

Judge gunned down in southern Thailand

THE NATION/ ANN,Bangkok

A Pattani judge Friday became the first high-ranking official killed by suspected insurgents, one of whom confessed his involvement immediately after his arrest.

Rapin Ruangkeow, 37, a Pattani provincial court judge, was shot seven times in the head, torso and chest by three gunmen on a motorcycle while his car was stopped at an intersection in Muang district's Tambon Sa-barang.

His wife, Duangnapha, and child were in the car, but not injured.

The gunmen fled the scene, but left behind their motorbike. Rapin died in hospital.

Police arrested Abdullah Bali, 20, a student at the private Islamic Pattana Suksa Wittaya School, who confessed that he and two friends killed Rapin.

It was not known if Abdullah was the gunman.

Justice Minister Pongthep Thepkanyana said two other suspects were also captured, but he did not provide any further details. He said that all three have confessed to the crime, and they also admitted being behind a number of violent incidents in the region, including assassinations and arson attacks.



PHOTO: AFP

Nusrat Shahbaz (R), the wife of former Punjab chief minister Shahbaz Sharif, brother of deposed premier Nawaz Sharif, leaves Lahore International Airport following her return to Pakistan yesterday. The Sharif brothers and their father, wives and children were exiled in Saudi Arabia in December 2000, 14 months after Nawaz Sharif was deposed by Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf in a coup in 1999.

S Korea renews pledge not to develop nukes

AFP, Seoul

South Korea yesterday made a fresh pledge not to develop nuclear weapons as the UN nuclear watchdog was set to send a team of inspectors to look into the country's controversial past nuclear tests.

"The government hereby declares again that it has no will to develop or possess nuclear weapons," the National Security Council said in a statement.

"The government will stick to the principle of nuclear transparency and step up international cooperation," it said in a four-point statement.

The statement followed a meeting of the National Security Council, chaired by Unification Minister Chung Dong-Young. The meeting also drew together cabinet ministers in charge of foreign affairs, defence, science and technology, and intelligence.

Chung read the statement at a nationally televised press conference, also attended by other cabinet ministers.

N Korea vows never to dismantle nukes

US must drop its hostile policy first

REUTERS, Seoul

North Korea will never dismantle its nuclear arsenal and will not resume talks on its atomic programmes unless the United States drops its "hostile" policy, the North's official KCNA news agency said yesterday.

In a rare commentary that carries considerable weight, KCNA said disclosures about unsanctioned nuclear experiments in South Korea in 2000 and 1982 showed Washington applied double standards, criticising the North but understanding the South.

"It is self-evident that the resumption of the talks can no longer be discussed unless the US drops its hostile policy based on double standards toward the DPRK and that the latter can never dismantle its nuclear deterrent force," said KCNA.

The North's official name is the Democratic People's Republic of

Korea.

A commentary from KCNA carries an official imprimatur but also allows Pyongyang the ambiguity to offer a different interpretation through diplomatic channels.

The United States, South Korea, China, Japan and Russia have been seeking at so far fruitless six-party talks to persuade North Korea to give up its atomic ambitions completely in exchange for security guarantees and energy aid.

North Korea has rejected Washington's demand for complete, verifiable and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of its projects.

"What infuriates the DPRK is that the US has so far shut its eyes to the secret nuclear activities of its allies under its nuclear umbrella but has pressurized the DPRK to accept the CVID," said KCNA.

"This means that the six countries having either access to nuclear weapons or perfect capability to

develop them sat at the negotiating table to discuss the DPRK's nuclear issue only."

It said the South's test underscored US double standards.

"The US transfers nuclear technology to its allies and connives at their development and access to nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, it makes far-fetched assertion without any convincing evidence that the DPRK has pursued clandestine uranium enrichment," it said.

The North Korea nuclear crisis began in October 2002 when Washington said the North had said it had an enrichment programme. Pyongyang has subsequently denied saying this.

