

16 dead in shopping centre fire in Sri Lanka

AFP, Colombo

At least 16 people were killed and another 17 injured when a fire swept through a shopping area in the Sri Lankan capital, doctors and rescue workers said yesterday.

Rescue workers deployed in Colombo's Pettah area to clear the rubble following the overnight fire pulled out six bodies from the rubble of a four-storeyed building, taking the death toll to 16, officials said.

They said the fire had started at a firecracker store and quickly spread throughout the building. Seventeen people were admitted to hospital with burns, doctors said. Police said an investigation was under way.

'Attack on US troops aimed at destabilizing Afghanistan'

AFP, Islamabad

Afghan Vice President Hedayat Amin Arsala said a grenade attack that wounded two US troops in Kabul was an effort to destabilize the country. The two US soldiers and their Afghan translator were hurt Tuesday in the first attack on foreign soldiers in Kabul in months. None of the injuries were life-threatening.

"This incident was unfortunate, and it shows that there are elements of course that would like to see the country destabilized," Arsala told reporters on a trip to Islamabad.

"But my feeling is the impact of it is not going to be enormous, because I know that the people of Afghanistan have decided absolutely to put an end to conflict in Afghanistan and that they would not tolerate any adventurists."

The Afghan state news agency Bakhtar identified the detained suspect in the attack as Amir Jon and quoted him saying he "hates America's presence in Afghanistan and wanted to kill them."

Seven arrested in Britain by anti-terrorist police

AFP, Edinburgh

Seven men of North African origin were being questioned by anti-terrorist detectives after they were arrested in Edinburgh and London on Wednesday, police in Scotland's capital city said. Three men were detained in Edinburgh in an operation led by Lothian and Borders Police, a police official told AFP.

"Four other men were arrested in London on behalf of Lothian and Borders Police by the Metropolitan Police," he said.

"All seven men have been detained under the Terrorism Act 2000 and will be held at a secure location while inquiries continue," he said. "All the men are in their early thirties."

On Tuesday, four suspected Islamic militants were arrested at an apartment in a Paris suburb. French Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy said they might have been preparing a terror attack.

"I don't believe there is a connection (between the British and French arrests) but these are still early days," a police official told AFP, indicating that the seven would be quizzed on any possible links with terrorism suspects elsewhere.

He said the four arrested in London were being transferred north to join the other three in detention in a location somewhere in Scotland.

Three sentenced to death over Indian parliament attack

Four injured in blasts in Kashmir after court sentence

AFP, New Delhi

An Indian court sentenced three Muslim Kashmiri men to death over the deadly attack on parliament last year which brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war.

The court had on Monday found the three guilty of waging war against the state of India by conspiring with five Islamic militants to kill senior political leaders inside parliament.

On December 13, 2001 attack, the five armed rebels stormed the parliament grounds, killing eight police officers and a gardener before they were shot dead by Indian security forces.

Judge S.N. Dhingra handed down death sentences to Mohammed Afzal, a 35-year-old fruit merchant, Shaukat Hussain, a former student at Delhi University and S.A.R. Geelani, a teacher at a New Delhi college.

According to the charge sheet, Afzal and Hussain were members of the Jaish-e-Mohammed Islamic militant group which is fighting Indian rule in Kashmir. The three were accused of helping to plan the attack and giving shelter to the gunmen.

Hussain's wife Afsan Guru, who was found guilty of not disclosing information to police, was sentenced to five years in jail.

"I sentence these three ... to death for the murder of nine persons," the judge told a packed court.

The three were convicted under the tough new Prevention of Terrorism Act (POTA), the Indian Penal Code and Explosive Substances Act. They were the first death sentences handed down under POTA.

The four stood impassively as their sentences were passed, but afterwards proclaimed their innocence.

"I am innocent, I have been framed in the case. Without justice there is no peace," said Geelani.

His lawyer, Sina Gulati, told reporters an appeal would be lodged and said she was confident Geelani would eventually be acquitted.

Meanwhile three Indian security force personnel and a civilian were injured in two grenade attacks in Kashmir after the sentence was delivered at a court in New Delhi.

The first attack, near Kulgam township, 70 kilometres (44 miles) south of the summer capital Srinagar, injured three members of India's Border Security Force (BSF).

A civilian was injured when suspected rebels hurled a hand grenade at a federal police camp in Srinagar, police said. The area was sealed and people were paraded in front of security force informers looking for militants. Photographers and journalists said they were beaten and intimidated by federal policemen when they rushed to the camp to cover the event.

A senior separatist leader in Indian-administered Kashmir, Shabir Shah, condemned the sentences, saying POTA had been drawn up "to suppress the voice of Kashmiris."

"It is a move to pressurise our freedom movement in Kashmir," Shah told AFP in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir.

