

Cong releases 'chargesheet' against NDA govt

PTI, New Delhi

In a major move to take the sheen off the BJP-led coalition's "India Shining" campaign, the Congress yesterday released a stinging "chargesheet" against the Vajpayee Government alleging that its rule saw the country losing Rs 50,000 crore in a number of scams and hundreds of farmers committing suicide.

Titled "Vajpayee Government: A saga of sins, scams and shame", the 55-page chargesheet accused the NDA Government of "miserable failure" on all fronts including national security, employment and agriculture and questioned the 'feel good' factor being projected by the ruling coalition.

Musharraf declared 'constitutionally' elected Pak president

ANI, Islamabad

Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf has finally received constitutional sanction for holding on to the post till 2007.

In a ruling that was expected, the Speaker of the National Assembly, Chaudhry Amir Hussain, ruled on Wednesday that Musharraf was the country's constitutionally elected president.

The ruling was announced in spite of the opposition's non-acceptance of this position.

"Neither a general can speak in the august house nor the house can debate an address of the general," Khurshid Shah, a leader of the PPP, was quoted by The News, as saying.

The speaker, however, reminded the opposition that Musharraf was not the first General who had become the president of Pakistan, and added that many politicians had joined the cabinets of the generals in the past.

US strikes compromise with Europeans on Iran's nuke

AP, Washington

The United States has struck a compromise with European nations that defers a showdown with Iran at the United Nations on its nuclear programmes yet deplores its failure to come clean with the UN International Atomic Energy Agency.

A draft resolution, in circulation at a high-level conference of the UN agency in Vienna, Austria, catalogues Iran's acquisition of centrifuge technology in what the US intelligence community is convinced is pursuit of nuclear weapons, an American official told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

The draft makes the case against Iran in a way that officials believe could persuade other countries to choke off technology supplies to Iran, said the official on condition of anonymity.

Among the allegations in the proposed resolution is that Iran has failed to explain its uranium enrichment program and its plutonium experiments, the official said. Also, the official said, the draft registers "utmost concern that Iran has not provided a full picture of its past and present nuclear programs."

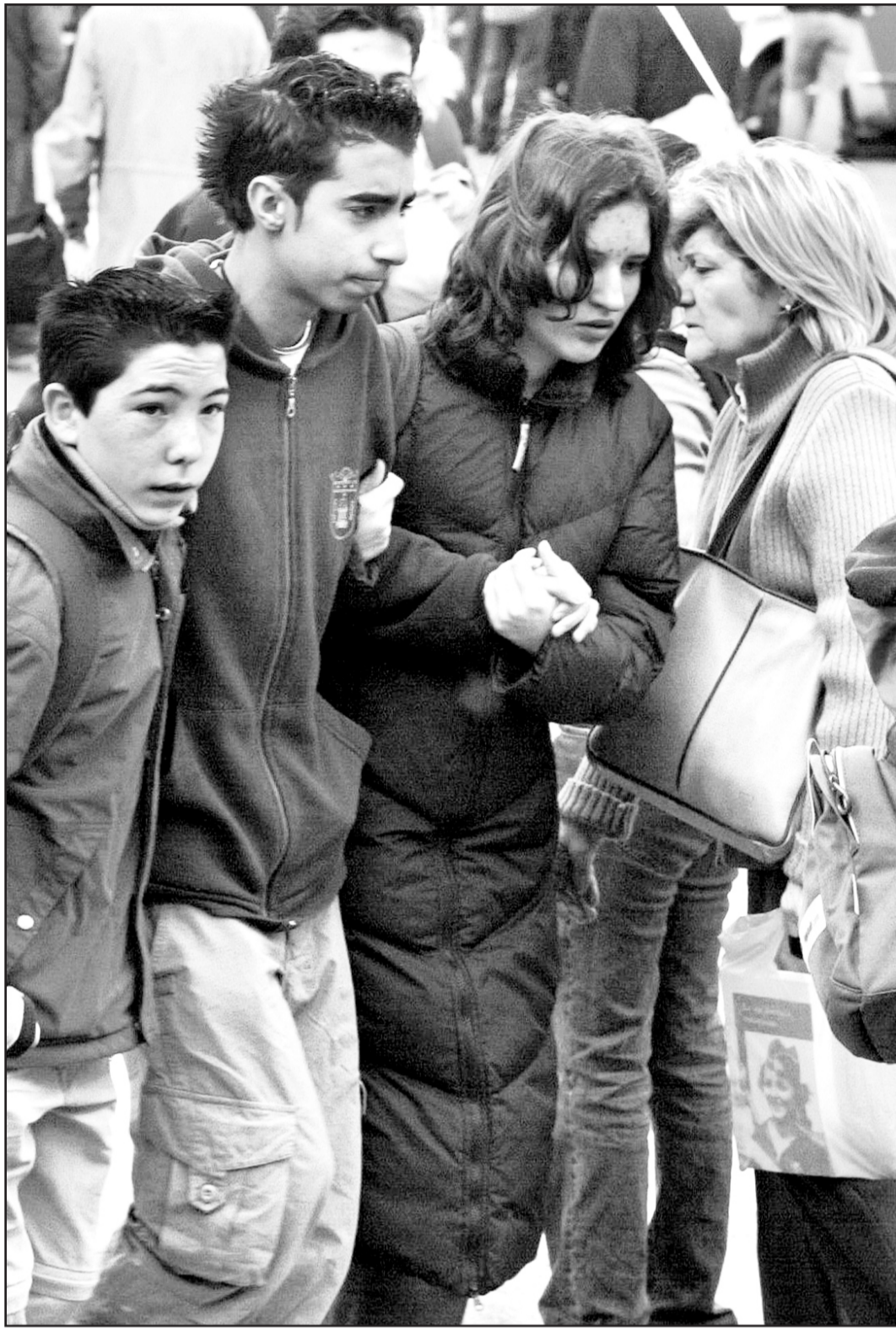
New Haiti PM arrives as US Marines kill 2

