



A man carries a child in a pot as he walks in a flooded area in Samastipur some 45 km from Bihar state capital city Patna on Friday. Floods in the eastern Indian state of Bihar claimed the lives of 46 people and are affecting four million, officials and media reports said.

46 drown in flood-hit Bihar

Floods in the eastern Indian state of Bihar claimed the lives of 46 people and are affecting four million, officials and media reports said Friday. Four of the dead Thursday drowned while trying to loot relief supplies airdropped by an army helicopter, an official said. They included two girls, a minor and a 14-year-old, the official said. Local media said a boat carrying 35 people had capsized in the strong currents of Koshi river in Supaul district, 400 kilometres (248 miles) northeast of Bihar's capital Patna. At least 30 people were feared dead as only five were able to swim to safety. In another accident, seven people were reported to have been

swept away by the surging waters near Kamrauli village, 250 kilometres (154 miles) from Patna, while five people drowned in Sitamarhi district, newspapers quoting witnesses said. Authorities have blamed the overloading of boats as a cause for the large number of casualties in Bihar, one of India's most impoverished states. "A large number of private and commercial boats plying in thousands all over the flood affected parts are illegal, without valid government licenses," a local official said. "They are usually makeshift boats and often, in the urge to make a fast buck, the boatmen load them beyond capacity causing them to turn turtle," he said.

Bihar's relief and rehabilitation minister, Ramvihar Rai, said more than four million people in 14 districts have been affected by the floods. "Standing crops in 12,200 hectares have been affected and a total of 728 houses have collapsed in floods," he said. Twenty other people died earlier this week from flooding in Bihar, including 17 who drowned Wednesday when their boat capsized. More than 300 people have died around South Asia this week in flooding and landslides triggered by heavy monsoon rains, most of them in Nepal. Other parts of India have been experiencing their worst drought in a decade.

Gibraltar calls referendum on sovereignty

Gibraltar Thursday threw down the gauntlet to Britain by calling an October referendum on sovereignty of the British colony, saying the future of the peninsula was "not negotiable" without consulting the people. But Britain immediately rejected the plan by Gibraltar Chief Minister Peter Caruana, calling it a "short circuit" for democracy. Spain, which is discussing shared sovereignty with London over the tiny territory off its southern coast, said any referendum would have to be approved by Britain. Caruana said the referendum was necessary so that "people can make their views absolutely clear" on the peninsula, which was ceded to Britain in perpetuity in 1713.

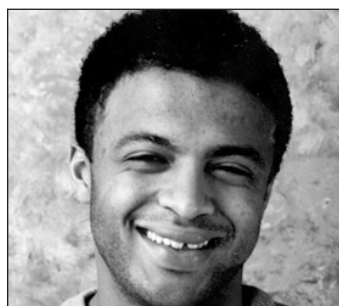
Musharraf may rethink constitutional changes

Pakistan's military ruler President Pervez Musharraf is reconsidering a proposed constitutional change that would allow him to appoint a prime minister after October elections, press reports said Friday. During a national radio debate Musharraf said his government felt "there is some opposition" to the proposal, the Dawn daily reported. "Therefore, we are considering withdrawing it." Government officials have said that there was opposition to the proposal from within Musharraf's own cabinet. In the Thursday night debate, Musharraf also discussed ditching a proposal to reduce parliamentary terms from five years to four and the duration of the senate from six to four years. Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in October 1999 and declared himself president last year, has drawn storms of protest over a raft of proposed changes to Pakistan's 1973 constitution. During the radio discussion he acknowledged there was some opposition but hinted that he would enact some before elections on October 10, citing

the backing of the "silent majority." It is the second time that Musharraf has agreed to modify some of his proposals, unveiled in two instalments for "public debate" June 26 and July 12. Last week he said he would review plans to give the president power to sack an elected prime minister, parliament and senate, instead handing authority to a powerful National Security Council. The proposed Council has provoked the most fervent criticism as it would entrench the military's role in politics. Five of the 11 seats would be held by military chiefs, with Musharraf holding two in his dual roles of president and army chief. Musharraf justified one of his most contentious proposals to ban candidates without university degrees from running for elections and said the move was a "popular" one. He said a survey showed that about 41 percent of previous assemblies would be disqualified under the educational bar and lead to a new leadership that he felt would be good for the people.

