

PHOTO: AFP
Railway protection force personnel stand guard next to the railway line while a train is passing by in Bhopal on Sunday. Fifty Shiv Sena activists were arrested while they attempted to stop the train in the city railway crossing demanding an under bridge instead of a level crossing for passing. It is said that for seven out of the twelve hours, the railway gate remains closed for the trains to pass, creating great frustration for pedestrians and crossing traffic.

BJP workers asked to 'corner' opposition in polls

AFP, New Delhi

India's ruling BJP party urged its workers Sunday to "corner" the main opposition Congress Party in upcoming state polls and next year's general elections.

"Our focus should be to highlight what the Congress (state) governments promised and what they failed to achieve," BJP President M Venkaiah Naidu told workers after a high-powered party meet in the northwestern Rajasthan state.

"Take an aggressive stand. Don't be defensive. Corner the Congress from all sides," the United News of India news agency quoted him as saying.

His comments came a day after a cabinet reshuffle expanded the ministerial council to its highest number of 80, which experts said was carried out with an eye on the state and federal elections.

The BJP party also passed a resolution at its meeting to set up a panel to provide job reservations for poor people belonging to upper castes -- a move which is bound to help its election campaign.

Supporters of Suu Kyi 'run for their lives'

AFP, Yangon

Hundreds of supporters of Myanmar democracy campaigner Aung San Suu Kyi were forced to "run for their lives" when members of a pro-junta group tried to run them over with their cars, her party said here Monday.

A dozen vehicles forced the supporters to flee as they waited along the sides of roads to greet Aung San Suu Kyi in Sagaing, in northern Myanmar's Mandalay division, on Sunday.

The Nobel Peace Prize-winner, who is currently on her longest political trip outside Yangon since being released from house arrest in May last year, has been routinely harassed by the Union Solidarity Development Association (USDA), an official social organisation claiming some 19 million members.

Indian gangster shot dead in Bangkok

AFP, Mumbai

Notorious underworld Indian gangster Ezaz Lakdawala, wanted in a number of extortion and murder cases, was shot dead in Bangkok late Sunday by rival gangsters, police here said.

Police believe Lakdawala was shot by members of the Karachi-based Chota Shakeel gang. The gang works for Dawood Ibrahim, India's most-wanted man who is accused of being the mastermind behind the 1993 Bombay bomb blasts which killed more than 300 people.

"We are getting details of the incident, but our information is that Lakdawala was shot dead at around 11:00 pm (1730 GMT) Sunday," a top police official told AFP.

"We believe it is the work of Shakeel gang. We are awaiting details from the Thai police."

Pakistan takes steps against militants

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan is treading a delicate tightrope as it takes subtle steps against anti-India militants, trying to prove its willingness for rapprochement with India without alienating Islamic hardliners, diplomats and officials said.

In the past fortnight Pakistan has banned outlawed Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar from entering its zone of Kashmir, and initiated unprecedented charges against the bodyguards of Pakistan-based commander of the Hizbul Mujahedin guerrillas, Syed Salahuddin, for carrying guns in public.

"They're moving on them," a Western diplomat, who would not be identified, told AFP.

"This is the beginning. We're going to see more of these apparently small, but significant moves. The Pakistani authorities feel at this stage they can't afford to do anything more radical, but at the same time they want to show they are serious about improving things with India."

As the rival nuclear neighbours set in motion a series of confidence building measures to lead to talks after a tense 17-month standoff, India has upped its demands for the dismantlement of "terrorist infrastructure" in Pakistan, including militant training camps.

A senior government official, who asked not to be named, pointed to the moves against Azhar and the Hizbul bodyguards as a "clear signal" of Islamabad's commitment to build a climate conducive for dialogue with India.

"We are making a determined effort to contain militancy and discourage those who are promoting violence in the name of jihad (holy war)," said the official, who is closely associated involved in efforts to reign in militants, told AFP.

India accuses Pakistan of using Islamic guerrillas to wage a proxy war since 1989 against its rule in Kashmir, the Himalayan region straddling the neighbours, claimed by both and divided between them.

India says 38,500 people have died in the insurgency, while Pakistan says 90,000 Kashmiris have been killed by Indian troops in the same period.

