

## Algerian gas plant explosion kills 23

AFP, Algiers

At least 23 people were killed and 74 injured when a huge explosion ripped through a liquefied natural gas plant near the eastern Algerian port of Skikda, in the country's worst industrial accident since independence in 1962, the state energy group Sonatrach said yesterday.

Algerian state radio said nine people were missing since the blast, which occurred at 6:40 pm (1740 GMT) on Monday.

The minister for energy and mining, Chakib Khelil, told the radio after visiting the site that it was not yet possible to say what caused the blast. He also said it was unclear how many people were working in the area at the time and rescue workers were digging

through the wreckage in case more bodies were buried there.

President Abdelaziz Bouteflika interrupted a visit to Algeria's third largest city, Constantine, to go to the disaster site.

Khelil said the explosion destroyed three liquefaction units at the plant, a huge complex lying 500 kilometres (300 miles) east of the capital Algiers which produced 23 percent of the country's liquefied natural gas (LNG).

Output would have to be stepped up at the Arzew complex, near Oran in western Algeria, which produced the other 77 percent, he said.

A foreman in a storage depot at the complex told the radio that he heard "strange noises and abnormal vibrations coming from a boiler and valves before the explo-

sion."

A woman living close to the plant, about 10 kilometres (six miles) outside Skikda, said: "There was a heavy blast and everything started to shake and the windows of my apartment were blown out."

Speaking haltingly, she said the complex was engulfed in smoke and flames. "We all ran out, we helped the handicapped and the old people," she said, adding: "Many of them were in shock and the children were crying."

A local official, in charge of health in the Skikda region, told state radio that a fire at the plant had been brought under control early Tuesday after raging for almost eight hours.

Khelil said 26 people were still under observation in Skikda hospital but 43 others had been dis-

charged after receiving treatment. Another five people were taken to hospital in Annaba, a port city about 100 kilometres further east.

The Skikda complex included six plants for processing gas and oil products and employs 12,000 people. It exported 15 million tonnes of LNG and oil products to Europe each year.

Unlike most other major petroleum exporters, which sell mostly crude oil, Algeria relies to a great extent on exports of gas, a cleaner and lighter energy source, for its foreign currency earnings.

The hydrocarbons sector brought in 24 billion dollars last year, or 96 percent of the country's export revenues, and natural gas and LNG accounted for more than half of that.

## Israel weighs reprisal after Hizbollah border attack

REUTERS, Jerusalem

Israel yesterday weighed a military response to the killing of one of its soldiers by Lebanese Hizbollah guerrillas, an attack that deepened Israeli skepticism about recent Syrian peace overtures.

A security source said any reprisal for Monday's missile strike on the Israel-Lebanon border would likely target Hizbollah, which is backed by Syria and Iran, and would be "measured" to avoid escalating the conflict.

But the Hizbollah attack threatened to aggravate tensions between Israel and Syria, the main powerbroker in Lebanon. Syria called in December for renewed peace talks with Israel, but Prime Minister Ariel Sharon has been cool to the idea.



Delegates protest against violence against women after a delegate to the 2004 World Social Forum (WSF) was accused of raping a colleague of his, at the WSF in Mumbai yesterday. Seeraj Desai, a prominent South African judge attending the anti-globalisation conference, was arrested Monday after a colleague accused him of raping her at the delegation's hotel, police said.

PHOTO: AFP



Russian Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov (L) and Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes (R) walk to the Ministry of Defence prior to a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. India and Russia are likely to clinch a 1.8-billion dollar contract for the sale and refurbishment of a Soviet-era aircraft carrier and a Russian delegation is in negotiations over the sale of the 44,570-tonne Admiral Gorshkov carrier to the Indian navy, which currently has only one such ship.

PHOTO: AFP

## Annan mulls sending UN mission to Iraq

AFP, United Nations

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said he would consider sending a UN team to Iraq in a move the United States hopes will quell opposition to its plans for the future Iraqi government.

Annan's cautious offer marked a breakthrough in the months-long bid by US and Iraqi officials to get the UN chief to play a role in Iraq's political transition despite being largely sidelined by the US-led coalition.

After meeting a delegation of the Iraqi Governing Council and the US overseer in Baghdad, Paul Bremer, Annan said he would consider sending a team to advise whether national elections can be held before June 30.

"The stability of Iraq should be everyone's business," he told reporters after the meeting. "I think we have an opportunity to try and move forward."

The Iraqis requested the team after the influential religious leader of Iraq's majority Shiite Muslims, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, rejected the current US plan for the political transition to an Iraqi caretaker government.

That plan, agreed on November 15 between the Governing Council and the coalition, envisions an indirect caucus system to select the government. Direct, national elections would not be held until 2005.

Sistani does not want an unelected government to assume power, and the impasse has threatened to derail the accord. Thousands of his supporters again rallied in the streets of Iraq on Monday.

