

Myanmar begins mass release of political prisoners

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's ruling junta said Thursday it had begun freeing a group of 115 political prisoners, the biggest single release since United Nations-brokered reconciliation talks began two years ago.

"The release of the prisoners started to take place in various parts of the country since this morning," a government spokesman told AFP.

The mass release came as pressure mounted on the government to advance a reconciliation process with the opposition led by Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, which UN envoy Razali Ismail kicked off in October 2000.

Since then more than 400 dissidents have been freed from jail in small groups and Aung San Suu Kyi has been released from house arrest, but the junta has reneged on promises to begin political talks with the opposition.

Razali visited Myanmar last week in another effort to kick-start the stalled process, but came away disappointed over the lack of progress and saying he had pushed the junta to release 200 more prisoners by the end of the year.

Musharraf to hand over power to civilian PM in 'one or two days'

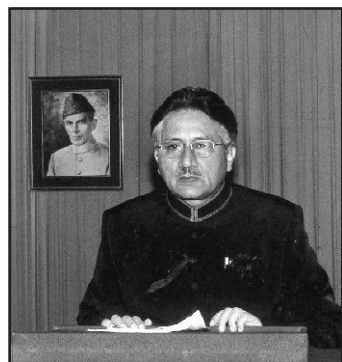
AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf, who took charge of the country in a 1999 coup, will hand power to a civilian prime minister "in the next one or two days", he said in a televised address to the nation on Wednesday.

"Within the next one or two days I will be fulfilling my promise and will hand over the responsibilities of government to the new prime minister," he said.

The transferral of power from Musharraf to a civilian prime minister, who was elected from the National Assembly on Thursday at 10:00 am (0500GMT), would be the final step in the president's "roadmap to democracy" which he foreshadowed in August 2001.

The country's transition back to democracy began with general



elections on October 10 to the 342-seat national assembly, which resulted in a hung parliament.

The elections were followed by last Friday's reactivation of the constitution -- including controversial amendments written by Musharraf -- and the inauguration of the national assembly on Saturday.

The pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q)'s candidate Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali won the prime minister's position and head the future civilian government, keeping control of parliament within Musharraf's grasp.

The key slots of speaker and deputy speaker in the assembly have already gone to Musharraf loyalists.

The general, who took an oath on Saturday to be president for the next five years, said during his national address, that he would continue to play a role in the country's progress.

"Our government has shown the right path and corrected the direction of the country. The ship of the nation has been steered clear from the stormy seas and is well set on its destination," he said.

Israel to react swiftly to Jerusalem blast

Tel Aviv to dismantle 'terrorist entity': Gissin

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel will "respond rapidly to stem a wave of terrorist attacks" after a suicide bomber killed 11 people on a Jerusalem bus Thursday, a spokesman for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon said.

"Mr Sharon has met with Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz. Adequate orders have been given to the army, for the moment there is no meeting of the security cabinet," spokesman Raanan Gissin told AFP.

Gissin and Public Security Minister Uzi Landau said the suicide bomber came from Bethlehem, a Palestinian town on the southern edge of Jerusalem which the army

quit on August 19 on the understanding that Palestinian security forces would halt attacks against Israel.

"It's completely systematic, as the Israeli army quits this town, this is the Palestinian response to Israeli gestures," Gissin said.

Gissin said the same had happened in the city of Hebron, in the southern West Bank, where Islamist gunmen killed 12 Israeli troops and security guards last Friday just weeks after the army pulled back from reoccupied Palestinian zones.

Landau told reporters at the scene of the bus blast in Jerusalem that the suicide bomber came from Bethlehem. "The man who blew himself up most likely came from

Bethlehem," he said.

A small Israeli unit of several jeeps and a tank raided Bethlehem before dawn, the army said.

Meanwhile, Israel will continue dismantling the Palestinian Authority, which finances attacks on Israelis, a spokesman for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon vowed Thursday after a rush-hour suicide bomb attack in Jerusalem killed at least 11 people.

"We will ensure that we can continue the process of dismantling this terrorist entity and replacing it with something or someone that will be willing to be real partners for peace and not partners for continuing terrorist activities," spokesman Raanan Gissin said on BBC radio.

