

Train derailment in Cuba kills 13 people

AFP, Havana

At least 13 people were killed and 74 injured when a passenger train derailed late Tuesday near Coliseo, 150 kilometers (95 miles) east of here, said Public Health director Ernesto Letucet.

Five cars of the passenger train headed from Havana to Santiago de Cuba jumped the track and turned over, Letucet was quoted as saying by Cuba's National News Agency.

Rescue crews removed 74 injured persons from the wreckage and rushed them to hospitals in Coliseo and Jovellanos, in Matanzas province, the official said.

Some of the injured were in serious condition, said Letucet, top public health official in Matanzas.

The accident occurred at 7:10 pm local time, but the rescue crews were quick and efficient and two hours later all the uninjured passengers were on their way to their destinations aboard buses and vehicles provided by government-run tourist businesses, Letucet said.

350 Vietnamese workers fall ill with food poisoning

AFP, Hanoi

Around 350 employees of two garment manufacturing companies in southern Vietnam were hospitalised with food poisoning after eating lunch prepared by a local restaurant, state media said yesterday.

Nearly 200 workers from the Vietnamese-owned Dai Thanh factory in Ho Chi Minh City's District 10 and more than 150 staff from Dea Won Vina Company, a South Korean entity in Binh Chanh district, were taken ill on Tuesday.

All had eaten a lunch that included pumpkin soup, pork, eggs, fish and cabbage cooked up by a restaurant in downtown Tan Binh district and delivered to the two factories, the Thanh Nien newspaper reported.

The restaurant provides 1,100 meals each day to staff at three companies.

City health officials were sent to inspect its kitchen and reported that the restaurant did not meet hygiene regulations.

N Korean ship with scuds seized in Arabian Sea

AFP, Washington

The United States and Spain said they have intercepted a load of Scud missiles believed to be North Korean hidden on a freighter in the Arabian Sea near Yemen, an alleged centre of terrorist activity.

A senior State Department official said on condition of anonymity that the destination of the shipment "may well have been Yemen" but there was no evidence to support speculation that the missiles were headed to Iraq.

US investigators are inspecting the shipment, US officials said late on Tuesday.

A merchant ship was intercepted in the Arabian Sea, said State Department spokeswoman Amy Black. "During a search by a multinational team, Scuds were found, believed to be from North Korea," she added.

"We are working with other governments on next steps. There is no final determination of the intended destination of the shipment," the spokeswoman said.

The Scud was used by Iraq during the 1991 Gulf War for attacks on Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Two Spanish frigates in collaboration with US forces intercepted the North Korean Vessel off the coast of Yemen, government sources announced in Madrid on Tuesday.

Spanish government sources said the ship was carrying 12 Scuds which were hidden under a consignment of cement.

Spanish Defence Minister Federico Trillo was to give a press conference on Wednesday to give details.

The seizure on Monday came two days after the United States launched a new, international anti-terrorism drive, Spanish sources said. CNN television, quoting US Defence Department officials, said the ship did

not have a flag of nationality, but had started its voyage in North Korea.

The ship may have been heading to Yemen, the birthplace of the family of September 11 mastermind Osama bin Laden and a reported hiding place for cells of the Islamic extremist group al-Qaeda.

US military advisers are in Yemen under a bilateral agreement with the country's government.

The vessel, named the So San, had been under surveillance by US intelligence since it left North Korea, according to the report. CNN quoted a Spanish official who said the navy had to fire shots to get the freighter to stop on Monday.

US President George W. Bush has described North Korea as part of an "axis of evil", along with Iran and Iraq.

Washington has long accused the Stalinist state of being the world's top exporter of missile technology and this latest incident is certain to further damage relations.

Bush's tough stance towards Pyongyang hardened in October when North Korea officials admitted to US envoy James Kelly that they were pursuing a nuclear programme based on enriched uranium.

US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld is visiting the Horn of Africa to deepen US ties with Eritrea, Ethiopia and Djibouti, which have emerged as important allies in the US war against terrorism.

Warships and military supplies, oil and trade that flow through the Bab el Mandeb strait linking the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea make the poor and lawless region of particular importance to the West.

