

Queen won't attend Charles' wedding

REUTERS, London

Queen Elizabeth's decision not to attend the wedding of her son and heir has heaped humiliation on Prince Charles and his long-time lover Camilla Parker Bowles, royal-watchers said yesterday.

The marriage plans of the two divorcees had already been verging toward the farcical, with the venue changed from Windsor Castle to a town hall register office and constitutional experts even questioning the legality of the civil ceremony.

But the Queen's surprise announcement on Tuesday night that she would not be going to the town hall added a bizarre new twist.

Buckingham Palace insisted the monarch's decision was not a snub and said she was trying to respect the couple's desire for a low-key ceremony.

The Queen, who has in the past never shown approval of Charles' affair with Camilla, will attend the church blessing ceremony afterwards at the historic castle west of London and is paying for the wedding reception.



PHOTO: AFP

Iranians search amid the rubble for survivors in the village of Oudkan yesterday after an earthquake measuring 6.4 on the open Richter scale hit the southeastern province of Kerman and destroyed "100 percent" of this small village according to local officials.

Iran's quake survivors protest slow aid effort

REUTERS, AFP, Zarand

Tired and cold survivors of a powerful earthquake in southeastern Iran begged authorities for food and shelter yesterday, complaining aid was slow to reach the worst-hit mountain villages.

Iran has so far declined offers of foreign assistance to deal with the aftermath of Tuesday's tremor, which had a magnitude of 6.4 and killed at least 530 people.

Hardest hit were about a dozen villages to the north of the town of Zarand, where fragile one-storey homes collapsed into piles of mud and broken tiles.

The tremor came just 14 months after a devastating quake hit the desert citadel city of Bam, in the same province, killing 31,000 people.

Some 900 were injured in Tuesday's quake, about 760km southeast of Tehran, and the death toll was expected to rise.

Reuters journalists witnessed a few dozen angry villagers on a high mountain road, some brandishing sticks and stones, besiege a convoy of vehicles, one of which carried

Interior Minister Abdolvahed Mousavi-Lari as he toured the affected area.

"We spent the night in the cold. Where is the aid you're talking about on television?" shouted one middle-aged man as the villagers banged on the windows and roofs of the vehicles.

"My children are freezing to death. You want to kill the survivors of the earthquake," a woman shouted hysterically, clutching a rock.

Police dispersed the crowd, some of whom had tried to block the convoy's passage by lying in front of the vehicles.

But aid workers acknowledged the relief effort was still slow and patchy.

"The aid which has been distributed is tents. We're trying to establish some camps here. We haven't distributed food or blankets yet," said Red Crescent medic Farhad Fathizadeh.

"We're sorry we haven't been able to help people much but we're trying to prepare ourselves for tonight," he said.

In the village of Houdkan,

shrouded in fog about 30km from Zarand, dozens of green and white tents dotted the hillside, many containing two or three families.

Groups clustered around bonfires trying to warm themselves under an intermittent drizzle.

Virtually no building was left standing and those that were had been deserted for fear they could come crashing down at any moment. Black banners draped on the remaining walls announced the names of the dead.

Some 20 aftershocks, with a magnitude of up to 4.6, shook the area on Tuesday, the ISNA students news agency said.

Locals said many of those killed in Houdkan, one of the two most badly damaged villages in the region, had died while at early morning prayers in the mosque.

Kerman province Governor Mohammad Ali Karimi told local radio almost all the affected villages had received tents, blankets and food. He said search and rescue operations, hampered by poor weather and difficult terrain on Tuesday, would be wound up by noon on Wednesday.

Palestinian lawmakers oppose cabinet list

AP, Ramallah

The Palestinian prime minister had trouble yesterday securing a parliamentary majority for his proposed Cabinet, despite promises that he would replace corruption-tainted politicians with professional appointees.

The prime minister, Ahmed Qorei, would have to step down if he fails to get his Cabinet approved. A vote was originally set for later Wednesday, but was then delayed until Thursday another sign of Qorei's growing difficulties, parliament officials said.

Several legislators said they wanted to push Qorei out and would not support any Cabinet he proposes. During years as parliament speaker, Qorei made many enemies among legislators who perceived him as doing the bidding of the late Yasser Arafat, at the expense of the legislature.

Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, who had largely remained on the sidelines during the political turmoil of the past few days, convened legislators from his ruling Fatah party yesterday, ahead of the vote, and urged them to support Qorei's Cabinet.

Iran must renounce nuke ambitions: Bush

US calls for full Syrian pullout from Lebanon

AP, REUTERS, Mainz

President Bush and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder insisted Wednesday that Iran not develop nuclear weapons, and the two discussed tactics on how to coax Tehran into compliance.

Bush also said yesterday Syria should withdraw not only its military but also its secret services from Lebanon.

