



A group of people push their car along a flooded street in Lahore yesterday. A heavy rainfall left several main streets of the city flooded, while at least 10 people were killed in Karachi on Thursday after heavy winds and rains buffeted several southern port cities.

4 held for Pak embassy attack in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

Four people have been arrested in the ransacking last week of the Pakistani embassy in Kabul, Interior Minister Ali Ahmed Jalali said Thursday.

"We have four people in custody. These people have confessed that they planned and carried out the attack, they came with a clear intention to attack the embassy," the minister told reporters without naming the defendants.

"The people who attacked the embassy had come with the intention of violence. They did not have permission from the Ministry of Interior or security forces for the demonstration."

A mob protesting the alleged intrusion by Pakistani border forces into Afghan territory stormed the embassy on July 8, damaging furniture and fixtures.

Afghan President Hamid Karzai telephoned his Pakistani counterpart Pervez Musharraf the following day to apologize for, and condemn, the incident.

Godhra victim alleges minister was among the mob

PTI, Ahmedabad

Deposing before the Nanavati Commission probing the post-Godhra communal riots, a victim on Thursday alleged that former Gujarat Minister Haren Pandya was part of the mob outside his residence in Paldi on February 28 during the riots last year.

"It was his (Pandya's) presence which 'instigated the rioters even more,' Dr Yunus Mohammed Usman Bhavnagar, a dentist staying at the Paldi area Ahmedabad, told the commission members Justice (Retd) G T Nanavati and Justice (Retd) K G Shah.

He also said he was "forced" to open fire at the rampaging mob which shot his son Dr Amir Bhavnagar in the chest from outside his house.

Several policemen were also present in the mob, he said.

£1.3m deal puts Vikram Seth among modern literary elites

IANS, London

Vikram Seth, the 'Suitable Boy', has, in what is believed to be the largest payment ever for a work of non-fiction, secured an estimated £1.3 million for a memoir of his great uncle and aunt, following an auction involving 10 publishing houses.

Time Warner has agreed the sum for Two Lives, having outbid other publishers "substantially" according to Seth's Edinburgh-based agent Giles Gordon. His A Suitable Boy, the longest single-volume novel in English, was also recently chosen as one of the BBC's 100 Great Novels.

The literary agent secured the deal after five short-listed publishers bid for the work on the basis of a proposal and a presentation by Seth himself.

They did so without seeing the manuscript. The book too is not due to be published before autumn 2005. Time Warner's imprint Little, Brown outbid Orion, publisher of A Suitable Boy, and Penguin the under-bidder, which was reported to have offered £1 million.

Rain hampers rescue operation in Kulu

AFP, Shimla

Heavy rains hampered an operation to rescue survivors from a flash flood triggered by a violent downpour that flattened a construction camp in a remote Himalayan valley, killing 100 workers.

Rescuers said a lack of earth-moving machinery was also impeding work in Himachal Pradesh state's Kulu valley where Wednesday's flash flood roared through a hydropower project, killing 100 workers.

"Not a single body was recovered (Thursday) by 3:00 pm (0930 GMT), as there is no machinery available at the disaster spot to extract debris and huge rocks," said Kirpa Ram Negi, a paramilitary commander engaged in the rescue work.

An eyewitness painted a grim

picture of the site, 26 kilometres (16 miles) from Kullu town.

"The makeshift shanties have been washed away by the torrent. Trees, large boulders and heaps of mud and slush are left in the workers' colony at the edge of the hydropower project," the witness told AFP by telephone.

Rescue workers have put the death toll at around 100, but state legislator Khem Ram said it could not rule out another cloudburst like Wednesday's killer deluge.

The official toll released by Himachal police chief A.K. Puri, however, was much lower.

"In all 35 persons are feared killed with 19 bodies recovered so far and 50 others injured," said Puri, adding that at least 450 people were involved in the rescue.

"Rescue operations are being hampered by the intermittent rains in Kulu... There has been a complete disruption of road links, and this is adding to our problems."

Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Vir Bhadra Singh, who was to visit the site later Thursday, said 230 workers were asleep in their shanties when the skies opened up.

The Meteorological Department said from New Delhi it could not rule out another cloudburst like Wednesday's killer deluge.

