

Azerbaijani plane crashes in China: 7 dead

AFP, Beijing

An Azerbaijani cargo plane crashed in China's northwestern Xinjiang region yesterday, killing its seven crew and narrowly missing houses after running into trouble soon after take-off.

The Il-76 plane, a four-engined heavy transport aircraft, dropped from the sky two minutes after taking off from Urumqi airport at 10:50 am (0250 GMT), sparking ear-shattering explosions and a pall of thick black smoke, Xinhua news agency said.

Cargo and debris from the crash was scattered over a two kilometre (more than a mile) wide area, which was sealed off as crowds of onlookers gathered, said witnesses, who believed the pilot was attempting an emergency landing.

"The plane touched down in a cotton field but kept sliding, with its fuselage resting on one side and its left wing poking into the earth," said Ma Yuelian, a taxi driver who saw the crash.

Myanmar junta rapped over constitutional talks

NLD fears fresh crackdown as phone lines snapped

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's junta was hit yesterday with international criticism for holding constitutional talks without Aung San Suu Kyi's pro-democracy opposition, which said it feared a new crackdown.

The National League for Democracy (NLD) said the phone lines to its Yangon headquarters, only recently reopened after a year's closure, were cut on Monday as the convention began, attended by delegates mostly handpicked by the regime.

"This is an indication that we are in for some hard times," NLD spokesman U Lwin said late Monday, adding that it was now up to United Nations chief Kofi Annan to push for concessions from the military government.

"This duty is Kofi Annan's duty," he told reporters.

The UN chief said the junta

risked its credibility by holding the talks despite the NLD's boycott, called when the regime refused to release Aung San Suu Kyi or relax the repressive rules governing the forum.

"The secretary general reiterates that, for the national convention to be credible, it must be all-inclusive and that all the delegates must be able to express their views without sanction," his spokesman said Monday.

The release of Suu Kyi and her deputy Tin Oo, as well as the lifting of restrictions on the NLD, was "essential if the international community is to recognise the national convention" as a legitimate step to democracy.

"The secretary general and his special envoy are dismayed that, despite receiving assurances from the government, (it) did not take these necessary steps," the spokesman said.

The talks are the first stage of a seven-point "roadmap to democracy" unveiled last year, which the government claims will conclude with free elections in a country ruled by the military for four decades.

Delegates have been tasked with setting out principles that would form the basis of a new constitution for Myanmar, to replace one abolished in 1988 when the regime took power as the State Law and Order Restoration Council.

Criticism also came from the European Union, whose Yangon-based diplomats stayed away from the convention's grand opening Monday in protest.

The EU "expressed its concern and deep disappointment that the Burmese authorities, despite previous assurances, have not released Aung San Suu Kyi and have not allowed the National League for Democracy to reopen their offices," it said.

43 Indonesian councillors convicted of taking graft

THE JAKARTA POST/ ANN, Padang

In an unprecedented measure in the Indonesia's recent history, a court here has virtually destroyed the legitimacy of a provincial legislative council.

A court here sentenced West Sumatra Legislative Council Speaker Arwan Kasri, his two deputies and 40 other councillors on Monday to up to two years and three months in prison for embezzling Rp 6.4 billion (US\$711,111) of the province's 2002 budget.

All the 43 convicts of the 55-strong council remain free however, as they have appealed. It was the first verdict handed down for a collective graft scam involving legislative members in the country.

Arwan and his two deputies Masfar Rasyid and Titi Nazif Lubuk were found guilty by the Padang District Court of embezzling the funds along with 40 other councillors.



An Israeli army bulldozer approaches a building in Rafah during an incursion into the southern Gaza Strip town yesterday. Palestinian negotiations minister Saeb Erakat accused Israel of perpetrating "war crimes" after the deaths of at least 13 residents during the army raid in the Rafah refugee camp, near the border with Egypt.

A hard look at Indian polls

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

Elections 2004 have thrown up some interesting statistics, which were released by the Election Commission here Monday:

There was just one voter in polling station No. 29 in Arunachal East Parliamentary constituency. The EC, however, did not reveal at what time the lone voter decided to exercise his franchise. He kept those on duty at that polling station waiting till evening?

