

## Probes launched into Australian race riots

AFP, Sydney

Australian authorities launched twin inquiries yesterday into the circumstances surrounding the death of an Aboriginal teenager at the weekend and subsequent rioting that left more than 40 police officers injured.

A railway station in the inner city suburb of Redfern -- home to much of Sydney's Aboriginal community -- was set ablaze, two cars were burnt out and windows were smashed as 150 drunken youths went on the rampage Sunday.

Eight police were hospitalised, some with broken limbs, after coming under a hail of flying rocks, bricks and petrol bombs in what police described as the worst riots ever seen in the trouble-plagued suburb.

The violence followed a day of racial tension triggered by the death of 17-year-old Thomas Hickey on Sunday, a day after he was impaled on a metal fence after falling from his bicycle.

His family alleged the accident happened because he was being chased by police, a claim strenuously denied by officers.

One local, Donna, said the community was angry because it believed police were responsible for the teenager's death. "He was murdered," she told ABC radio.

Local residents and Aboriginal leaders lashed out at what they described as ongoing police brutality, harassment and intimidation.

New South Wales state Premier Bob Carr sent his condolences to Hickey's family and said his government would launch separate inquiries to establish how the teenager died and what involvement, if any, police had in his death.

The police critical incident team was also ordered to undertake an investigation overseen by the Ombudsman.

But Carr added: "I've got full confidence in the way police tackled this incident... they have our full backing."

Police in riot gear at first tried to negotiate with angry youths in a three-hour standoff after posters went up around Redfern and leaflets were distributed branding police "child murderers" and accusing them of harassment.

## Nehru-Gandhi clan splits politically

### Maneka, her son Varun formally join BJP

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India's Nehru-Gandhi clan finally split politically yesterday with two of its key members Maneka Gandhi, wife of late Sanjay Gandhi, and her son Varun Gandhi joining ruling BJP ahead of coming parliamentary elections.

Twenty three-year-old Varun, educated in Britain, and Maneka, a former federal minister, met Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee here last afternoon and formally joined BJP, confirming what had been in the air for quite some time.

Immediately after joining BJP, Varun told a television news channel that his political idol was his grandmother and late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who he said not only gave leadership but motherhood to India.

Replying to a question, Varun said he held his aunt Sonia Gandhi,

the Italy-born chief of main opposition Congress Party, and her siblings Rahul and Priyanka in great esteem and he would never campaign against them in the coming elections or criticize them.

Answering another question, he, however, said the foreign origin of Sonia Gandhi was an issue before the country but not the main issue. Varun said Sonia Gandhi, Rahul and Priyanka are related to him through blood and there is no connection between blood and politics.

To a question whether Sonia Gandhi would not be acceptable as the Prime Minister, he said, "Yes, I agree."

Asked how he viewed the situation in view of the family members coming out in different directions, Varun said, "The situation was quite different 20 years ago...political thinking may differ... they are alright in the Congress and we will be in the

BJP."

According to him, it is quite normal in a healthy democracy that there could be different political thinking in the same family.

However, political observers believe the BJP is going to project Maneka and Varun to counter Rahul-Priyanka in the parliamentary election campaign in the key state of Uttar Pradesh, which sends the highest number of members to Lok Sabha and is home to Jawaharlal Nehru-Indira Gandhi clan.

Notwithstanding Varun's assertion that he would refrain from criticizing his aunt and her children, observers say that with Maneka and her son joining the BJP, the stage is set for a political battle between the Gandhis. After her husband's death in an air crash, Maneka had left the Indira Gandhi household and set up Sanjay Vihar Manch and campaigned against Congress.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (C) is presented with a bouquet of flowers by Varun Gandhi (R) as former union minister and Varun's mother Maneka Gandhi (L) looks on prior to a meeting in New Delhi yesterday. Maneka and her son Varun Gandhi joined the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the presence of President Venkaiah Naidu and General Secretary Pramod Mahajan.



PHOTO: AFP

Director general for South Asia at the Pakistani foreign ministry, Jalil Abbas Jilani (Foreground-R) and joint secretary of the Indian external affairs ministry Arun Kumar Singh (Background 2-L) sit opposite one another prior to a meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan and India opened their first talks in more than two years in a bid to resolve issues including their long-running dispute over Kashmir.

## Pak govt denies Khan's heart attack 'rumours'

AP, Islamabad

Senior Pakistani officials yesterday denied as rumours that country's top nuclear scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan suffered a heart attack, but admitted that Khan is in "very bad" health and seeking medical attention.

Abdul Qadeer Khan, the 68-year-old father of the country's nuclear programme -- now under house arrest after admitting he leaked weapons technology to Iran, Libya and North Korea -- was visited by a senior cardiologist at his home on Sunday, said Hussam ul-Haq, the head of a committee seeking Khan's release.

