

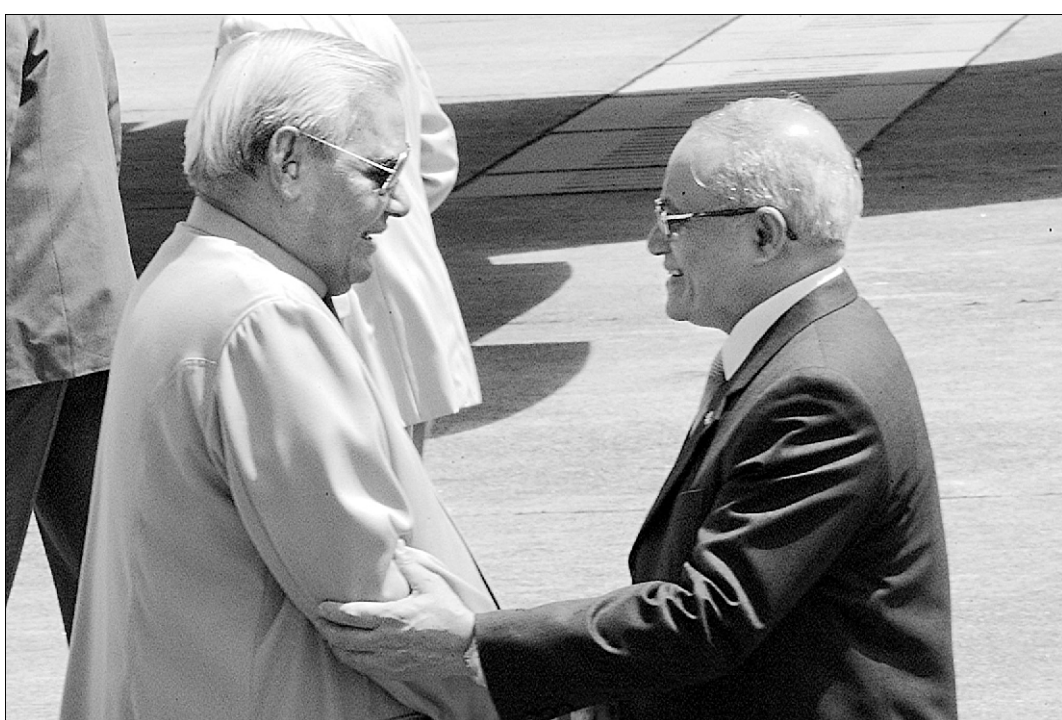
Vajpayee rules out talks with Pakistan

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee Sunday ruled out any resumption of talks with Pakistan over disputed Kashmir, saying there had been "no change" in Islamabad's stand.

"I do not think there has been any change in their attitude. The way they have been trying to disrupt the elections in the state shows there is no change in their stand," Vajpayee said before leaving on a four-day official visit to the Maldives.

Police have reported a surge of violence by Islamic militants in Indian-administered Kashmir since dates for elections to the state assembly were announced on August 2.



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (L) is greeted upon arrival in Male by Maldives President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom on Sunday. Vajpayee is in the Indian Ocean atoll state, the Maldives, for a four-day official visit.

Bush steps up campaign against Iraq on all fronts

AFP, Washington

From the corridors of the United Nations to the halls of Congress, the Bush administration is stepping its campaign against Iraq, putting its political, diplomatic and military muscle on the line.

The coming days and weeks will be crucial for President George W. Bush as he waits to see whether the UN Security Council will pass a new, tougher resolution to force Iraq to comply with its disarmament commitments and whether Congress will give him the green light to use force if necessary to oust Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

Bush himself has raised the bar, warning that Washington and its allies will act unilaterally if the world community fails to ensure that Iraq is clear of biological, chemical and nuclear weapons.

"If the United Nations Security Council won't deal with the problem, the United States and some of our friends will," Bush said. "If you want to keep the peace you've got to have the authorisation to use force."

Passage of the congressional resolution on Iraq sought by Bush would give him more ammunition in the upcoming tough international negotiations on Iraq and would make the threat of a military intervention more credible.

"It would be important for all of us to speak as a nation, and as a country to give this powerful signal to our diplomatic efforts," said Secretary of State Colin Powell.

The vote will be "a signal not just to both the United Nations and (Iraqi President Saddam Hussein), but also to others in the Middle East and to our European allies," said Helmut Sonnenfeldt, of the Brookings Institution, a leading think tank here.

White House officials said they hoped the resolution would be adopted in early October before lawmakers break to campaign for the November 5 mid-term legislative elections.

The Democrats, while loath to close ranks around a Republican president so close to elections, have little choice but to support Bush's resolution, if only to shift the focus to other issues in November.

