

27 Maoist rebels killed in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

At least 27 Maoist guerrillas have been killed in aerial and ground offensives launched by security forces in western Nepal, reports said yesterday.

"At least 27 Maoists are learnt to have been killed when security forces on Sunday made aerial and ground attacks against several Maoist training centres in several areas in the Dang district in the past couple of days," said the Nepali language daily, the Evening Commander.

The newspaper said security forces using helicopters attacked the Bankuti, Subaila, Jogikuti and Khagra regions of Dang, 355 kilometres west of Kathmandu, after receiving a tip off that there were rebel training camps in the area.

Other local reports said the Maoist casualty figure could be much higher.

More than 4,300 people have died since the Maoists launched their "people's war" in 1996 to topple the constitutional monarchy and establish a communist state, according to the official count.

Four al-Qaida suspects killed in Pak shootout

REUTERS, KOHAT, Pakistan

Four suspected al-Qaida militants and two Pakistani security men were killed yesterday in a shootout near the northwestern town of Kohat, police said.

The encounter occurred when security personnel tried to stop a vehicle carrying the suspected al-Qaida operatives at a military checkpoint at Jarma bridge, 6 miles south of Kohat.

Analysts say Pakistan, a key ally in the US war on terror, appears to have stepped up efforts recently to track down al-Qaida and Taliban fugitives who may have fled to the country from neighbouring Afghanistan.

Police official Nisar Tanoli told Reuters the men were coming from the direction of Miranshah, in North Waziristan in Pakistan's lawless tribal areas, where many al-Qaida and Taliban fugitives are believed to be hiding.

A Pakistan army soldier and a policeman were among those killed. Two people were injured and later admitted to hospital in Kohat, police said.

Ten Pakistani soldiers and two suspected al-Qaida members were killed last week in a gun battle in South Waziristan, more than 200 km southwest of Kohat.

World's tallest Buddha to get a facelift

AFP, Beijing

The world's tallest ancient statue of a Buddha is to get a two-month-long facelift in an attempt to fix some of the wear and tear incurred in almost 1,300 years of existence, Chinese state media said Wednesday.

The 71-metre Leshan Buddha, in the southwestern province of Sichuan, is looking somewhat battered due to the effects of wind and rain as well as damage caused by visitors, the Xinhua news agency said.

Some of the curls carved around the statue's head have broken off and the face has lost its colour, it added.

A team of engineers are swarming over the Buddha in a repair job expected to last until the end of August, the agency quoted a local official as saying.

The work is part of a longer maintenance project expected to cost around 250 million yuan (about 30 million dollars) overall.

The Buddha, carved into a cliff face overlooking the point where the Dadu and Min river meet, is 16 metres taller than the bigger of two giant carved Buddhas in Bamian, Afghanistan, both of which were destroyed by the then-ruling Taliban in March 2001.

It was built over a 90-year period beginning in 713, during the Tang Dynasty.

The facelift has come just in time if the Leshan Buddha is to continue attracting people's attention -- it was announced last month that the world's largest billboard is likely to be erected right next to it.

Local officials are to invite bids to construct a 40,000-square-metre advertising space by the Buddha, despite protests from local experts and academics, Xinhua reported in June.

Arafat fires top security chiefs

AP, Jerusalem

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has dismissed two top security chiefs in a move seen as part of an effort to reshape the Palestinian security forces, officials said.

Also, Israel's army on Wednesday lifted its curfew for longer periods than usual in several Palestinian cities and towns it controls. Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon convened his Security Cabinet for talks on other possible measures that could ease the restrictions imposed on Palestinians.

Arafat, who has been under intense pressure to restructure the security forces, sacked Jibril Rajoub, the preventive security chief in the West Bank, and Ghazi Jibali, the police chief in Gaza, Palestinian officials said.

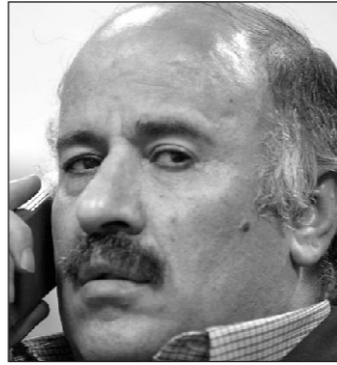
Rajoub told the Associated Press that he had been informed of Arafat's decision, while Jibali insisted the reports were "rumours."

