

A student of Delhi University holds a placard during a march to the Indian parliament in New Delhi on Wednesday to protest against foetal sex determination. Foetal sex determination by use of ultrasound machine has become a common practice in India, with a high rate of female foetuses being aborted.

Gunman kills 8 at Beirut university

AP, Beirut

A man opened fire Wednesday on a Beirut university campus, killing eight people before he was apprehended by police, police officials said.

Police said the gunman, identified as Ahmed Mansour, began firing in the air and then turned his gun on people in the offices of the teachers' compensation fund in the literature department of Lebanese University.

It was not immediately known whether Mansour was a student, a teacher or an employee or what his motives were.

Lebanon was torn apart by fighting during its 1973-1990 civil war, and violence continued along its border with Israel until Israeli troops withdrew in 2000 from a zone they had been occupying in the south.

Storms hit UK: Hundreds evacuated

AP, London

Hundreds of people were forced from their homes after heavy thunderstorms and torrential rains battered Britain overnight, emergency services said Wednesday.

Scotland, central England, and Yorkshire and Cumbria in northern England were among the areas worst hit by the storms, which occurred following two days of scorching weather.

Temperatures reached 30 degrees Celsius in many parts of Britain on Monday.

Overnight, some 2.5 inches (6.5 centimetres) of rain fell in Lincolnshire, central England, and 2.25 inches in Dundee, northern Scotland.

Torrential rain forced 200 guests out of a hotel in Stirlingshire, central Scotland, amid fears that water pouring from a hillside could destabilise the building.

In Glasgow, dozens of families were rescued by boat after water flooded their homes.

Infiltrations down: Advani

Govt official, policeman killed in Kashmir

PTI, REUTERS, New Delhi/Srinagar

Infiltration from across the border has come down but has not stopped altogether, Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani informed the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday.

Intervening during the Question Hour, Advani said it was too early to say that infiltration has stopped altogether as this could be judged only over a period of time.

Compared to June and July last year, there has been some decline in infiltration during the corresponding period this year, but it is continuing, he said.

Advani said there were enough Pakistani infiltrators already inside the country to carry out violence for another three to four months with the same intensity.

Meanwhile, an Indian government official and a policeman were killed and six people were wounded

in fresh militant attacks in India's strife-torn Kashmir region, police said on Wednesday.

Separatist violence has resumed, after a brief lull in the disputed Himalayan region which is at the heart of a seven-month military face-off between nuclear rivals India and Pakistan.

Police said suspected rebels fired at a car of a revenue department official near Tral town, south of Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir.

"Fayaz Ahmad Bhat, naib tehsildar (revenue official), died on the spot and four people, including two security guards in the car, were injured," a police official told Reuters.

In another incident, a policeman was killed and two people were injured when militants attacked a police post at Khrew on the outskirts of Indian Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar late on Tuesday, police said.

There have been several other grenade attacks in the past week.

India accuses Pakistan of stoking the revolt in the region by training and arming rebels and sending them into Indian Kashmir.

ARF urges Pakistan to help end terrorism

AFP, Bandar Seri Begawan

Asia-Pacific's top security forum including the United States on Wednesday urged Pakistan to take immediate steps to end terrorist activities along its border with India.

The governments of 22 countries and the European Union attending the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) said in a communiqué that while they welcomed Pakistan's commitment to fight terrorism, it should earnestly "take urgent further steps to implement it."

During ARF discussions Wednesday, Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Singh blamed Pakistan, which is not a member of the forum and not represented at the meeting, for the border crisis.

Pakistan denies the charge but openly offers moral and diplomatic support to the secessionist drive in India's only Muslim-majority state.

At least 36,500 people have been killed in Kashmir since the launch in 1989 of an Islamic rebellion.

Powell meets N Korean FM as US engages 'axis of evil'

AFP, Bandar Seri Begawan

US Secretary of State Colin Powell met North Korea's foreign minister Wednesday in first high-level contact of President George W. Bush's administration, which just months ago labelled Pyongyang one-third of an "axis of evil".

Powell had a "15-minute informal chat" with Paek Nam-Sun on the sidelines of an Asia-Pacific security conference in Brunei to discuss a resumption of suspended US-North Korean dialogue, State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

"He noted the recent statements the North Koreans have made, he reaffirmed the president's policy and said that in any future discussions we would want to emphasise a variety of matters including proliferation and mutual commitment made under the Agreed Framework," Boucher said.

"As for follow-on meetings or travel, we would consider the statements the North Koreans have made," he said.

The Agreed Framework is a 1994 deal under which Stalinist North Korea gave up its nuclear weapons program in exchange for the construction of two light nuclear reactors which produce less weapons-grade material than other models.

Washington has expressed deep concerns that Pyongyang may be violating the terms of the pact.

The conversation took place in a delegates' lounge at a conference centre where the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum (ARF) is meeting, a State Department official said.

Ahead of the meeting, Paek had told reporters that he was "always ready" for talks with Powell.

Powell instructed his staff to inform Paek he was in the lounge, the State Department official said.

