

Indian president rejects mercy plea of rapist killer

PTI, New Delhi

The mercy petition of Dhananjay Chatterjee, sentenced to death for raping and murdering a school girl, has been rejected by President APJ Abdul Kalam.

The mercy petition was sent by the Home Ministry for the President's consideration about a month back.

This was Dhananjay's second mercy petition before the President. His first one was rejected on June 23, 1994.

Chatterjee was sentenced to death, for rape and murder of a school girl in Kolkata in 1990, on August 12, 1991.

The execution order was confirmed by a division bench of the Calcutta High Court comprising Justice MK Mukherjee and Justice JN Hore on January 11, 1994.

The convict moved the Supreme Court and his appeal was dismissed by a division bench comprising Justice AS Anand and Justice NP Singh on January 11, 1994.

US defends 'three year-old' terror alert

REUTERS, New York

The warning that US financial centers may be attacked by al-Qaeda was based largely on three-year-old information, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge said on Tuesday, but some intelligence dated from January and he insisted the threat was still real.

Ridge's appearance in New York at the Citigroup building named on Sunday as a potential al-Qaeda target came as US terrorism intelligence has come under fire again, this time for forcing police in New York, Washington and New Jersey to massively increase security based on old information.

"I don't want anyone to disabuse themselves of the seriousness of this information simply because there are some reports that much of it is dated, it might be two or three years old," Ridge said.

Al-Qaeda had updated its surveillance of financial buildings "as recently as January this year," he said.

"This is the most significant, detailed pieces of information about any particular region that we have come across in along, long time, perhaps ever."

Ridge denied there was any political motivation behind raising the terror alert when President Bush and his Democratic challenger, Sen. John Kerry, are neck-and-neck in polls ahead of November's presidential election.

"This is not about politics. It's about confidence in government," Ridge said.

New York City Speaker Gifford Miller, a Democrat with ambitions of being elected mayor, said the city spends about \$1 billion a year to fight terrorism and Washington was "still not providing us with the support we need

to ensure the safety of American citizens."

The city now has 4,000 fewer police than on Sept. 11, 2001, and this year New York was given \$5.47 per head in homeland security grants -- the second lowest in the nation.

Jorge Diaz, a Times Square building safety worker, felt the government was now overcompensating for failing to point out the nation might be attacked three years ago.

"At a certain point it becomes exaggerated," Diaz said.

Amid the heightened terror alert, New York's Statue of Liberty reopened for the first time since the Sept. 11 attacks thanks to over \$30 million in private donations. But the crown on America's best-known symbol remains off-limits.

Ridge said there was no information on the potential timing of any attack and

no evidence of more recent surveillance by al-Qaeda of the buildings named in the latest terror alert.

One US counter-terrorism official told Reuters the Bush administration had earlier intelligence that al Qaeda might attack the US economic sector before November's election. The latest information on specific buildings in the financial sector had no time element, he said, but coupled with the belief of a pre-election attack on such targets, the decision was taken to raise the security alert.

US intelligence gathering came under fire from the commission investigating the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and on Monday Bush endorsed creating a national intelligence director and backed some other reforms recommended by the panel.



People try to hold back the tears at a Beijing kindergarten yesterday after a security guard went on a rampage, slashing 15 young children and killing one of them. Three teachers were also injured when the security guard, a 51-year-old doorman at the kindergarten, attacked children and staff at the Beijing University Number One Hospital's kindergarten early in the morning.



Students at Welland Goldsmith School, located in the Bowbazar area of Calcutta, surround Aditi Ghosh (C), a former student at the school, yesterday after they were advised that Indian President Abdul Kalam had rejected a mercy plea for a man convicted of raping and killing teenage girl Hetal Parekh, a then classmate of Ghosh, in 1990.

Heavy downpour disrupts life in Maharashtra

Train services from Mumbai cancelled

PTI, Mumbai

Continuous rainfall in many parts of India, particularly Maharashtra and Gujarat has led to flood situation disrupting the normal life.

