

## Rivals armed with candles join vigil for peace

IANs, Wagah

Scores of Indians and Pakistanis gathered at the two countries' only land border here armed with lighted candles to observe their independence and call for peace in the sub-continent.

Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were among the large gathering that also attracted a dozen members of the Pakistani Parliament who joined the commoners while raising slogans calling for better India-Pakistan relations.

The Indian side of the usually deserted border witnessed tremendous gaiety beginning Thursday evening as villagers and peace activists started assembling, cheering each other and shouting slogans.

The Pakistani MPs used the occasion to cross over into India carrying cloth banners proclaiming "Friendship Zindabad", "Long Live Friendship" and "Wagah For People".

Pakistani MP Fauzia Wahab said: "The old conception of rivalry between the two nations is gone. Now we want peace and friendship."



PHOTO: AFP

**Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) inspects a guard of honour at Red Fort to mark the country's 56th Independence Day in New Delhi yesterday. Vajpayee flagged off Independence Day celebrations with a call to Pakistan to end its support to cross-border militancy and boost bilateral trade, also highlighting the importance of nuclear weapons and said the arsenal had turned India into a powerful state.**

## NE India offers peace talks to militants

IANs, Guwahati

Government's in India's northeastern states offered unconditional peace talks with separatist groups on the country's Independence Day on Friday to end decades of insurgency in the region.

"Our doors for peace talks with any militant groups are open," Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi declared in his Independence Day speech in Guwahati.

"Violence is not the answer to any solution, and so the militants should shun the path of killings and bloodbath and join the mainstream by holding peace talks with the government," he added.

At least 11 separatist groups in six of the seven northeastern states called for a general strike to crippled Independence Day celebrations. Only Mizoram was unaffected.

Militants in the region routinely boycott Independence and Republic Day celebrations to protest New Delhi's alleged "colonial and repressive" rule over the vast region rich in oil, tea, and timber.

## US base under rocket attack in Afghanistan

AFP, Bagram Air Base

A US-led coalition base came under rocket attack in central Afghanistan but there were no casualties, a US military spokesman said Friday.

"One 107 mm rocket landed in the vicinity of the coalition force base in Deh Rawood in Uruzgan province (Thursday) evening," US Colonel Rodney Davis told reporters at Bagram Air Base 50 km north of Kabul.

Deh Rawood district, some 400 km southwest of Kabul, is regularly attacked by insurgents.

Davis did not say who fired the rocket but similar attacks have been blamed on Taliban remnants, their al-Qaeda allies or supporters of renegade former Afghan prime minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. Fugitive Taliban leader Mullah Omar came from Uruzgan.

Fifteen people were killed in neighbouring Helmand on Wednesday in a bus bomb blamed on the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

## Blackout affects planes, trains, subways

AP, Washington

The blackout in the Eastern United States and parts of Canada disrupted planes, trains and automobiles, leaving millions of travelers stuck in traffic jams, airport terminals and rail stations.

Flights were halted for several hours in and out of Kennedy and LaGuardia airports in New York, as well as Cleveland, Newark, New Jersey, Toronto and Ottawa. All four US airports reopened Thursday evening.

Other airports also were affected: Northwest Airlines curbed flights into Detroit and delayed, diverted or canceled flights in Hartford, Conn., and Lansing, Michigan. US Airways reported problems in Albany and Rochester, New York, Erie, Pennsylvania, and Montreal. American Airlines had difficulties in Syracuse, Buffalo, Islip and White Plains, New York.

The FAA and the airlines said

they did not know how many flights overall were affected.

The blackout also caused problems for ground transportation.

Amtrak halted travel between New Haven, Conn., and Newark, including New York's Pennsylvania Station. New York subways stopped in their tracks, forcing evacuations of passengers. The Port Authority Bus Terminal was evacuated.

Congestion was common in cities where power was out, as signals went dark. "It appears our major problem is probably traffic," said Erie, Pa., Police Lt. Robert Johns.

Delays were expected to extend into Friday as the airlines and Amtrak worked through the night to get planes and trains into position to handle the backlog. The FAA, the airlines and Amtrak urged passengers to check before heading to the airport or train station.

"You're going to get some residual delays as aircraft are put in

position, the effects being no more than after a severe snowstorm or severe thunderstorms," Federal Aviation Administration spokesman Greg Martin said. "It will take into the morning and perhaps to midday to get the system in place."

