

US marks 'day of justice' in anti-terror battle

AFP, Washington

The United States designated Friday a "defining day" in its anti-terror campaign, as officials said they had smashed a US-based terror cell, a court jailed an "American Taliban" for 20 years and a thwarted airline bomber pleaded guilty.

Six people, five of them US citizens, were charged with conspiring to wage war against the United States with Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida and the Taliban militia.

Four were in custody following a swoop by federal agents in Portland, Oregon, and Detroit, made public hours before John Walker Lindh, a US traitor who joined the Taliban, was jailed for 20 years at a court in Virginia.

7 'top' Hizbul militants held in Kashmir

REUTERS, Srinagar

Indian security forces said Saturday they had arrested seven "top" members of a Kashmiri rebel group involved in a series of attacks during the state assembly election.

The militants of the Hizbul Mujahideen group, which is fighting for Kashmir's merger with Pakistan, were arrested in separate raids by the Border Security Force (BSF) Friday, days before the final round of a crucial assembly election.

India sees the election, which ends next Tuesday, as a test of Pakistan's pledge to stop separatists entering the disputed territory, the cause of two wars between the nuclear neighbours which brought them to the brink of another conflict in June.

"We achieved a major breakthrough by apprehending the battalion commander of Hizbul Mujahideen along with six top associates during raids in Srinagar city Friday," a BSF spokesman said.

Karnataka to defy SC ruling on water sharing

AFP, Bangalore

The southern Indian state of Karnataka on Saturday decided against releasing water from the Cauvery river to neighbouring Tamil Nadu state, in defiance of a Supreme Court order.

The decision, taken at a meeting of the Karnataka state cabinet, was announced by Information Minister Kagodu Thimmappa to reporters here.

The decision came amidst reports of sporadic violence from parts of the state triggered by the row over water from the river, a lifeline to both provinces. Farmers from both states are dependent on the Cauvery water to irrigate their fields.

Arafat in favour of reforms even at cost of his powers

AFP, Cairo

Yasser Arafat has said he favours Palestinian political reforms even if they mean a reduction in his own powers, the Arabic-language daily Al-Hayat said Saturday.

In an interview with the London-based newspaper, Arafat said: "It was I who decided on the reforms, and if those reforms lead to a reduction in my prerogatives, I am in favour."

Under pressure from Israel and the United States, where his Palestinian Authority is widely viewed as inept and corrupt, Arafat appointed a new cabinet in June and has announced plans for elections.

Benazir denies pro-India tilt

PTI, Islamabad

Denying that she pursued a pro-India policy, former Pakistani Premier Benazir Bhutto has said she supported peace and dialogue with all neighbours including India and accused the military regime of "leaving behind" hundreds of young soldiers during the Kargil war.

Under the Musharraf government, Pakistan faces border tensions with India and Afghanistan, whereas peace prevailed with all neighbours during my tenure as prime minister, Benazir said in an interview to Pakistani daily The News.

Benazir also alleged that the Pakistan army's decision-makers left behind hundreds of young soldiers during the Kargil operations.



PHOTO: AFP
US Secretary of State Colin Powell (R) reacts to reporters' questions as chief United Nations weapons inspector Hans Blix (L front) and director of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Mohamed El-Baradei (L back) look on after their meeting on Friday at the State Department in Washington, DC. Blix reached an agreement with Iraqi officials on October 1, about new inspections under existing UN mandates.

US Congress set to give nod to Iraq attack

AFP, Washington

The US Congress on Friday inched closer to granting President George W. Bush his long-sought approval for a pre-emptive strike against Iraq, ahead of a speech by Bush next week in which he will outline his reasons for seeking military action against Baghdad.

Nevertheless, opponents were vociferous in their disapproval, particularly among Senate Democrats.

"Our first priority should be the successful completion of the war on terrorism," said Senator Bob Graham, a Democrat from Florida and chairman of the Intelligence Committee, in a speech on the Senate floor.

"Today, we Americans are more vulnerable to international terrorist organisations than we are to (Iraqi leader) Saddam Hussein," Graham said.

Bush's spokesman said the president hoped Monday's speech would sway detractors in the congress and in the public at large.

"As Congress begins the debate... it's important and it's helpful to members of Congress in both parties for them to hear what the president thinks," White House spokesman Ari Fleischer said.

"The country will benefit from an opportunity to hear the president reflect on the reasons that Saddam Hussein is such a clear threat to the United States," Fleischer said.

Meanwhile, the chief UN arms inspector on Friday threw his weight behind moves toward a new UN Security Council resolution on Iraq, but US officials admitted they lack the support for the tough resolution they want.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell and national security advisor Condoleezza Rice discussed moves toward sending a new disarmament mission to Iraq with chief UN arms inspector Hans Blix.

Washington said the tests would make it harder to prevent a nuclear arms race in South Asia.

"We're disappointed that ballistic missile tests are occurring in the region," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said Friday.

