

Derailment of Rajdhani Express act of sabotage

AFP, New Delhi

Sabotage caused the derailment of an Indian luxury train last month in which 120 people were killed, an enquiry by railway authorities said Thursday.

The Rajdhani Express headed from Calcutta to New Delhi veered off the tracks September 9 near Rafiganj in the eastern state of Bihar as it was travelling around 130 kilometres (80 miles) an hour. Several carriages fell into the swollen Dhabri river.

'Suu Kyi sceptical about reform promises'

AFP, Bangkok

Myanmar's opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi is sceptical about the ruling junta's promises of democratic reforms, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said Thursday after visiting the nation.

"She made it clear to me that she was sceptical about commitments that were made to me and that have been made to others," he said during a stopover in the Thai capital.

Downer, the first senior member of a Western government to travel to Myanmar in several years, was on a mission to advance reconciliation talks between the generals and Aung San Suu Kyi which began in October 2000.



A Palestinian boy holds up a poster of Marwan Barghouti, the imprisoned West Bank chief of Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement, during a sit-in in front of the International Red Cross centre in Gaza City on Thursday. The defence team of Barghouti, back in court on "terrorism" charges, threatened to accuse Israel of "genocide," as Washington rushed to calm Arab rage at its moves to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

Nepali PM asks king to delay polls by one year

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's cabinet Thursday asked King Gyanendra to delay parliamentary elections by one year until November 19, 2003 due to the Maoist insurgency, officials said.

Caretaker Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba's cabinet sent a letter to King Gyanendra citing the "deteriorating law-and-order situation" in the country for the delay, a senior cabinet source said.

Deuba was expected to meet with Gyanendra later Thursday followed by a decision from the king. The election to the 205-member assembly had already been announced in six rounds beginning November 13, 2002.

Barghuti lawyer says defence team quitting

AFP, Tel Aviv

A lawyer for Marwan Barghouti, a top lieutenant of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat on trial for terrorism, said Thursday the defence team was quitting the trial, accusing security men of beating him and throwing him out of court as the hearing was about to begin.

"We are withdrawing from this trial. We will not let the Israelis use this court any more for their campaign against the Palestinian people," said lawyer Khader Shkeirat outside the court building.

"They did not let me see Marwan and they threw me out of court and beat me up," he added, looking shocked.

Cops tighten noose around Salman Khan

AFP, Bombay

Indian police Thursday tightened the noose around Bollywood star Salman Khan, alleging he may not have had a valid driver's license when he ran over and killed a homeless man.

After concluding that Khan was legally drunk when he was behind the wheel of his imported Toyota Land Cruiser, police said they had contacted transport authorities to see if the film hero had a license.

"On Saturday itself when the police asked him for his license, the actor was unable to produce it. He has not produced it until now," joint police commissioner Ahmed Javed told AFP.

The muscular 36-year-old actor allegedly crashed into the pavement in Bombay on Saturday, killing one person sleeping on the ground and injuring three others.

Troops foil Kashmir infiltration attempt

10 militants, army officer, policeman killed in gunbattles

AFP, Srinagar

Ten suspected Islamic militants and two members of India's security forces were killed in two gunbattles in southern Indian Kashmir Thursday, as violence linked to assembly elections in the disputed state showed no signs of abating.

Also Thursday, five policemen and a civilian were injured when the policemen's bus ran over a landmine near Shopian township, 50 km south of the summer capital Srinagar, a police spokesman said.

Eight of the militants were killed in a violent clash with Indian troops soon after they sneaked across the international border with Pakistan into a heavily-militarised zone near the border town of Mendhar, he said.

The infiltrators were challenged to surrender but instead lobbed grenades and opened fire on the Indian soldiers, who then returned fire, he said.

An army officer was also killed while two soldiers were injured in the clash, the spokesman said.

In another encounter also in the south of the restive state, two Muslim rebels who killed eight civilians in an attack Tuesday on a bus near the town of Hiranagar were shot dead in a fierce all-night gunbattle with the security forces, police said.

A police officer was also killed and two constables wounded in the clash, which occurred on a hillside near Hiranagar, some 80 kilometres (50 miles) south of the state winter capital Jammu, said senior superintendent of police Arjuned Pervez Mirza.

