

Terror plot foiled in Hyderabad ahead of Manmohan's trip

AGENCIES, Hyderabad

Hours before the prime minister's visit to the city, police foiled the plot of Pakistan-based terror group Jaish-e-Mohammed to trigger bomb blasts, including suicide bombings, in Andhra Pradesh and neighbouring Karnataka.

A major tragedy was averted in this southern city as five bombs were defused by police who, sources said, had also arrested four suspects and seized a haul of explosives during the last two days.

Police said the Jaish plot came to light in a breakthrough after the interrogation of three youths arrested in connection with a suicide bombing attack in the city on October 12.

Prime Minister Manmohan Singh arrives in Hyderabad on

Monday night for a one-day visit amid tight security.

On Tuesday morning, the Prime Minister flies in a chopper to inaugurate the 93rd Indian Science Congress at the Acharya NG Ranga Agriculture University (ANGRAU) at Rajendranagar on the outskirts of the city and presents the out-standing scientists award.

Police on Sunday arrested Syed Haji and Shujauddin from the Mosarabagh neighbourhood and seized a 10-kg tiffin bomb and other materials used to trigger a blast. Three bombs, seized from one Shakeel Ahmed in the Laad Bazar area near the historic Charminar, were also defused, police sources said.

The fifth bomb that Shakeel had delivered in Zaheerabad in Medak district was also recovered and

defused after arresting a man, while yet another bomb sent to Bidar in neighbouring Karnataka was yet to be traced.

While the police are yet to officially announce the arrests and seizures, the sources said they found material used to make bombs.

The mastermind behind the plot is said to be one Shahed, brother of one of the accused arrested earlier in the suicide bombing case and identified as Zahid.

Police have not ruled out a link between this terror module and the last week's terror attack on Indian Institute of Science (IISc) in Bangalore, in which one professor was killed and three others were injured.

China sets up blacklist of bribers to fight corruption

AFP, Beijing

China's prosecutors have set up an on-line blacklist of people convicted of bribing officials, in the country's latest attempt to fight rampant corruption, state media said yesterday.

The list includes individuals and organisations convicted of bribery or bribery-related crimes since 1997 in the sectors of construction, finance, education, health and government procurement, the Beijing News said.

The paper quoted China's top prosecution office, the Supreme People's Procuratorate, as saying the public can search for information on the list but only after applying in writing to the prosecutors' offices.

It did not give further details about the accessibility of the site.

Chen Zexian, a research fellow with the Law Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, suggested the prosecutors' office list bribers in all industries in the future.



PHOTO: AFP

Former prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) offers sweets to newly appointed president of the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), Rajnath Singh (C) as former BJP president L. K. Advani (L) looks on, at the party headquarters in New Delhi yesterday. Rajnath Singh took charge as president of the BJP from hawkish former deputy prime minister Lal Krishna Advani, marking a change of guard in the 25 year old party.

Rajnath takes over as BJP chief

PTI, New Delhi

New BJP President Rajnath Singh on Monday identified four priority areas, including intensifying its agitation against the "anti-people" policies of the UPA government and further strengthening the NDA.

Addressing a press conference immediately after taking over the top party post from LK Advani, he said his other main tasks would be to maintain the clean image of the party and carry out its extensive expansion.

Lashing out at the UPA government, he said during the last 20 months of its rule, problems have cropped up all around.

"Farmers are not getting a good deal from the present Government, internal security situation has deteriorated and prices of petrol, diesel and LPG have gone up while the public distribution system has collapsed," he said.

Ridiculing the Congress slogan "Congress ke hath, aam admi ke saath (Congress hand is for the common people)," Singh said it has turned out to be "Congress ke haath, aam admi paraghat (Congress hand is harming the common people)".