The vulnerability of the sea lanes was demonstrated October 6 when activists believed to be from al-Qaeda attacked a French tanker off Yemen.

In 2000, 17 US sailors were killed in a similar suicide attack on the USS Cole in Aden.



This file photo dated April 26, 1997 shows members of the opposing forces setting up a SCUD missile during Exercise Roving Sands '97 by US forces at Roswell, New Mexico. Officials said yesterday that the United States and South Korea would address the seizure in the Arabian Sea of a ship carrying Scud missiles believed to be from North Korea during talks in Seoul. The US said that scud missiles believed to have originated in North Korea were discovered aboard a merchant ship impounded by international forces in the Arabian Sea.



Bank customers stand in line outside a bank in Caracas as Venezuela's crippling general strike entered its second week. The country's bank association opted to open only half-day in support of the strike launched on December 2. The economy of the world's fifth largest oil exporter has been hard hit by the latest strike, and the government expressed willingness to discuss a timetable for early elections.

Venezuela's strike intensifies

Strike costing Venezuela 50m dollars a day in oil exports: minister

AFP, Caracas

Venezuela's crippling strike intensified Tuesday, fuelling concerns over the stability of the oil-exporting country and prompting the United States to warn Americans not to travel there.

Combat troops manned those gas stations that still had supplies, lines outside Caracas banks stretched hundreds of meters, dozens of flights were cancelled, and panic buying was evident in supermarkets not shuttered by the strike.

Further adding to the tension, talks aimed at preventing an explosion of the conflict failed to make any significant progress as the opposition reacted coolly to indications embattled President Hugo Chavez might be ready to make concessions.

Under mounting pressure, the government had expressed willingness to discuss a timetable for early elections.

But the opposition again insisted the leftist-populist president should step down.

The United States, the top importer of Venezuelan oil, has watched the situation with alarm in recent days and said early elections would help end the crisis.

On Tuesday the State Department warned US nationals to defer travel to Venezuela, and urged those already in the country to consider departing.

Washington also authorised the departure of non-emergency personnel at its embassy in Caracas "due to the deteriorating political and security situation and the severe shortages of fuel and food supplies."

But leaving the country could prove increasingly difficult as the strike grounded the country's main airline and led to the cancellation of numerous domestic and international flights.

"It looks like a cold civil war in which each side is sitting in its

trenches, but the situation could explode at any moment and turn into a real civil war," said political analyst Alfredo Keller.

The strike, launched on December 2, gained strength as long-distance bus drivers joined the protests and banks cut their hours of operations.

Even the supreme court came to a standstill, as its 20 judges said in a statement they would halt all but the most essential activities "as long as the harassment and the insults continue..."

Chavez lashed out at the judges after they threw out charges of rebellion issued against four senior military officers accused of staging an April 12 coup. Chavez was deposed for two days before loyal troops restored him to power.

Government and military officials insisted the armed forces were squarely behind Chavez, who deployed troops to commandeer fuel trucks, force gas stations to remain open, take over oil tankers

and seize refineries.

Venezuela is losing 50 million dollars a day in oil exports as a result of a general strike, Energy Minister Rafael Ramirez said Tuesday.

"The cost caused to the county is of 50 million dollars a day," he said, blaming striking oil tanker captains and managers of the state oil company Petroleos de Venezuela (PDVSA).

"Evidently, the industry is being damaged," he said.

Ramirez made the comments shortly after the government announced he would not participate in a meeting of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in Vienna Thursday.

The conflict in Venezuela caused deep concern on international oil markets and New York exchange light sweet crude for January delivery climbed 57 cents to 27.74 dollars Tuesday.

India gears up for Gujarat polls

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Political circles in the Indian capital are abuzz with speculation about the outcome of today's battle of ballots in the western state of Gujarat to elect a new legislature and a popular government.

The elections in Gujarat, which witnessed communal riots for two months following the burning down of a train coach carrying Hindu pilgrims in February this year, is unlike assembly polls in any other Indian state.

