

Shia cleric shot dead in Pakistan

Gunmen on a motorcycle shot dead a minority Shia Muslim cleric Friday in a remote southwestern Pakistani town, police said, in the latest suspected sectarian killing to hit the country.

Religious leader Allamma Badar-ud-Din was ambushed by two armed men as he left his home to go to a mosque in Dera Murad Jamali, some 240 kilometres south of Quetta, police said.

"The attackers were riding a motorcycle and fled after the shooting," local police officer Khalid Magsi told AFP by telephone.

The small town was tense after the attack and security has been stepped up with extra police deployed in Quetta, the capital of volatile Baluchistan province.

A spokesman for Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, a banned extremist group loyal to Pakistan's majority Sunni Muslim community, called newspaper offices in Quetta and claimed responsibility for the attack.

Two US allies pulling out of Iraq

AP, Vienna

Two of America's allies in Iraq are withdrawing forces this month and a half-dozen others are debating possible pullouts or reductions, increasing pressure on Washington as calls mount to bring home US troops.

Bulgaria and Ukraine will begin withdrawing their combined 1,250 troops by mid-December. If Australia, Britain, Italy, Japan, Poland and

South Korea reduce or recall their personnel, more than half of the non-American forces in Iraq could be gone by next summer.

Japan and South Korea help with reconstruction, but Britain and Australia provide substantial support forces and Italy and Poland train Iraqi troops and police. Their exodus would deal a blow to American efforts to prepare Iraqis to take over the most dangerous peacekeeping tasks and craft an

eventual US exit strategy.

"The vibrations of unease from within the United States clearly have an impact on public opinion elsewhere," said Terence Taylor of the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Washington. "Public opinion in many of these countries is heavily divided."

In the months after the March 2003 invasion, the multinational force numbered about 300,000 soldiers from 38 countries 250,000 from the US and 50,000 from other countries. The coalition has steadily unraveled as the death toll rises and angry publics clamor for troops to leave.

Now the nearly 160,000-member U.S. force in Iraq is supported by just under 24,000 mostly non-combat personnel from 27 countries. Britain has the second-largest contingent with 8,000 in Iraq and 2,000 elsewhere in the Gulf region.

In the spring, the Netherlands

had 1,400 troops in Iraq. Today, there are 19, including a lone Dutch soldier in Baghdad.

Ukraine's remaining 876 troops in Iraq are due home by Dec. 31, fulfilling a campaign pledge by President Viktor Yushchenko. Bulgaria is pulling out its 380 troops after Dec. 15 parliamentary elections, Defense Minister Veselin Bliznakov said.

In his strategy for Iraq, announced Wednesday, President Bush said expanding international support was one of his goals. He also seemed to address the issue of more allies withdrawing.

"As our posture changes over time, so too will the posture of our coalition partners," the document says. "We and the Iraqis must work with them to coordinate our efforts, helping Iraq to consolidate and secure its gains on many different fronts."



PHOTO: AFP
An imprisoned Iraqi father hugs his children during their visit to him at a detention centre run by the interior ministry in Baghdad yesterday. Several Iraqi prisoners received their families for the first time since they were arrested few months ago. The step was a goodwill gesture, following last month abuse scandal that hit the Iraqi Interior Ministry.

Nine dead in fire at German homeless centre

AFP, Halberstadt

Nine people died in a fire which swept through mobile homes at a centre for the homeless in eastern Germany on Friday, police said.

Police said they were reducing the death toll from the figure of 10 they had given earlier.

Five people were also treated in hospital after the blaze in the town of Halberstadt in the state of Saxony-Anhalt.

The fire broke out in the early hours of Friday in one of the mobile homes and gutted the four other homes at the site.

An investigation was under way into the cause of the fire, but a police spokesman said there was nothing in the initial findings to suggest it was the result of arson.

According to lists kept by the centre, 15 people had spent the night in the homes, but police said the real number may have been higher.

Klaus Jeziorsky, the interior minister of Saxony-Anhalt, said the emergency services had been unable to save the victims.

"Help came quickly, but unfortunately too late," he said.



PHOTO: AFP
Activists of the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist shout slogans during an anti-King rally at Nayan Baneshwor near Kathmandu yesterday. Tens of thousands of political leaders, activists and people from different walks of life took part in the protest rally.

US carries out 1,000th execution

REUTERS, Raleigh

Double murderer Kenneth Lee Boyd became the 1,000th prisoner executed in the United States since the reinstatement of capital punishment when he was put to death by lethal injection on Friday.

"God bless everybody in here," Boyd said in his last words to witnesses separated from his death chamber by a double-paned glass partition.

Boyd, who was 57, died at 2:15 a.m. (0715 GMT) at Central Prison in North Carolina's state capital, Raleigh, spokeswoman Pamela Walker of the Department of Corrections said.

Boyd, a Vietnam war veteran with a history of alcohol abuse, was sentenced to death for the murder in 1988 of his wife and father-in-law committed in front of two of his children.

