

3 militants holed up in Kashmir mosque

AFP, Srinagar

Indian troops Tuesday surrounded a mosque in Indian-administered Kashmir where three Muslim militants holed themselves up overnight, an army spokesman said.

Security forces learned of a rebel presence in Sheikhgund village in the southern district of Anantnag and cordoned off the village late Monday.

"As troops closed in three militants present in the area barricaded themselves inside a mosque," army spokesman Colonel Mukhtair Singh told AFP.

Police had earlier said there was only one militant inside the mosque.

The mosque was sealed off by the army, backed by counter-insurgency police and the paramilitary Border Security Force.

3 killed in bomb blast in Mumbai

PTI, Mumbai

At least three people were killed and 27 seriously injured when a bus exploded in Mumbai on Monday, officials said.

Police said the blast took place in Ghatkopar, where the bus was parked near a railway station.

"The explosion took place in the rear of the bus, but the bus was empty. People standing around were injured by flying metal," said state Home Minister of State Kripshankar Singh.

An official at Rajawadi Municipal General Hospital said three of the injured died in the hospital and 27 people were admitted with serious injuries.

Burundi govt, rebel group sign truce

AFP, Arusha, Tanzania

Burundi President Pierre Buyoya and the leader of the rebel Forces for the Defence of Democracy (FDD), Pierre Nkurunziza, signed an historic ceasefire agreement here early Tuesday aimed at ending a civil war which has left around 300,000 people dead.

It is the first time that the Bujumbura government, drawn largely from the ranks of the Tutsi minority, and the main rebel group, from the Hutu majority, have signed such a pact since the country's civil war began in 1993.

The fighting has pitted the largely Tutsi army against a range of Hutu rebel groups. Most of the victims of the conflict have been civilians.

"The transitional government of Burundi and CNDD-FDD (rebels) agreed to a ceasefire with effect from the date of the signature of the ceasefire agreement," a joint statement issued by the mediators stated.

