

Rape defendant kills judge, two others in Atlanta courtroom

AP, Atlanta

A man being escorted into court for his rape trial Friday stole a deputy's gun, killed the judge and two other people and carjacked a reporter's vehicle to escape, setting off a massive manhunt and creating widespread chaos across Atlanta, police said.

Hundreds of officers in cruisers and helicopters swarmed the area in the search of the suspect, identified as 33-year-old Brian Nichols. The suspect, a former computer technician, had raised alarm a day earlier when he was found in court with two handmade knives hidden in his shoes, prosecutors said.

The rampage led to chaos around the city, with schools, restaurants and office buildings locking down amid fears that the suspect might strike again. Nichols' mug shot was plastered all over TV screens, and highway message boards issued descriptions of the stolen vehicle.

Late Friday, police reported that the car had been found in the same downtown parking lot that it had been stolen from. Someone working

in the area discovered the vehicle, Vernon Keenan, director of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation, said early Saturday.

"He went from one level of the parking lot to another, apparently," police spokesman John Quigley said early Saturday. "We don't know if any other cars are missing. I don't know if the person took public transportation or took another vehicle. There's lots of options."

Quigley said authorities were reviewing surveillance tapes for leads. "Mr. Nichols is considered armed and extremely dangerous and should not be approached," Fulton County Sheriff Myron Freeman said. "We are not going to rest until we find him."

Nichols got the semiautomatic pistol by overpowering the female deputy while he was being led down a corridor in the Fulton County Courthouse, Assistant Police Chief Alan Dreher said. After shooting the deputy in the face, the suspect then went to the courtroom, held about a dozen people at bay for a short time and shot and killed Superior Court Judge Rowland Barnes and court reporter Julie Brandau, authorities said.

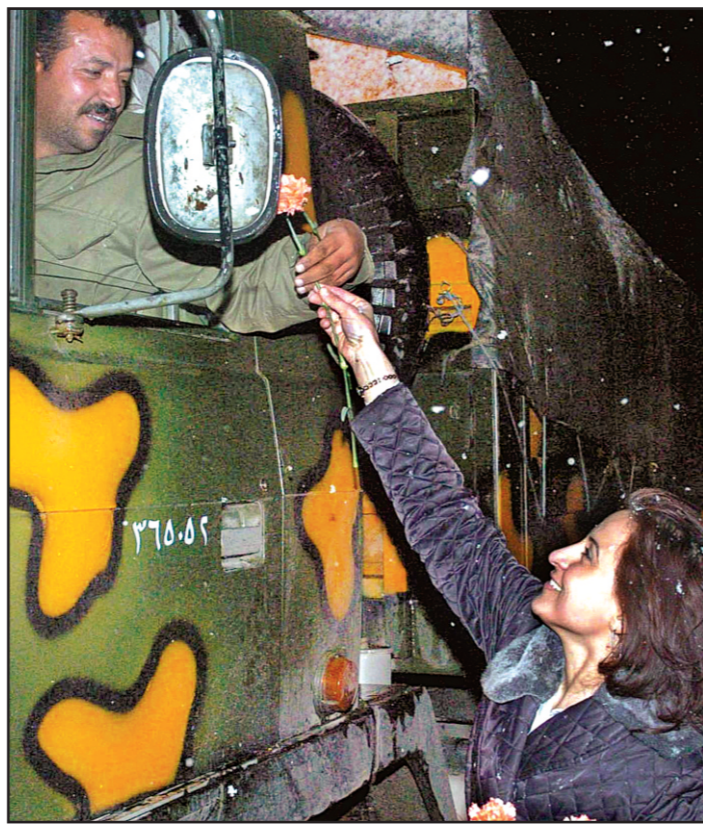


PHOTO: AFP

A Syrian woman offers flowers to a soldier coming back from Lebanon early yesterday in the snowy border town of Jdaidet Yabous. Some 60 Syrian military vehicles carrying troops and equipment crossed the Lebanese-Syrian border early today through this border post 40km west of Damascus and 70km east of Beirut.

UN gets timetable for full Syrian pullout

AP, Jdeidet Yabous, Syria

President Bashar Assad reiterated his commitment to withdrawing all Syrian troops and intelligence agents from Lebanon, a UN envoy said yesterday, indicating that he had received a timetable for the pullout. Meanwhile, a convoy of Syrian troops returning home received a rousing welcome.

The long convoy of vehicles carrying Syrian soldiers returned home amid a heavy snowfall early Saturday to the cheers of Syrian well-wishers, who chanted "Syria! Syria!" handed out flowers and threw rice.

UN envoy Terje Roed-Larsen did not give any details about timing after meeting with Assad in the northern city of Aleppo but said he would discuss the matter at the United Nations next week.

"I will present UN Secretary General Kofi Annan with further details of the timetable for a complete Syrian pullout from Lebanon upon arrival in New York early next week," Roed-Larsen said in a statement read to The Associated Press

by Roed-Larsen's spokesman Najib Frijj.