"His health is very bad. He is not in good shape," ul-Haq said. Two senior government officials, however, denied rumours that the scientist had suffered a heart attack. "It is absolutely wrong," army

spokesman Major General Shaukut Sultan said. "He was taken to a hospital for a routine checkup."

Pakistan Information Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said Khan was "fine" and also denied he had suffered a heart attack.

Earlier PTI said Pakistan's top scientist Abdul Qadeer Khan, involved in clandestine nuclear sales to "rogue states", has reportedly suffered a heart attack.

"Dr Khan is under treatment at his residence and his condition is stated to be critical," a local daily quoted officials of the of the hospital of the country's premier nuclear installation, Khan Research Laboratories (KRL) formerly headed by Khan, as saying.

It said in view of his "poor cardiac" condition, a heart specialist along with a cardiac machine was "secretly" sent to the nuclear scientist's residence.

## Iraqi Council debates handover options

REUTERS, Baghdad

With early elections looking increasingly unlikely, members of Iraq's US-appointed Governing Council began a debate yesterday on other ways of securing the handover of power from the Americans.

Elsewhere, a US soldier was killed in a bomb explosion in Baghdad and an American civilian attached to a religious group was killed in an ambush of a taxicab.

"We want an agreement on how we will create the leadership that will be handed sovereignty," Council member Mahmoud Othman told Reuters.

"We have two options: either expanding the Governing Council by adding new members or holding a national conference that will include all the Iraqi powers."

The US administrator in Iraq,

Paul Bremer, said on Sunday Washington was awaiting UN proposals on the handover, but insisted it take place by June 30 as President Bush wants.

Bremer signaled some willingness to bring closer Iraqi national elections -- set under the US plan to begin next January 31 -- perhaps to December this year.

But he insisted at the weekend that elections could not take place before the June handover set by Bush, who faces what could be a fierce US presidential re-election battle in November.

UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi said during his mission in Iraq last week that consensus had emerged on holding elections, but that all sides agreed they had to be well prepared.

That has left Iraqi politicians in the US-backed Governing Council

wondering how sovereignty will be restored to a country eager to put behind it decades of autocratic rule.

Many Iraqis criticise the council as US puppets who spent years abroad while Saddam Hussein oppressed those at home.

But expanding it is one option up for debate.

"I want to see a national conference for all the components of the Iraqi people under the auspices of the UN, the US, the European Union even the Arabic League and this would be the right step toward a national reconciliation," Othman said.

Although Shiite members of the council still insist polls are possible, they are also making proposals that would ensure Iraq's majority sect would be well positioned to dominate.

## Saarc holds emergency meet on bird flu

AFP, New Delhi

Officials and experts from the seven South Asian countries yesterday began an emergency meeting here to chalk up urgent measures to combat Asia's bird flu epidemic, an Indian health ministry spokesman said.

"The meeting is discussing possible cooperation to tackle the problem of bird flu," spokesman Harsh Bhal said.

The foreign ministry said relevant officials from the seven members of the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (Saarc) were attending the one-day emergency meeting in New Delhi.

Details of the meeting and the conclusions would be announced at a press conference later Monday, Bhal said.

Saarc groups Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

New Delhi says heightened vigilance at its borders has so far prevented the H5N1 virus, which has emerged in Cambodia, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam, from erupting within Indian territory.

Weaker strains of the flu have been reported in Pakistan, Taiwan and the United States.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) said at the weekend that cooperation with regional nations hit by the deadly virus had "significantly improved" but that the response to the crisis in some poorer countries had been slow.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has criticised Asian nations for putting economic concerns before public health by attempting to cover up outbreaks in a bid to protect their agricultural sectors and tourism industries.

## EU 'big 3' set for summit

AFP, Brussels

Britain, France and Germany head into summit talks this week on the back of unprecedented cooperation on the military front which is finally putting flesh on the bones of the EU's common defence policy.

Their burgeoning military alliance is expected to be one of the themes addressed by Tony Blair, Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schroeder when they meet in Berlin tomorrow (Wednesday).

The three countries -- the largest and most powerful in the European Union -- have been trying to rebuild their ties after falling out spectacularly over the US-led war in Iraq last year.

Their rapprochement bore fruit at a Blair-Chirac summit in November where the British prime minister and French president announced plans to create rapid reaction forces deployable at short notice to hotspots, notably in Africa.

## US, India air forces stage first-ever war games

AFP, New Delhi

India and the United States pitted their war jets against each other over central India yesterday as the two countries staged their first-ever aerial combat games, Indian officials said.

The gruelling exercises, due to last 10 days, were another sign of the intensifying military relationship between the countries which were on opposite sides during the Cold War.

The exercises began in the skies over the central Indian city of Gwalior after the United States Air Force (USAF) and the Indian Air Force scrambled their fighter jets, Indian defence ministry spokesman Amitava Chakravarty said.