"There is a charged atmosphere in the region and these tests can contribute to that atmosphere, and make it harder to prevent a costly and destabilising nuclear and missile arms race."

Relations between the hostile neighbours deteriorated after Islamic militants -- who New Delhi says were backed by Islamabad -- attacked India's national parliament last December, killing 14 people. The attack sparked a tense

US asks Turkey to provide bases for attack on Iraq

AFP, Ankara

The United States has asked Turkey, a NATO member, for permission to use its air bases for possible military action against neighbouring Iraq, the NTV news channel reported on Saturday.

The request was the reason for a surprise meeting of the Turkish leadership on Friday, the channel said.

Turkish Foreign Minister Sukru Sina Gurel declined to comment on the issue when questioned by reporters in the western city of Izmir.

NTV quoted Gurel as saying that "such specific matters" could not be made public.

The US has requested to use the Incirlik base in southern Turkey. It also wants to increase the number of warplanes it already has stationed there, NTV said.

Incirlik has been home to US and British jets enforcing the northern no-fly zone over Iraq since the end of the 1991 Gulf War.

US warplanes used the base to launch air strikes on Iraq in 1991.

The United States has also asked for permission to use two other military bases in the southeastern cities of Diyarbakir and Batman, which are closer to the Iraqi border, according to the report.

The demands did not include a request for the deployment of US troops on Turkish soil.

Turkey is opposed to US military action against Iraq, fearing that a war in region could exacerbate its own economic woes and destabilize the Turkish-

Iraqi border, populated on both sides by Kurds.

But many observers believe that Turkey, a close Muslim ally of the United States, would reluctantly extend support to Washington if it decides to intervene in Iraq.

Ankara worries that toppling the Baghdad regime could prompt the Kurds in northern Iraq, who have set up a near autonomous region under the protection of the no-fly zone, to declare independence, something that could incite its own Kurds in adjoining southeast Turkey to renew their own efforts to break away.

President Ahmet Necdet Sezer on Friday convened a meeting on Iraq, which was attended by Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, the country's foreign and defense ministers, the army chief and the head of the intelligence service.

Sezer's spokesman Tacan Ildem said after the meeting that "for Turkey, military intervention which did not have international legitimacy would be unacceptable."

He added that Turkey considered it important to seek a peaceful settlement to the conflict, and he urged Iraq to comply with UN Security Council resolutions on disarmament.

Gurel reiterated Saturday that the dispute between Iraq and the US should be resolved peacefully, but added that if military action becomes inevitable it should have an international blessing.

World condemns fresh Indo-Pak missile tests

AFP, New Delhi

The United States, Britain and Canada have condemned rival missile tests by nuclear-armed India and Pakistan which were launched within a few hours of each other.

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military stand-off with about a million troops from both sides ranged along their common border since January.

Britain also expressed regret for the tests, with Junior Foreign Office Minister Mike O'Brien calling for restraint.

Britain "continues to believe that restraint is in the long-term interests" of the countries, he said.

The Foreign Office had contacted the embassies of both countries "indicating our concern," he added.

Canada added its voice to the international condemnation.

"Canada deeply regrets that Pakistan has once again chosen to test a ballistic missile, particularly at a time when tensions with India remain high," Foreign Minister Bill Graham said.

Pakistan was the first to test its home-grown Hatf-IV or Shaheen missile, with a range of up to 800 kilometres (500 miles), at 8:30 am (0230 GMT) Friday.

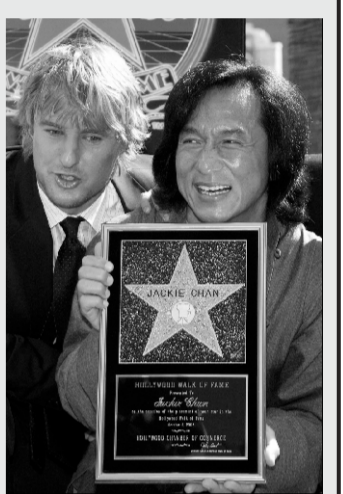
Hours later, India tested its Akash (Sky) missile, capable of travelling 25 kilometres (15 miles), off its east coast, in what it said was a "routine" exercise.

Boucher said Pakistan had informed US diplomats in Islamabad in advance that it was to carry out the test.

India had provided no such notification before its surface-to-air firing, he said, but stressed that when New Delhi had planned ballistic missile tests it had tipped off US diplomats.

Defence analysts on both sides of the border dismissed international concern over the tests.

"India had to do something to boost the morale of its people after Pakistan successfully tested its Shaheen missile," Pakistani defence analyst and retired air force marshal Ayaz Ahmed told AFP.



Jackie Chan gets Hollywood walk of fame

AFP, Los Angeles

Hong Kong action film hero Jackie Chan took his place among Tinseltown's most legendary celebrities on Friday when he received a prized star on the Hollywood walk of fame.

