

Ill-fated Indian train avoided blasts before derailment

AFP, Patna, India

An Indian high-speed passenger train of the same kind which derailed two days ago killing 105 people, escaped two minor blasts when it was passing through the eastern state of Bihar, a railway spokesman said yesterday.

Two crude bombs exploded on Wednesday soon after the Howrah-New Delhi Rajdhani Express passed Rajla village, 160 kilometres northeast of Patna, the state capital.

"Two bombs were detonated at 7pm (1330 GMT) on Wednesday near Rajla. It was a providential escape for the Rajdhani Express," said A.K. Das, spokesman for the state-run Indian Railways.

"The Rajdhani train guard informed the nearest railway station about the detonations after hearing two loud bangs. The tracks have not been damaged much as the explosions were minor. We have, however, sounded a security alert in the area.

Das said he did not know who was responsible for the blasts. Maoist guerrillas are active in Bihar, one of India's poorest and most caste-polarized states.

"It is too early to pinpoint blame for the Rajla blasts on anyone right now," said Das. "But the sequence of events has us worried."

At least 105 people died after another Rajdhani Express veered off the tracks late Monday near Rafiganj, also in Bihar, 380 kilometres away from Rajla.

Railway Minister Nitish Kumar has said he suspected sabotage over Monday's derailment, saying fish-plates supporting the lines had been removed.

51 foreigners among 95 Kashmir rebels killed in Aug

AFP, Jammu, India

Indian security forces yesterday said they had killed 95 rebels, including 51 "foreign mercenaries", in Kashmir in August.

The army's northern command spokesman, Lieutenant Colonel SPK Singh, said of the 95 militants, 77 had been killed by troops as they tried to cross the Line of Control (LOC) -- the de facto border that divides Kashmir between India and Pakistan.

Some 34 rebels were arrested as they tried to cross the LOC.

Ninety per cent of the foreigners were from Pakistan, while the rest were from Afghanistan and Chechnya, Singh said.

Rebel attacks in Kashmir have increased in recent weeks, ahead of state elections being held in four phases beginning on September 16.

Militants have threatened to kill anyone participating in the election.

Singh said Indian security forces had intercepted rebel radio messages about election violence.

"Finish all those candidates in the poll fray. You have full authority to do everything possible. All equipment will be given to you," he quoted one message as saying.

He said another message said: "Restrict people from voting. It is a matter of life and death."

He said during the last ten days rebels had killed 16 political activists in the state.



An Indian Border Security Force (BSF) trooper stands guard as an elderly Kashmiri woman looks on in Srinagar yesterday. Security has been tightened a day after the assassination of Kashmir's law and parliamentary affairs minister Mushtaq Ahmad Lone.

Minister's murder ignites fear ahead of polls

Security stepped up in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Candidates expressed fear yesterday ahead of Indian Kashmir's controversial elections next week after the disputed territory's law minister was assassinated and 16 others died in a separate attack near an election rally.

Indian Kashmir's government announced it was stepping up security for candidates in the election, due to begin Monday, after the daylight assassination Wednesday of parliamentary affairs minister Mushtaq Ahmad Lone and three of his bodyguards.

Defence Minister George Fernandes travelled to Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar and held a security review meeting at the Unified Headquarters, which devises the counter-insurgency strategy in the province, officials said.

Two Muslim rebel groups claimed responsibility for Lone's slaying and have vowed to target anyone participating in the Kashmir assembly elections, which is being

held in four rounds ending October 8.

But added security was little solace for many of the 425 candidates, particularly those, who unlike Lone, do not belong to the long-ruling National Conference party.

"Lone's death is tragic. But when people can kill him despite being a minister with high-security, what about the opposition candidates?" said Mehbooba Mufti, vice chair of another pro-India group contesting the polls, the People's Democratic Party.

She complained of "inadequate security" for candidates and said New Delhi should delay the vote due to the violence.

"I think resolution of the conflict (over Kashmir) is more important than holding elections in the state," she said. "The central government should concentrate on finding a breakthrough with militants and the separatists."

A police official in northern Kashmir, where Lone was killed, said he had received calls from more than two dozen candidates

asking for extra security after the minister's killing.

He said police were asking candidates to inform them about their movements.

"There is a need to sanitise the areas they want to visit," he said.

Violence broke out Thursday as top leaders gathered to mourn Lone. Rebels fired grenades and automatic weapons at security forces ringing the village where the minister was buried, witnesses said.

Three soldiers were injured, one of them seriously.

Some 21 activists from parties participating in the polls have been killed since India announced on August 2 the dates for the election. Two of the dead were candidates and 13 were members of the National Conference.

More than 50 civilians have been killed in the same period.

In a major attack Wednesday, gunmen opened fire at a bus stand near an election rally being held by the opposition Congress party.

