

Indian military plane crashes, pilot dies

AFP, Jodhpur

An Indian air force fighter jet crashed yesterday in the western desert state of Rajasthan killing the pilot, an air force spokesman said.

The British-designed Jaguar went down near Pokhran, about 200km from the western Rajasthan city, killing pilot Wing Commander Ravi Khanna, he said.

Khanna had been practising manoeuvres ahead of domestic air exercises scheduled for March 14, the official said.

A New Delhi-based spokesman for the air force, Mahesh Upasani, said preliminary reports pointed to a technical fault causing the crash.

There were no casualties on the ground or damage to property, the spokesman said.

Witnesses said the pilot was killed when he ejected from the aircraft but his parachute did not open, the Press Trust of India news agency said.

The crash was the third involving an air force jet this month.



PHOTO: AFP
US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly (L) sits beside the North Korea's ambassador to China Choe Kim-Su (C) and Deputy Foreign Minister Kim Kye-gwan (R), the North Korean chief negotiator to the six-way talks, at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing yesterday. China said it had not given up hope that the second round of six-nation talks on the North Korean nuclear crisis would lead to a document as a concrete sign that progress had been made.

China, Myanmar, N Korea target of US ire over HR

Asian nations score high for rights abuses

AFP, Washington

Asian nations featured high in the United States annual report on worldwide human rights abuses, with the military regime in Myanmar and communist dictatorships of China and North Korea condemned.

Afghanistan, however, was heaped with praise for its improving rights situation more than two years after the US-led removal of the repressive Taliban regime.

In the US State Department's annual score-card China drew fire for reversing earlier improvements in its record, with the report citing "backsliding on key human rights issues".

It cited arrests of democracy activists and online dissidents, and the targeting of labour protesters, defence lawyers, journalists, house church members and "others seek-

ing to take advantage of the space created by reforms".

It said a "harsh repression" of the Falungong religious group continued, that China's record in Tibet remained "poor," and that the government had used the war on terror to justify its ongoing crackdown against Muslim Uighurs.

North Korea was singled out for some of the harshest criticism, being labelled "one of the most inhuman regimes in the world".

"Rigid controls over information, which limit the extent of our report, reflect the totalitarian repression of North Korean society," it said.

"Basic freedoms are unheard of, and the regime committed widespread abuses of human rights."

The Stalinist state was guilty of "among other abuses -- killings, persecution of forcibly repatriated

North Koreans, and harsh conditions in the extensive prison camp system including torture, forced abortions and infanticide."

Myanmar's "highly authoritarian regime" had overseen "numerous, serious human rights abuses", the report said.

In particular it criticised the attack on and detention of pro-democracy campaigners including opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi by government-paid thugs on May 30.

"The government has not investigated or admitted any role in the attack," the report said.

It added that security forces were guilty of extrajudicial killings, rape, using forced labour and conscripting child soldiers and that 70 pro-democracy activists were killed and 270 democracy supporters

arrested.

Other countries whose rights records remained poor, according to the report, included Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Indonesia, Tonga, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and The Maldives.

Serious abuses were listed in countries that had otherwise good records, including India, where extrajudicial killings were common, and Sri Lanka, where custodial rape and assault were a concern.

Pakistan, an ally in the war on terror was not spared criticism. Security forces were praised for aiding the hunt for terror chief Osama bin Laden, but "used excessive force, at times resulting in death, and committed or failed to prevent extrajudicial killings of suspected militants and civilians".

5 Afghan aid workers killed in ambush

Rumsfeld in Kandahar to visit US troops

AFP, Kabul

Five Afghans working for a non-governmental organisation have been killed after their vehicle was ambushed northeast of Kabul, Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Jalali said yesterday.

Their vehicle was ambushed and five people died on the spot, and one other person was still missing, he said.

Two people had also been injured in the incident which happened on Wednesday afternoon in Ozbin village of Tagab district of Kapisa province, he said.

The victims were working for the Sanayee Development Foundation, an Afghan non-government organisation.

The group was assisting the Ministry of Rural Development in implementing a National Solidarity Programme partially funded by the World Bank which aims to assist Afghan communities manage their own reconstruction and development projects.

A spokesman for the World Bank confirmed that four or five people had been killed in the incident as they travelled towards Tagab district of Kapisa province. He said there were no firm figures on the number killed as yet because an investigating team had not yet returned to Kabul.

The deaths come less than

two weeks after four Afghan men working for a demining organisation were shot dead when their vehicles were ambushed in southwestern Farah province, bordering Iran.

The four employees of the Organisation for Mine Clearance and Afghan Rehabilitation killed on February 14 were the first aid workers to be killed in Afghanistan this year.

Meanwhile, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld arrived in this former Taliban stronghold Thursday to visit US troops fighting rebels in the southern region bordering Pakistan.

Lieutenant General David Barno, the commander of the 10,000 strong US force in Afghanistan, greeted Rumsfeld travelling on a C-135 plane.

Later in the day Rumsfeld will meet Afghan President Hamid Karzai in Kabul.