Chan, 48, who is Asia's top box office attraction in the United States, unveiled his permanent imprint in the heart of the spiritual home of cinema near the spot where the annual Academy Awards are held.

"I remember coming to Hollywood and seeing the stars and I wanted one," Chan said. "To show my appreciation, I will make better films."

Asia's biggest movie box office star for more than 20 years, Chan was asked what's next in his career and he said: "The Oscar."

Pakistan to turn its clocks back by an hour

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan will turn its clocks back by one hour at midnight Saturday to winter time, officials said, ending its first participation ever in daylight saving time.

The clocks were advanced one hour in April for the first time in Pakistan, in an experimental adoption of daylight saving time, putting the country six hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT).

Some 80 countries around the world already make use of daylight saving time.

Following the changeover, Pakistan will now be five hours ahead of GMT.



PHOTO: AFP
Snaunak Sompura, 6, gets his face painted at the "Know About Tiger" program to mark "National Wildlife Week" in Mumbai on Friday. The event was to raise awareness about the tiger and its wild habitats.

US envoy sets terms for better ties with N Korea

AFP, Seoul

US special envoy James Kelly indicated Saturday he had delivered to North Korean leaders a set of tough conditions for improved ties with the United States in "frank" and "useful" talks in Pyongyang.

Kelly, on his return from a landmark mission to North Korea, said he had brought up a wide range of problems that have put relations in deep freeze for two years.

Kelly said he offered the North the reward of better relations in return for progress on key issues. Pyongyang, desperate to combat economic collapse, is hoping reconciliation with Washington will lead to economic aid.

He said he had "explained how comprehensive efforts by North Korea to address our concerns could lead to improvement of US-DPRK (North Korea) relations."

US fears about North Korea's development of missiles and weapons of mass destruction have frozen ties with the reclusive Stalinist regime since President George W. Bush took office in January 2001.

No decision had been made for further negotiations, he said, but he added significantly that both sides "remain committed to addressing our concerns through dialogue."

"I felt that our exchanges in Pyongyang were frank as befits the seriousness of our differences and they were useful too," Kelly said in a

statement he read to journalists here.

Kelly's three-day visit from Thursday represented the highest level of sustained talks between Pyongyang and Washington since former secretary of state Madeleine Albright visited Pyongyang two years ago during the waning months of president Bill Clinton's second term.

President Bush reversed reconciliation efforts with the North when he took office, and earlier this year placed North Korea on the same level as Iraq and Iran as part of an "axis of evil."

Recent conciliatory steps by the Stalinist North have opened the way for the resumption of talks.

Pyongyang introduced market-opening measures in July and pushed for a series of agreements with the South in August, most notably on re-establishing road and rail links on the divided peninsula.

South Korea President Kim Dae-jung has staked his political reputation on reconciliation with North Korea and has pushed hard for US re-engagement.

He has also encouraged a Japanese drive for normalisation with the North, which resulted in last month's visit to North Korea by Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi.

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's political parties Saturday slammed King Gyanendra's sacking of caretaker Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba as unconstitutional and called emergency meetings to discuss the move.

King Gyanendra dismissed Deuba and the cabinet late Friday night, declaring he would temporarily take executive power and suspend national elections scheduled for next month.

In his national speech, Gyanendra described Deuba as "incompetent" and said the new caretaker prime minister would have a "clean image".

Gyanendra, a constitutional monarch whose role is supposedly largely ceremonial, said he would take political power until he nominated a new prime minister in five days time. He did not give a time frame for new polls.

Deuba expressed surprise at the monarch's shock move.

"As far as I have understood, the king cannot remove me as per the constitution," he said.

"I wanted elections. I had decided to postpone elections because everybody requested me to do so. That is why I decided to defer elections as per the constitution and according to the wishes of all the political parties," he said.

Deuba's sacking comes after he

Pak press slams new defamation laws

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani media on Saturday bitterly criticised new defamation laws in Pakistan which could see journalists jailed for up to three months, vowing an all-out fight against what it called a "legal minefield" for the press.

One of the laws, announced Tuesday by President Pervez Musharraf eight days ahead of the country's first national elections since 1997, foresees fines and possible jail against anyone who publishes or circulates a false statement which harms a person's standing.

"It makes one feel like one has wasted one's time for the past three years," Hameed Haroon, the head of the All Pakistan Newspaper Society (APNS) told AFP, in reference to the time that Musharraf has been in power since he led a military coup.



PHOTO: AFP
Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) chief Massoud Barzani (L), Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leader Jalal Talabani (R) and Danielle Mitterrand, widow of the late French president Francois Mitterrand (C) attend a parliament meeting on Friday in Erbil, the regional capital of the Kurdish enclave which came under the KDP control in the 1996 fighting in northern Iraq. The parliament endorsed a US-brokered deal between the two main Kurdish groups sharing control of northern Iraq at its first session in six years, crowning peace moves amid US threats to oust the Baghdad regime.