But the ageing cleric has said he could settle for a compromise if UN experts conclude, as they are likely to do, that not enough time remains to organise fair and credible elections.

"There should be real participation of the people through elections in choosing this council," Abdel Aziz al-Hakim, another influential Shiite leader and Governing Council member, said after the talks with Annan.

"If this is not possible, then we should search for the necessary alternatives," Hakim said. He called the political future of the nation a "matter for the Iraqi people."

Annan has been hesitant to send personnel back to Iraq and risk the lives of the staff he pulled out three months ago after two deadly bombings at the UN's Baghdad headquarters, one of which killed his top envoy and 21 others.

He has also been reluctant to get enmeshed in the US management of Iraq's political transition, with UN officials suggesting the United Nations would not resume a major role in Iraq until self-rule begins in July.

## 11 Afghans killed in US air raid

AP, Kandahar

A US air raid in southern Afghanistan killed 11 villagers, including four children, Afghan officials said Monday. The US military said it killed five militants in the weekend raid in insurgency-plagued Uruzgan province.

Sunday's incident came as American commanders and Afghan officials hunt for Taliban and al-Qaida suspects and try to improve security in the lawless south and east ahead of planned summer elections.

Their task was highlighted anew by a bold daylight raid on a remote military base that injured three American soldiers.

Abdul Rahman, chief of Char Chino district in Uruzgan, said the attack occurred around 9 p.m. Sunday in Saghatoo, a village where he said US forces hunting for insurgents had carried out searches and made several arrests.

"It's useful to have faces for a

## World Social Forum Americans serve as anti-Bush envoys

AFP, Mumbai

For many anti-globalisation activists meeting here the United States is shorthand for all that is wrong with the world. But the Americans they are finding at the World Social Forum are just as angry at President George W. Bush.

At panels and demonstrations throughout the annual convention of the anti-globalisation movement, the United States has been castigated left and right for everything from the occupation of Iraq to genetically modified agriculture.

So what does an American feel when seeing posters portraying Bush alternately as a bloodsucking vampire, a criminal in police lockup, or a Hindu version of Satan?

"It's fabulous," said Zach Allen, a campaigner against nuclear weapons from San Francisco.

"It's useful to have faces for a

movement to rally against and Bush right now represents that militarised state of the world," said Allen, as a dozen Indian trade unionists nearby chanted "Down, down, Bush!"

Of the 100,000 people attending the six-day World Social Forum which closes Wednesday, at least 1,000 are Americans, according to organisers.

"If you're here people know you don't support Bush," Allen said.

But some Americans, despite their dislike of Bush, were at times weary of the tone of the forum.

"Sometimes I've wanted to borrow one of those burqas and just cover my American face," said Kathleen Sheehan of the San Francisco-based fair trade movement Global Exchange.

She remembered seeing a skin in which a character playing Bush drags away an innocent person by a nose.

## India, Pakistan set agenda for Delhi talks in Feb

ANI, Islamabad

India and Pakistan have agreed to start discussions on eight issues, including Kashmir, Siachen and introduction of new confidence-building measures, Pakistani media has quoted European sources as saying.

No formal agenda has been drawn up for the first round of dialogue to be held in New Delhi, possibly in the third week of February, The News quoted diplomatic sources in Brussels, Belgium as saying.

Apart from the above two issues, the other subjects likely to be discussed are peace and security; Wuller Barrage and Tulbul Navigation Project; the Sir Creek issue; terrorism and drug traffick-

ing; economic and commercial cooperation; and, promotion of friendly exchanges.

The level at which the first round of dialogue will take place is yet to be decided. Pakistan wants that the negotiations start at the foreign secretary level, while India is insisting on a step-by-step approach and that dialogue commence from the joint secretary level.

According to the report, both countries may resolve their differences by determining a lowest common denominator of Indian and Pakistani positions on the level of dialogue.

A diplomatic source was quoted as saying that such a denominator is being discussed in terms of initiating dialogue on peace and

security related issues, Kashmir and Siachen at foreign secretary level and leaving all other areas for discussion at the level of joint secretaries.

The foreign offices of India and Pakistan are under strict instructions from their respective leaders that they should avoid touching the "areas of discord at the outset by trying to encourage the issues of concord".

A European diplomat said the foreign offices of India and Pakistan are trying to resolve the minor difference of opinion related to the level of initiating composite dialogue and the latest telephonic contact between Sinha and Kasuri was part of the efforts to resolve the difference of perception related to the mechanism for the official talks beginning next month.

## Myanmar starts peace talks with Karen rebels

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar junta chief Senior General Than Shwe yesterday held an historic meeting with leaders of the Karen National Union (KNU) during talks aimed at ending one of the world's longest-running insurgencies.

The unprecedented two-hour meeting raised hopes that the regime could soon agree on a ceasefire formalising a deal hammered out in December with one of the last ethnic armies still battling Yangon.