Moussaoui pleads not guilty

French national Zacarias Moussaoui, the only man charged in the September 11 attacks, finally pleaded not guilty in a chaotic court appearance here after first saying he wanted to admit his guilt. Moussaoui, the alleged 20th hijacker, began by telling US District Court Judge Leonie Brinkema on Thursday he would plead guilty to four of the six charges against him, all four of which carry the death penalty. But after a one-hour recess the volatile 34-year-old changed his mind, following a warning from Brinkema that a guilty plea would require him to accept responsibility for the attacks and reveal his relationship to the al-Qaeda network accused of carrying them out. "In Islam, suicide is forbidden. I cannot endorse in a rational manner the conditions you are putting on my guilty plea because that will mean death to me," he said before a packed federal courtroom. "Under my obligation to my creator, Allah, to save and defend my life, I withdraw my guilty plea," he told the court, which sits far from the Pentagon, one of the US build-



Moussaoui is charged with conspiracy to commit acts of terror that transcend international borders; conspiracy to commit aircraft piracy; conspiracy to destroy aircraft; conspiracy to use weapons of mass destruction; conspiracy to murder US employees; and conspiracy to destroy property.

Israeli troops storm Gaza as raid fallout continues

Israeli tanks stormed a town outside Gaza City Friday, blowing up alleged rocket factories and destroying a police post in the first operation here since a controversial air strike, sources on both sides said. Israel also renewed its offer to resume a dialogue with the Palestinians, who remained sceptical, while militants vowed to avenge the aerial bombing of a teeming Gaza City neighborhood that killed 15 people, including nine

children. Security was tight across the country Friday, as Israelis braced for the expected retaliation. Curfews in most of the occupied major West Bank towns were in force throughout the day after being sporadically eased previously. In Qalqilya, in the northern West Bank, a Palestinian man was shot and killed by Israeli troops who were carrying out house-to-house searches in his neighbourhood, Palestinian media sources said. In the Gaza Strip seven Israeli tanks and three bulldozers stormed

al-Zeitun, south of Gaza City, moving nearly one kilometre (half a mile) into Palestinian-controlled territory, security sources and witnesses said. Four Palestinians were injured, two seriously, as a fierce gunbattle erupted during the incursion, medical sources said, adding a woman was among the casualties. The Israeli army confirmed the raid in a statement, saying its troops "destroyed 22 machines used for making Qassam rockets and blew up the three buildings where they were produced."

Powell sees terror threat still real in Kashmir

US Secretary of State Colin Powell admitted on Thursday that the potential for terrorist violence in Kashmir was still high, despite a reduction in infiltrations by extremists into the Indian sector of the disputed region. Powell spoke a day before embarking on an Asian tour which begins with a visit to India and Pakistan, his second visit to the tension-plagued region this year. "There has been some reduction in infiltrations across the Line of Control, but it is still unfortunately the case that there is violence, there is terrorist violence that takes place," Powell told reporters. "In my conversations with the Indians and the Pakistanis, I will see

if there are any other actions that can be taken that will reduce the level of violence or the potential for violence," Powell said after meeting Afghan Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah. The issue of infiltrations in Kashmir is sure to be a contentious topic during the South Asian leg of Powell's trip this weekend which will see him meet senior Indian leaders and Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf. In recent days, India has stepped up the heat on the issue ahead of Powell's arrival, branding Pakistan as a state sponsor of terrorism. Washington said several weeks ago that there has been a sharp decrease in infiltrations from Pakistan into Indian Kashmir, in line with Musharraf's pledge to crack

down on the movement of extremists. US officials have privately expressed concerns that another terror strike like the one in Kashmir earlier this month, which killed 28 Hindus, could send India-Pakistan tensions back to the boiling point. Pakistan, under firm pressure, emerged as a key ally of the United States in its campaign against Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, following the September 11 attacks, and despite India's dismay, Washington still regards Musharraf as a useful partner. Powell is the latest in a series of top Western politicians to visit South Asia in recent weeks, the last was British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw.

