

## Roadblock landmine blast kills 7 in Nepal

### 5 soldiers die during fighting with Maoists

AFP, Kathmandu

Seven bus passengers were killed and six injured yesterday by a landmine which exploded as they worked to clear debris blocking a road, a security official said.

The official said the mine had been planted by Maoist rebels, who have been fighting since 1996 to establish a communist republic in Nepal in a conflict that has claimed more than 12,000 lives.

The passengers had dismounted from the bus and were trying to move rocks and logs blocking the road when the landmine concealed underneath exploded, the senior security official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told AFP.

"At least seven bus passengers were killed and six others injured when a landmine exploded as they tried to clear away the roadblock planted by Maoist rebels," the official said.

There was no immediate comment from the rebels. The blast

occurred along a highway in Kapilvastu district, 325km southwest of the capital Kathmandu.

Nepal's main political parties announced Tuesday they would hold talks with Maoists on forming a broad front against King Gyanendra as long as the rebels kept a pledge to cease killing civilians.

King Gyanendra seized power in February and sacked the government, saying it had not done enough to end the Maoist insurgency.

The latest deaths brought to 45 the number of civilians killed in landmine blasts since early June.

In the deadliest incident June 6, at least 36 civilians and three soldiers were killed when Maoists bombed a passenger bus.

The Maoists later apologised for the attack, saying they had been targeting security forces, not civilians, and called it a "grave mistake."

Meanwhile, Maoist rebels killed at least five soldiers and suffered

unknown casualties themselves in a clash Friday in Nepal's southwest, the army said in a statement.

The guerillas had set up road blocks in the Kapilvastu district, 320km southwest of the capital, and then attacked the security forces who were sent to clear the barricades, said the statement.

"At least five security personnel were killed in clashes with Maoists in the Khairampur road section of Kapilvastu district Friday," the statement said.

"The clashes occurred after the Maoists, who were hiding in the area, set off improvised explosive devices targeting the security forces."

The army said the rebels had also suffered casualties.

The Maoist rebels have been fighting for a communist republic in the impoverished Himalayan country since 1996, in an uprising that has claimed more than 12,000 lives.

## Most wanted Palestinian resurfaces in video

AFP, Gaza

One of Israel's most wanted men, the Palestinian militant Mohammed Deif, has resurfaced in an Internet video released yesterday in which he promises "hell" for Israel after its pullout from the Gaza Strip.

A man claiming to be Deif, a chief of Hamas' armed wing the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, urges Palestinians not to halt the struggle against Israel following the evacuation of over 8,000 Jewish settlers from Gaza and small parts of the West Bank.

The fugitive Deif, accused by Israel of masterminding a long list of attacks, is a mysterious figure who rarely reveals himself in public. Few images of him exist.

The video showed Deif seated in a chair in a dimly-lit room, gesticulating with his hands as he spoke. He was filmed side-on with his profile completely in shadow, making his features almost impossible to distinguish.

"We tell the Zionists who have tarnished our soil, we tell you that all of Palestine will become a hell," he said in the video posted on the Internet by the Brigades.



(L-R) Katina and Lashawn Ross, Angie Martinez and Betsy Rossi walk through a street flooded by rains from hurricane Katrina Friday in Naranja, in southern Miami, Florida. Storm-weary Florida braced for yet another hit as Hurricane Katrina strengthened over the Gulf of Mexico after pummeling the Miami area, leaving at least seven people dead and 1.4 million without power.

## Kashmiris reject ban on political speeches in mosques

AFP, Srinagar

Muslim separatists vowed yesterday to fight "tooth and nail" a ban by Indian Kashmir's government on political speeches in most of the revolt-hit region's main mosques and shrines.

Itikhar Andrabi, chief executive officer of the government-regulated Wakf board, said the decision to enforce the ban aimed to prevent separatists and pro-India politicians from using religious sites to spread political beliefs.

"No one will be allowed to make such speeches," he said in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir, where a deadly insurgency has raged against New Delhi's rule since 1989.

