

Prince Charles marks his 54th birthday



The Prince of Wales is given flowers to celebrate his 54th birthday as he greets the crowd on Thursday after his visit to The Jobcentre Plus in Cheetham Hill, Manchester.

Britain's Prince Charles marked a low-key 54th birthday Thursday, as allegations of a male rape scandal lingered over officials in his household.

Charles, heir to the British throne, was given an unusual rendition of "Happy Birthday" by a group of Barber Shop singers in Manchester, northwest England, far away from his London palace, which has been the focus of lurid newspapers headlines for two weeks.

2 killed in Kashmir violence

Indian troops shot dead a Muslim militant along the de facto border with Pakistan in Kashmir, where rebels killed a civilian and injured three soldiers in attacks, police said yesterday.

An Islamic rebel was killed by the Indian army along the Line of Control, which separates Kashmir between arch-rivals India and Pakistan, late Thursday in the southern district of Poonch, police said.

"By killing the militant security forces foiled an attempt by militants to sneak into Poonch," a police spokesman said.

But he said the army was hunting for any militants who managed to escape during the fighting on the de facto border.

In another southern district, Doda, suspected rebels overnight shot dead a contractor, Abdul Qayoon, police said.

They said they were investigating the motive for the killing. No rebel group has claimed responsibility for killing Qayoon, who was Muslim.

Blast on bus in Pakistan: 2 killed

An explosion on a passenger bus in Pakistan's southern city of Hyderabad killed two Pakistanis early Friday, officials and a local aid worker said.

"Two people have been killed and between seven and nine people injured," Sindh province home affairs secretary Brigadier Mukhtar Sheikh told AFP.

The blast occurred at around 9:40 am (0440 GMT), as security authorities braced for angry reactions to the execution in the US hours earlier of a Pakistani convicted of murdering two CIA agents in 1993.

Police said they were investigating whether the blast was linked to Mir Aimal Kasi's execution, but there was no immediate proof of a link.

International schools closed in Jakarta

International schools in the Indonesian capital Jakarta closed Friday following US and Australian warnings that they could be the target of a terrorist attack.

'Return of arms inspectors must fend off US meddling'

Baghdad predicts more trouble

AFP, AP, Baghdad

Iraq's ruling Baath Party said Friday that returning UN arms inspectors must show they can resist the anticipated US meddling in their work after Baghdad agreed to the "unfair and provocative" disarmament Resolution 1441.

Iraq's acceptance of the Security Council resolution despite its "bad and unfair" terms puts the inspectors "to the test," the party's mouthpiece Ath-Thawra wrote in a front-page editorial.

The UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and their experts will be tested "on their reaction to the anticipated US interference in their work," it said.

It has also to be seen if the inspectors will display "professionalism, neutrality and integrity" in keeping with the UN Charter and international law, the paper said.

UNMOVIC chief Hans Blix and IAEA director general Mohamed ElBaradei are due in Baghdad on Monday with a team of experts to begin the process of implementing Resolution 1441 aimed at scrapping Iraq's alleged nuclear, biological and chemical weapons programs.

UNMOVIC was set up in 1999 to replace the former UNSCOM arms commission, which was castigated by Baghdad as "a bunch of spies" for the United States.

Iraq has not tired of saying in the past few months that its allegations about UNSCOM have been vindicated by the former inspectors themselves, namely ex-commission chief Rolf Ekeus and senior inspector Scott Ritter.

Blix's arrival with an advance party on Monday will mark the first time arms inspectors have come to Iraq since UNSCOM pulled out of the country in December 1998 on the eve of a US-British bombing blitz.

Indeed, said Ath-Thawra, one of the reasons Iraq acquiesced to the "provocative" new resolution is that the inspectors have pledged to do their job professionally, impartially and with integrity and to act as UN employees who report to the United Nations and the Security Council and not to any other side.

Meanwhile, a day after accepting a tough new UN resolution, Iraq on Thursday predicted more trouble ahead with the United States as it prepares to receive the first weapons inspectors in nearly four years.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair, meanwhile, combined a renewed threat of force with an assurance to the Iraqi people that they would be richer if Saddam Hussein was gone.

Babil newspaper, owned by Saddam's son Oday, called on Iraq's traditional Security Council allies Russia, France and China to remain vigilant about America's true intentions.

"Our problem and crisis with the United States is not over yet and may have just begun," the influential newspaper said in a front-page editorial.

Hu takes China's helm with Jiang in shadows

REUTERS, Beijing

China's Hu Jintao took the helm of the world's most populous nation Friday to steer its booming economy and maintain tight Communist Party control with predecessor Jiang Zemin pulling strings from retirement.

Hu, 59, was formally appointed Communist Party chief and head of the "fourth generation" of leaders -- following Chairman Mao Zedong, Deng Xiaoping and Jiang -- after months of secretive jockeying for power among the retiring old guard.