His execution drew world attention because of its symbolism since

the US Supreme Court allowed the death penalty to be brought back in 1976 after a nine-year unofficial moratorium.

Boyd's lawyer Thomas Maher told reporters the execution had not made the world better or safer.

"This 1,000th execution is a milestone, a milestone we should all be ashamed of," Maher said.

Boyd was wheeled into the death chamber strapped down on a gurney and injected with a fatal mix of three drugs.

Boyd seemed "sort of resigned," said witness Elyse Ashburn. After he spoke his last words and the drugs were injected, "He just looked immediately like he had gone to sleep," she said.

Choking back tears, daughter-in-law Kathy Smith said Boyd "was a very kind man with a good heart. He would have given the shirt off his back to anybody in need." Several of Boyd's relatives also sobbed.

China criticizes local officials over toxic slick

REUTERS, Beijing

China has criticized officials in a northeastern province for failing to report a toxic spill, saying the delay hampered efforts to control a slick that forced cuts in water supply to millions and is bearing down on Russia.

An explosion at a JiLin chemical plant on November 13 poured 100 tons of cancer-causing benzene compounds into the Songhua River. But the State Environmental Protection Administration said from November 14 to 17 it received no reports from JiLin provincial authorities, the China Daily reported on Friday.

That meant the "best opportunity" to control the spill had been lost, the state-run newspaper quoted Administration Vice-Minister Wang Yuying as telling a national teleconference.

"A reckless pursuit of economic growth and a lack of emergency response mechanisms have seen China experiencing a high rate of environmental disasters," Wang was quoted as saying.

8 burned by tent fires in Pak quake zone

AFP, Muzaffarabad

Eight people, two of them Turkish aid workers, have been hospitalised with serious burns after their tents caught fire in quake-ravaged Pakistan, health officials said Friday.

Officials blamed the blazes on survivors of the October 8 disaster who had built fires too close to or inside temporary shelters, adding that they expected more such cases as the Himalayan winter intensifies.

"There are around eight burns cases in different hospitals, including two Turkish engineers," Major General Abdul Malik, the health secretary for Pakistan-administered Kashmir, told AFP.

"People are used to burning fires to protect themselves from the cold but they are burning wood inside or very close to the camps," he added.

"They need to realise that they are not in concrete shelters."

The earthquake killed 73,000 people in Pakistan and left more than 3.5 million homeless. Tent camps have sprung up across the worst-hit areas of northwest Pakistan and Pakistani Kashmir.

Turkey was the first country to send quake aid to Pakistan and dozens of its citizens are still in the country helping with relief and rebuilding efforts.

A World Health Organisation official in Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan's sector of Kashmir, also confirmed there had been a number of burns cases.

"There is no proper burns treatment in Muzaffarabad and the local health authorities are trying to set up one," the official said on condition of anonymity.

Plan to allow scissors on planes opposed

AP, Washington

A proposal to allow small scissors and tools back onto airliners is drawing strident opposition from flight attendants, families of victims of the Sept. 11 hijackings and several lawmakers.

Transportation Security Administration chief Kip Hawley was expected to outline the proposal Friday as part of a broader shift in airport security. The plan would allow airline passengers to carry scissors less than 4 inches long and wrenches and screwdrivers less than 7 inches long.

Reps. Ed Markey, D-Mass., and Joseph Crowley, D-N.Y., said Thursday they intend to introduce a bill to preserve the current prohibition on sharp scissors, tools and knives in airliner cabins.

"The Bush administration proposal is just asking the next Mohamed Atta to move from box cutters to scissors as the weapon that's used in the passenger cabin of planes," Markey said.

Britain pays Iraqis \$1.7m compensation

AFP, London

Britain has paid almost \$1.7 million in compensation to Iraqi civilians since 2003, the country's Armed Forces Minister Adam Ingram has said.

A total of \$1.69 million had been issued in 626 cases since the US-led, British-backed invasion of the country, Ingram said in a written parliamentary answer.

The claims were linked to "mainly property damage", a spokesman for the Ministry of Defence in London said.

Britain has about 8,000 military personnel still in Iraq, mostly based around the southern city of Basra.

Depression triggers heavy rains in Chennai

PTI, Chennai

The metropolis in India was battered by heavy rains for nearly three hours on Friday as the deep depression over southwest Bay of Bengal and adjoining west Bay weakened into a depression and lay 250-kms east-southeast off Chennai.

The depression was likely to move in a west-northwesterly direction and cross the coast between Chennai and Ongole in Andhra Pradesh on Friday night, Area Cyclone Warning Centre Director SR Ramanan told reporters in Chennai.

Under the influence of the depression, widespread rains are likely over north coastal Tamil Nadu, Pondicherry and parts of south interior Tamil Nadu on Friday, he said.

Isolated heavy to very heavy rains were also forecast in one or two places over north Tamil Nadu coast.