Relatives of the three men expressed shock and sorrow. "It is an unfortunate sentence. It has saddened us," said Abdul Raheem Geelani, the younger brother of the condemned teacher.



Members of the rightwing Hindu Shiv Sena party celebrate in New Delhi after a special court delivered the death sentence to three Kashmiri men found guilty of waging war against the state of India. Shaukat Hussain, Mohammed Afzal, and S.A.R. Geelani, were sentenced to death on charges related to the deadly attack on the Indian parliament last year that brought India and Pakistan to the brink of war.



This February 5, 2000 file photo shows a test conducted by the Ballistic Missile Defence Organisation (BMDO) and the US Army of the Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) missile at White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico. The US Department of Defence announced December 17, 2002, that US President George W. Bush has directed the Department of Defence to begin fielding initial missile defence capabilities in 2004-2005 to meet ballistic missile threats to the US, US forces and allies

Bush orders deployment of US missile defence Russia "regrets" Bush decision

REUTERS, Washington

President Bush ordered the military to begin deploying a national missile defence system with land- and sea-based interceptor rockets to be operational starting in 2004.

The controversial decision to take what the president called a "modest" first step toward a more sophisticated defence in future years came despite last week's failure of a major anti-missile test over the Pacific Ocean.

Defence officials told reporters they planned to deploy 10 ground-based interceptors -- at least six at Fort Greely, Alaska, and perhaps four at Vandenberg Air Force Base, California -- in 2004 and an additional 10 ground interceptors in 2005.

The ground interceptors would protect US targets against long-range attack. Other interceptors for use against shorter-range missiles would be deployed aboard US Aegis warships beginning in 2004 and those could help defend allies in other regions of the world, officials said.

"I wouldn't want to overplay it. I wouldn't want to oversell it. I wouldn't want to suggest that it has a depth or breadth or capability that will take some time to evolve," Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld told reporters in countering immediate

charges from critics that the system was not mature enough for deployment.

Erecting such a defence shield is the Pentagon's single most expensive development program and critics say it could cost hundreds of billions of dollars over coming decades.

In a statement, Bush said the move was "to protect our citizens against what is perhaps the greatest danger of all -- catastrophic harm that may result from hostile states or terrorist groups armed with weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them."

AFP adds: Russia expressed "regret" yesterday at US President George W. Bush's decision to deploy a limited missile shield by 2004, expressing fears that the move could lead to a new arms race.

"Moscow views with regret the renewal of US efforts to create a so-called global missile defence system," the Russian foreign ministry said in a statement, Moscow's first reaction to Bush's announcement made on Tuesday.

Russia said the decision threatened "to consign to oblivion the principles of strategic stability and lead to a meaningless global arms race, including the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction."

UN says al-Qaeda has new camps in Afghanistan

REUTERS, United Nations

Al-Qaeda has recently set up several new training camps in eastern Afghanistan near the border with Pakistan, the head of a United Nations group monitoring the flow of money to the network said on Tuesday.

"A large number of al-Qaeda operatives and others trained by al-Qaeda remain at large," said Michael Chandler, who heads the UN group, which tracks financing links with al-Qaeda.

"Adherents continue to join their ranks and it continues to develop alliances with national or regional extremist groups bent on using terror as their means to their objectives."

The UN group said a number of new training camps were recently activated, near the Pakistan border.

Chandler told reporters the unspecified number of camps were located in a region near the Khyber Pass.

However, a US official told Reuters there was no evidence of any new camps.

"I don't know of any al-Qaeda camps being reactivated," said the official, who asked not to be identified.

The UN report cited the recent bombings aimed at tourists in Bali, Indonesia and Mombasa, Kenya as evidence of al-Qaeda's wide reach and the existence of a coalition of extremist groups in Southeast Asia and East Africa.

"The al-Qaeda network remains a significant threat globally to peace and security," said Chandler, noting that many operatives who had been trained in such areas as explosives and hijacking methods have never been identified.

"The ones who got trained in all these evil techniques have melded back into different societies and they're the ones we have to worry about," he said.

A UN watch list of individuals and entities associated with Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda and the former Taliban regime in Afghanistan, was crucial to disrupt the network, said Chandler.

Some 233 individuals, including Taliban, and 91 entities are named on the list. The names of another 104 people said to be linked to al-Qaeda were also included, he said.

The report noted that regulatory measures have been taken to monitor charity groups in various countries that have been used to channel funds to al-Qaeda as well as hawalas, the informal banking and remittance networks widely used in Asia and the Middle East.

While Saudi Arabia has offered to regulate its charities more effectively, many other countries have not signed on to the effort.

UN probes Iraqi missile unit as inspections enter fourth week

AFP, Baghdad

UN arms expert in Iraq yesterday investigated the first time an army missile unit as their inspections moved into a fourth week, an Iraqi official said.

