

Bush feels 'great' after colon check

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush ceded power to Vice President Dick Cheney for two hours and fifteen minutes Saturday while he was sedated during a routine colon check that found nothing wrong.

"The president continues to be in outstanding health," Bush's doctor, Air Force Colonel Richard Tubb, said after the 20-minute procedure in which "no polyps were found (and) no abnormalities were found."

The only other time that a president has made use of the US Constitution's transfer of power to a vice president was when Ronald Reagan did so on July 13, 1985, as he underwent surgery for colon cancer, officials said.

As he awakened from the anaesthesia following the colonoscopy, Bush quickly called Cheney and First Lady Laura Bush, then greeted her and his brother Marvin in person, played with his dogs and enjoyed a waffle breakfast.

Karzai vows to shun warlordism

AFP, Washington

Afghanistan's newly-elected president, Hamid Karzai, has said he will resign if he fails to eradicate armed factions run by powerful regional warlords who often defy the central government.

"There cannot be separate armed groups. That's very, very certain," Karzai said in an interview due to appear in the Monday edition of Newsweek magazine.

"If I realise I'm failing there I will quit," he added. "I don't want to go into Afghan history with a bad name."

Chandrika accuses cops of political killing

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga on Sunday accused police of killing one of her supporters for political reasons.

An official statement alleged that police killed a supporter of her Sri Lanka Freedom Party, which is in opposition in parliament, and called it part of a government harassment campaign against thousands of opposition activists.

But police at Makola, Sapugaskanda, just outside the capital Colombo, said that the victim was a drug addict who fell to his death from a moving police vehicle while being taken to the station.

He had been arrested with three others Friday night for alleged possession of drugs.

India plans creation of new rank to retain army officers

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian army, reeling under a shortage of officers and an increasing number leaving the service, has proposed a new rank of colonel general to retain personnel, media reports said Sunday.

The Press Trust of India news agency said the army would also soon propose to the government the process of promoting officers be speeded up.

Army chief General Sunderajan Padmanabhan ordered a review after being alarmed by the exodus of personnel from the 1.1 million-strong force and complaints about bleak career prospects, the report said.

Flood alert central China

AFP, Beijing

Emergency services were put on high alert in central China after further rainstorms filled an important lake on the flood-prone Yangtze River to dangerous levels, state media said Sunday.

The level of water in Hunan province's Dongting lake, which acts as a buffer for the Yangtze River, rose to 31.71 meters -- close to the 32-meter flood warning mark, the official Xinhua news agency said.

Emergency services are on alert with the lake's water level still on the rise and predicted to hit the warning mark Monday, Xinhua said.

Experts warned that soil had been saturated, allowing more water to flow directly into the lake. Since June 13, 64 counties and millions of people have been affected by floods in Hunan and a total of 476,000 hectares of farmland inundated, according to Xinhua.



PHOTO: AFP

Villagers walk on a flooded road at Chimbipada village in Thane district 89 km from Mumbai on Saturday. Heavy rains flooded several villages in Maharashtra state claiming over 80 lives.

Israeli tanks shell camp in Gaza

Tel Aviv to dismantle liaison offices

AFP, Gaza City

Israeli troops fired tank shells and machine-gun bullets at the Khan Yunis refugee camp in the southern Gaza Strip late on Saturday, Palestinian security sources and witnesses told AFP.

The tanks fired at least six shells at the camp, damaging a number of houses, but no injuries were reported, they said.

The army said troops had opened machine-gun fire, but not tank fire, on the camp after Palestinian militants there fired mortar shells at a nearby army post in Divanit, which is next to the Jewish settlement of Neve Dkalim.

No injuries or damage was reported from the shelling, an army spokeswoman said.

In the central Gaza Strip, close to the Netzarim crossing, Israeli troops arrested two Palestinians, Palestinian witnesses said.

The army said it was investigating the incident.

Meanwhile, in the north of the Strip, close to the Jewish settlement of Beit Hanun, two Israeli bulldozers began razing an area of Palestinian agricultural land.

The army said the two bulldozers were not connected to any military activity, but belonged to the settlement which was razing the land in order to use it for its own purposes.

Meanwhile, Israel is to dismantle the liaison offices with the Palestinians set up in the West Bank and Gaza Strip under the 1993 autonomy accords, Yediot Aharonot newspaper reported Sunday.

It said the dismantling of the last vestiges of security cooperation between the Jewish state and the Palestinians showed that Israel's aim was to take sole responsibility for security in the Palestinian territories.

At a later state, Israel would also take charge of affairs of civilian administration in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, according to Yediot, Israel's best-selling newspaper.