The new lineup emerged from behind a carved wooden screen in the Soviet-style Great Hall of the People in the final act of the first succession in Communist China untroubled by purges, plots or bloodshed.



The televised ceremony was the first many ordinary Chinese learned of the most sweeping shakeup since Jiang took power in 1989 after a bloody crackdown on student protests on Tiananmen Square.

six Jiang allies, guaranteeing him a say in decision making as China grapples with rising unemployment and emerges as a world power.

"The more people you have, the less power each individual has," said one Chinese political scientist, who declined to be identified. "And the more allies Jiang has, the more he can influence decision-making after retirement."

Jiang also kept his post as head of the Central Military Commission (CMC), which commands the world's biggest armed forces, as Deng did for two years after leaving the Standing Committee in 1987.

Vice Premier Wu Bangguo, 61, emerged second and is expected to take over the parliament in March next year, when the old guard leaders step down from their government posts.

Japanese N-reactor shut down

AFP, Tokyo

Japan's Kansai Electric Power Co Inc. said yesterday it had shut down a reactor due to a worsening leakage of radioactive water from a pipe but said the leak caused no contamination of the outer environment.

The company completed the shutdown of the Number Three reactor at the Mihama plant, 350 kilometres west of Tokyo, at 8:53 am (2353 GMT Thursday), a spokesman said.

Kansai Electric traced the leakage of water from a welded part of a pipe connected to a coolant-water pump in the primary system of the reactor on Tuesday and tried to fix the problem while continuing to operate the reactor.

But the leakage worsened and 5,640 litres (1,420 gallons) had escaped as of 2:00 am (1700 GMT Thursday), prompting the company to stop the 826,000-kilowatt pressurised-water reactor.



Makdoom Faisal Saleh Hayat (2nd L) and Rao Sikander Iqbal (C), key leaders of the dissident group of Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) of ex-premier Benazir Bhutto, escorts other like-minded party members in Islamabad, late Thursday to hold a press conference. A split surfaced in Benazir's party as their ten national assembly members said they would support formation of a government of national consensus.

PA declares war on peace efforts with LTTE

AFP, Colombo

The Sri Lankan president's party Friday slammed Norway's attempts to broker peace on the island and accused Britain and the United States of supporting and rewarding the "terrorism" of Tamil Tiger rebels.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA) in a seven-page statement virtually declared war on the Norwegian-backed peace process aimed at ending three decades of ethnic bloodshed in the country.

Kumaratunga's party took strong exception to the United States and Britain taking part in a November 25 donors meeting in Oslo to raise money for the island's fragile peace process.

Oslo ... that notwithstanding resounding universal declarations that terrorism must be resisted in all its manifestations, terrorism will in fact be rewarded when the interests of certain donor countries merge with the interests of a terrorist group," the statement said.

The US team to the Oslo meet is due to be headed by Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, and the British delegation by International Development Secretary Clare Short.

Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) are expected to address the Oslo meet while the premier is also due to hold talks in Oslo with the Tiger negotiator Anton Balasingham.

Kumaratunga had invited Norway to broker peace in the island more than five years ago, but her initiative was put on hold in May last year.

When Wickremesinghe's United National Party (UNP) defeated Kumaratunga's PA at parliamentary elections in December last year, he revived the peace process. The president and premier have since been in an uneasy cohabitation.

The PA statement, the party's strongest criticism of the peace process yet, came only three days after Kumaratunga acknowledged that there had been progress since a truce went into effect February 23.

However, on Friday the president's party called for a complete review of the terms of the ceasefire agreement.



Pope John Paul II addresses the Italian Parliament's Chamber of Deputies (Lower House) on Thursday. For the first time, a pope addressed Italy's Parliament, a visit laden with historical significance for the Vatican's relations with Italy.

Al-Qaida planning major attack: FBI

AP, Washington

Al-Qaida may be planning a "spectacular" terrorist attack intended to damage the US economy and inflict large-scale casualties, the FBI warns.

An FBI law enforcement bulletin circulated Thursday to officials nationwide contains no information about the timing, location or method of a possible attack. Even so, the warning is unusual because of its dire language.

"Sources suggest al-Qaida may favor spectacular attacks that meet several criteria: High symbolic value, mass casualties, severe damage to the U.S. economy and maximum psychological trauma," says the alert, which was posted on the FBI's Web site early Friday after its existence was reported by The New York Times and The Associated Press.

The highest priority targets remain within the aviation, petroleum and nuclear sectors, as well as significant national landmarks, it adds.

Federal authorities previously have issued warnings for those specific industries and national landmarks in general. But there is clearly worry that the danger of an attack is growing because of increased "chatter" picked up through intelligence channels, the continuing US showdown with Iraq and the recently revealed audiotaped warnings believed to be from al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden.