Meanwhile chief nuclear inspector Mohamed ElBaradei said in an interview with an Egyptian daily that no proof has emerged yet that Iraq has developed a nuclear programme since the previous inspection regime ended in 1998.

A ballistics team of the UN Monitoring, Verification and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC) visited during the morning "one of the military units specialised in launching missiles" in Balad, 70 kilometers (42 miles) north of Baghdad, the Iraqi official said.

UNMOVIC and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)

monitors have already inspected military sites, missile testing ranges and production facilities, but it was the first time they probed a military missile unit.

UN Security Council Resolution 687, which defined the terms of the 1991 Gulf war ceasefire, prohibits Iraq from acquiring or developing biological, chemical and nuclear weapons as well as long-range missiles.

In the 1991 Gulf War Iraq fired several Soviet-supplied Scud missiles on Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Baghdad says all its long-range Scuds and locally-made Al-Husseini missiles were destroyed in 1991, whether unilaterally or under the supervision of the previous UN body tasked with disarmament, the Special Commission (UNSCOM).

But UNSCOM had said Iraq could not account for the destruction of two Scuds and seven al-Husseins.

According to the Iraqi official, a

total of six UNMOVIC and IAEA teams, including the ballistics team, were deployed Wednesday in and around Baghdad and in northern Iraq, checking military, industrial and academic sites.

One UNMOVIC biological team and another from the IAEA were working in the region of Mosul 400 kilometers (250 miles) north of Baghdad, after arriving there on Tuesday.

The team was inspecting the biology department of Mosul University. They were expected to investigate laboratories for equipment that can be used for dual civilian and germ warfare applications, as well as to interview personnel.

UNMOVIC undertook similar probes Monday and Tuesday at the university of Baghdad. The IAEA team was working near the Saddam Dam on the Tigris river, near Mosul, probably sampling water.

Another injured in Kenya blast dies, toll up to 17

AFP, Nairobi

The death toll in the bombing of an Israeli-owned hotel in the Kenyan port city of Mombasa last month has risen to 17 after a Kenyan worker injured in the attack died in hospital, police said.

William Lang'at, a deputy police commissioner leading investigation into the attacks, said Wema Mutisya, 34, a restaurant manager in the Paradise Hotel died on Tuesday, bringing to 11 the number of Kenyans killed in the attacks.

Three Israeli tourists and three suicide bombers were also killed when attackers rammed a vehicle packed with explosives into the Paradise Hotel on November 28.

Minutes before the bombing of the hotel, two shoulder-fired missiles were launched at an Israeli passenger plane with 261 Israelis on board, as it took off from Mombasa airport, but narrowly missed the aircraft.

Chinese dissidents demand release of detained activists

AFP, Beijing

A petition signed by 186 Chinese dissidents demanded China's new leaders free several political activists jailed last month ahead of a key Communist Party Congress.

The open letter to the government called for the release of Zhao Changqing, who was arrested in November after he organised a petition urging the congress to implement free elections and overturn the ruling on the bloody 1989 Tiananmen democracy protests.

Zhao was "kidnapped" by State Security agents from his home in northwestern Xian on November 6, said the petition, faxed to Beijing-based foreign news agencies by the New York-based China Labour Watch.

It was not until November 27 that police formally notified his family.

"The terrorist tactics of secret kidnappings and illegal arrests of

Chinese citizens has begun again just as the Communist Party has selected a new leadership and China and the US have resumed human rights dialogue," the letter said.

"This cannot but lead people to regret the ruling party's new leaders."

At last month's congress a new party leadership headed by Hu Jintao was appointed. Hu is tipped to be named as president at a parliamentary session early next year.

During China-US human rights dialogue in Beijing this week, the US side handed over a list of 298 people believed by Washington to be prisoners of conscience and called for their release.

While China made no comment on this, it agreed to accept unconditionally three United Nations human rights experts to independently investigate arbitrary arrest, torture and religious freedom in China.

Zhao organized 192 activists to sign the earlier petition, including He Depu, a member of the Beijing branch of the outlawed China Democracy Party and veteran Shanghai dissident Dai Xuezhong, the petition said. Both have since been arrested.

Wednesday's petition also called for the release of Ouyang Yi, an Internet activist seized last month in southwestern Sichuan province for posting anti-government essays on the web.

"Most of whom signed today's petition also signed the earlier petition," veteran activist and organizer of the second petition Lin Mu told AFP from his home in Xian.

"Although the US-China dialogue did not produce any immediate results, we welcome the United Nations to come to China and investigate human rights violations here."



Queen Elizabeth II receives Asma Al-Assad and her husband, the President of Syria Bashar Al-Assad, at Buckingham Palace, in London. It is the first time a Syrian leader has been invited to the Palace.