Earlier on Saturday in Seoul, South Korea declared it had no plans to develop or possess nuclear weapons, but said it would pursue scientific atomic research transparently in cooperation with the UN nuclear watchdog.

India eases visa rules for Pakistanis

AFP, New Delhi

India announced yesterday it will grant visas more easily to Pakistani journalists, doctors, academics and elderly people in the latest peace move between the rival neighbours.

India will also let Pakistanis travel more extensively in the country by permitting 12 destinations on each visit instead of the present three, a foreign ministry statement said.

Pakistani journalists with at least three years' experience at "national or international media of repute" will be eligible for multiple-entry visas and not be required to report to police, the statement said.

Pakistanis over the age of 65 will also be exempt from checking in with police, as will academics,

who will now be allowed multiple-entry visas, it said.

"It is a unilateral measure by the government of India to promote people-to-people contacts," said foreign ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna.

"We hope the Pakistani government will also be able to take such measures," Sarna told reporters.

Indians and Pakistanis wishing to visit the other country, including the thousands cut off from relatives when the subcontinent was divided in 1947, usually endure lengthy red tape for visas and are kept under close surveillance during their stays. With the exception of correspondents from leading national news organisations, Indian and Pakistani journalists are generally granted visas only to cover specific events such as bilateral meetings.

Visa regulations have steadily relaxed since Pakistan and India launched a cautious diplomatic drive last year to repair relations after a near-war over divided Kashmir.

Thousands of Indians entered Pakistan this year to watch a tour of the Indian cricket team, with many of the fans raving at the hospitality they encountered.

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf are due to meet later this month on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in the two countries' highest-level meeting since a change of government in India in May.

Manmohan tries to sort out differences with Marxist allies

AFP, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh promised his Marxist allies yesterday to consider their views after the leftists protested the government's economic reforms including allowing more foreign investment.

Singh said he used the 90-minute luncheon meeting with Marxist leaders to discuss the "working of the coalition" and prevent misunderstandings.

"Of course, we are committed to take all our colleagues and all coalition partners into confidence and we will fulfil their expectations," Singh said, as quoted by the Press Trust of India news agency.

The leftists, whose 61 MPs provide Singh crucial support without participating in the government, have accused the administration of straying from a policy frame-

work agreed upon after the upset election victory in May over the Hindu nationalists.

"Our differences are there in public and the government knows it," Marxist leader Sitaram Yechuri said after the meeting, which was also attended by Sonia Gandhi, leader of Singh's Congress party.

"The prime minister will discuss these issues with us at the meeting of the United Progressive Alliance-Left coordination committee after his return from abroad," Yechuri said.

Singh leaves Sunday for Britain and the United States.

The Marxists have protested a government proposal to raise the caps for foreign investment to 74 percent from 49 percent in telecommunications, to 49 percent from 40 percent in aviation and to 49 percent from 26 percent in insurance.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian Law and Justice Minister H.R. Bhardwaj (R) offers a bunch of flowers to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh yesterday in New Delhi during the opening session of a conference of Indian Chief Ministers and Chief Justices of all Indian High Courts.

Pak president heads for 1st meet with Manmohan

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf leaves today for crucial peace talks with Indian Premier Manmohan Singh on the sidelines of a UN gathering as the leaders of the nuclear-armed neighbors meet for the first time since India's change of government.

His meeting with Singh at the opening of the UN General Assembly next week is expected to give a push to the sluggish dialogue on Kashmir, a foreign ministry official said.

"It is going to be an important meeting," Information Minister Sheikh Rashid, who will accompany Musharraf, told AFP.

"It will be the first time the two leaders are going to see each other. People in Pakistan and India are praying for the success of the meeting between the two leaders," he said.

The ongoing Kashmir dispute was the focus of inconclusive talks by both Pakistani and Indian foreign

secretaries and foreign ministers earlier this month in New Delhi, though both sides jointly expressed the hope the dialogue would lead to a resolution.

