

India okays 2 more buses on Delhi-Lahore route

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian government has given the go-ahead for an extra two buses to be added to the service between New Delhi and the northern Pakistani city of Lahore, an official said yesterday.

"The permission has come from the External Affairs Ministry. Two more buses will now ply on the Delhi-Lahore route," Delhi transport minister Haroon Yusuf said.

The air-conditioned vehicles had been ordered and would be arriving in a month's time, he said.

With the new buses, the frequency of the Delhi to Lahore service would double to four times a week.

Buses from the Indian side currently run on Tuesdays and Fridays while the Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC) operates buses on Wednesdays and Saturdays.



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani Foreign Secretary Riaz Khokhar (L) shakes hands with joint secretary of the Indian external affairs ministry, Arun Kumar Singh (R) during a meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Pakistan and India Monday began their first peace talks for two years in an attempt to build a framework to resolve all their outstanding problems including the thorny issue of Kashmir.

Five dead as quake hits Sumatra

AFP, Jakarta

Five people including a mother and child died when a powerful earthquake hit the Indonesian island of Sumatra on Monday, the head of the Indonesian national earthquake centre said yesterday.

The quake measuring 5.6 on the Richter scale hit the western Padangpanjang region at 9:44 pm (14:44 GMT), Fauzi told AFP.

He said five people died while two others were seriously injured and five slightly hurt.

"There are several houses collapsed," Fauzi said.

A series of weaker aftershocks followed the quake, which was centred about eight kilometres southeast of Padangpanjang, a town about 70 kilometres north of the West Sumatra capital of Padang.

JKLF warns of uprising in Pak Kashmir if its concern ignored

AFP, Srinagar

A top separatist in Indian Kashmir warned yesterday an Islamic militant uprising could spread to the Pakistani zone of the divided province if India and Pakistan ignored Kashmiri interests in ongoing talks.

Yasin Malik, chairman of the Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), which wants the Himalayan territory to be independent of both India and Pakistan, did not say whether the uprising would be violent.

"If Kashmiris are not involved in talks as a basic party, the JKLF will launch Intifada resistance in both parts of Kashmir," Malik said.

Kashmir group warns women, beauty parlour owners

AFP, Srinagar

A lesser-known Islamic militant group has warned beauty parlour owners in Indian Kashmir "to mend their ways" and women to adhere to the strict Islamic dress code, a report said yesterday.

The warning was issued by the al-Madina Regiment, which has been active in Indian-administered Kashmir for the past four years and has claimed responsibility for murdering several pro-India politicians.

"We are giving them a week's time to mend their ways and after that we would execute our warning," the group's chief operation commander, Umar Khalid, said in a statement published in the Greater Kashmir English newspaper. He did not elaborate.

Alleged killer of Phoolan Devi escapes from Tihar jail

PTI, New Delhi

Prime accused in the murder of bandit-turned-politician Phoolan Devi yesterday escaped from high-security Tihar jail in a dramatic manner.

Shamsher Singh Rana was "taken out" from the jail by his associates while posing as Uttaranchal Police personnel, police sources said.

The escape was detected soon after policemen from Uttaranchal arrived to take custody of the accused for taking him to an Uttaranchal court, they said.

Iraqi Council turns away from US transition plan

AFP, Washington

Most members of Iraq's US-appointed Governing Council no longer support the US transition plan and are seeking direct sovereignty until elections can be held, The Washington Post said yesterday.

"The caucuses are pretty much dead now," Sunni Muslim council member Ghazi Yawar was quoted as saying in reference to the US plan that calls for caucuses to choose a transitional government that would assume authority on June 30.

Opposition to the US transition plan, agreed to by most council members on November 15, is strongest among Iraq's majority Shiite Muslim community in the south, whose top cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani is calling for snap direct elections.

UN diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi, who last week led a UN fact-finding mission in Iraq to determine whether

elections could be held before June 30, has cautioned it would be very difficult to hold free and fair elections by that date.

Sameer Shaker Suamidi, another Sunni member of the council, told The Washington Post that abandoning the US plan and transferring sovereignty to the council until fair elections can be held "makes the most sense".

Kurdish leader and council member Jalal Talabani has also come out in favor of transferring sovereignty to the council.

Yawar said the caucus system was too controversial, especially if elections were to be held by the end of 2004: "If it's only for six months, it's not worth it."

Senior US officials consulted by the daily said some council members had selfish reasons for opposing the US plan. By remaining in power until the elections, they would wield unrivaled political influence, allowing them to engage in patronage and skew the balloting rules.

The US officials said holding regional caucuses would allow new political talent to emerge and challenge the former exiles who now control the council and provide a more representative Iraqi administration.

"The Governing Council has been an effective body during this phase, but is it the appropriate body to hand over total sovereignty to?" a senior US official asked. "Is it sufficiently representative? Who is it accountable to? Will it be viewed as legitimate by the Iraqi people?"