Indian army ready for 'sacrifice' in Kashmir

One of India's top army officers in Kashmir said Friday the military was "ready to repeat the sacrifice" it made when it evicted Pakistan-backed forces in the Himalayan region three years ago. July 26 is observed by the Indian army as "victory day," marking the end of conflict in the Kargil region in 1999. Some 1,000 fighters were killed on both sides in the two-month war in which Indian forces combated Pakistan-backed Islamic guerrillas who had entered their zone of Kashmir. "Today after three years we are again ready to repeat that sacrifice, those acts of bravery, should the nation and should the situation call for it," said Lieutenant General V.G. Patankar, commander of the Indian

army in Kashmir's Muslim-majority valley. "Soldiers are ready to meet any eventuality and are on alert to prevent any misadventure," Patankar said. Nuclear-armed India and Pakistan are again feared to be on the brink of war, massing one million troops to their common borders after a December 13 attack on the Indian parliament allegedly carried out by Pakistan-based Islamic rebels. Tensions were further heightened by May 14 and July 13 massacres in Kashmir's Hindu-majority southern region of Jammu that left a total of 63 people dead. US Secretary of State Colin Powell is due in the region Saturday in his second bid this year to cool tensions on the subcontinent.



Relatives and friends of Kargil martyrs hold candles to mark the third anniversary of the victory at India Gate in New Delhi on Thursday. The last major military conflict between India and Pakistan was in 1999 on the heights of the Kargil mountains where more than 1,000 combatants on both sides died.

Superstition reigns for rain

With farmlands parched and dying, 80-year-old Maha Devi and many other women in northern India are resorting to dancing naked in their fields in a desperate ritual to call on the gods for rain and to keep their husbands happy. Each night Devi leads a group of 40 women from Sitalganj, a drought-ravaged village in Uttar Pradesh state, to their fields to perform their ancient ritual while their husbands remain at home. The women sing and dance. When dawn breaks, they put on their clothes and plough the dusty earth. But so far their prayers have gone unanswered and many areas of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state and known as the nation's "food bowl", are facing their worst drought in 12 years.

"There will be no crops this year and all of us will starve," says a despondent Devi, now fully clothed and back at her village, looking up at the unrelenting sky. "It is the third day of our performing the plough ritual and yet the rains have been missing." Despite Devi's pessimism, in general superstitious Indians still seem confident their pleas to the rain gods will eventually be answered, while they keep trying a bizarre range of ceremonies. "It is up to us how we proceed in pleasing Lord Indra (the Hindu god of rains) so that he may bestow upon us his blessings in the form of showers," another resident of Sitalganj, 70 kilometres (43 miles) from Lucknow, the state capital, said. In Aligarh district, 370 kilometres from Lucknow, women have been performing a similar ritual, taking off their clothes and ploughing the fields naked.

Al-Qaida had US training camp

Islamist extremists linked to al-Qaeda maintained a military training camp in the southern US state of Alabama, ABC news reported Thursday, citing European police sources. A Scotland Yard investigation following the arrest in London of an alleged al-Qaeda supporter led to the camp in Marion, Alabama, ABC reported. The camp, known as "Ground Zero, USA," promised state of the

art, world-class training in automatic weapons, urban warfare, special tactics and bone-breaking techniques, supposedly to fight terror attacks. But Marion police Chief Tony Buford told ABC News the use of police cars and school buses as targets concerned him. "It was rumoured people were coming to train who wanted to do bodily harm to people in this country," Buford told the television network. "The camp, known as 'Ground Zero, USA,' promised state of the

Advani in dock over Gujarat

Deputy Prime Minister L.K. Advani on Thursday denied he praised Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi as the best chief minister in 50 years during his speech in the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday. His clarification came as the Opposition declared its intention to put him in the dock again for "failing" to answer key questions on the riots and its aftermath. Advani explained that during the debate on the Gujarat issue he had only said that "in the last 50 years, there have been numerous riots at

numerous places, but I am not aware of any other chief minister having dealt with them so sternly." "When I had made this assertion, I had in mind these telling statistics of government action taken, namely persons killed in police firing: 200; number of persons arrested under preventive provision: 42,508 and number of persons arrested on criminal charges: 20,436," he said. Advani's "clarification" was issued as the Opposition said it was "unbecoming" of him to have given such a clean chit to Modi when his conduct had come under severe reprimand.