In Mumbai one person was killed and 14 others injured in separate incidents of wall collapse yesterday as rain continued to lash the city and various parts of Maharashtra for the second consecutive week, leading to overflowing of rivers, dams and disruption of rail and road traffic.

Movement of local and long-distance trains, both on the Central and Western lines were affected due to the heavy downpour, railway sources said.

The trains that were cancelled on Wednesday included Ferozepur-Janata Express, Saurashtra Express, Paschim Express and Vidyanagari Express, the sources said.

The situation was no good in Gujarat where at least 21 people were killed as

heavy rains lashed Bharuch district of south Gujarat bringing life to virtual halt even as situation was improving in worst-affected Valsad district and Union Territory of Dadra and Nagar Haveli, officials said today.

In Vadodara district, six persons were swept away and feared drowned in turbulent Hiran river in Moti Dungari on Tuesday, Collector Bhagyesh Jha said.

"We have received 200 mm of rains in just four hours since past midnight. At present I can confirm 21 deaths, mainly due to several house collapses of which 15 are in the city alone," Bharuch Collector Rajiv Topno said.

He said at least 1,000 people have been evacuated from low-lying areas.

"Due to topography of Bharuch, there is no heavy waterlogging as most of the rain water flows away into Narmada," Topno said.

In Bharuch, Ankleshwar recorded 200 mm, Bharuch city 210 mm, Jhaghadia 112, Hansot 84 and Valia 78,

state flood control room sources said.

The death toll from monsoon rains in the western Indian state of Gujarat has risen to 151, an official of the state flood control room told AFP yesterday.

"The death toll for this monsoon season which began around two weeks ago has hit 151," said an official of the Gujarat state flood control room, adding the flooding only assumed serious proportions in recent days.

"This is the worst flooding since 1998," said Gujarat Home Secretary K. Nityanandam, as soldiers using boats and helicopters plucked people sheltering on high ground to safety after waters up to 10 feet (three metres) high submerged roads and flooded dwellings in southern Gujarat.

The army and air force were called into airlift people in low-lying areas in at least three villages of southern Gujarat.

Thousands protest UN resolution on Darfur

AFP, Khartoum

Tens of thousands of people marched on UN offices in Khartoum yesterday to protest last week's Security Council resolution on Darfur, rejecting any foreign intervention in the war-torn province.

After gathering outside the presidential palace, the marchers headed to the UN offices shouting "Allah o Akhbar (God Is Great) and waving banners in English and Arabic proclaiming "Darfur Is the Graveyard of US" and "No to Foreign Intervention."

Many of the marchers were wearing students' uniforms, green for the boys and blue for the girls, who were all wearing headscarves.

One contingent of youths were wearing black shirts and red headbands marked "Martyrs Brigades."

The protest was organized by an umbrella grouping of several political parties called the Association of Faith and the Motherland.

The UN Security Council passed a resolution last Friday giving Khartoum 30 days to disarm the pro-government Arab Janjaweed militia accused of committing atrocities against black civilians in Darfur.

Chandrika ready to talk LTTE self-rule

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's president said yesterday she was ready to discuss a self-rule proposal by Tamil Tiger rebels and denied state media reports that she had rejected the controversial guerrilla blueprint for peace.

President Chandrika Kumar-atunga's office took the unusual step of rejecting reports in government media, including radio and television, that said she had dismissed the Tigers' demands for talks based on their self-rule proposal.

"The president maintains that the government of Sri Lanka is willing to discuss with the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) its proposal for an interim administration alongside the talks to reach a final solution acceptable to all communities," the government's official website, run by Kumaratunga's office, said.

It said state media reports had wrongly "implied" that the government had "totally rejected" the LTTE's

Interim Self-Governing Authority proposals which were first unveiled on October 31 last year.

The president's office also said that Irrigation Minister Maithripala Sirisena, who was quoted in the state media as saying Kumaratunga had ruled out talks based on the proposals, had issued a statement denying remarks attributed to him.