Bush said that he would wait to see Syria's response to his call for a complete withdrawal from Lebanon before he seeks any new UN sanctions against Damascus.

"It's vital that the Iranians hear the world speak with one voice that they should not have a nuclear weapon," Bush said at a news conference with the German leader. "Iran must not have a nuclear weapon, for the sake of security and peace."

Schroeder sought to play down any differences the United States and Europe have in convincing Iran to give up its nuclear weapons ambitions.

"We absolutely agree that Iran must say no to any kind of nuclear weapons," Schroeder said. "Iran

must not have any nuclear weapons. They must waive any right to the production thereof."

Bush and Schroeder remain far apart on the subject of how to make Iran give up any plans it has to build such an arsenal, although both said they agreed that the end result must be a nuclear-arms free Iran.

The two spoke during Bush's nine-hour stop here during his trip to Belgium, Germany and Slovakia, where the president will meet Thursday with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Bush and Schroeder seemed resigned to accept differences between them on issues such as global warming and Iraq, and yet they sought common ground on ways to move forward.

Schroeder said the two leaders also talked about climate control, noting the United States' refusal to sign the Kyoto global warming agreement as well as international problems, including Iraq and the Middle East.

"I think there is hope today, maybe even more than hope, that we'll come to a solution," Schroeder said, referring to efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

On Iraq, Schroeder noted that while Germany has refused to go into that wartorn nation, it is training Iraqi security officers in the United Arab Emirates

Schroeder did not support the US-led invasion of Iraq, but said "that is the past."

"Now, our joint interest is that we come to a stable, democratic Iraq," Schroeder said.

Bush thanked Germany for its "vital" contribution in Iraq.

"I fully understand the limit of German contributions," he said.

Iran dominated the news conference that followed their more than hour-long meeting.

Schroeder wants both sides to make conciliations, including extending incentives to Iran for dropping its nuclear program. Such incentives would include membership in the World Trade Organisation. Bush, in contrast, insists that Tehran must not be rewarded for breaking the nonproliferation treaty that prohibits it from making nuclear fuel.

Avalanches, rain & cold kill over 1,100 in S Asia

AFP, Srinagar

Avalanches in Indian Kashmir, icy temperatures in Afghanistan and torrential rain and snow in Pakistan pushed the death toll Wednesday from an extreme cold snap gripping South Asia to over 1,100, many of them children.

In Indian Kashmir army and civilian rescuers braved sub-zero cold and harsh Himalayan winds to search for survivors of avalanches that have claimed 229 lives since Saturday, police said.

"Some bodies have been buried, some are inside a mosque and others scattered on the snow. The entire village is devastated," rescuer Ghulam Mohammed Wagay said in Watlingo village, one of a string of communities crushed by snow-slides.

The army was flying in doctors and nurses to avalanche-hit parts of southern Indian Kashmir, along with snowmobiles to reach remote regions.

In Afghanistan frigid weather had claimed at least 350 lives -- 211 of them children -- as poor parents fed opium to their youngsters to ease their suffering from hunger, numbing cold and respiratory ailments such as pneumonia.

"Some parents don't go to doctors and administer opium to the

kids to stop the cough, and that stops the cough but can also kill them," said Health Minister Sayeed Amin Fatimie.

"We have 211 confirmed deaths of children under the age of five due to cold-related diseases such as respiratory tract infections or whooping cough in the last one month and a half," Fatimie added.

One humanitarian group, Catholic Relief Services, said up to 1,000 children could have been killed by brutal weather in western Ghor province alone, although officials rejected the figure.

On the outskirts of Kabul Mohammed Ismael, who lost his infant son, cradled one of his two surviving boys. "The child was only 15 days old. A boy. There were icicles on the inside of the tent when we woke up. How can a baby survive that?" he asked. Many Afghan children are already malnourished and weakened by weeks of freezing temperatures and the situation could worsen with many villages cut off by deep snow running out of food and fuel, aid groups warned.

In Pakistan, heavy snow and lashing rains have killed at least 533 people at both ends of the country in the past three weeks, federal government relief center spokesman Mashal Khan said.



PHOTO: AFP

Kashmir Chief Minister Mufti Mohammad Sayeed (L) sits along with Congress party leader Sonia Gandhi (R) who arrived at Srinagar civil airport yesterday to visit area affected by devastating snowfall and avalanches. Army and civilian rescuers are braving icy conditions and harsh Himalayan winds to search for survivors of avalanches in Kashmir as the death toll crossed 229, official said.

Lanka marks longest truce amid war fears

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels accused the Sri Lankan government of waging a covert war on them as the nation Wednesday marked the third anniversary of its longest ceasefire amid fresh diplomatic moves to restart peace efforts.

Three years ago on February 23, Colombo and the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) signed a Norwegian-brokered ceasefire in their 30-year war which claimed more than 60,000 lives. But peace talks have been stalled since April 2003.