Election in no other state has aroused so much interest as in Gujarat and the reasons are not hard to find. There is general agreement among political analysts that the result of Gujarat poll is set to be a watershed in the country's politics in the years to come.

Pollsters have differed in their assessment of the Gujarat election outcome in a straight battle between ruling BJP and main opposition

Congress.

Surveys conducted on behalf of leading magazines India Today and Outlook presented contrasting pictures the first predicting BJP retaining power and the second plumping for Congress as the winner.

Television news channel Zee News' survey also forecast a victory for BJP.

Interestingly, a second survey conducted by India Today and TV news channel "Aaj Tak" a few days back has found the gap between BJP and Congress narrowing even though it showed the ruling party still sailing through in the fight for majority in the 182-member Gujarat legislature.

The Gujarat election has been by and large described as a fight between votaries of aggressive "Hindutva" ideology of BJP and secularism and development.

Immediately after the communal violence in February and March this

year in the state, the BJP was viewed as set to sweep the next poll taking advantage of a perceived polarized electorate.

But by all accounts that scenario has appeared to have changed in the last eight months or so and issues relating to economic development and "mis-governance" of BJP in the last five years also came to weigh on the voters' mind.

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee had made it clear that communal violence should not be made a poll issue in Gujarat and the parties must fight on issues of development. In deference to his advice, BJP poll manifesto completely skirted the issue and concentrated on development and terrorism subjects.

But some analysts felt that terrorism issue was used by BJP to focus, in an indirect manner, on the attack on a train carrying pilgrims in Godhra on February 27 and the violence that followed.

Cherrie says sorry over flat fraudster row

AFP, London

A tearful Cherie Blair apologised and admitted that she had made a mistake in seeking the advice of a convicted Australian fraudster to buy two flats for her and her husband British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The affair, in its ninth day, centers on the role played by conman Peter Foster -- the boyfriend of Mrs. Blair's close friend Carole Caplin -- in helping Mrs. Blair find two luxury flats to buy in Bristol, western England, in October and November.

Speaking in public for the first time since "Cheriegate" broke, Mrs. Blair said she did not know until a few weeks ago that Foster had spent three years behind bars most notably for pitching bogus slimming products.

Earlier Tuesday, Downing Street firmly backed the wife of the prime minister, saying Mrs. Blair was the target of "character assassination."

UN arms experts swoop on newly declared Iraq site

REUTERS, Baghdad

UN arms experts swooped on a newly declared site near Baghdad yesterday, saying it was among locations disclosed by Iraq in its mammoth weapons declaration.

Inspections resumed across Iraq a day after the United States threatened possible nuclear retaliation if its forces or allies were attacked with doomsday weapons.

Teams of inspectors, escorted by Iraqi officials, drove from their Baghdad headquarters to five sites as their hunt for Iraq's alleged banned arsenal picked up pace in its third week.

One team arrived at the Karamah complex in Taji, six miles north of Baghdad.

"The site we are going to this

morning is one of the new sites that was given in the declaration and we need your help to get us there at this point," William Jolley, head of one UN inspection team, told an accompanying Iraqi official.

Jolley was speaking within earshot of reporters outside a walled compound called the "Strategic Storage Unit," according to a sign at the entrance, operated by Karamah Public Company.

The inspectors parked one of their white vehicles across the main gate to block access while they were inside. Taji houses complexes suspected of past involvement in Iraq's biological warfare and ballistic missile programs.

UN experts checked four other locations: Ibn Sina nuclear site in

Tarmiya 20 miles northwest of Baghdad, Tuweitha nuclear site 12 miles south of Baghdad, a biological site at Amriyah 28 miles to the southwest, and Fateh chemical site on the city's outskirts.

Inspectors who had spent the night at a phosphate facility at al-Qaem, 400 km (250 miles) northwest of Baghdad -- said to have produced refined uranium ore -- resumed work Wednesday.

Al-Qaem is the furthest the inspectors have travelled from Baghdad.

About two dozen UN arms inspectors arrived in Iraq on Tuesday, bringing the total to about 70. UN sources said most of the inspectors were out in the field yesterday.

