

Indian air force MiG-21 ploughs into village: 4 killed

AFP, Ahmedabad

Four people were killed and 15 injured when an Indian airforce MiG-21 fighter jet ploughed into a village and set ablaze several houses in the western Indian state of Gujarat yesterday, police said.

Three people including two children were instantly killed while a 50-year-old man succumbed to his injuries later in hospital, a police official said.

The Russian-designed jet crashed into a house in Lakha Baval village, 300km from Gujarat's commercial capital Ahmedabad.

Those killed instantly were a 19-year-old man, a five-year-old boy and a five-year-old girl, a police official said.

Burning aviation fuel spilled across the village as the plane broke into 17 pieces, the air force said, adding that the fire engulfed seven houses in the village.

A total of 15 houses were damaged, police said, adding that six children and two women were among those injured by falling debris and fire.

Aristide vows to die for Haiti, US to offer peace plan

AFP, Port-au-Prince

Embattled Haitian President Jean Bertrand Aristide declared Thursday he was ready to die for his violence-torn country, as Washington prepared to present an international plan aimed at pulling Haiti back from the brink of rebellion.

"I, too, am ready to die if that is what I must do to defend my country," Aristide said, two weeks into a deepening revolt that has claimed more than 55 lives.

Rebels were threatening to seize Haiti's second-largest city unless Aristide resigns, and the United States for the first time conceded that Aristide's resignation might be part of a negotiated political settlement.

"We're working with the international community, and I think we've got a solid consensus with the Organization of American States (OAS), the United Nations, France, Canada, a number of other countries," Secretary of State Colin Powell told ABC radio.

Thailand finds deadly bird flu in cat family

AFP, Bangkok

The deadly H5N1 strain of bird flu has been detected in a leopard, a tiger and two domestic cats in Thailand, experts said yesterday as the government prepared to announce more outbreaks of the virus.

"This is the first time in the world that we have found bird flu in cats and tigers," said Therapol Sirinarumit from Bangkok's Kasetsart University which tested the animals. "We found the H5N1 virus in the samples."

"One clouded leopard has already died and one white tiger is still alive and has recovered," he told a press conference, referring to animals kept at a private zoo east of Bangkok.

The H5N1 strain has hit eight Asian nations, with weaker varieties detected in Taiwan, Pakistan and the United States. On Thursday Canada also reported a less virulent strain in the western province of British Columbia.

Indian SC stays execution of parliament attack convict

PTI, New Delhi

The Supreme Court yesterday stayed the execution of Mohammad Afzal, convicted in the Parliament attack case.

It also issued a notice to the Delhi Government on his petition challenging the conviction and sentence.

A Bench comprising Justice Ashok Bhan and Justice HK Sema issued the notice on Afzal's petition and tagged it along with the petitions filed by Delhi Government and another condemned prisoner Shaikat Hussain Guru. The Court adjourned hearing on all the matters by four weeks.

With this the execution of both the condemned prisoners in Parliament attack case are stayed till the disposal of the appeal. The Court had on January 19 stayed the execution of Shaikat Hussain Guru on his petition challenging his conviction.