Rajoub is one of the most powerful figures in the West Bank but has had a falling-out with Arafat.

During a previous incursion into the West Bank, Israeli forces destroyed Rajoub's headquarters, and the men inside surrendered, with his approval causing him to lose face among many Palestinians. He was not among those taken into custody, which also contributed to sentiment against him.

Israel and the United States have insisted that the Palestinians must streamline the multiple, overlapping security agencies and use them to prevent terror attacks against Israel.

When Arafat reshuffled his Cabinet last month, he named Gen. Abdel Razak Yihyeh as interior



Jibril Rajoub

minister in charge of the security services, a post Arafat held previously.

Meanwhile, the army lifted the curfew in four of the seven Palestinian areas it currently occupies.

The military has been allowing Palestinians out of their homes for about three hours every third day so they can stock up on food. But Wednesday, the curfew was lifted for 11 hours in Hebron. In three other places, the curfew was removed for periods of five to 10 hours.

Israel says it would like to find ways to ease the restrictions, and the Security Cabinet planned to discuss the possibility of allowing tens of thousands to return to work inside Israel, Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer told Israel radio.

Before the Palestinian uprising began in September 2000, about 150,000 Palestinians from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip entered Israel every day, most of them to work.

Air collision warning system was off during crash

REUTERS, Zurich

An automatic system alerting air traffic controllers if planes are on a collision course was switched off when two aircraft crashed into each other over Germany, Swiss air traffic controllers said on Wednesday.

"The system was not working at the time," Roger Gaberelle, a spokesman for Skyguide, the Swiss air traffic controllers body monitoring the flights over southern Germany late on Monday, when the collision occurred, told Reuters.

He said the system in the control tower at Zurich's international airport, the so-called "short-term conflict alert system" (STCA), had been shut down for routine maintenance.

"That is always being done at night, because that is when there is the least traffic," Gaberelle said.

Normally, the system starts beeping and issues a visual alert if

two planes are on a collision path, urging the controller to take immediate action.

The Swiss controllers in charge of the airspace over the southern tip of Germany by Lake Constance said the Russian airliner that collided with a DHL cargo jet was ordered to lose altitude 50 seconds before the crash but initially ignored the warnings.

The two jets were both diving when they smashed into each other, killing 71 people in one of the worst air accidents in German history.

Swiss air traffic controllers said on Tuesday it was only on their third instruction that the Russian pilot began to lose height to avoid a collision.

But a Skyguide official said on Wednesday it was no longer clear after which warning the pilot had reacted.

"We can't say that for sure, that's part of the investigation now," said

spokesman Christian Weiss. German officials investigating the crash said the Russian pilot reacted after the second warning.

Controllers have some leeway to decide when to order jets to change altitude as long as they maintain a minimum distance between planes -- five nautical miles horizontally and 1,000 feet vertically.

"The controller reacted 50 seconds before the two flight paths crossed," Gaberelle said. "There is a good probability the system would not have warned him before that time either."

Still, officials said they could not rule out a mistake on the part of the air traffic controller on duty at the time.

"You can say he could have reacted earlier. That in itself is not a mistake," said Skyguide's Weiss. "But it could be, and that is part of the investigation, that this still was not according to the rules."

Skyguide said a warning time of only 50 seconds was cutting it close, but that the time frame was well within international standards. "Fifty seconds is not ideal but not impossible," Gaberelle said. "Technically, the timeframe is not too short."

The air traffic controller at Zurich airport who was on duty at the time was still receiving medical treatment, as was his family, and had not yet been interviewed by investigators, Skyguide said.

Officials said the controller was "experienced" but refused to release details of his age or seniority.

The controller was working alone with an assistant as his partner took a break because of the light air traffic. Five planes were in the sector over southern Germany which they were monitoring at the time, including the two doomed planes.



PHOTO: AFP

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad waves to thousands of cheering supporters from a makeshift stage outside the terminal building of the Royal Malaysian Air Force Base in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Mahathir plans complete break from power

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Veteran Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday that he would play no further role in government after stepping down in October next year and pledged full support for his named successor, Deputy Premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

"When I leave I leave completely. I'm not going to hold any position in the party or government," a relaxed and smiling Mahathir told a news conference on his return from a 10-day holiday in Europe, breaking his silence over his shock resignation.