5 gunned down as Pak criminal gang ambushes rival in Lahore

AFP, Lahore

Five people were shot dead and five wounded Monday when gunmen belonging to a criminal gang in the Pakistani city of Lahore opened fire on members of a rival underworld group, police said.

Police said gunmen from the city's notorious Gogi group wanted for several cases of extortion and seizing farmland attacked members of a rival gang as they left a court building in two separate cars.

Two passers-by among the dead, police officer Shakil Ahmed said.

"The assailants fled in a car seized from a lawyer which was later found abandoned on a highway," he said.

He blamed the attack on rivalry between the two groups saying "both are involved in similar criminal activities."

Musharraf for keeping uniform for 2 more yrs

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's government has asked Islamist opposition parties to give President Pervez Musharraf two years to relinquish leadership of the army, a senior Islamic party MP said Monday.

The suggestion, revealed by the parliamentary leader of the religious right alliance Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), Hafiz Hussain Ahmed, comes as pressure mounts on General Musharraf to abandon his dual posts.

"A heavyweight government figure last week suggested to the MMA leadership that it should consider giving two years to Musharraf to shed his military uniform," Ahmed told AFP.

Musharraf's dual role as army chief and unelected president are under fire from the MMA and fellow opposition parties Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

Demands that he quit the military and submit to a standard presidential election have brought the seven-month-old parliament -- the first since Musharraf began his three-year military rule -- to a standstill.

The suggestion of a two-year deadline came at a meeting Friday between Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam (JUI) chief Maulana Fazlur Rehman that was also attended by Ahmed and ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Quaid (PML-Q) party president Chaudhry Shujaat Hussain.

The fundamentalist JUI is a leading element in the MMA's six-party religious right alliance.

The Islamists had already offered to give Musharraf until August 14, when Pakistan celebrates the 56th anniversary of its creation, to quit the military. They have also pledged to back him in a presidential poll.

The PPP and PML-N, taking a tougher line, are demanding he quit both posts immediately.

The MMA has threatened to mobilise millions of supporters should Musharraf maintain his two posts.

The MMA's Rehman and Ahmed responded to the request to give Musharraf two more years in uniform with a suggestion he step down from the presidency.

"The MMA told government leaders that Musharraf can put a man of his choice into the presidency if he does not want to shed his military uniform," Ahmed said, adding the MMA would back the pro-Musharraf PML-Q's Hussain as president.

Musharraf, the army chief who stole power in military coup in October 1999 and declared himself president in 2001, last year amended the constitution to unilaterally extend his dual tenure for another five years.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali (C-wearing scarf) prays along with others at the shrine of Shah Latif Barri Imam, a Muslim saint, in Islamabad on Sunday. Thousands of Muslim devotees from all over the country arrived to participate in a five-day-long annual "Urs" or religious festival to pay homage to the great saint known as Barri Imama at the historical mirror-studded shrine.

9 killed in Kashmir

AFP, Jammu

Nine people including five of a family and three suspected Kashmiri militants were killed in separate incidents in Indian-administered Kashmir overnight, a police spokesman said Monday.

In the first attack, suspected Islamic rebels barged into a house in Kashmir's Rajouri district, 150 km west of winter capital Jammu and gunned down three children and their parents, the spokesman said.

In the second attack, three militants and one special officer of the Kashmir police were killed at Surankote in the border district of Poonch, 240 km west of Jammu, the spokesman said.

More than 38,000 people have died in Kashmir since the eruption of an anti-Indian rebellion in 1989. Separatists put the toll at twice as high.

Cruise ship explosion kills 4 in Miami

AP, Miami

An explosion and fire in the boiler room of a docked cruise ship that killed at least four crew members appeared to be an accident, officials said.

The explosion Sunday on Norwegian Cruise Line's SS Norway injured more than 15 other crew members, but none of the more than 2,100 passengers were harmed.

The historic ship that has been churning the oceans for the better part of four decades. It was once in keen competition with the famed Queen Elizabeth 2 on the trans-Atlantic run.

Fifteen crew members were taken to Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami, and five of them were in critical condition. Victims were taken to other hospitals, but Miami-Dade officials would not say which ones.