He said the bodies of the two militants, which television channels showed lying bloodied in thick grass, were strapped heavily with explosives and removing them would be difficult.

"These militants were involved in the shootout on Tuesday in which eight civilians were killed at Hiranagar crossing. They were heavily equipped with ammuni-

tion," deputy inspector general of police Dilbagh Singh said.

The militants had attacked the bus just as polling was about to open in Kathua district for the third round of controversial state assembly elections in Indian-administered Kashmir.

Singh identified the two militants as Abu Tala and Abus Usman of pan-Islamic militant group Lashkar-e-Taiba, founded in Pakistan but banned there since January.

"These two militants were trying to cross back to Pakistan, but they lost the track. One compass has been found with them, indicating that they were trying to find the direction of the border, which is hardly three kilometres (1.8 miles) away," Singh added.

Police said they had managed to locate the militants through intercepting radio messages to Pakistan in which they said they had successfully carried out the operation and wanted to return.

Hiranagar is in Kathua, one of four districts which went to the polls on Tuesday in staggered elections which Islamic militants fighting Indian rule have vowed to disrupt.

The third round of voting for the assembly was particularly violent, with 21 people killed in at least 27 different attacks.

The bloodletting continued on Wednesday, when suspected Islamic rebels killed another 15 people in Kashmir, while Indian troops gunned down seven militants.

India said late Wednesday it was not ruling out war against Pakistan if there was no other way to stop its alleged "cross-border terrorism."

Arafat leads outcry against US law on Jerusalem

Iran calls for Islamic summit

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Palestinian President Yasser Arafat led a chorus of Muslim condemnation on Wednesday against U.S. legislation that lends support to Israel's disputed claim to Jerusalem as its capital.

"This decision is a catastrophe that Muslims and Christians should not let pass in silence," Arafat said about the law that took effect on Monday and requires the U.S. government to list the holy city as the Israeli capital in official documents.

"I am asking the American administration and the American president to stop this," Arafat said in his compound in the West Bank city of Ramallah, scene of a 10-day Israeli siege that ended on Sunday under pressure from the United States.

Gaza, more than a thousand Palestinians marched to protest

against the U.S. law on Jerusalem, calling for Bush to be thrown into the "dustbin of history" and burning U.S. and Israeli flags.

The U.S. law also drew sharp criticism from the Arab League and key U.S. ally Saudi Arabia at a time when Washington faces an uphill struggle to convince Arab states to back possible U.S. military action against Iraq.

Iran warned it would trigger a wave of Muslim hatred against the United States, and Lebanon's Hezbollah guerrilla group said it exposed Washington's bias in favour of the Jewish state.

Palestinians want East Jerusalem, captured by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war, as capital of a future state in the West Bank and Gaza. Israel regards all of Jerusalem as its capital, a claim not recognised internationally.

The controversy over Jerusalem, a city sacred to Muslims, Christians and Jews, was another reminder of

the thorny issues that divide Israelis and Palestinians as they remain locked in conflict after two years of violence.

In Cairo, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a critic of Prime Minister Ariel Sharon's military clampdown on the Palestinians, used events marking the anniversary of the 1973 war against Israel to drive home his message.

"I warn the Israeli government of the danger of its policies for the future of the Middle East," he said in a speech. "The United States should stop what Israel is doing."

While Palestinians and their Arab brethren seethed over the U.S. law on Jerusalem, Arafat appeared to have won a temporary reprieve from US-backed reforms demanded by his parliament.

Arafat on Tuesday received the backing of his influential Fatah faction for a three-week delay in appointing an interim cabinet and

support for his opposition to the idea of naming a prime minister to assume some of his powers.

Meanwhile, Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi has called for a meeting of Muslim states following US moves towards recognising Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the official news agency IRNA reported Thursday.

Kharazi urged that the Al-Qods (Jerusalem) committee of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference meet to discuss the consequences of a new US law, in talks with his Moroccan counterpart Mohamed Benaisa, IRNA said.

The purpose of the Al-Qods committee, chaired by Morocco's King Mohammed VI, is to preserve the Islamic character of Jerusalem, whose Arab eastern sector was captured and annexed by Israel in 1967.

