



An Indian milkman pushes his bicycle laden with supplies through the waterlogged Kalina area of Mumbai yesterday. Monsoon rains which have lashed India's financial and entertainment capital disrupting flights, hampering rescue efforts and pushed the death toll closer to 1,000, as the city battled to recover from its worst-ever recorded deluge.

Mumbai counts the cost of floods

BBC ONLINE

Heavy monsoon rain in and around India's financial capital, Mumbai (Bombay), is estimated to have caused damage worth 30bn rupees (\$690m).

Others say the cost to agriculture and industry is likely to be much higher.

Indian officials say the number of people who have died could soon rise to 1,000. Rescue workers are still trying to recover bodies from flooded areas.

More than 20 million people have been affected by the rains, which began a week ago and have continued since.

Meteorologists are still forecasting heavy rain and strong winds in the state of Maharashtra, of which Mumbai is the capital.

The heavy rain and accompanying floods have had a major impact on agricultural production and industry, analysts warn.

The Indian Merchants' Chamber estimates that the total damage thus far is 30 billion rupees (\$690m), according to the Economic Times newspaper.

Ulfa vows violence if talks offer ignored

AFP, Guwahati

A powerful separatist rebel group in India's restive northeastern state of Assam vowed yesterday to step up its armed struggle unless New Delhi responds positively to its offer for peace talks.

The warning by the United Liberation Front of Asom (Ulfa), which has been fighting for an independent Assamese homeland since 1979, came less than two weeks ahead of India's Independence Day celebrations August 15.

Ulfa traditionally attacks key government installations in Assam such as pipelines rather than civilians. It usually carries out the attacks on August 15 -- Independence Day.

But last year, the outlawed group detonated a powerful blast during a parade to mark the day, killing some 20 people, many of them youngsters.

"We cannot just sit tight with the

hope of getting a positive response from the government for holding peace talks. We will intensify our armed struggle," Ulfa chairman Arabinda Rajkhowa said in a statement.

In July, Ulfa sent a letter to Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh saying it would enter peace talks if the government agreed to discuss its core demand for sovereignty.

The letter followed an invitation for talks by Singh in May aimed at ending an insurgency that has claimed over 10,000 lives.

"There was a lot of urgency shown by the government to get a formal letter from us for holding talks," said the Ulfa chairman. "But once we delivered the letter, the authorities have shown no urgency and that probably reflects their doubtful and insincere attitude in holding negotiations with us."

There was no immediate comment available from the federal

government.

During a visit to the region late last year, Singh ruled out discussing independence, saying Assam was an "integral part" of India. He urged militants to abandon arms if they wanted to resolve the region's problems.

Security officials in Assam said they were concerned about a fresh upsurge in violence by Ulfa ahead of this year's Independence Day festivities.

"Intelligence reports indicate massive plans by Ulfa to create terror ahead of August 15," said a senior Assamese police officer, asking not to be named.

India's far-flung northeast is a cauldron of insurgencies.

The around 30 rebel groups, including Ulfa, who are fighting for autonomy or outright independence in the northeast accuse New Delhi of plundering the region's resources while neglecting its development.

Bomb explodes outside British firms in Tehran

REUTERS, Tehran

A small bomb exploded outside the offices of British Airways, BP and DaimlerChrysler in the Iranian capital Tehran yesterday, but there were no casualties, witnesses said.

One witness said the blast was caused by a bomb hidden in a rubbish bin in the hallway of a large tower block on the floor shared by the three international companies.

"It was at 9.15 a.m. (0445 GMT) outside the BA and BP office, there were no casualties but the building was damaged," said the witness who works in one of the offices.

"I was sitting at my desk and suddenly we heard an explosion and there was smoke everywhere," he said. "Everyone panicked, especially the BA office people who are mostly women, they started to scream and we ran out of the office."

Iran is locked in a tense stand-off with Britain, Germany and France over its nuclear program. Iran said on Monday it had begun the process of restarting some nuclear activities which the three countries have warned could lead to UN sanctions.

6 GIs, 23 Iraqis killed in separate attacks

MPs discuss constitution

AFP, REUTERS, Baghdad

Six US Marines and 23 Iraqis were killed in western Iraq yesterday as Iraq military said yesterday.

The troops were killed on Monday near Haditha, a town on the Euphrates river 200 km northwest of Baghdad, said Lieutenant Colonel Steve Boylan, a US military spokesman.

It was not immediately clear if they were killed in a single attack or if they died in a clashes with insurgents.

There have been frequent insurgent attacks in the area around Haditha in recent months. US forces have launched at least two major offensives to try to quell insurgency in the region, one of the most violent in the country.

At least 23 people were killed in rebel attacks across Iraq yesterday as members of parliament discussed issues delaying the completion of the war-torn country's new constitution.

A powerful blast shook central Baghdad when a suicide car bomber blew himself up close to a US military convoy, killing four people and wounding 23 others, including four women, medics said.

