

Madrid car bomb injures three

REUTERS, Madrid

A car bomb exploded in the Spanish capital on Wednesday, injuring three people, 45 minutes after a Basque newspaper received a warning in the name of Basque separatist group ETA, police said.

Police sealed off the area in the San Blas district of northeastern Madrid where the bomb exploded and smoke could be seen rising into the air.

The warning gave police time to clear the area before the explosion, according to state radio, but emergency officials said three people were slightly injured.

The blast appeared to be an act of defiance from ETA after a vote by the Spanish Parliament last week to grant the government permission to open peace talks with the group if it laid down its arms.

Basque newspaper Gara said on its web site that it had received an anonymous call on Wednesday morning warning that a car bomb would explode in Madrid in 45 minutes. The call was made in the name of ETA, it said.



Spanish policemen inspect the site where a powerful car bomb exploded injuring three in the Spanish capital Madrid yesterday.

US troops launch new offensive in Iraq

AP, Haditha

About 1,000 US Marines, sailors and soldiers encircled this Euphrates River city in the troubled Anbar province before dawn on Wednesday, launching the second major anti-insurgent operation in this vast western region in less than a month.

The offensives are aimed at uprooting insurgents who have killed more than 620 people since a new Iraqi government was announced on April 28. Many of those insurgents are thought to be foreign fighters who have slipped across the border from Syria.

Syria is under intense pressure to stop foreign fighters from entering Iraq across their porous 380-mile-long border. Both the United States and Iraq, at their highest leadership levels, have been demanding Syria do more. Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari said last week that he would soon visit Syria for talks with officials

about repeated border infiltration.

Four US soldiers were killed on Tuesday, pushing the number of US troops killed in four days to 14, part of a surge in attacks that have also killed about 60 Iraqis.

In Haditha, helicopters swept down near palm tree groves dropping off Marines who blocked off one side of the town, while other troops on foot and in armored vehicles established checkpoints and moved toward the center of this city, 140 miles northwest of Baghdad. U.S. warplanes circled overhead.

"Right now there's a larger threat than should be in Haditha and we're here to tell them that they're not welcome," said Lt. Col. Lionel Urquhart, commander of the 3rd Battalion, 25th Marine Regiment, which is part of the operation.

The assault, called Operation New Market, focused on this city of about 90,000 people, where the US military says insurgents have been using increasingly sophisticated tactics. Earlier this month insur-

gents launched a multistage attack from a Haditha hospital, killing four U.S. troops in an ambush that included a suicide car bomber, a roadside bomb, and gunfire from fortified positions in the hospital, which was partially destroyed in the attack.

According to initial reports, three insurgents were killed during several fierce gun battles that broke out after US forces entered this town before dawn, Marine Capt. Christopher Toland told an Associated Press reporter embedded with US forces. Two Marines were also wounded and evacuated, Toland said.

US Marines took over several homes in Haditha, using them as observation and control centers as other troops fanned out through the city's mainly empty streets in an apparent bid to flush any insurgents out. At least one loud explosion rocked the city early this morning, but the source of the blast was unclear.

AMNESTY REPORT SAYS More disappearances, deaths in S Asia

AFP, New Delhi

Deaths and disappearances surged in South Asia in 2004 fuelled by separatist conflicts and corruption, London-based Amnesty International said in its annual human rights report released Wednesday.

Amnesty International said Nepal and Bangladesh witnessed the sharpest increase in rights violations as a Maoist rebellion raged in the impoverished Himalayan kingdom and a specialized crime-fighting force in the eastern delta nation led to a surge in deaths of suspected criminals.

In Sri Lanka, Amnesty said a split in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam rebel group led to increased fighting for territory and several deaths that have imperiled a Norwegian-brokered three-year-old ceasefire with the government of the island nation.

As well, Amnesty noted the continued recruitment of child soldiers by the Tamil rebels and numerous reports of torture by Sri Lankan police.

The report said 416 people

disappeared after being arrested by the Royal Nepalese Army and police forces in 2004.

Amnesty said the Maoist rebels also abducted and killed civilians at an increased pace in 2004 while thousands of people in the countryside have been rounded up for "political education" classes lasting from a few days to several weeks.

In India, the rights group said authorities have not successfully investigated more than 8,000 disappearances since a separatist conflict erupted in the the Indian-held portion of Kashmir in 1989.

However, the report said peace talks in 2004 between India and Pakistan over Kashmir have led to a series of confidence-building measures aimed at reducing violence.

In neighbouring Pakistan, Amnesty said the military-led government used emergency powers aimed at combating terrorism to arrest journalists and political protesters.

It also noted continued violence against women including a spate of "honour killings" approved by quasi-judicial tribal councils.

Delhi reopens diplomacy with Baghdad

PTI, Baghdad

In the first contact with the new Iraqi government, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's special envoy for West Asia, CR Gharekhan on Monday met Iraqi PM Ibrahim Al Jaafari and offered help in reconstruction of the war-ravaged country and in drafting of its new Constitution.

At a 40-minute meeting, Gharekhan handed over a personal letter from the PM citing India's commitment to cooperate with Iraq in its task of national reconstruction.

Gharekhan, on a three-day visit, suggested that Iraq could send a team to Delhi to study the Indian Constitution and talk to Constitutional experts there.

Six killed in Pak bomb blast

REUTERS, Wana

Six people, all of them women and children, were killed in a bomb blast in a remote tribal region in Pakistan near the Afghan border where al-Qaeda militants have been taking refuge, witnesses said on Wednesday.

The bomb, planted near the outer wall of the house of a tribal family, exploded late on Tuesday.

The incident took place in Makeen, a market town in South Waziristan, about 400 km southwest of the capital Islamabad, where a large number of al-Qaeda-linked

militants are believed to be hiding.

