



PHOTO: AFP

Indian school children hold cards and banners in Amritsar yesterday, as they prepare to welcome Pakistani cricket supporters to India to witness the forthcoming series of matches between the South Asian neighbours. India and Pakistan have agreed to run special trains from the Pakistani city of Lahore to Chandigarh in northern India to allow cricket fans to attend the first Test match due to start 08 March, in Mohali on the outskirts of Chandigarh.

Blast hits Pakistan-Iran rail link

AFP, Quetta

Suspected tribal militants in Pakistan's troubled southwest blew up a key railway track linking the country with neighbouring Iran, officials said Thursday.

The blast on Wednesday was the third in a month to hit the line from Quetta, the capital of Pakistan's Baluchistan province, to Zahidan in neighbouring Iran.

A scheduled fortnightly train between the two cities left early Thursday after engineers worked overnight to repair the track, Pakistan Railways Chief Controller Mohammad Shoaib told AFP.

"Terrorists hit the line at Naushki, some 150 kilometers (94 miles) west of Quetta on Wednesday," he said.

Impoverished Baluchistan is in

the grip of an escalating rebellion by nationalist tribesmen demanding jobs and more royalties for the natural resources extracted from their region.

Thousands of troops moved into the area in January after the rebels rocketed Pakistan's biggest gas field at Sui in Baluchistan in retaliation for the rape of a woman doctor at the facility, killing eight people.

Pakistan 'gang rape' accused acquitted

AFP, Multan

A Pakistani court Thursday overturned the convictions of five men sentenced to death in 2002 for raping a woman on the orders of a tribal council for her brother's alleged affair, officials said.

The death penalty of the sixth convict in the attack on Mukhtiar Mai, who went on to become a rights campaigner, was commuted to life imprisonment by a two-member bench of the high court in the central city of Multan.

"Justice has been done," defence lawyer Mohammad Salim told AFP.

Mai, in her early 30s, was raped

for more than an hour in the village of Meerwala in Punjab province in June 2002, as punishment for her brother's alleged affair with a woman of a powerful rival clan.

The case shocked the country and sparked international outrage. Later the same year an anti-terrorist court in Punjab province sentenced six men to death by hanging and acquitted another eight defendants.

Defence lawyers said Multan high court Thursday had acquitted convicts Ghulam Farid, Fayyaz Hussain, Faiz Baksh, Ramzan Bhojar and Allah Ditta Mastoi, while Abdul Khaliq was given life imprisonment.

"The verdict of the anti-terrorist court in August 2002 was largely

influenced by media hype and government pressure," lawyer Salim said.

Four of those originally sentenced to death were found guilty of participating in the rape itself. The other two were members of the tribal jury.

Women in Pakistan and other parts of South Asia are often subject to brutal "honour punishments", from acid-burning to rape and murder, paying for the alleged crimes of relatives.

After the rape, Mai embarked on a mission to improve girls' education in Pakistan, where 72 percent of women are illiterate, using her compensation money to set up her district's first ever school for girls.

Nepal braces for more Maoist blockades

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's pro-royal government said Thursday it was stockpiling food and fuel as it braced for more protests by Maoist rebels and tightened security, asking citizens to carry identity cards.

The announcement came after the rebels warned last weekend they would launch a nationwide general strike in mid-March unless King Gyanendra gave up absolute power which he seized February 1.

The government, named by

Gyanendra after he took power, said it would store enough food and fuel to last at least two months in the Kathmandu valley, home to 1.5 million people where Nepal's ancient capital is located.

"The government will stockpile essential commodities like food and petroleum products to meet the needs of the valley's population for at least two months," Commerce Secretary Dishesh Chandra Pyakurel told AFP.

Last Saturday, the rebels called off a crippling 14-day nationwide transport blockade staged to protest

Gyanendra's takeover that had sent food prices soaring in the impoverished Himalayan nation.

Maoist leader Prachanda -- his name means "the fierce one" -- said rebels ended the blockade to ease hardship. But he warned they would launch a national general strike March 14 unless the king abandoned his power grab.

Torrential rains kill 14 in Quetta

AFP, Quetta

At least 14 people were killed and more than 25,000 driven from their homes as torrential rains lashed southwestern Pakistan, still recovering from last month's devastating floods, officials said Thursday.

A man and his four children died when the roof of their house collapsed before dawn in Ganji Dori village 25 kilometers south of Quetta, the capital of Baluchistan province, a local official Usman Ali told AFP.

His wife and two other children were injured, while a girl in the nearby Khat Kucha village died when the roof of her house fell in early Thursday, he added.

Eight others died and 23 were

injured in different parts of the province on Wednesday, government spokesman Raziq Bugti said.

More than 25,000 people had to flee their homes in coastal towns, he said, adding that in the port town of Gwadar alone 6,500 people moved to safer places after the authorities released water from the overflowing Akra Kur dam on Wednesday.

Heavy downpours damaged some 1,700 houses in the town of Qila Abdullah, he said, adding that affected families had been shifted to safer places.

Officials said roads in Gwadar were submerged in water and the airport was closed due to the flooding.

Floods, heavy rains and snow in Baluchistan last month left an estimated 85 people dead.

Manmohan wants stronger ties with China

PTI, New Delhi

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on Thursday emphasised the need for strengthening ties between India and China as both the developing countries faced similar problems.

Speaking after drawing the lots for the Davis Cup tie between India and China, slated to begin in New Delhi on Friday, Singh said the ancient civilisational links between

the two countries were strong and people of both countries should know more about each other.

The prime minister also lauded the All India Tennis Association for its decision to adopt 12 children orphaned by the tsunami.

Yashwant Sinha, president of All India Tennis Association, Chief of Army Staff General JJ Singh and Vijay Amritraj were also present at the occasion.

SRI LANKA SAYS

Donors failed to keep tsunami aid promises

AFP, Colombo

International donors who outbid each other to pledge tsunami relief to Sri Lanka have failed to deliver and the island has received only a fraction of the promised cash, a top official said Thursday.

Finance Secretary P. B. Jayasundara said the pledging frenzy after the December 26 tsunamis that devastated the island's coastline and killed nearly 31,000 people has evaporated and the cash has been slow in coming.

"Although pledges are high, less than 40 million dollars has been converted into real cash so far," Jayasundara was quoted as saying on the website Lankabusinessonline.com.

The government had said earlier it had received pledges of over one billion dollars for tsunami relief. The government has said it needs more

than 500 million dollars in 2005 alone to pay for reconstruction.

The total reconstruction bill, to be spread over several years with the money to come from various countries and international lenders, is estimated at 1.8 billion dollars.

Jayasundara's comments came after the International Monetary Fund (IMF) last week asked Sri Lanka to make sure it gets the pledged international aid or risk economic disaster.

The IMF told the government to firm up promised international support amid fears many potential donors might not honour commitments made in the wake of the tsunami devastation.

"Aid pledges by donors have been impressive but commitments for 2005 still need to be firmed up," the IMF said in a report assessing the economic impact of the tsunami regionwide.