Air traffic came to a halt at the six airports Thursday because there was no power to run the metal detectors and X-ray machines at security screening checkpoints, Transportation Department spokesman Leonardo Alcivar said. In addition, flights to those airports were not allowed to take off from their originating airports.

Planes already in the air were allowed to land at the airports, directed by air traffic controllers operating with emergency power. That also allowed controllers to continue to direct flights to and from other airports, minimizing delays, Alcivar said.

## US convoys attacked as UN welcomes Iraq's Council

AFP, Baghdad

US army convoys came under attack yesterday west of Baghdad, a day after a British soldier was killed by a bomb near the southern city of Basra and the United Nations welcomed Iraq's US-formed interim authority without formally endorsing it.

An American convoy was hit on a highway between the flashpoint towns of Ramadi and Fallujah, locals said. A witness said two soldiers appeared to have been wounded.

Several Americans were wounded and three Iraqis arrested in the second incident in Falahat, on another road near Fallujah, some 60 km west of the capital, witnesses said.

Three mines blew up as three US army vehicles were passing, said office worker Abdel Hamid Ibrahim. An army spokesman said he could provide no details on either attack.

The Briton killed Thursday in Basra died when a military ambu-

lance, marked with a large red cross, he was travelling in was hit by a remote-controlled explosion in an attack that left two other soldiers wounded, the British army said.

The death brought to seven the number of British servicemen killed in Iraq in attacks since major combat operations were declared over on May 1. Sixty American troops have been killed over the same period by suspected loyalists of ousted dictator Saddam Hussein.

Another British soldier was found dead in his bed in southern Iraq, the defence ministry in London said, adding that an inquiry had been launched although there was no evidence of foul play or that it was suicide.

The Basra incident came as the top US soldier in Iraq said his army had apologised to Shiite Muslims in Baghdad over a clash on Wednesday that left an Iraqi dead and sent thousands of protestors into the streets railing against the occupation.

A letter of apology, given to Shiite

clerics for the incident sparked when US troops in a helicopter apparently removed a religious flag from a tower, also promised to punish the soldiers responsible.

The incident, in Baghdad's impoverished and predominantly Shiite Sadr City district, sparked outrage with many there seeing it as an attack on their cherished faith.

Leaflets being distributed Friday called on Shiites to come from across Baghdad to Sadr City for Friday prayers, which would be held not in the mosques there as usual but under the tower with the flag that sparked Wednesday's confrontation.

The prayers would "denounce the assault on the people of Sadr City, the people of this religion, the people of Islam," said the leaflet, signed by the secretary general of the district's firebrand anti-occupation Shiite cleric Moqtada Sadr.

## Israel, Palestinians seek to ease tensions

AFP, REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israeli and Palestinian security officials sought yesterday to calm tensions after a round of violence that dented a seven-week-old truce and virtually halted efforts to implement a US-backed peace plan.

Aides to Palestinian security chief Mohammad Dahlan said the two sides were to hold new security talks Friday or Sunday. Dahlan and Israeli Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz met late Thursday for talks they called "positive."

Israel made a small gesture Friday in freeing scores of Palestinian prisoners whose release had been delayed. Officials were also mulling briefly lifting a siege on Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat so he could join mourning for his late sister.

The moves came amid mounting fears of a new spiral of blood-

shed after a local commander of the radical group Islamic Jihad was killed Thursday by Israeli forces in the southern West Bank City of Hebron.

Islamic Jihad vowed to avenge the death, which came just two days after two Palestinian suicide bombings killed two Israelis in reprisal for a bloody Israeli army raid last Friday on the northern West Bank town of Nablus.

The round of attacks threatened a precarious truce which had dramatically reduced the death toll since it was declared by Islamic Jihad, Hamas and other Palestinian militant groups on June 29.

It also brought to a virtual standstill efforts to advance on Washington's "roadmap" for peace aimed at ending the nearly three-year-old conflict and establishing a Palestinian state by 2005.

address. "Our frequent initiatives to normalise relations with Pakistan are not a sign of our weakness, rather they are an indication of our commitment to peace," he said.

Vajpayee, who spoke from behind a bullet-proof glass shield, said, "We hope Pakistan abjures its anti-India outlook. The people of both countries wish to live in peace."

