

Maoists attack police post in S Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

A group of about 50 Maoists attacked a police post at a customs office in the town of Sugauli, in southern Nepal, and made off with about a dozen weapons, police said Monday.

The attack late Sunday was the first on a police post since the rebels and the government announced a ceasefire on January 29.

"The Maoists warned the policemen -- three constables -- to leave their post and after they ran away the rebels seized the arms," a police spokesman said.

The Maoists had sent a letter to the post a week ago warning the policemen to leave the premises.

"They attacked because the police did not evacuate the place," the spokesman said.

After the raid, police chiefs in Kathmandu sounded an alert to all the regional, district and area offices to be vigilant against attacks.

51 pc Americans have doubts on leadership of Bush: Poll

AFP, New York

US President George W. Bush's popularity is mixed in the eyes of the US public, with a new poll stating that 51 percent of Americans have doubts and reservations about his leadership.

The figure is up from 41 percent in March, according to a TIME/CNN poll in the Monday edition of Time magazine.

However an equal number -- 51 percent -- believe that Bush is more truthful than most other presidents, with 56 percent saying that he is more trustworthy than former president Bill Clinton.

And 52 percent say that Bush's handling of Iraq gives them more confidence in his ability to handle Iran, though 48 percent say it gives them confidence he can handle the North Korea situation.

On a broader topic 55 percent support US policy in Iraq, with 61 percent saying that the United States did the right thing in toppling the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Pak embassy in Kabul reopens

AFP, Kabul

Pakistan's embassy in the Afghan capital officially reopened Monday, nearly two weeks after it was closed when it was ransacked by a mob of protesters on July 8, a Pakistani diplomat said.

Dozens of visa applicants thronged the embassy Monday, with a few policemen looking on.

The embassy closed after it was stormed by a mob protesting alleged intrusions by Pakistani border forces into Afghan territory. The protesters damaged furniture and fixtures.

Six trapped in burning bus roasted alive in Taiwan

AFP, Taipei

Six people burnt to death early Monday trapped in the rear of a bus that burst into flames after colliding with a van that had broken down on a freeway near Taiwan's capital, officials said.

Initial investigations showed the van was hit by an oil tanker and then by the bus near Tucheng, outside Taipei, an official with the Taiwan Area National Freeway Bureau said.

The collisions sparked a fire that engulfed the bus, the official said.

"I told the other panic-stricken passengers to seek an exit from the front. But they seemed to ignore my advice and ran to the rear part of the bus," said passenger Li Ming-hua.

Bush welcomes Berlusconi to Texas ranch

AFP, Crawford

President George W. Bush was hosting a key ally, Italy's billionaire Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, at his Texas ranch Monday, as a political storm raged over Iraq.

Bush seemed delighted to see Berlusconi as he flew into the Prairie Chapel property in a US Marine Corps helicopter late Sunday for an overnight stay.

Casually dressed in a checked shirt, khakis and cowboy boots, Bush threw an arm around Berlusconi's shoulders, then drove him in a white pickup to his home, shimmering in temperatures of 102 degrees Fahrenheit (39 degrees Celsius).

Palestinians look to US to break ME deadlock

No breakthrough in Abbas-Sharon talks on prisoners' release

AFP, Jerusalem

Palestinians were looking to Washington Monday to help break the deadlock with Israel in the peace process as their prime minister Mahmud Abbas began a flurry of diplomacy which will culminate in talks at the White House.

Talks between Abbas and his Israeli counterpart Ariel Sharon broke up Sunday without any commitment from Israel to release more Palestinian prisoners from its jails while demands for troop withdrawals from the West Bank were also shelved.

Abbas arrived Monday in Egypt, where he was expected to hold afternoon talks with President Hosni Mubarak. His Cairo visit was the first leg in a round of meetings which will also take him to Jordan before arriving in Washington for

talks with US President George W. Bush on Friday.

Ahmed Qorei, the speaker of the Palestinian parliament, said that the White House would be urged to intervene and prevent the peace process outlined in the US-backed plan known as the roadmap from crumbling.

"Israel has tried to attach conditions that we find unacceptable and we will see what the Americans have to say about that," said Qorei, who will accompany Abbas to Washington.