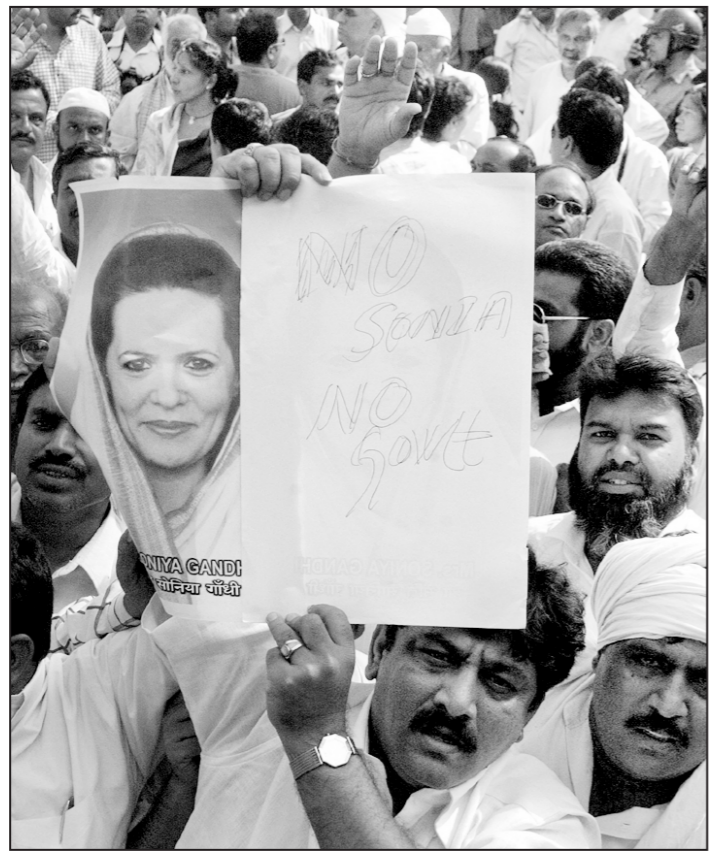
And proving that every vote counts, in the Karnataka Assembly elections in 119-Santhemarahalli Assembly the winning margin was only one vote. In the Lok Sabha polls, the minimum margin of victory in Lok Sabha was in Lakshadweep a paltry 71 votes, with Speaker PM Sayeed being at the losing end.

The maximum votes secured was by Sajjan Kumar of Congress in Outer Delhi 8,55,543.

The minimum votes secured by a candidate (Ashok Kumar) was in Chandni Chowk only 45.

The maximum margin of victory was in Arambagh in West Bengal 5,92,502 votes. Here, the runner-up lost his deposit.

The Parliamentary constituency with the largest area is Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir (173266.37 sq km), and the smallest constituency is Chandni Chowk, in Delhi, which has an area of 10.59 sq km.



Supporters of India's Congress Party leader Sonia Gandhi hold a placard saying "No Sonia, No govt (government)" during a show of support for her to become India's new prime minister, in front of her house in New Delhi yesterday. Some fans threatened suicide as Sonia has declined to become prime minister, throwing the Congress Party into "crisis," party leaders said.

Media castigates BJP for raising storm over Sonia's foreign origin

AFP, ew Delhi

India's media yesterday castigated the Hindu nationalists for raising a storm over the foreign origins of leader-in-waiting, Italian-born Sonia Gandhi.

In an editorial entitled "Oppose, don't distract", the Indian Express said the protests from members of outgoing Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to Gandhi succeeding him stemmed from a "desperate search for relevance."

"The idea is to ignite an incendiary sense of disgust in the public — that why-cant-one-billion-Indians-find-one-Indian-to-lead-them feeling — which could feed upon itself and yield possible dividends in the uncertain times ahead," the paper said.

The comment referred to remarks by BJP leaders ranging from a threatened boycott of parliament to launching a nationwide agitation if the widow of former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi were sworn in as premier.

On Monday, BJP president Venkaiah Naidu said his party and their allies would boycott the expected swearing-in of Sonia to

show opposition to a foreign-born person taking the helm.

Vajpayee, however, would attend the ceremony in "keeping with the tradition," he said, but ruled out a parliamentary boycott of the incoming government.

Media reports said outgoing parliamentary affairs minister Sushma Swaraj had gone a step further saying she would shave her head and become an ascetic to protest Sonia's inauguration.

"The day she takes oath, I will tonsure my head, put on white clothes, sleep on the floor and eat only roasted grams," she was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India news agency.

