

Bomb blast kills 2 in Karachi

AFP, Karachi

A bomb explosion killed two people and injured four others in Pakistan's violence-plagued port city of Karachi early yesterday, police said.

The bomb went off outside a car showroom in the southern residential district of the country's industrial and commercial hub.

"Two employees of the car dealer were killed and four others were injured," city police chief Fayaz Leghari told AFP.

The blast also damaged six vehicles and three shops.

Leghari said it was a time device and preliminary investigations indicated business rivalry could be the motive.

"The initial investigations suggest the incident was an outcome of business rivalry. We don't think it was an act of terrorism," he said.

"It was apparently meant to damage the showroom business."

Karachi has been hit by a series of bomb blasts in recent months including two suicide bombings at mosques in May that killed 48 people and injured about 150.

Iraqi VP raps US for 'uncivilised' killing

UK condemns kidnapping, murder of civilians

AFP, London

Iraqi Vice President Ibrahim al-Jafari implicitly criticised the United States Friday, saying the reported deaths of 300 insurgents in Najaf was "not a civilised way" to rebuild his nation.

"Of course, when I hear of the deaths of Iraqi civilians, I cannot find any justification for the killings," Jafari, on an official visit to London, told BBC television's "Newsnight" programme.

"So my reaction (to US claims of 300 insurgents killed in Najaf) is negative," he added.

"I think that killing Iraqi citizens is not a civilised way of building the new Iraq, which is based on protecting people and promoting dialogue, not bullets."

In the worst clashes since a June truce quelled a spring uprising spearheaded by radical Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr, the US military said

300 insurgents had been killed.

"We estimate we've killed 300 anti-Iraqi forces in the past two days of fighting. We've had a total of three killed, 12 wounded (in the Najaf clashes)," US Marine Corps Captain Carrie Batson said.

A spokesman for Sadr, Sheikh Ahmed al-Shaibani, disputed the claim, saying only nine militiamen were killed and 20 wounded.

Najaf's governor Adnan al-Zorfi issued an ultimatum to Sadr's militia to leave the city in 24 hours, branding them criminals.

But Jafari appeared to criticise Zorfi for his initiative, saying: "I think decisions like this should have been taken centrally... in Baghdad" rather than locally.

The vice president also said that, being abroad, he was unable to say whether the United States had sought authorisation from the fledgling Iraqi government before launching its assault on Najaf.

"Maybe this is what happened, or maybe not," he said. "But I am not aware of the details of such an agreement."

Jafari is to hold meetings next week in London with Foreign Office ministers, "Newsnight" reported.

PTI adds: Britain yesterday condemned the kidnappings and murder of innocent civilians in Iraq and said it shared the sufferings of the families and countries whose citizens "brutally treated."

"We share the suffering of the families and sacrifices of those Governments whose citizens have been kidnapped and so brutally treated," a statement from the UK High Commission said in New Delhi.

Sharing a view of the multinational force in Iraq, it said, "Terrorists and former regime elements have intensified their campaign of kidnappings and executions aimed at weakening the resolve of the international community from assisting the Iraqi Government."



A fire rages during clashes between militia members of radical Shia Muslim cleric Moqtada Sadr's Mehdi Army and US troops yesterday in the holy Shia city of Najaf, which left most of the commercial center of the city in ruins. Fresh fighting broke out between US troops and Shia Muslim militiamen in Najaf and Baghdad, as families began to flee the southern Iraqi pilgrimage city after days of intense fighting.

Al-Jazeera's Baghdad office closed for a month

AFP, Baghdad

The caretaker Iraqi government has ordered pan-Arab television channel Al-Jazeera to close its offices in Baghdad for a month, Interior Minister Falah al-Naqib confirmed yesterday.

Naqib announced the closure at a Baghdad news conference, following an order from the national security committee.

"We have asked an independent committee to monitor Al-Jazeera for the last four weeks... to see what kind of violence they are advocating, inciting hatred and problems and racial tensions," Prime Minister Iyad Allawi added.

"This is a decision taken by the national security committee to protect the people of Iraq, in the interests of the Iraqi people," he said.

The Iraqi government move was earlier reported by the Doha-based channel, which did not air the live news conference in Baghdad.

"Iraqi authorities decide to close the Al-Jazeera office in Baghdad for a month," read an urgent banner on the television which gave no more details on the reasons for the closure.



A Chicago police officer walks past demonstrators dressed like alleged tortured prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq as they protest outside a hotel where US Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld was addressing Friday in Chicago, Illinois. The protest was organised by the Chicago Coalition Against War & Racism.

'American faked his beheading in video'

AFP, Washington

Benjamin Vanderford, a man believed to have been beheaded in Iraq, told the Associated Press Saturday that he faked his own demise at a friend's home months ago as "part of a stunt" to draw attention to his campaign for San Francisco city supervisor.

"It was part of a stunt, but no one noticed it up until now," 22-year-old Vanderford told the AP. "I did this for a couple of reasons. One is to attract attention. But two is to just make a statement on these type of videos and how easily they can be faked."

