

6 soldiers killed in Kashmir car bomb attack

AFP, Srinagar

Six Indian soldiers were killed and 18 injured when a powerful car bomb exploded yesterday as a bus carrying troops drove past a popular tourist attraction in revolt-hit Indian Kashmir, police said.

The explosion ripped the bus apart and shook the famed Mughal gardens on the shores of lake Dal in the summer capital Srinagar around 4.00 pm (1030 GMT), a police spokesman said.

A civilian photographer who earned his living taking pictures of tourists in the gardens was also injured, as were the bus driver and conductor, both civilians.

The spokesman said explosives were placed in a car and detonated as a military convoy passed by. The bus carrying the soldiers bore the full brunt of the blast.

The soldiers were heading back to their units after having completed their annual holidays, army spokesman Vijay Batra told AFP. They had been travelling from Jammu, the southern winter capital.

The region's dominant rebel group Hizbul Mujahideen, which wants Kashmir merged into Pakistan, claimed responsibility for the explosion in a telephone call to local news agency Kashmir News Service.

Lanka signs tsunami aid deal with Tigers

Marxists disrupt parliamentary debate

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's government and Tiger rebels yesterday entered a landmark tsunami aid-sharing deal, raising hopes of salvaging a Norwegian-led peace process while hardline Marxists stepped up nationwide protests.

The government said the deal raised the prospect of reviving direct peace talks which remain on hold since April 2003, but the main Marxist party, the JVP, described it as a stepping stone for the break-up of the island.

Under the deal, the Colombo government and the Tigers will jointly handle billions of dollars in foreign aid for survivors of the December 26 tsunami, which killed at least 31,000 people and displaced one million in the country.

"The secretary to the ministry of rehabilitation, M. S. Jayasinghe,

signed on behalf of the government..." government minister Maithripala Sirisena said here.

The document, after being signed by Jayasinghe, was taken by Norwegian diplomats to the rebel-held town of Kilinochchi where it was inked by Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) deputy head of planning and development secretary, Shanmugalingam Ranjan.

Finance Minister Sarath Amunugama said the deal could help break the 26-month deadlock in peace talks.

"Though this is not directly linked to the peace process, this will create a good environment in which we are going to work with each other and that could help the peace process," he said.

Details of the proposed Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure were unveiled in parliament Friday after months of secret

talks with the help of Norway.

Government officials said the two sides had discussed 13 drafts before signing the 14th on Friday, underscoring the intense negotiations that went on before a deal could be clinched.

Several groups have attacked the government of President Chandrika Kumaratunga for agreeing to the deal, which critics see as granting the separatists too much legitimacy.

The Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, disrupted parliamentary debate on the controversial issue when the document was released ahead of debate in the assembly, and the sitting ended in chaos.

The JVP argues that the deal will set the stage for the LTTE to strengthen their claim for an independent homeland by granting them recognition as a separate entity.

The government responded to

the uproar in parliament by postponing assembly sittings until July 5. However, the delay has no bearing on concluding the deal as it does not require approval by parliament, a government minister said.

The JVP quit the ruling coalition last week protesting the deal to jointly handle tsunami aid and vowed to launch nationwide protests from Friday.

The joint mechanism will be in three tiers with a three-member panel -- comprising one representative each from the government, the Tigers and the minority Muslim community -- at the top.

A mid-level structure will be dominated by the rebels, who will have five seats while the government will have two and Muslims three.

The mechanism will have an international leader as the custodian of foreign aid.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan Marxist demonstrators stand outside the Sri Lankan parliament where Marxist legislators blocked a debate on a controversial aid sharing deal between the government and Tamil Tiger rebels yesterday in Colombo.

'Irregularities in Iran presidential run-off'

AFP, Tehran

Iran's interior ministry said it had received reports of irregularities in yesterday's presidential election run-off and warned it may suspend voting in certain polling stations.

However the Guardians Council, an unelected hardline-controlled political watchdog, dismissed the complaints and effectively vetoed any move to halt the high-stakes election.

"We have received a number of reports concerning interference in certain polling stations from people who shouldn't be there," the reformist-controlled interior ministry's spokesman Jahanbakhsh Khanjani told reporters.

Iranians were voting in a tight presidential run-off between moderate cleric Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Rafsanjani and two beaten reformist candidates have already alleged Ahmadinejad is being backed illegally by well-financed

regime elements such as the Guardians Council, the Basij militia and Revolutionary Guards.

"The reports from inspectors, particularly in Tehran, show that violations have gone beyond what could be considered a small level," Khanjani said.

"The interior ministry is examining the possibility of suspending operations in certain polling stations," he warned.

But the Guardians Council, whose 12 members are appointed by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and which has veto power over the interior ministry, dismissed the fresh allegations.

