



Indian soldiers survey blast damage on a platform of the main railway station in Dimapur yesterday. At least 27 people were killed and 93 wounded, many critically, in four powerful bomb blasts in northeast India, police said.

Pakistan reshuffles top military brass

AFP, Islamabad
Pakistan yesterday promoted two senior military officials to four-star generals, state media reported.

The head of Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, Lieutenant General Ehsanul Haq, was upgraded to general and appointed Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, the state-run Associated Press of Pakistan said.

The military commander of southern Sindh province, Lieutenant General Ahsan Saleem Hayat, was promoted to general and appointed the army's vice chief, it said quoting the military spokesman's office without giving any further details.

They will replace the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, General Aziz Khan, and Vice Chief of army staff, General Yusuf Khan, who are retiring this month.

In June, gunmen opened fire on a convoy carrying Hayat, killing seven soldiers, three policemen and a pedestrian but missing the senior general in Pakistan's commercial capital Karachi.

Officials have blamed al-Qaeda-linked group Jund Allah, or Army of God, for the attack.

Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf still heads the powerful army and wears a four-star general's uniform. Musharraf, who seized power in a bloodless coup in October 1999, is under pressure to

US asks Lanka, Tigers to resume talks quickly

AFP, Washington

The United States called late Friday for a speedy return to peace talks by the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers as the rebels began a week-long meeting to prepare for a next round of negotiations.

The State Department praised Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga for her "flexibility" in attempting to renew the talks and said any further delay in their resumption would hurt the interests of both sides.

In addition, spokesman Richard Boucher urged the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) to immediately end attacks against the government and to stop using children as combatants in their struggle for an independent homeland.

"Both sides have to take steps to ensure that all provisions of the Ceasefire Agreement are adhered to," he said in a statement, referring to a 2002 truce.

"We call upon the LTTE to end violence against political opponents and to cease the recruitment of child soldiers," Boucher said.

"President Kumaratunga has shown flexibility in her proposals to renew discussions with the LTTE," he said. "Further delay in restarting negotiations can only damage the

interests of all Sri Lankans who stand to gain from a return to real peace.

"We urge both parties to return to the negotiating table as soon as possible to bring peace to the island," Boucher added.

The LTTE has blamed the Sri Lankan government for the delay in reviving negotiations which the rebels themselves suspended in April last year.

But Kumaratunga said last month that the Tigers were holding up talks aimed at ending a conflict that has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.

The Tamil Tigers were reportedly undertaking a three-week tour of Denmark, Ireland, Switzerland and Sri Lanka's peace broker Norway to persuade donors to use aid as a tool to pressure the government to resume peace talks based on rebel self-rule proposals.

The Swiss foreign ministry said "a possible interim administration of the north east of Sri Lanka as decided in the peace talks should be based on a federal structure within a united Sri Lanka" and backed Norway's role as facilitator.

Swiss officials met the chief negotiator of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Anton Balasingham and other rebel officials on the sidelines of the meeting of the LTTE's Constitutional Affairs Committee in Geneva, which is due to end on October 7.

The Swiss foreign ministry said in a statement that it "welcomes the LTTE's continuing willingness to

WAR ON TERROR US targets visa violators

AP, Washington

More than 350 people who have committed crimes or are suspected of terrorist links have been arrested in a federal crackdown on foreigners with visa violations, part of a broader effort to prevent al-Qaeda from disrupting US elections.

Agents with US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, a Homeland Security Department component known as ICE, are matching identities of visa violators nationwide with names on secret government terrorism databases in hopes of finding al-Qaeda operatives. "We're intensifying it in the days leading up to the election," ICE spokesman Dean Boyd said Friday.

Some groups representing Muslims and Arab-Americans are concerned some people may be targeted because of their ethnicity

or religious beliefs.

"If somebody breaks the law in terms of their immigration status, they should pay the price," said Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations. "We can only hope they are not targeting people based on whether they are Muslim." Since its inception in June 2003, ICE's Compliance Enforcement Unit has opened more than 5,200 investigations of visa violators nationwide. Of those apprehended, 359 are considered "priority arrests" those with possible links to terrorism or known criminal histories.

