

Delhi shopping mall attackers shot dead

AFP, New Delhi

India said Monday that two Islamic militants killed by police at a New Delhi shopping mall ahead of a Hindu festival were Pakistanis, and stressed there would be no talks with Islamabad.

"It looks like these two men were from our neighbouring country. For some time they have been staying in nearby areas and came to Delhi a few days ago to carry out a big attack," Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani told reporters.

Speaking separately, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said such a "serious" incident showed there could be no talks with Pakistan.

5 men linked to Victoria kidnap plot charged with theft

AFP, London

Five men suspected of plotting to kidnap British pop star Victoria Beckham, wife of the England football captain David Beckham, have been charged with theft, police said Monday.

"Five men will appear in court today charged variously with theft and conspiracy to rob," a Scotland Yard spokesperson said. "The inquiries into the alleged conspiracy to kidnap continue."

Seven men and two women were arrested Saturday and Sunday in connection with an alleged plot to kidnap the former Spice Girl singer, reportedly with a view to demanding a five-million-pound (7.8 million dollar/euro) ransom for her and possibly her two small children.

Iran backtracks over detention of Laden's son

AFP, Tehran

Iran's foreign ministry said Monday it was unable to confirm or deny it had arrested and deported to Pakistan a son of fugitive al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden, just hours after a government spokesman confirmed the incident had taken place.

Foreign ministry spokesman Hamid-Reza Asefi confirmed that "foreign elements" had recently been arrested by border security forces and sent back to Pakistan, but said the identities of the group members remained unclear.



PHOTO: AFP
British actress Emma Watson arrives for the world premiere of the new film Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets in central London on Sunday. Emma Watson plays Hermione Granger in the second Harry Potter film The Chamber of secrets, the sequel to The Philosopher Stone.

KSA won't help any US strike on Iraq

Britain to mobilise 10,000 reservists for war

REUTERS, Dubai

Saudi Arabia, a key US ally in the Middle East, said Sunday it would not allow the United States to use facilities in the country to attack neighbouring Iraq, even if a strike was sanctioned by the United Nations.

"We will abide by the decision of the United Nations Security Council and we will cooperate with the Security Council. But as to entering the conflict or using facilities ... that is something else," Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal said.

"Our policy is that if the United Nations takes a decision on Chapter 7, it is obligatory on all signatories to cooperate but that is not to the extent of using facilities in the country or the military forces of the country," he told CNN.

Chapter 7 of the UN Charter makes it mandatory for member states to implement any mea-

sure immediately as part of international law.

The remarks were the strongest rejection by Saudi Arabia -- which was a launchpad for the US-led 1991 Gulf War that drove Iraqi troops out of Kuwait after a seven-month occupation -- of any assistance to a possible US attack on Iraq.

The rejection comes in the midst of strained relations between the strategic allies over last year's Sept. 11 attacks on the United States, in which 15 of the 19 men believed to be the suicide attackers were Saudis, and Saudi anger at what it sees as US bias toward Israel in the Middle East conflict.

Saud said there was no crisis in ties between the US and the kingdom, the largest oil exporter to the United States.

Washington could launch an attack on Iraq without using bases inside Saudi Arabia, but the air campaign would be more difficult if it could not

use Saudi air space.

Mary Malin, counselor to Vice President Dick Cheney, told CNN's "Late Edition" program following Saud's comments that the United States had many other allies it could depend on.

AFP adds: Britain will this week announce the mobilisation of 10,000 army reservists in preparation for a war on Iraq, the right-wing Daily Telegraph reported Monday.

In a move not seen since the Korean War, a Queen's Order will give defence chiefs widespread and highly controversial rights to call up many more people than would normally be available, the paper said.

The special order will give the army the possibility of mobilising the reservists for an unlimited period, the report said.

A ministry of defence spokesman said that no such decision had yet been made.



PHOTO: AFP
Sri Lankan Tamil devotees make offerings at a Hindu temple in Colombo on Monday during celebrations for the "Diwali" Festival or the Festival of Lights. The traditional Hindu festival is being celebrated by Sri Lankan Tamils for the first time in a peaceful environment since 1983. Peace talks to end Sri Lanka's ethnic separatist conflict is currently underway. The Tamil rebels and the government made significant breakthroughs in Bangkok on Sunday in a bid to end the conflict that had claimed over 60,000 lives.

Sharon faces no-confidence

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon faces a new challenge to his political survival on Monday with parliament set to vote on the first no-confidence measure since his broad coalition government collapsed last week.