Al-Arabiya television in Dubai, showing excerpts from a video, reported Saturday that a US hostage had been killed "at the hands" of al-Qaeda's alleged chief in Iraq, Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi.

In the video, Vanderford, wearing a white T-shirt, sitting on a white plastic chair with his hands tied behind his back, called for the "immediate" departure of US forces from Iraq, warning that foreign troops would face death otherwise.

ARMITAGE SAYS Muslim states resisting Saudi proposal on Iraq

UN remains high value target for Iraq attacks: Annan

PTI, Washington

Several countries apparently are resisting the Saudi proposal to set up a Muslim force to bolster the US-led coalition of troops in Iraq, US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage has said.

In an interview with Al-Hayat, a Saudi-owned newspaper based in London, Armitage said that it was a "genuine gesture" on behalf of the Saudi Government.

They (Saudis) are really seeking a peaceful resolution of the problems of Iraq "but I don't see much willingness on the part of many of the governments of the region, or farther beyond, to send troops," he said.

"Discussions will continue with those countries to see if they may be willing to," Armitage said in the interview text of which was released by the State Department on Thursday.

The Saudis have suggested that coalition forces would be withdrawn as Muslim troops take up positions in Iraq. Their primary job would be to protect UN officials, but they also could be used to help guard the borders against armed infiltrators.

While Jordan has expressed some interest, the Saudis and the interim Iraqi government were concentrating on enlisting distant Muslim countries, including Pakistan and Bangladesh. Armitage said King Mohamed VI of

Morocco was approached, but Morocco has decided "that's not the best use of its forces."

He confirmed there also was discussion with Pakistan and Bangladesh and more recently with some of the states of the former Soviet Union.

Meanwhile, the United Nations will remain a high value, high impact target for insurgents in Iraq and that would limit its staff and activity in the foreseeable future, Secretary General Kofi Annan said in a new report.

Staff security, he says, remains the overriding constraint for all UN operations and characterizes the risk to its personnel as high to critical and added that the world body lacks means to protect its personnel.

ENGLAND'S DEFENCE TEAM SAYS Abuse of detainees was systematic

AFP, Fort Bragg

A special military court hearing on the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal stretched into a fifth day Saturday with the presiding officer facing defence requests to call top US officials to the witness stand.

Private Lynndee England, known worldwide for a photograph showing her holding a leash tied to the neck of a naked inmate, is one of six soldiers facing a possible court martial and prison for abusing Iraqi detainees.

Her defence is arguing that the abuse of detainees at the facility was "systematic" and approved by senior officers.

The army contends, however, that England and some of her fellow military police officers acted in a rogue fashion and

were not following orders. The defence team, led by Richard Hernandez, has submitted a list of 158 witnesses it wants to appear in the court, including Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

On Friday Hernandez said he was especially keen to call the former top US commander in Iraq, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, and Brigadier General Janis Karpinski, who ran Abu Ghraib.

Friday saw dramatic testimony including the first public statements by the soldier who blew the whistle on the abusers and an allegation that England was praised for humiliating detainees.

Two US Army criminal investigators said England told them that military intelligence and other US officials "told us to keep it up, we were doing a good job."

India, Pakistan agree to hold more talks on maritime boundary

AFP, New Delhi

India and Pakistan yesterday concluded talks on demarcating the maritime boundary between the western Indian state of Gujarat and Pakistan's Sindh province and agreed to continue discussions. The talks are the latest in a series of negotiations between the rival neighbours, which are working to improve ties after a near-war in 2002.

The two delegations had a "detailed and useful exchange of views" on Sir Creek which runs between Gujarat and Sindh, a joint statement said after two days of talks in New Delhi.

"It was agreed that early resolution of the issue would be in the interest of both countries. The two sides agreed to continue the discussions," it said.

India says the boundary lies in the middle of the 60-kilometre (40-mile) estuary while Pakistan says it is on the eastern bank.

The area is considered economically strategic as it is believed to hold abundant deposits of oil and gas.

A similar statement pledging to talk again was issued Friday after separate talks between India and Pakistan over the Siachen glacier in Kashmir, which is considered the world's highest-elevation battlefield.

More discussions are scheduled in August on trade and cracking down on drug trafficking.

The talks are expected to pave the way for a meeting between the Indian and Pakistani foreign ministers in early September.

India and Pakistan, which have fought two of their three wars over Kashmir since 1947, sent a million troops to their borders after the Indian parliament was attacked in December 2001 by Islamic rebels New Delhi said were sponsored by Islamabad. Pakistan denied the charge.



Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam (L) presents a memento to Bollywood actress and polio delegation ambassador Aishwarya Rai as president of Rotary International, Glenn E. Estess (2-R) looks on during the opening function of the International Presidential Polio Summit 2004 in New Delhi yesterday.

Guantanamo hearings get cool response from inmates

REUTERS, Us Naval Base, Guantanamo Bay

Six of the 11 Guantanamo Bay prisoners so far given a chance to challenge their detention have shunned the hearings, which the US military in any case does not expect will lead to many inmates being freed.

Panels of three military officers this week began reviewing the status of detainees from the Afghan war who have been held at the US naval base at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, without trial for 2 and a half years.

Five prisoners participated in their hearings but six refused, including a 25-year-old Iranian whose hearing was attended by journalists on Friday.

Unclassified material summarized at the 13-minute session portrayed the Iranian as a Taliban fighter conscripted and trained by the Islamic fundamentalist group to use an AK-47 assault rifle.

The summary said he spent more than two weeks fighting US and allied forces in Afghanistan before his capture by the Northern Alliance, a group of Afghan militias that fought with US forces to oust the Taliban government that protected al-Qaeda, the summary said.



A woman takes part in a march against Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez Friday in Caracas as Venezuelans are bracing for the August 15 referendum that the opposition hopes will unseat the controversial head of state.

UN probe blames Sudan for Darfur deaths

REUTERS, Geneva

A UN investigator said Friday the Sudanese government was largely to blame for a humanitarian disaster in Darfur and its responsibility for large numbers of killings in the region was beyond doubt.

Investigator Asma Jahangir, a Pakistani lawyer, said a June visit to Darfur found overwhelming evidence government forces and militia they backed had executed large numbers of civilians.

But according to an agreement reached this week and released Friday, Sudan had now pledged to set up safe areas for uprooted villagers, work to disarm marauding militia and stop offensive actions by government troops in civilian areas.

The pact, reached Wednesday between Sudanese Foreign Minister Mustafa Osman Ismail and UN envoy Jan Pronk, outlines steps the Khartoum government must take within a month to improve security in its western Darfur region, site of what the United Nations calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

More than a million people have

been displaced by conflict there and Jahangir said the government was mostly to blame.

"It is beyond doubt that the government of the Sudan is responsible for extrajudicial and summary executions of large numbers of people over the last several months in the Darfur region," the Pakistani lawyer said in a report for the UN Sub-Commission on Human Rights, currently meeting in Geneva.

AFP adds: More than 200 members of a rebel group fighting Sudanese government forces in the war-torn Darfur region surrendered to the authorities, official media outlets reported yesterday.

According to the state-run Omdurman radio and several governmental newspapers, 10 field commanders and 200 men of the rebel Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) announced in the border town of Tina they were defecting and joining government forces.

Reports quoted the commanders as declaring at a ceremony held there for the occasion that their defection was prompted by the "unacceptable" treatment inflicted on them by rebel leaders.

Nearly 200 'badly covered' women arrested in Iran

AFP, Tehran

Nearly 200 Iranian women wearing head coverings considered insufficient under the country's Islamic code have been arrested, newspapers reported yesterday.

Iranian security forces launched raids in cities of central Semnan and northern Gilan provinces, arresting 183 women in recent weeks, the reports said.

Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, all post-pubescent females have been required to wear the veil and a long coat concealing their bodily form, or face fines or imprisonment.

Some 132 "badly covered" women were picked up in Semnan Province, the Sharq daily reported, adding that 69 of them face trial.

Another 1,250 women in the province have received verbal warnings to respect the Islamic dress code, police told the paper.

In Gilan, 51 women and girls were arrested "to fight open spectacles of corruption," the Iran newspaper quoted provincial security forces as saying.

Similar raids have been reported in recent weeks, mainly in Tehran shopping centers.

Threat of dam overflow eases in flood-hit India

REUTERS, Ahmedabad

Fears of a controversial giant dam overflowing in western India receded after South Asia's worst monsoon flooding in 15 years showed signs of easing, officials said.

More than 1,700 people have died in South Asia, mostly in Bangladesh and eastern India, in weeks of flooding. In the past week the monsoon rains have moved westwards to wreak havoc in the Indian states of Gujarat, Punjab and Haryana.

Authorities had been preparing to evacuate thousands of residents from more than a dozen villages downstream from the 110-ft (34-meter) Namada dam in Gujarat Friday after it began overflowing due to torrential rains in its catchment areas.

But a crisis appeared to have been averted Saturday after rains eased and officials said they had successfully diverted some water from the dam into canals.

"The inflow of water into the dam is not alarming any more. But the alert will continue, as we are still releasing water from the dam," said Rajiv Topno, chief of Bharuch district, where the dam is located.

The Narmada Valley project is

India's biggest dam scheme

About 3,200 small, medium-sized and large dams are to be built on the 1,300-km (800-mile) long river and its tributaries to generate electricity and provide water to millions of people.

Environmentalists and other critics, led by Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy, say the scheme is unsafe, is causing massive ecological damage and will displace a million people without providing adequate compensation.

"We are relieved now. But nobody is fully sure whether the rains will make a comeback and force us out of our homes," said Sabu Vala, a resident of Bharuch.

A major power plant had to be shut down in the northern state of Himachal Pradesh because of the high silt content in the floodwater, officials said. The Naphtha Jhakri power plant supplies nearly a third of the power used by northern India.

In the northern state of Haryana, 40 villages were submerged after the River Ghaggar burst its banks in two places overnight.

Troops distributed food and fodder in Haryana and neighboring Punjab to hundreds of marooned villages.