Dressed in traditional Karen costume, the KNU delegation headed by General Bo Mya -- the commander of the KNU's military wing -- met Than Shwe at a military reception centre in the capital Yangon, witnesses said.

## Pakistan, Turkey sign anti-terror deal

AFP, Ankara

Pakistan and Turkey, two Muslim countries recently targeted by Islamic extremists, yesterday signed an anti-terrorist cooperation deal along with agreements on expanding business ties at the start of visit by Pakistani counterpart Pervez Musharraf.

"Turkey and Pakistan are determined to efficiently maintain their joint stance against terrorism. We support the steps that my dear brother has taken against terrorism and extremism," Turkish president Ahmet Necdet Sezer told a news conference held jointly with Musharraf.

The anti-terrorist agreement covers the exchange of information and experts, Musharraf said for his part.

Several of the Muslim extremists blamed for November's car

bomb attacks in Istanbul, which left 62 dead and hundreds injured, were said to have received training in extremist camps in Pakistan.

In addition to the anti-terrorist cooperation deal, officials signed agreements on economic partnership and preferential trade, along with accords touching on the banking and health sectors.

"I'm sure these agreements will strengthen and fortify the already close and brotherly relations between Turkey and Pakistan," Musharraf said.

The Pakistani president, who was making his first visit abroad since two attempts on his life last month by Islamist extremists, said they also discussed regional issues, including Iraq, Afghanistan and Cyprus, along with recent developments in relations between his country and India.

## Kerry wins big in Iowa

### Gephardt drops out

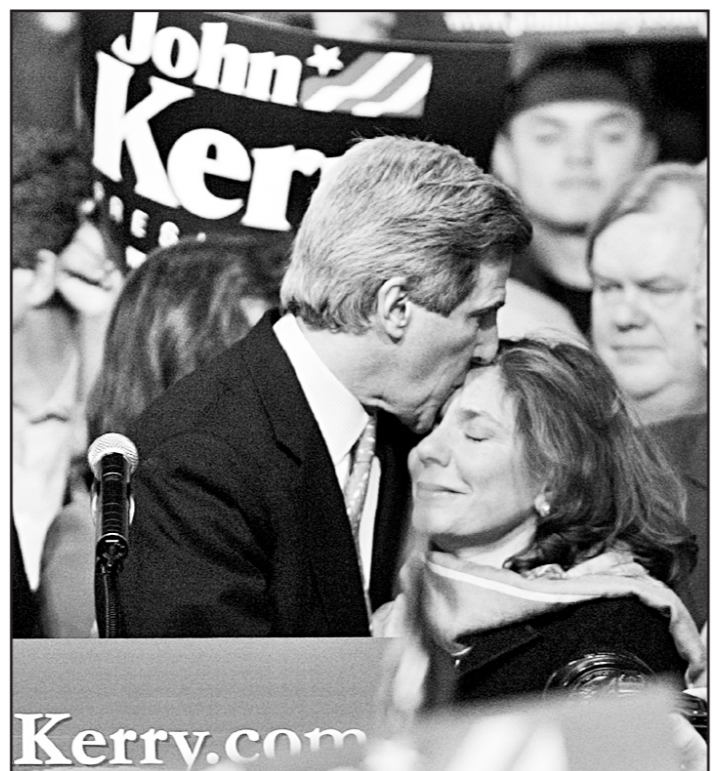


PHOTO: AFP

Democratic presidential candidate Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts kisses his wife Teresa Heinz Kerry before addressing supporters at the Hotel Fort Des Moines Monday in Des Moines, Iowa, after receiving word that he finished first in the Iowa caucus. Kerry snatched a surprise early victory in the Democratic Party battle to take on President George W. Bush in November as Iowa voters dealt a stinging blow to longtime favorite Howard Dean.

REUTERS, Des Moines

Democrat John Kerry capped a stunning political comeback on Monday with a victory in Iowa's caucuses that dramatically reshaped the Democratic presidential race and ended Richard Gephardt's White House quest.

In the first test on the road to find a challenger to President Bush, Kerry won 38 percent and John Edwards scored a surprise second-place finish with 32 percent of the vote. One-time favorites Howard Dean, the front-runner for months, and Gephardt trailed badly with 18 and 11 percent, respectively.

The win was a huge momentum boost for Kerry, the four-term senator from Massachusetts and decorated Vietnam War veteran who weeks ago was given up for dead but roared back into the race with an emphasis on his foreign policy and war experience and his ability to beat Bush.

"We came from behind and we came for the fight and now I have a special message for the special interests that have a home in the Bush White House: We're coming, you're going, and don't let the door hit you on the way out," Kerry told roaring supporters in Des Moines.

Kerry and Edwards, a senator from North Carolina, benefited from perceptions that they offered the best chance to beat Bush, which television network caucus polls showed was a crucial issue for Iowa Democrats.