

Pak cops detain 4 men of banned terror group

AFP, Islamabad

Four leading members of an outlawed terror group accused of bombing a US consulate and several other attacks have been arrested in Pakistan, police said Sunday.

The four hardcore militants were caught in a raid overnight at Jhang, a known base of underground Lashkar-i-Jhangvi (LJ) activists in the country's most populous Punjab province, Jhang police chief Tariq Masood Yasin told AFP by telephone.

"The LJ suspects were nabbed during a raid at their hideout and now they are under interrogation," Yasin said.

Peru disco fire toll rises to 26

REUTERS, Lima

A fire sparked by a barman's pyrotechnic stunt ripped through a disco packed with rich young partygoers in the Peruvian capital on Saturday, killing up to 26 people and a lion and tiger at a fatal "zoo party."

Tulio Nicolini, head of Peru's volunteer firefighting force, said the blaze that devastated the Utopia disco appeared to have been sparked by a barman "doing demonstrations with fire and pyrotechnics" that swiftly got out of hand.

He told Reuters an apparent miscalculation by the barman had set the ceiling on fire. That sparked a blaze that choked some 1,000 partygoers with thick black smoke and toxic fumes.

8 killed as train derails in Sicily

AFP, Rome

Eight people were killed and at least 47 injured when a Venice-bound train veered off the rails in Sicily, a police spokesman said Sunday.

Officials said of the 47 people hurt, at least 12 were hospitalised in a serious condition.

Italian authorities immediately ordered an inquiry into the cause of Italy's worst train disaster since 1979 which occurred just a few kilometres from the place where 12 people lost their lives in the 1979 collision.

The train had left the Sicilian capital Palermo and was approaching the northeastern town of Messina just before 7:00 pm (1700 GMT) Saturday when it jumped the tracks.

Landmine kills 13 Afghan bus passengers

REUTERS, Kabul

A land mine killed 13 bus passengers and six others were injured in the central Afghan province of Bamian, a U.N. spokesman said Sunday.

The incident occurred Saturday morning close to Bandi Amir lake which lies to the west of Bamian town. The area was the scene of heavy clashes during the five-year rule of the Taliban regime which was ousted last year, David Sing told reporters.

"According to reports from the field 13 passengers were killed and six wounded," Sing said.

Huge hailstorms kill 22 in China

AFP, Beijing

At least 22 people were killed when a ferocious storm pummeled the central Chinese city of Zhengzhou with egg-sized hail stones and fierce winds, felling trees and smashing cars, state press said Sunday.

The 20-minute hailstorm struck the capital of Henan province on Friday evening as force eight winds increased the velocity of the falling hail stones, causing havoc throughout the city, the Beijing Youth Daily reported.

Scores of people suffering head injuries flooded local hospitals seeking treatment, with at least seven deaths directly attributed to being struck by hail, it said.

Thousands flock to see Suu Kyi

AFP, Yangon

Thousands of people flocked to catch a glimpse of Myanmar's opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi as she continued a political trip to southeastern Mon state amid tight security Sunday.

The charismatic head of the National League for Democracy (NLD) reopened two of her party offices and visited a government project, a senior party official said.



PHOTO: AFP

Palestinian shoppers head back home by foot to their nearby villages past a mound of earth erected by the Israeli army to prevent cars from passing through Saturday at an entrance to the West Bank town of Bethlehem. Many took advantage of the lifting of the curfew to buy food and other basic commodities. Some 800,000 Palestinians in seven of the eight major cities in the self-rule West Bank have lived under curfew since Israeli forces launched Operation Determined Path on June 19 following two suicide bombings in Israel.

Peres pleased with talks

Bomb attack on Israeli train

AFP, Jerusalem

Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said Sunday he was satisfied with his meeting the night before with a delegation of Palestinian officials, and said more would be held later in the week.

"The meeting touched on real problems, we managed to partly avoid polemics, and there will be other meetings of this type held in the week," Peres told public radio.

The Palestinian delegation of five ministers was led by chief negotiator Saeb Erakat.

"We told them that the Israeli army has no intention of remaining in the sectors (of the West Bank) where the Palestinians take the situation in hand and stop the terror-

ism," he said.

Israeli forces took control of most of the West Bank, including seven of its eight major towns and cities, on June 19 as part of Operation Determined Path, aimed at rooting out militant groups behind suicide bombings and gun attacks on Israelis.

Israel has since kept hundreds of thousands of Palestinians under curfew and restricted movement, causing aid groups to warn of a looming humanitarian crisis in the territory.

"We should fight terrorism mercilessly while being careful not to harm Palestinians who are not linked to terrorism," he said.

Erakat told AFP the talks were "serious and practical," but added

that nothing had been agreed, except to hold another session between the ministers this week.