Vajpayee said that he had been telling his Pakistani friends, "We have spent 50 years fighting. How much more blood is yet to be spilt? The two of us need to fight against poverty, against unemployment and against backwardness."

Stressing the need to increase trade and economic links between India and Pakistan, he said, "When we share a 2000-km long border, it makes no sense for us to trade via third country."

Vajpayee added, "Let people travel to and from. Let more and more elected representatives visit

each other's country. Let us expand bilateral cultural relations. Let us open some new doors, new windows and new ventilators in the walls that divide us," he said.

On improvement of ties with Pakistan, Vajpayee said that the love that the two-year-old girl Noor from Lahore, who underwent a heart surgery in Bangalore, received in India, carried a message "which our friends in Pakistan should understand".

Vajpayee announced that he would be visiting Srinagar at the end of this month. "I had gone to Srinagar a few months back. I am going there again at the end of this month. The atmosphere there is changing."

Recalling that the Centre fulfilled its promise of holding free and fair elections in Jammu and Kashmir, the Prime Minister said that the polls demonstrated yet again the fact that the people of Kashmir had rebuffed terrorism from across the border.

"The people of Jammu, Kashmir

and Ladakh have faith in democracy. They want peace. They would like to see happiness return to their lives," he said.

Vajpayee said that the people who advocated the right to self-determination in Kashmir, wanted to divide India on communal lines. "They will not be allowed to succeed in this," he said.

The Prime Minister said "knotty issues" in J&K could be unravelled only through dialogue. "We shall take forward the efforts that have been initiated in this direction. People who have been uprooted have to be resettled in their homes."

In his 25-minute speech, the Prime Minister announced India's decision to send its own spacecraft Chandrayaan-I to Moon by 2008.

He also announced launch of mobile telephony in Jammu and Kashmir next week besides declaring a slew of measures to boost country's economy.

## 4 bombs defused near Nepali Royal Palace

AFP, Kathmandu

Army explosive experts defused four powerful socket bombs planted near a girls school and just 300 metres (1000 feet) from the Royal Palace in Nepal's capital Kathmandu Friday, army sources said.

No one has claimed responsibility for the bombs planted behind the Adarsha Vidya Mandir Girls Secondary School, but security officials believe Maoist rebels were responsible.

"Thank God we could defuse the socket bombs before they caused extensive damage to the school buildings or several hundred girl students who were to gather for beginning of classes," one security official said.

Elsewhere, a young woman was killed in the crossfire in an encounter between rebels and soldiers Wednesday night at Khamlung village in the far northeast of the country, an army source said.

He blamed the rebels for firing on an army post, which produced several skirmishes.

## US, Asian leaders hail Hambali arrest

AFP, Hong Kong

The arrest of Hambali was greeted Wednesday with elation and relief in Asia and the United States, with US President George W. Bush hailing the capture of "one of the world's most lethal terrorists".

"He is a close associate of September 11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. He is one of the world's most lethal terrorists," said Bush after US agents captured Hambali in Thailand.

"He is no longer a problem to those of us who love freedom. And neither are nearly two-thirds of known senior al-Qaeda leaders, operational managers and key facilitators who have been captured or have been killed," Bush added in a speech to US forces at a military base in California.

Asia-Pacific leaders sounded a similarly upbeat note after the arrest of Asia's most wanted man, accused of heading up the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terror network behind the bombings on the Indonesian island of Bali.