In recent months, separatist leaders have been making political speeches at mosques and then staging big rallies outside the Islamic houses of worship that have drawn huge crowds.

The rallies are intended as a show of strength to underline separatist calls for inclusion in an ongoing peace process between India and Pakistan aimed at settling their row over Kashmir that has sparked two of their three wars.

## PRISONER ABUSE

### Afghans slam 'lenient' US military verdicts

AFP, Kabul

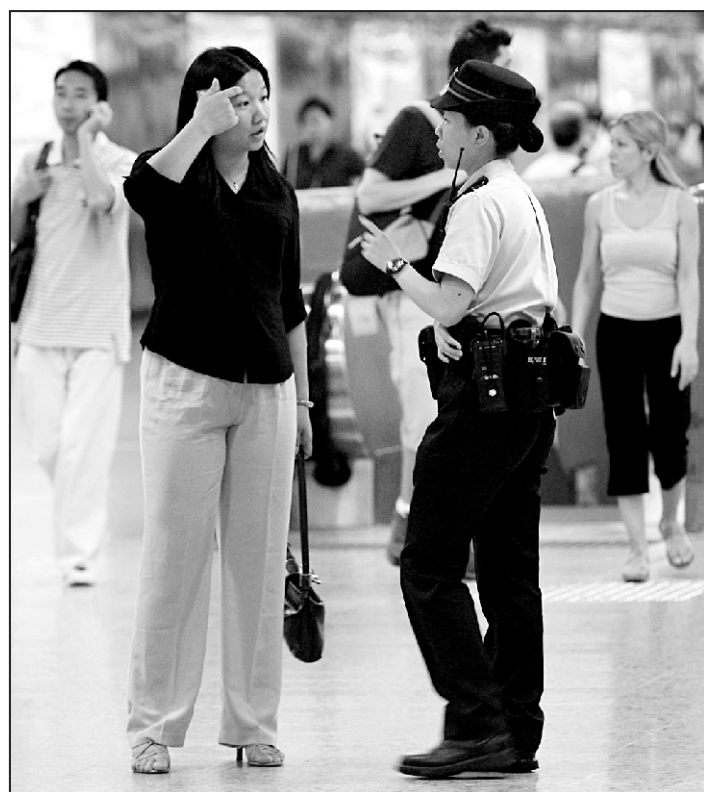
Afghanistan yesterday condemned as too lenient the jail terms of up to three months each for two US soldiers whose abuse of Afghan detainees led to the prisoners' deaths.

"We think the punishments given to those who have severely violated human rights are very light and unexpectedly lenient," said President Hamid Karzai's spokesman Karim Rahimi. "They should have been given severe punishments."

The two soldiers were tried in a US military court in Texas, leading to the first judicial sentences handed to any American soldier for prisoner abuse in Afghanistan since 2001.

"We're disappointed," Rahimi said.

The courts-martial occurred in the past few weeks at Fort Bliss in Texas, where the soldiers were charged in relation to the deaths of two Afghans in detention at Bagram, the main US base in Afghanistan, in late 2002.



A policewoman (R) talks to a commuter at a train station concourse in Hong Kong yesterday. Asian financial capitals have taken extensive measures to guard themselves against a terrorist attack as regional officials and experts fear a strike on a major city could just be a matter of time.

## Lankan media, parties call for fair polls

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lanka's media and political parties yesterday called for fair and peaceful elections in the conflict-torn island after a court ordered President Chandrika Kumaratunga to step down this year.

Kumaratunga had wanted to stay on an extra year -- which she argued she had left over from a first term cut short by snap polls -- but the Supreme Court ruled against her Friday, and polls must now be held before November 21.

Sri Lanka's usually divided media and political parties Saturday hailed the court's decision and urged all sides to ensure fair and peaceful campaigning and balloting, after elections in recent years led to scores of deaths.

The privately-run The Island daily greeted the court ruling with a headline of "three hearty cheers".

The state-run Daily News called for a peaceful campaign and urged candidates to tone down their rhetoric and ensure violence-free polls.