"I'm not raising any expectations about the result.

Meanwhile, the driver of an Israeli passenger train was wounded Sunday in a bomb attack near Tel Aviv, as Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said he was satisfied with a meeting that renewed contact with the Palestinians, interrupted after two anti-Israeli attacks last week.

The driver of the train travelling between the towns of Yavneh and Rehovot, just south of Tel Aviv, was slightly injured when the remote-controlled device was detonated by the side of the track.

'Hundreds of Afghan civilians killed in US war on terror'

AFP, Washington

The US air campaign to dislodge al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan has claimed hundreds of civilian lives through a tragic pattern of mistakes, the New York Times reported Sunday.

The report was based on reviews conducted over a six-month period of 11 locations where airstrikes killed as many as 400 civilians.

The reviews found that even when genuine military targets were identified, civilians were sometimes killed as a result of the Pentagon's use of overwhelming force.

Pentagon officials say their strategy has shifted in recent months to increased use of ground forces to hunt down remaining fighters for the Taliban and al-Qaeda, but that continuing airstrikes still often have tragic consequences, according to the Times.

The report follows a controversial US attack this month on villages in Oruzgan Province, where airstrikes killed at least 54 civilians.

American commanders however rejected the notion that they may be relying too heavily on air power.

"We painstakingly assess the potential for injuring civilians or damaging civilian facilities, and positively identify targets before striking," said Colonel Ray Shepherd, spokesman for the US Central Command in Tampa, Florida.

Afghan officials are beginning to demand a greater say in the choice of US

targets, the Times reported.

"We have to be given a larger role," Abdullah Abdullah, the Afghan foreign minister, said in an interview with the newspaper.

"If things do not improve, well, I will certainly pray for the Americans and wish them success, but I will no longer be able to take part in this."

Meanwhile, field workers with Global Exchange, an American organisation that has sent survey teams into Afghan villages, told the Times they have compiled a list of 812 Afghan civilians who were killed by American airstrikes.

The Global Exchange workers said they expect that number to grow as their survey teams reach more remote villages.

Another report says, three rockets were fired at a US base in eastern Afghanistan, but there were no casualties, the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) reported Sunday.

The attack targeted the base three kilometres (two miles) south of Gardez in Paktia province overnight, the Pakistan-based private news agency said.

The rockets fell near the US base, the AIP quoted a witness as saying.

"The first attack was on late Saturday evening, the second was at 2.00 a.m. (2100 GMT Saturday) and the third was early this morning."

The US and coalition bases had come under several rocket attacks in the troubled Paktia and Khost provinces since they launched their operations in eastern Afghanistan to hunt down remnants of Taliban and al-Qaeda fugitives.

Kashmir peace missions pointless unless Pakistan rethinks: Analysts

AFP, New Delhi

Peace missions to ease tensions over Kashmir, including one just completed by British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw, are pointless unless Pakistan halts support of Muslim militancy in the region, Indian analysts warned Sunday.

Foreign ministry officials also said that during Straw's visit, which ended late Saturday, India had "powerfully articulated" its stand that Pakistan's alleged backing to Kashmir separatists was an obstacle to renewed dialogue with its estranged neighbour.

Straw's latest mission to draw

India and Pakistan to talks began in New Delhi Friday, ending a day later in Islamabad with little more progress than his two recent previous fruitless missions to South Asia.

"The government should tell these so-called interlocutors that it is useless to try and re-start talks as long as Pakistan does not change its attitude towards India," said Muchkund Dubey, a former foreign secretary.

"Our position is that there cannot be talks until there is clear indication that Pakistan has stopped sending militants across the border, closed rebel training camps permanently and has dismantled the infrastruc-

ture of terror," he said.

He also said the West must weigh these pre-conditions before dispatching envoys to try to end hostilities between the two nuclear rivals over Kashmir, the subject of two of the three waves between India and Pakistan since independence in 1947.

"This is no occasion to make gestures because Pakistan is waging a war against us and India cannot be forced to negotiate under threat of violence. This is what they must recognise," former chief diplomat Dubey argued.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell is set to visit the region later

this week to attempt to achieve where Straw seems to have failed.

Neither Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee nor Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf gave Straw an audience.

New Delhi accuses Pakistan of arming, training and sending rebels into Indian Kashmir. Islamabad denies the charge but backs what it calls the Kashmiris' justified struggle for self-determination in the Himalayan territory.

More than 36,500 people have died in the insurgency in Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state, since the launch of the rebellion in 1989.

Lankan president, PM at odds over bomb in bag claims

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president and prime minister are involved in a standoff over a cabinet minister who allegedly accused the head of state of carrying bombs in her handbag, a government official said Sunday.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga has written a letter to Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe saying she can no longer have Commerce and Consumer Affairs Minister Ravi Karunanayake in her cabinet, presidential spokesman Janadasa Peiris said.