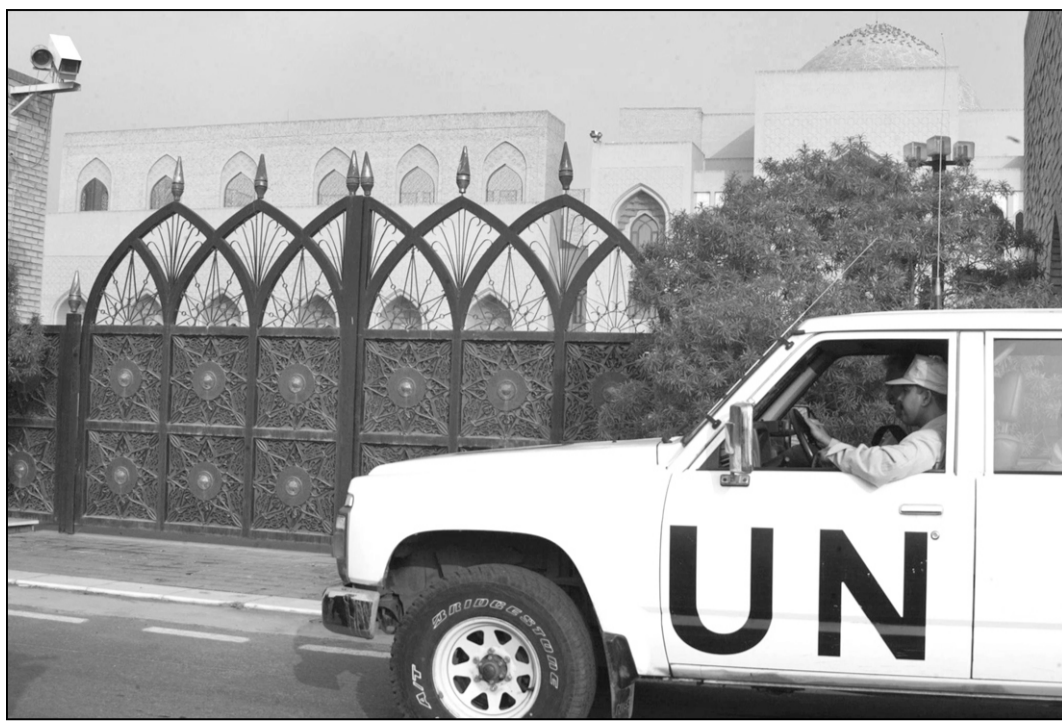


PHOTO: AFP

A UN vehicle drives inside a presidential palace compound in Baghdad Tuesday. UN arms experts inspected a sensitive "presidential palace" site in Baghdad for the first time since they resumed work last week.

UN inspects Saddam's palace

Bush sceptical of Baghdad's disarmament

REUTERS, AP, Baghdad

UN arms inspectors searched one of President Saddam Hussein's large palace compounds in Baghdad Tuesday in the biggest test of Iraqi cooperation since inspections for weapons of mass destruction resumed.

As a December 8 UN deadline for Iraq to come clean on whether it has banned weapons approaches, President Bush warned Saddam against trying to deceive the inspectors and said he was not encouraged by Baghdad's attitude.

Teams of inspectors entered al-Sojoud palace, one of several presidential compounds across Iraq, in central Baghdad's Karkh district.

One team, in six white UN cars, drove up to the palace gate shortly before 9 a.m. (1 a.m. EST) accompanied by Iraqi monitoring officials in a separate vehicle.

The convoy waited for a few minutes before guards opened the gates and let them in onto a road lined with palm trees and leading to a large compound. Other inspectors entered from another gate.

Journalists were not allowed in and Iraqi guards were visibly uneasy at the unexpected visit.

A UN car blocked the black and golden gate at the large entrance. A high wall blocks sight into the compound, which has several buildings and acres of lush gardens.

The inspectors left the compound after one hour and 45 minutes without

speaking to journalists.

It was the first presidential palace inspection since the UN experts returned to Baghdad last month armed with a tough Security Council resolution giving Iraq a last chance to disarm or face a possible war led by the United States.

Inspections of presidential palaces had been a source of major confrontations between Iraq and UN inspectors in the 1990s.

Both sides agreed on special procedures for the inspections in 1998, shortly before the inspectors pulled out of Iraq for alleged lack of cooperation.

AP adds: Despite the return of United Nations weapons inspectors to Iraq, President Bush said "the signs are not encouraging" about Saddam Hussein's willingness to disarm.

In a get-tough speech at the Pentagon on Monday, Bush repeated his vow to lead a coalition to take away Iraq's weapons of mass destruction if Saddam does not fully comply with UN demands.

"The inspectors are not in Iraq to play hide-and-seek with Mr. Saddam Hussein," the president said in his first extensive comment on the United Nations weapons inspections since they got underway last week.

"In the inspections process, the United States will be making one judgement: Has Saddam Hussein changed his behaviour of the last 11 years? Has he decided to cooperate willingly and comply completely, or has he not? So far the signs are not encouraging," Bush said.

Putin warns US against unilateral use of force

AFP, Beijing

Russian President Vladimir Putin ended a visit to China Tuesday with strong words against the unilateral use of force to solve international disputes, as the United States again threatened military action to disarm Iraq.

Before leaving for New Delhi after two days of talks in which he stood shoulder-to-shoulder with his Chinese on a host of global issues, Putin addressed students at the elite Peking University.

Following on from his summit with President Jiang Zemin Monday in which the two leaders urged a diplomatic solution to the Iraq crisis, Putin fired another shot across the bows of the United States.

"Disregard of international agreements and accords is absolutely inadmissible, and so is the

practice of double standards and the attempt to solve problems by the unilateral use of force," said Putin, according to Russian news agencies.

US President George W. Bush Monday called Iraq's response to UN weapons inspections so far "not encouraging" and warned that Baghdad must account for its weapons by a Sunday deadline to avert war.