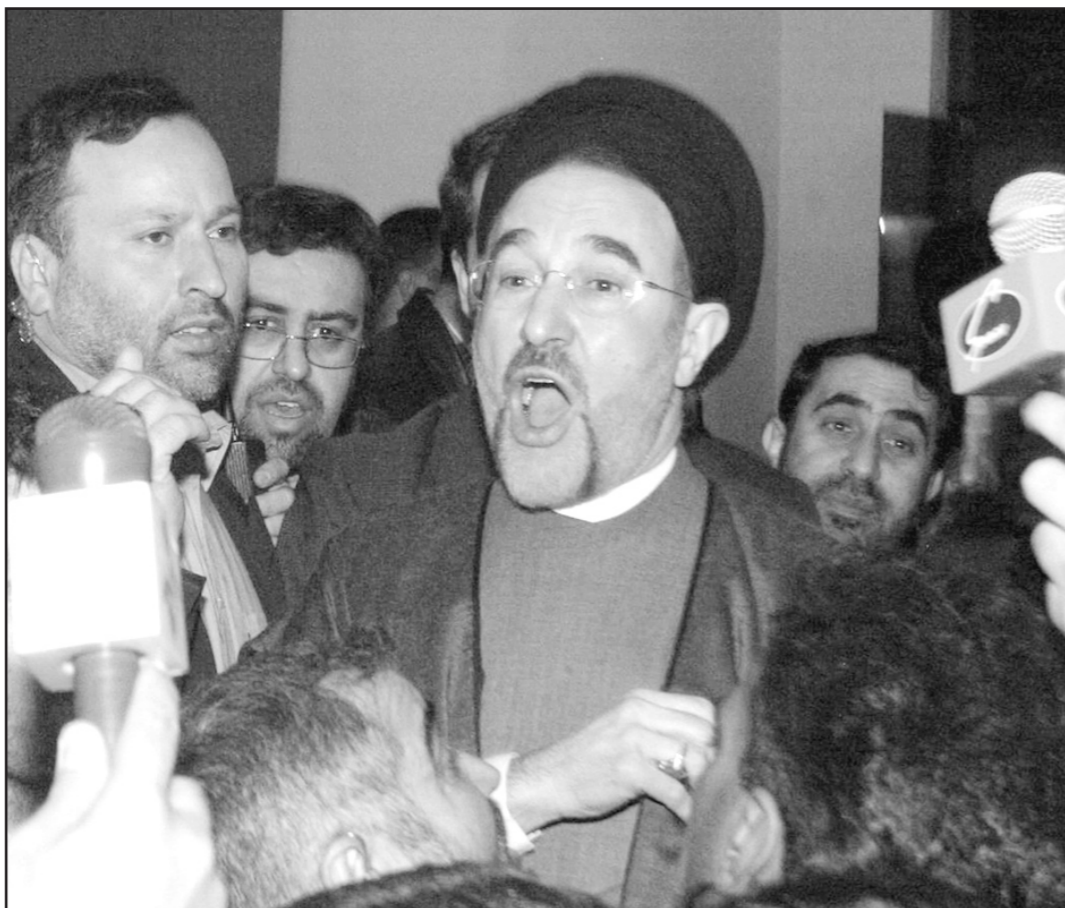


PHOTO: AFP
Iranian President Mohammad Khatami talks with journalists after voting at the Interior Ministry in Tehran yesterday. Polling stations across Iran opened for parliamentary elections expected to see religious conservatives tighten their grip over the Islamic republic after most reformist candidates were barred from standing.

Iranians divided over polls participation

AFP, Tehran

Boycotts and snowsports competed yesterday with civic pride as Iranians were split over taking part in controversial parliamentary elections that have left pro-democracy supporters disenchanted and apathetic.

With most reformist candidates disqualified and conservatives expected to roll to a landslide sweep, the only real suspense in the polls was who and how many of the 46.3 million eligible voters would turn out.

Little electoral enthusiasm was visible at the Tochal telecabin and ski station in the mountains north of the Tehran, where hundreds of Iranians sat out the elections basking in mild sunshine.

Some hiked in the Alborz mountains and others picnicked. Many "voted" with their skis or snowboards while a few looked over an

exhibition titled, no political pun intended, "The Return of the Dinosaurs".

"Ninety-five percent of young people won't vote today," predicted Amir A'Rabi, a 20-year-old real estate worker with a snowboard slung jauntily over his shoulder. "They don't believe in any of the candidates."

Mehdi, a student, set out on a trek in the mountains with his girlfriend Sara. Both voted during the reformist landslide in 2000, when two-thirds of eligible Iranians cast ballots, but stayed on the sidelines this time.

"People are disillusioned and the regime should attract their attention," said Mehdi, 22, who would only give his first name. "They should give back to the people the trust they took away."

Ali Reza'ee, a 45-year-old clockmaker, said he would not vote and the outcome of the elections was virtually decided in advance.

He was on his way home from the mountains for the traditional Friday meal of chelo kebab.

But his wife Mahnaz Arzani, 40, surprised him by saying she planned to cast her ballot. She had no problem contradicting her somewhat startled husband: "He has his opinion and I have my opinion."

Tucked away amid the jovial weekend crowd at Tochal was a sombre prayer room used as a polling station, where five people were seen filling out ballot forms.

The head of the polling operations there, Asadollah Mohebi, said 60 people had voted in the first 90 minutes. "It is less than four years ago, you can see that," he said.

Iran's clerical regime pressed hard for a large turnout and state-run television rallied voters with patriotic songs and footage of revolutionary founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and the 1980-88 war with Iraq.