REUTERS, Port-au-Prince

Haiti's new interim prime minister flew into his revolt-torn country on Wednesday and promised to improve security as US Marines said they killed two more Haitian gunmen.

The latest shootings, which took place Tuesday night near the prime minister's office, underscore growing attacks against US troops heading an international mission to quell chaos and looting after a rebellion and international pressure drove President Jean-Bertrand Aristide into exile on Feb. 29.

"Marines were conducting a security patrol outside the Prime Minister's residence. ... They walked into this one neighborhood ... and they were taken under fire by gunmen from two separate rooftops, more or less an ambush. The Marines returned fire immediately," said Col. Mark Gurganus, commander of the US Marines in Haiti.



Young people help each other at the Atocha railway station in Madrid yesterday after more than 173 people were killed and hundreds injured in rush hour blasts which ripped through four Madrid trains almost simultaneously. In a deliberate attack staged only 72 hours ahead of Spanish general elections, two of the blasts went off in separate trains in Atocha railway station packed with commuters and two other explosions took place in the El Pozo and Santa Eugenia stations, in suburbs outside Madrid.

PHOTO: AFP

World condemns Madrid blasts

AFP, Paris

Foreign governments and institutions joined in strong condemnation of the explosions on the Madrid rail system, which killed more than 173 people yesterday morning in what the European Parliament described as "the worst act of terror in memory in any European state."

Members of the parliament in Strasbourg observed a minute's silence as a mark of respect for victims of what the chamber's Irish president Pat Cox said was "a declaration of war on democracy."

The president of the European Commission in Brussels Romano Prodi described the explosions as a "bloody, ferocious and senseless attack."

"There is no justification whatsoever behind which the authors of this bestial crime can hide," he said, condemning "this criminal act against defenceless people, which was totally abhorrent and senseless."

From the Vatican, Pope John Paul II sent a message of condolence to the Catholic church in Spain, describing the explosions as "detestable attacks."

"These unjustifiable attacks are an offense to God," the Pope said. President Jacques Chirac of France sent a message of support and condolences to Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar.

"It is with dismay that I learned of the terrible attacks which have just hit the Madrid rail network and cast Spain into mourning," he said.

"These irresponsible acts, which can have no justification, are from every standpoint to be condemned. In these atrocious circumstances I must send in my own name and that of the French people my most sincere condolences," Chirac said.

France said it has beefed up police deployments along the two countries' shared border which cuts through the historic Basque region. The Basque group ETA is

prime suspect in the Madrid attacks, which took place three days ahead of general elections in Spain.

Ireland, which holds the rotating EU presidency, said there could be "no excuse, no justification" for the explosions.

"I condemn in the strongest terms those responsible for this morning's bomb attacks in Madrid. Horror and revulsion are the words that come to mind," said Foreign Minister Brian Cowen.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair said that the attack "underlines the threat that we all continue to face from terrorism in many countries, and why we all must work together internationally to safeguard our peoples against such attacks and defeat terrorism."

"These abominable terror acts that claimed so many lives fill us with deep sadness and outrage," said German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer in a message to his Spanish counterpart Ana Palacio.

ETA: A deadly rebel group

AFP, Madrid

The attacks on four trains in Madrid yesterday that killed at least 173 people and wounded another 350 were by far the most murderous yet blamed on the Basque separatist group ETA in its more than three-decade fight for an independent homeland in Spain's northeast.

The group, which the European Union has put on its list of terrorist organisations, has chalked up a long list of bloody incidents, though the deadliest dates back to June 1987 when an attack in the parking lots of a Barcelona supermarket claimed 21 lives and wounded 45 people.

