

5 Nepali troops killed in landmine blast

AFP, Kathmandu

At least five soldiers, including an army major, and a taxi driver were killed in a landmine blast in Parbat, 255 kilometres (141 miles) west of here Wednesday, security sources said yesterday.

"In the explosion five civilians and three security personnel were also injured," the source said.

The injured are undergoing treatment at local hospitals, the source said.

According to the army source, Maoist rebels allegedly set off the landmine when an army patrol was

checking a taxi parked on the Baglung-Pokhara highway in western Nepal.

"After the explosion, the rebels opened fire at the security personnel from their hide-outs in which five security personnel including Major Ravi Singh Gartaula, police inspector Chandra Jyoti Chaudhari were killed," the source said.

The taxi driver, identified as Khup Bahadur Pun, died on the spot.

The rebels have been fighting for a communist republic in Nepal since 1996 and the uprising has so far claimed more than 11,000 lives.

Sino-Indian trust vital for regional growth

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

New Delhi yesterday said trust between India and China was one of the most crucial elements that made the region and Asia a vibrant and energetic fulcrum for economic growth.

Addressing the Asian Security Conference here on "Changing Security Dynamic in Eastern Asia", India's External Affairs Minister Natwar Singh said New Delhi has not allowed its differences with Beijing to work as a hurdle in the way of developing bilateral relations in various areas.

Answering those who view Sino-

India ties only from an adversarial prism, he said "theories by those who see these ties with the old mindset of balance of power or conflict of interests and East Asia as a theatre of competition between these two countries, are losing relevance in today's fast-emerging dynamics of Asia's quest for peace and prosperity."

Singh said India and China were aware that trust and cooperation between them were one of the most crucial elements that made the region and Asia a vibrant and energetic fulcrum for growth.



Nato Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer (R) walks with Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz during his visit to the Nato headquarters in Brussels Wednesday. Aziz pledged to keep moving "step by step" towards peace with long-time nuclear foe India, voicing hope that such moves will benefit the entire region.

Pak PM plans talks with India on gas pipeline

Islamabad warns Delhi against arms race

AFP, Islamabad/Brussels

Pakistan and India will discuss a regional gas pipeline from Iran during a South Asian summit in Dhaka early next month, Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz said in an interview published yesterday.

Aziz told the Wall Street Journal the 4.05-billion-dollar (3.1-billion-euro) project would be a priority when he meets Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on the fringes of a February 6-7 summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

The 1,600-kilometer (1,000-mile) pipeline is designed to transfer gas from Iran to India through Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan province, which has been under a low-level tribal insurgency.

The Pakistani leader called the project a "win-win" that would provide for rapidly growing energy needs of Pakistan and India, and would reduce the "trust deficit" between the two nuclear armed rivals, it said.

The paper warned the project depended on many factors, among them keeping the improving Pakistan-India relations on track.

"I have always said that if we create mutual linkages and mutual dependencies, that helps the overall

political framework," it quoted Aziz as saying.

"Of course, in this case it takes three to tango."

Aziz said the offer of "an energy corridor through Pakistan to India" is justified by the increasing needs of both countries for imported energy.

The negotiations on the pipeline began in 1994, but little headway was made due to tensions between Pakistan and India which have fought three wars since gaining independence in 1947 from Britain.

However, warming ties between India and Pakistan since April 2003 have revived hopes the project could go ahead.

Aziz insisted in the interview Pakistan could provide sufficient security assurances to India, and relations between the two have improved to a point that such a project could be considered.

"You have risk mitigation techniques that are pretty advanced" that would "give them comfort."

Meanwhile, Pakistani Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz urged nuclear rival India Wednesday to desist from an arms race that he warned would be economically dangerous and "destructive" to South Asia.

A strategic balance was vital to peace in the region, as well as a solution to the two countries' five-

decade-old dispute over the Himalayan territory of Kashmir, he told the Royal Institute for International Relations here.