"It is also equally important to

ensure that the campaign is free of racist hate talk and religious bigotry," the Daily News said in an editorial headlined: "Let's have civilised restraint."

Past electoral violence has been fuelled by a three-decade-old conflict between Sri Lanka's mainly Hindu Tamil minority and the predominantly Buddhist Sinhalese majority that has claimed more than 60,000 lives.

A ceasefire has been in effect since 2002, but tensions have been heightened by the assassination earlier this month of Sri Lanka's foreign minister that the government has blamed on the separatist Tamil Tiger rebels.

At least five people were killed in campaign-related violence when snap parliamentary elections were held in April 2004. In a December 2001 general election, some 41 people died and more than 700 were injured.

European Union election observers said after the last general election that the Tamil Tigers had used violence to manipulate results in favour of their proxies.

## Pak ruling coalition claims polls win

### Islamists cry foul

REUTERS, Islamabad

Government parties in Pakistan claimed victory yesterday in the second round of local elections, but the opposition Islamist alliance denounced the poll saying a fair vote was impossible under President Pervez Musharraf.

The elections were officially held on a non-party basis but were keenly contested by political factions to consolidate their power bases ahead of general elections in 2007 which are expected to result in Musharraf staying in power.

The Election Commission said it was still counting ballots from Thursday's second round and an official announcement on winning candidates was expected late Saturday or Sunday.

The pro-Musharraf Pakistan Muslim League said candidates backed by the ruling coalition fared well in all four provinces including the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) ruled by an opposition Islamist alliance.

"Like the first phase, we have also swept the second phase," Tariq

Azim Khan, a spokesman for the ruling Pakistan Muslim League, told Reuters.

"We have maintained our majority in Punjab, which has been our stronghold, as well as in Sindh and Baluchistan," he said.

"We have done well even in NWFP, contrary to what has been said before the elections. Results in NWFP show people have rejected extremism."

But Islamists denounced the elections as rigged and said they took part in the polls "only to expose the regime before the world".

"The results are totally managed, planned and rigged," Liaquat Baluch, deputy secretary-general of the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal alliance said.

"It shows that free and fair elections are not possible in the presence of General Musharraf."

Musharraf, a key ally in the US-led war on terrorism who sharpened his criticism of Islamists ahead of the elections, on Friday hailed the outcome of the poll as "defeat for extremists".

MMA won control of NWFP and

shared power in Baluchistan, thanks in part to anti-American sentiment fuelled by the US-led war on terrorism launched in neighbouring Afghanistan in late 2001.

The elected councillors will vote themselves on Sept. 29 for district and sub-district chiefs known as nazims. The nazims influence is expected to play a key role in campaigning for general elections in two years time.

Musharraf is expected to stand for office in 2007 and he is widely expected to be voted in by the national and provincial assemblies that emerge from the general elections.

But analysts say it is yet to be seen how Musharraf will develop relations with the secular political forces like the party of the self-exiled former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto as he tries to sideline religious conservatives.

After coming to power in a bloodless military coup six years ago, Musharraf won a controversial referendum in 2002 to become president for five years and was later endorsed by the parliament.

## 30 nations to negotiate UN summit action plan

AP, United Nations

UN member states have agreed to let about 30 nations take the lead in trying to resolve major differences over an action plan world leaders can adopt at next month's summit.

The United States has submitted hundreds of proposed amendments to the 39-page draft currently on the table, and Russia, the Non-Aligned Movement (Nam) representing 116 mainly developing countries, and dozens of other countries have submitted hundreds more.

General Assembly President Jean Ping said the "core group" representing all regions and groups at the United Nations would start negotiations Monday and was prepared to work nights if need be to finalise a document by Sept. 2.

The text would then be submitted to the 191 member states on Sept. 6 for approval, and sent for translation

into the UN's six official languages, he said. The summit is Sept. 14-16.

"We have to work hard, and we'll do everything in order to produce an outcome," Ping told reporters after a closed-door meeting of representatives from all countries.

