

Blast kills 4 in Singapore industrial area

AP, Singapore

Four people were killed and two were seriously injured when a fire triggered by an explosion swept through an industrial area in Singapore yesterday, police said.

A police spokeswoman said the bodies of the four victims were found inside the office of an advertising agency where the explosion took place in the Toa Payoh industrial estate.

Police had earlier given the number of fatalities as five, although the spokeswoman said the death toll had now been confirmed as four.

Two other people were seriously injured. A radio reporter on the scene said she saw a man and a woman jump from the second-floor office.

Civil defence authorities said preliminary investigations showed the fire was probably due to an industrial accident and there was no sign of foul play.



PHOTO: AFP

Managing Director of the Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC), Malik Habib (R), shakes hands with Indian Managing Director of the DTC (Delhi Transport Corporation) A.J. Sawhney (L), before their meeting in Rawalpindi yesterday. The meeting is aimed at discussing the extension of the Lahore-Delhi bus service.

Pakistan calls for liberal visa regime with India

Transport officials of both nations begin talks

AFP, Karachi

Pakistan's Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri yesterday called for diplomatic staff levels to be increased at Indian and Pakistani embassies to free up stalled visa-processing procedures.

"The number (of staff) should be increased so that visa applications can be processed, as a liberal visa regime can only be possible with sufficient staff at each embassy," he told a press briefing in Karachi, Pakistan's commercial port city.

"Without visas the air and train

services stand meaningless and they would be exposed to financial losses."

The South Asian neighbours reduced diplomatic ties and severed transport links after the December 2001 attack on the Indian parliament by gunmen India claimed were backed by Pakistan.

Under a peace process kickstarted by Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee last April ambassadors have been reinstated, buses and flights are back on and a cross-border train service is set to resume this week.

Would-be commuters, how-

ever, have complained that the visa application process is so slow that some have missed out on travelling over the border.

The nuclear rivals agreed last week to resume dialogue, stalled since the last attempt failed at Agra, India, in July 2001, from February.

Details of next month's talks are still being worked out but Kasuri said they would probably be held between foreign secretaries.

"The resumption of talks at secretary level is likely," the minister said.

Meanwhile, Indian transport officials yesterday opened two-day talks with their Pakistani

counterparts to extend an agreement on a recently revived cross-border bus service, an official said.

Both sides are considering increasing the fares arices less than the cost of the products.

The US side requested formal consultations with China on December 23 and under China's World Trade Organization agreements, the country has 90 days to reach a resolution.

If the two sides fail to reach agreement, the US can unilaterally impose a 7.5 percent growth cap on exports of the three goods.

WHO warns of Sars 'false alarms'

BBC ONLINE

The World Health Organisation has warned that fear of the deadly Sars virus is causing false alarms in China.

The news comes as Chinese media reported that a patient suspected of having Sars in the southern city of Shenzhen in fact has pneumonia.

WHO spokesman Bob Dietz told the Associated Press it was still difficult to test for Sars and people just with colds or a fever could be misdiagnosed.

China confirmed its first new case of Sars in months earlier this month.

The 32-year-old man, from Guangdong province, has since recovered.

'US war in Iraq strategic error'

BBC ONLINE

A report published by the US Army War College has criticised the war against Iraq as a strategic error.

It also suggests that the Bush administration's global war on terror may be unsustainable.

The report, by academic Jeffrey Record, has been dismissed by US defence officials, who say it does not represent the view of the US Army.

But BBC Pentagon correspondent Nick Childs says the report could be an embarrassment for the Pentagon.

The author of the report is a visiting professor at the prestigious college in Pennsylvania and his

conclusions about the Bush administration's conduct of its war on terrorism appear quite damning.

He calls the invasion of Iraq "an unnecessary war of choice" and a "detour".

Record says that by lumping together a host of threats - from the destruction of the al-Qaeda network to stopping the spread of weapons of mass destruction - the administration has set goals in the war which are unsustainable.

"The United States may be able to defeat al-Qaeda, but it cannot rid the world of terrorism, much less evil," he says in the report.

Record adds: "[The war] against a deterred Iraq has created a new

front in the Middle East for Islamic terrorism and diverted attention and resources away from the security of the American homeland against further assault by an undeterrable al-Qaeda." US officials have played down the report. They say the views are those of the author alone and do not represent any official policy.

In a disclaimer, the US Army's War College's Institute for Strategic Studies adds that the report does not represent the views of the college.

They said staff and students at the War College are encouraged to be critical and that the college was founded to promote independent analysis.

US SC allows secrecy for Sept 11 detainees

REUTERS, Washington

The US Supreme Court Monday allowed the Bush administration to keep secret the names and other basic details about hundreds of foreigners detained after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Without comment, the top court refused to hear an appeal by civil liberties and other groups challenging the secret arrests and detentions for violating the Freedom of Information Act and constitutional free-speech rights under the First Amendment.

Kashmiri rebels get formal invite for talks from Delhi

AFP, Srinagar

The moderate faction of Kashmir's main separatist alliance has been formally invited for talks on January 22 on the future of the disputed state by Indian Deputy Prime Minister Lal Krishna Advani, a separatist source said yesterday.

