

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 accounts 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.



PHOTO: AFP

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 Marja'iyi, 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 called the procedure "gruesome, brutal, barbaric and uncivilised."

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

AFP, 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 countryside 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 bureaux 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

Classified parts of the US Army generals' report on abuses at Abu Ghraib prison say the former top commander in Iraq approved the use in that country of severe interrogation practices intended to be limited to captives in Afghanistan and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, the New York Times said yesterday.

The report also says that by issuing and revising interrogation rules three times in 30 days, the commander, Lt. Gen. Ricardo Sanchez, and his staff created such confusion that interrogators' actions violated the Geneva Conventions, which they understood poorly to begin with, the newspaper said.

The Times said it received classified parts of the 171-page report from an unnamed senior Defence Department official.

The original version of the report by Maj. Gen. George Fay and Lt. Gen. Anthony Jones was released by the Pentagon on Wednesday.

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 Jalna 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 Asom (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

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 cover 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.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian soldiers stand guard at a railway track as a train arrives near an oil refinery outside Guwahati, the capital of northeastern state of Assam yesterday. Suspected United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) militants triggered two explosions late Thursday which injured three people and ripped up a railway track near the oil refinery.

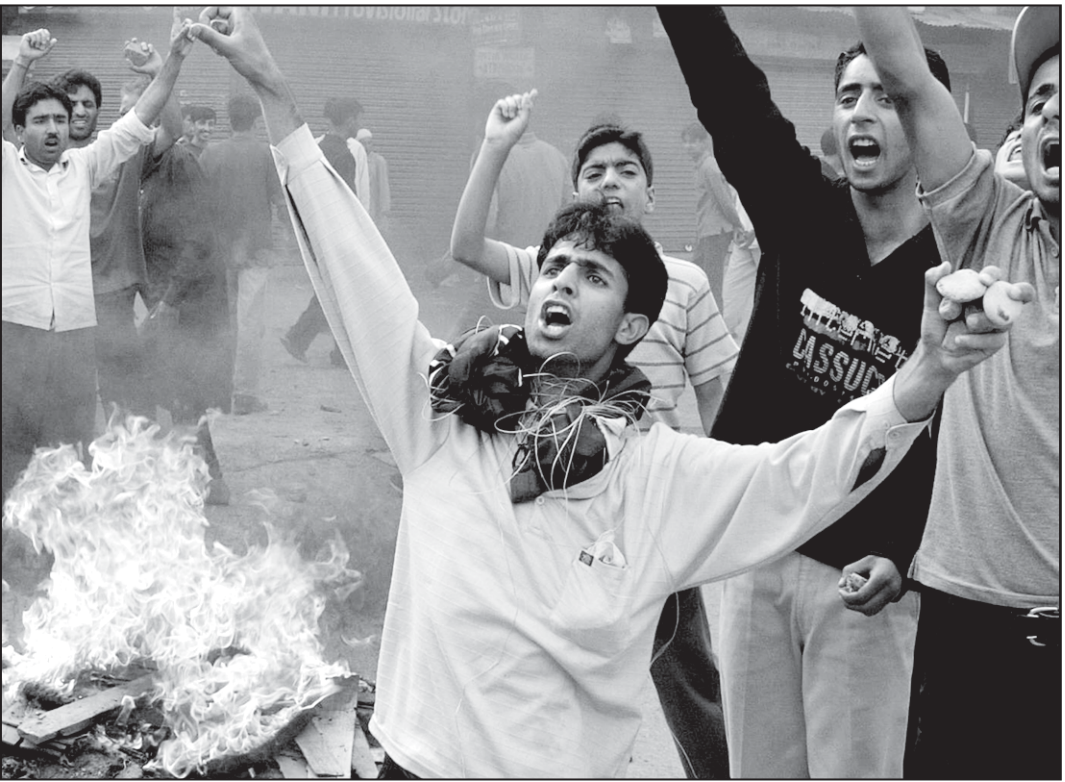


PHOTO: AFP

Kashmiris shout anti-US slogans as they stand beside a burning tyre during a protest in Srinagar yesterday. Hundreds of protestors clashed with security forces as they demonstrated to denounce American military actions in Iraq and clashed with the riot police.

MALAYSIAN OPPOSITION SAYS US war on terror aims to paralyse Islam, seize oil

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's Islamic opposition leader yesterday accused the United States of using its global anti-terror war as a cover to paralyse the rise of Islam and to gain control of oil reserves.

Islamic Party (PAS) president Abdul Hadi Awang said Washington and its allies were "openly warring against Islam" and charged that the US-led invasion of Iraq was fuelled by "hatred towards Islam and greed for oil in the Arab world."

"They are not satisfied with being gangsters in the Persian Gulf... they are behaving like bullies in the Gulf of Thailand because in Southeast Asia too, there is Islam and oil," he told the opening session of a three-day PAS congress.

"Their evil motive is none other than to paralyze 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 in Islamic 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.

The assembly of more than 1,000 delegates is PAS's biggest gathering since it suffered a humiliating defeat in general elections in March at the hands of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's National Front coalition.

PAS, which aims to turn Malaysia into a theocratic state, lost a swathe of seats in the national parliament, was ousted from power in Terengganu state and managed to retain control of Kelantan only with the slimmest of majorities.

Abdul Hadi accused Abdullah's ruling coalition, which is led by Muslims but includes parties representing non-Islamic ethnic minorities, of pandering to US ambitions in the region and putting Malaysia's sovereignty at stake.

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.



PHOTO: AFP

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

3,000-yr-old bodies found in Pacific

AFP, Sydney

Archeologists have discovered a 3,000-year-old cemetery in Vanuatu holding secrets about the first humans to colonize 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 archeological digs across the region.

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