



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf (C) attends a meeting on the Access to Justice programme, in Rawalpindi Tuesday. Musharraf will seek another five-year term as head of state after his current tenure ends in 2007, the country's Information Minister Sheikh Rashid said.

6 Afghan aid group workers killed

Kabul rejects amnesty for Mullah Omar

BBC ONLINE, AFP, Tokyo

Six Afghans working for a US-funded aid agency have been shot dead by suspected Taliban militants, officials say.

The men were travelling in a vehicle in the southern Zabul province, along the main highway linking the city of Kandahar with the capital, Kabul.

It is not clear which aid organisation the men worked for.

The attack came a day after suspected Taliban ambushed and killed five Afghans working on a US-

funded anti-drugs project in the south.

In a separate incident, an Italian female aid worker was kidnapped in Kabul on Monday.

The latest attack is said to have taken place in the early hours of Thursday.

"Six Afghan volunteers... were killed at around 0400 in an attack on the main highway," Gulab Shah Alikhel, a spokesman for the Zabul governor, is quoted as saying by Reuters news agency.

On Wednesday, gunmen attacked a group of anti-drug work-

ers as they drove through Helmand province, 180km from the city of Kandahar.

Two of the men were working on a project to replace opium crops for a US company, Chemonics, while a government engineer, driver and guard also died.

Meanwhile, Afghan Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah ruled out an amnesty for the leader of the ousted Taliban regime and a most wanted warlord after a commission suggested bringing them into the political mainstream.

Afghanistan's reconciliation

commission said on May 9 that former Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar and veteran guerrilla Gulbuddin Hekmatyar could be pardoned if they disarmed and obeyed the new government.

But Abdullah, in an interview published Thursday in the Yomiuri Shimbun, Japan's top-selling daily, dismissed the proposal by the autonomous commission.

"The two men are terrorists who are said to have links with the international terrorist group al-Qaeda. They should not be part of that" amnesty offer, he said.

MISSIONARY KILLING

Indian court commutes death sentence

AFP, Bhubaneswar

A court in eastern India yesterday commuted a death sentence to life in prison for a Hindu extremist convicted of killing an Australian missionary and his two sons six years ago.

The High Court in Orissa overturned the original death sentence for Dara Singh, who was convicted by a trial court in September 2003 of murdering Graham Staines and his two minor sons, a court official said.

The court also acquitted 11 others who were sentenced to life terms in 2003, but upheld the life sentence handed to Singh's colleague Mahendra Hembrum by the trial court, the court official said.

In January 1999, Staines and his two sons, Philip, 10, and Timothy, eight, were burnt to death by a mob of Hindu fanatics who accused him of forcibly converting poor Hindus in Orissa to Christianity.

Abbas seeks Pak role in ME peace

AFP, Islamabad

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas said yesterday after talks with Pervez Musharraf that the Pakistani president could play an important role in the quest for Middle East peace.

"President Musharraf can play a very significant and effective role in resolving the Palestinian question as he is an acknowledged world leader, who enjoys great respect for his vision and policies," Abbas was quoted as saying by Pakistani state media.

"We hope that President Musharraf will put his political weight behind efforts for a just resolution of the lingering dispute," he said, according to the official Associated Press of Pakistan.

Information Minister Sheikh Rashid told AFP the talks between Abbas and Musharraf had been very "fruitful."

Abbas arrived in Islamabad Thursday from Beijing on a one-day visit during which he also held talks with Prime Minister Shaokat Aziz before flying to New Delhi to meet with Indian leaders.

The Palestinian leader's visits

are part of his first Asian tour since succeeding the late Yasser Arafat as president of the Palestinian Authority in January.

Pakistan, a key US ally, has offered to mediate in the Middle East conflict although Islamabad has no diplomatic relations with Israel.

The visit will reinforce Pakistan's "deep rooted" relations with the Palestinian people, the foreign office said before his arrival.

There has been a recent upsurge in attacks in Middle East, prompting the United Nations to express concern Wednesday that confidence between both sides in the region was being undermined.

Abbas admitted differences between the various Palestinian factions was a problem, but said he was confident of the future.

"We have agreements among different factions, hostile conflicts are unlikely to break out. I'm fully capable of controlling the situation," he said.

"I look forward to strengthening internal unity and making progress in political restructuring," he added.

Nepal frees 15 leaders

But ex-PM Deuba remains in jail, rebels bomb TV transmission tower

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal freed 15 political leaders Wednesday but former premier Sher Bahadur Deuba remained in jail after refusing to testify at a second day of hearings held by a powerful anti-graft committee.

Twelve members of the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist Leninist and three belonging to the Nepali Congress were released in the capital of the Himalayan kingdom, Kathmandu.