Still, the latest warning has not led the Bush administration to raise the terrorist threat level above code yellow, or "elevated," which is the middle of a five-level scale of risk developed after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Eminem big winner at MTV Europe Music Awards 2002

AFP, Barcelona

Controversial "white rapper" Eminem was the big winner at the 2002 MTV Europe Music Awards Thursday, taking home three prizes.

The US rap sensation, already triumphant at the MTV Video Awards in New York last summer, picked up the awards for best European male artist, best hip-hop artist and best album for "The Eminem Show".

Eminem, who made a stunning leap from music icon to Hollywood star with the recent US success of his semi-autobiographical first film "8 Mile", dedicated his awards to his fans. "Thanks a lot. I couldn't do it without you guys," he said, visibly moved.

Australian singer Kylie Minogue and American groups Red Hot Chili Peppers and Linkin Park also each picked up two awards each.



R&B group Destiny's Child performs during the Victoria's Secret 8th Annual Fashion show in New York on Thursday.

White House, Congress reach deal on Sept 11 probe

AFP, Washington

The White House said Thursday it had reached agreement with key lawmakers to create an independent commission to look into intelligence failures that preceded the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on US targets.

"It appears Congress is ready to move forward on a strong, bipartisan commission," spokesman Scott McClellan said, confirming plans to establish a 10-person panel evenly divided between Republicans and opposition Democrats.

Under the accord, US President George W. Bush would appoint the commission's chairperson, while Democrats would choose the vice-chairperson.

The remaining eight members would be evenly chosen by the Republican and Democrat Senate and House leaders, according to a senior Senator Republican aide.

It would require six votes or an agreement between the chairperson and vice-chairperson to issue subpoenas, said McClellan.

The commission's report would be released 18 months after its enactment.

The measure could be passed by both chambers of Congress as early as Thursday night or Friday, the aide said.

"This is a decisive victory for the families of September 11 victims and the nation as a whole. Finally we will get a clear clean picture of

what government agencies failed, how they failed and why," Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman said.

But the Senate's top Democrat earlier Thursday questioned whether US President George W. Bush was winning the war on terrorism at home or abroad, noting that the global effort has yet to snare Osama bin Laden.

"We haven't found bin Laden. We haven't made any real progress in many of the other areas involving the key elements of al-Qaeda," bin Laden's militant group, said Senate Democratic Majority Leader Tom Daschle.

"They continue to be as great a threat today as they were a year and a half ago. So by what measure can we say this has been successful so far?" said Daschle, whose party loses the majority come January.

His comments came as US officials privately acknowledged that a recently broadcast audiotape attributed to bin Laden was authentic, meaning the Saudi-born extremist is therefore probably still alive.

If confirmed, the tape would be the first solid proof that the mastermind of the September 11, 2001, terrorist strikes that left more than 3,000 dead on US soil had survived the US-led military campaign that crushed his Taliban hosts in Afghanistan.

Daschle and other leading Democrats also questioned why the

establishment of an independent commission to investigate the attacks had been dropped from a compromise measure to set up a multibillion-dollar Department of Homeland Security with 170,000 employees.

That bill passed the House Wednesday by a vote of 299-121 and was expected to come to a vote on the Senate floor as early as Friday.

The CIA, FBI and other US intelligence agencies have come under heavy fire for their failures to connect the dots from information flooding in that indicated an impending spectacular terrorist attack last year aimed at causing massive casualties.

CIA chief George Tenet told a congressional hearing here last month that US intelligence, although stretched to the limit after years of budget cuts, had disrupted a series of terrorist attacks prior to the September 11 strikes.

"We never acquired the level of detail that allowed us to translate our strategic concerns into something we could act on," he acknowledged before a joint House and Senate Intelligence panel.

Meanwhile Bush, who last year said he wanted bin Laden "dead or alive," said Wednesday Washington would take the threats on the latest tape very seriously regardless of whether the voice was bin Laden's.

Ban on VHP yatra will be enforced: Vajpayee

PTI, New Delhi

In a clear message to VHP which has vowed to defy the Election Commission ban, Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee on Friday asked "all organisations" to honour the ban and said Godhra and the violence after it should not be made election issue in Gujarat. "The Government of Gujarat has done the right thing by acting as per the directive of the Election Commission to prohibit religious processions in the state ahead of the Assembly elections on December 12."

"I appeal to all organisations to honour this directive issued by the Constitutional authority and help the state administration in discharging its duty," Vajpayee said, in a statement, a day after VHP decided to defy the Commission's ban and go ahead with its 'padshahi yatra' from Godhra on Sunday.

Disagreeing with the BJP criticism of the Commission's decision, the Prime Minister said "on the face of it the decision might look wrong but given the circumstances in Gujarat, the ban order is alright."

In his statement, Vajpayee said "with elections less than a month away, it is natural for political and social organisations to want to go among the people and conduct their campaign. It is their democratic right."