Politics aside, the resolution drafted by the White House would enable Bush to fold a military strike against Iraq into the framework of the war against terrorism.

"The administration want to use the momentum of the Afghan campaign" said Sonnenfeldt, who was a diplomatic adviser to the late US president Richard Nixon.

Avalanche: 100 still missing in Russia

AFP, Moscow

Rescue workers have discovered 17 people bodies while some 100 people remain missing in the Caucasus mountains of southern Russia Saturday after tons of ice and rock snapped off a glacier and buried an entire village, according to local officials.

The avalanche, loosened by heavy rains in recent weeks, engulfed Nizhny Karmadon in the early hours of Saturday.

Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke of a "catastrophe of unprecedented proportions," and promised assistance to the southern Russian republic of North Ossetia.

The emergency ministry said the avalanche buried at least 10 houses and blocked the main road to the mountain village southeast of the regional capital Vladikavkaz.

Mumbai don Salem has al-Qaida links

AFP, New Delhi

Abu Salem, India's most-wanted gangster who was arrested in Portugal last week, has links with terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network, a newspaper here claimed Sunday.

Salem, 40, was arrested by Interpol in Lisbon on Wednesday along with his companion Monica Bedi and another man.

Wanted in several criminal cases in India including the deadly serial bomb blasts in Bombay in 1993 that killed and injured hundreds of people, Indian authorities have been trying to secure Salem's deportation.

The efforts received a setback when a Lisbon court ruled against his deportation on Saturday.

Scepticism over al-Qaida plot to kill Megawati

AFP, Jakarta

A report that Muslim radicals are plotting to assassinate President Megawati Sukarnoputri was an attempt to pressure Indonesia into cracking down on militants, analysts believe.

Time magazine, citing a regional intelligence report, said an alleged al-Qaida senior operative, Omar al-Faruq, admitted he planned to kill Megawati in May 1999 when she was running for the presidency.

The report comes amid concern in Washington that Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, may be home to sympathisers or members of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida network.

Pro-hunting rally gets underway in London

AFP, London

Hundreds of thousands of protesters from rural Britain took to the streets of London on Sunday to rally against government plans to ban the hunting of foxes with hounds.

An extra 1,600 police were on duty for the "Liberty and Livelihood" rally, which the British media billed as the largest civil liberties march the country has ever seen.

The main focus of the protest is Prime Minister Tony Blair's vow in March to push through an anti-hunting law, if after six months of talks no compromise deal is struck between hunt supporters and opponents.

DPRK dominates ASEM Violence flares up ahead of 2nd round of polls

REUTERS, Copenhagen

Reclusive North Korea's dramatic if still tentative efforts to open up to the outside world will dominate talks between European Union and Asian leaders due to start Sunday.

The ASEM summit, grouping the 15 EU nations and 10 Asian states, will hear reports from South Korean President Kim Dae-jung and Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi on the latest surprise developments on the Korean peninsula.

They are expected to strongly endorse the strategy of Tokyo and Seoul to engage North Korea, branded part of an "axis of evil" by President Bush, in a broad dialogue.

"We all agree on the importance of coaxing North Korea in from the cold through a constructive dialogue," said one EU diplomat, playing down the differences between Europe and Asia on the one hand and the United States on the other.

EU diplomats also conceded that Bush's tough speech earlier this year, bracketing North Korea along with Iraq and Iran as an "axis of evil" bent on building weapons of mass destruction, could have helped persuade North Korean leader Kim Jong-il to seek a rapprochement with his wealthy neighbours.

"The speech helped to focus minds," said one.

Over dinner Sunday evening at a venue outside Copenhagen, Japan's Koizumi will brief the leaders, including France's President Jacques Chirac and Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, on his historic trip to Pyongyang last Tuesday.

At the Japan-North Korea meeting, Kim Jong-il apologised for his country's abduction of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s, promised to extend a moratorium on missile tests and said it would honour commitments on its nuclear program.

In return, Japan apologised for its brutal rule of the Korean peninsula from 1910 to 1945 and raised the prospect of economic aid and the establishment of diplomatic relations.

After his return to Tokyo, Koizumi spoke with Bush about his trip and quoted the U.S. president as saying Washington would seriously consider resuming a dialogue with Pyongyang.

In Denmark, South Korea's President Kim will report on the start of work to clear mines and rebuild rail links across its border with North Korea, still one of the most tense and potentially dangerous spots in the post-Cold War world.

16 killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Sixteen people have been killed in a fresh surge of violence in Indian-administered Kashmir, police said Sunday, two days ahead of the second round of voting for the state assembly.

