

Pak rescue efforts stepped up as quake toll rises to 23

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan on Friday stepped up relief and rescue operations in the country's northern Karakoram mountains, a day after a series of earthquakes left 23 dead and dozens injured, government officials said.

"The government has dispatched relief items to the affected areas. The provincial government has started rescue operations providing emergency assistance to people in need," interior ministry spokesman Brigadier Javed Cheema told AFP.

The quakes hit near Gilgit, a once-popular tourist gateway to glaciers and the famed Nanga Parbat and Rakaposhi peaks, lying 260 km northeast of the capital.

The first measured 5.5 on the Richter scale at 2:32 am local time Thursday (2132 GMT Wednesday), deputy director of the Peshawar Seismological Department Salahuddin Malik told AFP.

Bali suspect confesses to planning blast

AFP, Jakarta

A key suspect in the Bali bombing who was arrested Thursday said he confessed to planning and ordering the attack, Indonesian police said Friday.

They said Indonesian citizen Imam Samudra selected a bar full of Westerners as the target on the resort island and then ordered his subordinates to mount the attack which killed more than 190 people on October 12.

According to Samudra, one of the bombers may also have been killed in the blast, said national police chief Da'ib Bachtiar.

Australian officials hailed a major breakthrough in the case with Samudra's arrest.

Inspector General I Made Mangku Pastika, the police officer leading the probe, said separately in Bali that police are still hunting seven people -- including two unspecified "new names."

Montreal-Paris flight hijack bid failed

REUTERS, Paris

An Air France flight from Montreal landed safely in Paris Friday after a failed hijack bid by a passenger, the Paris airports authority said Friday.

"A passenger was overpowered after he threatened to blow the plane up," a spokesman for the Paris airport authority said.

"The plane landed normally at 6:07 a.m. local time," he added. Flight 345 from Montreal landed at Charles-de-Gaulle airport, north of Paris.

Junior Transport Minister Dominique Bussereau told Europe 1 radio the passenger involved had been arrested and all the other passengers had safely left the plane. He said it was not yet clear whether the would-be hijacker had really had a bomb.

UK firefighters on strike again

AFP, London

Firefighters in Britain embarked on a second, eight-day strike on Friday after last-ditch pay talks ended in failure, the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) said.

FBU leader Andy Gilchrist blamed last-minute intervention by Prime Minister Tony Blair's government for "wrecking" the chance of a deal, triggering the walkout at 9 am (0900 GMT).

The 52,000 firefighters -- who want a hefty rise in pay -- staged a 48-hour strike last week, their first in 25 years, leaving the British armed forces to provide emergency fire cover using antiquated fire equipment.

Maoist violence closes 2,000 schools in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

More than 2,000 schools in Nepal have closed down in recent months because of disruptions due to a violent Maoist insurgency, according to a human rights activist.

Some 200,000 students have been affected by the closures mainly in rural areas in the west and the east of the country, according to Subodh Raj Pyakurel, general secretary of Information Sector Services Centre (INSEC), which monitors human rights in Nepal.

"The educational institutions in the western and eastern parts of Nepal are trapped between the Maoist rebels and the security forces," he said.

Israel invades Bethlehem

Army raids Jenin, Tubas, destroys houses in Nablus, 2 killed

AP, Bethlehem

Israeli troops reoccupied Bethlehem early Friday, searching homes and deploying tanks outside the Church of the Nativity after 11 bus passengers, including four youngsters, were killed in a Jerusalem bombing.

With troops back in Bethlehem, Israel was again in control of all Palestinian cities in the West Bank except for the quiet oasis of Jericho mirroring the massive deployment that capped military offensives in April and June.

However, Israel's range of responses is limited; it is under pressure from the United States to keep a lid on Mideast violence while Washington concentrates on its campaign against Iraq. In responding to Thursday's Jerusalem bus bombing, the Israeli military was expected to stick to tried methods, such as hunting down militants and demolishing homes of terror suspects.

Expelling Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, an option previously raised by hardliners in the Israeli Cabinet, was not discussed by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon and Defence Minister Shaul Mofaz in consultations Thursday.