Swaraj's colleague, Uma Bharti, a fiery Hindu nun who governs the central state of Madhya Pradesh, held a closed-door meeting with President Abdul Kalam Monday.

Bharti told reporters at the weekend that she would, "go to any length" to prevent Gandhi from getting the top job.

Another BJP leader, Babul Marandi, called for a "national movement" to ban people of foreign origin from holding high office in India.

Dozens of gays wed in US state

REUTERS, Boston

Dozens of gays exchanged wedding vows on Monday when Massachusetts became the first US state to allow same-sex marriage, a move hailed by some as a civil rights milestone and denounced by others as a fatal blow to a centuries-old tradition.

President Bush renewed his call for a constitutional amendment banning the unions as Massachusetts joined Belgium, the Netherlands and two Canadian provinces in legalizing gay marriage.

Tanya McCloskey and Marcia Kadish, partners for 18 years, were among the first gay couples in the state to tie the knot in a simple ceremony in the famously liberal enclave of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

"What a way to celebrate the wonderful freedoms in this country. To celebrate in love — it's fabulous," McCloskey, 52, told reporters. "I'm so proud to be an American."

Cambridge officials conducted at least 22 gay weddings on Monday and Boston officials presided over more than a dozen. Hundreds more are expected across the state in the coming days — everything from simple beachfront ceremonies to solemn church services — in what could be a boon to the local economy.

'Child prisoners face abuse in Asian jails'

AFP, Bangkok

Child prisoners in Asia are experiencing inhumane treatment and are at risk of sexual exploitation and drug abuse, Unicef warned as it called for a regional judicial overhaul for the young.

The bleak outlook was laid out in a report by the UN fund titled "Justice for children, Detention as a last resort", which called on Asian Governments to find alternatives to prison for young offenders.

"Children behind bars face inhuman conditions and treatment. They are denied basic rights, such as decent healthcare and education, and are highly vulnerable to drug abuse, sexual exploitation and HIV/AIDS," it said.

Unicef's regional director Mehr Khan said a greater focus was also

needed on the causes of youth crime in the region.

"The vast majority of children in conflict with the law have suffered a history of abuse, including violence at home and at school, sexual exploitation, drug addiction and poverty," Khan said.

"These children need support services such as drug rehabilitation and family counselling rather than punishment in a criminal justice system which is designed for adults, so naturally we are very concerned," she said.

The report recommended the establishment of child-friendly legal frameworks and special efforts to protect girls, who it said faced a high risk of abuse from the moment they are detained by police through to imprisonment.

US assessing reports of sarin gas in Iraq

REUTERS, Washington

The United States, which invaded Iraq over alleged weapons of mass destruction, said on Monday an exploded artillery shell found there will be tested further to confirm indications that it was armed with sarin nerve agent.

It would be the first time any chemical weapon has been found in Iraq since the United States led an invasion of that country last year, accusing then-President Saddam Hussein of developing chemical, biological and possibly nuclear weapons.

Failure to find such weapons has stirred criticism in the United States and Britain, Washington's closest ally in the war.

Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other US officials in Washington and Baghdad said on Monday that initial field tests indicated that the 155mm shell contained sarin.

"Additional testing will be done outside of Iraq, more detailed testing. But the initial tests in the field show the presence of sarin," one US official, who asked not to be identified, told Reuters in Washington.

"Whether the person who rigged it up as an IED (improvised explosive device) knew what they had or not is open to question," the official added.

The discovery represented the possibility of good and bad news for the Bush administration — good that it could support long-unproven claims that Iraq possessed such weapons during the lead-up to the war, and bad that attempts are being made to use the weapons against US occupiers.

US Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt told a news conference in Iraq that the substance had been found in an artillery shell inside a bag discovered by a US convoy a few days ago. The round had exploded, causing a small release of the substance, he said.

Pressure mounts on Malaysia over 'Iraq-style' torture claims

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Pressure mounted on the Malaysian government yesterday to investigate claims of the torture of prisoners which human rights groups have likened to the abuse of Iraqi detainees by US troops.

A group of 31 detainees held under Malaysia's security laws for alleged terrorist links has complained of abuses such as being stripped naked, forced to masturbate, massage their interrogators, drink spittle and having their beards burnt.

A statement by the detainees listing 59 forms of alleged abuse was submitted to the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (Suhakam) in January and widely reported by the international media, but the issue has been revived after the scandal over the treatment of Iraqi detainees.