Palestinian information minister Nabil Amr for his part told AFP that the Palestinians would ask Bush to make a clear statement "demanding that the building of the separation fence and settlement activity be halted, and that the siege on president Arafat be lifted".

Palestinian analyst Ali Jerbawi predicted the US visit, Abbas' first to Washington, would be crunch time for the blueprint.

"Either the roadmap will be implemented or it won't... If the US does not push Israel, we are heading back to the vicious circle of negotiations which led to this situation," he said.

The United States is one of the co-sponsors, along with the United Nations, European Union and Russia, of the roadmap, which aims to create an independent Palestinian state by 2005.

The issue of Palestinian prisoners has proved to be the main stumbling block between the two sides, with Israel so far approving the release of just 350 of an estimated 6,000 detainees.

The Palestinians had been

hoping that Sharon would give more ground on the issue at his meeting with Abbas in a bid to bolster the latter's position in the face of Palestinian critics.

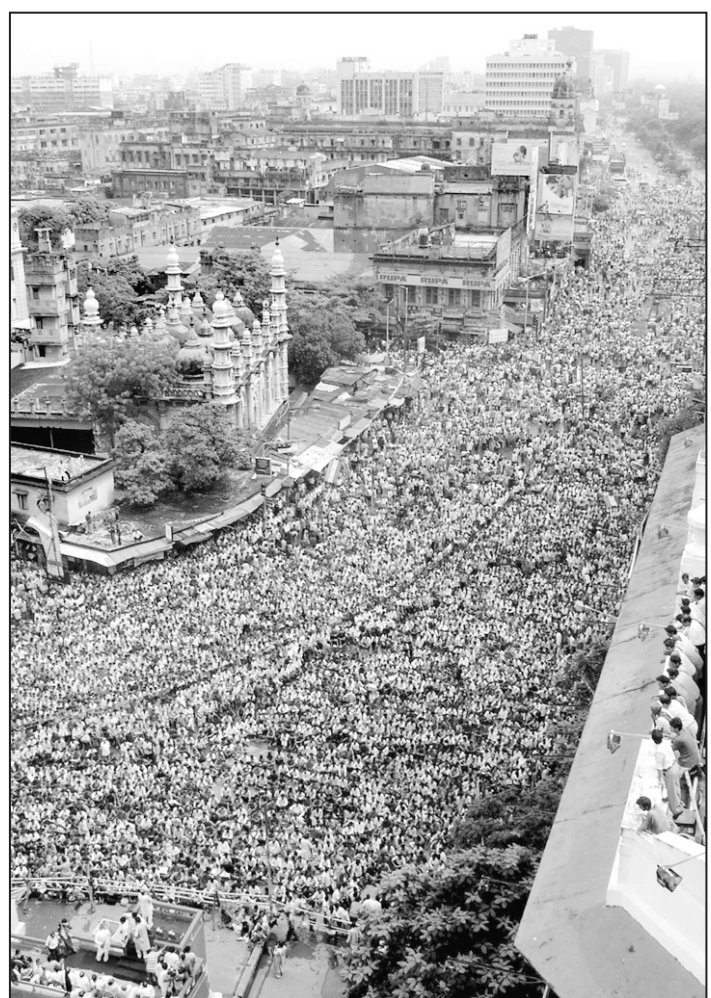
But instead the two sides merely agreed to form a joint committee to discuss the issue, featuring Palestinian prisoners affairs minister Hisham Abdelrazeq and Avi Dichter, the head of Israel's Shin Beth security service.

Abdelrazeq said that Israel must accept input from the Palestinians over the names and numbers of releases and not try to dictate terms.

"If this is the intention of the Israeli government, a meeting on this subject would not make any sense," the minister told Israeli public radio.



Palestinian boys shout slogans while holding posters of imprisoned Ahmed Saadat, secretary-general of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, with Arabic writing that reads "No for Political Detention" during a demonstration in support of the Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails on Monday in Gaza city.



Crowds gather at a Trinamool Congress (TMC) rally in Kolkata on Monday. TMC leader Mamata Banerjee (not in picture) started her campaign for next year's elections with a meeting commemorating the deaths of 13 party activists who were killed on July 21, 1993.