Israeli police said Friday that the bus bombing was carried out jointly by the militant groups Hamas and Islamic Jihad, though neither issued a clear claim of responsibility. The bomber, 22-year-old Nael Abu Hilal from Bethlehem, blew up 11 pounds of explosives strapped to his waist while

riding on a Jerusalem city bus that carried many youngsters on their way to school. Among those killed were seven adults and four youths, ages 8, 13 and 16.

AFP adds: Dozens of Israeli tanks rolled into the northern West Bank town of Jenin and its refugee camp early Friday, and armed clashes broke out with militants, Palestinian security sources said.

Israeli forces surrounded a house in the camp where a wanted Islamic Jihad militant is suspected to be hiding, the sources told AFP.

Fifteen km south of Nablus, Israeli armoured vehicles raided the town of Tubas, and soldiers proceeded to search for militants, Palestinian security sources said.

Meanwhile, a Palestinian policeman and an Israeli soldier were killed as the army moved into West Bank towns and the southern Gaza Strip on Friday, following a suicide bombing in Jerusalem that killed 11 people.

A Gaza hospital source said the policeman was killed by Israeli tank fire near a Jewish settlement south of Gaza City.

Sahni Abu Hussein, 26, was working in the sector when it was shelled, the source said. But an army spokesman said Abu Hussein was about to attack Netzarim settlement when he was gunned down.

And in Nablus, also on the northern West Bank, Israeli forces destroyed the houses of two Palestinian militants accused of having carried out anti-Israeli attacks earlier this year, in which they both died.



Top al-Qaida leader in Gulf captured

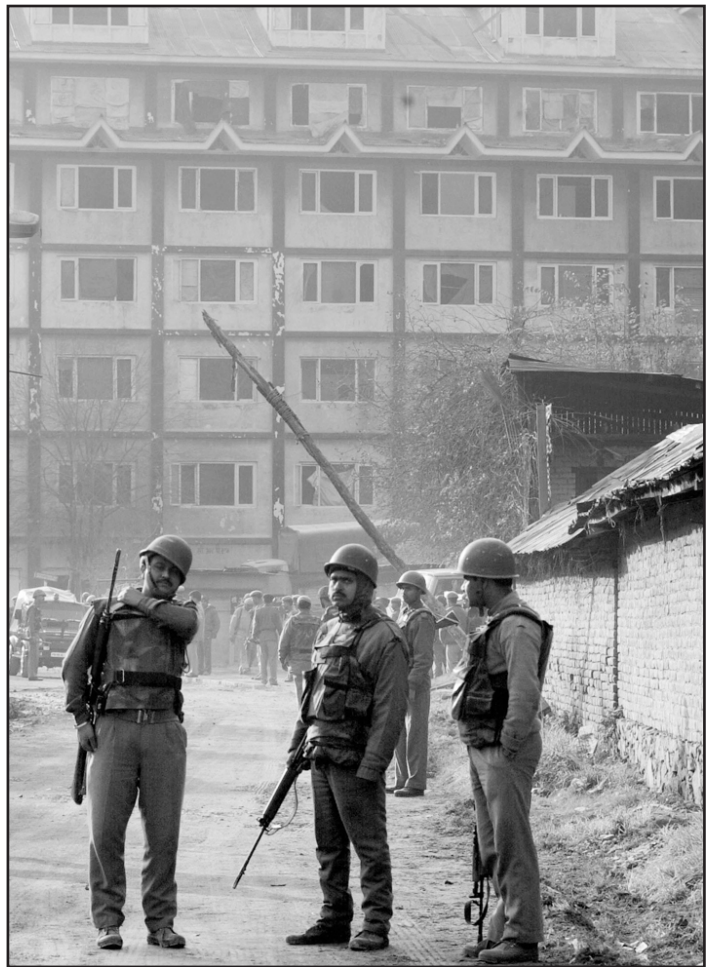
REUTERS, Washington

Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, described as al Qaeda's chief in the Gulf and a suspected planner of the bombing of the American warship USS Cole, is in U.S. custody, officials said on Thursday.

"He's a top al-Qaida operational planner for the Arabian Peninsula, he was captured in recent weeks and is currently in US custody at an undisclosed location," one official said.

Sources disclosed last week that a top al-Qaida leader had been captured recently, but his identity was not revealed until Thursday.

