

CIA fires employee for alleged leak to press

AP, Washington

The CIA fired a top intelligence analyst who admitted leaking classified information that led to a Pulitzer Prize-winning story about a network of secret CIA prisons, government officials say.

The officer was a senior analyst nearing retirement, Mary McCarthy, The Associated Press learned. Reached Friday evening at home, her husband would not confirm her firing.

Almost immediately, the firing turned political. Senate Intelligence Committee chairman Pat Roberts, R-Kan., praised the agency for identifying a source of the leaks and encouraged vigorous investigation of other open cases. "Those guilty of improperly disclosing classified information should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law," Roberts said.



Pramod Mahajan shot by brother at his home in Mumbai

REUTERS, New Delhi

A senior leader of main opposition Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was shot by his brother yesterday and is undergoing emergency surgery, police said.

Pramod Mahajan, a former federal minister and a high-profile politician, was attacked at his home in Mumbai, the city's police commissioner A.N. Roy told Reuters.

"Mahajan's brother shot him at his residence this morning and he has surrendered with his weapon," Roy said.

"He has told us he shot his brother over some property dispute," he said. "Mahajan has been taken to hospital and he is being operated upon."

Roy said: "We found two cartridge cases and he could have been shot two or three times."

No immediate details were available on his condition.

Critics of outgoing Thai PM vow to disrupt by-polls

AFP, Bangkok

Opponents of outgoing Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra have vowed to disrupt by-elections today in 40 constituencies held to fill seats left vacant after snap polls earlier this month.

Thaksin's critics want the 4.2 million voters, mostly in southern provinces, to tear up their ballot papers, wear black clothing or choose the "none of the above" option in a poll they say lacks legitimacy.

The by-elections are being held after the inconclusive April 2 poll Thaksin called three years early to end weeks of street protests against him. The three main opposition parties boycotted that poll.

Sunday's polls are crucial to pulling Thailand out of a months-long political crisis as parliament cannot convene to name a new prime minister until all 500 seats are filled.

Frist will try anew for US immigration bill

AP, Washington

Majority Leader Bill Frist intends to seek Senate passage of immigration legislation by Memorial Day, hoping to revive a bill that tightens border security and gives millions of illegal immigrants a chance at citizenship, Republican leadership aides said Friday.

In a gesture to conservative critics of the measure, Frist and other Republicans also intend to seek roughly \$2 billion in immediate additional spending for border protection.

The aides said the money would allow for training of Border Patrol agents, construction of detention facilities for immigrants caught entering the country illegally, the purchase of helicopters and surveillance aircraft and construction of a fence in high-traffic areas.



PHOTO: AFP

Nepalese policemen use sticks to beat pro-democracy protesters at Ason near King Gyanendra's Palace in Kathmandu yesterday. Police fires tear gas on thousands of protesters who ignored a curfew and marched towards the centre of the capital.

Dangerous moment for Nepal king & opponents

AP, Katmandu

The king's words were about democracy, but in this Himalayan land where a royal dynasty once revered as godlike is facing the whiff of open rebellion, the future appeared dangerously uncertain.

An opposition campaign of protests and a general strike against King Gyanendra's reign has tapped a deep vein of discontent in Nepal -- the protesters' ferocity and violence blind-siding both the king and his opponents.

With Gyanendra's promise Friday to restore multiparty democracy, his adversaries will find out in coming days just how serious protesters were when they chanted "hang the king!" and "burn the crown!"

For the king, the danger is obvious. His dynasty is already teetering - it long ago lost control of much of the countryside to communist insurgents and now appears unable to even command the cities. More protests could push it over the edge.

For the opposition, the challenges are less dramatic but no less daunting. Accepting the deal could lead Nepal's seething streets to turn on it; rejecting the deal could result in spiraling violence - a situation that

diplomats and analysts warn could give an opening to the Maoist rebels, the opposition's mistrusted allies.

The seven-party alliance behind the campaign is "afraid of the sentiment of the crowd and the ferocity that protesters are showing," said Yubraj Ghimire, editor of the weekly Samay. "They do not know if they can control these outpourings."

