

Moderate quake jolts northern India

AFP, New Delhi

A moderate earthquake jolted northern India on Wednesday, a day after the region was shaken by a 6.7 magnitude quake in the remote mountains of northeastern Afghanistan.

"The earthquake (Wednesday) measured 5.2 on the Richter scale," an official at the Indian Meteorological Department said.

The epicentre was 20 kilometers north of the Hindu pilgrimage town of Badarinath in the Himalayan state of Uttaranchal, said R.K. Pandey, head of Uttaranchal disaster management office.

He said there were no reports of injuries or damage from the quake which hit at 0709 GMT and was also felt in the Indian capital New Delhi.

The tremor followed a 6.7-magnitude quake Tuesday in the Hindu Kush range of northeastern Afghanistan that was felt as far away as New Delhi and triggered panic among survivors of October's South Asian earthquake disaster.



PHOTO: AFP

An Iraqi policeman attempts to stop a car that broke a curfew in central Baghdad yesterday one day before the country's general election. Iraq ground to a halt with strict security measures in force on the eve of a landmark election aimed at restoring full sovereignty and stability to the strife-plagued country.

France wants to expand Hariri murder probe

AFP, United Nations

The French draft resolution, a copy of which was obtained by AFP, says the 15-member council decides to extend the mandate of the UN commission until June 15, 2006, and to extend it further if recommended by the commission and requested by the Lebanese government.

It also expands the mandate to "include investigations on the terrorist attacks perpetrated in Lebanon since October 1, 2004 ... and calls on all member states and parties to cooperate fully with the Lebanese authorities and the commission in this regard."

It directs the commission to report to the council on the progress of the inquiry every two months, "including on the cooperation received from the Syrian authorities".

It also expresses deep concern at findings by the Mehlis commission that

Syria failed to provide "full and unconditional cooperation" with the Hariri probe as demanded by UN resolution 1636 adopted last October 31.

France submitted a draft resolution in the Security Council extending for six months the UN probe of the murder of Lebanese ex-premier Rafiq Hariri and broadening it to cover other assassinations in Lebanon.

The move came shortly after UN chief investigator Detlev Mehlis said the UN investigation of Hariri's slaying might take "another year or two" because of the slow pace of Syrian cooperation.

The French resolution was significant because the mandate for the Mehlis commission of inquiry into the Hariri assassination expires on Thursday.

The resolution followed the latest attack against a Damascus critic in Lebanon, Monday's car bombing in Beirut which killed prominent anti-Syrian lawmaker Gibran Tueni.

The Tueni killing prompted Lebanon to call for an international tribunal for the Hariri murder and an international probe into a dozen bombings that targeted anti-Syrian critics over the past year.

Deadly gunbattles erupt in West Bank

AFP, Nablus

Fierce gunbattles erupted during an army incursion in the largest West Bank city, leaving one Palestinian dead and 25 Palestinians and two Israeli soldiers wounded.

The clashes in Nablus, which residents said were the fiercest for around six months, broke out during an operation in which around 20 jeeps roared into the northern city at daybreak before leaving in late morning.

As the troops fanned out across the city, they were first attacked by stone-throwing youths and then by Palestinian gunmen.

Doctors at Nablus's main hospital named the dead man as 22-year-old Hossam Saqer who had been shot in the head by the Israeli soldiers.

The other 25 were wounded by a combination of live fire and rubber-coated bullets, the medics said.

The Israeli military said two of its soldiers were hit by shrapnel from an explosive device that was thrown at them.

"There have been numerous incidents of Palestinian gunmen shooting at the forces. In some cases the forces returned fire," an army spokeswoman told AFP.

"In addition there have been numerous incidents of Palestinians throwing rocks, but the forces have not returned fire in those instances."

Another military source refused to explain the purpose of the operation, describing it as "part of the operations against the general terrorist infrastructure in Nablus."

The army has made a series of arrests in the northern West Bank following a suicide bombing 10 days ago in the Israeli coastal city of Netanya.

Nablus is regarded as a stronghold for a number of armed factions and will become an electoral battleground on Thursday when voters cast their ballot in a municipal election pitting the radical Islamists of Hamas against the ruling Fatah movement.

Iraq comes to halt on eve of landmark vote

Strict security measures taken, streets deserted

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq ground to a halt Wednesday with strict security measures in force on the eve of a landmark election aimed at restoring full sovereignty and stability to the strife-plagued country.

A faint call to prayer drifted across the early morning chill in an almost deserted Baghdad where shops, schools, banks and cafes were closed and most residents stayed home.