Al-Nashiri, who was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, was among the top dozen al-Qaida leaders sought by US authorities. He has spent time in Yemen, Afghanistan and Pakistan, officials said, declining to reveal where he was captured.



Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel guarding inside a police camp in Srinagar on Friday. Two militants and six CRPF personnel died and several were injured after an attack in the camp.

Militants storm police camp in Kashmir

6 cops, 2 rebels killed

AFP, Srinagar

Suspected Islamic rebels early Friday stormed a hotel serving as a police camp in central Srinagar in a brief but violent assault that left six policemen and two militants dead, police said.

A police spokesman said one militant attempted to force his way into the private Pamposh hotel complex through the front gate, but he died in an explosion he triggered when a policeman tried to overpower him.

Another gained entrance into the camp and managed to lob grenades and open fire at police before being gunned down.

Two policemen died in the initial assault, which occurred soon after dawn, and another four succumbed to their injuries in hospital later.

Another nine were still being treated in hospital, three in a serious condition.

The camp, a local headquarters of India's Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), is situated at a busy intersection of Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian-administered Kashmir.

Rakesh Kumar, a constable, said the two militants were wearing

police uniforms and had tried to force entry into the camp by firing their automatic rifles and exploding grenades.

"One of them (militants) managed to sneak into the lawns of the camp firing in all the directions," he said.

Kumar said one of his colleagues managed to snatch an AK assault rifle from the second militant at the main gate and was trying to overpower him when the rebel detonated a grenade, killing both of them.

Meanwhile three militants and a soldier were killed in a fierce encounter in the Hafuda forest area of the northern Kupwara district late Thursday.

Police said the clash erupted when Indian army soldiers, backed by counter-insurgency police, raided a militant hide-out on a tip-off.

Police said the slain militants belonged to Jaish-e-Mohammad -- the other group which India said carried out the parliament attack.

Two other militants were shot dead by security forces in two difference clashes.

Some 37,500 people have been officially killed since Islamic militants launched a rebellion 13 years ago against Indian rule in Kashmir, which is divided between India and Pakistan and claimed in total by both.

NATO support for UN demands to disarm Iraq falls short of war

AFP, Prague

US President George W. Bush was due for more talks on Iraq in Russia Friday after NATO pledged "effective" action to back UN demands for Iraq to disarm, but without promising to go to war over it.

During its summit in Prague, the military alliance's unanimous declaration for "effective" action papered over deep divisions within the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation over Bush's push to disarm Iraq by force if necessary.

Germany said it would not be a party to any military action.

However, French President Jacques Chirac warned Iraq it had a "last chance" to abandon weapons of mass destruction or face possible military action.

"There is no alternative for Iraq to full and entire cooperation with the United Nations," he said here.

Against the backdrop of division, Washington's staunchest ally,

Britain, said it would prefer any military action against Iraq to be backed by a fresh resolution of the United Nations Security Council.

"Our preference has always been for a further resolution for the security council," British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw told BBC television late Thursday, speaking from Prague where NATO decided to expand into eastern Europe.

Bush was to visit Saint Petersburg to reassure Russian President Vladimir Putin, his ally in the war on terror, that NATO expansion poses no threat to Russia but also to discuss Russia's war in Chechnya and US plans for Iraq.

The meeting will also focus on Russian concerns over the future of its booming trade ties with Iraq should Bush follow through with threats to unseat Saddam Hussein's regime.

UN Security Council Resolution 1441 demands that Iraq accept weapons inspectors and declare by

December 8 any programmes to develop chemical, biological and nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

Iraq denies having such arms.

The measure also says that within 60 days of starting work in Iraq, UN weapons inspectors and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) will draw a work programme containing "the key disarmament tasks" to be achieved by Iraq.

The resolution warns of "serious consequences" if Iraq fails to cooperate.

The United States and Britain, meanwhile, kept up pressure on Baghdad with a pair of air strikes on mobile radar units in southern Iraq on Thursday.

The raids came amid what Washington said was intensifying Iraqi attacks on US and British aircraft patrolling no-fly zones even as Baghdad welcomed back UN arms inspectors.

New Pak PM starts talks for forming his cabinet

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's new prime minister, Mir Zafarullah Khan Jamali, began talks Friday on forming the first civilian cabinet in three years, a day after his narrow election in the divided parliament.