Meanwhile, in India's inundated northeastern Assam state, officials reported another two drownings Thursday in the inundated Dhemaji district, taking the local death toll to 30 since a second wave of monsoon floods which began June 27.

Explosion at southeastern Pak hospital injures seven

AP, Hyderabad

An explosion at a hospital in southern Pakistan on Wednesday injured at least seven people, city police chief Iqbal Sarhandi said.

It was not immediately clear what caused the explosion in Hyderabad, 100 kilometers north of Karachi.

Investigators and bomb disposal experts were on the scene. No arrests have been made and police refused to speculate about who may have been behind the explosion. In recent years, southern Sindh province has been rocked by explosions in terrorist attacks.

Release Suu Kyi, Annan to Myanmar envoy

REUTERS, United Nations

Myanmar's military rulers must quickly free pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan told an envoy from the reclusive Southeast Asian nation on Wednesday.

The envoy, Myanmar Deputy Foreign Minister Khin Maung Win, met with Annan at U.N. headquarters as part of a drive by the Yangon government to counter global criticism of its detention of Suu Kyi, 58, who was arrested on May 30 and has since been held in an undisclosed location.

Annan said he gave the envoy a message for junta leader Than Shwe, "telling him that I would expect them to release Aung San Suu Kyi as soon as possible, and that they are responsible for (her) protection and safety."

Political crisis in Hong Kong deepens after resignations

REUTERS, Hong Kong

has been accused of being indecisive and out of touch with the public, merely waved at journalists as he moved in and out of his office on Thursday.

He flies to Beijing on Saturday where he is expected to report to his political masters on the city's biggest political crisis in years, offer names of possible new cabinet members and outline plans on how he hopes to keep the government running despite massive public protests.

Some residents and newspaperers said the resignations were too little, too late.

"The resignations are useless. There will be new replacements but nothing will change. Hong Kong leaders are still controlled by Beijing," said a retired biologist from China, who identified himself only as Stuen.

The Beijing-backed leader, who

said Tung's handling of the resignations had only deepened the political crisis, which began on July 1 when half a million people took to the streets to denounce the government and its controversial plans for an anti-subversion law.

The government is trying to find ways in consultation with them to improve the security situation in northern provinces including Mazar-i-Sharif, said Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Jalali.

Jalali said the existence of armed groups within the city had created a situation of fear and insecurity which the government was now trying to tackle.

Three armed factions -- the ethnic Uzbek Junib militia, the ethnically Tajik Jamiat and the Hezb-i-Wahdat which is made up of the Hazara minority -- have been fighting for control of Mazar-i-Sharif and the north since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 and have rejected control by the government in Kabul.

Northern Afghan warlords meet for security talks

AFP, Kabul

The heads of the main military factions controlling northern Afghanistan have met for the second day of talks with the government in Kabul aimed at improving regional security, officials said Thursday.

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A man sits in an underpass as pedestrians walk by as Hong Kong's unemployment rate looks set to rise to new record levels, July 17. The territory's unemployment rate looks set to hit 8.6 percent or even higher as the full impact of the SARS outbreak is reflected in figures released later today.

Bollywood bad boy refuses to be 'Ram' after threats

AFP, Bombay



duced by Khan and Walia's production company, G S Entertainment, with a budget of over 1.0 billion rupees (21.6 million dollars).

Khan's brother Sohail Khan had been tapped to play Laxman, the younger brother of the Hindu deity, in the legendary epic tale of Prince Ram and his wife Sita who are made by Ram's stepmother to spend 14 years in the jungle to make way for her son to be crowned King of Ayodhya, a princely province in the state of Uttar Pradesh.

The movie was aimed at both the Indian and the international market. To arouse the interest of the more lucrative western market, Lord Ram's wife, Sita -- the epitome of the ideal Indian wife -- was to be portrayed by a Hollywood actress.

The movie was to be shot in Lord Ram's birthplace of Ayodhya and also in New Zealand.

A television series on "Ramayana" about a decade ago drummed up tremendous religious fervour, with fans across India tuning in for the show and paying homage to actors who portrayed the on-screen gods.

"I would not like to say who these people are who threatened us as it would create further controversy. I kept on telling them that Khan is just an actor and it should be taken only in that spirit. But you can't make some people understand."

The Asian Age newspaper reported that Khan, a Muslim, received threats from Hindu right-wing group Bajrang Dal for taking the role.