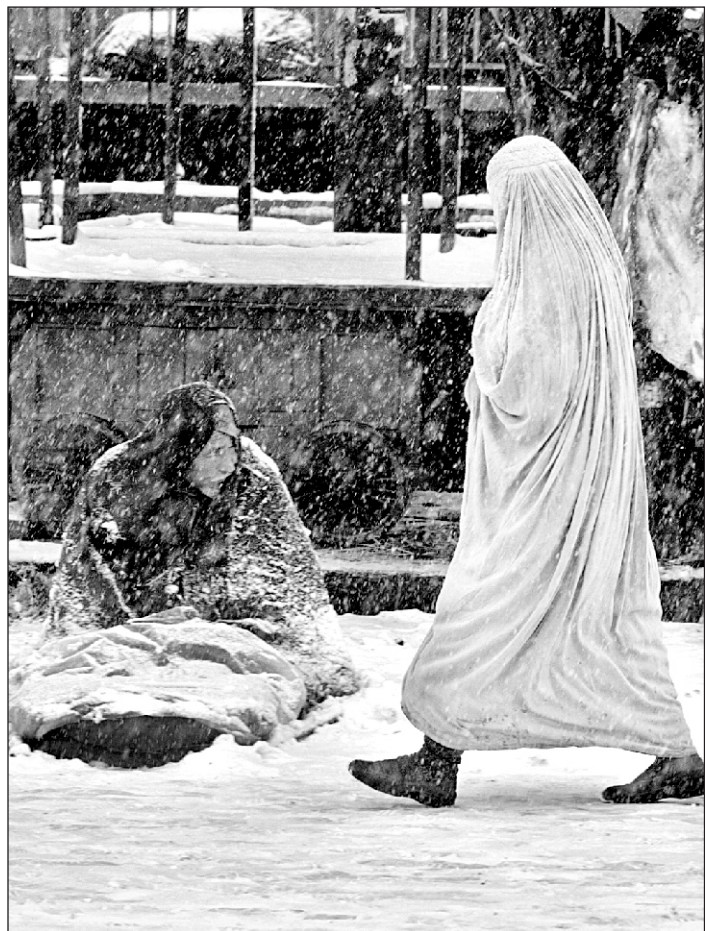


PHOTO: AFP

An Afghan burqa-clad woman walks past a beggar on a snow-covered street in Kabul yesterday. Snow has started falling across Afghanistan as winter envelops Central Asia.

'Better Indo-China ties a determinant for Asian peace'

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Chinese President Hu Jintao yesterday pitched for "greater substance to bilateral strategic partnership" saying Sino-India relations have implications for the world at large.

In a New Year message to Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao, Singh said the fast developing ties between India and China was an important determinant for the peace and security as well as development and prosperity of Asia and the world.

"We are confident that in the New Year, we will be able to continue with greater determination to impart further depth and substance to our rapidly growing ties, and add an important new chapter to India-China friendship," the prime minister said to mark the two countries' decision to declare 2006 as India-China Friendship Year.

Singh said India and China "made significant progress in addressing some of the longstanding issues in our relationship

without allowing them to define the agenda of our cooperative ties."

Jintao, in a message to President A P J Abdul Kalam, said "an ever-lasting China-India friendship not only serves the fundamental interests of our two countries and peoples but also contributes to peace, stability and development in Asia and the entire world."

Pointing out that India and China are major developing countries with great influence in the world, Jintao said China is ready to work with India to continuously deepen the contents of our bilateral relations and push forward the China-India Strategic and Cooperative Partnership in an all-round and in-depth way."

He said the Strategic and Cooperative Partnership set up by China and India for peace and prosperity "symbolises that the bilateral relations have entered a new stage of development."

Kalam, in his message to Jintao, said "the footprints of India and China are increasingly visible and have made an impact on the global landscape in diverse areas."

18 killed in Iraq violence

Attack on Turkey's ambassador

AFP, REUTERS, Baghdad

At least 18 people were killed in Iraq yesterday, including seven new police recruits blown up by a suicide bomber as they travelled on a bus.

The recruits were struck by a car bomb near Baquba, north of the capital, as they headed for the northern Kurdish region to undergo training. Thirteen recruits were wounded.

At least 11 more Iraqis were killed by insurgents elsewhere, including two children whose family was machine-gunned in a car and an ambulance driver shot through the head as he drove to a hospital, security officials said.

Turkey's ambassador to Iraq, Unal Cevikoz, survived an ambush on his convoy as it drove through western Baghdad, his embassy said.

Cevikoz was travelling back from near the airport to his embassy when gunshots were fired at all three cars in his convoy, a diplomat said on condition anonymity. "Nobody was hurt," the diplomat added.

There have been numerous attacks on diplomats in the violence-ravaged Iraqi capital with several being kidnapped and killed, including the top Egyptian envoy and two Algerian diplomats.

Iraq's oil ministry spokesman, meanwhile, said crude exports had hit a record post-war low, dropping to 1.1 million barrels a day (bpd) in December compared to an average of 1.6 million bpd earlier in the year.

"This was due to a combination of bad weather in the Gulf" where tankers hook up at terminals to take on crude and to "lack of electricity" to pump the oil, along with insurgent attacks, Assim Jihad said.

In the latest unrest, Monday's death toll was in keeping with the daily average for the past year, according to government statistics obtained by AFP.

The statistics, compiled by the health, defence and interior ministries, put the number of Iraqi dead in 2005 at 5,713. More than 4,000 were civilians, while 1,693 were from the security forces.

Those wounded totalled 8,378, including more than 6,000 civilians.

September was the bloodiest month for civilians with 557 dead, while January when elections were held for an interim parliament was the least deadly with 162 civilians killed.