The comments came shortly before UN inspectors in Baghdad searching for any weapons of mass destruction Tuesday began searching a sensitive "presidential palace".

China and Russia, traditional allies of Baghdad and two of the UN Security Council's veto-wielding permanent members, oppose unilateral American or joint US-British military action against Iraq.

"The Iraqi question can only be

resolved through political-diplomatic means, as well as in firm keeping to UN Security Council resolutions," said a joint declaration signed by Putin and Jiang.

Putin's two-day visit to China has been packed with meetings with Chinese leaders in which Beijing and Moscow have reaffirmed their close partnership on the international stage.

"There are almost no irritants left in our relations -- on the contrary, we have become partners," Putin told Russian journalists after Monday's summit.

In the joint declaration, Jiang and Putin also urged North Korea not to develop nuclear weapons.

Moscow and Beijing refrained from saying explicitly whether Pyongyang already had a nuclear weapons program as Washington claims.

Sridevi to stage a comeback on small screen

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Mumbai

Five years after she bid adieu to acting, former Bollywood queen Sridevi is all set to return -- though not in movies.

The star of films like "Chandni" and "Lamhe" had taken a break from acting after marrying producer Boney Kapoor. Now Sridevi will stage a comeback through television.

She will play an Indianised version of American comic genius Lucille Ball in a sitcom for Sahara TV. Several episodes of the serial have already been scripted. Sridevi is expected to start shooting shortly.

After her last film "Judaai", offers never stopped coming to Sridevi. But she chose to play mom to real-life daughter Jahnuvi. And just when she was poised for a big screen comeback in "Shakti: The Power", produced by her husband, Sridevi was pregnant with her second daughter Khushi.

S Korea calls for new pact on US troops

Seoul welcomes Russia, China's call on North's nukes

AFP, Seoul

South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung on Tuesday called for revision of an accord under which South Korea cedes its judicial jurisdiction in crimes involving US troops.

The order came in response to growing anti-US protests over the acquittal of two US soldiers who crushed two schoolgirls to death with a 50-tonne military vehicle in a road accident in June.

"Through this incident, South Korea and the United States will have to learn to cooperate more closely and improve the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA)," Kim said at a cabinet meeting.

He said the two countries could develop their alliance to "a future-oriented one" by revising the accord so that South Korea exercises greater jurisdiction on crimes committed by US soldiers.

The SOFA governs the legal status of US troops stationed under a mutual defence pact dating back to the 1950-1953 Korean War.

Meanwhile, Russia and China's joint call for a nuclear-free Korean peninsula was welcomed here as a sign that Pyongyang's two allies were squeezing the Stalinist regime to abandon its suspected nuclear weapons programme.

But some concern was expressed that Moscow and Beijing, Pyongyang's only friends, were also seeking to limit the US role in the region.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Jiang Zemin, after meeting on Monday in Beijing, issued a statement stressing the importance of a nuclear-free Korean peninsula and calling for normalisation of ties between Washington and Pyongyang.



PHOTO: AFP

South Korean protesters march towards the US embassy in Seoul holding signs calling for a revision of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) Tuesday during an anti-US demonstration over the acquittal two weeks ago of two US soldiers who killed two schoolgirls during a recent road accident. South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung called for revision of SOFA, an accord under which South Korea cedes its judicial jurisdiction in crimes involving US troops.

Safe ways to watch an eclipse

December 4, 2002

Looking directly at the sun can damage eyesight

Dangerous radiation

Short UVA / UVB rays Stopped by the eye

Long infrared rays Stopped by the eye

Continuous or repeated observation

Partial or total blindness

Vision problems may appear several hours or days later

Tools recommended by astronomers and governments

Direct Two ways to watch Indirect

Special sunglasses

Aluminum-coated mylar

Pinhole that projects image onto a surface

Hole Shoe box

"DIY" methods to avoid

Plate of glass blackened with candle or gas lamp

Film or negatives

Medical X-rays

Layers of sunglasses

Lankan peace talks focus on politics

AFP, Oslo

Sri Lanka's warring parties began a second day of talks here Tuesday focusing on contentious political and economic issues a day after agreeing on de-mining and restoring archaeological sites, diplomats said.