Anticipating a UN recommendation for year-end elections, the daily said, US officials in Baghdad and Washington were frantically trying to assemble a set of contingency transition plans for Iraq.

Meanwhile, Iraq's deputy interior minister Ahmed Ibrahim confirmed Tuesday five men were arrested over the weekend in connection with the murder last year of female Governing Council member Akila Hashemi.

Attacks in Saudi Arabia may be imminent: UK

AFP, London

Terrorists may be "in the final stages" of preparing more attacks in Saudi Arabia, the British government warned on Monday, advising its citizens not to travel to the country.

The unusually strong-worded statement followed the cancellation of a British Airways flight from London to the Saudi capital, Riyadh, on Monday, which was called off last week due to unspecified security fears.

"Following terrorist attacks in Riyadh in May and November 2003, we believe that terrorists remain determined to carry out further attacks in Saudi Arabia and that these may be in the final stages of preparation," the Foreign Office said on its website.

"We advise British nationals against all but essential travel to Saudi Arabia," it said in updated travel advice for the country.

UN rights group says

Anti-terror battle has led to widespread HR abuse

AFP, Geneva

A working group of the UN Commission on Human Rights said Monday it was gravely worried about rights abuses by several countries, including the United States, in their quest to battle terrorism.

The Working Group on Arbitrary Detention report criticized in particular the "imprecise definitions of crimes" in anti-terror legislation and the use of military tribunals and special courts of law by certain states.

The UN group's criticisms come as the United States finds itself under increasing fire for its extrajudicial procedures for detainees held at its Guantanamo military base on Cuba.

Washington has rejected the UN

report, saying the working group is not competent to judge the matter.

"States do not have the right to contravert principles as fundamental as the presumption of innocence... and the right to be judged within a reasonable period of time by a competent, independent and impartial tribunal," the report, written and released in French, read.

Since the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, a significant number of people from several countries have been arbitrarily detained as a result of new anti-terror laws, the UN experts continued.

Some have been held in secret locations set up for presumed terrorists, and others -- notably those at Guantanamo -- have held been without trial and deprived of

the rights due to either indicted criminals or prisoners of war.

The UN experts said Washington did not have the right to detain indefinitely the hundreds of detainees at Guantanamo -- mostly men captured during US military operations against the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

"In no case may an arrest -- made under laws of exception -- be prolonged indefinitely," they said in the report.

Last week US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld defended the indefinite detention without trial or charges of the Guantanamo men, saying that their cases would be reviewed on an annual basis and that those deemed no longer a threat would be released.

Confident Kerry aims his arrow at Bush

AP, Milwaukee

Bolstered by the polls and disarray in a rival camp, a confident-sounding John Kerry wrapped up his campaign for yesterday's pivotal Wisconsin presidential primary by aiming barbs at President Bush and ignoring his Democratic opponents.

Kerry has focused heavily on job-creation plans, and on Monday he labeled Bush missing in action on the economy. He ridiculed the president for taking a trip to the Daytona 500 auto race in Florida at a time when the economy should have his undivided attention.

"We don't need a president who just says, 'Gentlemen, start your engines,'" Kerry said. "We need a president who says, 'America, let's start our economy and put people back to work.'"

While Kerry was sounding like a general election candidate, Howard Dean's campaign went through an election-eve shake-up that left him battered and his future in even greater doubt.

Haitian rebels take another town

AFP, Port-au-Prince

Armed Haitian rebels seized a central town and killed the district police chief as embattled President Jean Bertrand Aristide asked for international help in putting down a spreading uprising. The latest killings pushed the death toll since February 5, when rebels seized the northern city of Gonaives, to more than 55. The town of some 200,000 remains in rebel hands.

"I have already asked and I will continue to ask the international community and prime ministers of the region to move faster on this issue," Aristide told reporters late Monday at the presidential palace.

Israeli barrier spells doom for Palestinians: UN

AFP, Jerusalem

More than 200,000 Palestinians are already suffering the humanitarian consequences of the separation barrier that Israel is building in the West Bank, according to the United Nations.

The barrier, whose legality is being debated by the world court in The Hague next week, is expected to eventually stretch more than 700 km by the time it is completed at the end of next year.

The 180-km segment completed so far -- a montage of razor wire, electronic fencing, concrete and ditches -- has cut off villages from markets, medical services and schools in the northern West Bank.

It has resulted in the confiscation of 11,400 dunums (2,850 acres -

1,140 hectares) of privately-owned Palestinian land and in the destruction of 102,320 trees, a report by the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) found.

This land, which employs one quarter of the population there, is some of the West Bank's most fertile, and yields around 900,000 dollars per square kilometer, more than double the amount from other areas of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The barrier has also limited access to water in an area whose wells are some of the best of the western aquifer.