Koreas on alert after sea clash

30 North Koreans killed or wounded

AFP, Seoul

Cold War tensions mounted between North and South Korea on Sunday after a deadly sea clash which the South's top military officer warned could have become an all-out war.

A South Korean destroyer and other navy boats cruised near the disputed maritime frontier where Saturday's gunbattle left four South Korean sailors dead, one missing and 19 wounded, many seriously, Seoul officials said.

The United States and other nations expressed concern but the South's President Kim Dae-Jung went ahead with a visit to Japan despite the blow to his "Sunshine Policy" of peaceful engagement with the communist North.

Kim put the South Korean army on high alert but went to Sunday's World Cup final in Japan in a bid to show the North it could not disrupt the success of the month-long football tournament co-hosted with Japan.

The two Koreas have angrily blamed each other for the incident, which senior South Korean military officials said the clash could easily have escalated into a peninsula-wide conflict.

A South Korean patrol boat was hit and sank while being towed away after the fierce 20 minute gunbattle. South Korean officials said a North Korean boat that had crossed into the South's territory was seen being towed away in flames.

General Lee Nam-Shin, commander of the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), told a parliamentary committee: "We exercised self-restraint to stop the skirmish from escalating into an all-out war which could devastate the Korean peninsula."

Another JCS officer, Major General Ahn Ki-Seok, said that after the South's patrol boat was hit by a barrage of gunfire other vessels fired hun-

dreds of shells at the North's boat.

"It would not have been difficult for us to sink the vessel but we had to take the World Cup into consideration," he told a press briefing.

"If we had sunk the boat, North Korea would have almost certainly fired a guided missile from the coast and then it would have escalated into an all-out war."

Ahn said South Korean experts had estimated that more than 30 North Koreans were killed in the clash. The North has admitted suffering losses but not given details.

The North has also refused demands for an apology from the South. And political parties and newspapers in Seoul have angrily demanded the government take strong counter measures.

Meanwhile, at least 30 North Korean sailors were killed or wounded in a clash Saturday with a South Korean patrol boat, a top South Korean military official said Sunday.

"Our formation leader said he saw hundreds of rounds of ammunition flying toward a North Korean patrol boat and most of North Korean sailors operating the ship's guns being knocked down," Major General Ahn Ki-Seok of the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) told a press briefing.

"The 70mm and 40mm guns installed on our patrol vessels have high accuracy as they are computer-operated. We therefore believe the North's casualties number more than 30," he said.

North Korea has admitted suffering losses in the battle in the Yellow Sea off the west coast of Korea on Saturday but not given details.

A South Korean patrol boat was badly hit and sunk while being towed away from the scene. South Korea has said four of its sailors were killed, one is missing and 19 were wounded in the clash.

Leading Kashmiri group won't call for polls boycott

AFP, Jammu

In a major shift, a leading pro-Pakistan separatist group in Indian-administered Kashmir said Sunday it would not urge people to boycott upcoming state elections.

"We will not participate in the forthcoming assembly elections but at the same time we will not launch a poll boycott campaign," the chief of Jamaat-e-Islami, Ghulam Mohammad Bhat, said in a newspaper interview published Sunday.

Jamaat, one of the most important constituents of Kashmir's main separatist alliance, the All Party Hurriyat Conference, spearheaded an anti-poll campaign during state and parliamentary elections in 1996

and again in 1999.

Bhat represents the moderate face of Jamaat while the group is represented in Hurriyat by hardline separatist Syed Ali Geelani, who is currently in jail facing accusations he has funded rebels fighting Indian rule in Kashmir.

Bhat in the interview termed an election boycott campaign an "unlawful activity which my organisation doesn't believe in".

"Jamaat does not believe in forcing things," he said, "(just) as there is no compulsion in religion.

Hurriyat has made it clear that it will boycott the polls, due late September or early October, but has so far not issued any formal boycott call.

FBI seeks vigilance ahead of US Independence Day

AFP, Washington

The US Federal Bureau of Investigation has warned local law enforcement agencies to be on the lookout for attacks ahead of the first post-September 11 celebration of Independence Day, government officials said late Saturday.

The warning came in a series of secret communications between FBI headquarters here and police departments across the country that are increasingly concerned that Fourth of July crowds could be an attractive target for foreign militants, one of the officials told AFP.

"We have nothing specifically about the Fourth of July," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "But the Fourth of July is a national celebration with large crowds, and we are reminding people to be vigilant and be aware

of their surroundings."