"I've served for 21 years. I think 21 years is quite a long time for a prime minister," he said, adding that he had originally planned on being premier for just "six or seven years". In an apparent reference to a

US launches tracking system to monitor foreign students

AFP, Washington

The US Immigration and Naturalisation Service has implemented an Internet-based tracking system to monitor foreign students and more easily catch those who violate their visas, officials said Tuesday.

The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System, or SEVIS, which started operating Monday, is part of Washington's effort to boost surveillance of visitors to the United States.

Schools hosting foreign students are required to enrol in the system by January 30, forcing them to prove they are able to provide the education those students entered the United States to receive.

"SEVIS promises to revolutionise the way information about foreign students is shared between schools and the INS," INS Commissioner James Ziglar said.

Some 660,000 foreigners held visas to study in the United States last year, and many are able to elude efforts to police their activities.

Earlier this year, US lawmakers mandated better

tracking by 2005 of the 35 million foreign visitors who land in the United States annually, in the wake of deadly terror attacks September 11 by Islamist militants who entered the United States legally.

In addition, 41 of the 47 foreign-born individuals who were charged, pleaded guilty or were convicted of involvement in terrorism on US soil in the last 10 years had been approved for a visa by an American consulate overseas.

Schools will use the system to alert immigration officials of the status of foreign students, including anything that might violate their visas.

One college administrator said she looked forward to using the system, even though at first she found it difficult to master.

"When all the kinks are worked out, it's going to be better, because it will offer us a better way of keeping track of them ... I'm kind of excited about it," said Peggy Hudson, enrolment director of Lewis and Clark Community College in Godfrey, Illinois, which has 10 foreign students.



PHOTO: AFP

A man prays in front of a candle and a bouquet of white roses in the Catholic church of Ueberlingen on Tuesday in commemoration of victims of the plane crash overnight. Emergency services crews have recovered 26 bodies after a mid-air jet collision overnight that killed 71 people, most of them Russian students heading for vacation in Spain, police said.

US balloonist makes history

AFP, St. Louis, Missouri

US adventurer Steve Fossett pulled off the first solo circumnavigation of the globe in a hot air balloon Tuesday, but had to postpone his celebrations for a later date.

The 58-year-old tycoon revelled in his achievement in a phone call with mission control headquarters here, but said celebrations would have to wait until he had a little more company.

"It is hard to describe the feeling that I have now," said Fossett, who was speaking via satellite phone. "I am just so happy right now."

"I cannot do very much celebrating ... I do have a few bottles of Bud Light, but I'm saving that for the landing because there's no one to do it with here."

Fossett crossed the imaginary "finish line," in Western Australia at about 1338 GMT Wednesday.

The seasoned sportsman flew over his starting point -- 117 degrees east longitude -- two weeks and more than 19,000 miles after he took off from a point east of Northam, Western Australia.

The achievement marks the end of a personal marathon that began in 1996 and involved five failed attempts.

"I've put everything into this ... all of my efforts ... all of my skills. I've taken the risk associated with this over this long period of time and finally after six flights I've succeeded and it's a very satisfying experience," he told his backup crew at Washington University in St. Louis.

Before Fossett can lay official claim to the record he has to land the Spirit of Freedom balloon, which could take him another 12 to 14 hours, according to members of his crew here.

"To officially make a record, the pilot has to land first without killing himself first," said Joe Ritchie, mission control director.

"So we have to focus on that ... but we have good weather ahead. There will be light surface winds. It won't be perfect landing conditions, but it will be good enough."

Fossett, who was flying over the Indian Ocean off the coast of southern Australia when he hit his target, is looking for a light wind to carry him inland to a safe landing spot, according to Gerry Everding, a member of Fossett's back-up team.

Once on the ground, Fossett said he planned to hold a press conference in Sydney and prepare an early return to the United States.