Chants of "Syria we love you" erupted from a crowd of about 300 men, women and children as 62 military trucks hauling supplies, eight buses loaded with soldiers and jeeps carrying officers crossed into Syria. The convoy also included a battle tank on a flatbed truck.

The civilians, sheltering in the cold under the roof of a Syrian customs drivethrough point, also waved Syrian flags or blew whistles. A heavy snowfall delayed the crossing for several hours.

Some people handed flowers to the soldiers, others threw rice, rose petals and sweets at the vehicles in the traditional Arab welcome. A group sang nationalist songs to the beat of drums.

Soldiers responded by flashing victory signs. One climbed atop a vehicle to hold a picture of Assad.

A Syrian officer at the border, speaking on condition of anonymity, said about 1,000 soldiers made the crossing.

Roed-Larsen had been expected to press Assad for a timetable for a

full withdrawal from Lebanon during their meeting, but UN associate spokeswoman Marie Okabe said he "was not operating with the use of threats." UN Security Council Resolution 1559 calls for, among other things, an immediate withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon.

"The meeting was very constructive and I am much encouraged by President Assad's commitment to the full implementation of Security Council resolution 1559," Roed-Larsen said. "The president has committed to withdraw all Syrian troops and intelligence from Lebanon in fulfillment of Security Council resolution 1559."

Assad decided a week ago to call Syria's 14,000 troops home after relentless US-led international pressure and anti-Syrian protests in Lebanon. By late Friday, almost all of Syria's troops in Lebanon had moved into the eastern Bekaa Valley nearly three weeks ahead of a March 31 target date to complete the first phase of redeployment.

Maoist raid on Indian police post: 7 killed

AFP, Hyderabad

At least seven people were killed in an overnight raid by suspected Maoists on a police station in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, a senior official said yesterday.

The raid occurred late Friday in Andhra Pradesh's Guntur district, some 295km from the state capital Hyderabad, when a group of about 30 Maoists attacked the police station, T. Jitender, superintendent of police said.

The group cut off communication lines before lobbing grenades and storming the building, Jitender said.

Those killed were five police personnel, including a woman constable, and two civilians.

Jitender said the attack could have been retaliation for the killing of 10 Maoists in a clash with police on Monday.

The Maoists, who hold sway over large parts of the southern state, pulled out of government-sponsored talks last month, ending an eight-month-old peace initiative, after accusing the security forces of killing their men in "fake encounters".

NUKE ENRICHMENT

Iran defiant in face of united US, EU stance

REUTERS, Tehran

Iran defiantly insisted yesterday it would never give up its nuclear fuel program despite a new united policy of incentives and threats from Washington and the European Union.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran is determined to use peaceful nuclear technology and no pressure, intimidation or threat can make Iran give up its right," Foreign Ministry spokesman Hamid Reza Asefi said.

Tehran says its nuclear facilities will only be used to generate electricity and never diverted to weapons production.

The EU and Washington, which suspect Iran could use its nuclear power program to make atomic bombs, unveiled a coordinated

carrot and stick approach on Friday aimed at pressuring Tehran to give up sensitive activities like uranium enrichment which can be used to make bomb-grade fuel.

Iran has frozen enrichment while it tries to reach a negotiated settlement about its nuclear program with the EU big three Britain, Germany and France.

While the EU trio said they would back US demands to send Iran's case to the UN Security Council if it resumed enrichment, Washington, in a policy shift, offered practical backing for the EU's diplomatic approach.

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Washington would allow Iran to begin talks on joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and would consider letting it buy civilian airline

parts if it ceased all activities that could produce fuel for nuclear power plants or atomic weapons.

WTO membership and aircraft spares are key incentives which the EU hopes will persuade Iran to scrap enrichment plans. The EU was unable to deliver these inducements without US support.

Iran dismissed the incentives as meaningless. Asefi said US restrictions on the sale of aircraft spares to Iran should never have been imposed.

"Lifting them is no concession and entering the WTO is a clear right of all countries," he said.

"Correcting some (previous) errors and lifting some restrictions imposed on Iran without reason will not stop Iran from acquiring its legitimate rights."

BJP-led coalition forms govt in Jharkhand

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Hindu nationalists took office in the Indian state of Jharkhand yesterday, ending a bitter power struggle after provincial elections last month left a hung parliament.

Sonia Gandhi's ruling Congress party accepted defeat in the see-saw battle for power and asked its ally Shibu Soren to resign as chief minister.

Elections to Jharkhand state assembly last month produced a hung parliament but Governor Syed Sibtay Razi went ahead and swore in tribal leader Shibu Soren, an ally of Congress, as its chief minister on March 2.

But Soren resigned on Friday night following prodding by Congress leadership after he failed to win a confidence vote in the newly-elected legislature on Friday in compliance with a directive of the Supreme Court.

Sensing the arithmetic in the assembly did not favour them,

legislators belonging to Soren's party Jharkhand Mukti Morcha and its allies stalled the proceedings of the assembly Friday challenging the Speaker's authority to conduct the trial of strength.