The Norwegian-brokered talks aimed at ending three decades of ethnic bloodshed in Sri Lanka shifted gear to take up thorny political issues to prepare for a final settlement to the conflict, diplomats said.

However, talks were likely to be drawn out, officials and diplomats involved in the negotiations here said, adding that the two sides would study a presentation on the Canadian system of government Tuesday.

The talks opened here amid a worsening political crisis that could

have a knock-on effect on the peace process revived by Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, who came to power a year ago.

Sri Lanka went in for the talks here Monday with a depleted negotiating team as its key Muslim leader, Rauf Hakeem, was forced to return home Sunday to face a challenge to his leadership in his minority party.

"This is a conspiracy to destabilise the Muslims and to create a change in the balance of power in parliament," Hakeem said after reaching Colombo. "The crisis has the potential to lead to the toppling of the government."

However, the other peace negotiators here played down the impact of the crisis at home and pursued talks with no change in their original agenda, diplomats said.

'Al-Qaida' statement claims Kenya attack

AP, Cairo

A statement attributed to al-Qaida claimed responsibility Monday for last week's car-bombing of an Israeli-owned hotel in Kenya and the attempt to shoot down an Israeli airliner the same day.

The statement, posted on an Islamic Web site, called the Thursday's attacks a Ramadan greeting to the Palestinian people and referred to the al-Qaida attacks against US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, which killed 231 people including 12 Americans and wounded more than 5,000.

Delhi for united approach in dealing with terrorism

PTI, New Delhi

Without naming Pakistan, India on Tuesday asked the international community to take "decisive" steps against all states, individuals and entities which promote terrorism and a "united approach" to eradicate this menace.

"Terrorism is indivisible and there cannot be any double standards in dealing with it," External Affairs Minister Yashwant Sinha said in an interview to Russian agency Itar-Tass to mark the three-day State visit of President Vladimir Putin to India.

New Delhi is expected to ask Russia to have a close look at

WHO creates emergency response fund

AFP, Washington

The World Health Organisation announced here Monday the formation of a rapid outbreak response fund aimed to support international response to outbreaks of infectious diseases.

"Crucial hours lost in the early days of a disease outbreak can mean the difference between a handful of cases and a major epidemic," said WHO director Gro Harlem Brundtland.

"As soon as an outbreak occurs, it is critical to get people on the ground as soon as possible. This revolving fund will enable WHO to provide medical experts and equipment immediately," she said.

Adult Siamese twins need more tests before operation

AFP, Singapore

Singapore doctors will decide after Christmas whether to take on an unprecedented operation to separate a pair of adult Siamese twins joined at the head, a top surgeon said Tuesday.

Neurosurgeon Keith Goh said detailed physical, psychological and psychiatric tests are continuing on 28-year-old female Iranian twins Laleh and Ladan Bijani to determine if the operation can be successful.

"I think what we found is that the data-gathering process and investigations are going to be a lot more in-depth than perhaps you have believed," said Goh, who won worldwide acclaim last year when he led a team that successfully separated two Nepalese babies conjoined at the head.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranian sisters Laleh (R) and Ladan Bijani (L), joined by the head, smiles during a press conference at the Raffles Hospital in Singapore Tuesday. A team of specialists are still working out the best plan to separate them.

Fragile Afghan truce holds as warlords talk

REUTERS, Shindand

Government mediators scrambled Tuesday to negotiate a lasting cease-fire between rival warlords in western Afghanistan after fierce weekend fighting that killed at least 13 people.

But both Ismail Khan, the powerful governor of the western province of Herat, and his opponent, Amanullah Khan, insisted there would be no peace unless their conditions were met. Their forces clashed Sunday and early Monday in the Zeer Koh area some six miles from Shindand air base to the south of Herat. Local residents say US forces have deployed hundreds of troops in and around the air base in recent weeks.