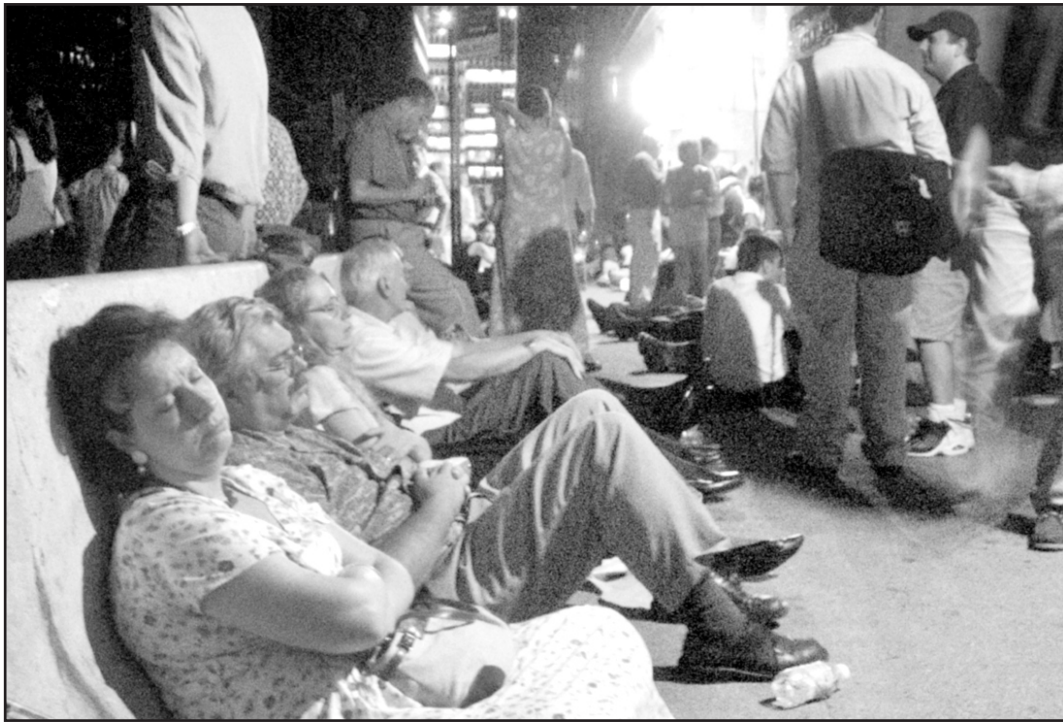


PHOTO: AFP

**Stranded passengers sleep on a sidewalk outside of Grand Central Station yesterday in New York City as huge power blackouts hit New York and other major cities across the northeast United States and Canada trapping thousands in underground trains and elevators and bringing commuter chaos to millions.**

## French stand may hold up Lockerbie deal

REUTERS, Paris

France on Thursday raised a last-minute obstacle to a deal in the Lockerbie plane bombing with a demand for more compensation from Libya in the separate downing of a French plane before it would agree to the lifting of UN sanctions against Tripoli.

Libya agreed Wednesday to set up a \$2.7 billion fund for families of victims of the 1988 attack over Lockerbie, Scotland, in a landmark deal which could thaw icy relations with the West and reopen the door to foreign investment.

The deal, which includes an arrangement in which Libya was expected to take responsibility for the bombing that killed 270 people, had been expected to trigger a UN Security Council vote as soon as early next week to permanently end the UN sanctions.

But in a move bound to fuel Franco-US tension, France, a veto-wielding member of the Security Council, said it first wanted more compensation for the 1989 bombing of a UTA airlines flight over Africa that killed 170 people.

## Massive Pak manhunt to capture fleeing al-Qaeda

AFP, Peshawar

Pakistani security forces have launched a massive manhunt for at least three al-Qaeda suspects who escaped after a clash here overnight that left one of their companions dead, officials said Friday.

"Paramilitary soldiers, police commandos and plain-clothed intelligence officials are combing the area," a security official told AFP.

"Our focus is Bara and Jamrud towns" located in the tribal belt running along the eastern Afghan

district of Jalalabad, he said.

Officials said security had been beefed up at all roads leading to the semi-autonomous region following a six-hour encounter in Peshawar city's suburban neighbourhood of Hayatabad late Thursday.

One al-Qaeda suspect, identified as Libyan national Abdul Rehman, was killed in the clash that erupted after security forces surrounded a house in Hayatabad and advised the fugitives to surrender.

Those holed up inside

responded with a volley of bullets and grenades, triggering the gunbattle, witnesses and officials said.

Security officials said the Libyan, killed when a grenade exploded in his hand, appeared to be a "well-trained militant."

He was carrying a hand grenade and a Kalashnikov rifle and had been firing on security forces perhaps to provide cover for the others to escape, a senior security official said on condition of anonymity.



PHOTO: AFP

**South Korean students march in Seoul yesterday holding banners and effigies in Seoul calling on Korean national reconciliation to mark Korea's liberation from Japanese colonial rule 58 years ago. The students paraded through the streets of the South Korean capital calling also on the US to leave South Korea to allow Korean national unity to take place.**