

S African judge attending WSF arrested on rape charges

AFP, Mumbai

A prominent South African judge attending an anti-globalisation conference in Mumbai was arrested yesterday after a colleague claimed he raped her at the delegation's hotel, police said.

A city court denied bail to Seeraj Desai, 53, a senior judge in the Cape High Court, and remanded him in police custody until Friday, a police spokesman said.

South African media front-paged the story. Desai in an SMS to a mass-circulation newspaper, The Star, said he was not guilty.

"I am innocent. I find rape offensive," he said.

The alleged victim in her statement to police said the accused raped her after she went to his room at around 3:00 am Sunday at the Taj President Hotel in Bombay's upscale Cuff Parade area to discuss the day's programme at the World Social Forum, the police spokesman said.



PHOTO: AFP

Bangladeshi delegates march at the 2004 World Social Forum (WSF) in Mumbai yesterday. Anti-globalisation activists demanded the world economic system to better represent the poor as the WSF dedicated the day highlighting the plight of Indian low-caste Hindus in host country.

India appoints Krishna Murthy as new CEC

AFP, New Delhi

India's government yesterday appointed T.S. Krishna Murthy, seen as a low-key official, as chief election commissioner to replace the outspoken and soon-to-retire James Michael Lyngdoh, domestic media said.

Murthy, currently one of three officials overseeing the election commission, is expected to take over on February 7 and stay in office until May, 2005 when he turns 65, the Press Trust of India news agency said.

Lyngdoh, noted for his plainspeaking ways, incurred the wrath of Indian politicians last month for describing them as a "cancer" in the body politic.

Baghdad blast death toll stands at 24

AFP, Baghdad

The death toll from Sunday's devastating truck bombing outside the front gate of the US-led coalition's Baghdad headquarters stands at 24, Iraq's Health Minister Kudhayer Abbas said yesterday.

"Our official report is 24 dead," the minister told AFP, adding that the number of injured was more than 100 in figures compiled from different hospitals around Baghdad.

Some 20 patients had been discharged from hospital Monday, he said.

On Sunday, casualty figures compiled from Baghdad hospitals and the US military put the toll at 25 dead and 100 injured.

The US military said two of the dead were believed to be US civilian contractors working for the coalition, while the injured included three US civilians and three US soldiers.

Indian SC stays death penalty on parliament attack convicts

AFP, New Delhi

India's Supreme Court yesterday stayed the death penalties handed to two Kashmiri Muslims for their role in an attack on the parliament which pushed India and Pakistan close to war, domestic media said.

The court set aside the penalty ordered by the Delhi High Court and a lower trial court to Mohammed Afzal and Shaukat Hussain Guru, who were convicted of conspiring with five attackers who tried to storm the parliament in December 2001, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

Japan airline cancels 120 flights

AFP, Tokyo

Japan Air System (JAS) said it had cancelled 120 domestic flights affecting 7,000 passengers yesterday after discovering cracks in US-made engine parts from at least seven McDonnell Douglas aircraft.

JAS, a subsidiary of Asia's top carrier Japan Airlines System (JAL Group), reported engine trouble on January 6 and 7 in an MD-81 and an MD-87 jet and asked US engine manufacturer Pratt and Whitney to check the engine parts.

Pakistan invites India for talks on bus services

Delhi-Lahore vintage car rally to bolster peace

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan announced yesterday it has offered to hold talks with India in March on starting bus services between their respective zones of Kashmir and between the cities of Kokharpar and Munabao.

"The cabinet of Pakistan has offered to India to host technical-level talks on the Kokharpar-Munabao bus service on March 8 to 9 and Muzaffarabad-Srinagar bus service on March 29 and 30 respectively," foreign ministry spokesman Masood Khan told a weekly news briefing.

Meanwhile, after delegations of parliamentarians, school children and journalists, it's now the turn of vintage car enthusiasts to make their way to Pakistan to bolster recent peace efforts between the arch-rivals, a report said Monday.

More than 100 vintage and classic cars are set to cover the 537km between the Indian capital New Delhi and the northern Pakistani city of Lahore mid-March to promote people-to-people contact, the Hindu newspaper reported.

The peace effort is the brainchild of the Heritage Motoring Club of India.