"The Sri Lankan military has formed new paramilitaries to wage a covert war on the Liberation Tigers and our people," the rebels' political head S.P. Thamilselvan was quoted

as saying on the Tamilnet.com website.

"This covert war should be stopped immediately. The ceasefire and peace would fall apart if this covert war against us continues," added Thamilselvan, who on Tuesday held talks with top Norwegian peace broker Erik Solheim.

Relations between the rebels and government hit a low after the killing of top Tiger regional political chief E. Koushalyan and five others two weeks ago.

The Tigers claimed that renegades supported by the military carried out the attack while the government blamed a splinter faction of the rebel movement.

It has accused the guerrillas of killing over 250 rivals during the

truce.

Thamilselvan said in his latest statement the rebels were open to continuing the ceasefire.

"Our leadership is determined to remain fully committed to peace initiatives with whatever international support we may get. However, the limits of our patience are being tested," he said.

"There are clearly premeditated attempts to break our will to remain committed to the ceasefire. On this day there is a window of clear opportunity to take the ceasefire agreement seriously and resolve the crisis."

Norway's Foreign Minister Jan Petersen was here last month for talks with Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran, a signatory to the truce agreement.

Phuket moved 32cm after tsunami

THE NATION/ ANN, Bangkok

Phuket shifted 32 centimetres to the south-west and Bangkok moved nine centimetres as a result of the Sumatra earthquake that caused the devastating tsunami two months ago, a Chulalongkorn University lecturer said.

Dr Ilti Trisirisattayawong, head of the Faculty of Engineering's Survey Engineering Department, said the positions of Phuket and Bangkok were measured and compared with data recorded in October.

The land position measurements were carried out as part of the Southeast Asia Mastering Environment Research with Geodetic and Space Techniques (Seamerges) project with the cooperation of Asean and the EU. The project began on January 19 last year.

INDO-PAK TALKS Little progress on Kashmir issue

AFP, Tokyo

Pakistan and India have made little "substantive" progress on Kashmir despite the breakthrough agreement to start a bus connecting the divided region, Pakistani Foreign Minister Khurshid Mahmud Kasuri said yesterday.

"There has not been much progress in substantive issues. There has been progress, however, on people-to-people contacts and means of communications are much better," Kasuri told a news conference at the end of a three-day visit to Tokyo.

"We hope, therefore, this (the bus) will lead to better interaction between Kashmiris on both sides. And hopefully they will start thinking of resolving the issue which has

kept Pakistan and India divided for so long," he said.

Kasuri said Pakistan was prepared to be "flexible" if India would do the same to broker a solution acceptable to the people of Kashmir.

Abus service will begin on April 7 to connect Kashmiris for the first time since the Himalayan region was split apart in the war that erupted after the subcontinent's 1947 partition on religious lines.

India and Pakistan both claim Muslim-majority Kashmir in full.

Past negotiations have stalled, with Pakistan saying Kashmir is the core dispute which the two nations need to resolve and India countering that Kashmir is only one issue between the nuclear-armed rival nations.

Nepalese editors summoned over blank spaces in papers

AFP, Kathmandu

The editors of four Nepali weeklies were to present themselves before security officials yesterday to answer for leaving blank spaces in their papers after King Gyanendra banned political comment against his power grab, a lawyer said.

The Chief District Office (CDO) in Kathmandu, a powerful civilian body in charge of all security issues in the Kathmandu valley, last week summoned the editors after they left blank spaces on the pages where they normally publish editorial comment, the lawyer said.

The editors were told they would have to explain the reasons for leaving the blank spaces, he added.



PHOTO: AFP

Demonstrators march with banners portrait of US president Georg W. Bush reading "Terrorist No. 1" Tuesday in the center of Berlin. Germans demonstrated against the visit of the US President, who met German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder yesterday in the western town of Mainz.

'Asia facing real risk of bird flu pandemic'

AFP, Ho Chi Minh City

The deadly bird flu virus will take years to eradicate and Asia is now facing the serious risk of a pandemic that would cause far greater loss of life than the Sars outbreak, experts told a landmark conference here yesterday.

Delegations from more than 20 countries and organisations, including major donors and United Nations agencies, were seeking to evaluate their understanding of the H5N1 virus and find long-term measures to get rid of it.

"It is in the interest of both developed and developing countries to invest in the control and containment of avian influenza," said Samuel Jutzi, the Food and

Agriculture Organisation's director of animal production and health.

"There is an increasing risk of avian influenza spread that no poultry keeping country can afford to ignore."

"We must assume that avian influenza will persist for many years in some of the countries that had disease outbreaks in 2004-2005," Jutzi told the conference.

Bird flu has been discovered in eight countries since late 2003 -- Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, China, Indonesia, Japan, Laos and South Korea.

Thirty-three people have died in Vietnam since then in several outbreaks. Another 12 have died in Thailand.