Rumsfeld flew into Kandahar after visiting the Central Asian states of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan for talks on regional security problems and the situation in Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan, a former Soviet republic, in 2001 allowed US forces to set up camp at a vast military base in the south of the country close to the border with Afghanistan.

The US defence secretary has earlier visited Kuwait and Iraq.

US slams UN rights body for failures

AFP, Washington

The United States on Wednesday accused the UN Commission of Human Rights (UNCHR) of delinquency in its mission, citing commission members China, Cuba, Libya, Sudan, Syria and Zimbabwe as having failed "to protect their own citizens' rights."

The US State Department's annual human rights report released Wednesday called for reinforcement of the presence of democratic countries on the UNCHR.

"With Libya in the Chair and such countries as Zimbabwe, Cuba, Sudan, China and Syria, which fail to protect their own citizens' rights, as members, the 2003 session of the UNCHR fell short in several respects," said the report.

"Resolutions on the human rights situations in Zimbabwe, Sudan and Chechnya were defeated," it said.

"The United States continued to emphasise the need to improve the functioning of the commission, primarily by supporting the membership of countries with positive human rights records."

"We began to discuss the formation of a democracy caucus with interested governments," said the report. "We envision this as a group of like-minded countries that would coordinate more closely in multilateral settings to advance goals consistent with democratic values."

Washington said, apart from the report, it may present a draft resolution to the UNHRC in Geneva next month specifically criticising China's human rights record.

Pak troops commit 'widespread' HR abuses: US

AFP, Washington

The United States on Wednesday accused Pakistan's security forces of committing widespread human rights abuses that include extrajudicial killings and the excessive use of force.

In its annual review on global human rights, the US State Department reproached the government of President Pervez Musharraf for intimidating and arresting opposition figures. It also said the credibility of Pakistan's judiciary was "low."

"In Pakistan, abuse by members of the security forces, ranging from extrajudicial killings to excessive use of force, is widespread," the State Department's 2003 review said.

"Corruption and inefficiency remained acute, although reforms initiated by the Musharraf government to reduce corruption have had some effect on officials at higher levels of government," the report noted.

The criticism fell as Pakistan's security forces continued to support the United States in its manhunt for wanted al-Qaeda terror chief Osama bin Laden.

Washington regards Pakistan as a key regional ally in its war-on-terror and the Musharraf government has said it will hand bin Laden over to Washington if he is apprehended on Pakistani soil.



PHOTO: AFP
He Changchui (L), representative of United Nations' Food and Agriculture Authority (FAO), looks on as Thai Deputy Minister of Agriculture and Cooperatives Newin Chidchomb (R) addresses a FAO/OIE Emergency Regional Meeting on Avian Influenza Control in Animals in Asia in Bangkok yesterday. Officials from some 23 Asia-Pacific countries, international experts, donor and development organisations participated in the meeting.

'Asian bird flu crisis poses unprecedented threat'

AFP, Bangkok

The bird flu outbreak, which has spread to 10 Asian nations and killed 22 people, represents an unprecedented threat, experts at a UN conference aimed at finding ways to contain the virus said yesterday.

"This situation in Asia is unprecedented in the world," said Bernard Vallat, chief of the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), the top watchdog for veterinary health.

"Never in the past have we witnessed an avian virus circulating

so quickly in such a large part of the world," he said in a statement as experts from 23 Asia Pacific nations convened for three days of talks.

Vallat said the immediate priority for affected nations was to stop the virus in its tracks by slaughtering infected poultry as well as birds that had come in contact with them.

"This is the best method to control the disease wherever possible, but many issues have to be solved: adequate compensation for farmers, the management of carcass disposal compatible with environmental risks and use of acceptable

methods of killing," he said.

World Health Organisation (WHO) representative in Thailand, Bjorn Melgaard, also said bird flu was having an unparalleled impact on the region and that it was clearly not yet under control.

"These outbreaks of H5N1 have been unprecedented in scale and geographical spread. Not only have they threatened human health globally, they have also inflicted significant damage on commercial agriculture and most painfully on individual farmers and their families," he said.

US pressing hunt for Laden

AP, Kabul

The US military said Wednesday that a "renewed sense of urgency" is firing the search for Osama bin Laden, even as it dismissed reports that the fugitive al-Qaeda leader had been located near the Afghan-Pakistan border.

The new impetus comes amid plans to provide security to the lawless regions outside the capital, Kabul, before national elections planned for June. President Hamid Karzai also suggested an unprecedented move that could promote peace, saying he would consider talks with a former Taliban leader to promote reconciliation with less extreme elements of the former regime.

KNU rebels end talks with Yangon

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's biggest rebel group the Karen National Union said Thursday it had wrapped up three days of "frank" peace talks with the ruling junta, but appeared to have made little progress.

The KNU, which has been fighting for autonomy for 53 years, met with officials from the military government in the Myanmar town of Moulmein, the headquarters for the junta's southeastern division command.

The talks, which followed a ceasefire agreement reached last month, addressed the relocation of armed forces, delineation of KNU territory and the fate of some 200,000 Karen displaced by the years of bitter fighting.