As it gears up for the celebrations, the FBI has not issued any public security alerts, which have been criticised in the past as excessively frequent, alarmist and lacking specificity and corroboration.

Instead, the official said, it has "reached out to our law enforcement partners on the state and local level in view of the big holiday."

According to The New York Times, which first reported the warning on its Web site earlier Saturday, the secret instructions went out of FBI headquarters last Wednesday.

But the official said FBI executives began discussing preparations for the Fourth of July with the agency's 56 field offices several weeks ago and have continued ever since.

Nepali Speaker advises king not to hold early polls

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's parliamentary speaker has told King Gyanendra that November polls called two years ahead of schedule are not possible because of the kingdom's troubled economy and the Maoist insurgency, press reports said Sunday.

Speaking at a function on Saturday of lawmakers, constitutional experts and lawyers, Speaker Tara Nath Ranabhat said he recently told the king "that the nation is not ready for the mid-term polls in November because of the deteriorating economic conditions the nation is facing and the weak security situation."

"The government has already accepted that it is finding it hard to manage the daily state expenditure and the Maoist terrorism has not yet stopped," said Ranabhat,

quoted by the English-language daily Space Time Today.

Maoist rebels fighting to overthrow the monarchy have been launching attacks with new intensity since breaking a truce in November, devastating the kingdom's already battered economy.

Gyanendra on May 22 disbanded parliament on the advice of Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and called new elections for November 13 as the parliament looked set to defeat an extension of emergency rule imposed to crack down on the Maoists.

The ruling Nepali Congress party has since effectively split into two, with rival factions headed by Deuba and his predecessor Girija Prasad Koirala.

Speaker Ranabhat is known to back the Koirala branch of the Nepali Congress.

Prisoners run riot, take 15 hostage in Lanka

AFP, Colombo

Inmates took hostage at least 15 prison officials and wounded a policeman in a jail mutiny Sunday, authorities said.

Around 500 prisoners at the Tangalle jail, 195 kilometres (122 miles) south of the capital Colombo, broke open the armoury, stole weapons and took wardens and other officials hostage.

A policeman was injured in firing by the attackers, who are believed to be mainly military deserters.

Police and the army launched a joint operation to rescue the hostages, officials in the province said.

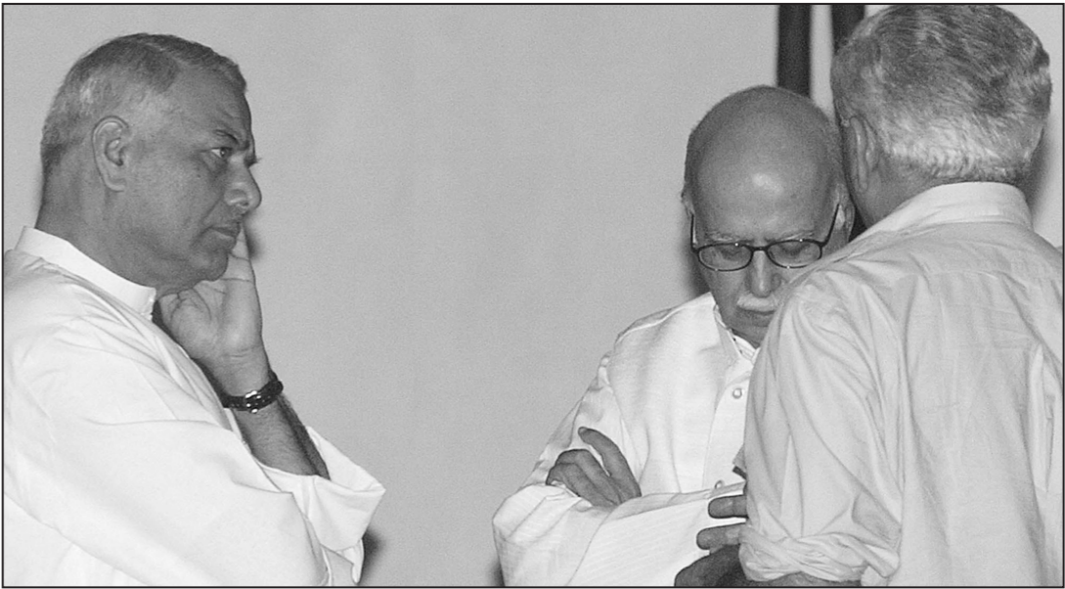


PHOTO: AFP

A June 5 file photo shows Indian Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani (C), Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh (R) and Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha talking while waiting for the arrival of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee at Indira Gandhi International Airport in New Delhi. Advani, who has been elevated to the post of deputy prime minister, is a hardliner who single-handedly changed the face of Indian politics by forcing Hindu nationalism to the very top of the agenda. Sinha and Singh were expected to swap portfolios in the cabinet shake-up with Sinha taking the post of foreign minister and Singh the post of finance minister.

