

Poverty rate up among Asians in US

AFP, Washington

The poverty rate among Asians in the United States has increased even though they are relatively better off than the other foreign-born populations, a government survey showed Thursday.

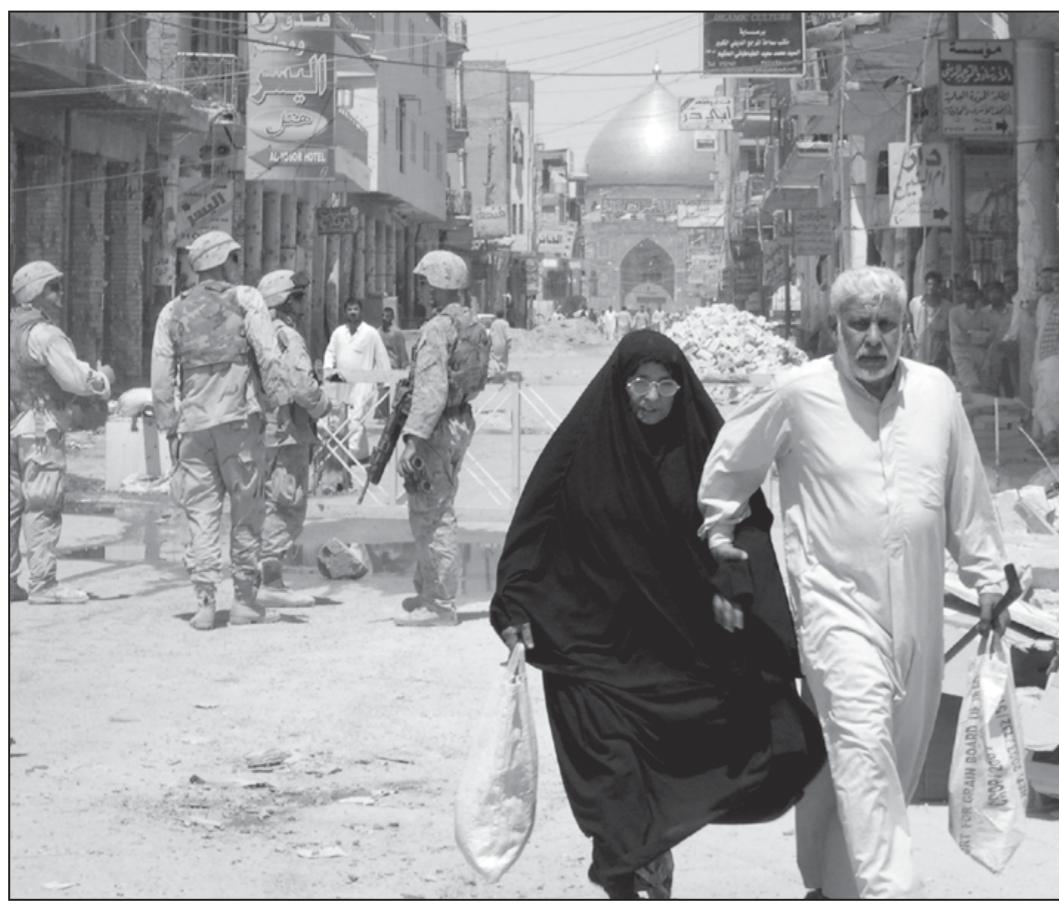
The Asian poverty rate in the world's most developed country increased from 10 percent in 2002 to 11.8 percent in 2003, according to the Census Bureau.

But Daniel Weinberg, the Census Bureau's chief of housing and household economic statistics, played down the increase, saying it might be related to the small size of the Asian population.

Asians account for 3.6 percent of the US population.

"When you have a relatively small group, the numbers will move up and down from year to year, and occasionally become significant," he said. "I wouldn't single out Asians as particularly special," Weinberg said.