"Certain people are trying to disturb the election by diffusing false information," Guardians Council spokesman Gholamhossein Elham told the student news agency ISNA.

"We have not received any reports of irregularities that could damage the electoral process. No organ has the right to stop the vote and any such move can be followed up by the judiciary," he warned.



PHOTO: AFP

Protesters make the thumbs down sign as they display mock compact discs during a protest march in Manila yesterday. The protesters were seeking the ouster of President Gloria Arroyo for alleged cheating in the last election and her family's alleged involvement in illegal gambling.

Pak cops 'sewed prisoner's lips shut'

AFP, Multan

Pakistani authorities ordered a probe yesterday into claims that police sewed up a suspect's lips to stop him screaming obscenities, officials said.

Policemen allegedly used a needle and jute yarn to silence the man when he fought with a fellow prisoner, tore an officer's shirt and shouted while being taken to court Thursday in dusty Vehari, near the central city of Multan.

"I have ordered an inquiry into the sewing of the lips of an under-trial prisoner, Muhammad Hussain, to keep his mouth shut," Multan deputy inspector general of police Malik Muhammad Iqbal told AFP.

Another local official speaking on condition of anonymity said police tied the suspect to a pillar and beat him but resorted to the gruesome needlework when he kept hurling abuse at them.

Hussain, facing trial over a fight between rival groups, badly damaged his lips when he then tried to speak again, he said,

Annan warns against 'big stick' approach to UN reforms

AFP, Washington

UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, in a letter published yesterday by The Wall Street Journal, warned US lawmakers that the threat to withhold UN dues could undermine UN reform efforts and US diplomacy.

Annan quoted from a bipartisan Task Force report by US lawmakers saying US diplomacy needed to build a strong coalition of countries who share US desire to reform the United Nations.

"Such a coalition will not be built by one nation threatening to cut its own contribution unilaterally. Other states will not accept such a 'big stick' approach," warned Annan.

He was referring to a bill the House of Representatives passed a week ago to withhold half of Washington's UN dues if the world body does not reform. Proposed by Republican Henry Hyde, the bill is opposed by the White House.

Iraqi PM opposes setting troop withdrawal date

Saddam must be tried soon

REUTERS, AFP, Washington

Iraq would like to see US forces withdraw as soon as feasible, but setting a date for their departure would be a mistake, Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari said in an interview published yesterday.

"We would like to see the withdrawal of American forces as quickly as possible, because the presence of any foreign troops on our land means there is a weakness that we cannot by ourselves control the security situation," Jaafari said in an interview with The Washington Post.

But a deadline would "play into the hands of the terrorists," Jaafari said on the eve of a meeting with President Bush at the White House yesterday.

Some US lawmakers, including a few from Bush's own Republican Party, have called for a deadline to

begin withdrawing American troops from Iraq.

But the White House and the Pentagon have rejected the idea, saying insurgents would simply wait for a withdrawal and then renew their fight.

In the interview, Jaafari called instead for accelerating the training of Iraqi troops, including a possible role for nations that are not a part of the US-led military coalition.

"We strongly prefer an increase in quality of Iraqi forces, increase in number, increase in efficiency, increase in the effectiveness of tactics they use, as well as increase in equipment ... anything that will raise efficiency of Iraqi forces is something that will be very welcomed because it will allow other forces, especially American forces, to withdraw," the prime minister said.

The newspaper said Jaafari

insisted that recent US-Iraqi offensives have improved security "dramatically." He also said growing support from Iraqis had generated new public cooperation and information that has been helpful in combating insurgents.

Meanwhile, Jaafari said it was time to put the deposed Saddam Hussein on trial, as insurgents pressed on with their terror campaign yesterday and pressure grew for US-led troops to withdraw.

Jaafari was in Washington to meet with President George W. Bush and help him try to ease increasing US concern about the Iraq war.

Speaking to the Council on Foreign Relations think-tank Thursday, Jaafari said: "There has indeed been some time wasting and I have spoken to the main judge responsible for trying Saddam Hussein."

India says no to Pak minister boarding Kashmir bus

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday said it had rejected a request by Pakistani Information Minister Sheikh Rashid for permission to travel to Indian-administered Kashmir on the new trans-Kashmir bus service next week.

"The government of India has processed the application and has declined permission, taking into account all aspects," Foreign Ministry spokesman Navtej Sarna told a media briefing here.

The minister has been at the centre of a controversy since a leading separatist earlier this month praised his help during the early days of the Islamic militancy which exploded in the divided state in 1989.

Rashid, a Kashmiri, had said he wanted to cross on the next run of the bus service on June 30 to visit relatives in Indian Kashmir.

Senior separatist leader Yasin

Malik, one of several moderate separatists who made a historic visit to Pakistan early in June, stunned an audience in Islamabad by thanking Rashid for helping militants cross the Line of Control -- the ceasefire line dividing the Pakistani and Indian zones of Kashmir -- in the early 1990s.

