

Kashmir's lone woman minister braves attacks for re-election

AFP, Srinagar

Sakina Itoo, Kashmir's leading female politician, never thought she would drop out of college to join government. And she never thought that she would be Islamic rebels' top target for assassination.

The 30-year-old Itoo, the only woman in Indian Kashmir's cabinet, has already survived four attempts on her life since launching her re-election campaign earlier this month.

China demands lifting of EU arms embargo

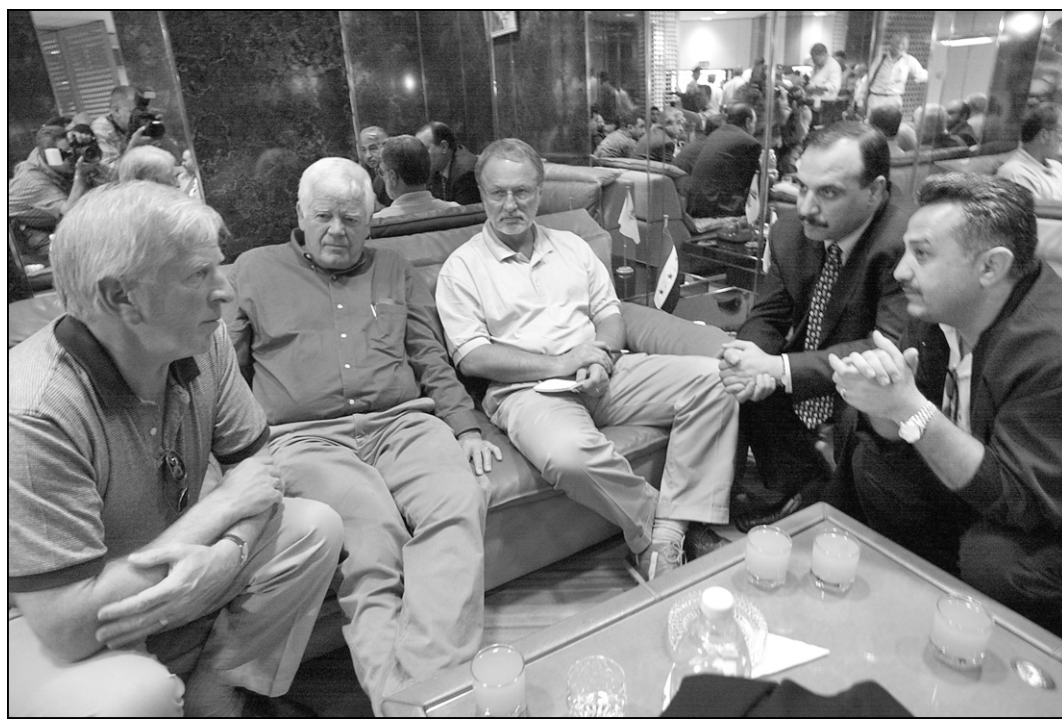
AFP, Paris

Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji on Friday called for the lifting of the European Union's embargo on arms shipments to Beijing and urged French companies not to sell weapons to Taiwan.

"I hope the European Union will be able to lift the embargo against China," Zhu told French business leaders, noting he had made his case for the ban to be lifted in a meeting Thursday with French President Jacques Chirac.



Marija Milosevic, the daughter of former Yugoslav president Slobodan Milosevic, was given an eight-month suspended jail sentence over a shooting incident during a standoff when her father was arrested in April 2001, Serbian state television reported on Thursday.



Three US Congressmen opposed to war against Iraq, from L to R, Michael Thompson (California, west), Jim McDermott (Washington, north-west), and David Bonior (Michigan, north) talk to Iraqi officials upon their arrival at Baghdad Airport on Friday. US Congressmen have been divided over how swiftly to approve the use of US force against Baghdad, with many Democrats insisting the United Nations be given a chance to secure movement from Iraq first.

India, Pakistan trade blame over temple killings

Delhi identifies gunmen as Pak nationals

AFP, New Delhi

Arch-enemies India and Pakistan traded blame Friday over a temple massacre in Gujarat state, with New Delhi reportedly identifying the gunmen as Pakistanis but Islamabad calling the bloodbath a fallout from anti-Muslim riots.

The riot-torn state, meanwhile, began returning to normal Friday after two tense days that followed Tuesday's attack on Akshardam temple in Gandhinagar, in which two militants gunned down 31 people before they themselves were shot dead early Wednesday.

Muslims who had fled fearing a backlash began returning to their homes, while schools which had been shut reopened.

However, police remained in large numbers on the streets, while army reinforcements were on

standby at a military base.

The Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency, quoting sources among the investigators, said the two attackers have been identified as Mohammed Amjad Bhai of Lahore and Hafiz Yasir of Attock. Lahore is in east Pakistan while Attock is in the northwest.

If the report is proven correct, tensions between the arch-rivals are certain to escalate again. Hindu rightwingers have already begun calling for action against Pakistan, while Junior Home Minister I.D. Swamy said on Thursday India was keeping "all options" open, including war, to end "cross-border terrorism."

Letters found on the slain militants identified them as members of unknown group Tehreek-e-Kisaas, or the Movement for Revenge.

But Swami said the name was

merely a mask for two pan-Islamic movements originally based in Pakistan, Jaish-e-Mohammad and Lashkar-e-Taiba, which are active in the Islamic insurgency against Indian rule in Kashmir.

The nuclear-armed neighbours came close to conflict twice in the past 10 months over India's claims of Pakistani involvement in militant attacks.

New Delhi will use the latest incident to debunk claims by Islamabad that it has reined in the militants.

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf rejected accusations of Islamabad's involvement in Tuesday's bloodbath and said the attack was "fallout" from massacres of Muslims in the Indian state.

US, UK lobby for new UN resolution on Iraq

AFP, Washington

The United States and Britain lobbied fellow UN Security Council members Friday to back a tough new resolution on Iraq as US President George W. Bush pressed for congressional approval to use force to disarm Saddam Hussein.

Meanwhile, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld upped the ante in the Iraq debate by charging that al-Qaida operatives had recently been in Baghdad as part of a decade-old relationship that may include training in chemical and biological agents.

On the diplomatic front, Secretary of State Colin Powell said Washington and London had agreed on "what we thought a good resolution looked like and should contain" and were "now expanding

the circle of consultation" to discuss specific language of the resolution with the other members of the UN Security Council.

"We now both -- the United States and the United Kingdom -- have begun consultations with the other permanent members of the Security Council on our idea," he said.

As part of those discussions, Powell said he had dispatched a senior US diplomat -- Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Marc Grossman -- to Russia and France, where opposition to new UN action on Iraq is highest.

Grossman, accompanied by a British diplomat, will talk "with the French and the Russians what we believe should be in such a resolution," Powell told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Powell, who previewed the ideas Wednesday and Thursday with the foreign ministers of the other three permanent members of the Security Council -- France, China and Russia -- acknowledged that forging a consensus would be difficult.

"We are a long way from getting an agreement (on the council), but we are working hard," he said. To pass, a resolution needs the support of at least nine of the council's 15 members without a veto from any of the five permanent members.

France is opposed to the US and British desire for a single resolution that lays out Iraq's failure to comply with previous mandates, identify what it must do to satisfy them and spell out in detail the consequences of non-compliance, including perhaps, the use of force.

Paris is sticking to its demand for two resolutions: one empowering UN weapons inspectors to do their

jobs and, if necessary, a later one to authorise use of force, US officials said.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Moscow believed the Iraq situation could be resolved without the adoption of any new UN resolution.

But Bush also underscored special US concern about Iraq, arguing during a trip to Houston, Texas, that disarming and ousting Saddam was a "uniquely American issue."

And, for the first time, the president revealed a personal interest in the matter, referring to Saddam as "the guy who tried to kill my dad."

According to Kuwaiti officials, they thwarted a car-bomb plot in April 1993 that was aimed at the Kuwaiti emir and visiting former US president George Bush.

'US can force Sharon to lift Arafat siege'

Tel Aviv admits Hamas leader survives attempt

AFP, Ramallah

US pressure will soon force Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to lift his siege of Yasser Arafat, an advisor to the veteran Palestinian leader predicted Friday.

Bassam Abu Sharif said Sharon had "put himself in a big dilemma," when tanks stormed the Ramallah compound, razing everything around Arafat's office, in retaliation for back-to-back suicide attacks which killed seven people plus the bombers on September 19.

"The Israelis will have to withdraw in a couple of days from the Muqataa and finish the siege because of the dilemma," he told AFP.

"Arafat has said it himself several times, and I know him personally, he

will never surrender (...) his aides and he will never leave Palestine," said Abu Sharif, a Ramallah resident who telephones Arafat or his aides daily.

Israel has told Arafat to hand over wanted men holed up with him or face exile, but the veteran leader lost support by ending previous sieges under deals that consigned militants to jail under international guard or to exile in Europe.

"Sharon knows he cannot blow up the building because that will be a catastrophe for Israel" and its image abroad, Abu Sharif said.

"This siege embarrasses the United States," and Britain, who are pushing for a tough UN Security Council resolution on Iraq while Sharon is still defying a UN call to lift the siege on Ramallah, he said.