Top government officials and diplomats were stunned by the reports, which appeared to be a departure from the president's comments last month when she said she was willing to discuss the setting up of an "interim authority" for the island's embattled, Tamil-dominated northern and eastern regions.

There had been mixed signals from the government to the LTTE's proposal, with Kumaratunga's shaky Marxist-backed minority coalition and the president herself describing it as a "stepping stone to a separate state."



Pakistani paramilitary soldiers stand by as photojournalists and cameramen take pictures and video footage of weapons, seized by security forces in an anti-crime crackdown in Karachi yesterday. Pakistani paramilitary soldiers recovered about 100 machine guns, light machine guns, sub-machine guns and automatic rifles with over 16,000 rounds of live ammunition in a raid at a hideout of Karachi based ethnic group Mohajir Qaumi Movement's activists.

Syria frees scores of political prisoners

AFP, Damascus

Syrian authorities have released almost 100 political prisoners, including a communist leader who was incarcerated for almost 30 years, a human rights lawyer said yesterday.

"Fifty-five political prisoners were released on Tuesday, including Imad Shiha, in addition to 36 released on Monday," lawyer Anwar Bunni told AFP.

The 51-year-old Shiha, a member of the Arab Communist organisation, was imprisoned in 1975. He was the country's longest-serving political prisoner.

A total of 251 political prisoners, including a number of former militants from the Muslim Brotherhood, have been freed in the past two weeks, Bunni said.

The lawyer called on Damascus to "quickly settle the question of political prisoners by releasing them".

Human rights groups have repeatedly called for the release of political prisoners and the abolition of Syria's emergency law, in place since 1963.

BJP will continue boycotting House

PTI, Bangalore

An end to the deadlock over the Parliament panel issue notwithstanding, the Opposition boycott of 'tainted ministers' in the House and the campaign against them would continue, BJP President M Venkaiah Naidu said yesterday.

Speaking to reporters, Naidu said that the then Opposition Congress had boycotted George Fernandes as Defence Minister for 22 months in the House, though there was no FIR or case against him. But in the case of 'tainted ministers' in the UPA Government, 'nothing has changed from the time they quit ministerial posts earlier,' Naidu said.

He said the BJP would fight 'tooth and nail', the 'communal reservation' for Muslims proposed by the Andhra Pradesh Government. Terming it as 'release of a trial balloon', he said the BJP strongly felt that unless it was

stopped, it would sow the seeds of another partition of the country.

Naidu said the BJP would prepare an action plan for five states slated to go to the polls. It had also asked party units in Uttar Pradesh and Karnataka to remain on alert, as there is 'political uncertainty' in these two states.

He said that Samajwadi Party general secretary Amar Singh was having a 'love-hate' relationship with their coalition partner Congress in Uttar Pradesh, while the Congress and the JD-S are 'singing different tunes' in Karnataka.

The BJP also wanted a ban on gutka in India, he said and urged the UPA Government to enact a legislation in this regard by treating the matter seriously. The revenues accrued by allowing gutka sales was 'negligible', compared to the health damage caused by its consumption.

NASA names supercomputer after Kalpana Chawla

PTI, Houston

NASA has dedicated its new Altix supercomputer 'KC' to the memory of Indian-born astronaut Kalpana Chawla, one of the seven crew members aboard the space shuttle Columbia which disintegrated midair in February last year.

Naming the new supercomputer 'Kalpana' follows a long tradition at NASA's Ames Research Centre of calling its new supercomputers after pioneers in the supercomputer industry or individuals who have significantly contributed to research at the aircraft research laboratory.

"It is indeed an honour to name NASA's new SGI Altix 3000 supercomputer after Kalpana Chawla," said Ames Centre director G Scott Hubbard, adding "she was not only a member of the NASA family, but also a special member of our own Ames family. We all miss her and her many contributions to the agency."

During an interview in 1995, Chawla predicted that her exposure to a wide variety of computer systems at Ames would be especially useful to her as an astronaut.