An embarrassed Rashid quickly issued a denial, and Malik, on his return, said he was misquoted by a Pakistani newspaper.

But India termed the comments a "matter of grave concern".

India has often accused Pakistan of aiding militancy in Kashmir by organising training camps in its zone.

Pakistan has denied any direct involvement in the militancy but has said that it gives them moral and diplomatic support. It has pledged as part of the peace process to stop militants crossing into India.

Iraq-style regime change not appropriate for Syria: Rice

REUTERS, Dubai

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice signalled in remarks published yesterday that Iraq-style regime change was not appropriate for Syria, but said Damascus must change its policies.

"What we want is to send the Syrians a clear message from everybody that their behavior must change. This means that they should not be in a position to cause instability in Lebanon," the London-based Ashraq al-Awsat newspaper quoted her as saying in an interview given to three Arabic-language newspapers.

Asked whether the US administration would go as far as toppling President Bashar al-Assad's government, she said:

"Every situation is different from the other. Syria is not Iraq and Iraq is not Syria. Iraq was a special case

where there was a problem of weapons of mass destruction, backing terrorism and UN (Security Council) resolutions. We were also in a state of war with Iraq.

"The Syrian regime is capable of changing itself, its policies and its behaviour with its neighbours. This is the path we hope they will take," she said.

Washington stepped up its campaign to isolate Damascus on the international stage following the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri in February.

Lebanese opposition leaders accused Damascus, which then had a strong military presence in Lebanon, of being behind the killing -- a charge it denied.

Syria bowed to pressure to withdraw its troops in April after anti-Syrian protests swept Lebanon.

China flood toll rises to 567

AP, AFP, Beijing

China yesterday braced for the start of the rainy season along the flood-prone Yangtze river as the death toll from torrential downpours this year jumped to 567 with at least 165 more missing.

There was no immediate official word on the economic impact of storms forecast for Guangdong province, which borders Hong Kong and is China's most populous region with more than 100 million people. But state media said road and railway traffic in some areas was cut, including the main Beijing-Hong Kong railroad.

Major flooding across China this year has so far wreaked economic losses valued at 22.9 billion yuan (2.76 billion dollars), with more than 44 million people affected, the civic affairs ministry's flood headquarters said.

At least 2.45 million people have been evacuated. Nationwide, rain-related deaths were reported in 22 of China's 31 provinces and regions, it said.

In Guangdong, at least 48 people have been killed and 120,000 forced to flee their homes, state television

reported on its midday news Friday. So far, most damage in Guangdong appears to be to farms, with export-oriented factories largely unaffected, said Ruby Zhu, China economist for the Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce.

"It doesn't seem serious now," she said. "But if it gets more serious, we're not sure what will happen in Guangdong province."

Nationwide, a total of 137 people are missing, Xinhua said.

Authorities in Macau, the former Portuguese colony west of Hong Kong at the mouth of the Pearl River, issued a flood warning, saying the rain-swollen river could rise to as much as three feet above normal, Xinhua said.

The death toll was higher than most of the rainy seasons of the past decade, though still below that of 1998, when 4,150 people were killed in summer flooding in central and northeastern China, Xinhua said.

China suffers hundreds of flooding deaths every summer in its south and northeast.

'Aziz will not testify against Saddam'

AFP, Washington

Iraq's jailed former foreign minister Tareq Aziz will not testify against his former boss Saddam Hussein and is requesting a trial outside Iraq, his attorney told CNN.

"Aziz told me that he will not take the witness stand against Saddam," Badi Aref Izzat told CNN Thursday in a telephone interview from Baghdad.

The lawyer said he witnessed Aziz's first official interrogation on Tuesday at a US base near Baghdad airport.

He said Aziz told him "he is in good health and spirits ... despite his more than two year detention," but that he was "always asking about his family," whom he has not seen since his arrest in April 2003.

Izzat said Aziz, the white-haired, bespectacled spokesman of Saddam, and other senior aides to the fallen dictator were being housed in separate cells, under US guard, but that they were allowed to meet three hours a day.

On Aziz awaiting trial by an Iraqi special tribunal, the lawyer said that "any interrogation or future trial, if there is any evidence against Mr. Aziz, should be conducted on an independent soil, such as Holland or Sweden."



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani religious students and other protesters block a street as they set tyres on fire in Karachi yesterday. Protests erupted in Pakistan's largest city after gunmen on motorcycles shot dead two Sunni Muslim clerics in the latest sectarian killings to shake the country.



PHOTO: AFP

A man reads while resting on a makeshift raft outside his flooded home in Fuzhou, southeastern China's Fujian province yesterday. At least 567 people were killed and over 160 others missing after torrential rains and floods pounded southern China.