The source said the invitation addressed to the chairman of the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, Maulana Abbas Ansari, was sent by fax from New Delhi on Tuesday.

He said the special secretary to the deputy prime minister had said in the letter that Advani was ready to meet Hurriyat leaders on January 22 at the home ministry offices in New Delhi.

In a surprise turnaround in October, India's powerful security cabinet authorised Advani to hold formal talks for the first time with Hurriyat leaders.

Meanwhile, Indian troops shot dead two suspected Islamic militants and rebels killed a village head in the latest violence in restive Kashmir, a police spokesman said

yesterday.

The militants died in separate clashes with security forces in southern Pulwama and northern Baramulla districts while the rebels shot dead a Muslim village head in southern Poonch district.

The deaths over the past 24 hours marked the latest clashes in Kashmir that have continued even after Indian and Pakistani leaders agreed last week to resume talks over the scenic region held in part by the nuclear rivals and claimed in full by both.

US Treasury seeks probe into O'Neill interview

REUTERS, Washington

The US Treasury, acting less than 24 hours after ousted Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill sharply criticised President Bush in a television interview, sought a probe Monday into how a document marked "secret" was shown in the programme.

O'Neill, who resigned a year ago in a shake-up of Bush's economy team, told the CBS programme "60 Minutes" broadcast on Sunday night that he had seen no "real evidence" during his two years in the administration that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

He said Bush had been intent on ousting Saddam Hussein since well before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and he described the president's management style as disinterested and unengaged.

Bush, in his first public response, brushed aside O'Neill's comments on Monday, telling a news conference in Mexico that "like the previous administration, we were for regime change" in Iraq.

Treasury spokesman Rob Nichols told reporters the department had asked its Inspector General's office to investigate how a document marked "secret" had come to be shown during the "60 Minutes" interview with O'Neill.

"We're asking them to simply look into the '60 Minutes' segment and then take appropriate steps, if necessary," he said, adding that the legal threshold

for asking for an inquiry was "very low."

Asked if the Treasury risked being seen as vindictive in seeking the probe, Nichols said, "We don't view it in that way."

The Inspector General's office investigates possible violations of agency laws or regulations. The office received the request late Monday afternoon and was evaluating it, a source told Reuters.

A spokesman for "60 Minutes" said the program had not been given access to any secret documents.

"We have no secret documents. We merely showed a cover sheet that alluded to ... a secret document," the spokesman said, describing the secret document as dealing with a post-Saddam Iraq.

The program was aired in conjunction with publication of a book based on O'Neill's experiences in the Bush administration, "The Price of Loyalty," written by journalist Ron Suskind.

Suskind, who also appeared on "60 Minutes," said O'Neill had given him access to thousands of administration documents.

In the book the former Treasury secretary, the first major Bush administration insider to attack the president, described Bush during Cabinet meetings as being like "a blind man in a room full of deaf people."

The book was likely to provide fodder for attacks on Bush from Democratic presidential candi-

dates who have accused him of using faulty intelligence on the extent of Iraq's weapons program as a pretext for war.

O'Neill could not immediately be reached for comment on the Treasury probe request.

Bush, giving a joint news conference with President Vicente Fox in Monterrey where they are attending a regional summit, avoided a direct answer on whether he felt betrayed by O'Neill.

He said early in his administration Iraq policy was geared toward "regime change" but after Sept. 11, 2001, he began an effort to force Saddam to disarm. He did not address the fact that the weapons of mass destruction that the war was fought over have never been found.

"Now he (Saddam) is no longer in power and the world is better for it," Bush said.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan said O'Neill's criticism "appears to be more about trying to justify personal views and opinions than it does about looking at the results that we are achieving."

The Bush administration has previously been accused of acting vindictively toward a critic of its invasion of Iraq - former ambassador Joseph Wilson.

Last year Wilson accused administration officials of compromising his wife's safety by leaking the fact that she was an undercover agent for the CIA in retaliation for his criticism.

ROK-US set to finalise troops relocation

THE KOREA HERALD/ ANN, Seoul

The future presence of the US military in central Seoul will be on the table when American and South Korean officials sit down later this week to discuss troop repositioning and other issues.

South Korean negotiators appear poised to offer the US forces more land than they did during earlier talks.

A South Korean military delegation leaves for Hawaii today for the talks, the Defence Ministry said yesterday. The Seoul delegates will sit down with their counterparts from the US government tomorrow and Friday for a sixth round of the Future of the Alliance Policy Initiative, Ministry spokesman Brig. Gen. Nam Dae-yeon said.

The two-day consultation is expected to focus on whether the US

military command in Yongsan, central Seoul, should keep a residual, symbolic presence in the capital. The command will relocate the bulk of its facilities under a

bilateral accord to areas south of Seoul by 2006.

Despite the two nations having already agreed to leave about 1,000

American personnel in Seoul, they are still apart over how much land will be available for the use of the remaining US forces.