Arab ministers hold talks on ME peace, Iraq

AFP, Damascus

Arab foreign ministers kicked off talks in Damascus Wednesday night concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the US confrontation with Iraq.

Arab League chief Amr Mussa and 11 foreign ministers were set to discuss a US-backed roadmap for peace that looks to establish a Palestinian state alongside Israel by 2005, an Arab League source told AFP.

The plan, drafted by the diplomatic quartet of the United States, Russia, European Union and the United Nations, has been accepted in principle by the Palestinians and moderate Arab states like Egypt and Jordan.

Israel also backed the plan, although its newly appointed Foreign Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has since said it is "not

on the agenda" for the narrow right-wing caretaker government that will hold power until early elections in late January.

Hardline Arab state Syria and its smaller neighbour Lebanon have given a lukewarm response to the proposal which they perceive as not addressing Syria's rights to the Golan Heights, which Israel captured from Syria in 1967.

The roadmap was discussed with Arab states by US envoy William Burns during a regional tour last month.

The two-day meeting gathers the foreign ministers of Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Yemen and the Palestinian Authority, who make up with Mussa a follow-up committee for an Arab peace initiative.

The Saudi-inspired initiative adopted by the Arab summit held in

March in Beirut offers Israel normal ties with the Arab world in return for its withdrawal from all the territories occupied in the 1967 Middle East war.

Tunisian Foreign Minister Habib Ben Yahia and Libya's Minister for African Unity Ali Abdel Salam Triki were also attending the meeting.

A top official participating in the talks told AFP on condition of anonymity that the ministers were looking to forge common Arab positions on Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Meanwhile, Lebanese Foreign Minister Mahmoud Hammoud, whose country chairs the rotating presidency of the Arab League, said Tuesday the meeting had "an exceptional character" because it would examine ways "to delay" a US-strike on Iraq.



A bus burns after turning over on Wednesday in Mandla, some 40 km from Jabalpur in Madhya Pradesh state. At least 60 people were killed when the passenger bus caught fire after overturning from a burst tire.

60 killed as bus catches fire in India

AFP, Bhopal

At least 60 people have died in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh when a bus caught fire after a passenger carrying cans of fuel lit a cigarette, an official said Thursday.

Thirty people were being treated -- mostly for burn injuries -- in hospital, district collector Sanjay Shukla told AFP.

The accident occurred late Wednesday in Maniri village, 600 km from the state capital Bhopal. So far, 21 bodies have been recovered. The rest are charred beyond recognition, the official said.

According to survivors, the overcrowded bus was carrying more than 100 people, most of whom were returning from a village fair, when the accident occurred.

Preliminary investigations suggested that a lit cigarette from a passenger lugging two cans of petrol was responsible for the explosion, Shukla said.

Due to the remoteness of the village, it took more than two hours for the fire brigade to reach the scene.

India, China begin talks on border dispute

AFP, New Delhi

Senior Indian and Chinese government officials began talks here Thursday on a longstanding border dispute, but discussions could also cover international terrorism and the situation in Iraq, an Indian official said.

Indian foreign secretary Kanwal Sibal, the highest-ranked bureaucrat in the foreign ministry, was heading the Indian delegation to the one-day talks being held at an undisclosed venue here.

The Chinese side is headed by vice foreign minister Wang Yi, who was slated to meet Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha for a one-on-one later in the day.

"The two sides will have two sessions at which issues relating to

the India-China boundary question and other bilateral aspects of India-China relations will be discussed," an Indian foreign ministry statement said.

The two countries share a 4,000 kilometre (2,480 mile) border, part of which is disputed. It was expected that the two sides would exchange maps on the contentious areas.

"Both sides will also exchange views on regional and international issues of mutual interest," the statement added.

Relations between India and China have been improving in recent years despite the border dispute which dates back to the 1962 Indo-China war.

The two countries have been exploring cooperation in trade which is likely to figure prominently during

Thursday's talks.

Also to be discussed, according to C. Raja Mohan, political analyst with the Hindu newspaper, are plans for a visit by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to Beijing, the first by an Indian prime minister in close to a decade.