"The foreign minister walked in, they shook hands and sat down at a coffee table to talk," the official told reporters, on condition of anonymity.



PHOTO: AFP

US Secretary of State Colin Powell (L) greets his South Korean counterpart Choi Sung-hong during a bilateral meeting in Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei on Wednesday.

Israeli cabinet decides to expel relative of militant

UN set to make Jenin report public

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli cabinet on Wednesday decided to expel to the Gaza Strip a relative of a West Bank militant who had attacked Israelis, political sources said after the meeting.

The man to be banished, who was not identified, will have 12 hours to appeal the decision, the sources said.

The online edition of the Israeli daily Haaretz said the man in question was a relative of a militant who

ambushed a bus near the Jewish settlement of Emmanuel on July 17, killing nine people.

The decision emerged as the security cabinet met to consider new ways of tackling suicide bombings a day after a teenage kamikaze blew himself up in Jerusalem, injuring seven Israelis, and as intelligence reports stated 60 more such attacks were in the planning stages.

Shortly after the meeting another bomb ripped through the cafeteria of

Hebrew University in east Jerusalem, killing five people and injuring more than 30, police said.

If the expulsion goes ahead, it will be the first time the controversial measure, which has been criticised as being overhasty, has been used by Israel since the start of the Palestinian uprising, or Intifada, in September 2000.

Meanwhile, a report on events during the Israeli occupation of a Palestinian refugee camp in the West Bank town of Jenin in April will

be made public later this week, diplomatic sources said Tuesday.

After the release of the report which is expected on Thursday, the UN General Assembly will reconvene the special session that voted overwhelmingly to direct the investigation and report on May 7.

"I would prefer the session on Thursday, but it is not possible for practical reasons," said Nasser al-Kidwa, the Palestinian observer to the United Nations, adding that it would likely be held on Friday.

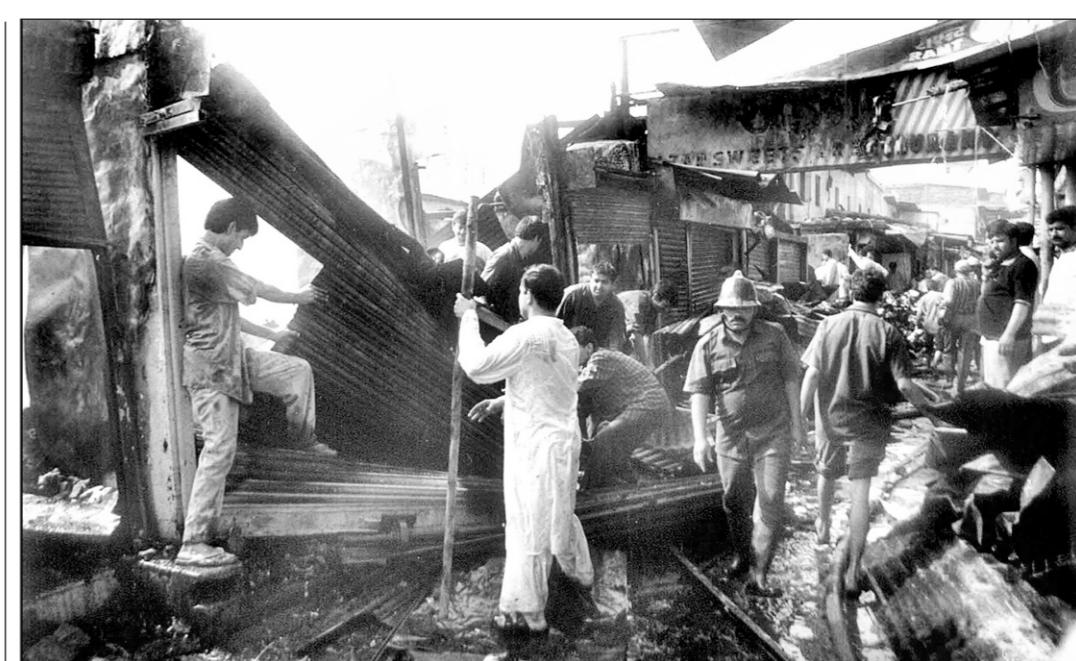


PHOTO: AFP

Citizens and firefighters work out the wreckage of shops in Ahmedabad on Wednesday following overnight riots. More than 1,000 people have died in Gujarat since February 27, most of them Muslims, in riots which erupted after a Muslim mob torched a train killing 58 Hindu pilgrims in the Gujarat town of Godhra.

Musharraf rejects linkage between Islam, terrorism

AFP, Singapore

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf on Wednesday rejected any linkage between Islam and terrorism and called for addressing the root causes of political violence.

"I would like to right away clear one perception that is going around the world that terrorism is somehow synonymous with our religion Islam,"

Musharraf said in a recorded speech opening a global media industry conference here.

"Nothing could be farther from the truth," he told participants at the News World Asia meeting led by the world's top broadcasting networks.

Musharraf, who has played a pivotal role in Washington's anti-terrorist campaign centred on Afghanistan following last September's attacks in the US, said political disputes were ultimately behind terrorism.