Taliban warns of wave of attacks

Laden, Mullah Omah still in Afghanistan

AFP, Khost

The remnants of the Taliban, forced out of power in Afghanistan in 2001, will stage a new wave of attacks against US-led coalition forces in the south and southeast of the country this Spring, a man claiming to represent the fundamentalist militia told AFP yesterday.

In an interview in the southeastern city of Khost, the man, who has previously proved himself a credible source of information on the intentions of the militant group, also claimed that al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and the Taliban leader, Mullah Omar, were both alive and in Afghanistan.

Bin Laden and his deputy, the Egyptian Ayman Al-Zawahiri "are alive and both are in Afghanistan, in different places", Mohammed Saiful Adel told an AFP journalist in an interview in the city of Khost, close

to the border with Pakistan.

A former leader of the anti-Soviet Mujahaddin fighters, Jalaluddin Haqqani, "has taken on the role of deputy leader of the Taliban," the Taliban spokesman said. "He is playing a key role in our movement and is responsible for all the military operations," he added.

"Haqqani is personally leading the operations in Paktia, Paktika and Khost," said the spokesman, referring to three southeastern provinces.

Since it was ousted from power in Afghanistan by US-backed forces in December 2001, the fundamentalist militia has been unable to do more than stage isolated attacks on the US-led coalition which supports the government of President Hamid Karzai.

Some western analysts warn that the Taliban is now attempting

to exaggerate its real power in an attempt to destabilise Afghanistan in the run up to elections intended to take place some time this year.

The Taliban will launch hit and run attacks but cannot pose a serious threat in a country where its popular support remains low, they say.

Adel insisted the movement was capable of mounting serious attacks and boasted, but without providing any proof, that: "We will stage attacks on an unprecedented scale in the Spring."

Taliban members would "for example, attack a big town, seize it, occupy it for several hours and then leave ... We will lead attacks against American bases here. We will have a lot of martyrs but we will do it," said the spokesman.

The interview with Adel took place over two hours in a room in a hotel in the centre of the town.

US troops to remain in Iraq for years

Annan promises to help Iraqis form new govt

AP, Washington

American officials say US forces will be needed in Iraq long after a sovereign government is restored this summer, but they have yet to work out the terms of a continued presence.

Senior Pentagon officials said Thursday they were confident that the Iraqis, once given political control, would agree US troops should stay. But some outside the government question whether that would hold true once an elected Iraqi government took over.

Anthony Cordesman, a close observer of the Iraq situation as a strategist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said that if political control was turned over on July 1 to an Iraqi body that is not elected, it likely would align itself with US objectives and therefore welcome a continued US military presence. But once elections were held, the US role would be in doubt, he said.

If the new Iraqi government decided it wanted American forces to leave, "We would certainly be obligated to leave, under international law," Cordesman said.

Defence Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld's chief spokesman, Larry Di Rita, told reporters at the Pentagon that there is a "fairly confident belief" that most Iraqis accept the US view that American troops will be needed over the long haul to ensure a stable transition to democracy.

The basis for a continued US military presence under the authority of a transitional Iraqi government is "being developed," Di Rita said without elaborating.

"I think there's a fairly comfortable understanding that the coalition has a lot to offer with respect to continued security in Iraq," Di Rita said, and "that people in Iraq understand that (and) want the coalition to continue to be involved in security in some way."

Di Rita did not define the roles

that US troops would play once the occupation ended. Other officials have said troops will be needed to guide the development of Iraqi internal security forces as well as build an Iraqi army that is capable of defending against external threats.

US troops also will be engaged in combat as long as the insurgency remains active.

The legal basis for US troops operating in any foreign country is normally spelled out in a legal arrangement called a status of forces agreement, which defines legal protections for US troops accused of crimes in that country. Without it, US troops in Iraq would be subject to local Iraqi law, once the US occupation authority is ended and a government is restored.

"That would be untenable," Cordesman said.

Reuters adds: UN Secretary General Kofi Annan is prepared to send his top adviser back to

Baghdad to help form an interim government if Iraqi leaders cannot agree on a plan to assume power when the US-led occupation ends in June, UN officials said.

Annan on Thursday sided with the United States, saying elections in Iraq before the political transfer of power on June 30 were not feasible. He also said the date for restoring sovereignty that Washington wants "must be respected."

But he did not give any proposals for a caretaker government to take power in June, saying Iraqis should determine its shape before the world body steps in.

"We have absolutely no preferred options," Annan told reporters. "We need to have the Iraqis discuss it. They must take ownership, discuss it among themselves, and we will try and work with them to find a consensus."

