

India braces for backlash after Mumbai blasts

REUTERS, Mumbai

India stepped up security nationwide yesterday to head off any Hindu-Muslim violence as grieving families of the victims of twin car bombings in the financial capital Mumbai prepared to cremate their dead.

Police have blamed the bombings, which killed 48 people, on an outlawed Muslim students group, acting along with a Pakistan-based Kashmiri separatists.

Among the victims were eight people from western Gujarat state, where at least 1,000 people, most of them Muslims, died last year in revenge killings following an attack on a train carrying Hindu pilgrims from the northern holy town of Ayodhya.

The eight Gujaratis, whose bodies were being taken back on Tuesday to their home town of Surendranagar, had been on a pilgrimage to a Hindu festival and were in Bombay on holiday.

K. Chakravarthi, Director-General of the Gujarat police, said authorities had posted police along the route where the bodies of the eight Gujaratis would be returned for cremation.

In Mumbai, police raided slums and picked up people for questioning about Monday's bombs, which were planted in two taxis.

Bloodstained footpaths, broken glass and debris marked the blast sites, one at a crowded gold and jewelry market, the other near the Gateway of India, a huge waterfront arch built by India's former British rulers.

But the city opened for a normal working day with its usual heavy traffic and packed trains.

"Every moment, I feel there is danger in Mumbai. But still, I have to put my life on the line and go out to work today," said Sheikh Abdul Sheikh, a 32-year-old tailor waiting at a bus stop.

Financial markets rallied, shrugging off the blasts. The key 30-share index was up 2.14 percent in late morning trading after closing down 2.92 percent on Monday. Currency and bond markets also recovered.

Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani was to fly to Bombay to visit some of the 150 injured in the attacks.

Police said they suspected the outlawed Students Islamic Movement of India (SIMI), working with the Pakistan-based Kashmiri separatist organisation Lashkar-e-Taiba.

No one has claimed responsibility. Police are questioning the owner of one of the taxis used in the blasts about a couple who hired him on Sunday for a tour.

Pakistan on Monday condemned the bombings.

India, which came close to war last year with its nuclear-armed neighbor, has traditionally blamed Pakistan for bombings and other attacks in disputed Kashmir and elsewhere.

But Monday's bombings coincided with a thaw in relations between the two countries.

The explosions were the worst in Mumbai since 1993, when a series of bombs killed at least 260 in what was seen as retaliation for the deaths of minority Muslims after Hindu-Muslim riots.

Those riots were triggered after Hindu zealots demolished a 16th century mosque in the town of Ayodhya which they said had been built by Muslim Mughal invaders on top of a Hindu temple.

Police have long feared a major attack or communal clashes in Mumbai after the 2002 riots in the nearby state of Gujarat.

Coincidentally, Indian archaeologists on Monday released a court-ordered report saying they had found evidence of a Hindu temple under the ruins of the demolished mosque.

Hindus in Ayodhya, in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, burst crackers and lit up their homes with candles and earthen lamps overnight to celebrate the report.

Police also tightened security across Uttar Pradesh, a traditional stronghold of the SIMI group.

The tensions came at a sensitive time for the state, plunged into political upheaval after its Chief Minister Mayawati, who uses only one name, said on Monday she planned to quit.



PHOTO: AFP

Harsh Solanki, a five year old Indian boy, holds his bandaged hand as he looks from his family's fifth floor apartment which overlooks the Temple of Mumbadevi in Mumbai yesterday. Harsh was injured by flying glass on Monday, when a bomb in a taxi exploded in the street under his families apartment. Two bombs exploded in the city killing 52 people and injuring more than 140 others.

Kagame wins polls in Rwanda

AFP, Kigali

Close on ten years after the Rwandan genocide, incumbent President Paul Kagame declared himself the victor in presidential polls in the early hours of Tuesday morning with roughly fifty percent of the votes counted.

Partial results from Monday's poll, the first multi-party presidential election since Rwanda gained independence in 1962, showed Kagame winning 94.3 percent of the popular vote.

