

Pakistani Shia Muslims carry the body of devotees who were killed in an Ashura religious procession, during a funeral ceremony in Quetta yesterday. Some 50 people, including six policemen, died after gunmen fired and threw grenades at a procession of Muslims from the Shia minority on March 2, sparking mob violence and rioting in the southwestern city. The attackers struck on the Shia calendar's holiest day, Ashura, coinciding with multiple assaults on Shia shrines in Iraqi cities that killed 235 pilgrims.

China turns up heat on Taiwan president as election looms

China yesterday described Taiwanese President Chen Shuibian as "immoral" and warned the island's voters not to be tempted by Chen's pro-independence platform in March 20 elections.

China views the island off its southeastern coast as part of its territory even though Taiwan has been ruled separately for over 50 years. It is concerned Chen's reelection will be another step towards Taiwanese independence.

"In seeking his personal reelection, Chen has put the tangible interests of the Taiwan people at stake," National People's Congress spokesman Jiang Enzhu told journalists ahead of China's annual parliamentary meeting opening

"This is indeed very immoral.

'Yangon, Suu Kyi ready to work for democracy

REUTERS, AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Myanmar Prime Minister Khin Nyunt is committed to taking his country to democracy and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi is ready to work with him on it, UN special envoy Razali Ismail said yesterday.

"I think the prime minister is truly committed to take this process to a transition to democracy," Razali told Reuters on his return to Kuala Lumpur after a four-day visit to

The veteran Malaysian diplomat said Suu Kyi -- whom he met twice in the villa to which she is confined -was amenable to making the process

"There's no sense of recriminations. She is not asking for a pound of flesh," he said

UN envoy Razali Ismail yesterday wrapped up his twelfth visit to

Myanmar after a flurry of meetings with the junta and democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi in his push for democracy in the military-run state.

Razali spent three days shuttling between separate talks with Aung San Suu Kyi, who remains under house arrest, Prime Minister General Khin Nyunt and others in a bid to move forward the "roadmap" to democracy Yangon announced last

"His mission went well," a source close to the envoy's visit told AFP after Razali's departure from Yangon to the Malaysian capital Kuala

"It is too early to say if there has been progress, maybe we will see some results in the next few weeks,' the source said, adding that Aung San Suu Kyi, whom Razali met twice in two days, remained in high spirits.

"As usual, she was very pugna-

cious and determined," the source said of the Nobel peace laureate, enduring her third period of house arrest since 1988.

Razali was kept in a tight security cocoon during his trip, which authorities did not publicise, and reporters could not approach him as he left his Yangon hotel for the airport.

Yangon's democracy "roadm-ap' has been met with scepticism from Western governments, which tightened sanctions against Myanmar after last May's brutal crackdown on Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD).

The NLD won a landslide 1990 election victory but was never

But Razali appears to have thrown his support whole-heartedly behind the process and held a series of meetings with government officials, foreign diplomats and ethnic leaders.

French Senate votes ban on religious insignia in schools

A controversial government bill that bans the wearing of conspicuous religious insignia in state schools cleared its final hurdle with ease in the French parliament Wednesday despite loud protests inside and outside the country.

Senators of both left and right voted 276 to 20 in favour of the bill, ignoring demonstrations by angry Muslims claiming they are being discriminated against and brushing aside a recent warning from Osama bin Laden's right-hand man who accused France of "crusader enmity".

Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin told senators before the vote in the upper house that the law did not aim to discriminate against religions but to "send a powerful and quick

Mass burials for **Pak Shias**

Grieving Shia Muslims gathered in Pakistan's violence-hit southwest city Quetta yesterday for mass burials of the nearly 50 people killed in one of the country's bloodiest-ever sectarian

At least 47 people, including six policemen, died after gunmen fired and threw grenades at an emotionallycharged procession of Muslims from the Shia minorityon Tuesday, sparking mob violence and rioting.

The attackers struck on the Shia calendar's holiest day, Ashura, coincidingwithmultipleassaults on Shia shrines in Iraqicities that killed 140 pilgrims.

The burials in Quettawere delayed by a day because Shia leaders demanded authorities first release Shia youths arrested over the rioting and that they

suspend security officials for failing to protectthe Ashura procession.

"We have decided to go ahead with the mass funerals today," local Shia leader Jawa d Es art old reporters.