King Gyanendra ordered the arrest of hundreds of political leaders, party activists and others after he seized power on February 1, but has released many in batches after international pressure to restore civil liberties.

"The king's defeat is now certain," Bam Dev Gautam, a senior communist leader, told reporters following his release.

Gautam was referring to an alliance struck among the seven mainstream political parties last weekend to seek the restoration of

democracy.

King Gyanendra has said he grabbed because squabbling politicians had failed to end an increasingly bloody Maoist insurgency in the Himalayan nation. The nine-year revolt has claimed more than 11,000 lives.

Human rights group say hundreds remain in detention despite the king's lifting of emergency rule in late April.

Meanwhile, Deuba, fired by Gyanendra as premier when he took power and now charged with fraud, refused to answer questions posed by the anti-corruption body, a day after prosecutors sought to hand him a 10-year prison term.

"I don't recognise the unconstitutionally formed commission," Deuba told reporters inside the commission headquarters.

King Gyanendra has said the commission aims to tackle rampant corruption, but critics say existing anti-corruption bodies are sufficient to address the problem and that it is being used to target opponents of

the royal takeover.

"It has no legal validity so I will not testify," Deuba said, calling his arrest "a political vendetta."

Deuba, the most senior politician to be detained by the commission which has sweeping arrest and punishment powers, was arrested 22 days ago.

The panel, whose hearings are open to the media, is probing a contract granted when Deuba was in power related to the 464-million-dollar Melamchi Water Project to supply drinking water to the parched capital.

Meanwhile, Maoist rebels attacked a state-run television station in southwestern Nepal, bombing a transmission tower and destroying equipment, police said Wednesday.

No one was injured in the attack late Tuesday by the rebels who overpowered guards at the Nepal Television building in Palpa, around 250km southwest of the capital, police said.

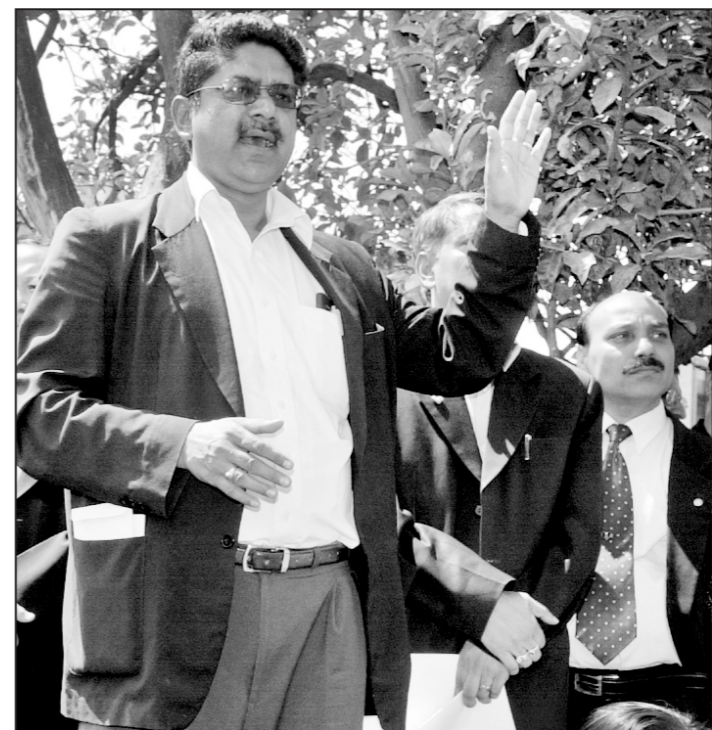


PHOTO: AFP

Shambhu Thapa (L), the president of the Nepal Bar Association, an umbrella organisation of Nepalese lawyers, addresses a protest demonstration in Kathmandu Tuesday. Thapa strongly protested against Nepalese policemen who allegedly assaulted lawyers, students, human rights activists and journalists while trying to arrest two student leaders defying the Supreme Court orders.

'Rent-a-crowd' company launched in India

AFP, New Delhi

A former politician in southern India has launched a "rent-a-crowd" company to recruit people to cheer at party rallies and said he has been deluged by would-be recruits, a report Friday said.

"When all political parties and organisations are doing it discreetly, why can't we do it professionally?" the Hindustan Times newspaper quoted the company's founder, Devarajan, who goes by one name, as saying.

Indian political parties are known for paying people to show up for rallies, often transporting them in fleets of buses, but usually the recruitment is carried out by the parties.

Devarajan is offering recruits training, guaranteed wages and says they can be deployed when parties need a "decent-sized crowd" at a rally, the newspaper reported.

Who owns Taj Mahal?

AFP, Agra

An ownership battle has erupted over the world's most famous monument to love, the Taj Mahal, as it celebrates its 350th anniversary.