India's security cabinet to meet on sending troops to Iraq

AFP, New Delhi

India's security cabinet was expected to meet Monday to decide whether to send Indian troops to Iraq as part of an international "stabilisation" force, an official said.

The meeting was being held on the eve of Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's departure on a three-nation tour of Russia, Germany and France.

The Hindustan Times newspaper said Monday the cabinet meeting was significant because Vajpayee was expected to hold talks with US President George W. Bush in France on the sidelines of a summit of Group of Eight (G8) industrialised nations.

The G8 political leaders, from Britain, Canada, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, Russia and the United States, are meeting in the French alpine resort of Evian on the Swiss border for their annual summit from June 1.

Asian success fades by SARS resurgence

AFP, Hong Kong

Dwindling SARS cases across Asia fuelled hopes the deadly virus was on the run Monday but optimism was tempered as a clutch of new cases in Canada raised the spectre of a possible global resurgence.

As life began returning to normal in SARS hotspots Beijing and Hong Kong, Canadian health officials were probing a suspected new infection cluster in its financial hub Toronto, where three more deaths clocked up a toll of 27.

Authorities in Toronto have asked more than 800 people to enter quarantine in an effort to control the fresh outbreak, which surfaced 12 days after the World Health Organisation (WHO) took the city off its danger list.

The experience of Canada, the worst SARS-affected country outside of Asia, comes as a stark warning to other nations already boasting success in combating the pneumonia-like epidemic which has killed some 700 people worldwide.

On Friday the WHO lifted an advisory against travel to Hong Kong and southern China's Guangdong province, where the disease is believed to have originated in November.

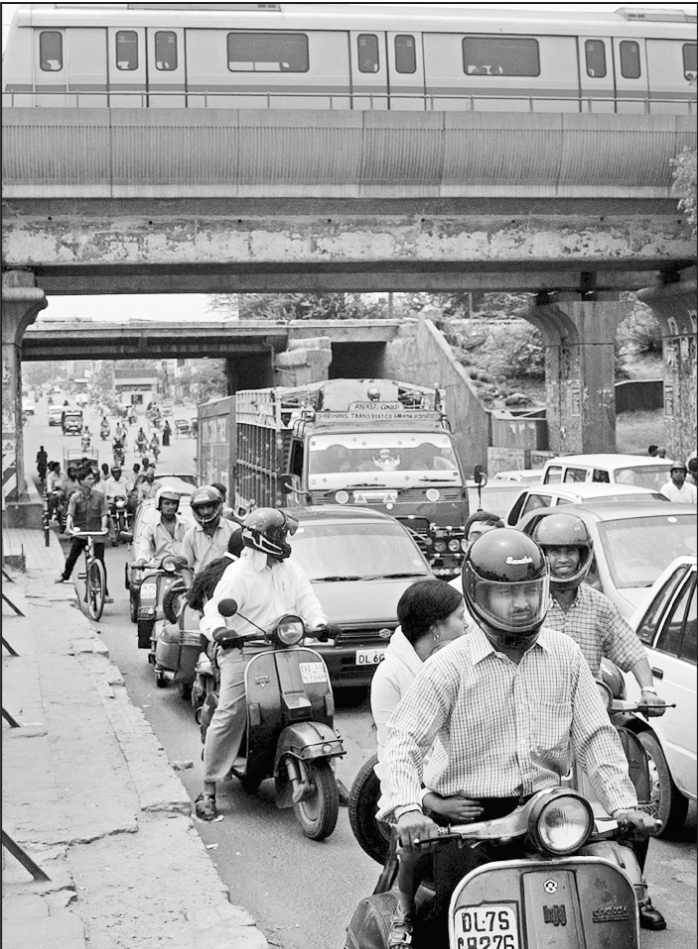


PHOTO: AFP
People using private transport wait at a traffic intersection as the Delhi Metro rail passes by on the overpass above in New Delhi on Sunday. Six months after Delhi's swanky metro rail was flagged off amid huge waiting queues, it is now looking to convince people to use the system beyond a joy ride. From nearly 200,000 people who rode the train daily in the period close to the inaugural run, the number of commuters has dwindled to around 40,000 to 50,000 people a day.