The following is a rundown of the worst attacks in the ETA's armed struggle against central power in Madrid:

June 7, 1968: A 25-year-old paramilitary policeman, Jose Pardines, is shot dead in the Basque city of Villabona in what the Spanish interior ministry has recorded as the

first deadly attack by the ETA.

December 20, 1973: A spectacular attack kills Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco, then head of government and expected successor to the dictator Francisco Franco. A bomb hidden under his car propels the vehicle several dozen meters (yards) into the air when it explodes as he heads to mass in central Madrid.

September 13, 1974: Twelve civilians are killed when a bomb explodes in a cafeteria in Madrid.

July 14, 1986: Twelve paramilitary police are killed when a booby-trapped car explodes in Madrid.

June 19, 1987: Twenty-one people die and 45 are wounded when a booby-trapped car blows up in the parking lot of the Hipercor shopping centre in the northeastern city of Barcelona.

December 11, 1987: Eleven people are killed when a booby-trapped car goes off near the barracks of Spain's paramilitary police

in Saragossa in east-central Spain.

July 12, 1997: A municipal councillor, 29-year-old Miguel Angel Blanco, is killed 48 hours after his kidnapping in an attack that reviles Spain and triggers a series of huge, unprecedented public demonstrations against the ETA across the country. The separatist organization also mounted two failed attacks in Madrid in 1995 against Jose Maria Aznar, shortly before he took over as conservative prime minister the following year, and against King Juan Carlos in Palma de Mallorca in the Balearic islands.

On December 3, 1999, ETA broke a truce in its armed struggle that had been observed since September 18, 1998.

In February this year despite a partial truce, the ETA, whom Spanish authorities have blamed for more than 800 killings in 35 years, said that "armed struggle" remains an indispensable part of its campaign for self-determination.

Stand-off ends at girls' school 13 die in Kashmir violence

AFP, Srinagar

Thirteen people were killed in the latest violence in Kashmir, four of them when two Islamic rebels holed up inside a girls' school traded fire with Indian troops after attacking an army camp, officials said yesterday.

The rebel pair allowed all 173 students and ten teachers to leave the government-run school in central Pulwama district ahead of a day-long duel with troops in which both militants were killed, police and the army said.

"The two were killed when they came out of the school and tried to enter another building," a local police officer said.

A woman who was in the vicinity was shot dead in the crossfire, he said. An army spokesman said the two rebels had barricaded themselves in the high school after shooting two soldiers but had failed to penetrate the nearby Core Battle School, which trains troops to fight in the insurgency that has

stretched for 15 years in Kashmir.

One of the soldiers who had been shot died at an army hospital, where the other remained in critical condition, the spokesman, Colonel Mukhtair Singh, said.

"The firing has stopped but security forces are still searching the area around the school in case any other militants are present," Singh said.

Jaish-e-Mohammad, a rebel outfit formed in Pakistan but banned there in a 2002 crackdown on extremism, claimed responsibility for the attack in a telephone call to Kashmir media.

Ten other people died in separatist violence elsewhere in Indian Kashmir.

Suspected rebels shot dead an activist of the state's ruling People's Democratic Party in Pulwama district, while two army soldiers and two rebels died in a gunfight in northern Barmulla district, police said.

Three other soldiers were

injured in the gunbattle.

A woman who was injured during a grenade blast late Tuesday died in hospital, taking the death toll from the blast to six.

A civilian died in the crossfire between rebels and troops near southern Tral town, police said.

Two more militants were killed elsewhere in Kashmir, police said, without providing details.

The violence follows a rebel raid Tuesday evening in the government media centre in the Kashmir summer capital Srinagar.

The three-storey media building's top floor toppled to the ground as huge flames shot up in the middle of the city. Two rebels were killed and six troops injured in the attack.

Separatist violence had ebbed since India and Pakistan, which both claim the scenic Himalayan province, entered a truce on their Kashmir borders in November and relaunched bilateral talks last month.

'Mercenaries' to stand trial in countries of arrest: S Africa

AFP, Pretoria

South Africans arrested as suspected mercenaries in Zimbabwe and Equatorial Guinea will have to stand trial and serve any prison sentences in those countries, a foreign ministry spokesman said yesterday.

South Africans are being detained in both countries on suspicion of being involved in a plot to topple Equatorial Guinean President Teodoro Obiang Nguema.

"We have no prisoner transfer agreement with any country," said spokesman Ronnie Mamoepa.

"As all South Africans arrested in foreign countries, they would have to face the laws of those countries should it turn out that they were mercenaries," he told AFP.

"We do however offer consular services. But bringing them back would be out of the question."