Quetta, a dusty city of around one million people including many Afghans, lies 100 kilometers (62 miles) from the Afghan border and 760km southwest of thecapital Islamabad.

Its streets have been deserted except for army patrols under a curfew imposed since Tuesday. Authorities said they would lift it temporarily for the funerals.

An inquiry headed by a high court judge has been set up by the provincial Baluchistangovernment.

Investigators were still trying to clarify the sequence of events and exactly how manyattackerswereinvolved.

Britain 'satisfied' with Pak nuclear probe: Straw

Britain is satisfied with Pakistan's cooperation ininvestigatingnuclearproliferationbyitschief nuclear scientist, Foreign Secretary Jack Straw

"What'simportantisthatweleamalesson from what has happened and take action to ensurethatthereisn'tsuchsimilarproliferation infuture."Strawtoldapressconferenceafteran hour-long meeting with President Pervez

"But I am satisfied about the progress which the Pakistani authorities are making and the cooperation which they are providing totheInternationalAtomicEnergyAgency."

Straw discussed the proliferation scandal with Musharra fatthestart of a three-day visit to the Pakistani capital, one month after the founderofits nuclear program Abdul Qadeer Khan publicly confessed to selling nuclear

Mushanaf's decision to pardon Khan instead of prosecuting him, and to forbid an inquiry by international experts, has drawn criticism, amid yet-to-be proven allegations that Pakistan's army had a role in the sale of nucleartechnology

StrawsaidthetreatmentofA.Q.Khanwas

"What happens to those involved is a matterforthe Pakistaniauthorities and not for Straw.onhisfifthvisittoPakistanintwoand

ahalfyears, also discussed the war on terrorism, peace moves with India, Afghan reconstruction and Pakistan's bid to re-enter the Commonwealth after a suspension of more

He described his talks with Mushamaf as

Straw, who arrived in the Pakistani capital late Wednesday for a three-day official visit, spent one hour with Musharraf at army headquarters in Rawalpindi, next to

Earlier he met Foreign Minister Kurshid Mahmud Kasuri and will later meet Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali and Interior MinisterFaisalSalehHayat,officialssaid.

AseniorPakistaniofficialsaidearlierthathe would discuss Islamabad's four-month probe intothesaleofnuclearequipmentanddesigns by Pakistani scientists to Iran, Libya and North

The probe, launched late November following revelations by Iran to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAFA), resulted in a public confession of proliferation bythearchitectofPakistan's nuclear program AbdulOadeerKhan.



Pakistani Prime Minister Zafarullah Jamali (R) shakes hands with British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw prior to a meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Straw is on a three-day visit to Pakistan.

Pro-Maoist group calls strike in Nepal

A general strike called by union backers of Nepal's Maoist rebels emptied the streets of the Himalayan kingdom's ancient capital and shut businesses, shops and schools yesterday

The dawn-to-dusk strike called by a pro-Maoist trade union was the latest in a series of shutdowns to be sought by the rebels or their supporters.

It followed a bloody Maoist guerrilla raid Wednesday on a telecommunications tower and a bank in east Nepal in which at least 41 people were killed in fierce fighting between security forces and the rebels.

The clash was one of deadliest since peace talks between the government and the militants collapsed last August. Police said there were no reports of

violence Thursday. Almost all shops were shuttered and schools, factories and businesses were closed in the capital.



Former Chief Minister of Karnataka and Dalit Leader S. Bangarappa (L) addresses the media after joining the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as BJP president Venkaiah Naidu (R) gestures at party headquarters in New Delhi yesterday.

Corruption in NDA govt to be an election plank, says Sonia

Alleging that there was rampant corruption in the NDA government, Congress president Sonia Gandhi said yesterday herpartywould make this one of its main pollplanksintheLokSabhaelections.

She made the charge while talking to reporters at the start of the second day of her roadshow in Himachal Pradesh which today took her to parts of Kangra, Mandiand Hamirpurdistricts. Sonia made it clear that while

Congress was not averse to an alliance with BSP or Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh, it was prepared to go it alone if noalliancecouldbestruck. Referring to the Bharat Uday Yatra of

Deputy Prime Minister LK Advani she said "thereisnothingnewinhisyatraand it only proved that the BJP is afraid of a

UK now relies more on

She said that her roadshow had

evoked overwhelming response and she was accorded a very warm welcome at all On her way to Hamirpur and Una

districts later, she stopped at Sundernagar, Bhambla and Jahu to interact with the people. Sonia Gandhi was accompanied on

her tour by Chief Minister VB Singh, state Congress president Vidva Stokes and otherseniorCongressleaders.