Among the cars set to cross the frontiers via the Wagah border -- the only land crossing between the two countries -- is a 1941 Ford Super Deluxe stationwagon, which featured in a Bollywood movie on the bitter partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan in 1947, the report said.

Others include a 1956 Chevrolet Belair Sport Sedan, a 1924-25 Morris Oxford and a 1927 Minerva AL.

"We at the club have been thinking of chipping in our mite to promote peace and harmony between the two nations," said Navinder Singh, one of the club's founder members.

"Holding a peace rally will be the right way to reiterate our commitment towards improving India-Pakistan relations," he added.

"Of course, I will also drive one of my cars to Lahore."

Singh said members of his club were in touch with their counterparts in Pakistan regarding the organisation of the rally.

"We on both sides of the border have approached our respective governments and permission for the peace rally is likely to be granted soon," Singh said.

"Other preparations for the proposed historic event are going

on as per schedule."

According to the plan, Indian vintage cars will drive up to the Wagah border where a fleet of Pakistani classic cars will join them for the drive to Lahore, the report said.

The return journey to Delhi will begin with the Pakistani drivers bidding adieu at Wagah to the Indians, who will continue their drive to the Indian capital.

Club members are hoping that next year their Pakistani counterparts will make a similar trip to Delhi.

India and Pakistan this month announced a resumption of stalled talks aimed at resolving their differences over the Himalayan region of Kashmir, which is divided between them and claimed in full by both.

Pakistan visit can push forward peace: Hurriyat

AFP, Srinagar

A moderate Kashmiri separatist said yesterday he would suggest to the Indian government during high-level talks this week that separatists be allowed to visit Pakistan to boost the peace process.

"The visit to Pakistan can push forward the peace process by leaps and bounds," said Maulana Abbas Ansari, who heads the moderate faction of Kashmir's main separatist alliance, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference.

"In Pakistan and its controlled Kashmir we can meet Mujahedin (holy warrior) leaders and try to persuade them to call for a ceasefire," he told AFP, referring to Islamic militants fighting against Indian rule in Kashmir.

Sonia in Kashmir with polls strategy in mind

AFP, Jammu

Sonia Gandhi, leader of the main opposition Congress Party, began a two-day visit to restive Indian Kashmir yesterday and was expected to discuss strategy ahead of looming national elections.

Sonia was due to meet Kashmir Chief Minister Mufti Mohammed Sayeed to discuss sharing of seats between her Congress party and his People's Democratic Party (PDP), ahead of the elections expected to be held in April or May, officials said.

Massive security was in place for her arrival in Jammu, winter capital of Jammu and Kashmir state where a deadly revolt has raged against New Delhi's rule since 1989.

Police probe assaults on Stephen Hawking

REUTERS, London

British police are investigating a series of alleged mysterious assaults on disabled top British scientist Stephen Hawking, the Daily Mirror reported yesterday.

The paper said detectives wanted to question Hawking, a Cambridge University professor and author of the best selling "A Brief History of Time," about a number of minor injuries he had recently suffered.

"The family are worried sick. They've been suspicious for some time that someone has been harming Stephen," an unnamed source told the paper.

Australia nets 200 in crackdown on ME crime syndicates

AFP, Sydney

A police squad set up to target a wave of murders, blood feuds and drug trafficking in Sydney has arrested about 200 suspects linked to Middle Eastern crime syndicates, the authorities said yesterday.

The squad, known as Task Force Gain, was established last October to investigate nine murders, five other shooting incidents, a string of robberies and other crimes in Sydney's southwestern suburbs, home to much of Australia's Muslim community.

Police say six people, including four brothers, were arrested and charged with drug offences after a series of raids last week, bringing the total arrests so far to around 200, predominantly Lebanese or Middle Eastern men.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi border guard searches an Iraqi pilgrim at the Iraqi-Saudi border crossing point of Arar Sunday. Some 1,300 pilgrims, who arrived at the border, are the first batch of those making the 1,000-kilometer journey by bus to Makkah to perform the Hajj, one of the five tenets of Islam. They are among the 35,000 Iraqis chosen through a lottery to go to Makkah. Under Saddam only those connected to the regime or aged over 45 were allowed to make the trip.