Eight killed in bus ambush in Nigeria

AFP, Lagos

Armed robbers ambushed three buses in Nigeria's commercial capital Lagos, killing several passengers and injuring many others, witnesses said yesterday.

"I saw eight bodies being taken away from the bullet-ridden buses. Two of them were women," shopkeeper Sunday Anjorin told AFP after Tuesday's attack.

Lagos police spokesman Emmanuel Ighodalo confirmed the incident but could confirm only two deaths. Nigerian police habitually play down casualty figures.

The gang sprayed bullets into three buses heading to the eastern part of the country in the Orile-ganmu area of the city on Tuesday, Ighodalo said.

"I can confirm to you that police recovered two bodies at the scene of the incident," he said, adding that many passengers were wounded, some critically.

"It will take the mercy and grace of God for them to survive the attack," he added.

Carter attacks Bush's war plans against Iraq

AFP, Stockholm

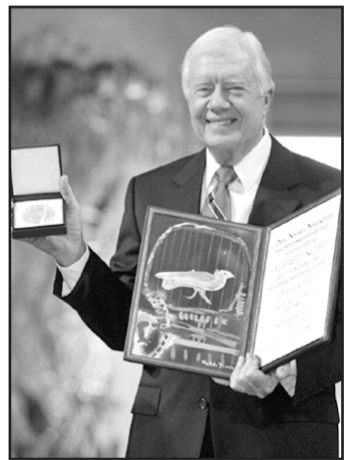
Former US president Jimmy Carter used his Nobel Peace Prize speech here Tuesday to take a swipe at US policy towards Iraq, warning that a so-called preventive war could have "catastrophic" results.

The 78-year-old Carter, the third US president to win the prestigious prize, did not directly name either Iraq or the United States but made clear his opposition to US plans to oust Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein.

"For powerful countries to adopt a principle of preventive war may well set an example that can have catastrophic consequences," he said in accepting the prize, which recognises his years as an international mediator for peace.

"We must remember that today there are at least eight nuclear powers on Earth, and three of them are threatening to their own neighbours in areas of great international tension," Carter said.

Carter has been an outspoken critic of current President George W. Bush, who has been readying US forces for an attack on Iraq, which Bush called part of an "axis of evil" that is developing weapons



of mass destruction.

Iraq insists it has no such weapons and on Sunday gave the United Nations around 12,000 pages of documents to back up the claim. Washington has warned it will take action if Baghdad does not comply with demands to disarm.

But Carter also said Iraq must "comply fully with the unanimous decision of the (United Nations) Security Council that it eliminate all weapons of mass destruction and permit unimpeded access by inspectors to confirm that this

commitment has been honoured. "The world insists that this be done," he said.

Carter often has been regarded as one of the better former US presidents, but saw his actual term in office, from 1977 to 1981, dogged by the Iran hostage crisis as well as a weak economy.

A soft-spoken, "born-again" Christian with a broad, toothy grin, he was often perceived as naive and weak in the dog-eat-dog world of Washington insider politics.

"Jimmy Carter will probably not go down in American history as the most effective president, but is certainly the best ex-president the country ever had," Nobel Committee chairman Gunnar Berge said in presenting the award.

Yet Carter won plaudits around the world for negotiating the 1978 Camp David peace accord between Egypt and Israel, for which he was widely expected to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Berge acknowledged that Carter "should have" won the prize in 1978, together with Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin and Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, but said he was not nominated in time for the vote.

Australian parliament passes controversial stem cell research bill

AFP, Sydney

Australian legislators passed a controversial bill yesterday allowing research on human embryos after months of intense emotional debate.

The legislation will allow Australian scientists to conduct stem cell research using some 70,000 spare embryos created for in vitro fertility treatments.

Politicians were given a rare conscience vote on stem cell research, which supporters believe could help find cures for diseases such as Alzheimers and youth diabetes, but which opponents condemn for involving the destruction of potential humans.

Attorney-General Daryl Williams told parliament that the new laws were sensible, cautious and balanced.

"It sets appropriate boundaries in a sensitive and delicate area," he said.