The figure was based on results from 51 out of a total of 106 voting districts in Rwanda following Monday's vote.

"Victory! Victory! Thank you for this victory", Kagame told more than 15,000 supporters gathered in Kigali's biggest football stadium.

"Victory to say there are many challenges ahead of us. Victory for men, for women, for young people, for all Rwandans, a victory that brings hope, a victory to show all those who think they know Rwanda that they don't. A victory that will reassure everyone, even those who didn't vote for this victory."

However the camp of the main opposition candidate for the presidential vote swiftly cried foul, claiming a lack of transparency in the election process.



PHOTO: AFP

A collage of the morning edition city newspapers in Mumbai yesterday shows pictures after bombs exploded in the city the day before. India's commercial capital is limping back to normalcy after two bombs hidden in taxis exploded Monday afternoon near a Hindu temple and the Gateway of India-a busy tourist spot-killing at least 52 people and leaving 143 others injured.

Mumbai in mourning

AP, Mumbai

Hindus and Muslims alike mourned yesterday for victims of the worst terrorist attack in a decade in India's financial heart of Mumbai, while the death toll from the twin car bombings rose to 52, with 150 people wounded.

As relatives went to morgues to claim their dead or visited the injured in hospitals, investigators of Monday's bombings focused their probe on Muslim militants.

These included groups that Hindu-majority India alleges are backed by Muslim Pakistan - sparking fears of increasing tensions just when relations between the nuclear-armed neighbors appeared on the mend.

Pakistan, however, condemned the carnage as "wanton targeting of civilians," and the United Nations and the United States also denounced the attack.

"Acts of terror are intended to sow fear and chaos among free peoples," President Bush said in a statement. "I hope that the perpetrators of these murders will be identified quickly and brought to justice."

Indian police and officials said they had no direct evidence of who carried out the bombings and no group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, which killed Hindus as well as Muslims.

"I can say it is a terrorist group,

but which group, we can't say," said Kripa Shankar, the home minister of Maharashtra state where Mumbai is located.

Terrorist attacks in the past have triggered severe tit-for-tat sectarian violence, and Muslims in Mumbai worried that they would be blamed by Hindus.

"There is a fear gripping the city," Muslim community leader and businessman Sohail Rokadia said. Overnight, roads in several parts of the city - usually clogged with traffic - were deserted.

But the metropolis of 16 million people, India's largest, appeared calm as daybreak brought the usual hectic activity. Office-goers crowded pedestrian crossings on their way to work. Schoolchildren were seen off by their parents and worshippers thronged the popular Siddhi Vinayak temple as part of Hindu religious festivities that will climax on Sunday to honor the elephant god Ganesha.

The bombs in two taxis exploded minutes apart, ripping through a crowded jewelry market, the Zaveri Bazaar, and in front of a colonial-era tourist attraction, the Gateway of India. The blasts shattered window panes of the luxury Taj Mahal hotel facing the gateway and several other buildings.



Mayawati resigns

AFP, Lucknow

The chief minister of India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, quit Tuesday amid a growing rift with her coalition partners over an abortive project to develop the world famous Taj Mahal monument.

Mayawati, who like many Indians uses only name, had plunged India's most politically crucial state into turmoil on Monday by offering to quit when she met governor Vishnu Kant Shastri.

Following Mayawati's offer of resignation, her coalition ally, India's ruling Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), announced it was withdrawing its support for her regional Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which champions the cause of India's lower castes.

World leaders slam Mumbai blasts

AFP, Hong Kong

The international community condemned the deadly twin car bombings that rocked Mumbai, voicing outrage yesterday at the attacks that left at least 50 people dead and around 150 injured.

With the United Nations still in shock after the attacks on the UN offices in Baghdad last week which killed 23, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan called the bombings "despicable acts of terrorism" that could only be condemned.

"The secretary-general utterly condemns the terrorist bomb attacks today," a statement released Monday by Annan's spokesman said.

"He is adamantly opposed to all acts of terrorism, from whatever quarter."