US to continue separate Indo-Pak policies: Rice

PTI, Washington

Sticking to a dual policy in its relations with India and Pakistan, the US has said it is cooperating with New Delhi on a range of issues while simultaneously working closely with Islamabad.

Stating that US hoped to use great power cooperation to solve Kashmir and other conflicts, US National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice said "the confluence of common interests and increasingly common values creates a moment of enormous opportunities."

"Instead of repeating the historic pattern where great power rivalry exacerbates local conflicts, we can

use great power cooperation to solve conflicts, from the Middle East to Kashmir, Congo and beyond," she said while delivering the Wriston Lecture at the Manhattan Institute in New York.

Defending President George W. Bush's National Strategy of pre-emptive or preventive wars, Rice said: "Preemption is not a new concept. There has never been a moral or legal requirement that a country wait to be attacked before it can address existential threats.... The US has long affirmed the right to anticipatory self-defence -- from the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 to the crisis on the Korean Peninsula in 1994."

"But," she said, "this approach must be treated with great caution. The number of cases in which it might be justified will always be small. It does not give a green light -- to the United States or any other nation -- to act first without exhausting other means, including diplomacy."

"Preemptive action does not come at the beginning of a long chain of effort. The threat must be very grave. And the risks of waiting must far outweigh the risks of action".

Meanwhile, US President George W. Bush would remain focussed on the "existing problems" between India and Pakistan which were a priority for his administration, the White House has said.

Israeli army practised Arafat exile operation

AFP, Jerusalem

The Israeli army has carried out a practice run of an operation to exile Yasser Arafat from the Palestinian territories and has even prepared a secret final destination for the Palestinian leader, the daily Maariv said Thursday.

Troops simulated the seizure of the Palestinian chief, whose headquarters were besieged for 10 days last month, and despatch at speed to an unnamed foreign country, the daily said, adding only that neither Jordan nor Lebanon was to be the destination. Maariv said the plan could be executed very rapidly if the Israeli leadership gave the green light for a banishment.

The operation would deploy helicopters and aides close to Arafat

could also be bundled off into exile with their boss.

The daily stressed however that after the latest siege of Arafat's Ramallah base and the harsh reaction of Washington, which forced Israel to back off, the plan had been put on ice "until further notice or until the American operation in Iraq is completed -- whichever comes first."

Maariv added that the plan had been fine-tuned at the request of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Israeli Defence Minister Binyamin Ben Eliezer.

Israeli hardliners have long been calling for Arafat's expulsion, accusing him of responsibility for every Palestinian act of violence against Israelis.

Afghan conflict continues despite UN efforts

AFP, Kabul

Factional fighting which has so far claimed at least three lives continues to blight northern Afghanistan despite United Nations efforts to broker peace, a UN spokesman said Thursday.

Manoel e Almeida de Silva said fighting in the Dara-i-Suff region of Samangan province between supporters of Uzbek strongman Abdul Rashid Dostam and warlord Atta Mohammad had ceased but there was still unrest in the area.

He said a UN Security Commission team had held talks with Ahmad Khan, the main commander in Samangan, over demilitarising the region and had secured a limited peace deal.

On Sunday the UN said three people had been killed in clashes around Dara-i-Suff over a change in security forces in the area, which is jointly controlled by Dostam's and Mohammad's men.

"A ceasefire was agreed upon.

The situation is calm and negotiations are ongoing," he said.

However, as the UN team returned to the main northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, they were forced to make a detour near Piruz Nakshir, also in Samangan, where there was more fighting between Dostam's and Mohammad's men.

"This was described as a local power struggle in abeyance, rekindled due to a dispute between two soldiers," e Almeida de Silva said.

"The Security Commission re-routed their return and were able to prevent further escalation of the conflict by imposing a ceasefire. Five people were reported as being injured."

"Unfortunately our office received information that the problem resurfaced last night. There was fighting last night (Wednesday) as well as this morning... the Security Commission is leaving Mazar again back to Piruz Nakshir to see what they can do to stop that fighting."



Friends and relatives carry the body of Palestinian Ahmed Stity, 45, in the West Bank town of Jenin on Thursday. Stity was shot in the head by Israeli troops at a fruit market during an exchange of fire, Palestinian security sources said.