Israeli lawmakers are due to begin the debate on the motion brought by the left-wing opposition Meretz party at 9 a.m. EST.

Sharon is expected to weather the vote after securing the support of an ultra-nationalist opposition party to bolster his minority government's 55 seats in the 120-member assembly.

He is currently courting the party, the far-right National Union-Yisrael Beitenu faction, to join his new government.

But his term of office, now 19 months old, has been increasingly threatened by domestic political turmoil since the centre-left Labour Party bolted government last week in a dispute over funding for Jewish settlements.

On Sunday, hawkish former

Prime Minister and political rival Benjamin Netanyahu demanded early elections as a condition for accepting Sharon's offer of the post of foreign minister.

Any alliance between the two would likely be uneasy, as Netanyahu still plans to challenge Sharon for the Likud leadership in the next election Israel holds.

Netanyahu, 53, served as Likud prime minister from 1996 to 1999.

"Everyone knows we can't do the right thing with the current parliament," Netanyahu told Channel One television.

"In my view, the Likud will double its power in these elections and will be able to build a government which can offer solutions to save the economy... Why should we wait?"

Palestinian officials have expressed alarm that an Israeli government dominated by right-wingers and ultra-nationalists would take an even harder line against their two-year-old uprising for statehood.

A staunchly right-wing government under Sharon could also

disrupt U.S. efforts to restore calm to the Middle East as it seeks support for possible war on Iraq.

Netanyahu said in a statement after he met Sharon on Sunday that he "agreed to accept the position of Israel's foreign minister provided the government goes to early elections to salvage Israel's ailing economy."

An early ballot would likely be held by May, and Sharon had already been considering the move if he failed to forge a narrow right-wing government. By law, Sharon must hold a national ballot no later than October 2003.

Political commentators said the move by Netanyahu, popularly known as "Bibi," was an evasive tactic as he faced pressure in the Likud party to join the government but was loath to serve under Sharon's wing ahead of Likud leadership elections.

Opinion polls show the Likud growing to become the largest party in parliament by the next ballot, outstripping Labour which currently holds that role.

Kuwait closes Al-Jazeera office

AFP, Kuwait City

Kuwait closed down the office of Qatar's satellite channel Al-Jazeera because it took a "hostile" stand against Kuwait and for security reasons, senior Kuwaiti officials said in newspaper remarks published Monday.

"I believe the closure of this shop is better for security reasons. I don't consider it an office as much as I consider it a shop," Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah was quoted as saying in Al-Rai Al-Aam.

Sheikh Sabah said the station does not represent Qatar and that he was keen to separate the two.

Al-Jazeera correspondent Saad al-Enezi told AFP on Sunday that he had received a telephone call from Kuwait's information ministry officially notifying him that a decision had been taken to close down the station.

"They said it was because Al-Jazeera is biased," Enezi said.

Kuwaiti Information Minister Sheikh Ahmad al-Fahd al-Sabah told Al-Watan: "News should be carried in a professional way by Al-Jazeera," whose coverage of recent events here "took a hostile (stand) against Kuwait."

Milosevic's ill health again delays war crimes trial

AFP, The Hague

The war crimes trial of Slobodan Milosevic was again delayed on Monday because of the former Yugoslav president's poor health, a court spokesman said.

"He needs another day to rest," court spokesman Jim Landale told AFP.

The trial was adjourned Friday when Milosevic, 61, did not appear in court, complaining of exhaustion and fatigue.

Milosevic has repeatedly fallen ill during the trial that started on February 12. After extensive health checks, doctors found Milosevic was facing "severe cardiac risks" and recommended shorter trial days.

The court has been working with a new system with less court time since the second part of the case, focusing on Bosnia and Croatia, started on September 25.

