

Saudis pledge allegiance to new king

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi clerics, tribal chiefs and officials pledged allegiance to King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz on Wednesday in a ceremony seen as a public endorsement of the new monarch of the oil powerhouse.

One day after world leaders joined ordinary Saudi citizens in bidding farewell to King Fahd, who died on Monday aged 84, prominent figures converged on a royal palace in Riyadh to swear allegiance to King Abdullah and new Crown Prince Sultan bin Abdul Aziz.

Rulers of the ultra-conservative Gulf kingdom, whose entire system is based on Islamic law, see the pledge of allegiance based on the Koran and the teachings of the Prophet Mohammad as akin to a public referendum.

Clerics, religious scholars, tribal chiefs, officials and businessmen, as well as ordinary citizens, take part in the process.

More foreign leaders flew in to offer condolences after the death of Fahd and congratulate the new monarch, his half-brother and de facto ruler since the late king suffered a stroke a decade ago.

India to take lead in tsunami early warning system

AFP, Perth

India was Wednesday selected to take the lead in implementing a tsunami early warning system for Indian Ocean countries after the devastating December waves that killed more than 200,000 people.

The international warning system, expected to be in place by July 2006, brings together 27 nations and aims to give them enough time to alert their citizens to avoid a catastrophe.

"We already have a system that is providing warnings. There are already 25 national centres that have been established in the last three months," said Patricio Bernal, head of the UN's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission.

"That is a very important accomplishment. These centres are receiving information now from outside the region, from (the Pacific Ocean warning centres in) Honolulu and Tokyo.



A television grab from Sky News shows the crash site where an Air France passenger jet skidded off the end of the runway August 2, 2005 and burst into flames after landing in a thunder storm at Toronto's Pearson International Airport. All 309 passengers and crew were miraculously safe in the crash of the jet that was flying from Toronto to Paris. Witnesses said the plane was cut in two and at least two fireballs were seen coming from the debris after the crash.

Mumbai back on its feet

Aid workers say worst not yet over

AFP, Mumbai

India's financial capital Mumbai surged back to life Wednesday after coming to a near-standstill during week-long driving monsoon rains, but aid workers battling to get relief to flood-affected areas said the worst is not yet over.

Streams of office-goers poured from railway stations into the city's streets, holding colourful umbrellas against the occasional drizzle as schools, colleges and offices reopened.

Traffic jams returned as residents, who had been urged by police at the height of the monsoon torrents to stay indoors, drove to work. Buses, taxis and three-wheelers added to the chaos.

A total of 1,023 people have died across the western state of Maharashtra including Mumbai since the heaviest rainfall in a 24-hour period was recorded in the region on July 26, police said Wednesday.

The situation in far-flung districts of the state was still serious, said state police chief P.S. Pasricha. He said extra rescue teams from the navy had been rushed to flooded

areas in the southwest.

Some 60,000 villagers living alongside rain-swollen rivers, lakes and dams across the state were moved to higher ground during the night on Monday as officials were forced to release water from dams, causing downstream flooding.

Aid organisations such as Oxfam, ActionAid International and the Humanitarian Aid department of the European Commission, who held a meeting overnight to discuss relief and rehabilitation programmes being undertaken by the state government, warned some flooded areas had still to be reached.

"The situation is under control in certain areas," said P. Unnikrishnan, a spokesman for ActionAid International. "(But) in some places there is not enough to eat. There is a shortage of chlorine tablets.

"It is time for a reality check. The media and television channels portray Mumbai's economic might and think receding waters are good. The ground situation is entirely different. Relief materials are only reaching isolated places."

Astronauts begin to repair shuttle

REUTERS, Houston

Two Discovery astronauts floated outside the shuttle on Wednesday for the start of a seven-hour spacewalk that will include an unprecedented repair job on the shuttle's troublesome heat shield.

Steve Robinson was to become the first astronaut in the 24-year shuttle program to spacewalk to Discovery's underside and, once there, the first to try to fix the spacecraft's heat shield during flight.

"See you later," Robinson radioed to his crewmates as he emerged from the spacecraft. "I'm in the great outdoors."

His task on the U.S. space agency's first shuttle mission since the 2003 Columbia disaster was to remove two strips of ceramic-covered cloth sticking out from between the heat-resistant tiles on Discovery's otherwise smooth belly.

The strips are thought to have come loose from their adhesive bond and, though protruding only an inch (2.5 cm), could change the aerodynamics enough during landing on Aug. 8 to cause dangerous heat damage to the shuttle's underside.

Britain seeks extradition of suspect from Italy

Zambia agrees to deport another terror suspect

AFP, London

British officials were endeavouring to get a key suspect in the London bombings removed from Italy, as Zambia agreed to deport a Briton after he was arrested in Zambia on suspicion of terrorism.

Zambian President Levy Mwanwa announced Wednesday that Zambia had agreed to deport Haroon Aswat to his home country.

Haroon Aswat, 31, has been named in US and British media reports as the alleged mastermind behind the July 7 blasts that killed 56 people including four suicide bombers, but Scotland Yard has not confirmed that he is wanted in connection with the attacks.