The talks and Vajpayee's visit, Mohan said, should aim to transform the Himalayan mountain range from the political barrier it is today into a passage between the two great civilisations.

"At a time when both India and China are adapting to the logic of trade flows and movement of people across borders, it makes little sense to keep the Himalayas in a state of permanent political tension," Mohan said.

5 militants killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

The Indian army killed five Muslim rebels in Kashmir near the de facto border with Pakistan overnight, while suspected militants killed two civilians, police said Thursday.

The army shot dead the five militants at the village of Wadipora in the northern district of Kupwara near the Line of Control that divides the Himalayan territory between the arch-rivals, police said.

"It is being ascertained whether they (the slain militants) had infiltrated or were about to cross into the Pakistani zone of Kashmir," a police spokesman said.

The army recovered an assault rifle and a pistol from the scene, he said.

Meanwhile, two Muslim civilians were shot dead at two different places Thursday in the southern district of Anantnag, police said.

Sony acquires rights for 10 new Bollywood movies

AFP, Mumbai

Sony group's Sony Entertainment Television India said Thursday it has acquired satellite rights for 10 Bollywood movies, to be screened on its entertainment channel MAX from December 31.

The movies acquired include the blockbuster film "Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham" (Sometimes Joy Sometimes Sorrow) starring legendary star Amitabh Bachchan and superstar Shahrukh Khan, newly released "Deewangee" (Obsession) and eight other recent releases.

"We are delighted to have acquired some of the best movies created in the last couple of years," said Kunal Dasgupta, chief executive officer of Sony Entertainment.

Sony plans to premiere "Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham" on New Year's Eve.

Afghan police foil 'terrorist' attack on Kabul power station

AFP, Kabul

Afghan police arrested several people and seized a large quantity of explosives in what was believed to be an attempt to destroy a power plant near Kabul, state media said Wednesday.

Kabul Radio said an undisclosed number of people were found trying to plant 45 kilograms of explosives at a hydro-electric plant east of the capital.

The report described the would-be attackers as "terrorists" who were attempting to destabilise the government by showing its inability to prevent an assault on the capital's already feeble electricity supply.

A spokesman for the International Security Assistance Force which patrols Kabul said the discovery was made late Monday in the generator room of the power station.

Major Mike Edwards said ISAF was not involved in the incident but confirmed reports had been received from Afghan police indicating that at least 25 kilograms of explosives had been found. He said there were no details of any arrests.

In a separate incident in the capital, four "pressure bombs" were discovered by police, Kabul Radio said without elaborating.

Kabul was hit by a series of bomb attacks earlier this year, culminating in a massive blast on September 5 in which 30 people were killed.