"Why is only Israel above international law?"

The solution is either to "convince Sharon bluntly to get out, and I think the Americans can do that, or impose sanctions or send troops" to the Palestinian territories under the aegis of the Security Council, Abu Sharif said.

Meanwhile, Mohammad Deif, a military leader of the Islamic radical group Hamas who tops Israel's wanted list, escaped a Gaza City assassination bid with only moderate injuries, an Israeli cabinet minister told army radio Friday.

"The information I have been getting from our services shows he has been injured but that his life is not in danger," said Sports Minister Matan Vilnai, who is a member of Israel's security cabinet.

Opposition pledges not to wreck peace with Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's main opposition, which has disagreed with the government over its peace bid, Friday urged a final settlement with Tamil rebels within a year and expressed optimism of an end to war.

Opposition spokesman Lakshman Kadirgamar said President Chandrika Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA) would not scuttle the Norwegian-backed peace process, despite conflicting signals from some PA legislators.

Kadirgamar, a former foreign minister and a key player in the peace bid before the PA lost elections in December, said he was more optimistic of a final settlement now than six months ago.

"It is an evolving process and I am prepared to say I am reasonably optimistic of success now compared to six months ago," Kadirgamar told reporters here.

'US is after Iraqi oil'

Baghdad vows to defend itself

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq accused the United States Friday of seeking to control its oil and warned that the Iraqi people will never allow Americans to desecrate their sacred soil.

"The aim of the war (Washington is threatening to launch against Iraq) is Iraqi oil," President Saddam Hussein's elder son, Uday, said on his Youth Television station.

Uday said that the US administration would never control Iraqi oil, swearing that the "last barrel of crude in the world will be Iraqi".

"If the Americans don't manage to control our crude, it will go to other countries such as Germany, China, Japan or France," he said.

Uday warned that a US strike would not target his father alone: "When they (the US) went into Afghanistan, they did not leave any hospital or village without bombing them."

"If Uday or Qusay (Saddam's other son) were to die in battle, numerous other men will still be in Iraq to defend it, he said.

Uday added that Iraq would be ready to hold talks with the United States on condition that it respect us and recognise our rights, but if it continues to behave arrogantly, let it come (to fight us) if it can."

The official press also charged Washington with seeking to control

Saddam 'tried to kill my dad': Bush

AFP, Houston

Saying "this is the guy who tried to kill my dad," President George W. Bush late Thursday embraced disarming and ousting Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein as a "uniquely

American issue."

"Other countries of course, bear the same risk. But there's no doubt his hatred is mainly directed at us," Bush said at a political fundraiser here. "After all this is the guy who tried to kill my dad."

As Bush's father, former president George Bush, traveled to Kuwait in April 1993, officials there

disrupted a car-bomb plot they said they traced back to Saddam. The plot was aimed at Kuwait's emir and the former president, officials said.

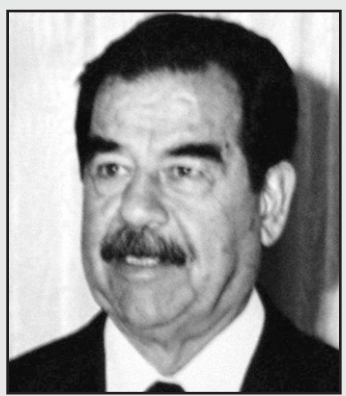
Then-US president Bill Clinton cited the plot as justification for a June 1993 US missile attack on Baghdad's intelligence headquarters.

Bush had also referred to that US charge in his September 12 address to the UN General Assembly, but had deliberately referred only to "a former American president." Aides said Bush was taking pains to avoid personalising the issue.

In his speech here, the US leader again said Washington would act alone if the world body failed to take strong action to strip Saddam of any nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons.

"If the United Nations won't act, if he doesn't disarm, the United States will lead a coalition to make sure he does," the president said here. "It's an American issue, a uniquely American issue."

Bush, who has struggled to rally US allies in Europe as well as Russia behind his hard-line stance on Iraq, said the September 11, 2001, terrorist strikes had made clear Saddam poses a special threat to the United States.



American issue. "Other countries of course, bear the same risk. But there's no doubt his hatred is mainly directed at us," Bush said at a political fundraiser here. "After all this is the guy who tried to kill my dad." As Bush's father, former president George Bush, traveled to Kuwait in April 1993, officials there



Property owners in the Little Woods area of New Orleans, Los Angeles, watch debris floating in from the high tides of Lake Pontchartrain as tropical storm Isidore makes landfall on Thursday. Isidore remained a large storm, with winds extending outward up to 552 km, and continued to drench parts of southern Mexico.