China, Britain hail new, open and frank ties

AFP, Beijing

China and Britain Monday hailed a new frankness and openness between the two countries, and vowed to work together to produce a "stable, prosperous and peaceful" world.

In his first visit to China since he was reelected in 2001, embattled British Prime Minister Tony Blair found some respite from the domestic crisis engulfing him, with a warm welcome from Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao.

"The discussions we've just had privately now are an indication of how open and frank we are able to be with each other across a range of issues and also how much agreement there is on how we produce a world that is stable and prosperous, peaceful, where we are diminishing the possibility of conflict," Blair said.

"The relationship between Britain and China has strengthened enormously over these past few years..."

"I've got no doubt that it will continue to strengthen still further both in the economic field where we are the largest European investor in China but also in the political field as well where we are working together in resolving some of the critical issues that face our world."

Wen said relations with Britain had prospered since Blair took office six years ago, starting with the handover of the former British colony of Hong Kong to China.

"I fully share your assessment about China-UK relations. Since you became the prime minister China-UK relations have achieved much progress," he said at the Great Hall of the People.

More US troops ordered to Liberia amid fighting

AFP, Washington

Faced with a flare-up in Liberia's civil war, the United States has ordered 41 additional troops to the capital of the West African nation, but given no word on whether it will send peacekeepers.

The soldiers, from a naval "anti-terrorism security team" based in Rota, Spain, are to join US Marines currently guarding the US embassy in Monrovia, the Defense Department said as it announced the move late Sunday.

There was no indication US President George W. Bush was any closer to making a decision on US participation in a peacekeeping force being considered for Liberia, despite the spiraling violence.

The deployment was ordered by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld at the request of US Ambassador John Blaney, according to a Pentagon statement.

A Pentagon spokeswoman

declined to provide any further details.

The move comes as Liberian government troops are locked in a fierce battle for control of the capital with advancing rebels seeking the ouster of President Charles Taylor.

On Sunday, government forces repulsed a rebel advance on two key bridges that lead to the heart of Monrovia, where many diplomatic missions are located.

However, heavy fighting continued to rage in the city center, with at least five rockets landing there in the afternoon, sparking fresh panic among desperate local residents.

The deployment order was followed by a new US government appeal to all warring parties for an immediate restoration of a short-lived June 17 ceasefire brokered by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Bush credibility rests in probe: Senators

AP, Washington

The credibility of President Bush and the nation are at stake with the information that led the United States into the Iraq war, two members of the Senate Intelligence Committee say.

Investigations under way by the committee's staff, the CIA and the FBI marked a good beginning, Sens. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va., and Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., said Sunday on CNN's "Late Edition."

"Ultimately, the public needs to be reassured that, in fact, the intelligence the president was given... (and) was used, and how he framed the debate and the decision to go into Iraq, was intelligence that they can have confidence in,"

Hagel said.

"And that's, by the way, important for the world to have that same confidence in our word."

A crucial question will be to determine how Bush's State of the Union address on Jan. 28 came to include a reference to what US intelligence had determined was an incorrect British report that Iraq was shopping for uranium in Africa.

"There are plenty of investigations, and the question is, what's the point of them?" said Rockefeller, the intelligence committee's vice chairman. "The point of them is to find out if we were being misled, if somebody inserted that in" despite earlier objections

by CIA Director George Tenet.

On "Fox News Sunday," Rockefeller said Bush could make the controversy go away by coming clean whether the justification for war was exaggerated. "It's just a question of was it right, or was it wrong?" he said.

Rockefeller said the argument should not be personalised or politicised. Because of Bush's policy of maintaining the right of preemptive attacks against potentially dangerous governments, he said, "intelligence is the basis now of war-fighting."

Therefore, Rockefeller said, "it's very important to intelligence to say that facts really do matter, they count, they have to be accurate."

Labour MPs bash BBC for role in Kelly's death

AFP, London

The BBC came under fire on Sunday for its part in the death of a British arms expert after confirming he was the source of its report that the government had "sexed up" evidence to justify war on Iraq.

Lawmakers of British Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party rounded on the national broadcaster for its conduct during a bitter dispute over its report that the government embellished its intelligence on Iraq's weapons programmes.