"The major joint exercise is aimed at building a higher degree of coordination between the two air forces," he told AFP.

The exercises are intended to facilitate future joint peacekeeping

operations, not for any Indian combat role alongside US forces, press reports have quoted IAF officials as saying.

The USAF flew F-15 Eagle fighters while their Indian hosts sought to match the speed and manoeuvrability of the twin-engined US planes with their Russian-designed MiG-29s, Indian Air Force (IAF) officials said.

The MiG-29 and the F-15s have a maximum speed of around 2,661 kilometres (1,650 miles) an hour and roughly match each other's climbing rate of around 15,151 metres (50,000 feet) a minute, experts say.

Besides MiG-29s, the IAF was also using its ageing MiG-21s, ground-attack MiG-27s and multi-role MiG-23 planes as well as its French-built Mirage-2000 and Russian-designed Sukhoi-30 frontline war jets, Chakravarty said.

## Democrats question Bush's credibility

REUTERS, Milwaukee

The Democratic presidential hopefuls questioned President Bush's credibility and leadership on Sunday, but steered clear of attacks on each other in a sober debate two days before the Wisconsin primary.

With front-runner John Kerry looking for a Wisconsin win that could put him on the road to a November matchup with Bush, rival John Edwards warned Kerry against planning too far ahead.

"Not so fast, John Kerry," said Edwards, a North Carolina senator who has vowed to stay in the presidential race even if he loses in Wisconsin.

"We're going to have an election here in Wisconsin this Tuesday and we've got a whole group of primaries coming up, and I for one intend to fight with everything I've got for every one of those votes," he said during the Milwaukee debate.

Kerry, a Massachusetts senator, has taken control of the Democratic race with wins in 14 of the first 16 contests, including easy victories on Saturday in Nevada and the District of Columbia.

But rivals Edwards and Howard Dean hope to make a stand in Wisconsin, where the Tuesday primary is their last chance to stop Kerry's surge before a March 2

round of 10 contests in big states like New York and California.

Rather than put Kerry in the hot seat, however, the Democrats kept their focus on Bush, criticizing his economic leadership and his approach to the war in Iraq.

Edwards, Dean, Dennis Kucinich and civil rights activist Al Sharpton all questioned Bush's truthfulness about the reasons for going to war.

"I do not think we were told the truth about why we went to war in Iraq and I think that's a huge problem," Dean said during the 15th debate in the Democratic presidential campaign.

"The president lied to the American people," said Kucinich, an Ohio congressman. Edwards said it was fair to question Bush's statements about Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction and posing a threat to the United States.

"Certainly the integrity and character of the president of the United States is at issue -- no question," Edwards said.

Kerry criticised Bush's judgment in going to war and his failure to view it as a last resort. A decorated Vietnam veteran, Kerry drew a contrast with his own combat experience in Vietnam and Bush's decision to send men to war.

## Siamese twins separated in China

AFP, Beijing

Doctors in northern China's Hebei province have successfully separated a set of 44-day-old Siamese twin girls who were born joined at the chest and abdomen, state press reported yesterday.

The three-hour operation at the Hebei Medical University in the provincial capital of Shijiazhuang was performed on the twin girls Bei Bei and Bao Bao on Valentine's Day, Saturday, the China Daily reported.

Doctors said the livers, ribs and midriff of the two infants were almost completely linked.

The well-being of Bei Bei, who was diagnosed with inborn heart disease, remained a concern with doctors saying her life would remain in danger for up to 12 months if another operation was not performed to correct the disease.

A heart operation was planned for the girl as soon as she recovered from the initial separation, the doctors said.

The hospital performed the operation free of charge for the babies and will continue to care for the infants without charge, it said.



PHOTO: AFP

Siamese twin girls Bei Bei and Bao Bao undergo surgery to separate them at the Hebei Medical University in the provincial capital of Shijiazhuang on February 14. Doctors in northern China's Hebei province successfully separated on Valentine's Day the set of 44-day-old Siamese twin girls who were born joined at the chest and abdomen.

## Taiwan's Chen doesn't rule out possibility of unification with China

REUTERS, Taipei

Taiwan's pro-independence president, Chen Shui-bian, does not rule out the possibility the island may eventually reunify with China, Time magazine said in a report yesterday.

But Chen stressed that Taiwan and China were at present separate states. Taipei and Beijing split after a civil war ended in 1949 and China sees Taiwan as a breakaway province that must be recovered -- by force if necessary.

"Currently, there are two separate, independent countries across the Taiwan Strait, neither of which has jurisdiction over the other," Chen told the magazine.

But Chen, a staunchly pro-independence leader who is trailing the more moderate Nationalist Party candidate, Lien Chan, in opinion polls before presidential elections due on March 20, would not rule out some form of eventual unification.

"But who knows if these two separate countries might become one over time? We do not exclude any possibilities for the future," Chen told Time.