"The real way of addressing and uprooting terrorism in its entirety is to get to the root of the tree, and where does this root of this tree lie?" the Pakistani leader said.

"The root of this tree lies in all the political disputes going around the world and these political disputes involve injustices, which cause a sense of deprivation, a sense of powerlessness, a sense of hope-

lessness," he said.

Throw in the poverty experienced by those affected by political disputes and all "this then leads to extreme acts of terrorism," Musharraf said.

"So I personally feel that if we are to address the issue of terrorism, we must address... get to the root of the tree... resolve political disputes around the world," he said, listing the conflicts in Kashmir and Palestine as the "two major disputes" in the world.

According to Musharraf, the terrorists who carried out the atrocities on September 11 last year in the US were not motivated by religion.

Congo, Rwanda sign peace pact, call for world's help

AFP, Pretoria

The leaders of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Rwanda signed a peace pact Tuesday in Pretoria, asking the world to help them end four years of warfare in the DRC estimated to have claimed 2.5 million lives.

South African President Thabo Mbeki pledged that his country would send troops to the DRC to help implement the accord.

A UN spokesman said the United Nations was ready to provide support for the implementation of the agreement. It was also hailed by Belgium, DR Congo's former colonial power, and France.

In a statement in New York, the UN spokesman said UN Secretary General Kofi Annan "welcomes the renewed commitment of the governments of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda to a mutually agreed settlement process, aimed at making concrete progress toward peace in the region."

In Brussels, Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel said the two central African nations should "start to implement their undertaking from now."

A foreign ministry spokesman in Paris praised South Africa's mediation efforts at bringing the two sides together.

"We ask both parties to implement this accord as fast as possible in a constructive spirit," the French spokesman said. "We will follow its implementation closely."



Rescue workers walk away after euthanising a pod of more than 20 pilot whales, which kept running aground on beaches off Wellfleet, on Cape Cod, Massachusetts on Tuesday. Around 40 pilot whales beached themselves again off the coast of Massachusetts, a day after they were pushed back into the sea. Marine experts said the second beaching was a cause of serious concern as it pointed to the whales' continued sense of disorientation and significantly reduced their chances of survival. "It's clear from the tags that these are the same whales," said Teri Frady, spokesperson for the local field office of the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Pak madrassah graduates exempted from polls ban

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan has exempted graduates of religious schools from a controversial new electoral law that bars non-university graduates from running for general elections, in what critics have branded yet another concession to religious groups.

The Election Commission issued a ruling, carried in state-run media late Tuesday, stating that graduates of government-recognised religious seminaries, known as madrassahs, will be considered eligible to contest general elections in October.

"For the purpose of forthcoming general elections the holders of the 'Sanad Shahadatul Alimiya' will

ROK Parliament rejects first female PM

REUTERS, Seoul

South Korean lawmakers vetoed the country's first female prime minister on Wednesday, dealing a blow to President Kim Dae-jung, who had nominated her to boost his beleaguered government's image in an election year.

The National Assembly rejected Chang Sang, a 62-year-old theologian, by 140 votes to 100 after a bitter two-day hearing in which she was accused of perjury over an inflated resume and property dealings, live television coverage showed.

Mamata on course to desert NDA?

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Is Trinamool Congress leader Mamata Banerjee once again preparing to part ways with India's ruling BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA)?

The highest policy-making forum of her party is meeting in Kolkata on Wednesday to decide on its relationship with NDA, just two days after the cabinet of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee rejected her demand for a rollback of the decision to change the territorial jurisdiction of Eastern Railway which has its headquarters in the capital of West Bengal state.

The decision to bifurcate Eastern Railway and create a new East Central Railway zone with its headquarters in Hajipur, a town in West Bengal's neighbouring state of Bihar has seen the entire political class of the two states at loggerheads.

The decision was taken by the United Front government way back in 1996 and Vajpayee cabinet had on Friday night rejected Mamata's demand for revoking it.

The split in Eastern Railway will no doubt curtail employment opportunities in railway West Bengal but create the same in Bihar.

Angered by Vajpayee cabinet's endorsement of the 1996 decision, Mamata yesterday accused the

Prime Minister of "ditching" West Bengal and mounted a veiled attack on Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani.

Political sources here say Friday's cabinet endorsement of bifurcation of Eastern Railway is reflective of Advani's growing clout in Vajpayee government.

Advani, in a recent interview, let it be known that he had disfavoured the idea of giving Mamata back the railway portfolio in the event of her returning to Vajpayee cabinet by taking it away from incumbent Nitish Kumar.

Mamata also rejected a berth in Vajpayee cabinet the offer for which was ironically by Defence Minister George Fernandes, the Prime Minister's trouble-shooter, shortly after the cabinet rejected her demand on Friday night.

Given Mamata's attack on Vajpayee, something she has always refrained from doing in the past, and Advani is likely to make continuance of her association with NDA difficult, say political observers.

It was only in March last year that she had quit NDA demanding the resignation of Fernandes soon after a news portal exposed of corruption in defence deals and tied up with Sonia Gandhi-led Congress party to fight the assembly polls in West Bengal.