Presidential hopefuls await Iowa outcome

Democrats blast Bush after Iraq bombing

AP, Des Moines, Iowa

Democratic presidential rivals, each coveting what only one can have, are eagerly awaiting the outcome of the Iowa caucuses, the first test in a volatile campaign to pick President Bush's general election opponent.

Iowans "are going to stand in the shoes of all Democrats in the country," Rep. Dick Gephardt said Sunday night as the caucus campaign neared an end. And on that, Howard Dean, John Edwards and John Kerry doubtless agreed.

All four men arranged a final round of campaign appearances during the day, before moving on to New Hampshire and the nation's first primary on Jan. 27. Two other major contenders who skipped the caucuses awaited them there. Sen. Joe Lieberman and retired Gen. Wesley Clark.

By the numbers, Iowa's caucuses offered scant reward. First claim in a fight over 45 national convention delegates out of 4,322 who will attend next summer's national convention.

But Iowa Democrats had the power to confer more than that when they settled in for an evening of politicking in 1,993 precinct caucuses. They offered instant campaign credibility for the winner and potentially crippling setbacks for also-rans.

While the contenders spent months and millions wooing a single-state constituency, the final surveys judged the race too close to call.

But they couldn't take into account the relative strengths of get-out-the-vote organisations that are unusually important in caucuses.

Gephardt and Dean, a former

Vermont governor, were given the edge there, while polls suggested Sens. Kerry and Edwards had late support coming their way.

Adding another element of uncertainty, a large percentage of potential caucus-goers told pollsters they might change their mind at the last minute.

Meanwhile, Democrats seeking to replace President George W. Bush Sunday cited a massive suicide bombing in Baghdad as evidence of the failure of US policy there.

Bush's Democratic opponents have harshly criticized the president's Iraq policy, and some said the bombing was the latest proof it is a failure.

"We have a failed policy right now. Why the administration is not willing to change course, I have no idea," Senator John Edwards of North Carolina told CBS.

State of the Union Address

Bush set to tout his success in Iraq

AFP, Washington

US President George W. Bush gets a chance today to tout his successes in Iraq, the fight against terrorism and the US economy, in his annual State of the Union policy speech.

Bush returned Sunday to the White House from the presidential retreat at Camp David, Maryland, to put the finishing touches on his speech to a joint session of the US Congress. He offered a preview Saturday in his weekly radio address, and an official said on condition of anonymity that Bush was to announce "the path we are on is the right path."

The address comes a day after the Iowa state caucuses -- the first in a long series of contests to decide which Democratic candidate will challenge Bush in November.

Political analysts say this election is as tight as the 2000 race, in

which Bush lost the popular vote but won in the Electoral College after the US Supreme Court decided to award Florida's disputed electoral votes to Bush.

The speech also comes a year after Bush declared Iraq, Iran and North Korea an "axis of evil" for supporting terrorism and pursuing nuclear, biological and chemical weapons, and said the United States would use military force to prevent threats against it.

This year, Bush is expected instead to focus on his successes, such as the economy, which has turned the corner in recent months.

"Tax relief has helped turn our economy around. We've doubled the child tax credit, cut taxes for everyone who pays income taxes and increased incentives for small businesses to invest in new equipment and create jobs," Bush said in

his radio address. "The results are clear. Our economy grew at its fastest pace in two decades in the third quarter of 2003. Manufacturers are seeing a rebound in new orders in factory activity. And more than a quarter-million new jobs have been created since August."

Bush also was expected to ask Congress to make permanent tax cuts adopted in 2001 and 2002 and could also seek a law allowing US workers to contribute part of their payroll taxes in private retirement funds, fulfilling a campaign promise.

On the international front, Bush can claim credit for the arrest last month of ousted Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, even though al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden, mastermind of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, remains at large.



PHOTO: AFP

Colonel Steve Russell, commander of the 4th Infantry Division's 1st Battalion, 22nd Regiment, points his gun during a patrol in the early hours of yesterday in former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit, some 180km north of Baghdad. A massive suicide truck bomb killed 25 people, two of them believed to be Americans, and wounded scores of others on Sunday in the deadliest attack yet on the US-led coalition's heavily fortified central Baghdad headquarters.