Pakistan wants no part in US strike on Iraq

Musharraf tells New York Times

AFP, Washington

A US attack on Iraq would inflame Islamic extremism throughout the Muslim world -- and Pakistan wants no part in it, President Pervez Musharraf said in an interview here.

Musharraf, interviewed by the New York Times for the paper's Thursday edition, cautioned US President George W. Bush to gain consensus from the global community, and especially the Muslim world, before any such attack.

"Pakistan is facing problems in its own region," Musharraf told the daily. "We have too much on our plate, too much on our hands... we would not like to be involved in anything more than this."

The "main direction" for US policy in the region should be conflict resolution, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Musharraf told the newspaper.

"Tensions are high," Musharraf said. "In the Islamic world and in the Middle East especially, people are seeing a US role maybe biased towards Israel. So under

these circumstances, undertaking an operation against another country, an Arab country and Muslim country, will certainly have negative repercussions," he said.

An attack on the Iraqi regime of President Saddam Hussein would also likely sap efforts to strengthen the government of Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan, Musharraf said.

The Afghan operation "needs to be taken to its logical end," Musharraf said. "It needs to be culminated with government established over the whole of Afghanistan. Leaving it half there would be extremely dangerous."

Musharraf also told the Times that he feared Bush's doctrine of pre-emptive strikes against hostile nations could encourage India to move against Pakistan.

"There is a possibility that India could take a lead from this theory of preemption," Musharraf said. "And they may undertake an adventurous act. But I would like to hasten to add that here the situation is different. Pakistan is not Iraq, and India is not the United States."

In other words, Musharraf told the Times, "they'd better not try it."

Mayhems over, Maoists propose ceasefire

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's Maoist rebels yesterday made a fresh call for dialogue with the government, after two massive attacks by the guerrillas left more than 350 people reported dead.

In a statement sent to several Kathmandu-based newspapers, the Maoists' elusive supremo Pushpa Kamal Dahal said the rebels were ready to declare a new ceasefire if the government was ready to find a "positive and peaceful" way to end the six-and-a-half year insurgency.

"We really want to end this turmoil through a positive political way out, but if the government forces us to fight then we shall fight till the end," said Dahal, better known by his alias Prachanda, or "The Fierce."

"We are ready to declare a ceasefire and participate in the process of dialogue at any point should the government desire so for a positive and peaceful political way out," said the statement faxed Wednesday to the English-language Kathmandu Post.

The statement came just days after thousands of guerrillas attacked security posts in isolated areas of the kingdom, leaving 115 policemen and soldiers dead as well as more than 250 rebels, according to figures Thursday from the defense ministry.

In one of the attacks, the Maoists lined up 49 troops and shot them dead, the officials said.

There was no official government response to the Maoists' call for dialogue, but a source in the cabinet said that caretaker Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba did not trust the rebels.

The Maoists want an assembly that would redraft the constitution and, they hope, abolish the monarchy.

Deuba reached a ceasefire with the Maoists shortly after taking office in July 2001. The two sides held three

rounds of talks, which stalemated over the Maoists' demands to end the monarchy.

The ceasefire collapsed in late November when the Maoists launched a string of bloody attacks. Since then more than 3,000 people have died, according to official estimates.

Two days after the truce ended, King Gyanendra for the first time deployed the army against the Maoists and, on Deuba's advice, imposed a state of emergency that gives security forces more leeway to impose curfews and to detain or interrogate suspected Maoists.

The emergency ended August 28 and was greeted by a surge in Maoist violence, including daily small bomb blasts in the normally peaceful capital Kathmandu.

Deuba met his advisers Wednesday to consider reimposing the emergency, but sources close to him said the cabinet decided not to bring back the controversial measures for the time being.

A delegation from the International Press Institute, a Vienna-based media rights lobby, met with Deuba Wednesday and said he assured "that Nepal had no intention of reimposing a nationwide state of emergency."

Nepal heads to the polls November 13, with Deuba's Nepali Congress party effectively split into two.

His arch-rival and predecessor as premier, Girija Prasad Koirala, has blasted Deuba for recommending that the king dissolve the parliament in May, as the parliament had looked set to end the emergency. The measures were instead extended for three months by King Gyanendra's decree.

More than 4,700 people are believed to have died since the Maoists declared their "people's war" in the impoverished west of the kingdom in February 1996.

Judgement on Benazir's plea reserved

AFP, Karachi

A Pakistani election tribunal yesterday reserved judgement in an appeal by former prime minister Benazir Bhutto against the rejection of her candidacy for October polls.

"The tribunal heard the arguments and reserved judgement," her counsel Farooq Naik said as a large crowd of slogan-chanting supporters gathered inside and outside the court.