Advani rides high on Hindutva

AFP, New Delhi

The appointment of hawkish Lal Krishna Advani as deputy prime minister is a signal that India's dominant party is shedding its liberal image in favour of hardline Hindu nationalism ahead of general elections in 2004, analysts said here Sunday.

"This is the beginning of a toning up operation within the BJP party," said political analyst Mahesh Rangarajan.

"Advani's appointment clears doubts about the line of succession in the BJP after (prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee) and increases his hold on power."

As India's home minister, Advani was in any case referred to as the number two in Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's

cabinet.

On Saturday evening, a presidential statement announced Advani's appointment as deputy prime minister and added that he would continue to function as home minister.

In Advani's own words, the appointment merely formalised a role he was already performing.

"Earlier too, when the prime minister was unavailable, people and ministers used to approach me and I used to advise them (on how to go about things)," Advani told reporters at his residence on Saturday evening.

"There is essentially no change in my role in the government only an increase in responsibility vis a vis the people and the country."

Advani's elevation is just one of a number of significant changes

currently underway both in the BJP and in Vajpayee's cabinet line-up.

BJP president Jana Krishnamurthy resigned from his post Saturday, paving the way for his expected replacement by Venkaiah Naidu, presently the minister for rural development and described by the Indian media as an "Advani loyalist."

On Monday, Vajpayee is scheduled to announce a cabinet reshuffle, with the media predicting he will shift key BJP members out of their ministerial posts and give them leading party positions in a bid to strengthen the BJP.

Also on the cards is the removal of "non-performing" ministers and shifting of Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha, who is slated to swap portfolios with Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh.

Fear of death keeps Kashmiris away

AFP, Ranbir Singh Pura

Tensions may have eased between India and Pakistan but for the 130,000 displaced people near the Indian side of the disputed Kashmir border, fear of death is still only a gunshot away.

"We will prefer to get killed by snakes in the relief camps than fall prey to the bullets of Pakistani rangers," said captain Hakim Singh, 70, a retired army officer.

"The army says Pakistani shelling has reduced and there is no mortar shelling from across the border," said Hakim, who has fought in two wars between India and Pakistan.

"But the Pakistani guns continue to roar. This has discouraged all of us from going back to our homes."

Indian officials say at least 43 people -- soldiers and civilians -- have died in fighting on the disputed border since the crisis with Pakistan intensified after a May 14 massacre of women and children at an Indian army camp.

Pakistani officials put the toll on their side at more than 100. The standoff that has sent one million Indian and Pakistani troops to the common borders calmed down somewhat in early June after intense international diplomacy.

But few of the 130,000 villagers who fled on the Indian side are taking their chances, fearing the guns may boom once again.

"I know we face malnutrition and other discomforts in the camps but we are not ready to return to our homes unless we are sure that the Pakistani guns have fallen silent for good," said Shanti Devi.

Devi, 60, left her home in Chandouchek for a relief camp here, some 35

km southwest of Kashmir's Hindu-majority winter capital Jammu.

Jatinder Kumar, 18, has just been selected to serve as a soldier in the Indian army but he too is unwilling to shift his family back to their village.

"We do not believe statements made by the Pakistani president because he changes his statements after 24 hours. On these circumstances, how can I shift my ailing father and mother to the border village when I will be away to join the army?" he said.

"If the situation on the border has improved, why don't the soldiers come back?" asked Nirmal Kumari of Begha village.

India and Pakistan regularly accuse each other of starting skirmishes on the disputed Kashmir border. India says firing from the opposite side has greatly reduced over the past fortnight.

"Yes, Pakistani troops continue to fire but not more than 1,000 rounds from small arms in a day," a defence ministry source said.

"Three weeks ago, they were firing more than 20,000 rounds from small arms and over 2,000 mortar shells. Now it is only sporadic small arms fire."

The statistics do not impress the villagers.

"I am not sure we will survive if we were forced to go back," said Pritam Singh. "We do not trust Pakistan at all."

Sagar Chand of Abdullahin village said residents remember incidents at the Pallanwala area in Akhnour sector after India and Pakistan fought the bloody six-week Kargil conflict in 1999.

"When the people started returning to their homes there, the Pakistani troops renewed their firing and shelling," he said.

"We have lost everything -- foodgrains, utensils, clothes. We have lost peace."