A key finding of the survey was that the number of Americans living in poverty had risen 1.3 million to 35.9 million people in 2003, pushing up the poverty rate to 12.5 percent from 12.1 percent. It is the third year in a row that it has increased. The rate among Americans is the highest since 1998, when 12.7 percent lived in poverty.



An man drags his wife past a US checkpoint on a street leading to the shrine of Imam Ali (background) in Najaf yesterday. Rebel Iraqi Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr officially handed over the shrine to the Marjaia, the top Shia religious authority, a representative of Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani announced, who received the key to the shrine and locked it after the departure of all of Sadr's men.

US judge rules abortion ban unconstitutional

AP, New York

A federal judge declared the Partial-Birth Abortion Ban Act unconstitutional because it does not contain an exception to protect a woman's health, something the Supreme Court said is required in laws prohibiting types of abortion.

US District Judge Richard C. Casey issued his ruling Thursday the second such ruling in three months even as he concluded the procedure "gruesome, brutal, barbaric and uncivilized."

The law, signed last November, banned a procedure known to doctors as intact dilation and extraction and called partial-birth abortion by abortion foes. The fetus is partially removed from the womb, and the skull is punctured or crushed.

Louise Melling, director of the ACLU's Reproductive Freedom Project, said her group was thrilled by the ruling.

"We can only hope as we have decision after decision after decision striking these bans, saying they endanger women's health, that the legislatures will finally stop," she said.

On June 1, US District Judge Phyllis Hamilton in San Francisco also found the law unconstitutional, saying it

Maoists ask Nepali polls officials to quit or face consequences

AP, Kathmandu

Maoist rebels have warned all four members of Nepal's Election Commission to quit their posts by tomorrow or "be ready to face the consequences," a rebel statement said.

The rebels, who are fighting for a communist republic in Nepal, oppose elections proposed for next year by King Gyanendra, who sacked the elected government in October 2002 for "incompetence" and handpicked a new government.

"The old regime (monarchy) is trying to strengthen its hand in the administration by holding the elections at gunpoint by mid-April next year with the help of the army," said the statement.

"The EC is making preparations for the fourth national general elections by the end of March next year by exploiting the Nepalese people," added the statement, which was issued in the name of Maoist Action Team chief Prabha Kiran and Task Force commander Bhusan, who uses

only one name.

Although the government headed by Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba is campaigning for the vote, Nepalese civil society, human rights organisations and opposition leaders say polls cannot be held until an agreement is reached with the rebels, who control vast tracts of the country side in the impoverished Himalayan kingdom.

However, EC officials said they had not received any letters from the rebels demanding the resignation of Chief Election Commissioner Keshav Raj Rajbhandari and his three colleagues.

The commissioners held an emergency meeting Friday to discuss the Maoist statement but no details of their deliberations were immediately available.

The EC had recently started discussions with political leaders for the staging of the vote, which is overdue by almost two years, and is gearing to open bureaus in all 75 districts of the kingdom.

It is also in the process of drawing up

voters' lists, an EC official said.

The coalition government has already allocated 1.4 billion rupees (20.16 million dollars) for the election, a finance ministry official said.

The latest threat from the Maoists, whose uprising since 1996 has claimed more than 10,000 lives, follows a weeklong blockade of the capital Kathmandu which saw traffic to and from the ancient capital dropping to a trickle and prices of fresh produce rocketing.

The blockade, enforced through fear rather than force, ended Wednesday but the rebels warned they would reimpose it in a month if their demands were not met.

The Maoists, who are inspired by Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong, had said the blockade was to press the government to free colleagues allegedly in detention and to stop classifying the guerrillas as terrorists.

'US army report faults general in prison abuse'

REUTERS, New York

It is one of two reports this week that greatly expanded the scope of culpability in the prisoner abuse scandal. A panel headed by former Defence Secretary James Schlesinger issued the other report.