Museum on very basics of life

AFP, New York

A sex museum opens on New York's Fifth Avenue on Saturday seeking to inject some academic passion into that most basic of mankind's preoccupations.

After five years of often stormy planning, the Museum of Sex will open in a former five-story fashion shop with researchers, renowned experts and curators.

US to reward Pakistan with arms for support

AFP, Rawalpindi

The United States said Friday it was ready to consider providing more hardware for Pakistan's military as a reward for its help in the fight against terrorism.

It also promised assistance to enhance the capabilities of Pakistani troops and police in fighting terrorism, including the infiltration of al-Qaida fugitives from neighbouring Afghanistan.

Kicking a dog could be deadly

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

A businessman who kicked a dog died after jumping off a fourth-floor hotel balcony as he fled the animal's enraged samurai sword-wielding owner, reports said Friday.

Mohamad Ridhuan Mat Rejab, 31, kicked the pet in a fit of anger as he left a stressful business meeting in a hotel room in Malaysia's capital Kuala Lumpur, the official Bernama news agency reported.

The dog belonged to the hotel owner, whose wife saw the incident and began yelling at the businessman.

Her husband heard the row and rushed out wielding a samurai sword. The businessman took fright, leapt over the balcony and died later in hospital, Bernama said.

Police are looking for the hotel owner, who fled.



National Spokesperson for the Citizens Commission on Human Rights, Lisa Marie Presley, (R), testifies on Thursday before the House Committee on Government Reform's hearing on "Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder--Are We Over-Medicating Our Children" on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC.

4 relatives of Ne Win sentenced to death

AFP, Yangon

Death sentences handed to four relatives of former dictator Ne Win for plotting to overthrow the military regime mark the end of the ageing autocrat's era of domination over Myanmar, analysts said Friday.

The arrests of the four in March transformed Myanmar's political landscape by dispelling the popular notion that Ne Win continued to wield significant influence despite standing down in 1988 after leading the country for 26 years.

On Thursday, a special tribunal set up in the grounds of Yangon's notorious Insein jail delivered the final blow to the dynasty by sending Ne Win's son-in-law, Aye Zaw Win, 54, and three grandsons to the gallows.

However, the four accused appeared nonchalant as the sentence was read out, bolstering speculation that Myanmar's former "First Family" had cut some kind of deal to spare their lives.

"Not only were they not surprised but they seemed to take it in their stride, even chatting away with

each other while the judge reeled out the incriminating testimonies," said one political observer.

Judge Aung Ngwe left the door open to an appeal, saying the Supreme Court would have to confirm the sentences before they could be carried out.

But as he finished speaking, the eldest of the 20-something grandsons, Aye Ne Win, who is a qualified lawyer, called out defiantly "We are not going to appeal!"

And as the four were being led away from the court, he challenged his government-appointed lawyers and accused them of being lackeys of the junta.

"Since you have been hired by the authorities you may as well do their bidding," he said as military intelligence photographers snapped away.

Few analysts believe the Ne Win relatives were seriously attempting to mount a coup, but suspect the junta took the opportunity to sideline them after their behaviour and business interests became increasingly unruly and troublesome.

Rebels take another town in Ivory Coast

AFP, Odiene

Rebel soldiers in Ivory Coast have captured the northwestern town of Odiene, near the border with Guinea, a municipal source told AFP Friday.

The source said the mutineers arrived Thursday evening, taking control of key points.

No details were available on any casualties.

Foreign missionaries there, some of them from Norway, asked a western embassy in Abidjan to organise their evacuation, a diplomat told AFP.

Soldiers who mutinied on September 19 seized Ivory Coast's second city of Bouake, in the centre, and Korhogo, the main town in the predominantly Muslim north.

The uprising was put down in Abidjan, the main city on the coast, at the cost of 270 dead and 300 wounded, according to the government.

Meanwhile, panic-stricken Ivorians tried to flee the central

Ivory Coast city of Bouake Friday under the protection of French troops deployed to evacuate foreigners, but were turned back by rebel soldiers holding the town.

Other African nationals, who thronged the French consulate in Bouake's centre desperately appealing for people with cars to take them out of the city on the second and last day of an evacuation organised by French soldiers, were allowed to leave.

French troops were seen telling Ivorians that they could proceed with departing foreigners but warned that they would be turned back by the rebels.

The Ivorian government has dubbed Bouake a "war zone", threatening renewed attacks to wrest it from the mutineers.

Some whites were seen leaving the city Friday but the overwhelming majority of the 600-strong local French population and other Europeans left Bouake on Thursday, when the evacuation started.