The BBC, which had previously refused to name its source, said it was "profoundly sorry" over the death of former UN weapons inspector and defence ministry consultant David Kelly, but stood by its decision to air the report.

"We continue to believe we were right to place Dr Kelly's views in the public domain," it said.

Kelly, 59, was found dead on Friday after apparently committing suicide following a grilling

earlier in the week from a parliamentary committee examining the accusations -- hotly denied by Blair's office -- that a key dossier last September on Iraq had exaggerated the threat of Saddam Hussein's arsenal.

While he denied being the primary source for the May 29 BBC story, Kelly admitted briefing Andrew Gilligan, the BBC defence correspondent whose report triggered the furor.

Gilligan, who has come under fire from lawmakers, said Sunday he did not distort what Kelly had told him.

"I want to make it clear that I did not misquote or misrepresent Dr David Kelly," said a BBC statement issued on behalf of Gilligan.

"Entirely separately from my meeting with him, Dr Kelly expressed very similar concerns about Downing Street interpretation of intelligence in the dossier and the unreliability of the 45-minute point to Newsnight," the statement said.

But the chairman of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, which has been probing the disputed dossier, said there was a "fundamental conflict" between the evidence given to the committee by Kelly and Gilligan.

"I think the BBC has got to look at itself long and hard now after Andrew Gilligan's latest evidence to the foreign affairs committee last Thursday," Labour MP Donald Anderson told Sky News.

The BBC, which prides itself for its reputation for rigorous journalistic standards and an independent viewpoint, is no stranger to clashes with the government.

Margaret Thatcher's government criticised the broadcaster's coverage of the Falklands War in 1982, though the BBC stood its ground and retained the support of voters.

Nevertheless, the broadcaster's naming of its source turned some of the glare of the media spotlight away from Blair.



Rescue personnel from Japan's Self-Defence Force remove debris from a mud field in Hogawachi village, near Minamata on Monday. Torrential rain triggered landslides in southwestern Japan on Sunday left nine people dead and about 20 others missing. A heavy downpour struck the city of Minamata, some 900 km southwest of Tokyo, since July 19 as the Japanese archipelago is in the throes of the rainy season.

3-way talks on DPRK nukes likely in Sept

REUTERS, Seoul

Nuclear crisis talks between North Korea, the United States and China are likely to be held in early September, a South Korean newspaper reported on Monday.

The mainstream Korea Times quoted anonymous sources as saying an announcement would be made this week on the three-country talks to be held on September 6 in the Chinese capital, Beijing.

A South Korean government official said Seoul was unaware of any schedule for a second round of nuclear talks following a meeting of US, North Korean and Chinese officials in April in Beijing.

The Korea Times said an expanded meeting involving South Korea and Japan, two countries that would be directly threatened

by a North Korean nuclear arsenal, would follow the three-way talks.

China has floated new talks formats as a way of bridging the gap between North Korea's demand for bilateral talks with the United States and the US insistence that only a multilateral approach can make any deal with North Korea stick.

South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun, speaking to reporters after talks on Sunday with British Prime Minister Tony Blair that were dominated by North Korea, struck a hopeful note on the prospects for a diplomatic solution of the nine-month-old impasse.

"Everybody is emphasising the peaceful resolution of this matter," Roh said through an interpreter. "I think all of the related parties are converging on this side."

US visa to be easier for 'legitimate' tourists

PTI, Houston

Visitors to the United States are in for changes from January 1, next year, as a new system - the United States Visitor and Immigrant Status Indicator Technology (US VISIT) - will identify and track immigrants and non-immigrants who come to work, visit or live in the country.

According to the US Department of Homeland Security, the "US VISIT" is designed to make entering the country easier for legitimate tourists, students and business travellers, while making it more difficult to enter the

US illegally through the implementation of biometrically authenticated documents.

All the visitors entering the US with a valid visa through airports and sea ports alike will be finger printed, photographed and customs officials will scan their travel documents. The system will replace the currently existing National Security Entry Exit Registration System (NSEERS) programme, integrate the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) programme, and encompass the Congressional requirements of the automated entry exit system.