Seoul offered 170,000 pyeong of the 810,000-pyeong Yongsan base to be used by the United Nations Command and Combined Forces Command between South Korea and the United States. One pyeong equals 3.3 square meters.

The US side had sought to keep 280,000 pyeong or some 30 percent of the total Yongsan plot to build large-scale lodging facilities, hospitals and schools to support 1,000 personnel affiliated with the CFC and UNC, as well as their family members.

However, South Korean negotiators are expected this time to offer 200,000 pyeong and other benefits as part of an effort to bring the stalled negotiation back to life, ministry officials said.

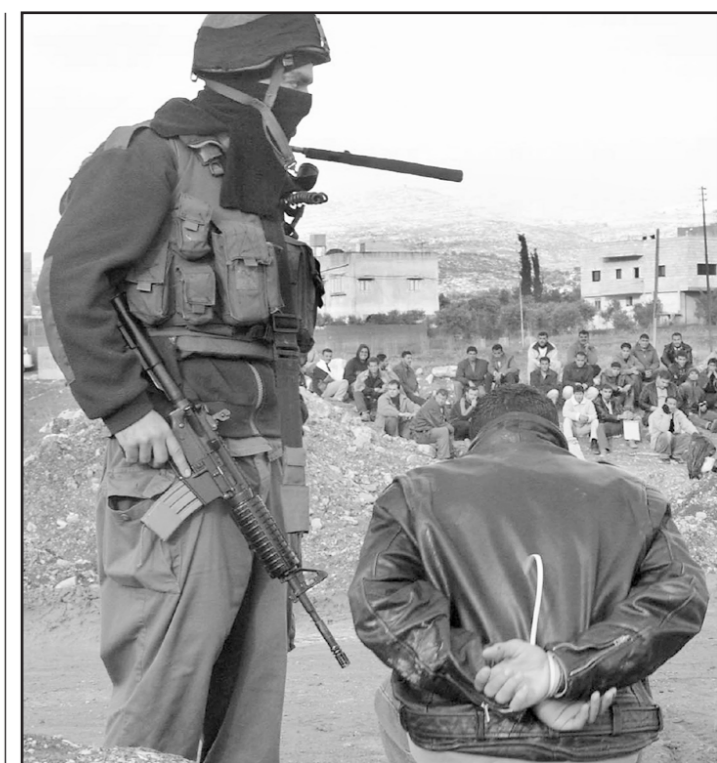


PHOTO: AFP

An Israeli soldier arrests a Palestinian at the Salem checkpoint near the West Bank city of Nablus Monday. In the southern Gaza Strip, armed clashes broke out after Israeli tanks entered a refugee camp and demolished at least two houses, Palestinian security sources and witnesses said.

'Militants planned to seize Thai province'

THE NATION/ ANN, Bangkok

Defence Minister Thamarak Issarangura yesterday said Muslim insurgents have been conducting "training and recruitment" in the south and added that they had planned seized the province of Narathiwat "within a 1,000 days" starting this year.

Speaking at the weekly Cabinet meeting yesterday, Thamarak candidly stated that insurgents who had been responsible for the last week attack against an army battalion in Narathiwat have given themselves 1,000 days to take over the province and "plant their flag pole at Thaksin Rajanivej Palace", a property of the Royal Household.

US publisher convicted of spying for Saddam

REUTERS, Chicago

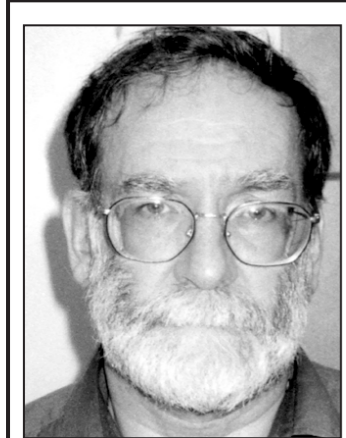
A Palestinian-born newspaper publisher was convicted Monday of lying to the government and with not registering as a foreign agent while spying on Iraqi exiles on behalf of Saddam Hussein.

After a week-long trial, a federal jury convicted Khaled Dumeisi, 61, of crimes that carry a maximum 10-year prison sentence. He was not charged with stealing US government secrets or with any crimes related to terrorism.



PHOTO: AFP

US President George W. Bush speaks at the inauguration ceremony of the Special Summit of the Americas at the Parque Fundidora in Monterrey, Mexico Monday. More than 30 leaders from American nations gathered in the Mexican city for a two-day summit.



UK serial killer 'Dr. Death' found hanged

REUTERS, BBC ONLINE, London

Britain's most prolific serial killer Harold Shipman was found hanging dead in his cell yesterday, the prison service said.

Shipman, a family doctor nicknamed "Dr Death," was convicted in 2000 of murdering 15 of his patients and sentenced to life in prison. An inquiry later ruled that he had murdered at least 215 of his patients with heroin injections.

He was jailed for life in January 2000 for murdering 15 patients but an official report later concluded he killed at least 215 patients.

The 57-year-old GP, from Hyde, Greater Manchester, was given 15 life sentences to run concurrently for the murders, and four years for forging a will.