Winds with speeds reaching 50-60 kms were likely to be experienced in Chennai, Kancheepuram and Tiruvallur districts of Tamil Nadu during the period. The sea was likely to be rough and fishermen have been advised not to venture into sea. Cautionary signals have been hoisted at the Ennore and Chennai ports, he added.

On Wednesday and Thursday, the cyclonic storm, which was located 400-kms east northeast of Chennai had remained stationary, but weakened Thursday night as a deep depression.

Ballot boxes set on fire in Palestinian ballot

REUTERS, Nablus

Voting in a primary election for the ruling Fatah faction was halted in a Palestinian town near the West Bank city of Nablus on Friday after ballot boxes were set on fire, election officials said.

Voting was called off in the town of Salfit "because of problems and divisions," said Ahmed al-Deek, a senior Fatah official. Election officials said some ballot boxes had been torched but there was no immediate word on who was behind it.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas suspended voting in the Gaza Strip and at several West Bank voting stations earlier in the week due to widespread fraud and violence.

In an attempt to salvage the primary vote which has highlighted widening internal rifts in Fatah, Abbas set up a review board to finalize a list of the party's candidates for a January 25 parliamentary election.

Fatah faces a strong challenge in the January poll from the militant Hamas group, which is running for the first time in a parliamentary election and enjoys a corruption-free reputation.

In Salfit, residents said gunmen were hovering in the vicinity of ballot stations, which also prompted the decision to suspend voting. The ballot was also called off in the West Bank city of Qalqilya due to disagreements over voter registration.

Voting in the West Bank cities of Hebron and Tulkarm was going ahead as planned, he said.

Last week, voters in primaries in some parts of the West Bank cast aside veterans in favor of newcomers and militants. Fatah's younger generation is challenging a dominant old guard, many of whose members are widely seen as tainted by corruption.

Public support for Fatah is already eroded by complaints of corruption and misrule, and new signs of disarray could boost Hamas after the Islamic movement's strong showing in municipal polls.

Palestinian gunmen stormed a government office in the Gaza Strip on Thursday to demand that the Fatah primary election be allowed to proceed after it was suspended due to violence and fraud.

SECRET CIA FLIGHTS At least two stopovers in France: Report

AFP, Paris

Aircraft hired by the US Central Intelligence Agency possibly to transport Islamist prisoners have made at least two stopovers in France, in 2002 and 2005, the daily Le Figaro reported Friday.

The conservative newspaper said the first flight was that of a Learjet which landed in Brest after arriving from Keflavik in Iceland on March 31, 2002 and took off again for Turkey.

Officials at Brest airport told Le Figaro that the jet headed for another stopover in Rome, with the crew saying there were no passengers on board.

The second flight arrived at Paris Le Bourget airport from Oslo on July 20 this year, the paper said quoting Norwegian weekly Ny Tid. The plane was a Gulfstream III.

The United States was facing mounting embarrassment as allegations continued to emerge of a shadowy network of both secret prison camps and CIA "torture flights" carrying undeclared detainees through European and other countries.

British newspaper The Guardian said Thursday it had seen navigation logs showing that more than 300 flights operated by the CIA had passed through European airports, as part of a network that could be involved in the clandestine detention and possible torture of terrorism suspects.

There have been widespread reports that the alleged network could involve both the transport and torture of undeclared detainees.

The EU has meanwhile threatened sanctions against any of its member states found to have been operating such prisons, or allowing their territory to be used for the transport of the phantom detainees.

Irish Foreign Minister Dermot Ahern said in Washington on Thursday that US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice will make a statement on the row over reported secret CIA prisons when she visits Europe next week.



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinians fill in ballot slips as a woman casts her vote during the Fatah primaries in Dura, close to the West Bank town of Hebron yesterday. The ruling Fatah party is scheduled to hold primaries in the West Bank towns of Hebron, Qalqilya, Sulfit and Tulkarem to select candidates for the January 25 Palestinian parliamentary election.

EU adds Hizb-ul-Mujahideen to terror list

PTI, London

The European Union (EU) has added Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, the Pakistan-based outfit carrying out terrorist activities in Jammu and Kashmir for over a decade, to its list of terrorist organisations.

The EU's decision strikes a major blow to the group as restrictive anti-terror measures will be applied to it, including a freeze on its funds, assets and economic resources.

The Hizb-ul-Mujahideen (HM) is among the groups active in Jammu and Kashmir and reportedly has strong ties to the Muslim fundamentalist group Jamaat-e-Islami.

Founded in late 1980s, the group's primary focus is Indian security forces and politicians in Jammu and Kashmir. It also occasionally strikes at civilian targets. It reportedly operated in Afghanistan and is led by Syed Salahuddin.

The outfit claimed responsibility for a car bomb late last month that killed a border guard and injured 21 people on the outskirts of Srinagar.

New Delhi calls the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen "terrorists" for their frequent guerrilla raids to attack Indian Army targets across the Line of Control.

The EU blacklist was drawn up late in 2001, following the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington and is revised regularly.