of vote-rigging during the referendum. He expressed his "regret." "It should not have been done," he said, says the report.

The general had intended to go further in that speech and announce an investigation into the allegations and the sacking of the chief election commissioner, Irshad Hassan Khan, a former chief justice who organised the vote.

Vajpayee sees no war threat

Delhi vows fair polls in Kashmir

AFP, Lucknow

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Friday pledged free elections in insurgency-racked Kashmir and said there was "no question" of war with Pakistan, despite a six-month military standoff between the nuclear powers.

"I think it is time that fair elections are held in Jammu and Kashmir and for that, if need be, I shall even have president's rule," the premier told reporters in the northern Indian city of Lucknow, his home constituency.

President's rule, or direct control from Delhi, can be imposed by the Indian cabinet over a state in time of political instability.

Vajpayee is hoping the election in Kashmir due by October 14 will be incident-free, thereby thwarting criticism that the Muslim-majority state has not been able to choose its own leaders.

Separatists have already called for a boycott of the polls, alleging that past votes that have brought to power Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah's National Conference party were rigged.

Islamic rebels, meanwhile, have vowed to "sabotage" the polls and warned voters not to show up on

election day.

The Himalayan region has been at the centre of a six-month military standoff between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan, with New Delhi demanding Islamabad put an end to the infiltration of Islamic rebels into its zone.

Vajpayee acknowledged that tensions had eased but again ruled out any withdrawal of the hundreds of thousands of Indian troops on the frontier.

"There is no question of having a war with Pakistan, but right now we are not taking any steps to remove troops from the border," he said.

"I am willing to hold talks with Pakistan on all issues including Jammu and Kashmir, but for that I need the right atmosphere and cross-border terrorism should end first," he said.

Vajpayee also said he was ready for dialogue with Indian Kashmir's main separatist alliance, the All Party Hurriyat Conference.

"I have already expressed that I am always open to having a dialogue with them, provided they set no conditions."

The Hurriyat considers itself the representative of Kashmiris and wants tripartite talks among alliance

leaders, India and Pakistan.

Indian officials expect a surge in violence in the coming months as headline rebels work to scuttle the elections.

Army jeeps have hit two landmines in as many days, with one incident on Thursday killing three troops.

Another 17 people died in Indian-administered Kashmir Thursday, including five civilians killed together by unidentified gunmen.

Vajpayee's largely conciliatory tone over Kashmir on Friday came three days before he is to announce a reshuffle of his cabinet that observers believe may boost the role of headline Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani.

Vajpayee confirmed to reporters that his Hindu nationalist BJP party was considering creating a position of deputy prime minister.

Advani is effectively the cabinet number two, but an appointment to deputy premier would virtually set in motion a succession plan to the 77-year-old Vajpayee.

G8 asks both to talk on Kashmir

REUTERS, Kananaskis

The world's rich nations on Thursday called on Pakistan to put a stop to extremist groups using the country as a base, while urging it and India to get down to serious talks to end conflict over Kashmir.

"We discussed the tensions between India and Pakistan. We agreed that Pakistan must put a permanent stop to terrorist activity originating from territory under its control," said the communiqué, which released after the end of the two-day Group of Eight summit.

The G8 leaders urged the two countries to begin talking peace, saying: "Both countries should commit to sustained dialogue on the

underlying issues that divide them."

Meanwhile, Islamic militants fighting Indian rule in Kashmir pledged on Friday to keep up their revolt, a move that could disrupt state elections seen by New Delhi as key to bringing peace to the region.

The Hizb-ul-Mujahideen guerrilla group, based in Pakistan, made its statement after a fresh surge of violence in Indian Kashmir -- at the heart of a military stand-off between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan.

Indian police said 19 people, including eight from the Indian security forces, died in various incidents on Thursday, including one attack claimed by the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen.

We will continue such attacks on Indian occupation forces and their installations unless they quit Kashmir," Salim Hashmi, spokesman for the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, said by telephone from Rawalpindi in Pakistan.

"We have never targeted civilians, we only target Indian security forces and their installations," he said.

The fresh surge in violence coincided with a call by the Group of Eight rich nations for Pakistan to put a stop to extremist groups using the country as a base and for both Pakistan and India to get down to serious talks.

Delhi pledges to help Nepal fight Maoists

AFP, Lucknow

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Friday pledged to help neighbouring Nepal in its fight against Maoist rebels as Nepalese King Gyanendra closed a six-day visit to India.

"We do not believe in the revolutionary ideals of the Maoists in Nepal. We will not allow terrorism to spread in any country," Vajpayee told a news conference in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh's capital Lucknow.

"We have sent some police support to Nepal. If need be, we will continue to support them," he

added.

However, Vajpayee said that the problem was an internal matter of Nepal and therefore must be solved by its government.

On Wednesday, Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes at a meeting with Gyanendra agreed to Nepal's request for helicopters, utility vehicles and mine-proof combat vehicles to fight the rebels, a defence spokesman said.

Under a decades-old treaty India is the chief supplier of military hardware to Nepal, which is in the throes of the six-year Maoist rebellion that has cost more than 4,300 lives.

Al-Qaida still operating in US

AFP, Washington

Domestic intelligence collected by the United States appears to show that the al-Qaida network of Osama bin Laden continues to operate on US soil, the CBS network reported late Thursday.