The cabinet will be a coalition of pro-military parties, independents and dissenters from the opposition Pakistan People's Party (PPP) who voted for him, said Azeem Chaudhry, a spokesman for Jamali's military-backed Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) party.

"Mr Jamali is busy in forming government today," Chaudhry told AFP.

"He is consulting with friends, colleagues, allies and the concerned quarters."

Jamali, who is guaranteed the support of the military because of his loyalty to President Pervez Musharraf, won 172 votes in the 342-seat national assembly, giving him a razor-thin majority of one in a full house, and a majority of seven out of the 328 MPs who voted.

Musharraf telephoned Jamali to congratulate him late Thursday and assured him "his fullest support and continued good wishes as he embarks to lead Pakistan on the course of a stable, democratic and prosperous Pakistan."

Jamali will be sworn in at the

presidential palace on Saturday by Musharraf, the army chief who stole power in a bloodless military coup in 1999, marking his promised transfer of power to civilians.

Critics however say the power transfer is only partial, as Musharraf wields power to sack the parliament and will head a military-dominated National Security Council tasked with overseeing the government.

One of the first politicians Jamali met after his election Thursday was Makhdoom Faisal Saleh Hayat, the leader of the 10 PPP dissenters whose votes brought him just over the required majority.

In search of a synthetic life form

AFP, Washington

Craig Venter, the American scientist who gained renown by first deciphering the human genome, or total index of genetic information, has embarked on a new endeavour: creation of a synthetic life form.

For that purpose, Venter, president of the Institute for Biological Energy Alternatives in Rockville, Maryland, has just been awarded a three million dollar grant from the US Department of Energy.

His task is to develop a synthetic genome that could eventually be parlayed into a virtually limitless source of synthetic fossil fuel to supplant such depletable sources as coal or oil.



Oil-covered seagulls are seen on a beach in Camalle, northwestern Spain on Thursday. A storm is expected to hit northwest Spain in the next two days, raising fears that more oil from the sunken tanker Prestige could wash up on the Galician shores, forecasters said on Thursday.



US pop star Michael Jackson (R) and actress Halle Berry pose for photos while holding their German Bambi entertainment prizes, on Thursday. Pop star Michael Jackson on Thursday was awarded Germany's most important entertainment prize, the "Millennium Bambi," in recognition of his reign as the world's "greatest living pop icon". The US actress Halle Berry, an Oscar winner and the latest Bond girl in "Die Another Day", also received a Bambi.

India, Lanka begin talks about Delhi's participation in Oslo meeting

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha and Sri Lankan peace negotiator Milinda Moragoda were holding talks here Friday over Indian participation at an Oslo donors conference next week, an official said.

The Oslo "support meeting" has been called for the international community to pledge their backing for the peace process in Sri Lanka, with a strong political message as well as cash to rebuild the island's embattled regions.

On Thursday, India said it will not send a political representative to the Oslo meeting, which begins on Monday.

"India has decided not to have any political or headquarter-level representation in the donor conference in Oslo ... but may ask someone from the Indian mission there to participate," foreign ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna said Thursday.

He said it was customary to invite diplomats on such occasions as was done in Thailand earlier this month where the Sri Lankan government has recently held two rounds of talks with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebel separatist group.

Moragoda said Wednesday his visit to India was in line with an agreement between Sri Lankan

Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe and Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee to keep Sri Lanka's largest neighbour informed at every step of the peace process.

India has serious reservations about joining the meeting organised by peace facilitator Norway, since it would have to share a platform with the LTTE, an organisation banned in India, sources said in New Delhi.

The LTTE was outlawed in 1992 after the group's supreme Velupillai Prabhakaran was held responsible for the May 1991 assassination of former Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi.

The LTTE had also been banned by the Sri Lankan government, but the ban was lifted earlier this year when peace talks began.

Any contact with the LTTE at an international forum will be also unacceptable to India's main opposition Congress party, which is led by Gandhi's widow Sonia.

The Oslo meeting is to be addressed jointly by Wickremesinghe and the chief negotiator of the Tamil Tigers, Anton Balasingham, on Monday.

US deputy secretary of State Richard Armitage and British Minister for International Development Claire Short are also expected to attend, while Japan and the European Union are expected to be represented at a senior level.