US President George W. Bush, whose administration has waged an anti-terror drive since the September 11 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, offered condolences to India.

"Acts of terror are intended to sow fear and chaos among free peoples. I hope that the perpetrators of these murders will be identified quickly and brought to justice," Bush said.

"I strongly condemn the bomb-

ings," Bush said in a statement. "On behalf of all Americans, I send condolences to all affected by today's tragedy and to the government and people of India."

The bombs, hidden in the rear seats of taxis, exploded during the lunch-hour rush at the temple of Mumbadevi and a square in front of the Gateway of India monument.

Russia's foreign ministry likened the explosions to attacks against civilians by Chechen suicide bombers, who earlier this month killed 50 people in southern Russian when they blew up a military hospital.

"Russia resolutely condemns the terrorist acts in Mumbai (Bombay) and is confident that those who organised and carried them out will be tracked down and severely punished," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

"Russia shares the Indian people's grief over the death of innocent people and it sends its condolences to their families and relatives," it said.

China expressed its shock at the blasts, with foreign ministry spokesman Kong Quan offering sympathy for the families of the victims, while other countries, including Canada, New Zealand and Australia, voiced their outrage.

Hutton inquiry grills spy chief over Kelly's death

AFP, London

The judicial inquiry into the death of weapons expert David Kelly was hearing Tuesday from Britain's top intelligence chief, as it inched closer to testimony later this week from Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Sir John Scarlett, chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC), which coordinates the work of Britain's intelligence agencies, was to appear before the inquiry headed by Lord Brian Hutton.

The 30-year MI6 veteran was due to be grilled on what political pressure, if any, he came under during the preparation of a September 2002 dossier on Iraq and weapons of mass destruction -- a key plank in Blair's case for taking Britain to war.

Kelly was the source of a BBC report in May alleging that Downing Street "sexed up" the dossier, which

notably claimed that Saddam Hussein could deploy chemical or biological weapons in as little as 45 minutes.

Blair is to testify on Thursday, on the heels of his defence minister Geoff Hoon, who many observers believe could wind up losing his job as a result of the controversy.

The British prime minister ordered the judicial inquiry on July 18 just hours after the body of Kelly - a one-time UN arms inspector in Iraq and one of the world's top authorities on Saddam Hussein's secret arsenals -- was found in woodland near his home in the English countryside, west of London.

Over the weekend, the inquiry released 9,000 pages of documents, including notes of government meetings which suggested that Blair was intimately involved in deciding whether Kelly should be

exposed as the anonymous source behind the original May 29 BBC radio report on the September dossier.

As well as being asked about his role in drawing up the dossier -- he has insisted he was happy with its contents -- Scarlett was likely Tuesday to face questions about what advice he gave about the handling of Kelly.

Among the documents released over the weekend included one detailing a meeting in Blair's office, in which Scarlett asked: "If Dr K's name becomes public, will government be criticised for putting him under wider pressure?"

Although the evidence to be given Tuesday was sure to be of interest, the main events this week will be Wednesday's appearance by Hoon, followed Thursday by the prime minister.

US troops raid homes in Iraq's 'Sunni triangle'

REUTERS, Baghdad

US troops hunting guerrillas and criminals raided homes overnight in Iraq's restive "Sunni triangle," the Army said yesterday, as tension simmered among ethnic groups in the north and Shiite factions in the south.

The US 4th Infantry Division said hundreds of soldiers had raided homes around Khalis, north of Baghdad, on Monday night, looking for a gang accused of crimes in the area. Officers said several people had been detained.

US forces have mounted scores of raids in Iraq's Sunni Muslim heartland around Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit, looking for the fugitive ex-dictator, his lieutenants and guerrillas who have killed 64 US soldiers since May 1.

Last week, US officers announced the capture of two of

Saddam's top aides -- "Chemical Ali" Hassan al-Majid and former Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan. But Saddam himself remains on the run, despite a \$25 million price on his head.

Senior US officers based in one of Saddam's former palaces in Tikrit say they believe the deposed president is in disguise and moving every few hours to evade capture.