Results of the polls to the 81-member state legislature showed Soren and his Congress allies had won 33 seats while BJP and its partner bagged 36 seats.

While Soren himself had been circumspect about the exact number of MLAs in his alliance, claiming they numbered 41 and again at times putting the figure at 42, the BJP-led combine had paraded all its 41 MLAs, including five independents, both before the Governor and President APJ Abdul Kalam.

The Governor summoned Soren Friday evening and later appointed Arjun Munda, leader of NDA Legislature Party, as the new chief minister.

After meeting the Governor, Munda told newsmen that he would face a vote of confidence in the House by March 21.



PHOTO: AFP

Immigrants staged a protest march in Barcelona requesting Spain government to legalise illegal immigrants yesterday.

Manmohan to flag off 1st trans-Kashmir bus

AFP, New Delhi

India's prime minister will personally flag off the first bus to travel between the Indian and Pakistan zones of divided Kashmir in almost six decades when the service resumes next month, an official said yesterday.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Kashmir in April will be his third since he assumed office in May.

"The prime minister will be in (the Indian Kashmir summer capital) Srinagar to flag off the first bus on April 7," Singh's spokesman said.

The bus service is the first tangible result of 14 months of dialogue between the nuclear-armed neighbours who have fought three wars including two over Kashmir, which each hold in part but claim in full.

India and Pakistan agreed last month that Kashmiri residents would not need passports to cross the divided state by bus but would use permits issued by the civil administration after being cleared

by police.

The bus service was suspended in 1947 after the first India-Pakistan war over Kashmir. The second was in 1965.

Indian Kashmir is in the grip of a 15-year-old insurgency that has so far left thousands dead.

India blames Pakistan for fomenting the insurgency in Kashmir which has left at least 40,000 dead according to Indian estimates, though separatists put the toll at twice that number.

Pakistan denies supporting the rebels though it admits to extending moral, political and diplomatic support to the Kashmiris' freedom struggle.

Indian authorities last week said some 150 permits had been issued to applicants from Indian-Kashmir to travel by the bus linking Srinagar to Muzaffarabad, capital of the Pakistan-administered zone.

Of the 150 applicants, 60 will be short-listed for the first two trips -- the first on April 7 and the second a fortnight later -- an official said.

RIGHTS GROUP SAYS

Rape, abuse rampant by Afghan warlords

AFP, Kabul

A human rights group yesterday urged Afghanistan to tackle the rampant abuse of power by warlords and militias who are allegedly involved in the widespread rape of women and children.

US-based Human Rights Watch said the Afghan government, the United Nations and Nato member states had not done enough to check the power of local strongmen who hold sway outside the capital Kabul.

"Warlords and their troops in many areas have been implicated in widespread rape of women and children, murder, illegal detention, forced displacement, human trafficking and forced marriage," the rights group said ahead of a meeting of the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva next week.

"Local military and police forces, even in Kabul, have been involved in arbitrary arrests, kidnapping, extortion, torture, and extrajudicial killings of criminal suspects," it

added.

Key to tackling the problem and bringing abusers to book is disarming illegal militias and establishing a functioning judiciary and police force, the group said.

"Warlords and armed factions, including remaining Taliban forces, dominate most of the country and routinely abuse human rights, particularly the rights of women and girls," it added.

The New York-based group said that the "international community has failed to contribute sufficient troops or resources to adequately address the situation, and basic human rights conditions remain poor in many parts of the country, especially outside of Kabul," it added.

Steps had been taken to tackle the power of warlords by removing Ismael Khan as governor of Herat and by dismissing powerful former defence minister Marshal Mohammed Qasim Fahim, but more needed to be done, Human Rights Watch said.



PHOTO: AFP

Chairperson of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government and Congress Party President Sonia Gandhi (C) walks with Congress Party members on the 75th Anniversary of the famous Salt March (Dandi March) in Ahmedabad, in the western state of Gujarat, yesterday.

Gandhi's salt march reenacted

AFP, Ahmedabad

Thousands of people began the long march across a vast expanse of arid western India Saturday to honour the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi, India's independence hero and apostle of non-violence.

The re-enactment of Gandhi's famous "salt march" of 1930 from Ahmedabad to coastal Dandi village in western Gujarat state, was flagged off amid much pomp and show by ruling Congress party president, Italian-born Sonia Gandhi.

Similar marches to mark the 75th anniversary of one of the first acts of defiance in India's fight for independence from Britain were to be held in 15 cities around the world including in Durban, South Africa where Gandhi took his first political steps.

Amid the burst of camera flashes and the blare of prayer songs, Sonia Gandhi led the first batch of marchers, walking with them for a distance of about five kilometers (three miles) on a freshly washed road strewn with flowers in this major Gujarat city.

Cries of "Long Live Mahatma Gandhi" broke the early-morning silence at Sabarmati Ashram, a cluster of huts on the banks of Sabarmati river which once served as Gandhi's hermitage and is now a museum.