Islamabad is keen on a timeframe for progress on Kashmir, the Himalayan state divided between Pakistan and India that has been the cause of two of their wars.

India wants an end to what it calls cross border infiltration into its zone of the disputed state.

A Muslim separatist insurgency in Indian-controlled Kashmir has claimed tens of thousands of lives since 1989. Delhi has accused Islamabad of supporting the militants, while Pakistan says it only gives political, diplomatic and moral support to a legitimate freedom struggle.

In a meeting with US President George W. Bush, Musharraf is expected to urge Washington to take a larger behind-the-scenes role in settling the Kashmir dispute, the foreign ministry official said.

Musharraf to keep his uniform

AFP, Washington

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf said in an interview published here Friday that he might renege on his pledge to step down as military chief because "the vast majority" of the Pakistani people "want me in uniform."

Musharraf said that conditions in the country had changed since he promised last December to leave the army as part of a deal with opposition lawmakers that would allow him to remain president through 2007.

"It's primarily the security of Pakistan, the internal conditions," Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in 1999, said in an interview with the Washington Post.

"There's too much happening around," he continued, citing terrorist threats and potentially divisive battles over the sharing of limited water resources.

UN vote on Sudan hinges on China

AP, United Nations

A UN Security Council vote on whether to threaten sanctions against Sudan hinged on China and other opponents who fear that the specter of punishment could ruin efforts to end a crisis that has killed more than 50,000 and spawned 1.2 million refugees.

The United States submitted a final draft with final changes Friday, making minor changes in a bid to win support from China and other opponents including Russia.

The last draft still threatens sanctions if the Khartoum government doesn't rein in militias ravaging western Darfur and calls for an international commission to investigate alleged human rights violations and whether or not acts of genocide occurred two issues raised by the opponents.

US Ambassador John Danforth said the United States had at least nine "yes" votes for the resolution,

the minimum needed for adoption, and several council diplomats said there would probably be at least 11 votes in favor.

But it wasn't clear what China, which threatened to veto the original draft, would do about the latest text.

Before the final draft was released, China's UN Ambassador Wang Guangya said Beijing was concerned that the resolution "will be a recipe for failure for the peace talks" aimed at ending the crisis that has killed more than 50,000 people and forced over 1.2 million to flee their homes.

There were signs Sudan already believed that. The talks in Nigeria collapsed Friday and the two sides said no deal was likely soon. Still, Sudan pledged to stick to the terms of an off-violated cease-fire agreement for the Darfur region and said it will allow humanitarian agencies unfettered access to the area where tens of thousands have died.

Iran tests long-range missile as IAEA reviews its N-plan

AFP, Vienna

Iran will test fire a long-range missile yesterday amid fears in the West that Tehran is developing nuclear weapons and an ongoing review by the UN watchdog of the country's atomic energy programme.

State television said Iran's Revolutionary Guards will test fire the missile during military manoeuvres being watched by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, after firing short- and medium-range missiles on Friday.

"The most important part of today's programme consists of the firing of a long-range missile on fictitious enemy positions," the television said.

Iran's state-controlled media have been giving extensive coverage to the manoeuvres in the western part of the country.

The officially stated purpose of these exercises is to "test and evaluate new equipment," try out

"modern tactics" and maintain the "spirit of jihad (holy war) and of defense."

Saturday's report said the missile was a "strategic" one, a term that normally refers to weapons systems designed to strike an enemy at the source of its power, such as its cities, factories, military bases, communications and transport.

The report gave no details on the range or capabilities of the missile.

In August, Tehran tested an enhanced version of its medium-range Shahab-3 missile, which is derived from the North Korean No-dong missile reportedly capable of carrying a 1,000 kilogram (2,250 pound) warhead.

The Shahab-3 was deployed with the Revolutionary Guards air arm in July last year. Although the missile has been paraded with the banner "Israel should be wiped off the map", Iran says it is purely defensive.