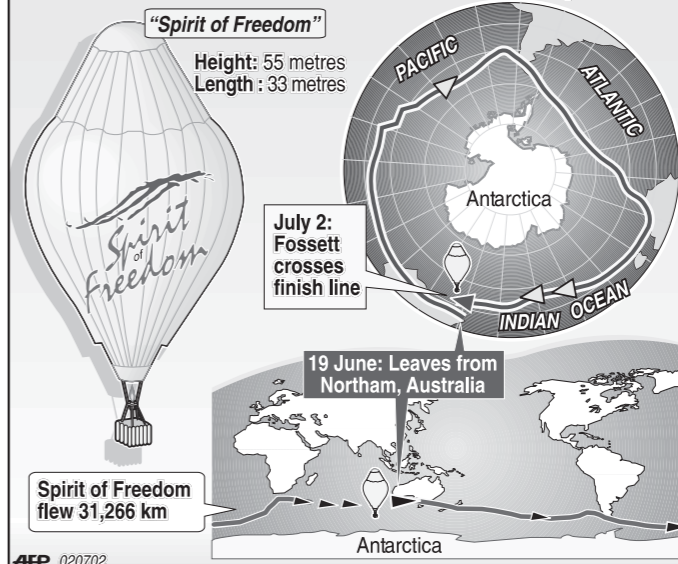
Fossett's voyage was largely trouble free, thanks to meteorologists back at mission control who guided him round three potentially lethal storms.

As with his two previous attempts, Fossett charted a course across the southern hemisphere, in part because it was simpler to get permission to fly over the airspace.

Fossett's sixth bid to circumnavigate the globe solo was almost aborted several days ago when he was unable to maintain his altitude as he flew near South America -- near where he was forced to end last year's attempt.

Fossett floats into record books

First solo round-the-world balloon trip



AFP 020702

US fugitive arrested in Thailand

REUTERS, Bangkok

An American wanted by the Federal Bureau of Investigation in connection with the murder of his wife has been arrested by police at a resort in Thailand, a U.S. embassy official said on Wednesday.

James Vincent Sullivan, whose wife was shot dead in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 16 1987, was found at a condominium on Cha-Am beach late on Tuesday.

"On the request of the FBI, Thai police arrested Sullivan late on Tuesday," a spokesman for the U.S. embassy in Bangkok told Reuters.

The FBI Web site says Sullivan, 61, is wanted on suspicion of hiring a man to shoot his wife on the front porch of her residence, one day before their divorce settlement took effect.

Al-Qaida funded US consulate bombing: Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

The al-Qaida terror network of Osama bin Laden financed the deadly US consulate bombing in Karachi last month, Pakistan's Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider was reported as saying yesterday.

He said authorities had evidence that al-Qaeda agents paid local "sectarian terrorists" to plan the June 14 car-bomb blast outside the consulate which killed 12 Pakistanis.

"Al-Qaeda had financed them," the minister was quoted as saying by the official Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) news agency.

Haider's statement is the first public accusation by Pakistan that al-Qaeda was behind the attack.

It backs up earlier revelations by police intelligence officers that al-

Qaeda was suspected in both the consulate attack and the May 8 suicide car-bomb attack that killed 11 French naval engineers and three Pakistanis.

On Saturday a senior investigator told AFP that police "strongly suspected" al-Qaeda agents had worked with militants of the outlawed Sunni militant group Lashkar-i-Jhangvi to plan both car-bomb attacks.

Police had earlier identified Lashkar-i-Jhangvi as "one of the gangs" behind the consulate attack and linked one of its activists to the murder of US journalist Daniel Pearl.

An intelligence officer said last week that two detained Lashkar-i-Jhangvi "terrorists" had been working with "al-Qaeda terrorists to hit targets in Pakistan."

In the past two weeks police have arrested more than 100 followers of Lashkar-i-Jhangvi, the outlawed Sipah-e-Sahaba network and Kashmiri militants Jaish-e-Mohammad in a bid to crush their suspected support of al-Qaeda fugitives from Afghanistan.

Haider warned that al-Qaeda agents were planning more strikes to avenge Pakistan's support for the US-led anti-terrorism coalition.

However he said the attacks and threats would not deter Islamabad's support of the international drive against terrorism.

Haider said some "foreigners" had fled Afghanistan for Pakistan in the face of the US-led crackdown against terrorism.

President Pervez Musharraf said last month that Pakistan has

arrested more than 300 suspected al-Qaeda men since December.

Haider said Islamabad has asked US forces in Afghanistan to intensify patrols to prevent infiltrations along Pakistan's western border with Afghanistan.

However he ruled out a direct military role for the United States in Pakistan.

He said up to 12 US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents were assisting Pakistani forces in the hunt for al-Qaeda and the Karachi blast investigations.

"We are sharing information with the FBI, but all the operations are being conducted by our own intelligence agencies," Haider said.

Pakistan has not authorised the FBI to launch its own operations in the country, he said.