Kumaratunga alleged that Karunanayake had on Thursday claimed she had carried a bomb in her handbag to the weekly cabinet meeting to kill the prime minister.

"The nature of this accusation is so serious and his behaviour so completely unacceptable that I cannot have him as a member of my cabinet anymore," Kumaratunga told Wickremesinghe in her letter.

However, government sources said Karunanayake in fact had alleged the president had carried a handbag fitted with microphones and a video camera capable of filming in low light conditions.

Wickremesinghe, just before leaving the country Saturday on an official visit to the United States, had replied to Kumaratunga in a letter in which he denied the commerce minister had made the bomb allegations.

He said further that the appointment and dismissal of cabinet ministers can only be done on Wickremesinghe's recommendations.

"I can say that the president received the prime minister's reply, but we don't know what her response will be," presidential spokesman Peiris said.

Malaria draws back Indian militants from Bhutan

AFP, Guwahati

Indian separatist rebels holed up in Bhutan were returning to their homeland after suffering a bout of malaria in their hideouts inside the adjoining Himalayan kingdom, officials said Sunday.

Indian officials in Guwahati, capital of northeastern Assam state which adjoins Bhutan, said the rebels were fleeing the kingdom in scores due to the mosquito-borne disease.

"We have come across reports that a number of militants from Assam, having bases in Bhutan, were infected by malaria and forced to flee their bases for medication," Assam police chief Harekrishna Deka told AFP.

Rebel groups such as the United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), both fighting for homelands in Assam, allegedly operate from their bases in southern

Bhutan.

Officials say some 3,500 ULFA and NDFB guerrillas are sheltered in such hideouts.

A state intelligence official said that in the past month an unspecified number of malaria-stricken ULFA and NDFB separatists entered the Indian state of West Bengal for medical treatment.

"Malaria has assumed epidemic proportions in some of the camps like Daifam and Tintala in Bhutan," said an Indian army commander engaged in anti-insurgency operations on the Assam-Bhutan border.

He said monsoon rains have fuelled a rise in the spread of malaria in these guerrilla hideouts.

The camps are in thick forests and the militants are exposed to mosquito bites, he added.

Indian troops have been put on alert along the border to prevent malaria-hit militants from crossing over to Assam.

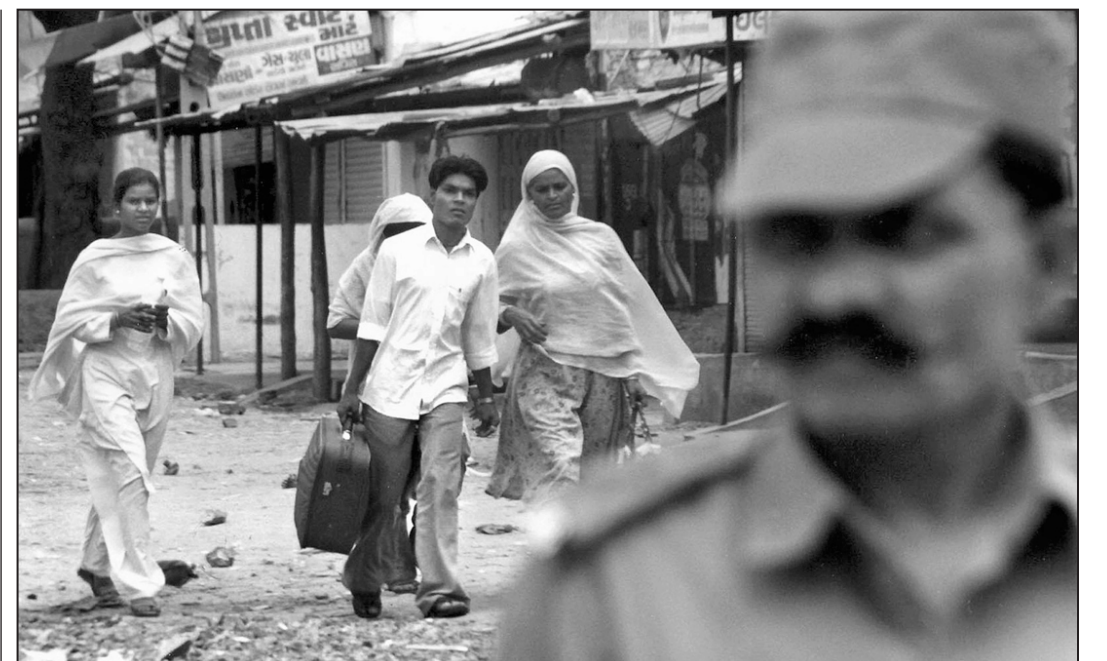


PHOTO: AFP

An Indian policeman (R) stands guard on a street in Viramgam, some 70 km northwest of Gujarat's commercial capital Ahmedabad on Saturday as civilians (L) leave the city for a safer place following recent violence. Two people were killed and eight injured on Friday when police opened fire to disperse a rioting mob of Hindus and Muslims in the western Indian state.