Among those killed were 10 Muslim rebels shot dead in clashes with police, including one of two who launched a brazen attack on a police compound in Srinagar, Indian Kashmir's summer capital.

Violence in Kashmir has in recent days risen sharply ahead of Tuesday's voting in the districts of Srinagar, Budgam and Jammu, with anti-India militants targeting those who have chosen to contest the four-phase elections.

Police said a 12-hour siege of the police complex ended early Sunday with a policeman and a militant dead.

"The siege is over. There were two militants. One has been killed while the other it seems has managed to escape under the cover of

darkness," police inspector general K. Rajendra told AFP.

The two militants, disguised in police uniforms, appeared at the gates of the residential complex in the Bemina area of Srinagar Saturday evening, opening fire and hurling a hand grenade at the sentries, injuring two of them.

The militants later managed to get into the complex of dozens of buildings housing policemen and their families and opened fire intermittently in the darkness.

Little-known militant group al-Madina Regiment claimed responsibility for the attack.

In other violent incidents, rebels ambushed a paramilitary convoy at Bijbehara, 46 km south of Srinagar on Sunday, killing one troop from the Border Security Force, a spokesman for the force said.

Suspected Muslim rebels also overnight threw grenades and fired at the residence of ruling National Conference legislator Sheikh Rafiq in the township of Shopian, 50 km south of here, police said.



Paramilitaries stand guard outside a police residential housing complex in Srinagar on Sunday. A siege of a police residential complex in Indian-administered Kashmir ended early Sunday with one policeman dead and eight others injured. The incident also left one of the two militants who stormed the complex late Saturday dead.



German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder (L) and his wife Doris get ready to cast their votes at the Kaiser Wilhelm gymnasium in Schroeder's home constituency of Hannover on Sunday. Germans went to the polls as Schroeder's Social Democrats face the Christian Union alliance (CDU/CSU) and Edmund Stoiber in the general election.

Germans begin voting in cliffhanger election

REUTERS, Berlin

Germans began voting Sunday with the outcome wide open yet crucial for Europe's lumbering lead economy, its role in any Iraq war and a developing crisis in relations with the United States.

In one of the closest elections in post-war German history, voters face the dilemma of preferring charismatic centre-left Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, but feeling dissatisfied with his Social Democrat party (SPD) and spiralling unemployment.

Schroeder's conservative challenger, austere Bavarian state premier Edmund Stoiber, is far less popular, but opinion polls show his party is seen as a more capable manager of the economy.

Final opinion polls have shown Schroeder's SPD clinging to a lead of only half a percentage point over

the conservatives. It means it is far from certain whether the SPD and junior coalition partners, the Greens of Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, will be able to stay in power.

Polls opened at 8 a.m. local time (0600 GMT) with rain and heavy clouds over much of the country. They close at 6 p.m. (1600 GMT) when first exit polls will be published.

Stoiber was the first of the candidates to vote, arriving in blazer and red-and-white striped tie and accompanied by his wife in his hometown Wolfratshausen, south of Munich.

Schroeder's opposition to a U.S. war in Iraq has dominated the final run-in and, along with his deft handling of last month's floods, helped his party narrow the conservatives' lead.

Palestinians outraged at Arafat siege

Israeli troops kill 4 more

AP, Ramallah

Thousands of Palestinians, many defying military curfews, poured into West Bank and Gaza streets Sunday to protest Israel's assault on Yasser Arafat's headquarters, and four demonstrators were killed by army fire.

Later, a Palestinian teenager was killed in Nablus, residents said.

In Arafat's battered compound, Israeli threatened several times over loudspeakers to blow up the building where Arafat is holed up the only one left standing unless wanted men inside surrendered, witnesses said.

Israel initially called for the surrender of 19 Palestinian officials, including members of the intelli-

gence service and the Force 17 bodyguard unit.

On Saturday, a senior army officer taking reporters on a tour of Arafat's compound said Israel wanted 50 men to give themselves up. Army officials said the figure increased because Israel initially did not have a complete picture of who is inside.

Israel has said it does not intend to harm Arafat, and the army later said it had no plans to blow up the building.

Israel's deputy defence minister, Weizman Shiri, said Arafat was free to leave the country but would not be allowed to return.

"We'll give him a one-way ticket in a dignified way," Shiri told Army

Radio on Sunday. Some Cabinet ministers called for Arafat's expulsion.

Shiri did not say which country could be likely destination. "If he decides he wants to get out we'll find him a good place," he said.

Israel, preparing for a long stand-off, planted an Israeli flag on top of Arafat's office building. Officials said troops would not withdraw from the compound before the wanted men surrendered, and left open the possibility that even then they might not leave.

Early Sunday, Arafat's Fatah movement led protest marches in the West Bank and Gaza towns, some defying Israeli military curfews.