India's conventional forces vastly outnumbered Pakistan's, especially in air and naval power, Aziz said. "The gap is growing by the day," he said, with India "rapidly expanding, upgrading and modernising" its armed forces.

"Pakistan does not, and I repeat does not, wish to enter into an arms race with any country, including India, whether this is nuclear or conventional," the prime minister said.

"We believe such a race is neither economically sustainable nor morally tenable, and would be destructive to the entire region. The two neighbours need to invest in the tools of development, not in tools of destruction."

"We will continue to pursue a policy of restraint and responsibility in nuclear matters. We hope that India will agree to the concept of strategic restraint in South Asia," the Pakistani leader said.

Despite his warnings, Aziz reaffirmed comments made during three days of talks with European Union officials in Brussels that Pakistan is serious about peace with India.

Gujarat failing to help women victims of riots: Amnesty

AFP, New Delhi

The government in India's Gujarat state has failed to help hundreds of women raped, tortured or murdered get justice almost three years after communal riots in 2002, Amnesty International said yesterday.

Nearly 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed in the Gujarat riots which were sparked by the burning to death of 59 Hindu activists in a train coach off Godhra railway station, allegedly by a Muslim mob.

"Hundreds of girls and women were dragged out of their homes, stripped naked before their own families and thousands of attackers, (who) taunted, insulted and threatened them," the rights watchdog said in a report titled "India: Justice -- the victim in Gujarat".

"They were then raped, often gang-raped, beaten with sticks, Hindu tridents and swords, had their breasts cut off and their wombs

slashed open and rods violently pushed into their vaginas. Finally the women victims were mutilated or burned to death."

Amnesty said that according to local human rights groups, between 250 and 300 girls and women were among the dead. Amnesty said local police and state investigators have either failed to investigate cases or deliberately closed them citing a lack of evidence.

The Gujarat government said the latest findings are "one-sided." The federal government led by the Congress Party elected in May repeated its condemnation of the Gujarat riots but said courts were considering action and it would be inappropriate to comment during that process.

The riots occurred when the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party led the federal government.

'Kid power' seeks to free kidnapped student

AFP, Patna

Thousands of Indian children boycotted school, staged fasts and prayed yesterday, hoping "kid power" would win the safe release of an abducted boy in Bihar state where kidnapping is a major industry.

Fourteen-year-old Kislay Kaushal was waiting for a bus when he was snatched eight days ago, witnesses said, by abductors who sped away in a car in Patna, capital of Bihar, where criminal gangs run riot.

Since his kidnapping, many students in Patna have stopped going to school, protested on the streets, held symbolic 12-hour "fasts" and conducted mass prayers for his release, school officials say.

Indonesia, Lanka urged to seize tsunami chance for peace

AFP, Putrajaya

Indonesia and Sri Lanka should seize the opportunity provided by the Asian tsunamis to end their long-running civil conflicts, Malaysian Prime Minister and head of the Non-Aligned Movement, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, told AFP in an interview yesterday.

Abdullah, who is chairman of the 117-nation group of developing nations which includes both countries, said he believed the opportunity for peace talks was "excellent".

"I think that when people get together because they have a common problem, a shared grief, that is the kind of situation which we hope will bring a better understanding among them and pave the way for talks," he said.

Indonesia's Aceh province, scene of the worst devastation wrought by the December 26 tsunamis with 220,000 residents dead or missing,

has been in the grip of a separatist rebellion since 1976.

Sri Lanka, which was also badly hit with more than 30,000 people killed by the giant waves, has been fighting rebels of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in the north-east of the country for three decades.

"The desire of most people is not to continue conflict but to find the most amicable solution, and this is the best time to do it," Abdullah said. "I think the opportunity is certainly excellent."

"Of course there has to be strong political will on the part of those involved to say let's talk about this."

Early hopes of reconciliation amid the tragedy wrought by the tsunamis have begun to fade, with Sri Lanka blocking foreign aid going directly to the Tamil Tigers and the Indonesian military showing reluctance over relinquishing its grip on Aceh.