The magnificent 17th-century structure built by Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan as a tomb for his beloved queen, Mumtaz Mahal, is owned and managed by the Archaeological Survey of India as a national monument.

But the Sunni Waqf Board, which oversees Sunni Muslim graveyards and mosques throughout India, has staked a claim to the white-marbled tomb, saying since the monument houses Muslim graves, the Taj belongs to it.

The Taj in Agra in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh contains the tombs of Shah Jahan and his queen along with other tombs.

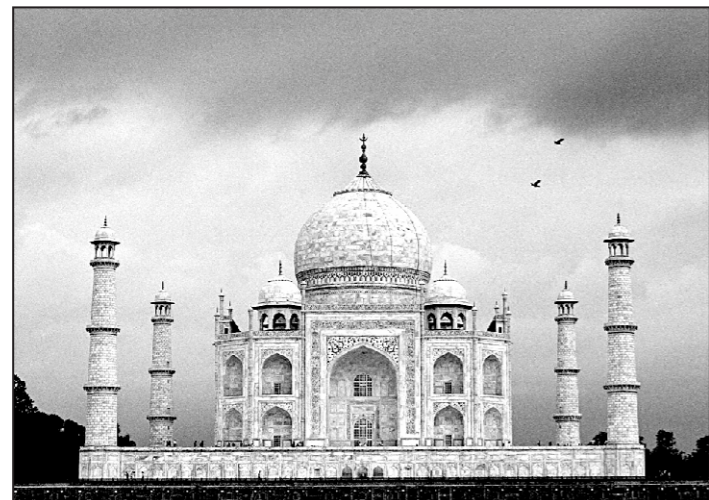


PHOTO: AFP

World's most famous monument to love, the Taj Mahal, celebrates its 350th anniversary as its ownership battle rages on.

Contradicting the Muslim claim, a hardline Hindu outfit, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP or World Hindu Council), says the Taj Mahal's builders constructed it after demolishing a Hindu temple dedicated to Shiva, one of the most important gods in the Hindu pantheon.

The Hindu group says the monument should be declared a temple and adds the key to the mystery lies in a sealed basement in the Taj that it says contains the "pillars and artefact of a temple".

On either side of the massive platform on which the Taj stands are steps down to the basement that has been locked for as long as people can remember.

"If the basement is opened, it'll reveal the truth. I know it contains Hindu pillars and temple artefacts," said Agra VHP leader Raghvendra, who goes by only one name.

Former MP Subramanian Swamy, head of the regional Janata Party, recalled he was not allowed to see the basement when he visited the Taj in 1978.

"I was later called by (former prime minister) Morarji Desai who said I should not press the matter as it was in the national interest that the basement be kept sealed," he told AFP. "The government has something to hide and the issue should be thoroughly investigated."

The Waqf board, which under powers granted to it under India's 1950 constitution can summon witnesses and decide cases involving its interests, is to hold a hearing Friday to which it has summoned the Archaeological Survey.

The survey is to present its response to the board's show-cause notice asking why the Taj cannot be handed over to the Waqf board. If the two sides cannot agree, the case will go before the courts.

Archaeological Survey officials did not return calls for comment. But Archaeological Survey administrator Ghulam Ali Qamar, the custodian in charge of the Taj between 1958 and 1976, says no one knows what is in the basement.

Tigers push for aid deal with Lankan govt

AFP, Colombo

Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday pushed for "serious engagement" with Sri Lanka's government to share billions of dollars of tsunami aid despite official fears that such a deal threatens the president's life.

The top negotiator of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), Anton Balasingham, told Norwegian peace brokers that the rebels were keen to establish a joint mechanism with Colombo to disburse millions of dollars in relief.

President Chandrika Kumaratunga vowed Monday she will press ahead with a plan to establish the mechanism with the Tigers despite "extreme danger" to her life and opposition from within her own coalition.

The "president must engage seriously with the LTTE in finalising the terms of the joint mechanism and sign the agreement to enable aid to flow to the Northeast," the pro-rebel Tamilnet.com website quoted Balasingham as saying.

It said he told Norway's special

envoy Erik Solheim in London Wednesday that there should be "concrete action" on the part of the Colombo government to ensure that aid was sent to rebel-held areas of the northeast.

International donors have promised three billion dollars in aid to recover from the December 26 tsunami that killed 31,000 people.

However, diplomats said the aid was subject to Colombo and the Tigers reviving peace talks that

remain stalled since April 2003 and agreeing to share aid.

Kumaratunga has said that the tsunami aid sharing could be a foundation for a final peace settlement in a country where more than 60,000 people have been killed in three decades of ethnic conflict.

Dozens of Buddhist monks took to the streets here Thursday protesting Kumaratunga's plan to share aid with the Tigers.