Security forces suffered their highest number of fatal casualties in May with 238 dead, while the lowest figure was recorded in October with 105 killed.

A total of 1,702 rebels were killed and 9,264 arrested during 2005, according to the government figures.

US President George Bush has suggested that 30,000 Iraqis have been killed since the start of the war in 2003, but some non-governmental organisations have put the figure much higher.

At least 844 US soldiers and more than 30 other coalition soldiers also died in 2005 in Iraq, according to figures released by the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, a non-profit organisation that tracks casualties.

On Monday, the civilians killed included two boys, aged seven and 10, who died in a drive-by shooting when gunmen targeted their parents' car south of Kirkuk. The parents were wounded.

The ambulance driver was shot dead in Kirkuk itself.

Three more men were shot dead while travelling in a car just south of Baghdad, near Iskandariyah.

Two Iraqi soldiers died when their patrol was hit by a roadside bomb near Dujail, north of Baghdad. Another soldier was killed and an officer wounded in a drive-by shooting on the road between Baiji and Tikrit.

UN Hariri probe wants to quiz Syrian president

AP, Beirut

The UN commission investigating the assassination of a prominent Lebanese politician has asked to interview Syria's president and foreign minister, the panel's spokeswoman said Monday.

Nasra Hassan also said investigators want to interview former Syrian Vice President Abdul-Halim Khaddam "as soon as possible."

Khaddam alleged in a TV interview broadcast Friday that Syrian President Bashar Assad had threatened former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri several months before Hariri was assassinated in a Feb. 14 truck bombing.

The commission has reported that several people whom Hariri spoke to after he met Assad in August 2004 said Hariri told them the Syrian leader had threatened him over his opposition to Syrian plans to extend the term of Lebanon's pro-Syrian president.

Orissa cops kill 6 tribals in clash over land

REUTERS, AFP, Bhubaneswar

Six people were killed yesterday in a clash between police and tribals protesting the alleged occupation of their land by a private firm in the eastern state of Orissa, an official said.

The dead included a policeman and five members of a tribal group opposed to the construction of a boundary wall around a Tata company steel mill in Jajpur district, 120 kilometres (74 miles) north of the state capital Bhubaneswar.

The violence erupted after around 1,000 tribespeople, some armed with bows and arrows, opposed a move by authorities to acquire land for the setting up of a steel plant in Jajpur in Orissa.

Shiv Senas resign en mass, join Raj Thackeray

PTI, Mumbai

Former Shiv Sena leader Raj Thackeray, who had announced that he would be forming a new party, has received a boost with around 2,500 Shiv Sainiks led by a corporator quitting the Sena and joining him.

The Sainiks, led by two-term corporator Dilip Lande, on Sunday dashed off letters to Sena executive president Uddhav Thackeray stating they were quitting the party.

After Raj announced his rebellion on November 27 against the Sena leaders, whom he termed as "clerks" running the party, Lande was among the first to publicly side with him.

'Indo-Pak war of words won't affect peace bid'

INDO-ASIAN NEWS SERVICE, Islamabad

The recent war of words between India and Pakistan will not affect their peace process and both sides will push efforts to resolve dragging disputes through the next round of the composite dialogue talks, say Pakistani officials and experts at the beginning of the year.

New Delhi, say Pakistani officials, touched off a war of words when it expressed "concern" last week at the spiralling violence in Balochistan and military action there and asked Pakistan to "exercise restraint".

Pakistan's response was swift - it said India's comments were "unwarranted" and amounted to interference in its internal affairs. Islamabad also noted that New Delhi's stand was "contrary" to efforts aimed at creating peace and stability in South Asia.

Despite these hiccups, officials admitted the third round of talks

under the composite dialogue would go ahead as scheduled from January 17.

"We (Pakistan and India) will start the third round of the dialogue on January 17 with talks between the foreign secretaries," a senior government official said.

In the two-day talks to be held in New Delhi, both sides will discuss matters related to peace and security, including the nuclear dimension, besides the Kashmir dispute.

"A formal announcement about dates for more talks under the third round is expected shortly," said the official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The meeting of the foreign secretaries will mark the first high-level contact between the two countries in 2006, said the official, adding the recent war of words, "though unfortunate", will not affect the talks schedule.

Experts too believe the talks will go ahead though the recent devel-

opments could affect the atmospheres.

Sardar Assef Ahmed, a former foreign minister, said: "This (war of words) has happened after a long time and India should have avoided such statements when both countries are successfully moving ahead with their peace initiative."

Ahmed said such statements could "spoil the atmosphere of dialogue", especially when the media is out to find such stories. "I would suggest both sides should not lose such an opportunity (for peace)."