The persistent guerrilla ambushes, and last week's devastating truck bomb attack on the United Nations headquarters in Baghdad that killed at least 23, have led to calls for a wider UN role and more troops on the ground.

But Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said on Monday that troop levels were adequate, though he would not hesitate to recommend boosting forces if it became necessary.

Israel awaits action from Abbas against militants

Hamas vows revenge at funerals

AFP, Jerusalem

Israel vowed yesterday to continue its pursuit of militants in the absence of action from Palestinian authorities, arresting two activists in a hospital and staging an incursion into the West Bank town of Jenin.

But in a sign that he may be about to line up concrete action against headline groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad, moderate Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas was to travel to Gaza City later Tuesday where he would host a cabinet meeting on Wednesday.

"This meeting will focus on the issue of the security ... and what steps the government should take on the ground," a close aide to Abbas told AFP on condition of anonymity.

Abbas and his security chief Mohammed Dahlan have pledged to

take on the hardliners in the wake of a massive suicide bomb on a bus in Jerusalem a week ago which left 21 people dead and hammered the final nail into the coffin of a seven-week-old truce called by Palestinian factions.

There has been little sign of action so far after orders were issued to confiscate the groups' weapons after the Jerusalem bomb. Israel has dismissed the demolition of tunnels in the Gaza Strip used to smuggle arms from Egypt as little more than a publicity stunt.

Abbas' room for manoeuvre has been limited by a continuing struggle with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat for control of the security apparatus.

His move to Gaza is seen as an attempt to distance himself from Arafat who is confined by the Israelis to his headquarters in the West Bank

town of Ramallah.

Israeli Foreign Minister Silvan Shalom said Tuesday that there could be no hope of progress in the US-backed "roadmap" for peace plan until Abbas moved to dismantle the infrastructure of the militant groups.

Meanwhile, thousands of Palestinians swore vengeance Monday at the funerals of four militants slain in an Israeli helicopter attack as Israel vowed to press its campaign to wipe out headline leaders.

The nearly three-year-old confrontation showed no signs of abating, with Israel locked into military mode and the Palestinian government bogged down in a power struggle between Yasser Arafat and his moderate prime minister.



PHOTO: AFP

Sister Nirmala, (C) successor to Mother Teresa, along with Nuns and volunteers of Missionaries of Charity celebrate the 93rd birthday of Mother Teresa while standing around her mausoleum at the Mother House in Kolkata yesterday.

Pakistan must handover wanted criminals: Advani

PTI, Mumbai

Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani yesterday said Pakistan should handover to India 20 wanted criminals who were responsible for the serial blasts in Mumbai in 1993.

Advani, who arrived here to visit the blast sites and the hospitals where the injured were being treated, told reporters at the airport "it is good that Pakistan has condemned the incident."

"But the people of Mumbai remember that those who perpetrated a bigger tragedy a decade back claiming over 250 lives here and were wanted by the Interpol and the courts, besides being declared as absconders, were enjoying the patronage of Pakistan. They must be handed over to India," he said.

Advani said: "This raises doubts about the credibility of Islamabad's condemnation of

yesterday's incidents".

Meanwhile, surveillance all over the metropolis and the state has been stepped up following the twin blasts in Mumbai and in view of the ongoing Kumbh Mela in Nashik, according to Director General of Police OP Bali.

"Surveillance from air and at ground level would be intensified at Nashik in view of the ongoing Kumbh Mela," Bali told reporters after the high-level meeting at Mantralaya here on Tuesday.

The Deputy Prime Minister, who held talks with Maharashtra Chief Minister Sushilkumar Shinde, Deputy Chief Minister Chaggaan Bhujbal and senior police officials at the airport, said he hoped the state government would be able to arrest the culprits and make suitable arrangements for the future.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani bomb disposal experts inspect the wreckage of a fireworks shops which was destroyed by a powerful fire cracker blast in Muzaffarabad yesterday. The explosion on late Monday in the fireworks store killed at least six people and wounded 14 others.