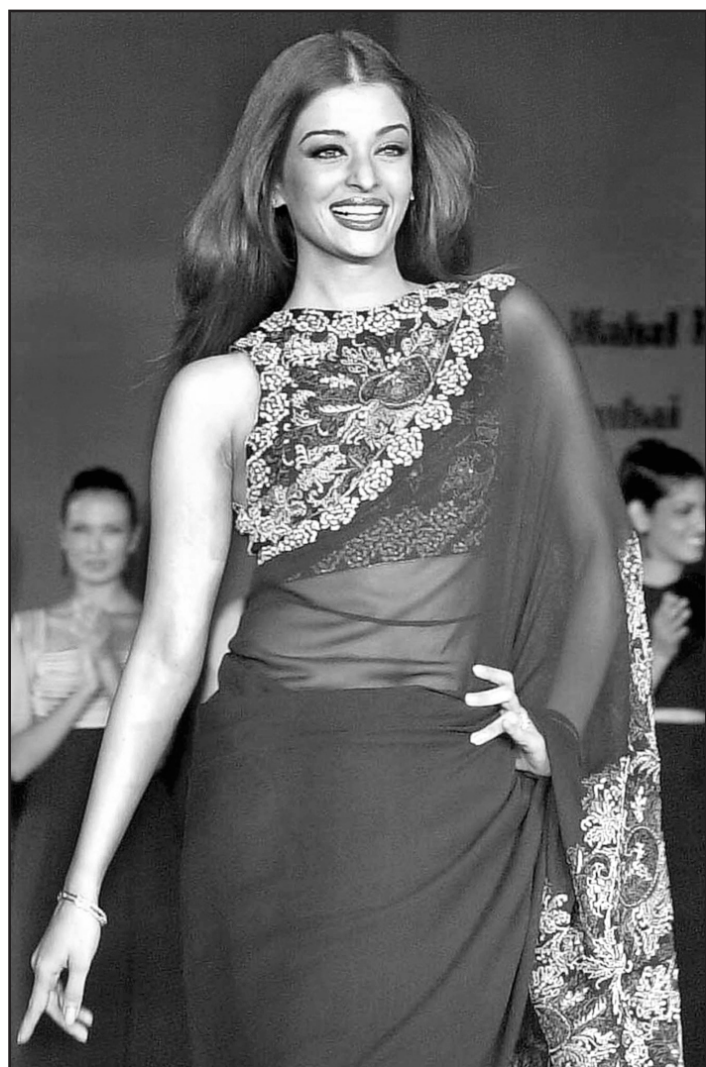


PHOTO: AFP

Bollywood's famous actress and model Aishwarya Rai smiles as she displays an outfit by designer Shahab Durazi during a fashion show in Mumbai on Wednesday. Durazi unveiled his 2002/2003 collection after a gap of two years.

Opposition blasts Delhi for handling of drought crisis

AFP, New Delhi

India's main opposition Congress party leader Sonia Gandhi accused the federal government Wednesday of doing "too little, too late" to provide relief to the country's drought-stricken states.

Sonia, kicking off a parliamentary debate on the drought crisis, accused Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's government of lacking "a comprehensive policy to tackle the situation."

"The government woke up suddenly and announced a relief package two days before the current session, which is not only too little, but too late," Gandhi told parliament.

She added that the Congress government in the drought-hit western desert state of Rajasthan had asked for 5.7 million tonnes of foodgrain but had only received a "measly" 200,000 tonnes.

"It is a cruel joke," she added. Vajpayee rejected the accusation of mishandling the drought.

"I feel pained by the charges of political discrimination. We are taking adequate steps to help all the states, including those which are financially weak," he said.

He urged Gandhi to help the government implement a plan to link rivers in different states in order to combat drought.

Lanka sends envoy to India ahead of Oslo meet

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka is sending an envoy to India, officials said Wednesday, amid doubts over New Delhi's presence at a meeting in Oslo where international political support for the island's peace process is expected to be pledged.

Government peace negotiator Milinda Moragoda said he would go to New Delhi Thursday to brief Indian Foreign Minister Yaswant Sinha on the developments in the Norwegian-backed peace process.

The visit comes amid fears that India may not have direct representation at next week's "support meeting" organised by Sri Lanka's peace broker Norway to drum up political support for attempts to end the island's ethnic bloodshed.

Indian writer revives scandal of Nehru

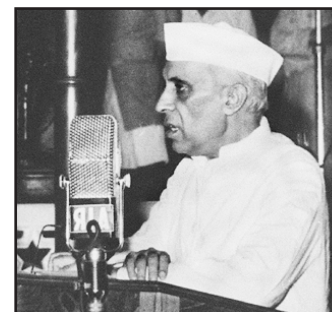
AFP, Mumbai

A new book to be released this week will rekindle one of India's most suppressed scandals -- surrounding Jawaharlal Nehru, the country's first prime minister.

Author and freelance journalist Mohan Deep, who has previously chronicled the love lives of Bollywood stars such as Amitabh Bachchan and Rekha, has turned his attention to Nehru's affair in the late 1940s with Shradha Mata, a young north Indian woman, in his book, "Nehru and the Tantrik Woman".

"It is a well suppressed fact that Shradha Mata gave birth to Nehru's son in 1949 at a convent in Bangalore. I have attempted to blend this fact with fiction in my book," said Deep.

The birth of the child has previously been highlighted by Nehru's then special assistant M.O. Mathai in his book, "Reminiscences of the



Nehru Age.

"Nehru and the Tantrik Woman" was originally written as a play, but the Maharashtra state censor body disallowed the staging of the fictionalised-historical story.

The board said the play defamed national leaders and also had the potential of hurting the religious sentiments of Christians and insulting Hindus.