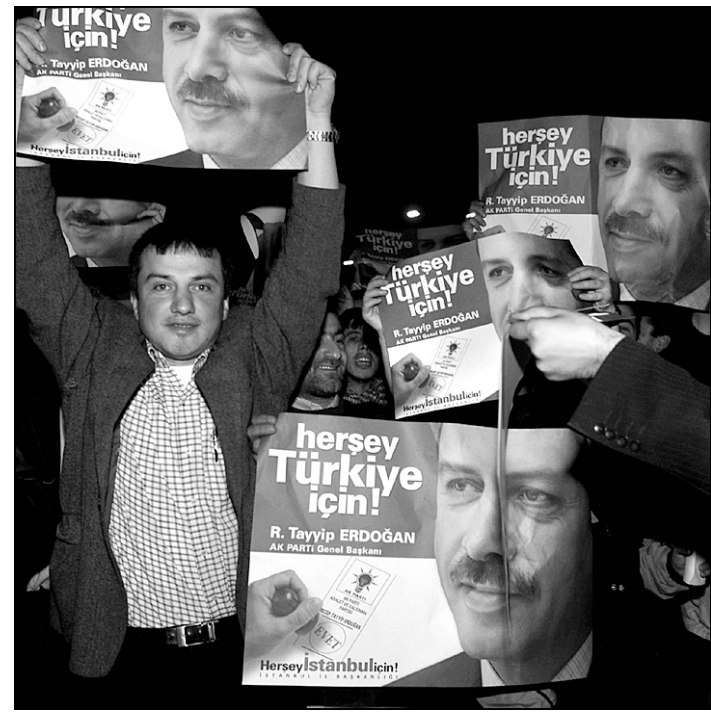


PHOTO: AFP
Pro-Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) supporters celebrate with posters of leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan after polling stations closed in the early general elections in Istanbul on Sunday.

Islamists ready for power after Turkey polls win

AFP, Ankara

Turkey's main Islamist party was laying plans on Monday to form a new government after a spectacular election win that left it in solid control of the secular nation's parliament.

Voters disenchanted with months of political chaos and the worst recession since World War II on Sunday handed a landslide win to the novice Justice and Development Party (AK), the first Islamist party in the nation's history ever to have an outright majority in parliament.

The AK moved to reassure nervous Western allies but faces wide suspicion it is hiding an Islamist agenda behind its moderate rhetoric -- a key concern now that it may hold a two-thirds majority that could allow it to amend the secular constitution.

Meanwhile the powerful army, a cornerstone of NATO and crucial to US war plans in neighbouring Iraq, forced an Islamist-led government from power five years ago and will have strong reservations about AK, founded just last year.

With all ballots counted, the AK won 34.2 percent, Anatolia news agency said, giving it 363 of 550

parliamentary seats and leaving it in the driver's seat to form Turkey's first single-party government in more than a decade.

Outgoing Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit, 77, saw his three-party coalition wiped off the map as voters dumped the ruling political establishment from power without a single seat.

"Social explosion at the ballot box," the Hurriyet newspaper headlined. But Radikal daily warned: "Turkey may have achieved 'one-party rule', one of the main conditions for political stability, but a majority of the votes are not represented in parliament."

"There is a legitimacy crisis," it said.

AK leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a controversial figure barred from office because of a 1998 conviction for Islamist sedition, insisted his party would keep Turkey in line with the West and on track for EU membership.

"The first thing we will do will be to accelerate the EU process," the charismatic 48-year-old told NTV news channel.

The battle to join the European Union was part of Ecevit's undoing, when his coalition collapsed earlier

Quito covered with ash as volcano erupts

REUTERS, Quito

Ecuador's El Reventador volcano erupted on Sunday, covering the capital Quito with thick ash that sparked health warnings and forced the airport to close indefinitely, authorities said.

Although there were no known fatalities from the avalanche of burning rock, health officials warned the city's 1.4 million inhabitants to stay indoors because of the danger of inhaling ash from the volcano about 60 miles to the east.

"Stay calm and don't leave your homes ... If you have to leave, please cover your nose and mouth with a damp cloth," said Col. Miguel Flores, civil defence chief for the Quito area, describing the ash as harmful if inhaled.

Juan Neira, manager of Quito's water company, told Reuters the company was studying the possible impact of ash contaminating drinking water.

Stage set for Senate race

AP, Washington

With control of the Senate to be determined by several close races, Republicans are counting on voters who worry about the nation's security while Democrats seek to attract those angered by a bad economy.

Despite the two parties' best efforts, there appears to be no national issue in Tuesday's election that will decide control of a Senate that now has 49 Democrats, 49 Republicans and independent James Jeffords of Vermont, who usually sides with the Democrats.

There is, however, the national suspense of dead-heat contests that make the Senate outcome unpredictable. And there is drama in Minnesota, where former Vice President Walter Mondale, who replaced the late Democratic Sen. Paul Wellstone, is conducting a one-week campaign one of the shortest in history.