OCHA estimates that some 40,000 acres (16,200 hectares) of "high-income Palestinian land" will be affected by the wall in the north-

ern West Bank alone.

The UN organization's field workers documented cases around the town of Qalqilya, where villages are severed from the main social, education, economic and health service center as a result of the eight-meter (25-foot) high wall which completely encircles the town.

"Whereas residents of these villages were once within three-five kilometers (two-three miles) of the hospitals, schools and markets of Qalqilya, they now face a journey of more than 20 kilometers and the need to pass through an IDF (Israeli Defence Forces) checkpoint into Qalqilya," said OCHA.

OCHA drew similar conclusions about the barrier's impact around annexed east Jerusalem.



PHOTO: AFP
Mothers tend to their children suffering from the dengue fever at a hospital in Jakarta yesterday. An outbreak of dengue fever has killed 17 people and infected more than 2,500 others in the Indonesian capital since January, the health ministry said.

Asthma on the rise in Asia due to mounting pollution

AFP, Bangkok

Asia's rapid urbanisation, dangerous pollution levels and poor medical treatment have triggered an alarming increase in asthma which affects 300 million people worldwide, experts said yesterday.

The global prevalence of asthma, already the world's largest respiratory killer, has increased steadily over the past 20 years due mostly to urban development, particularly in the region.

"This problem is set to worsen as Asian populations become more urbanised, unless measures are taken now to improve treatment," the Asia Asthma Development Board (AADB) said at the World Asthma Meeting held here this week.

Experts at the conference, attended by hundreds of scientists and doctors, warned that sufferers in Asia are particularly at risk because doctors are failing to address the chronic condition.

"Asthma is becoming more of a concern in Asia... and there is a growing problem with asthma related to people living in cities," said Richard Beasley of the Wellington School of Medicine, who co-authored a global strategy for asthma management and prevention.

Urgent and immediate attention is needed in the region to close the widening treatment gap for the growing number of Asian asthmatics, he said.

While several theories about the cause of asthma are in circulation, "undoubtedly one of the factors could be the use of motor vehicles and their emissions," said Eric Bateman, a professor at the University of Cape Town's Lung Institute.

Control of the condition hinges on preventative treatment regimes such as inhaled cortico-steroids, but Asian doctors are often unaware of new medical treatments and control procedures or are reluctant to use them.

The AADB said that poor treatment standards in the region "are leading to some of the highest mortality rates in the world; figures from China suggest that 36.7 of every 100,000 asthma patients will die."

By comparison, in the United States' the death rate is 5.2 per 100,000 and in Canada 1.6.

Singapore, with 16.1 deaths per 100,000, is also an area of concern in Asia and highlights the belief that urban areas are home to abnormally high numbers of asthma sufferers.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian workers shout slogans during a protest near the Erez border crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip early yesterday. Thousands of Palestinian workers have been allowed to enter Israel but still face long delays after the army lifted a closure. One Palestinian worker died of a heart attack Monday while waiting in a crowded line of Palestinian workers who were trying to cross from Gaza to work into Israel via the Erez border crossing.

Palestinians block Gaza crossing

AFP, Gaza City

Hundreds of Palestinian workers yesterday blocked access to the Erez industrial zone, between the Gaza Strip and Israel, to protest lengthy security controls which they claim cost the life of one of their colleagues who was crushed to death the previous day.

"We have the right to earn a living with dignity," "No to humiliation at Erez", "Erez crossing, crossing to death", chanted the protestors, an AFP reporter witnessed.

They also called for boycotting their employers at the Erez industrial zone and not a single worker went to work Tuesday.

Mohammed as-Sheikh, 41, was crushed to death Monday by a crowd of fellow workers waiting to cross into the estate, witnesses and

Palestinian security said.

They said Israeli soldiers were too slow in checking the workers, who do not need a permit, provided their employers put their names on a daily list of those allowed into the industrial estate.

But the workers are still controlled for weapons and explosives. A woman suicide bomber blow herself up at that spot on January 14, killing four Israelis.

An Israeli spokesman said Sheikh died of a heart attack.

Meanwhile, the Israeli parliament's finance committee approved late Monday the transfer of nearly 20 million dollars for building work in the occupied Palestinian territories and east Jerusalem, sources in the Knesset said.

'Pakistan, US plotting Khan's murder'

ANI, AP, Islamabad

Family members of Pakistan's detained nuclear scientist and other officials of the Kahuta-based Khan Research Laboratories have alleged that the Musharraf regime is out to murder A.Q. Khan, the father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb, with the backing of the US.

"The health condition of Khan has deteriorated while government is not allowing his medical check-up. This situation is very alarming and shows that government is hatching a conspiracy to kill him at the behest of US," Online News quoted some of them, as saying at a joint news conference.

The family members of the arrested scientists charged the government with not allowing anyone to meet Khan after February 4.