The tribunal, made up of two Sindh High Court judges, set no date for the verdict. However Naik said the decision was expected on Friday, the last day for deciding appeals against rejection of nomination papers.

Naik last week lodged an appeal with the tribunal against the rejection of Bhutto's nomination papers for two constituencies in Larkana district in her power base in southern Sindh province.

He has filed another appeal against the returning officer's decision to reject her bid to run for one of the 60 seats reserved for women in the national parliament.

The second appeal is scheduled to be heard on Friday.

Bhutto, sacked as prime minister on corruption charges in 1990 and 1996, has been living in self-exile in London and Dubai since 1998.

She was disqualified from standing after President Pervez Musharraf passed a law barring "absconders."

Bhutto was convicted twice this year of absconding for failing to appear at graft trials in May and July.

Sharif makes poll pullout official

AFP, Lahore, Pakistan

Pakistan's exiled two-time former premier Nawaz Sharif, deposed by President Pervez Musharraf in a coup three years ago, formally withdrew yesterday from next month's polls.

Sharif had nominated himself to run in the October 10 parliamentary polls, the first since Musharraf seized power by toppling Sharif and jailing him on corruption, hijacking and terrorism charges.

Sharif's nomination won preliminary approval by election authorities, enraging fellow exiled ex premier and traditional arch-rival, Benazir Bhutto.

Sharif surprised Pakistanis by volunteering to withdraw his candidacy as a professed "act of solidarity" with Bhutto.

The withdrawal was formalised by his lawyer Ashtar Ausaf Ali, who produced a written statement from Sharif before an election tribunal in his home city and political stronghold of Lahore.

From battlefield to boardroom

Sri Lankan government, LTTE rebels set for talks in Thailand

AFP, Colombo

After decades of ethnic bloodshed and a failure by either side to gain any advantage on the battlefield, Sri Lanka's government and Tamil Tiger rebels retreat to a boardroom in Thailand next week to seek a way to live together.

The government has been pouring more than a third of its revenue to fund the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), but has ended up with an empty war chest and a bloody nose.

For Tiger rebels, a war of attrition was too much to sustain despite a band of highly dedicated suicide bombers who have staged spectacular strikes and managed to keep fear alive in the island nation.

By June last year, the LTTE said it had lost 17,211 of its fighters since the first guerrilla was killed by government forces in 1982.

The military has lost roughly the same number of combatants while many more on both sides have been wounded.

A figure of 60,000 people killed in the conflict in the past three decades is at best an arbitrary estimate as no one has kept complete track of all the civilians caught

up in the conflict.

United Nations agencies estimate nearly 800,000 people are internally displaced by the war. Another million minority Tamils could be living abroad as refugees.

"The military option is not an option," said Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who took office in December promising peace with Tigers. He has also promised to revive the economy which went into a recession last year.

His attempts to dust-off a Norwegian-backed peace bid will reach a new level when delegates of the government and the LTTE have a formal face-to-face discussion on Monday, the first under Western facilitation.

Wickremesinghe said the peace process was only made possible by foreign support for his right-wing government.

"This (peace process) would not be possible if not for the Royal Norwegian government, India, the US, the United Kingdom and the European Union but to mention a few," Wickremesinghe said.

After a brief opening ceremony at a beach resort in Thailand, the delegates will move to a tightly

guarded Thai naval base in Sattahip in the Chonburi Province for three days of closed-door talks.

"The first round will be basically to clear the table and decide the priority of the items on the agenda," said the government's chief negotiator GL Peiris.

A new optimism has gripped Sri Lanka as two sides talk after several "confidence-building measures", including a Scandinavian-monitored truce which began on February 23.

"The expectations from the talks are very, very high," said Nanda Godage, a former additional secretary to the foreign ministry. "Clearing the table and agreeing on the initial matters alone will take time."

"We are set for the long haul. It is going to take a long time to get to the main issues."

The government and the Tigers are expected to sidestep contentious matters at the beginning and focus on the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the island's war-ravaged northern and eastern regions.

The hard bargaining could be done elsewhere. There have been informal contacts between the two

sides in London and Oslo as well as inside rebel-held territory of northern Sri Lanka.

The Norwegians who are facilitating the talks have made it clear they will not force a solution on the parties.

The guerrillas have said they are willing to consider a substantial power-sharing arrangement within a concept of "internal self-determination", but it will have to be defined and dissected first.

Hardliners in Sri Lanka's majority Sinhalese community are opposed to any concessions to the Tamils, who over the years have complained of discrimination over language, education and jobs.

Western diplomats say the start of talks in Thailand was a powerful message of the commitment of both sides to resolve differences through dialogue rather than through the barrel of a gun.

But the prime minister has been stressing caution.

"I don't want to create euphoria. But if we have a firm foundation, the talks will not collapse," Wickremesinghe said. "A start has been made and we must go forward."