Meanwhile, Congress president Sonia Gandhi said yesterday her party is not averse to having an alliance with BSP or Samaiwadi party in Uttar Pradesh in the Lok Sabha polls but prepared to go aloneifnoalliancecan bestruck.

Referring to the Bharat Uday yatra of deputy prime minister LK Advani she said "there is nothing new in his yatra, it only proved that the BJP is afraid of a

China frees top democracy campaigner

Leading dissident Wang Youcai has been released from a Chinese jail and was Thursday on a plane to the United States following behind-the-scenes pressure from Washington, a US-based rights group told

"Mr. Wang said goodbye to his family, and, accompanied by an official of the US government, departed Shanghai for medical treatment in the United States today," said John Kamm, director of the Dui Hua Foundation.

Wang, 37, was jailed in 1998 for 12 years as a founding member of the fledgling China Democracy Party.

Ten prisoners escape from Gujarat jail

PTI, Ahmedabad

Ten prisoners have fled from a sub-jail in Anand district of Gujarat, a police official said here vesterday. The prisoners, all convicts of theft and

robbery, approached the security guard creating a scene as to one of them is ill late on Wednesday night, Anand District Superin-tendent of Police BS Jebalia said. When the guard opened the door, the

prisoners snatched his rifle and injured him by hitting him on the head before escaping, Jebalia said. A manhunt has been launched and

a state-wide alert has been sounded to nab the accused, he added,

Two killed as helicopter crashes near **UK** airport

AFP, London

Two people were killed when a civilian helicopter crashed near an airport in southernEnglandWednesday,policesaid.

The helicopter, believed to have been flying from London, came down in a field about one mile (1.6 kilometres) from Bournemouth International Airport near thesoutherncoastat7:42pm(1942GMT).

Police said two bodies were recovered from the wreckage as officers scoured the

Pakistan denies offering Nigeria nuclear power

Pakistan yesterday rejected Nigerian claims that its armed forces chief offered this week to help the African state acquire nuclear

"We are denying it. This is baseless. He said nothing of this kind," military spokesman Major General Shaukat Sultan told Nigeria's defence ministry has accused

the chairman of Pakistan's joint chiefs of staff General Muhammad Aziz Khan of offering to "strengthen (Nigeria's) military capabilityandacquirenuclearpower." In a statement issued in Lagos, it said

Khan made the offer during talks Wednesday with Nigeria's Defence MinisterRabiuMusaKwankwasoinAbuja. Pakistan is still reeling from revelations

that its top nuclear scientist sold nuclear equipment and designs to Iran, Libya and NorthKorea.

Abdul Oadeer Khan, the metallurgist

program, confessed on television last monthtoproliferatingnuclearsecretsaftera two-month probe prompted by information from the International Atomic Energy Agency, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf has denied allegations that former army chiefs and governments

Buthehasrefusedtoallowaninguiryby international investigators, who want to probe further to determine whether the nuclear know-how was sold to other

authorised the nuclear sales.

Musharraf pardoned Khan after he made a televised confession, in which the

scientistexonerated the military of anyrole. However in a written confession

submitted five days before his televised admission. Khan had accused two former armychiefsof"indirectlypressuring"himto proliferate, a military official told AFP in

Lankan candidates pull out of election amid death threats

Tamil Tiger death threats forced ruling party candidates in eastern Sri Lanka to withdraw, police said Wednesday amid calls for foreign monitoring of the campaign for next month's parliamentary polls.

Two candidates from Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe's party pulled out after a fellow candidate was gunned down by suspected Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels in the district ofBatticaloaonMonday,policesaid.

Wickremesinghe's party said it was seekingmore protection for candidates.

It blamed the security breaches on President Chandrika Kumara-tunga, who took over the defence and interior ministry portfolios from the prime minister'scontrollastNovember.