Opposition health spokesman Stephen Smith said the laws would give hope to people suffering from terrible afflictions and diseases.

"The passage of the legislation

today will bring hope to those people who look to research on spare or excess embryos ... as the only hope for the best research for providing a cure for afflictions which adversely affect them," he said.

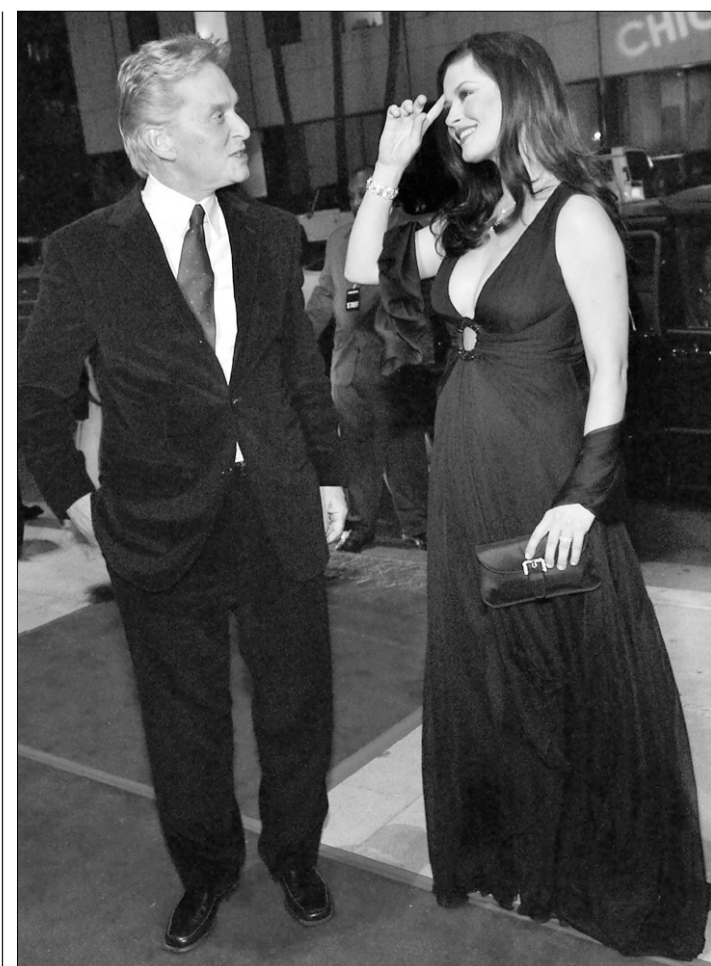
Prime Minister John Howard introduced the bill in June and, after extended debate, it was passed at the lower house in September.

Last week, after another passionate debate which one senator said had prompted him to consider resignation, the Senate gave its approval after introducing 14 amendments.

Lower house legislators gave the legislation its final seal of approval Wednesday and it will now be passed into law by the Governor-General Peter Hollingsworth.

The Australian stem cell legislation is less restrictive than US laws which limit research to stem cells drawn from destroyed embryos, but falls short of British law which permits embryos to be created for research purposes.

The parliament also passed a bill banning human cloning.



Welsh-born actress Catherine Zeta-Jones chats to her husband, actor Michael Douglas, as she arrives at the premiere of her film "Chicago" in Beverly Hills, California.

UK's first free channel for South Asians launched

PTI, London

A 24-hour entertainment channel for UK's ever-expanding South Asian Community "Simply Asian" has been launched.

Claiming to be the first free Asian channel, "Simply Asian" offers an exciting mix of programmes in Hindi, Gujarati, Urdu, Bengali, Punjabi and Tamil.

The channel promises a broad range of programmes that includes two movies a day, comedy, music, entertainment news, Bollywood blockbusters, established religious programming plus the latest dramas, soaps and tele-shopping services.

"Simply Television pledges to fit in the provision of a free channel for the Asian community with real investment. From now I think the viewers of Asian pay channels will be asking themselves why pay, when they can watch a free channel," Controller of "Simply Asian" Khusal Khagram said at the launch on Tuesday.