"We have received four bodies and 23 other people who are wounded from the car bomb," said a doctor at Ib-Nafis hospital.

One US Humvee was set ablaze and 14 other vehicles were damaged by the blast, which occurred at around 1:00 pm (0900 GMT), an AFP correspondent reported.

There were no immediate

reports of US casualties.

"We were 20 meters (yards) away when the car bomb went off and me and my team carried 15 wounded civilians," said policeman Hussein al-Musawi, his shirt soaked with blood.

The latest car bombing came as parliament worked on a draft constitution that MPs have vowed will be ready by August 15, on time for a scheduled mid-October referendum.

US officials have pressured Iraqi leaders to complete the document on time and keep to the timetable, amid fears a delay could undermine public confidence in the political process and play into the hands of insurgents.

New Saudi govt pledges unrelenting fight against terror

AFP, Washington

The administration of Saudi Arabia's new King Abdullah will step up cooperation with the United States in the fight against the "evil cult" of terrorism, a top official of the oil-rich state's embassy here said Monday.

Charge d'affaires Rehab Massoud said that cooperation in the US-led "war on terror" would be the cornerstone of relations between the two allies, aside from working together in the economic field.

"Saudi Arabia will not stand for an evil cult using the Islamic faith as an excuse for mass violence," he told a news conference called to reaffirm Riyadh's close ties with Washington under King Abdullah's leadership.

He said Abdullah, in talks with US President George W. Bush at his

Texas ranch during his visit to Washington in April, had "renewed our desire to be an ally both economically and in the war on terrorism."

The US-Saudi Arabia alliance was harshly tested by the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on the United States in which 15 of 19 hijackers were Saudi.

But tensions began easing when Saudi Arabia, often accused in Washington of being lenient with terrorists, launched its own crackdown on al-Qaeda network chief Osama bin Laden's disciples.

"During his tenure as crown prince, the relationship between our two nations was challenged as never before on September 11, 2001," Massoud said. "The response was certain and unwavering" and relations "between our two great nations (will) become even stronger," he said.



Member of the Politbureau of Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist (NCP-UML) Bidhya Bhandari (L) takes part in an anti-King rally at Baneswor in Kathmandu yesterday. Seven mainstream opposition political parties including the Nepali Congress and the NCP-UML held a demonstration demanding the reinstatement of the parliament and democracy in the country.

Sudanese grieve for John Garang

REUTERS, AFP, New Site/ Khartoum

Southern Sudanese grieved for John Garang around a simple bed yesterday and world leaders hoped a peace deal would stick after rioting over the ex-rebel leader's death killed 42 people.

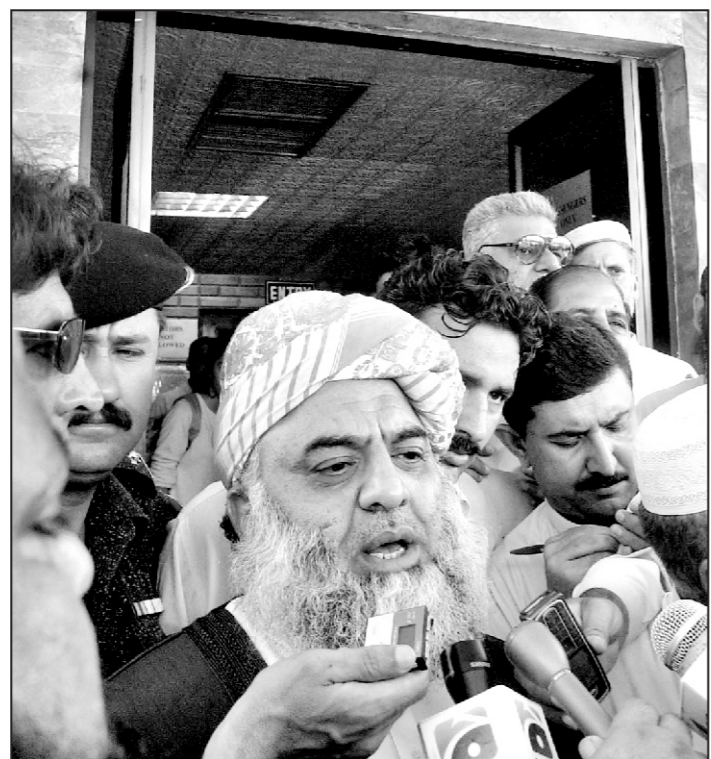
Garang -- who just three weeks ago became Sudan's vice-president as part of a January peace accord hailed as a rare success for the continent -- died when a Ugandan helicopter he was travelling in went down in bad weather at the weekend.

Fellow former fighters, supporters and relatives gathered in New Site, a small settlement in the remote bush of southern Sudan, where Garang's body was laid out in a wooden casket with a flag draped over it on a bed in a modest room.

Scented charcoal burned under the bed. Outside, men in green combat fatigues sat under thorn trees, some holding rifles.