According to the classified portions of the generals' report, procedures that Sanchez approved violated standard Army doctrine and the Geneva Conventions, the newspaper said, though military officials and others in the administration of President Bush have said the conventions applied to all Iraq prisoners.

For example, an order Sanchez issued last Oct. 12, while not authorizing abuse, effectively opened the door at Abu Ghraib for interrogation techniques, used in dozens of cases involving dozens of soldiers, that Pentagon investigators have characterized as abusive, the newspaper said.

Among the techniques that Sanchez did not sufficiently prohibit were isolation and the use of dogs in interrogation, the newspaper said, citing the report.

16 injured in blasts outside mosque in Maharashtra

AFP, Mumbai

At least 16 people were injured in two separate blasts outside mosques during Juma (Friday) prayers in India's western state of Maharashtra, police said.

A police spokesman told AFP by telephone from Parbhani town, about 500km from the state capital Mumbai, that youths on a motorcycle had thrown a bomb into a mosque at 1.55 pm (0825 GMT) at nearby Purna village.

"Thirteen people were injured and they have been admitted to the hospital," the spokesman said, adding that superintendent of police Rajesh Kumar More had rushed to the site with additional forces.

He did not know the nature of the injuries.

Just 10 minutes earlier, a blast took place outside Kadri mosque on a busy market street in Jalsa town, around 400km from Mumbai, in which three people were hurt, another police spokesman said.

'Assam blasts aimed at sparking panic'

AFP, Guwahati

A spate of bombings which killed six people and injured scores in the past two days is aimed at triggering panic in the revolt-hit Indian state of Assam, an official said yesterday.

Police have blamed eight separate bombings and grenade attacks in the oil and timber-rich province on separatist rebels from the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).

"The ULFA wants to create terror and scare the people of Assam so that they are frightened to come out openly to protest the recent incidents of violence unleashed by the militants," Assam chief minister Tarun Gogoi told AFP.

On August 15 ULFA militants triggered a landmine explosion in the eastern district of Dhemaji killing 15 people, most of them students attending an Indian Independence Day parade.

"After the blast at Dhemaji the people of Assam took to the streets to condemn Police Khagen Sharma.

the ULFA's nefarious designs at targeting civilians," Gogoi said, adding that the dominant guerrilla group was now attacking "soft targets" to stem anti-rebel protests.

On Thursday unidentified attackers in separate incidents blew up a bus and a vehicle carrying troops going on leave with their families and staged four separate grenade attacks.

The attacks killed a total of six people and injured 63.

"Definitely there is fear in the minds of the people as the ULFA is going berserk. What happens if the militants simply throw a grenade on the street?" asked Hemanta Nath, a physician in Assam's main city Guwahati.

Soldiers were on guard across the state Friday while police and paramilitary troops blocked all entry and exit routes to Guwahati, police said.

"Heavy security has been provided and we are devising new strategies to deal with the ULFA's urban terror tactics," said Assam Inspector General of Police Khagen Sharma.

INDIAN TRUCKERS' STRIKE

Delhi invites transport union for talks

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian government yesterday invited a transport union spearheading a truckers strike for talks in a bid to resolve a dispute over a controversial tax, officials said.

The government officials said Finance Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram invited transport union leaders for the talks as the truckers warned they were prepared to continue the strike for three months to force New Delhi to yield to their demands.

B. N. Dhumal, president of the All India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC), India's largest transport union, also warned against coercive measures to break the strike, which entered its seventh day yesterday.

"If our demand is not met immediately, we are willing to continue this strike for three months," said Dhumal following the arrest of a regional transport union leader affiliated to the

AIMTC, which has three million truck owners on its books.

The union argues that it is not feasible for haulers personally to collect a 10 percent service tax from booking agents, suppliers or customers in line with guidelines unveiled in the national budget for the 2004-2005 fiscal year.

It also argues the flat rate of tax will fuel inflation and hit the transport sector.

The Press Trust of India, meanwhile, said the week-old strike had pushed up prices of goods particularly perishable commodities by as much as 30 percent, adding the government had set up an agency to monitor the situation.