Mushahid Hussain Syed, chairman of the Pakistan Senate's foreign affairs committee and secretary general of ruling Pakistan Muslim League, said India's statements were "unwanted".

"We hope India will exercise restraint in issuing such statements in future," he remarked. But he hastened to add that the composite dialogue "will go on and should go on".

Palestinian cops storm offices in Gaza

REUTERS, Gaza

About 200 policemen stormed government offices in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah on Monday to protest at the failure of the Palestinian Authority to fight growing lawlessness, witnesses said.

The incident was the latest sign of chaos in Gaza, which has suffered growing internal unrest since Israel withdrew last September after 38 years of occupation.

Firing into the air as they ran through the streets, the policemen raided government offices, court-houses, an election office and the municipality building in Rafah.

They smashed windows at the Interior Ministry building and forced the staff to leave.

The number of police taking part in the protest swelled to some 200 officers, most of them armed, who forcibly shut down one government building after the other.

"We are calling on all offi-

cers to take off their uniforms because the Palestinian Authority has tied the hands of policemen, preventing us from implementing law and order," one policeman told Reuters.

The police rampage followed the killing of a police officer in fighting with a Rafah clan on Thursday. After that incident, Palestinian police backed by gunmen imposed an armed blockade on the Rafah border crossing and forcibly ejected travellers.

Witnesses said the police did not wear uniforms -- in protest at what they said was the Palestinian Authority's failure to give them the power to restore law and order in Gaza. Some wore masks.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas vowed at the weekend that he would work to restore order. Hours afterwards, Palestinian gunmen briefly kidnapped an Italian peace activist and blew up a UN club that served alcohol.

Oklahoma wildfires force evacuations

REUTERS, Oklahoma City

Wildfires fuelled by high temperatures and strong winds damaged several homes around Oklahoma City on Sunday and forced 15 to 20 families to evacuate as the flames neared their houses, officials said.

The fires were the latest to break out in the lower Great Plains, where months of drought have combined with unseasonably warm weather to turn the prairies in Oklahoma and Texas into tinderboxes.

Oklahoma County Sheriff John Whetsel said his department had been on the scene of 19 fires on Sunday, but all were now either out or contained so they no longer threatened homes or businesses.

Television reports showed bright orange lines of fire burning in areas on the outskirts of the Oklahoma capital.

Michelann Ooten, spokeswoman for the Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management, said 25,000 acres had burned in the state in the past week, 100 houses had been destroyed or damaged and that one person died last Wednesday.

Since November 1, 250,000 acres had burned in Oklahoma, the State Emergency Operations Centre said.

Temperatures on Sunday reached the 70s (21-25 C) in most of the state, well above normal highs for this time of year. Winds of 35 to 40 mph (56-64 kph) whipped across the plains, the National Weather Service said.

Oklahoma Gov. Brad Henry said he had asked President George W. Bush to expedite the process of declaring the state a disaster area for the purpose of getting federal aid.

Snow cuts off Kashmir highways

Quake survivor killed

AFP, Srinagar

Heavy snow in Indian Kashmir yesterday shut down key highways and killed at least one man in areas hit hard by last year's earthquake, police and residents said.

"The highway leading to Tangdhar has been closed for traffic due to the accumulation of heavy snow," said a police spokesman in Srinagar, the summer capital of the mountainous Kashmir region.

He said some 40 inches (100 centimetres) of snow had accumulated at Sadna Pass, the crest of the road to the remote village, which is usually isolated for two to four months in winter.

The government and army

stockpile rations and kerosene for the winter well in advance and this year worked overtime to try to keep the road open for relief supplies to quake-affected areas.

It has been snowing in Kashmir since Sunday morning.

Some 1,300 people were killed in Indian Kashmir and over 150,000 left homeless. In Pakistan and its portion of Kashmir more than 73,000 people were killed and millions left homeless.

The heavy snow also closed the region's main highway connecting Srinagar with the winter capital Jammu, police said. Traffic police officer Zahoore Ahmed said some 300 vehicles are stranded on the highway.

"We are worried about the people living in tents," said Akeela Urhi from Action Aid.

Residents said it had been snowing heavily in mountain villages, forcing people to brave cold to clear snow from their temporary housing before they collapse under the weight of snow.

Police said a 72-year-old man died in Balkote village when his shelter caved in due to snow.

Snow also closed down the region's main airport in Srinagar, officials said.

A cold snap sweeping northern India has killed more than 100 people since the start of December.

But winter sports enthusiasts were seen heading to Gulmarg, Kashmir's main ski resort.



PHOTO: AFP

People try to find way out of their village after flash floods swept through Jember district in East Java yesterday. Flash floods triggered by monsoon rains killed at least 34 people and swept away hundreds of houses in Indonesia's East Java.