Indian fishermen sit on a fishing boat near the sea at a fishermen village outside Nagapattinam some 325km south of Chennai yesterday. The number of people presumed dead in last month's Asian tsunamis rose to more than 283,000 yesterday with Indonesian authorities announcing a further increase in the number of dead and missing.



Pakistani army officers (behind) check the security outside the country's biggest gas plant at Sui in southwest Baluchistan province Wednesday. Pakistan's army formally announced the launch of a controversial project to build a garrison in the troubled gas-rich town of Sui in the southwestern province of Baluchistan.

Pak army to establish garrison in Sui

AFP, Sui

Pakistan's army formally announced Wednesday the launch of a controversial project to build a garrison in the troubled gas-rich town of Sui in the southwestern province of Baluchistan.

Earlier this month tribal rebels fired rockets at Pakistan's main gas field at Sui, killing eight people and suspending the supply to millions of homes and hundreds of industrial units.

Since then troops have been deployed around the Sui gas fields to track down those responsible.

"We have come here and taken over the 400 acres of land allotted to the Pakistan army," commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Mazhar Masood said.

"We will soon build a cantonment (garrison) here which is the need of the area," he said at a special press briefing in this dusty town, some 350km southeast of the provincial capital Quetta.

The land had been acquired and

payment made to the owners, he said adding that one battalion of regular troops with a number of tanks had already arrived in Sui.

"You can see only sand dunes here, but within very short time a cantonment will be built and the sand dunes will be turned into green land," he said.

Masood said the troops were in Sui "to protect the key gas installations, life, honor and property of its citizens from miscreants and to provide reinforcement to paramilitary forces in maintaining the law and order in the area."

He said it was necessary to station troops in the town as rocket attacks which have damaged the strategic gas pipelines had become a "regular feature".

The government last year said it planned to build three new military bases in Sui as well as in Kohlu, which has untapped oil and gas reserves, and the coastal town of Gwadar, which is the site of a Chinese-funded deep sea port.

Lanka rules out direct tsunami aid to Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka Wednesday ruled out Tamil Tiger rebels receiving direct foreign aid to be distributed among tsunami survivors and said all external help must go through Colombo.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga's spokesman Harim Peiris said there was no question of aid going directly to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which has accused the government of blocking aid to areas held by them.

"No foreign government will deal with a non-governmental actor," Peiris told reporters when asked if Colombo agreed to rebel demands to receive foreign aid directly.

Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar said there had been no response yet from the Tamil Tigers

to a government invitation to work together in delivering tsunami aid to people in affected areas of the island's north-east.

The remarks came a day after aid donors appealed to Colombo and Tamil Tiger rebels to forge a united front in their response to last month's tsunami disaster, which killed 30,957 people by official count.

Aid officials from the European Union, Japan, Norway and the United States who met in Brussels to review the island's peace process in the wake of the December 26 catastrophe stressed the need for unity.

The four participants, co-chairs of the so-called Tokyo Conference on Sri Lanka, welcomed "the ongoing effective response" to the tsunami from Colombo and the LTTE. In a statement, they said both

sides were "distributing humanitarian aid to people of all ethnic and religious communities and political affiliations".

"Co-chairs emphasised that in the midst of this tremendous natural disaster, renewed opportunities exist to build confidence and to strengthen the peace process," the statement said.

But it added: "The co-chairs called on donors and all parties to ensure that tsunami assistance adheres to basic principles of equity, transparency and accountability. It should be focused on objective local needs and priorities."

The Tigers and government troops, having battled for decades, have been observing a truce which Norway arranged in February 2002. But peace talks have been deadlocked since April 2003.

UN asks Maoists, Nepal to sign rights accord

AFP, Kathmandu

The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said Wednesday that if Maoists and the government don't sign an accord respecting human rights their sincerity on the issue would be questioned.

"A failure to sign the accord by either party calls into question the sincerity of their professed commitment to the welfare of the people of Nepal," commissioner Louise Arbour told a press conference on the last day of her four-day fact-finding visit to Nepal.