The Israeli daily Haaretz recently wrote that the upgraded version had a range of 2,000 kilometers (1,280 miles), whereas the previous version was believed to have a range of 1,300 to 1,700 kilometers.

Whatever the case, the missile is well within the range of Israel, which lies only some 800 kilometres (500 miles) west of Iran.

The United States and Israel claim Iran is using its atomic energy program to secretly develop nuclear weapons, and fear the missiles could be used to carry nuclear warheads.

Tehran vehemently denies charges that it is seeking nuclear weapons, saying its program is purely for civilian purposes.

On Monday, the head of Israeli military intelligence, General Aharon Zeevi, claimed that Iran could be in a position within six months to develop nuclear weapons without outside help.

Florida Supreme Court puts Nader on state ballot

AFP, Tallahassee

The Florida Supreme Court ruled Friday that Ralph Nader can appear on state ballots as a presidential candidate, increasing the chance the maverick contender will again influence the outcome of the presidential election.

The 6-1 ruling ended a legal tussle that saw state election officials printing out two sets of ballots, one containing Nader's name and one without.

"We are relieved with the Supreme Court ruling to enable our candidate to be on the November ballot," said Patrick Slevin, spokesman for the Reform Party of Florida.

"But we are also angry and disappointed we had to go through this process to begin with. This is a black eye for Florida, and it should have never happened."

A lower court judge last week struck Nader from the state ballot, ruling that his association with the Reform Party was not sincere and that the party did not hold a bona fide national convention, as parties are required to do to field a candidate under Florida state law.

But the Supreme Court said state ballot access law is so vague it is impossible to tell if Nader and the Reform Party abused it.



PHOTO: AFP

A young boy survivor of the deadly school hostage taking in Beslan lies in a berth at the railway station in Vladikavkaz yesterday. Dozens of children with relatives left for the resorts in Krasnodar region, where they will undergo rehabilitation following the attack that left nearly 340 people dead, half of them children.

Law enforcers foil terror attack in Moscow

AFP, Moscow

Russian law enforcement agencies have foiled another extremist attack on targets in Moscow, the FSB security agency said yesterday, two weeks after a series of devastating strikes killed more than 400 people within days in the country.

"As part of anti-terror measures in Moscow and Russia, police and the FSB have found and defused explosive devices in cars in Moscow," FSB (ex-KGB) spokesman Sergei Ignatchenko was quoted as saying by the Interfax news agency.

The explosives and mines were discovered in a car after police stopped it late Friday and became suspicious of the driver, who appeared to be under the influence of narcotics, he said.

Under questioning, the man confessed that he was promised 1,000 dollars to drive and park his and another car on Kutuzovsky Prospekt, a major thoroughfare in Moscow that many government officials use to get to their residences, he said.

FSB sappers defused the explosives in one of the vehicles overnight, as residents from neighboring houses were evacuated to a nearby school, NTV reported.

"We were sleeping and got a call around 5:00 am (0100 GMT), I

think," a woman told NTV. "They said there was the threat of a blast... we quickly left."

The detained driver later died in hospital of a heart attack, unnamed police officials told Russian news agencies.

It was not immediately clear whether there were explosives in both of the cars -- some news reports said the second car did not contain any, while others said it contained explosives but no detonators.

The incident came a fortnight after four major attacks on Russian soil, including the school hostage-taking in the southern town of Beslan in which nearly 340 people died, half of them children.

The school was seized a day after a woman suicide bomber blew herself up outside a metro station in Moscow, killing 10 people, and a week after the downing of two planes, which left 90 dead.

Responsibility for all the violence was Friday claimed by notorious Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev, according to a rebel website.

Russia considers the 39-year-old rebel leader its public enemy number one and has offered a 10 million-dollar reward both for Basayev and another, more moderate Chechen rebel chief, Aslan Maskhadov.