An official of the local administration said two women and four children were killed while a resident said one woman and five children died.

Local officials and residents said the blast appeared to be the result of tribal rivalry rather than militant related.

Pakistan's tribal belt is awash with weapons and munitions smuggled during decades of war in neighbouring Afghanistan that are often used by ethnic Pashtun tribesmen to settle scores.

Zarqawi wounded, says al-Qaeda website

AFP, REUTERS, Baghdad, Dubai

Iraq's most wanted man Abu Musab al-Zarqawi has been wounded, according to the website of his al-Qaeda front group, as insurgent attacks left nine US soldiers and dozens of Iraqis dead over a 48-hour period.

The web site of Zarqawi, who has a 25-million-dollar US bounty on his head and is reputed to be behind some of the deadliest insurgent attacks in Iraq and the grisly execution of hostages, indicated life-threatening wounds to the Jordanian-born militant.

"Islamic nation, brothers in unity, we pray God that our sheikh, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, recovers from the wounds he has sustained," said a statement issued in the name of his militant organization on the Internet Tuesday.

"The injuries of our leader are an honour for us and a motivation to tighten the net on the enemies of God and to step up attacks," said the Al-Qaeda Organisation in the Land of Two Rivers in a statement whose authenticity could not be verified.

US officials reacted cautiously to

the claim and said they could not immediately verify the authenticity of a statement posted on a militant web site.

In Jordan, a sister of Zarqawi told AFP: "I haven't heard anything. I know nothing."

His relatives who live in Zarqa, north of Amman, have repeatedly said they have no contacts with him.

Meanwhile supporters of Zarqawi filled Islamist bulletin boards on the Internet with prayers for his recovery yesterday after his group said he had been wounded.

Within hours one posting had launched a "million prayers of recovery campaign," quickly garnering over 70 responses.

"Do not be sparing in your prayers for a speedy recovery for the Sheikh and may God return him to the fray in safety," the poster said, signing off with a graphic that featured Zarqawi's face, a bloodied knife and the words "behead."

"O God, take away the pain of Abu Musab, and heal him, since there is no healing or medicine other than from You," wrote a group calling itself the Global Islamic Media Front.

Hurriyat leaders agree to visit Pakistan

AFP, Srinagar

Indian Kashmiri separatists have accepted an invitation to visit Pakistan on the next intra-Kashmir bus service next week, moderate Kashmiri leader Mirwaiz Umar Farooq said Wednesday.

Pakistan on Monday invited the leaders of the separatist umbrella group, the All Parties Hurriyat Conference, to make their first visit to the Pakistani zone of the divided territory as part of the 16-month peace process between the South Asian rivals.

"It has been decided that a high-level Hurriyat delegation will visit Pakistan and Azad Kashmir (Pakistan-controlled) on June 2," Farooq told reporters.



Former US president Bill Clinton arrives at the Maurya Sheraton Hotel in New Delhi yesterday. Clinton is in India to boost the fight against AIDS and to tour the tsunami-ravaged southern coastline as a UN special envoy.

US House passes stem cell bill

REUTERS, Washington

Despite a veto threat from President Bush, the US House of Representatives on Tuesday easily approved bipartisan legislation that would permit more federal funding of stem cell research on human embryos that would otherwise be discarded.

The House also approved by a 431-1 vote less controversial legislation that would expand research involving cells drawn from umbilical cord blood.

The embryonic stem cell bill, sponsored by Delaware Republican Rep. Michael Castle Colorado Democrat Rep. Diana DeGette, would allow federal funding of stem cell research involving excess embryos from in vitro fertilization that would otherwise be discarded. It would not allow cloning a human baby.

The bill passed with a comfortable 238-194 margin, but was well short of the two-thirds threshold needed to override Bush's threatened veto.

Opponents of embryonic stem

cell research believe it destroys human life and object to using taxpayer dollars to finance it. They also charge that the promise of the research has been hyped.

"The deliberate destruction of unique living self-integrated human persons is not some incidental tangent of embryonic stem cell research. It is the essence of the experiment - kill some in the hopes of saving others," said House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, a Texas Republican.

But several conservative Republicans, who usually oppose abortion rights legislation, broke with their party leaders and the anti-abortion movement to support research, saying it held out hope for treating devastating diseases, like Parkinson's or diabetes.

Rep. Joe Barton, a Texas Republican who chairs the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said in 21 years in Congress, he had voted only once against the anti-abortion movement. Announcing his support for the Castle-DeGette bill, Barton said his record would now be "100 percent minus two."

50th anniversary of first Kangchenjunga ascent

AFP, Kathmandu

The first team of climbers to conquer the world's third highest peak, Mount Kangchenjunga, half a century ago celebrated the feat in the Nepalese capital on Wednesday.

"Fifty years ago, Mount Everest and K2 had already been climbed, so we climbed Kangchenjunga, though it was very difficult," New Zealander Norman Hardie, 80, told a Golden Jubilee celebration.

British climbers George Band and Joe Brown reached the 8,586-metre (28,168 feet) peak on May 25, 1955, and Hardie and Tony Streater made it up the following day as part of team organized by Britain's Charles Evans.

Band, Hardie and Streater met government officials Wednesday and were later driven through Kathmandu on horse-drawn carriages followed by traditional musical bands. Brown could not attend because of health problems.



PHOTO: AFP

The first British mountaineer to summit Mount Kangchenjunga, George Band addresses a reception to celebrate the occasion in Kathmandu yesterday.

Kangchenjunga, a chain of five peaks on the border with India, has been scaled 195 times since the first ascent and has claimed the lives of 30 climbers, said Nepal Mountaineering Association president Ang Tsering Sherpa.