The stepped-up initiative is one of many government efforts given new urgency by persistent intelligence indicating al-Qaeda is determined to attack inside the United States before the Nov. 2 election.

Ulfa rejects truce offer

AFP, Guwahati

A separatist group in India's north-eastern province of Assam has rejected a ceasefire offer by the state chief minister to end more than two decades of bloodshed, a militant leader said yesterday.

"The puppet chief minister has no right to offer a ceasefire and we do not believe in any conditional truce by the government," said Paresh Baruah, self-styled commander-in-chief of the outlawed United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa).

Assam Chief Minister Tarun Gogoi Thursday gave the rebels, who are fighting for a separate homeland, until October 15 to respond to his invitation for a truce.

The rebel leader was quoted as saying by newspapers in Assam's main city of Guwahati that the outfit would hold talks with New Delhi if the federal authorities were sincere in their approach.

PAK MOSQUE BLAST Shias run riot as funerals held

AFP, Islamabad

Thousands of Shia youths rioted in eastern Pakistan yesterday as mourning relatives buried the dead from a suspected suicide bombing which killed at least 30 people at a mosque in Sialkot.

The tensions flared as police launched investigations into the blast which ripped through a Shia mosque in the city during Friday prayers.

Members of the Shia Imamia Students Organisation staged violent protests and burned tyres at various locations after police blocked entry points to the city and soldiers stepped up their patrols.

"We will continue our protest until the culprits behind the attack are arrested," the organisation's president, Nasir Shirazi, told AFP. Witnesses said vehicles were set

alight and crowds attacked government buildings after thousands of people carrying black flags attended funeral prayers for nine of those killed in the mosque blast.

An angry crowd of about 2,000 people carrying rifles, iron rods and batons ransacked the offices of Pakistan International Airlines, a state-owned National Bank branch, district courts and the district jail, the witnesses said.

The crowd torched the office of Sialkot's mayor and besieged a police station, with officers from a commando unit responding with gunfire and teargas to disperse them. Hundreds of youths burned tyres and blocked traffic on a busy road in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistani Kashmir, some 240km northwest of here to protest the killing of a politician in the Sialkot blast.



Pakistani policemen walk near burning tyres set ablaze by an angry mob after the funeral ceremony for victims of a suspected suicide bomb blast in Sialkot yesterday. Thousands of Shia youths rioted in Pakistan as mourning relatives buried the dead from the attack which killed at least 30 people at a mosque in eastern Sialkot city.

' Hamas to stop firing rockets if Israel leaves Gaza'

AFP, Gaza City

A leader of the Palestinian radical Islamic group Hamas said yesterday his group was prepared to stop firing homemade rockets on Israel if Israeli forces end their campaign in the northern Gaza Strip.

Ismail Haniyeh spoke only hours after Hamas militants held a press conference in the nearby Jabaliya refugee camp saying they would continue firing rockets at Israel and that they would target the port city of Ashkelon.

"Our sons will stop the firing of Qassam rockets as a means of defense if the Israeli occupier ceases its aggressive incursion and its occupation in the north of the Gaza Strip," said a statement by Haniyeh.

Earlier, a leader of the Hamas military wing, the Ezzedin al-Qassam Brigades, told the press conference that "the Israeli military operation has failed," a reference to a campaign to stop the rockets that has left more than 50 Palestinians dead this week.

AL-QAEDA THREAT Norway, South Korea tightens security

AFP, Oslo

Norway and South Korea have raised its level of alert after a message attributed to al-Qaeda number two Ayman al-Zawahiri threatening the interests of several Western and Asian countries, officials said yesterday.

The alert was raised from low to moderate, Joern Holme, head of Norway's anti-terrorism services, said in a communique.

"When Norway is threatened so directly there is every reason to take the threat seriously," he said, cautioning that Zawahiri was a key al-Qaeda chief who could influence other groups.