The strike has also affected industrial production and movement of finished goods from factories to the market, transport ministry officials said.

Meanwhile al-Qaeda and its supporters are making effective use of the media to drum up support in the Muslim world, capitalising on anger over the war in Iraq and continuing to try for a potentially devastating chemical or biological bomb attack, the report

UN REPORT SAYS

Effort to cripple al-Qaeda not working

AFP, United Nations

The threat of more al-Qaeda terror attacks demands an organised global response but UN-led sanctions and other measures are not working, according to a damning new report by experts at the United Nations.

The experts call into question many of the basic assumptions in the war on terror, including efforts to cut off the flow of money to would-be terrorists even though all but the most spectacular attacks, such as September 11, can be carried out at little cost.

"There is no prospect of an early end to attacks from al-Qaeda associated terrorists," it said. "Using minimal resources and exploiting worldwide publicity, they have managed to create an international sense of crisis."

Efforts to block the sale of weapons and the movement of terror suspects --

cornerstones of the UN sanctions regime against al-Qaeda and Afghanistan's former Taliban rulers -- have not been effective, the study said.

It recalled that the Security Council first determined that al-Qaeda merited a united world response in October 1999 - two years before the 2001 attacks on the United States that brought down the World Trade Center.

After September 11, the council then passed a resolution requiring all UN member nations to freeze the assets, block arms sales and restrict the travel of any person or group believed to be linked to terrorism.

But the experts found that not even one nation had reported stopping either the travel or the sale of weapons to anyone on the UN list of those suspected of links to al-Qaeda or the Taliban.

3,000-yr-old bodies found in Pacific

AFP, Sydney

Archaeologists have discovered a 3,000-year-old cemetery in Vanuatu holding secrets about the first humans to colonise the South Pacific, Australian researchers said yesterday.

A team from the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra said 13 headless skeletons of the Lapita people had been unearthed in what was described as the oldest cemetery ever found in the region.

Traces of the Lapita, considered the ancestors of all Pacific Islanders beyond the Solomons, have been found in more than 100 other archaeological digs across the region.

But finding remains of Lapita people is so rare that until the Vanuatu discovery, many archaeologists believed they must have buried their dead at sea, said ANU archaeologist Matthew Spriggs.

MALAYSIAN OPPOSITION SAYS

US war on terror aims to paralyse Islam, seize oil

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

congress.

"Their evil motive is none other than to paralyse the rise of Islam and to plunder the oil wealth," Abdul Hadi told supporters in Kota Baru in northeast Kelantan, the only one of Malaysia's 13 states controlled by the Islamists.

Now they are trying to interfere with Islam's education by forcing Islamic countries to amend the teachings of Islam and remove jihad teachings from Islam so that the world is left only with a US version of Islam and not the teachings of the Prophet," he said.

He vowed that PAS would not compromise its goal of changing the secular constitution and establishing Islamic rule if it came to power in this multi-religious country.

Bush, Kerry bow to McCain's wishes on ads

AP, New York

President Bush and Sen. John Kerry bowed to the wishes of popular maverick John McCain on Thursday, as the president embraced the Republican senator's legal fight against big-money special interest groups airing negative ads and the Democratic nominee scrapped a commercial that featured McCain.

Their bitter fight over Vietnam-era military service took a compelling new twist as Kerry stood by the central charge in his ad that Bush has used smear tactics to undercut the Democrat's valorous combat record. "I am absolutely telling you the God's honest truth about what happened and what took place over there," Kerry told supporters in Minnesota.

He has been on the defensive since a group financed by Bush supporters, Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, aired a television commercial early this month accusing Kerry of exaggerating his wartime experience.



A skeleton with three skulls sitting on its chest is uncovered after archaeologists discovered a 3,000 year-old cemetery in Vanuatu, holding secrets about the first humans to colonise the South Pacific.