A five-day holiday, which began Tuesday as part of security steps, brought an eerie sense of calm to the city of seven million, better known for devastating suicide bombings, drive-by shootings, and grisly kidnappings.

There was almost no traffic in the streets, and just a few people could be seen crossing bridges on foot.

On Thursday, the electorate of 15.5 million people is called to the polls to elect 275 deputies for four-year terms designed to further Iraq's transition to a full democracy and eventually allow US-led forces to withdraw.

Expatriates in 15 countries from Australia to Europe, North America and the Middle East are already casting their ballots in a three-day process that began Tuesday, with

voting completed in Iraqi hospitals and prisons Monday.

Many Iraqis and foreign diplomats hope that the first full-term legislature since the 2003 invasion to oust Saddam Hussein will draw disaffected Sunni Arabs back into politics and undermine support for the insurgency.

The Sunni minority boycotted elections in January but more than 1,000 Sunni clerics have pressed members of their community to vote this week in order to maximise their chances of playing power broker in the government.

Choosing a functioning government could, however, take several months, a senior US lawmaker said Tuesday following a White House briefing on the vote.

"The briefers cautioned that given the multiplicity of parties and interests, solidifying a parliamentary government will not be instantaneous," Senator Richard Lugar said.

"They indicated that under some scenarios, the selection of ministers might not be finalized until April."

Iraqis who had already cast ballots in countries like Jordan, Denmark and the United States, expressed their enthusiasm for the process.

"We're doing it for the future of

our country. For the future of our kids," said Talib al Bedany, who waved an ink-stained finger after he voted in Skokie, Illinois following a nine-hour trip with 150 other Iraqis from Nebraska.

In equally chilly Denmark, Shiite student Bilal Abdulhadi agreed. "It's a crucial vote for our country, for its future," he said, proudly showing an ink-stained thumb.

Around 1,000 Iraqis voted in Amman and dozens in the United Arab Emirates, where armed guards protected polling stations as men in traditional dress accompanied wives and children to the ballot box.

Iraqi insurgents struck Tuesday ahead of the security clampdown, killing four US soldiers, a police commando, and a businessman working with the US army.

In the heavily damaged western city of Ramadi, a leading local electoral candidate in the Al-Anbar province, Mizher al-Dulaimi, was also killed on Tuesday, the latest victim of political assassinations that have marred campaigning.

China topped the list with 32 journalists in custody, followed by Cuba with 24. The African nations of Eritrea and Ethiopia came next with 15 and 13 respectively.

The United States, which is holding five journalists in detention centers in Iraq and Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, rose to sixth place, just behind Uzbekistan and tied with Burma.

"Anti-state" allegations, including subversion, divulging state secrets, and acting against the interests of the state, were the most common charges used to imprison journalists worldwide, accounting for 78 cases.

"We're particularly troubled that the list of the worst abusers now includes Ethiopia and the United States," CPJ Executive Director Ann Cooper said.

"Journalists covering conflict, unrest, corruption, and human rights abuses face a growing risk of incarceration in many countries, where governments seek to disguise their repressive acts as legitimate legal processes."

World boycotting Saddam trial: Rice

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice bitterly accused the world community of boycotting the trial of deposed Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

In a speech to the Heritage Foundation think tank on Tuesday, Rice named no countries for the lack of support for the trial of Saddam and seven henchman charged in a 1982 massacre of Shia villagers.

"The international community's effective boycott of Saddam's trial is only harming the Iraqi people who are now working to secure the hope of justice and freedom that Saddam long denied them," Rice said.

Jewish Holocaust a 'myth' Says Iran's Ahmadinejad

AFP, Tehran

Iran's hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad launched a fresh attack against Israel on Wednesday, dismissing the Holocaust as a "myth" and saying the Jewish state should be moved as far away as Alaska.

And with just a week to go before scheduled talks with the European Union -- which is seeking guarantees Tehran will not acquire atomic weapons -- the outspoken president vowed he would not compromise "one iota" on its nuclear programme.

"They have invented a myth that

Jews were massacred and place this above God, religions and the prophets," the controversial right-winger declared in a speech carried live on state television.

"If somebody in their country questions God, nobody says anything, but if somebody denies the myth of the massacre of Jews, the Zionist loudspeakers and the governments in the pay of Zionism will start to scream," he said.

"Our proposal is this: give a piece of your land in Europe, the United States, Canada or Alaska so they (the Jews) can create their own state."