

Serial killer
Sobhraj jailed
for life in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

Charles Sobhraj, the infamous serial killer of Western backpackers in Asia in the 1970s, was sentenced yesterday to life in prison in Nepal over the death of an American woman in 1975.

The 60-year-old French national, who was nicknamed "The Serpent" for his cunning escapes from the law and who resurfaced last year when he was arrested at a Kathmandu casino, said he would appeal the verdict.

"I have been declared guilty without proof and without witnesses," Sobhraj, wearing dark glasses and a baseball cap, told reporters at the end of the three-hour hearing.

Sobhraj, who was freed in 1997 after 21 years in prison in India, was sentenced to life in jail by Kathmandu District Judge Biswanbhar Prasad Shrestha, who said any property Sobhraj owned in Nepal would be seized.

Indo-Pak officials trade
lists of 'wanted people'

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan and India exchanged lists of people wanted by each country for acts of terrorism and other crimes, ending a two-day bilateral meeting here Wednesday, officials said.

The talks between senior interior ministry officials of the two countries focussed on ways to counter terrorism and drug trafficking in the region.

Pakistan's interior secretary Tariq Mahmud and Indian home secretary Dharendra Singh led the delegations.

A senior Pakistani official told AFP Islamabad had presented a list of some 53 people allegedly responsible for terrorist acts in Pakistan to the Indian side which gave its own list of 25 men.

"They came up with a dossier of 25 wanted men they say are hiding in Pakistan, while we gave them names of 53 men we want India to hand over to us," the official who could not be identified told AFP.

The names on the two lists were not revealed.

A joint statement issued after the talks made no mention of the list.

It said both sides "reaffirmed their determination to combat terrorism and emphasised the need for complete elimination of this menace."

The discussions were "frank and candid," it said.

The official said both sides expressed concerns over alleged sabotage training camps in each other's territory.

The official said India voiced its concern over alleged training camps in Pakistan for militants involved in the anti-Indian insurgency in the Indian-administered part of Kashmir.

He said Islamabad told the Indians that Pakistan had done everything possible to rein in militants.

He said the Pakistani side also conveyed to the Indians "our concerns

Pakistan arrests
5 al-Qaeda
suspects

REUTERS, Islamabad

Pakistan has arrested five al-Qaeda suspects in the last two to three days as part of a month-long crackdown on Osama bin Laden's shadowy network, officials said yesterday.

Officials said the suspects, whom they declined to identify, were captured in various parts of the country.

It was not clear how senior the suspects were or how many among them were foreigners. An official said one of the five was a South African. He gave no further details.

Reuters reported on Wednesday that two Turkish al-Qaeda operatives, believed to be behind an attack on Jewish targets in Istanbul, had been detained in Pakistan.

"These people keep many aliases and it is too early to say whether there is an important target among them," one official said on condition of anonymity.

"They often appear as ordinary people, but during interrogation and investigations they turn out to be real valuable people, big gems," he said.



PHOTO: AFP

Members of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s women attend a party's national women conference at the BJP headquarters in New Delhi yesterday. BJP will soon launch an agitation campaign against the alleged anti-people policies of the Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) central government.



PHOTO: AFP

A Pakistani policeman stands guard on a patrol van passing by national flags displayed for sale in Karachi yesterday, two days ahead of country's 57th Independence Day. Strict security measures have been taken across the country to avert any possible terror act during the Independence Day celebrations.

Tibet lake spill threatens
property, not Indian lives

AFP, New Delhi

A melting glacial lake in Tibet threatening to gush into northern India could destroy buildings and crops but is unlikely to take a human toll as people have been evacuated from the danger zone, an official said yesterday.

D.S. Sharma, a spokesman for the Himachal Pradesh state government, said the threat to life had been minimised because of "sound alerts" from neighbouring China and satellite images tracking the glacial lake.

Himachal Pradesh and Punjab states have been on alert since last Thursday and thousands of people have been evacuated after China warned that water from the melting glacial lake in Tibet could spill into northern India.

"We have taken adequate precautions based on the Chinese alerts," Sharma told AFP by telephone from the state capital Shimla.

All people living in the "danger zone" -- the districts of Kinnaur, Rampur and Bilaspur -- had been evacuated, Sharma said.

"We have moved people from the danger zone ... farmers have even herded their cattle to higher ground," said Sharma.

"Therefore, we are not worried about people getting swept away but we are very worried about standing crops, homes and buildings being destroyed. The financial damage will be high."

Sharma added that the army had also been alerted and was on standby to help the state's crisis management group.

"It will swing into action to rescue anyone who may be trapped," he said.

The Indian air force on Wednesday conducted aerial surveys of a Himalayan valley looking for signs that the glacial lake in China could burst its banks.

"The air force found the rise in the water level is nominal. There is no reason to panic," P.L. Negi, the administrator of Punjab's Kaza province, told reporters.

Japan mulls
resuming aid
to Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

Japan is considering resuming multi-million dollar aid to Pakistan that was cut after Islamabad tested nuclear weapons in 1998 to match tests by India, Japanese Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi said Wednesday.

"I have instructed my people to consider the resumption of the yen-loan to assist Pakistanis' need for social economic assistance," Kawaguchi told reporters after meeting her counterpart Khurshid Kasuri.

Japan had been providing Pakistan with 500 million dollars in official aid annually before the sanctions were introduced.

Kawaguchi, on an official two-day visit here, also met President Pervez Musharraf, Prime Minister Shujaat Hussain and premier-designate Shaukat Aziz, the finance minister due to succeed Shujaat later this month.

Lankan graft busters
manipulated by
politicians: Study

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's independent anti-corruption unit is plagued by political manipulation and unable to combat graft effectively, watchdog Transparency International said yesterday.

The anti-graft unit established in 1995 with bipartisan support in parliament remained ineffective with few prosecutions and a "rarity of convictions", the Berlin-based organisation said in a report on Sri Lanka.

"The Commission to Investigate Allegations of Bribery and Corruption's internal administration has been crisis-ridden and plagued by political manipulation," a statement said.

Although the Commission is supposed to be independent, it depends on police officers sent to it on secondment to carry out investigations.

Transparency International said a positive start had been made with the establishment of ombudsmen in the police and the education departments where corruption was rampant.

The watchdog called for the enactment of a freedom of information act and legislation to protect whistleblowers.

It also said political parties and candidates should be required to disclose audited financial statements of their sources and amounts of funding.

Powell, Indian envoy
talk Indo-US ties

PTI, Washington

Indian Ambassador-designate to the US Ranendra Sen met Secretary of State Colin Powell and discussed with him various issues, including the progress made in the "strategic partnership" between the two countries.

Sen presented his credentials to the Secretary of State yesterday (Aug 11, 2004) and had a formal meeting with Powell after that. The discussions focussed on the "the new stage in strategic partnership" between New Delhi and Washington.

Sen said that the conversation between him and Powell focussed on various issues, including Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's forthcoming visit to the US to attend the UN General Assembly meeting, but centered primarily on the bilateral relations between the two countries.

"In general terms, I would say Secretary of State Powell expressed his

satisfaction at the development of the bilateral relations, following the elections in India, maintaining the momentum in these relations in diverse fields," Sen told reporters.

Expressing confidence that the momentum in Indo-US relations will be maintained, Sen said that both sides support maintaining the upward swing in relations and attach utmost importance to them.

He said that the leaders of both countries keep in touch with each other regularly over phone and Defence exchanges between India and the US are continuing.

Joint air exercises have been held both in India and the US and an Indian mission headed by External Affairs Ministry official S Jaishankar is having discussions on the "new partnership", with the first stage covering peaceful uses of nuclear energy and space cooperation, he said.

Arjun denies any
difference with
Manmohan

THE STATESMAN/ ANN, New Delhi

A mellower Arjun Singh Wednesday said he has no differences with the Prime Minister even as the Congress strongly refuted reports that the party president, Sonia Gandhi, would "mediate" to patch up the "differences" between Dr Manmohan Singh and the Union HRD minister over "de-saffronisation of the administration".

AICC leader, Girija Vyas, said, "such reports are absolutely false, unfounded, and irresponsible". She said, "there are no differences between the Prime Minister and Arjun Singh on the issue, the rumour is being spread by the BJP-RSS".

Arjun Singh said fighting communalism was part of the government's common minimum programme and the question of differences with Dr Manmohan Singh did not arise. He said his call for "purging the administration of the RSS elements" was his "personal view".

Singh challenged the Sangh to get itself registered by the EC and contest elections instead of "playing politics behind the curtains".

On the "propriety" of a senior Cabinet minister like Arjun Singh publicly advising the PM to "cleanse the administration of RSS elements", Vyas said, "It is his individual opinion, it is up to the PM to consider it". On the Congress' stand, she said: "It is not the party's job to advise the government over purging the administration".

Lanka blasts LTTE's
military build-up

AFP, Colombo

The Sri Lankan government said yesterday it had protested against an alleged Tamil Tiger military build-up around a strategic port following guerrilla warnings of a possible return to war.

Government spokesman Mangala Samaraweera said they had lodged a formal complaint with the Norwegian-led team monitoring an Oslo-brokered truce which has been in place since February 2002.

"There have been reports of the Tigers setting up new bunkers near the Trincomalee harbour area," Samaraweera told reporters here.

He said the move by the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) undermined efforts to bring a political end to the island's long-running ethnic conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.

Samaraweera said the government was also concerned about a spate of political assassinations allegedly carried out by the Tamil Tigers in recent weeks in a bid to eliminate rivals.

He said the killings, coupled with the alleged Tiger military build-up in the island's east, were undermining Norway's efforts to help revive stalled peace negotiations between the two sides.

There was no immediate comment from the Tigers.

The government lodged its complaint with the Scandinavian-run Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission and was awaiting a ruling. The mission rules on truce violations, but has no powers to

impose punitive action against offenders.

Samaraweera said despite the tension, they were keen to revive the peace negotiations which have been on hold since April last year. "If we can sit across the table, most of these problems can be resolved," he said.

His remarks came after the Tigers warned last week the country could slip back to war and accused the military of supporting a renegade Tiger leader to divide the rebel movement.

The government has denied giving any backing to breakaway Tiger leader, V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna, who went underground in April following a major Tiger onslaught against him.

Earlier at least three people were shot dead in eastern Sri Lanka overnight in escalating violence between Tamil Tiger rebels and a breakaway faction, officials sources said Wednesday.

The three people were killed in separate attacks blamed on the main rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), police officials said, adding that the victims were believed to be sympathisers of the renegade group.

Gunmen have been targeting supporters of regional commander V. Muralitharan, better known as Karuna, who spearheaded the unprecedented split in March and went underground five weeks later after an onslaught against him.

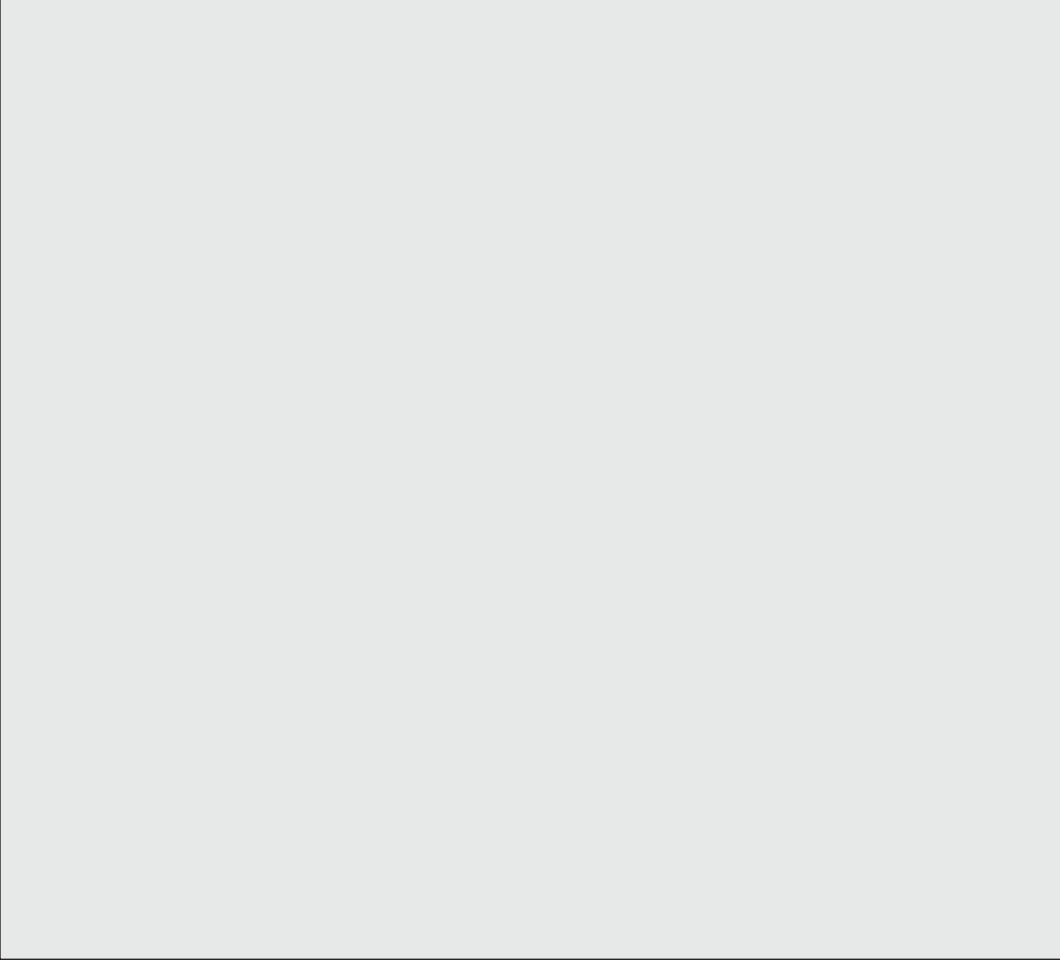


PHOTO: AFP

Activists hold placards as they protest outside the US embassy in Manila yesterday denouncing US troops' presence in the Philippines. Protesters also called on the US government to lift a terrorist tag against the Communist Party of the Philippines, which has caused a delay in peace talks.