



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 the southern port city.

## 4 held for Pak embassy attack in Kabul

AFP, Kabul

Four people have been arrested in the ransacking last week of the Pakistan 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 Bhavnagari, a dentist staying at the Paldi area Ahmedabad, told the commission members Justice (Retd) G T Nanavti and Justice (Retd) G G Shah.

He also said he was "forced" to open fire at the rampaging mob which shot his son Dr Amir Bhavnagari 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 workers' camp.

"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 Kulu 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 Khemi Ram said it could reach 150 "as bodies could still be buried in the debris or washed away downstream by the Parvati river."

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 Dhémaji district, taking the local death toll to 30 since a second wave of monsoon floods which began June 27.

# Musharraf seeks OIC support on Kashmir

## Pakistan ready to talk resumption of air links with India

ANI, Tunis

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf, who is on a week-long South African visit, has asked for support from Islamic countries on the Kashmir issue. He also called for better co-ordination on other international issues, including Palestine and Iraq.

"The Islamic countries must regularly consult each other at the UN and all other international fora to co-ordinate their position on all important regional and international issues including Palestine, Kashmir and Iraq," the President was quoted as saying in an interview with Tunisian Arabic daily Al-Sharouq.

Once again asserting that what was going on in Kashmir was a freedom struggle and that people there were fighting for their UN-guaranteed right of self-

determination, he said, "The fact that the Palestinians and Kashmiris happen to be Muslims should not in any way affect their basic fundamental rights, including their right to self-determination."

About the realisation of Islamic solidarity worldwide, Musharraf said it would require a strong political will and unequivocal commitment of the leaders of the Islamic countries, Pakistani daily, The News, reported on Thursday.

"The re-invigoration of the OIC (Organisation of the Islamic Conference) would be an important step forward in this direction. It is high time to further strengthen the OIC and make it more effective to meet the contemporary challenges," he said.

He added Pakistan would put forward some concrete and spe-

cific proposals for this purpose in the forthcoming OIC Summit Conference in Kuala Lumpur later this year.

Musharraf said: "As a first step, the OIC members states should settle their inter-state disputes in the spirit of the Islamic brotherhood and in the larger interest of the Ummah. Secondly, the OIC will have to put greater emphasis on socio-cultural contacts and economic and trade cooperation."

Urging the Muslim world to present the true image of Islam to the world, the president said, "Islam, as we all know, is a religion of universal peace and harmony. While the Muslim world has to take the direction of enlightened moderation, the West too needs to exhibit an understanding of Islam. Dialogue, understanding and mutual respect among religions and cultures is necessary for peace

and prosperity in the world."

PTI, Islamabad reports: Pakistan on Wednesday agreed to hold talks with India on the resumption of air links, the foreign ministry said. "Pakistan has agreed to host experts-level talks between the civil aviation authorities of Pakistan and India to consider all aspects for resumption of air links between the two countries," it said.

The dates for the meeting would be fixed "after mutual consultations" in due course, the foreign ministry statement added. The proposal has been communicated to the government of India, it said. Air links between the countries were suspended after an attack on the Indian Parliament in December 2001 which New Delhi blamed on Pakistan-based militants.

## 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."

"I also indicated that really the best way to move forward is to resume dialogue," Annan told reporters, adding that Suu Kyi had already indicated she was prepared to resume negotiations with the government.

The envoy, in turn, delivered a message from his government seeking to explain its detention of Suu Kyi, Annan said.

The United Nations has pushed hard for national reconciliation and a shift to democracy in Myanmar.

But its military rulers have accused international governments of meddling in its internal affairs and have warned of instability if Western-style democracy was imposed.

Speaking ahead of his meeting with the envoy, Annan said some

governments were "becoming quite exercised" by the continued detention of Suu Kyi, a Nobel laureate who was once again taken into custody following a clash between supporters and pro-government groups during a tour outside the capital.

The US Congress on Wednesday cleared legislation closing the US market to imports from Myanmar, sending the measure to the desk of President Bush for his signature.

But Annan said it was premature to talk about Security Council sanctions on Myanmar, formerly known as Burma. "This is not an item on the council's agenda," he said.

Diplomats said the United States would like Security Council action but China and Mexico, among others, are wary.



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.

## Political crisis in Hong Kong deepens after resignations

REUTERS, Hong Kong

Hong Kong plunged deeper into crisis on Thursday after the resignations of two top cabinet ministers added fuel to demands for democratic change and put further pressure on leader Tung Chee-hwa.

Financial markets were on edge after the resignations of deeply unpopular Security Secretary Regina Ip and Financial Secretary Antony Leung, which raised fresh questions about the government's ability to revive what was once one of the world's most dynamic economies.

Tung gave little explanation for the departures on Wednesday and did not name their successors. He kept his usual distance despite pleas from local newspapers to show more leadership.

The Beijing-backed leader, who

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 newspapers 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 Suen.

The South China Morning Post

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 "people power" protests and defection of a key ally later forced Tung into an embarrassing postponement of the bill, but he has vowed to reintroduce the legislation at a later date.

Tung has four years left of his term in office and most analysts said it was unthinkable for Beijing to let him go.

But Tung, and any possible replacement, face growing demands for greater democracy in the territory, which Beijing fears could spill over into the rest of China. Confrontations with increasingly bold pro-democracy forces could rise.

## Bollywood bad boy refuses to be 'Ram' after threats

AFP, Bombay

Salman Khan, Bollywood's bad boy, has dropped plans to play the role of Hindu god Lord Ram after threats allegedly from Hindu hardliners, Khan's producer friend Bunty Walia said Thursday.

Khan, 37, who has been in news for bashing girlfriends and a fatal hit-and-run controversy, announced earlier this year that he was to star as Lord Ram in the big-budget "Ramayana."

"He (Khan) as well as I have received a number of threats from certain people, following which we have decided not to make the movie at least for now," Walia told AFP.

"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-



Bollywood actor Salman Khan.

production work on the film, but there are some people who think that I should not play Ram because I am a Muslim," the report quoted Khan as saying.

"How can people forget that my mother is a Hindu? And if my mother would not have been there, how would I be here today? It is frustrating and sad, but what can I do?"

Walia said the project is being kept in abeyance at the moment and may be revived later.

"Ramayana" was to be pro-

duced by Khan and Walia's production company, GS 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.

## 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 peace 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 constitutional 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 livings 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.