Lankan president warns of assassination bid

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga has accused her cohabitation government of trying to assassinate her, but said she will "kill 500" assailants if anyone comes to attack her, press reports here said Sunday.

Kumaratunga told party loyalists in the central district of Kandy that Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was moving to clip her executive powers through a constitutional amendment tabled in parliament last week.

"If they hit me I will hit back. If

they come to attack me I will use the powers at my command. If they come to kill me, I will kill 500 before dying," the president was quoted as saying in the Sunday Times weekly published here.

Sunday newspapers here gave wide coverage to Kumaratunga's remarks made Friday at a ceremony marking the 19th death anniversary of a party stalwart.

There was no immediate reaction from Kumaratunga's office to the remarks attributed to her in all the main Sunday newspapers here.

Kumaratunga has warned that taking away her powers as the

commander in chief would leave the country exposed to the threat of war.

"If war breaks out, I would have no powers to order the security forces to retaliate," Kumaratunga said. "It is my duty and responsibility to protect the country and the people and I will do so at the risk of my life."

Kumaratunga is heading for a major showdown with the government over its attempts to remove the president's power to sack parliament after the first anniversary of the last general election, which falls on December 5.

Blair faces cabinet revolt over Iraq

REUTERS, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair faced direct defiance from a key member of his cabinet on Sunday who said another war with Iraq would inflict too much suffering on the Iraqi people.

"We cannot have another Gulf war. We cannot have the people of Iraq suffering again. They have suffered too much. That would be wrong," Clare Short, Blair's International Development Secretary, told the British television network GMTV.

"We've got to have remedies that will hit (Iraqi President Saddam

Hussein) and the elite, and not the people," she said. "I think we need more thinking about that."

Short's comments came on the eve of a special cabinet meeting to be conducted by Blair Monday. A so-called "dossier" on Iraq, in which Blair will set out what he sees as the case for action against Saddam, will be released Tuesday.

Blair hopes he can use the document, first promised six months ago, to win over those within his Labour Party who oppose military action against Iraq.

A special session of Parliament will be devoted to debating the Iraq

issue Tuesday, but there will be no direct vote on an Iraq policy.

More than 160 members of the 659-strong lower parliamentary chamber, most of them from Blair's ruling Labour Party, have over the past few months signed a motion expressing "deep unease" about Britain backing military strikes on Iraq -- particularly if there is no explicit UN resolution calling for an attack.

Short urged Blair and President Bush to use the UN to pressure Saddam, rather than pushing ahead with action not sanctioned by the international body.



Miss Illinois Erika Harold (L) reacts while being crowned Miss America 2003 by Miss America 2002 Katie Harman at the pageant in Atlantic City, New Jersey on Saturday.

France sends troops to Ivory Coast

Politician's home set on fire

AFP, Abidjan

The home of a key opposition leader was set alight overnight in continuing violence following a coup bid in Ivory Coast prompting France to send troops to its former west African colony, officials said on Sunday.

AFP correspondents saw smoke and flames billowing from the residence of opposition leader Alassane Ouattara.

"Mr Ouattara's residence, in the upmarket Cocody district of Abidjan, was set alight by elements of the security forces there," Aly Coulibaly, spokesman for Ouattara's Rally of Republicans (RDR) party told AFP by telephone.

Ouattara, 60, who served as prime minister from 1990 to 1993, has sought refuge at the French embassy in Abidjan with the approval of Ivorian authorities.

Ouattara said: "The German ambassador told me that it (Ouattara's home) was on the point of collapsing".

The opposition leader said that the arson attack "could only be the work of the security forces because there is a curfew in place. I called the fire brigade but so far no one has arrived".

Ouattara confirmed that he was still staying in the French embassy, where he has taken refuge since the

rebel uprising which began on Thursday.

With the country's second city, Bouake, in central Ivory Coast, and the northern town of Korhogo still under rebel control and tensions high in Abidjan, France dispatched troop reinforcements to ensure the security of French citizens and the international community, the French army chief of staff said early Sunday.

More than 100 reinforcements arrived in the west African nation aboard a transport plane, accompanied by helicopters, from other French bases in Africa.

"Under precautionary measures decided by the French authorities to assure the security of French citizens and the international community, the army chief-of-staff has reinforced the military unit stationed in Abidjan," the army said in a statement.

France already had a 600-strong contingent in the main Ivorian city of Abidjan. It also has bases in Chad, Senegal, Gabon and Djibouti, with a total of some 6,000 troops.

With an estimated 20,000 French citizens living in Ivory Coast, officials in Paris said the reinforcements were being sent in as an implicit message to rebels that they will take quick action in the event of an attack on the French community.