'Kashmiris should be involved in talks'

AFP, New Delhi

Pakistan's foreign minister said in an interview published here yesterday that Kashmiris would be a "moderating" influence on both India and Pakistan during their talks on the future of the divided region.

India and Pakistan should try to involve the Kashmiris "as soon as possible" in efforts to resolve the dispute, Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri told India's Business Line newspaper.

"This is not a precondition but a matter of common sense because in my opinion the Kashmiris will be a force for moderation."

"They have more at stake than either India or Pakistan so they will bring in more moderation and common sense into this whole thing," Kasuri said.

"Let us not feel threatened by the Kashmiris. The sooner they are brought in the better," he said.

UK begins probe into Guantanamo Britons

REUTERS, London

British anti-terror police began an investigation yesterday into five Britons to be freed from the US Guantanamo Bay prison camp after being held without trial for two years.

London and Washington announced Thursday that the five, among the 660 held at the naval base in Cuba, would be sent back to the United Kingdom in the next few weeks and could be freed on their arrival.

Four other Britons will remain at the camp, set up in January 2002 to cage combatants captured in Afghanistan or people with alleged links to the radical al-Qaeda network.

Home Office Minister David Blunkett said none of those to be released is considered a security threat, but police said they were launching a probe to see whether the men should be charged with offences under anti-terrorism laws on their return.



PHOTO: AFP
Indonesians leave their homes in flooded area in Jakarta yesterday. The death toll from Indonesia's dengue fever outbreak rose to 191 and local health official warned that floods beginning to inundate Jakarta and other cities would worsen the situation.

Thousands forced out of homes by flooding

AFP, Jakarta

Thousands of Jakarta residents have been forced to flee their homes by flood waters as deep as two metres (6.6 feet), officials in the Indonesian capital said yesterday.

Wagiman of the Jakarta flood control centre said at least 10 neighbourhoods had been inundated, forcing at least 10,000 to seek temporary refuge in mosques or civic offices.

"Public kitchens have been readied but not yet set up. We will ask help from other agencies if the flood gets worse," he told AFP.

Koran Tempo newspaper reported that a boy aged 10 was electrocuted when he tried to lift a television above the water that poured into his house.

Floods close to one metre deep inundated hundreds of shops at a market in the Cipulir area of South Jakarta, swamping several cars and causing massive traffic jams.

A public order officer said waters reached two metres deep at Kampung Melayu in East Jakarta. In the north of the city, water as high as one metre flooded a posh residential area.

Flooding is a near-annual rainy season ordeal for residents in parts of the city of eight million.



PHOTO: AFP
US Army Lt. Katrina Metcalfe places sandbags on the hood and base of the windshield of a vehicle for protection in the event of an attack by gunfire in Tikrit. Nearly a year after its invasion of Iraq, the US military is not only replacing about 100,000 troops that took part in the original occupation, but is also rotating most of their equipment in one of the biggest logistical exercises it has ever undertaken.

'Pak scientist sold nuke centrifuge parts to Iran'

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

The former head of Pakistan's nuclear programme Abdul Qadeer Khan sent enriched uranium to Libya in 2001 and sold nuclear centrifuge parts to Iran in the mid-1990s, Malaysian police said yesterday.

Buhary Syed Abu Tahir, named by the United States as a middleman in an international nuclear trafficking ring run by Khan, said the scientist asked him to send centrifuges from Pakistan to Iran in 1994 or 1995, according to police.

Tahir also said Khan told him that a "certain amount of UF6 (enriched uranium) was sent by air from Pakistan to Libya" around 2001, according to police.

The revelations were made in a detailed 12-page police report on their investigations into Malaysia's alleged link in the nuclear weapons black market and the role of the Sri Lankan businessman, who is now in Malaysia.

The probe was launched after US and British intelligence services told Malaysia that centrifuge parts manufactured by a local company had been found on a ship bound for Libya last October.

The Malaysian company, Scomi Precision Engineering (SCOPE), admitted making the parts but said it did not know their final destination and believed they were for the oil and gas industries.

The company is owned by Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's son Kamaluddin, and Malaysia has strenuously denied that either the company or the country was knowingly involved in the nuclear arms black market.

Abdullah revealed last week, however, that Tahir -- named by US President George W. Bush as Khan's "chief financial officer and money launderer" -- had indeed placed the order for the parts with SCOPE.

The report also names citizens of Germany, Turkey, Britain and Switzerland as allegedly involved in the nuclear black market.