Garang's Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) announced five days of mourning starting on Tuesday.

Seeking to confound predictions from some of a messy succession fight, the SPLM also moved swiftly to choose a close Garang ally -- his deputy Salva Kiir -- to succeed him.



Fazlur Rehman, opposition leader in Pakistan's National Assembly and general secretary of the six parties alliance, the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA), talks with media upon his arrival at Peshawar International Airport from Dubai yesterday. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) government refused Rahman's entry to Dubai and sent him back to Pakistan.

Police warned on stop and search of Muslims

BBC ONLINE

Police should not use racial profiling in their efforts to prevent further terror attacks on London, Home Office Minister Hazel Blears has said.

People should not be stopped and searched just because they are Muslim she said, before the first of a series of meetings with community leaders.

The powers should be used on the basis of available intelligence and not in a discriminatory way, Blears added.

She also urged police to explain to communities how they used the powers.

There have been concerns from Muslim leaders that the searches could harm community relations.

Blears said the police had guidance that they "should not be used against any particular community".

Picking people up just on the basis that they're Muslim is never going to get the result you want," she said.

The comments came as Blears was beginning talks with Muslim leaders across the country, in an attempt to improve community

relations and root out extremists.

At the first, in Oldham, she met councillors, police and MPs, as well as Muslim leaders.

Blears wanted to ensure the "genuine anger" of some young Muslims was heard.

"It's a very difficult thing to do but it is absolutely vital to make sure that we give people a sense they have a say here," she added.

Shadow Attorney General Dominic Grieve welcomed the meeting, but said that these alone would not resolve problems in Muslim communities.

He said he believed the bomb attacks on London were "explicable" because of the deep sense of anger, fuelled by the Iraq war and despair about the Islamic world, felt by some Muslims in the UK.

The meeting was held as police continued to question further suspects, arrested on Monday, in connection with the attempted bomb attacks of 21 July.

And a senior Metropolitan police officer has met in Brazil the family of Jean Charles de Menezes, shot dead by police after he was mistaken for a suicide bomber.

'US, Indian accord to boost nat'l security'

AFP, New Delhi

India's defence minister yesterday defended a military pact with Washington signed in June that paves the way for joint weapons production and cooperation on missile defence, saying it did not compromise national security.

"The document, more than anything else, signals the United States' willingness to enhance defence cooperation with India and strengthen our defence capabilities," Pranab Mukherjee told parliament, the Press Trust of India news agency reported.

AMNESTY SAYS Nepalese vigilantes cause civilian casualties

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's use of vigilante groups to protect villages from Maoist rebels has led to increasing civilian casualties, Amnesty International said today in a report which also highlighted "systematic and routine" torture by troops.

The government and security forces supported the creation of "village defence forces" in February 2005 as part of an effort to stem the rebellion that has claimed around 12,000 lives since 1996.

"The creation of these village

defence forces blurs the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, resulting in an increased number of civilian casualties," said Purna Sen, Asia-Pacific programme director for Amnesty, in the report.

"Law enforcement must remain the responsibility of the state and not of vigilante groups."

Amnesty said civilians in the countryside, much of which is under Maoist control, face a dual threat from the vigilantes and the rebels that includes forcible recruitment, beatings and sexual harassment of women.

Resumption of nuclear work irreversible: Iran US warns Tehran over nukes

REUTERS, AFP, Tehran/ Paris

Iran said yesterday its decision to resume activities at a sensitive nuclear plant near the central city of Isfahan was irreversible, a spokesman said.

"The political decision has been taken. We have handed over the letter to the IAEA (International Atomic Energy Agency). The resumption is irreversible," Supreme National Security Council spokesman Ali Aghamohammadi told Reuters.

"I deny reports of any delay," he said.

Earlier the White House warned Iran on Monday against restarting sensitive nuclear fuel activities at a uranium conversion plant, saying such a step could lead the United States and its European allies to seek UN action against Tehran.

White House spokesman Scott McClellan said Iran had agreed to suspend its uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities "while negotiations were ongoing" with European powers Britain, France and Germany.

"We've made clear that if Iran's

going to violated its agreement and restart uranium reprocessing and enrichment activities, then we would have to look to the next step, and we'd be talking with our Europeans friends about that next step," McClellan said. Asked what that next step would be, McClellan said: "We would have to look to the Security Council," which could impose sanctions.

Iran sent a letter informing the UN nuclear watchdog that it would restart nuclear fuel activities at a uranium conversion plant near the central city of Isfahan on Monday, a government official said.

The European Union said such a move would be "unnecessary and damaging" and could derail talks over a package of economic and political incentives for Tehran in return for Iran's indefinite suspension of nuclear fuel activities.

Iran's decision to resume its nuclear activities may spark "a major international crisis," French Foreign Minister Philippe Douste-Blazy said yesterday after a cabinet meeting chaired by President Jacques Chirac.