Photographs published around the world showed inmates at the Abu Ghraib prison outside Baghdad who had been stripped naked and forced into humiliating, sexually suggestive poses.

Sistani urges US forces to leave Najaf & Kerbala

2 GIs killed in fighting

REUTERS, Najaf

Iraq's foremost Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, called on US forces and Shia militia fighters to withdraw from the holy cities of Najaf and Kerbala yesterday.

It was the most clear-cut statement on the issue from Sistani, Iraq's most influential Shia authority, since militiamen loyal to radical Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr launched an uprising against the US-led occupation in April.

"It's permissible...to demand the withdrawal of all military vestiges from the two cities and allow the police and tribal forces to perform their role in preserving security and order," Sistani said in a rare statement released by his office in Najaf.

US forces and followers of Sadr's Mehdi Army militia have fought pitched battles in the streets of Najaf

and Kerbala over the past week, often fighting close to some of Shia Muslims' holiest shrines.

Sadr's followers, in sermons at mosques across southern, Shia dominated Iraq, have urged Shias to converge on Najaf and Kerbala to defend the cities against US forces.

But Sistani said in his statement it was too dangerous and Shi'ites should instead demonstrate in their hometowns against the presence of all military bodies in the cities.

"The office of Ayatollah Sistani calls on citizens in all of the cities and governorates not to head to holy Najaf due to the dangerous circumstances that the holy city is passing through," the statement said.

Instead, it said, gatherings should be organized in mosques and provinces around the country, "to protest violations of the sanctity

of the two holy cities."

Sources in Sistani's office said the statement was aimed mostly at Sadr's militia, which has been accused of attacking US forces from inside mosques, including the Imam Hussein mosque in Kerbala, one of Shia Muslims' holiest shrines.

AFP adds: Two US soldiers were killed in fighting in the restive al-Anbar province, in western Iraq, the military said yesterday.

Meanwhile, fighters loyal to rebel cleric Moqtada al-Sadr attacked a US base on the edge of the holy Iraqi city of Najaf yesterday with mortar bombs, witnesses said.

Two US tanks stationed around the main police station, some two km (one mile) from some of the holiest shrines for Shia Muslims, moved toward the base and were attacked with rocket-propelled grenades, the witnesses said.

US intelligence told prison guards how to interrogate

REUTERS, Washington

The officer in charge of interrogations at Iraq's Abu Ghraib prison said intelligence officers sometimes instructed the military police on pre-interrogation techniques, The New York Times said.

The techniques, which included forcing the prisoners to strip naked and shackling them before questioning were used on prisoners protected by the Geneva Convention that prohibits inhuman treatment of prisoners of war, the daily said.

The disclosure, included in a classified, 6,000-page report by General Antonio Taguba on the Iraqi prisoner abuse scandal, is the highest-level confirmation so far that military intelligence officers

directed military guards in preparing for interrogations, said the daily.

Several US soldiers are awaiting courts-martial for alleged prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, but so far none of their superior commanding officers or intelligence officers assigned to the prison have been charged in the scandal.

Investigators are still trying to determine if the soldiers acted alone or on instructions from their superiors in the extensively photographed and videotaped abuses.

Taguba's report includes a February 11 interview with Colonel Thomas Pappas, who was in charge of interrogations at Abu Ghraib.

According to portions of Pappas' sworn statements read to The New York Times by a government official familiar with the transcript, Pappas

told Taguba that intelligence officers sometimes instructed military police at the prison to use forceful interrogation techniques.

"To my knowledge, instructions given to the M.P.s, other than what I have mentioned, such as shackling, making detainees strip down or other measures used on detainees before interrogations, are not typically made unless there is some good reason."

Pappas also told Taguba that commanding officers could ensure that the military guards understood the limits of their instructions or whether the instructions were legal.

"There would be no way for us to actually monitor whether that happened," Colonel Pappas said. "We had no formal system in place to do that."



An Iraqi boy plays in front of flames blocking a street in Baghdad's Shia Sadr City neighborhood yesterday. Residents of Sadr city blocked many roads in Sadr City, in a bid to prevent US military vehicles from entering the poor slums. One Iraqi was killed and five wounded in the holy city of Kerbala in night-time clashes between coalition troops and the militia of radical Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr.