

## Indian Railway sets off alarm with mock train crash drill

AFP, Kolkata

A drill to test the preparedness of emergency staff of Indian railways sparked panic and forced officials to issue a public apology Wednesday after they reported a head-on collision between two trains near Kolkata.

"It created confusion among (railways) officials," Southeastern Railways official spokesman Robi Mahapatro said after inquiry centres, acting on an official message sent to their computer network, announced an accident had occurred near the town of Kharagpur.

Mahapatro said a corrective message explaining that the "accident" was merely an exercise was now being relayed to officials dealing with panic-stricken people.

"Many people were misinformed because of the (computer) glitch. A lot of passengers at the Howrah station became panicky and newspaper offices also rang us relentlessly to confirm this so-called news," Mahapatro said.



PHOTO: AFP

A Nepalese woman walks past a soldier manning a checkpoint at Naubise, some 26km southwest of Kathmandu yesterday on the second day of a Maoist inspired blockade. Maoist rebels cut off routes to Nepal's capital Kathmandu Wednesday in their first blockade of the city since they launched their insurgency to overthrow the constitutional monarchy eight years ago.

# Maoist road blockade fuels food price hike

## US condemns 'terrorism' in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

A blockade by Maoist rebels of the Nepalese capital, being enforced through psychological fear rather than physical force, entered a second day yesterday, leading to price rises and a heavy deployment of troops.

Home Minister Purna Bahadur Khadka said the government had increased security around Kathmandu but that there had been no major incidents on Wednesday, the first day of the first Maoist blockade of the capital.

Maoists rebels, who have been fighting since 1996 to overthrow the constitutional monarchy and install a communist republic, have said they would enforce the siege until their various demands are met.

While they have not physically prevented vehicles from entering and leaving Kathmandu, fears of reprisals kept trucks and heavy vehicles off major

highways Wednesday and Thursday

Witnesses and officials said no rebels had been seen policing the highways nor have the rebels set up any physical barriers, although few were willing to challenge the blockade.

Khadka said the Maoists were trying to create a climate of fear in Nepal, where the Maoist insurgency has claimed nearly 10,000 lives.

"It was called mainly to create psychological terror," the ministersaid. "The army and armed police have been deployed for the safety of the people," he added.

Khadka said the authorities were trying to ensure residents start hoarding food, and were also keeping a watch on traders to ensure they did not push up prices unrealistically.

However the president of the Nepal Consumers' Forum, Harendra Shrestha, said that market prices, mainly of vegetables and fruit, had already

increased by some five to 10 percent since Wednesday.

Supply ministry officials said Thursday the government had stockpiled essential commodities which would be enough to last at least a month.

Buses, meanwhile, continued to operate sporadically between Kathmandu and other towns, Khadka said.

Meanwhile, the US State Department on Wednesday decried acts of "terrorism" by Maoist rebels against civilians in Nepal, after the leftist insurgents cut off roads to Kathmandu and bombed a luxury hotel in the Himalayan country's capital.

"The United States firmly rejects the Maoist intimidation, terrorism, and threats of violence against civilians," State Department spokesman Adam Ereli said in a statement.

## India rules out direct dealing with Iraqi kidnappers

AFP, New Delhi

India's junior foreign minister said yesterday efforts were underway to free three Indian truck drivers held hostage by Iraqi insurgents but ruled out direct negotiations with the captors.

The main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party has accused the government of not doing enough to free the Indians held hostage in Iraq since July 21.

"We are carefully dealing with the situation," the Minister of State for External Affairs E. Ahamed, told parliament.

But "the government of India has decided there will be no direct dialogue with the kidnappers and under no circumstances are we going to have a dialogue with them," Ahamed said.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said in a separate statement to parliament: "Efforts that need to be made are being made but I cannot say the hostages will be released tomorrow."

## INDIAN POLICEMAN SAYS

# Gujarat bloodshed fuelled by local govt

AFP, Ahmedabad

A top police official has testified that anti-Muslim riots that raged in India's Gujarat state two years ago were backed by its ruling Hindu nationalist government, it was revealed Wednesday.

The man's 172-page testimony was unveiled a day after India's Supreme Court reopened 2,000 cases from the riots which claimed the lives of more than 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, in the western Indian state.

In his testimony Gujarat police official R. B. Sreekumar said Hindu militant groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Bajrang Dal were given a free hand to stir up violence after 59 Hindus were burned alive in a train allegedly torched by a Muslim mob in February 2002.

The state is still ruled by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party), which then governed India.

"The VHP, Dal and fraternal bodies had given a call on February 27, 2002 for observing a state-wide strike on

February 28 and this was supported by the BJP.

"This created an atmosphere conducive for mobilisation of Hindu mobs, particularly in communally-sensitive areas of the state," Sreekumar said in his testimony to a two-judge panel probing the sectarian violence that raged for months in Gujarat.

"The Hindu communal organisations, particularly the VHP and Dal had left no stones turned to whip up the sentiments of the Hindu community by projecting Muslims as a community responsible for the (train) carnage," the testimony said.

The document also accused a section of state police of colluding with Hindu mobs that targeted Muslims and their property in Gujarat during the bloodbath.

"Such officers have become quite adept in doing the art of deceptive law enforcement for the benefit of their political friends, who ensure their placements, and continuance in their choicest executive posts, at the cost and spirit of the laws of the land," it said.

## Myanmar seeks to soothe concern over Suu Kyi

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar yesterday sought to soothe UN concerns over the detention of democracy icon Aung San Suu Kyi after the world body's secretary general Kofi Annan condemned the military regime over its claimed democracy drive.

The junta said it appreciated and respected the views of Annan after he criticised the failure to consult the opposition in the seven-step "roadmap" to democracy that has been dismissed as a sham by international critics.

The military regime, which has ruled since a 1962 coup, said it would take "constructive" suggestions into account as it moved towards its claimed goal of multi-party elections.

"The Government of Myanmar appreciates and respects the views and opinion of the United Nations Secretary General," it said in a statement.

"With the view to due process, the Government of Myanmar welcomes any constructive remarks and suggestions and shall take them into consideration as we move forward in reaching our common goals."

## China accuses Taiwan of seeking to dampen warming Sino-US ties

AFP, Beijing

China yesterday urged the United States not to be duped by the "tricks" of Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian who it said would use US stopovers enroute to Latin America to sabotage Sino-American ties.

Chen will transit Hawaii on August 29 on his way to Panama and stop in Seattle on September 3 on the way back home from Belize.

"The Taiwan administration is using the excuse of stopovers to try and split China and violate Sino-US relations," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

"This is a trick they have used before. We urge the US side not to allow ranking Taiwan officials to carry out splittist activities on the excuse of a stopover."

Chen's trip comes at a time of heightened tensions between China and Taiwan, who have been bitter rivals since their split in 1949.

China regards Taiwan as part of its territory awaiting reunification, by force if necessary, and angrily opposes any overseas visit by officials from the

island.

It is particularly sensitive about Chen, who has been pushing a pro-independence agenda.

A transit by Chen in New York last October en route to Panama provoked warnings of dire consequences for Sino-US ties.

While in Panama, Chen met US Secretary of State Colin Powell, drawing further loud protests from Beijing.

The United States has maintained a "one China" policy since switching its diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing in 1979.

However, it maintains close economic and defence ties with Taipei and remains the leading arms supplier to the island.

Latin America is a major battleground of the decades-old diplomatic tug-of-war between Taiwan and China, with 13 of the 26 countries that recognise Taipei rather than Beijing being in Latin America.

China refuses to have any diplomatic links with countries that recognise Taiwan.



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters demonstrate outside the British High Commission in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo yesterday demanding international condemnation of Tamil Tiger rebels for the slaying of political rivals. Similar demonstrations were staged outside several other foreign diplomatic missions in the capital. The protestors from a pro-government Tamil party say dozens of its members have been gunned down by Tiger rebels amid international supported peace moves which remain suspended since April last year.

## Chief of pro-Pak rebel group killed in Kashmir

AFP, Srinagar

Indian security forces shot dead the head of a pro-Pakistan Muslim rebel group while suspected separatists killed three people as new violence flared in Kashmir, officials said yesterday.

The rebel chief, Manzoor-ul-Islam, also known as Darjee, was one of the "most wanted militants" in the region, India's Border Security Force said.

Darjee, who headed the pro-Pakistan Jamiat-ul-Mujahedin rebel group active in Kashmir since 1990, died in a clash late Wednesday with troops and police on the outskirts of Srinagar, summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir state which is in the grip of a 15-year revolt against New Delhi's rule.

An assault rifle and grenades were found in the rebel chief's car, the statement said. A second militant managed to flee, the security force said.

Also overnight Wednesday, police said suspected rebels shot dead three Muslims, including a candidate, Ali Mohammed Dar, who unsuccessfully contested Kashmir's 2002 state polls as an independent.



PHOTO: AFP

A destroyed boathouse is seen on Captiva Island Wednesday in Captiva, Florida. The death toll from Hurricane Charley rose to 20 and 439,000 homes remained without power five days after the storm devastated southwest Florida, state officials said.

## Afghan factional fighting rages on High casualties reported

AFP, Kabul

Pitched battles that broke out last weekend between the forces of warlord Ismael Khan and rival factional militia in western Afghanistan's Herat province caused high casualties on both sides, the local intelligence chief said yesterday.

"Casualties on both sides are very high," said Nasir Ahmad Allaoui, addressing a press conference.

He said 21 people were buried Thursday in Herat city, where he said thousands turned out for special services in the grand mosque.

Local police chief Ziauddin Muhmoodi said three people had already been buried in Herat and 11 others in Shindand district, one of the scenes of fierce fighting in recent days.

He said 20 more bodies would be carried to Herat's provincial capital, also named Herat, either Thursday or Friday.

"Several hundred people are missing," Muhmoodi added.

Meanwhile, an Afghan defence ministry official said a ceasefire in place

since Tuesday afternoon between the forces of Ismael Khan, an ethnic Tajik and his Pashtun rival Amanullah Khan was still holding.

"Government officials are going to resume their work," and the regular Afghan army, which is enforcing the ceasefire, as well as the police are occupying the combat zone of Adrakand district, about 85 kilometres (50 miles) south of Herat, ministry spokesman Mohammad Zaher Azimi said.

He said Amanullah Khan's forces were no longer in control of Shindand district, 120 kilometres south or Herat, where fighting first broke out.

However, a spokesman for the Pashtun forces, Abdul Karim Afghan, denied the report.

The weekend clashes highlight Afghanistan's fragile security situation as it prepares for its historic presidential elections on October 9.

# 11 killed in South Ossetia fighting

AFP, Tbilisi

Eleven people were reported killed yesterday in fighting in the separatist Georgian region of South Ossetia as Georgia and Russia continued to joust over who was to blame for the conflict.

Speaking on television, Interior Minister Irakli Orkuashvili said there was heavy fighting in the region overnight and said Georgian troops had killed and recovered the bodies of eight Cossacks fighting with South Ossetian rebels.

The corpses however were not seen by independent sources, and a spokeswoman for the breakaway South Ossetia administration denied the Georgian claim.

"The Georgian interior minister's statement that eight Cossacks were killed near Tskhinvali last night is not true," spokeswoman Irina Gagloyeva said, quoted by Interfax news agency.

Gagloyeva told AFP that two local police officers were wounded in the fighting but "no one was killed."

Separately, Georgia revised downward its own earlier report that six Georgian troops were killed in the fighting, saying that in fact only three had died.

An unnamed Georgian defence ministry official quoted by Interfax news agency said seven servicemen were also wounded, two of them seriously.

Officials in Georgia and South Ossetia routinely distort facts surrounding the conflict in comments to media, and independent verification of official statements is often impossible.

## Indian sisters shoot dead each other's hubby

AFP, Mumbai

Two sisters have shot dead each other's husband in an upscale Mumbai neighbourhood in an apparent dispute over property, police said yesterday.

Farida Ahmad and her younger sister Gazala, who uses only one name, have been arrested after the killings, which took place early Wednesday.

"They had a blazing row and the crime was committed in the heat of the moment," deputy police commissioner Amitabh Gupta told AFP.

"The dispute was probably over property, but we're yet to ascertain all the facts."

According to Gupta, Farida used her husband's revolver to shoot dead her brother-in-law. Her sister then retaliated by snatching the gun out of Farida's hands and pumping three bullets into its owner.

# By-polls win makes Shaukat Aziz closer to become Pak PM

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's Finance Minister Shaukat Aziz was yesterday poised to become prime minister after landslide by-election wins got him into the parliament's lower house.

The opposition claimed the exercise was rigged and accused police of harassing activists.

Unofficial results from the election commission showed huge margins to Aziz in the northwest Punjab seat of Attock and the deep south seat of Tharpakar.

Both seats had been vacated by ruling party MPs to make way for Aziz to move from the upper to lower house of parliament.

He won 76,161 votes in Attock to the 29,443 votes of his nearest opponent from ex-premier Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP).

In Tharpakar, Aziz far outpolled his nearest opponent, also from PPP, winning 152,102 votes to the PPP's 10,732 vote, according to unofficial

results published by the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan.

The election commission will declare final results later Thursday, Information Minister Sheikh Rashid said.

Aziz, 55, a technocrat with no political party background, was picked by President Pervez Musharraf in June to become premier, but he had to win election to the lower house in order to fill the post.

A rubber-stamp vote by the 342-seat house next week will precede his swearing in to replace Zafarullah Jamali, who stepped down abruptly in June.

Aziz and his new cabinet will be sworn in either on August 22 or August 25, Rashid said.

The swearing-in must take place before or after Afghan President Hamid Karzai's visit on August 23 and 24, the minister said.