Independent monitors sought foreign help to reduce violence and voterigging and said they were particularly concerned about the embattled northern and eastern regions where the Tigers

Four private election monitor organisations here jointly expressed concern over the murder of two political activists in the Batticaloa Monday and said they "We have the greatest concern about

the condition of elections in the north

and the east," spokesman Paikiasothy

Saravanamuttu said, adding that they

wanted more international observers deployed in those areas. However, he said a heightened level of violence in the troubled regions could make it difficult to persuade foreigners to

travel there to monitor the April 2 parliamentaryelection. Thevote is not being held in vast areas of the island's north-east where Tamil Tiger rebels are in control, but civilians

neighbouring government-held villages and cast their ballots. Tiger rebels are not contesting the polls, but have openly supported the moderate Tamil National Alliance,

from those areas are entitled to travel to

which is fielding Tiger proxies who could emergeaspotentialkingmakers.

Top judge attacks changes to Britain's asylum law

Britain'stopjudgeWednesdaylauncheda strong attack on key reforms by Prime Minister Tony Blair's government, warning that plans to limit asylum seekers' rightsofappealwereagainsttheruleoflaw.

Lord Chief Justice Harry Woolf said that changes which would stop people going to the higher courts to challenge a decision to deny them asylum would be "fundamentally in conflict with the rule of

The comments were unusually outspoken in a country where the judiciary usually steers clear of public pronouncements on political controversies. Woolf, the most senior judge in

England and Wales, insisted that plans to bar the courts from reviewing asylum cases would be a "blot on the reputation of thegovernment". InaspeechatCambridgeUniversityin

central England, he said: "Immigration and asylumin volve basic human rights. "What areas of government decision

Britain is the European destination of choice for asylum seekers and Blair's

courtsifyoucannotaccessthem?"

government has been under pressure to deal with the issue, which is a political hot Parts of Britain's tabloid press have waged a long campaign against so-called

makingwouldbenexttoberemovedfrom

thescrutiny of the courts? What is the use of

many are unfairly milking welfare benefit The government announced last week that the number of immigrants claiming political asylum in Britain droppedbymorethan40percentlastyear,

crediting tougher border controls and

otherrestrictionsforthedecline.

foreign "asylum cheats", claiming that

Responding to Woolf's claims, a spokesman for the Department for Constitutional Affairs, which is in effect Britain's justice ministry, said that changes to the asylum appeals system should reducethetimeittooktodecidecases.

foreign medics THE STRAITS TIMES/ ANN, London

Britain's growing dependence on foreign workers to keep its ailing National Health Service (NHS) afloat is illustrated by new figures showing that a record 44,443 health workers were signed on last year from outside the European Union (EU).

This was a staggering 27-fold increase on the number of overseas medics issued with work permits just a decade ago, and the figure is expected to continue to rise steeply.

Amid fears that immigrants from 10 new EU nations will soon be plundering jobs in Britain, organisations representing doctors, nurses and patients - as well as the government all told The Straits Times that without foreign health-care workers, the NHS would be in chaos.

Home Office figures just released show that last year, Britain 'imported' 27,171 nurses, 9,290 hospital consultantsand2,947 doctors.

Work permits were also granted to

pists, 384 radiogr-aphers, 201 dental surgeons, 189 psychiatrists and 208 social workers from overseas nations outsidetheEU. Most of the nurses came from the

Philippines - 12,000 of them, while

over 9,000 were from India and 5,800

409 pharmacists, 389 physiothera-

from South Africa A total of 1,068 nurses came to Britain from China last year, but that figure could quadruple during the next 12 months as dozens of hospitals send recruiting teams to Beijing, Shanghai and other big cities and

classes to Chinese nursing recruits who want or need language lessons. Virtually every hospital in Britain is short of nurses, doctors, therapists

Many hospitals will offer English

and other medics. British O-level, A-level and university students are reluctant to enter the medical profession because of the comparative low pay and long work-

ing hours in the NHS, with many hospitals situated in crime-ridden, run-down areas of the country. The British Medical Assoc-iation

doctors are playing a vital role in our NHS. Without them, many hospitals would have to close 'But we still need 10,000 more general practitioners and 10,000 more

told The Straits Times: 'Overseas

Dr Shiv Pande of the British International Doctors' Assoc-iation said: 'Britain is dependent on foreign health-care professionals and that situation will continue for many years. 'Without them, some hospitals

Health Minister John Reid this week launched a £4-million (S\$12.6million) recruitment drive for doctor and nurse trainees, saying: 'We want more British-born staff, but we realise that for many years we will have to rely on huge numbers of overseas

would be on their deathbeds.'