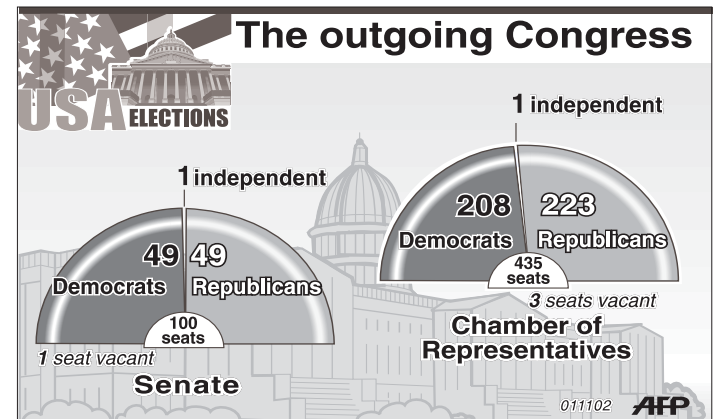
Senate races in Colorado, Missouri, New Hampshire, South Dakota, Georgia and North Carolina are extremely close. Late polls indicate. The South Dakota contest

between Democratic incumbent Tim Johnson and Republican Rep. John Thune has become a proxy fight between Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D., and President Bush, who recruited Thune.

Republicans are defending 20 of the 34 seats in Tuesday's election. Sen. Bill Frist of Tennessee, the Senate Republican fund-raising chief, and his Democratic counterpart, Sen. Patty Murray of

Washington, tried on Sunday talk shows to steer voters toward thinking about national problems.

"I think we do have to look at that larger environment, an environment that has been very much coloured by what happened September the 11th a year ago, the subsequent anthrax attacks, the recent sniper shooting here in Washington, D.C. ...," Frist said on CBS' "Face The Nation." "People don't feel very secure today."



Bhutan's king paves way for democratic reforms

AFP, Thimphu

Bhutan's King Jigme Singye Wangchuck is held in such high esteem that when he offered to give up some of his hereditary powers, members of parliament immediately asked him to reconsider.

But the king, who came to the throne in 1972 at the age of 16 after the death of his father King Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, stuck to his decision that the remote Himalayan country should be run along more democratic lines.

Four years ago he devolved executive authority to an elected council of ministers and further radical political changes followed.

The king has ordered decentralisation of powers to village committees which are elected by the people, universal adult suffrage was introduced earlier this year and he has set up a committee to draft the country's first constitution, which is expected to include the introduction of political parties.

"The first draft of the constitution

will be ready very soon and it will include the role of the monarch," said Prime Minister Kinzang Dorji.

"It then has to go through consultations with the people and parliament."

The king is the fourth hereditary monarch of the tiny country, which has a population of 699,000. Bordered by India to the south and east and by China in the north, Bhutan's people follow Mahayana Buddhism, which has unique beliefs and practices.

Bhutan was never colonised and fiercely protected its independence and isolation from the world, only allowing foreigners to enter since the 1970s and joining the UN in 1971. Television was only permitted in 1971.

Local elections taking place this month will be the first since a universal adult suffrage law was passed earlier this year. Previously each household had one vote.

"It will be the first election when every adult is eligible to cast a vote," Dorji said.

Of the 150 members of the National Assembly, 105 are elected, 35 are appointed by the king and 10 are representatives of Buddhist groups.

In each of the country's 20 dzong, or districts, the governor, who is appointed by the government, used to be in charge of all local administration.

But this year the king surprised everyone by saying that power would now rest with the village committees.

"People in the local areas will be in charge of decision-making, fiscal devolution. It is a very new initiative," the prime minister said.

"His Majesty has given his powers to the people. No other king has done this. The trust he has put in them is enormous," said Pem Dorji, governor of the Wangdue Phodrange dzong in central Bhutan.

Analyst Karma Ura from the Centre for Bhutan Studies said many people in Bhutan could not

understand why the king wanted to give up his powers.

"People are happy to be ruled by the king and feel that he has their best interests at heart. In a Buddhist country, the king is both a teacher and a leader and embodies wisdom and compassion."

"It is true that the leadership been progressive and the king is pushing people towards new political frontiers."

Ura added: "Bhutan is a substantive democracy. It may not be multiparty democracy but the substance of democracy is fulfilled."

"This is partly because we have such a small population so that at a grassroots level people can make themselves heard."

But it remains to be seen whether Bhutan is really on the path to full democracy.

The king's word is still law -- as seen in his proclamations on decentralisation -- and there are people who believe that the constitution will be a whitewash.