During her visit, Arbour met King Gyanendra, Prime Minister Sher Bahadur Deuba and the chiefs of the Royal Nepalese Army and police to discuss allegations of summary

detention and murder.

Arbour didn't meet with Maoist leaders during the trip due, she said, to time constraints.

More than 11,000 people have died since 1996 when the rebels launched an insurgency to topple the monarchy and create a communist republic.

Nepali rights groups say the last three months of 2004 were the deadliest in the conflict with 450 people killed.

In a statement, Arbour outlined measures that would be critical to improving the human rights situation in Nepal.

Rights Commission," she said.

"This accord is nothing more than a reiteration of obligation which already binds both the government and the Maoists," she said.

"Equally, I have no doubt that the signing of the accord by both parties, coupled with genuine efforts to implement its provision, will serve to build confidence, which is in turn a vital prerequisite for a genuine and lasting peace," she said.

"Secondly, I have pressed the government of Nepal for a prompt and public clarification of how it intends to maintain the effectiveness and independence of the National Human Rights Commission after May 25, 2005, when the term of the current commissioners expires," Arbour said.

Taliban commander killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

A Taliban commander was killed and his deputy was captured when rebels attacked an Afghan police convoy and killed a policeman in the southeastern province of Helmand, officials said yesterday.

Three policemen were injured in the attack on Wednesday in Mosa-Qala district 460km southeast of Kabul, said provincial deputy governor Haji Mawin.

"The Afghan police chased the rebels who fled after the attack and in the ensuing exchange of fire Taliban commander Mullah Mohammadullah was killed and his deputy Mullah Ghaffar was taken prisoner," he told AFP.

Mawin said the junior-level

Taliban commander was believed to have staged several attacks on Afghan security forces and on US-led coalition troops.

Meanwhile, an Afghan soldier opened fire on his colleagues inside a US military base yesterday, killing five soldiers and wounding six others before he was himself shot dead, the US military said.

The soldier involved had just finished a spell of guard duty at the base in the southern Afghan province of Helmand and it unclear what the motive for the shooting was, said a US statement.

The wounded soldiers were evacuated to a US military hospital in the main southern city of Kandahar, said the statement without giving details of their conditions.

Don of Pak underworld Shoaib Khan dies in jail

AFP, Karachi

The alleged kingpin of Pakistan's criminal underworld, Shoaib Khan, died in custody yesterday three weeks after his arrest, jail officials said.

Khan, in his 40s, complained of chest pain and was rushed to a hospital where he died of a heart attack, the deputy chief of Karachi's Central Prison, Amanullah Khan, told AFP.

An inquiry into his death would be conducted after an autopsy, the jail official said.

Khan was accused of running gangs in the port city of Karachi and was one of Pakistan's most notorious criminals.

INDIAN POLICE STARTS PROBE 'Miracle' baby meets family after stampede

AFP, Wai, India

Police launched an inquiry yesterday into a western Indian temple stampede that killed at least 257 Hindu pilgrims as a man was tearfully reunited with his infant grandson found among the dead.

"He only has us to look after him," said Maruti Jadhav, clasp the child to his chest and weeping.

"Your mother is gone," he said addressing the four-month-old. The baby who had been taken by her mother and her mother's parents to seek the blessings of the goddess Kalubai at the Mandradevi temple was found among the bodies after Tuesday's disaster. All three adults died.

The infant, whose father did not go on the pilgrimage, was brought to

the police station in Wai, 300 kilometres (180 miles) south of Bombay.

"The baby has lost his mother," one woman police officer told India's NDTV television. "He was unharmed. It was a miracle he survived (the stampede)."

At least 257 Hindu devotees, mainly women and children, were crushed to death.

Some 300,000 to 400,000 people were packed into a hilltop temple and a narrow access road when the stampede began Tuesday at the annual festival in Maharashtra state.

The inquiry announced by Satara district police chief Chandrakant Kumbhar is separate from a state government judicial investigation.