The negotiators will be focusing on seven key issues where there are still serious differences: Defining and tackling terrorism; Disarmament and nonproliferation;

A new Human Rights Council to replace the discredited Human Rights Commission;

A new Peacebuilding Commission to help countries emerging from conflict;

Overhauling UN management; Taking collective action to protect people against genocide;

Actions to fight poverty and promote development.

But other issues can also be raised, and even though about 30 countries will be leading the negoti-

ations, any other UN member state can step in with proposals during the negotiations, Ping said.

He said the key negotiators would include the five permanent Security Council members the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France as well as Malaysia, which heads the Nonaligned Movement, Japan, India, Pakistan and representatives from every region.

"I think we're making progress," US Ambassador John Bolton said. "We're prepared to be flexible on format and process. We want a strong outcome document."

He called the US agreement with the Non-Aligned Movement (Nam) that all governments should be able to contribute and that the entire text should be open "a good sign."

"We're very pleased about this," Bolton said. "We're moving ahead."

## Sunnis urge Iraqis to reject constitution

AP, Baghdad

Iraq's head of parliament announced yesterday that Shias and Kurds had agreed to Sunni Arab proposals for the new constitution and were awaiting a response. But Sunni negotiators said the changes fall short of their demands and urged voters to reject the draft in the Oct. 15 referendum.

Speaker Hajim al-Hassani, himself a Sunni, said the amended text, dealing with issues of federalism and former members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party, would be submitted Sunday to parliament. The legislature, overwhelmingly Shia and Kurdish, may vote on it or simply refer it to the voters.

Al-Hassani's comments followed similar statements late Friday by Shia and Kurdish lawmakers but were significant because he has final say in when the assembly will act.

His remarks indicated that negotiations on the new constitution had run their course. Barring a sudden change

of mind by the Sunnis, the charter is likely to go to the voters over Sunni objections, setting the stage for a bitter political battle ahead of the referendum by supporters and opponents of the draft.

If the constitution clears parliament without Sunni blessing, it would be a blow to the Bush administration, which insisted all along that Sunni participation was critical to produce a document, which was accepted by all communities.

Sunni Arabs are at the forefront of the insurgency and the Americans hoped the constitution would lure them away from the rebellion. But Sunni negotiator Saleh al-Mutlaq said the final draft fails to meet Sunni aspirations.

"We tell our people that we have fulfilled the duty that you asked us to do," al-Mutlaq told reporters Saturday. "We have sincerely done the job and now the matters are up to you. We want those who did not wake up until now to wake up. We want you to express your point of view but without violence" in the Oct. 15 referendum.

## 'al-Qaeda may hit US, Australia this year'

AFP, Seoul

al-Qaeda has listed the United States and Australia as prime targets for attacks this year along with Britain, South Korea's spy agency has reported according to a lawmaker yesterday.

South Korea, Japan and the Philippines are secondary targets, South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) told parliament this week, quoting a "senior" al-Qaeda member arrested last month.

"According to NIS, this terrorist testified that South Korea, Japan and the Philippines are secondary targets, while the United States, Britain and Australia are the prime targets for this year," a lawmaker told AFP.

NIS did not reveal the name of the al-Qaeda member, where he was arrested or what country handed over the information, according to the lawmaker sitting on the National Assembly's intelligence committee,

who requested anonymity.

The comments come after the Financial Times quoted French investigating magistrate Jean-Louis Bruguiere as saying that an Asia-Pacific financial centre such as Sydney, Tokyo or Singapore could be targeted by al-Qaeda extremists.

NIS told the committee that security officials were on alert for attacks in South Korea, which is hosting an Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) summit in the southern port of Busan in November.

South Korea, Japan and the Philippines have all contributed troops to the US-led war in Iraq. South Korea, which like Japan hosts US military bases, has 3,600 troops in Iraq, the third-largest contingent after the United States and Britain.

Britain has already been targeted by extremists this year with 56 people dying in the July 7 bombing of three subway trains and a double-decker bus in London.



Bangladesh High Commissioner to the Republic of South Africa Nasima Haider presents her credentials to President Thabo Mbeki at the presidential guesthouse in Pretoria recently.