PHOTO: AFP

Sets of twins dance to broadcast music during the Twins Parade at the 20th annual Just for Laughs comedy festival on Saturday in Montreal, Canada. About 2,000 twins and triplets participated in the annual parade.

Rains wash away drought fears in N India

AFP, New Delhi

India's food-growing northern states were in high spirits Sunday as monsoon rains finally swept parched farms and scorched crops, diminishing fears of an economy-crippling drought this year.

The rains, delayed by 20 days, also pushed away soaring power shortages and put the brakes on agonising summer temperatures that plagued tens of millions of people of India's eight crucial northern states, officials said.

In the Indian capital, the rains late Saturday evening saw many of the city's 14 million people leaving offices and homes to dance in knee-deep water on the streets.

"We are happy our forecast this time has come true," said a spokesman from the meteorological department.

The besieged agency had failed in its previous three predictions since June 29 -- the official day for the onset of monsoon across northern India.

"Or else we would have faced a violent riot," he said, referring to police reports of rising crime this month because of heat-induced temper in the city.

There has been at least three separate incidents of street riots in the capital last week over prolonged power brownouts, which has not spared even Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee or bungalows of his top aides.

Heavy rains on Sunday rewarded the food-bowl states of Punjab and Haryana, diminishing fears that the delayed monsoon could burn their crops -- accounting for almost 18 percent of the country's strategic summer yield -- and delay winter sowing of economy-nourishing paddy.

Reports of rains in Himachal Pradesh also took away enormous worries that parched conditions this year would shrivel a third of the northern summer resort state's annual apple crop worth six billion rupees (125 million dollars).

"A delay of just another two days would have put our produce out of the domestic and export markets," a Himachal Pradesh Apple Growers' Association official said as rain pattered on thousands of acres (hectares) of apple orchards.

Nepal asks Maoists to lay down arms first for talks

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal has rejected an offer from Maoist rebels for peace talks, saying they first had to give up their arms and "apologise for their mistakes", local media reported Sunday.

In the first reaction since rebel leader Prachanda, or "The Fierce", called for the resumption of dialogue with the government, Home and Local Development Minister Khum Bahadur Khadka said the ball was in the Maoists' court.

"The government will not hold talks with the Maoists until they surrender their arms and publicly apologise for their past mistakes," Khadka told activists of his party, the Nepali Congress, at Garuda in southwestern Rautahat district on Saturday, newspapers and radio reported.

Khadka warned the Maoists that they would be "finished off" before mid-

term legislative elections are held on November 13.

Prachanda in a rare statement on Friday said the resumption of peace talks could go some way towards persuading the rebels to participate in the poll.

"Even today, our party is prepared to hold talks with the government to find ways to solve the country's problems," Prachanda said in the statement, sent to newspapers.

He also called for the establishment of an interim government, but did not repeat his usual demand for the scrapping of the constitutional monarchy and the establishment of a constituent assembly.

In his response, Khadka said at the Garuda rally that if the Maoists refused to lay down their arms or refused to participate in the November vote, the security forces would continue to pursue them.

US behind the delay

AFP, London

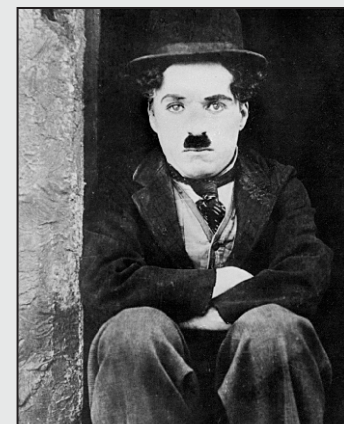
Charlie Chaplin was refused a knighthood in 1956 by the British government because it feared criticism from the United States over the comic's communist sympathies, newspapers reported Sunday.

The British actor, considered one of the great masters of film comedy, had to wait until 1975, when he was 86, before he eventually received the title.

Quoting newly declassified files released by the Public Records Office, the Sunday Telegraph said Britain's Conservative government wanted to honour Chaplin in October 1956.

But the knighthood was blocked on advice from British officials in Washington who feared that it would inflame American public opinion.

Chaplin was a known supporter



of left-wing causes and had been named by the House of Representatives Un-American Affairs Committee's investigation into Communists in 1952.