"We had started pre-

Lanka govt makes formal offer to revive peace talks

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan government offered unspecified political and financial powers to Tamil Tiger rebels on Thursday in a bid to revive the stalled Norwegian-backed peace process.

The government's chief negotiator, GL Peiris, said that a set of proposals to establish a "provisional administrative structure" was handed to the Tigers.

The minister said that Norwegian special envoy Jon Westborg carried the proposals to the LTTE leadership in the northern Wanni region on Thursday.

"We do not expect a quick response from the LTTE," Peiris said, noting that the Tigers would require time to consult with their traditional and political experts before replying.

Peiris said, however, he believed that the new proposals could form the basis for reopening talks and end the deadlock.

The Tigers suspended peace talks on April 21 because of alleged government failure to deliver on promises made during the talks.

Peiris, who is also the government's constitutional affairs minister, declined to discuss details of the latest proposals, which follow two offers already rejected by the LTTE.

The Tigers are demanding greater political and financial powers in the island's embattled northern and eastern areas as a pre-condition to return to the negotiating table.

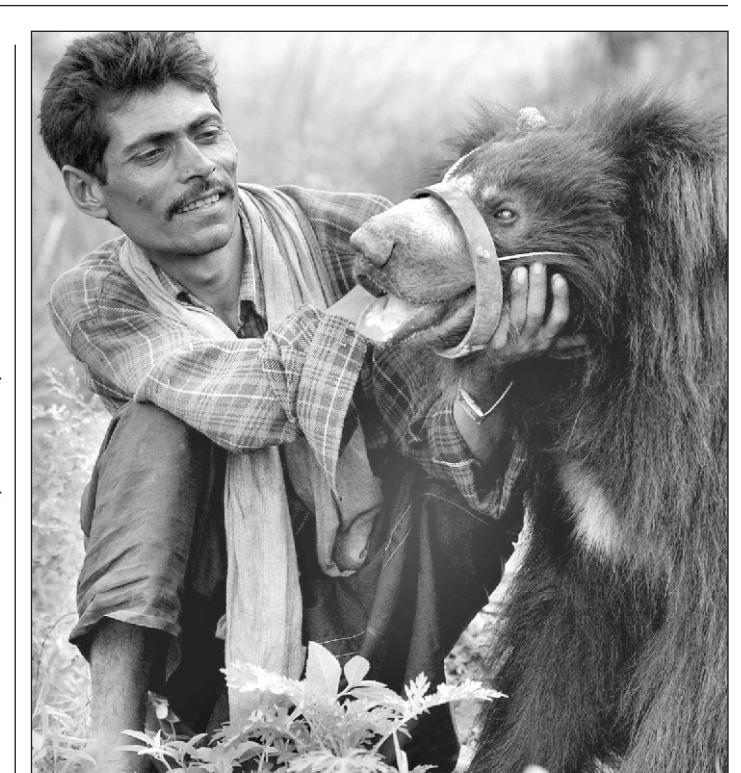
Three weeks ago, the LTTE said that peace talks could be revived if they were granted greater political authority ahead of a final settlement to the conflict that has claimed over 60,000 lives.

LTTE's London-based chief negotiator, Anton Balasingham, said that the group was awaiting a government proposal for an interim administration that would give them political, administrative and financial power.

"If a concrete set of proposals is presented, the LTTE will study the framework and suggest improvements," Balasingham said. Then, the parties can negotiate and finalise the proposals, he added.

The government's latest proposals came a day after the World Bank raised its level of assistance to Sri Lanka to one billion dollars over four years, and expressed confidence in the peace process.

The World Bank said that it was awaiting the resumption of peace talks to activate a North-East Reconstruction Fund (NERF) held by the Bank.



Indian sloth bear owner, Azad, says a last farewell to his bear, Raju at the Agra Bear Rescue Facility, 20 kms from Agra, after selling it to the rescue facility. Although gypsies have been eking out their living for the past 300 years making the bears so called "dance", the Agra Bear Rescue Facility, run by Wildlife SOS, an Indian animal rights group, funded by Australia's Free the Bears Fund, One Voice of France and the British based International Animal Rescue, are trying to persuade the gypsies to terminate this form of cruelty by paying them money to relinquish their bears to the rescue group and develop an alternative business with the funds received.