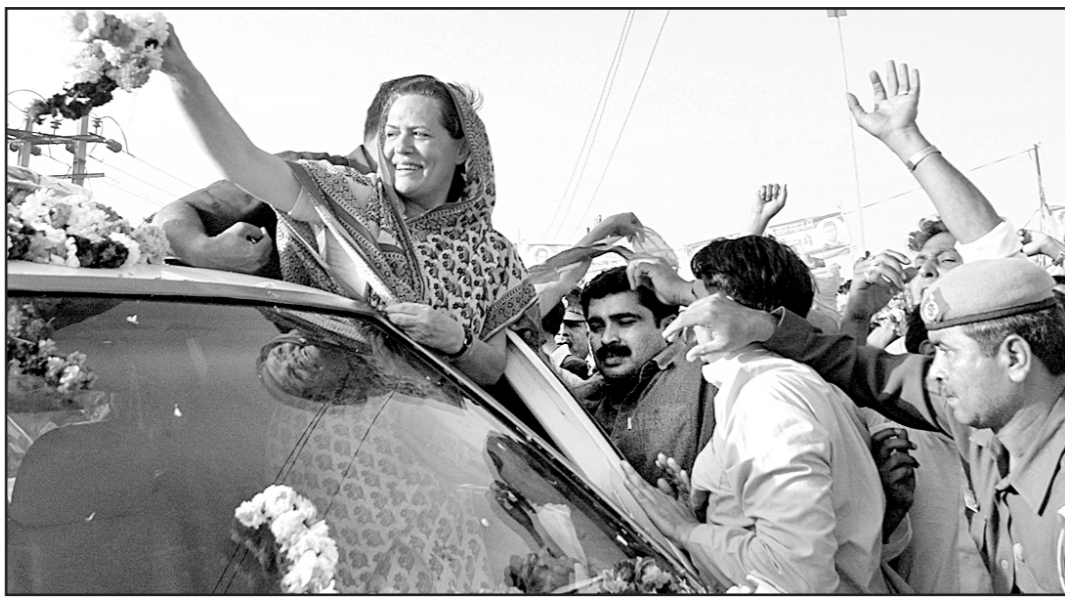


PHOTO: AFP
India's Congress Party president and opposition leader Sonia Gandhi waves to supporters yesterday during her election campaign in Sonipat, some 52 kms north of Delhi. India's politicians are preparing for the forthcoming general elections, which will be held in between late April and first week of May this year.

Israeli army raids banks

Israeli, 2 Palestinians killed in attack

AFP, Ramallah

Israeli troops Wednesday forced their way into three banks and the headquarters of an aid group in the West Bank town of Ramallah in what the army said was an operation to seize the illegal funds of militant groups, Palestinian security sources and witnesses said.

A senior Israeli security official later said in Tel Aviv that soldiers had seized several million dollars allegedly used to finance "terrorist actions."

"We seized between seven and nine million dollars in cash from 400 accounts of private individuals, families and institutions," the official,

who declined to be named, told a press conference.

He said the funds were being used to buy arms and explosives, or to pay off anti-Israeli militants or their families if they were killed.

The raids provoked fierce clashes between soldiers and stone-throwing youths, who were dispersed with rubber bullets, tear-gas and rifle bullets.

Moreover, US officials on Wednesday criticised Israel's raid on Palestinian banks in the West Bank town of Ramallah, arguing that the action risks destabilizing the Palestinian banking system.

Meanwhile, two Palestinians and an Israeli died in a gun battle when members of the Al Aqsa Martyrs brigades opened fire on Israelis at the Erez crossing point into the Gaza Strip early yesterday, Israeli military sources and Palestinians said.

Two other Israelis were injured, the Israeli sources said. The dead were the two Palestinian assailants and an Israeli who died shortly afterwards of injuries sustained during the attack.

It was not immediately known whether the Israeli casualties were soldiers or civilians.

Hundreds of pigeons die mysteriously in Assam

REUTERS, Guwahati

Hundreds of pigeons have died of a bacterial infection in an ancient temple in Assam in the past two weeks, but doctors have ruled out bird flu as the cause of their death.

Bhola Nath Sarma, spokesman of the hilltop Kamakhya temple in Assam, said around 1,500 of an estimated 5,000 pigeons had just dropped their heads and died.

"They just turn disoriented, drop their head and die. It's getting worse every day and we are afraid the disease might infect visitors," Sarma said.

Veterinary doctors who examined the birds said they were suffering from a common bacterial infection called septicaemia, which could be cured with antibiotics.

7 cops killed in landmine blast in West Bengal

AFP, Kolkata

Seven policemen and a driver were killed Wednesday and four others injured in a landmine blast triggered by Maoist militants in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal, officials said.

Chayan Mukherjee, inspector general of West Bengal police, told AFP the police had just arrived at Kokrajhar village to search for rebels when the attack occurred.

"When the vehicle reached the area, the militants triggered the landmine by remote control," he added.