South Africa passed a law in 1998, which specifically forbids any mercenary activity and carries heavy penalties.

Zimbabwe detained a Boeing 727-100 with 64 suspected mercenaries aboard plus three men who came to meet them at Harare International Airport on Sunday after it arrived from South Africa.

Pak madrassas breeding grounds of terrors: Powell

PTI, Washington

Pulling no punches, US Secretary of State Colin Powell has denounced madrassas or schools imparting religious education in Pakistan and several other countries as breeding grounds for "fundamentalists and terrorists."

He said the US had held several discussions on the issue with the countries concerned and was in the process of introducing education programmes which would shift the focus of these madrassas to providing useful education.

"... We have talked to those countries that were the principal sources of funding for the madrassas such as Saudi Arabia and others and their support for these madrassa programmes that do nothing but prepare youngsters to be fundamentalists and to be terrorists, and are not preparing them with an education that would be useful," Powell said.



South Korea's parliamentary Speaker Park Kwan-Yong (2nd R) speaks with pro-government Uri Party lawmakers who are blocking him from taking his seat at the National Assembly in Seoul yesterday. Pro-government lawmakers continued their sit-in protest at the National Assembly as South Korean opposition parties pursued their bid to oust President Roh Moo-Hyun through impeachment to revitalise their flagging fortunes in April's parliamentary elections.

PHOTO: AFP

5 more Palestinian militants slain Tens of thousands vow revenge in Jenin

AFP, Jenin

Tens of thousands of furious Palestinians vowed to exact their revenge yesterday on Israel as the West Bank town of Jenin ground to a halt for the funerals of five militants shot dead by Israeli troops.

Mourners chanted "Israel will pay the price" and "our revenge will be in Tel Aviv and Haifa" as the bodies of the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades fighters were carried through the streets.

In the local morgue, a tearful Bilal Jaitawi watched his cousin Mohammed Khairallah being wrapped in the Palestinian flag and the emblems of the armed offshoot of the mainstream Fatah party.

"I feel sorrow but also pride and joy as my cousin was a shahid (martyr). All Palestinians must follow the path of the shahids," he told AFP.

Dozens of gunmen fired off volleys as they accompanied the cortege among a crowd of more than 20,000.

The governor of Jenin, Ramadan al-Batta, said that any reprisal "will be the responsibility of the Israeli army and government. This is the biggest funeral I have ever seen, the whole city feels sorrow, pain and much anger."

The bodies were taken to the family homes and were later to be buried in the town cemetery after a funeral ceremony at Jenin's old mosque.

The five militants were shot dead Wednesday during a raid by an undercover unit of the Israeli army.

Meanwhile, Israeli deputy prime minister Ehud Olmert held talks with British Prime Minister Tony Blair in London late Wednesday in what was the third visit to the British capital by a senior Israeli official within a month.

According to a report on army radio, Olmert asked Blair to work to get broad international support for Israel's plan to "disengage" from the Palestinians which was proposed in December by Israeli

Spanish parties suspend campaign

AFP, Madrid

Spain's political parties said yesterday they were suspending campaigning for Sunday's general election following a series of bomb blasts at railway stations in Madrid that killed more than 131 people.

Mariano Rajoy, leader of the ruling Popular Party (PP), announced that the party had halted its campaign for Sunday's election following the attacks.

Other parties swiftly followed suit after the attacks on four trains, which were immediately blamed on armed Basque separatist group ETA.

"The electoral campaign has stopped," said Rajoy, who told Onda Cero radio he condemned "this massive assassination which has plunged democracy into mourning."

"The criminal terrorists ... have sown suffering and death."

"But they will not bring us to our knees," he vowed.

"This was a massive, indiscriminate attack on people going to work."

"ETA is a criminal organisation with no respect for life. It has thrown Spanish democracy into mourning."

"All of Spain is suffering. This is a moment to put aside differences and show unity with the victims and their families," said Rajoy in explaining the decision to halt the electoral campaign three days before he hopes to succeed PP colleague Jose Maria Aznar as prime minister.

13 bombs used in Madrid train attacks

AFP, Madrid

A total of 13 bombs were planted around Madrid and 10 exploded on Thursday, killing 173 people and injuring more than 600, Interior Minister Angel Acebes said.

"Three went off at Atocha station" in central Madrid, "four near to" the same station, as well as "one at Santa Eugenia and two at Pozo Stabes," in nearby suburbs, said Acebes.

He added three further bombs had been located by Spanish authorities and detonated in controlled explosions.



US marines guard a US military convoy in the late Wednesday afternoon in Port-au-Prince on the same spot where unidentified attackers shot at Marines stationed at the Haitian Prime Minister's office the night before. Troops from the US, France and Chile have poured into Haiti in an effort to stabilise the country after former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide fled.

PHOTO: AFP