Al-Qaida operatives were to assist accused "dirty bomb" suspect Jose Padilla once he returned from an overseas scouting mission, the network said, citing US officials. The helpers included Palestinian-born Florida resident Adham Hassoun, who has been detained since early June on immigration charges.

Hassoun is considered by the United States an "important link," not only to the investigation of

Padilla, a former Chicago gang member who took the name Abdullah al-Muhajir upon his conversion to Islam, but also to sleeper al-Qaida cells lying in wait for future attacks in the United States.

Hassoun was known in south Florida as a fervent and outspoken supporter of extremist Islamic groups, though members of the southeastern state's Muslim communities insist such actions were political, not radical, CBS said.

Padilla was detained May 8 in Chicago when he returned from a scouting mission in Pakistan, where he was thought to have presented his plans to detonate a hydrogen bomb in the United States to the al-Qaida leadership.

The news channel said that while none of the people under federal surveillance are believed to have had a supporting role in the September 11 attacks, some could have been tapped to assist Zacarias Moussaoui in any nefarious schemes he was plotting.

Meanwhile, al-Qaida fighters in Pakistan and Afghanistan have received new shipments of weapons and other equipment, Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told The Washington Times.

"We have very recently discovered some new stuff that is not old, and it is modern," Rumsfeld said in an interview published Friday. "It is expensive. It is well-done."

Chorus of condemnation over bid to change Pak constitution

AFP, Islamabad

A chorus of condemnation over proposed sweeping changes to Pakistan's constitution gained momentum Friday with critics charging the package made military President Pervez Musharraf "lord and master of all he surveys".

The 28 proposed amendments released for debate this week would allow Musharraf, the armed forces chief who seized power three years ago, to sack the prime minister and cabinet and dissolve the lower house of parliament.

"Under the new dispensation the president will be the lord and master

of all that he surveys," screamed an editorial in The Nation daily.

The package, released ahead of October general elections, "envisages an all-powerful president" with "absolutely no check on his powers," it warned.

Political commentator Najam Sethi, editor of the Daily Times, branded the proposals a "nightmare".

"These proposals are just one man's dream. And his dream is a nightmare for all political and democratic forces," Sethi told AFP, rejecting the government line that they were aimed at stability and sustainability.

Russia strikes rich with G8 plutonium deal

AFP, Moscow

Moscow's backing of the US-led war on terror has paid off big with a 20-billion-dollar western aid package to boost safeguards of Russia's nuclear stockpile in a deal high on symbolism but lacking specifics or guarantees.

Western powers vowed to raise the funds over a 10-year span to ensure Russia's plutonium stocks are kept out of the hands of terrorists who seek to build a "dirty bomb" and to help both Moscow and former Soviet republics eliminate massive stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons.

A jubilant Russian President Vladimir Putin concluded the G8 summit in the Canadian Rockies by declaring that his cooperation with the United States now "will make a decisive contribution to the eradication of global terrorism."

The initial reaction in Russia was

a mixture of elation and relief.

"The eighth wonder of the world - Russia has been accepted into the club of the rich," declared the Vremya Novostei daily while senior defence officials said Western powers have now accepted the responsibility for securing Russian weapons.

"Russia has had big trouble implementing conventions like the one on eliminating chemical weapons," said Andrei Nikolayev, chairman of the State Duma lower house of parliament's defence committee.

"The international community now takes on the obligation of helping Russia out," Nikolayev told AFP.

Yet the deal also highlights the contradiction of Russia taking full part in the Group of Eight club of big powers yet receiving a huge bailout to help protect the world from its own weapons.

Vajpayee asks Hindu leaders to go by court ruling on temple

AFP, Lucknow

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Friday urged Hindu leaders to abide by a court verdict that put on hold a controversial plan to build a temple near the site of a razed mosque.

"This issue is going to be solved only by holding talks and abiding by the court's order. Anyone who is opposed to this is not right at all," he told reporters in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh's capital Lucknow, his home constituency.

The 16th-century Babri Mosque at Ayodhya, also in Uttar Pradesh, was pulled down by a mob of Hindu zealots in December 1992, sparking communal riots in which more than 2,000 people were killed across India.

Hindus claim the mosque was built over the birthplace of their god Ram and hardliners, led by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP,

World Hindu Council) want to erect a temple there.

The communities are locked in a bitter political and legal battle for ownership of the land, which is now under court protection.

The VHP, which has links with Vajpayee's right-wing BJP party, had set March 12 as a deadline for the federal government to clear obstacles for the construction of the temple.

India's supreme court in March banned the activists from any ceremony or temple construction on the site of the razed mosque and urged all parties to negotiate a settlement.

After intense lobbying by Vajpayee and his aides, the hardliners agreed to a scaled-down ceremony on March 15.

But VHP leaders met last weekend in the northern holy town of Haridwar and vowed not to wait for a further court order on the site's future.



Sri Lankan troops stand guard by the vehicle in the northeastern town of Muttur on Thursday after inter-communal clashes spread to a neighbouring district overnight. Sri Lanka imposed a 24-hour curfew at another town in the east of the island to quell Tamil-Muslim mob violence that left five people dead.