Security has been tightened around South Korean interests overseas after a new al-Qaeda threat against countries supporting the US-led coalition in Iraq, government officials said Saturday.

Powell 'regrets' Iraqi WMD claims at UN

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Colin Powell said Friday he regretted presenting incorrect intelligence on Saddam Hussein's weapons to the United Nations last year but defended President George W. Bush's foreign policy against attacks from his Democratic challenger Senator John Kerry.

Powell, who has said he wants to avoid the political limelight during the campaign for the November 2 election, avoided directly criticism of Kerry, but made clear he did not agree with the candidate's assessment that Bush is alienating allies by pursuing a unilateral approach.

In comments here and in Atlanta, Georgia a day after Bush and Kerry butted heads on foreign

policy in the first of three debates, Powell said the sole incorrect assertion in his February 5, 2003, presentation to the UN Security Council on Iraq's weapons was that Saddam still had stockpiles of weapons of mass destruction.

"The only thing where we got it wrong and where the presentation did not hold up was actual stockpiles," he told reporters at the Atlanta Press Club. "We have seen nothing to suggest that he had actual stockpiles."

"So that was not right, and as we have gone back and looked through the intelligence, there are indications that we had bad sourcing and we should have caught some of this bad sourcing," Powell said.

"For that, I am not only disappointed but I regret that that infor-

mation was not correct."

In Thursday's debate, Kerry took aim at Bush's justification for going to war in Iraq, saying that Powell had been forced to apologise to world leaders for the inaccuracy of his UN presentation and that the president had erred by shifting resources from finding Osama bin Laden to ousting Saddam.

However, Powell, who has previously lamented the mistakes in his UN presentation, said that despite the problem, Bush had still been right to go to war.

"Those stockpiles would have reappeared since he was no longer under observation or control by the international community," he said later at the State Department after meeting with Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht.



Blair back at work after heart surgery

REUTERS, London

British Prime Minister Tony Blair was back at work yesterday after successful heart surgery but his vow to hold on to power for five more years has sparked fevered speculation about who might succeed him and when.

Blair left his Downing Street office in the morning for Chequers, his official country residence, where his spokesman said he was due to do some paperwork over the weekend.

The secluded mansion is a far cry from Westminster, which was abuzz with gossip over the future shape of British politics.

Bush, Kerry shift focus from Iraq to economy

AP, Orlando

President Bush and John Kerry, shifting away from the sharp debate over war and terrorism, return to bread-and-butter economic issues in campaign stops in two closely divided states.

Bush planned to trumpet his economic agenda yesterday, encouraging policies that let individuals and families hold a stake in an "ownership society" on a bus tour that marked his 27th trip to Ohio.

That agenda includes partly privatized Social Security accounts, homeownership and changes in health care, along with the promotion of the president's signature tax cuts.

His Democratic opponent scheduled a speech for delivery in Florida that accused Bush of forgetting middle-class families and favoring wealthy special interests.

"For the last two years, I've traveled all over this country and listened to the stories of Americans struggling to make ends meet," Kerry said in prepared remarks.

"I've also shared their frustration at this administration's constant state of denial, which neglects their needs."

Repeating the theme he hit during the first presidential debate, Kerry said, "George Bush has a four word plan more of the same."

Bush's tour through Ohio comes as polls show the race to be close. Hurricanes and their aftermath have complicated polling and campaigning in Florida, where some polls show Bush ahead and others indicate a close race.

The switch from foreign matters to pocketbook issues comes as the campaigns look ahead to the candidates' second face-to-face meeting on Friday, where undecided voters pose the questions.

The campaign opponents roared out of the first debate with sharpened attacks over Iraq and terrorism, hitting the campaign trail with more aggressive attacks and hoping to influence voters' impressions of their performance.



Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh offers prayers at the memorial of India's Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, in New Delhi yesterday during a ceremony to mark Gandhi's 135th birth anniversary.