Raising the issue immediately after the Question Hour, Congress chief whip P.R. Dasmunshi said, "We will not keep quiet. Advani must reply to 14 questions of the Opposition either today or tomorrow or on Monday." The questions relate to the responsibility of the Modi government as a caretaker, namely tabling of the report of the Forensic Science Laboratory on the burning of the train at Godhra, status of relief camps and the Centre's response to the Human Rights Commission's indictment of the Modi government.

Pope thrills pilgrims at festival

Pope John Paul II urged young pilgrims to be beacons for peace as he greeted hundreds of thousands of cheering followers at a Catholic youth festival here Thursday. Smiling and tapping his lectern, his spirits visibly uplifted by his reception, the frail pontiff urged his audience to be an inspiration to a world blighted by violence, in his first appearance at World Youth Day. "Last year we saw with dramatic clarity the tragic face of human malice. We saw what happens when hatred, sin and death take command," he said in a pointed reference to last year's September 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington. "But today Jesus' voice resounds in the midst of our gathering. His is a voice of life, of hope, of forgiveness; a voice of justice and of peace. Let us listen to this voice!" The welcoming ceremony, a two-hour pageant of singing, dancing and speech-giving, attracted a crowd of up to 400,000 to the grounds of a downtown convention centre, according to official estimates -- almost double the number of registered pilgrims. Their ranks were likely swollen by

reflection and renewal, were overwhelmed by finally getting up close and personal with their spiritual icon.



The World Youth Day Cross is raised in front of Pope John Paul II at the Papal welcoming ceremony in Toronto on Thursday. The Pope is in Toronto for the 17th World Youth Day.

Maoists turn to talks in Nepal

High-level officials from Nepal's government and the Maoist rebel movement have held preliminary talks to prepare for more thorough negotiations, a newspaper reported Friday. The Nepali-language daily Space Time Dai said "senior ministers" from the government and high-ranking Maoists had begun talks on "preliminary arrangements" for a more structured dialogue. The newspaper did not give further details. There was no immediate confirmation of the talks by the government. The Maoists, who are fighting to topple the constitutional monarchy, held three rounds of negotiations with the government after Sher Bahadur Deuba became prime minister in July 2001. The talks, however, became deadlocked over rebel demands that a "constituent assembly" be convened to redraft the constitution. The Maoists broke a four-month truce in November with a flurry of attacks, prompting King Gyanendra to deploy the army against the rebels for the first time.

Deuba has since vowed to crush the rebels but under increasing international pressure has recently held olive branches. Speaking at a rally Thursday in Putlaw, 390 kilometres (250 miles) west of the capital Kathmandu, Deuba said he was ready to accept the Maoists in parliament if they ended their attacks and participated in elections due in November. "If the Maoists hand over their arms and take part in the forthcoming elections, the government will welcome them," said Deuba, quoted by state radio. Deuba has since vowed to crush the rebels but under increasing international pressure has recently held olive branches. Speaking at a rally Thursday in Putlaw, 390 kilometres (250 miles) west of the capital Kathmandu, Deuba said he was ready to accept the Maoists in parliament if they ended their attacks and participated in elections due in November. "If the Maoists hand over their arms and take part in the forthcoming elections, the government will welcome them," said Deuba, quoted by state radio.

EU urges Delhi to calm tension

The European Union's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, held talks Friday with Indian leaders in another effort by Western leaders to calm tensions between India and Pakistan. Solana met Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha for discussions followed by a quick working lunch. They will later hold delegation-level talks. "India will highlight its unhappi-

ness with Pakistan which has done a volte face," an Indian foreign ministry official said. "Islamabad has not kept its pledges to either stop Islamic militants crossing into Kashmir or made efforts to dismantle terrorist infrastructure. We want the world to know this." On Saturday, US Secretary of State Colin Powell will begin a trip to India and Pakistan. In June, visiting US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage

said he had extracted a promise from Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf that he would permanently shut Islamic militant camps in the Pakistani zone of Kashmir. India accuses these rebels for infiltrating into the Indian zone to carry out bloody attacks. The pledge managed to pull India and Pakistan, which between them have around a million war-ready troops massed on their borders, from the brink of all-out conflict.