Ministers in London have said they are also trying to get Hamdi Issac, also known as Osman Hussain, extradited as fast as possible from Italy so British police can quiz him along with the three other primary suspects in the case.

The four men, three of whom were held in Britain last week, are suspected of having carried out botched attempted suicide bombings on subway trains and a bus on July 21, in which no one was hurt after the explosives failed to fully detonate.

The four dead bombers were all British Muslims, three of Pakistani origin and one Jamaican born.

Since July 7, London's Metropolitan Police said on Tuesday evening, crimes motivated

by religious hatred have soared by almost 600 percent in the British capital.

Police figures showed that there were 269 such incidents reported since the first blasts, compared to 40 over the same three-and-a-half week period in 2004.

"There is no doubt that incidents impacting on the Muslim community have increased," said Metropolitan Police assistant commissioner Tarique Ghaffur.

The majority of incidents were minor assaults or low-level abuse but they had a great "emotional impact" on communities, he said.

"It can lead to these communities completely retreating and not engaging at a time when we want their engagement and support."

Britons arrested in Dubai claim abuse

BBC NEWS ONLINE

Two Britons arrested in Dubai on suspicion of involvement in the London bombings claim they were abused, threatened and deprived of sleep. The West Yorkshire men, who protest their innocence, say they and a third UK man in Dubai were held for 10 days.

Labour MP Shahid Malik urged the government to investigate. The Foreign Office said it would ask Dubai for an investigation if the men wished.

The two men say they were arrested in a restaurant on 21 July and freed 10 days later without an apology.

A Foreign Office spokesman said it was confirming the dates over which the men had been held, but that while they were in custody "our staff gained full consular access to ensure all of their immediate welfare needs were addressed".

Ahmadinejad takes office in Iran

AFP, Tehran

Iran's new President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose country is facing an international crisis over its nuclear ambitions, took office Wednesday appealing for an end to weapons of mass destruction and pledging to fight for justice and prosperity for Iranians.

Ahmadinejad, 49, an ultra-conservative former revolutionary guard, was formally installed at a ceremony led by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei after coming from nowhere to win a stunning election victory in June.

In his first address, the new president appealed for an end to weapons of mass destruction in the world a day after the West issued sharp warnings to Tehran over its threatened violation of a deal suspending its nuclear programme.

But after formally endorsing Ahmadinejad as president, Khamenei ordered the new government not to give up "the rights of the nation."

"Iranian leaders have no right to give up the nation's economic and political rights. These rights must be

defended," Khamenei said in a speech punctuated by cries of "Death to America, Death to Israel" from regime officials at the ceremony.

"I congratulate the Iranian people for their vote, I confirm that vote and name Mr. Ahmadinejad president of the Islamic Republic of Iran," Khamenei said in a declaration read by outgoing reformist President Mohammad Khatami.

The European Union and United States on Tuesday issued sharp warnings to Tehran over its threats to resume some sensitive nuclear fuel work, risking an international crisis.

But shortly after the new president took office Iran's nuclear negotiator Ali Agha Mohammadi said the country hoped to resume limited nuclear activities at a uranium conversion facility on Wednesday despite the risks of triggering an international crisis. "I hope to remove the seals and resume activities today," nuclear negotiator Ali Agha Mohammadi told reporters, referring to seals placed by international nuclear inspectors on the conversion plant in the central city of Isfahan.



Iran's new President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad waves to supporters after a ceremony to install him as successor to outgoing president Mohamad Khatami, in Tehran yesterday.

Americans anxious about US foreign policy: Poll

REUTERS, Washington

Americans are anxious about the direction of US foreign policy and how the country is perceived overseas and a majority believes the government has been too quick to go to war, a survey released on Tuesday said.

"Contrary to conventional wisdom that the American public doesn't know and doesn't care how it is seen abroad, strong majorities believe the U.S. image overseas is suffering and "large majorities are worried about it," the survey concluded.

Some 63 percent of Americans say the charge that the United States has been too quick to go to war is justified and three-quarters worry about losing trust abroad and about the growing hatred of the United States in Muslim countries, it said.

"So far, public thinking is a dis-

quieting mix of high anxiety, growing uncertainty about current policy and virtually no consensus about what else the country might do," the survey concluded.

The national survey of 1,004 American adults between June 1 and June 13 was conducted by the Public Agenda, a non-profit organization dedicated to public policy research, in conjunction with Foreign Affairs magazine, which is published by the Council on Foreign Relations.

It was funded by the Ford Foundation and is intended to be the first in a series of surveys designed to produce a "foreign policy index" that measures long-term US thinking on foreign policy.

Dan Yankelovich, Public Agenda's chairman, declined to describe the results as a reprimand of the Bush administration but said "there is definitely dissatisfaction ... a feeling that we're not on the right track."



An Indian booking clerk checks the registrarr at a 'Yatra' (traditional open stage theatre) office for the show based on London Blast, in Kolkata yesterday. Digvijayi Opera, the yatra group, expects a big market as they planned to stage their show based on recent blast on London and also on the Tsunami, the killer wave for the forth coming season.