That's a big problem for an opposition that is held in low regard by many of the protesters, who seem to operate on the enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend principle.

One of the tens of thousands still in the streets after the king's speech, Saroj Shrestha, said he had little respect for the politicians, who "did nothing for the Nepali people."

In fact, when Gyanendra dismissed an interim government and seized power in February 2005, many Nepalis - frustrated by the corrupt and squabbling politicians now leading the protests - welcomed the king's pledge to restore political order and put down the insurgency, which has killed nearly 13,000 in over a decade.

Flash-forward 14 months - an intensifying insurgency and foundering economy have caused Gyanendra's popularity to plummet,

and the opposition has successfully brought tens of thousands into the streets, many of them calling for the head of the king whose ancestors were revered as reincarnations of the Hindu god Vishnu.

"Gyanendra can fool the people again," said Prakash Thapa, a 30-year-old teacher. "We will always have to be looking at him. He could take power at any time again."

Others were less measured.

"This king is a very bad person. We will never accept him," said Saroj Sharma, a 28-year-old computer specialist. He repeated a now familiar call to hang the monarch, and warned: "We will hang all those who work with him."

Worrying words for an opposition sure to find itself under enormous pressure to take the deal from Nepal's major international partners - the United States and India - both of which played leading roles in persuading a defiant Gyanendra to back down.

Tigers reject latest offer, talks still far off

REUTERS, Colombo

Sri Lanka's Tamil Tigers rejected a deal on transport of their commanders yesterday that could have allowed peace talks with the government to go ahead, as more violence raised fears of renewed civil war.

Swedish Major-General Ulf Hennricsson, who heads the monitoring mission that oversees a 2002 ceasefire, travelled to the rebels' northern base to try to coax them to attend talks in Geneva planned for April 24-25 but won no agreement.

"The meeting was called off with Thamilselvan," said the monitors' spokeswoman Helen Olafsdottir, referring to Tiger political wing leader S.P. Thamilselvan. "The Head of Mission is heading back to Colombo," she said.

The talks are seen as the best chance of halting a series of claymore mine attacks, political murders and riots that have killed about 90 in the past two weeks and raised concerns that the war over a separate homeland for minority Tamils in the

north and east could restart.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) initially pulled out of the Geneva talks because of a dispute over how to transport commanders to their northern headquarters for consultations. On Saturday, they rejected the latest government proposal, an offer to use civilian helicopters for the transport.

"These are very small aircraft and they can be easily attacked," the head of the Tigers' Peace Secretariat, S. Puleedevan, told Reuters by telephone from Kilinochchi.

Some analysts say the rebels are using the transport issue as an excuse to stay away from the talks in anger over attacks they blame on a break-away faction in the east known as the Karuna group, which they say is acting with government complicity.

Norwegian peace envoy Jon Hanssen-Bauer also remained in Colombo, hoping to reach a deal that would allow the Geneva talks to go ahead.

As the wrangling continued,

there was more violence around the island.

On Saturday, a claymore mine explosion near the northern town of Vavuniya killed a soldier on foot patrol, the army said.

It also announced the discovery of a huge cache of weapons in the northern Jaffna peninsula that included claymore mines, rocket-propelled grenades and explosives.

In northeastern Trincomalee -- an ethnically mixed and volatile region -- a Tamil was killed overnight but local police said calm had been restored to the area after a series of attacks and riots on Friday that left at least four dead.

Local senior police superintendent Nehal Samarakoon said the Tigers were using claymore mine attacks to stir up tension between ethnic communities.

"They want to somehow create problems," he said. "But no one can win a war. We will have to find a way to bring the other side to the table and talk."

Russia must freeze arms deals with Iran: US

REUTERS, Washington

Russia must stop any arms deals with Iran and other nations must bar the sale of dual-use technologies to Tehran to put pressure on Iran to abandon its nuclear programme, a senior US official said on Friday.

"It's time for countries to use their leverage against Iran," said senior State Department official Nicholas Burns, adding: "We think it's very important that countries like Russia freeze any arms sales planned for Iran."

Washington wants Moscow to cancel the planned sale to Iran of Tor tactical surface-to-air missiles. Moscow and Tehran say they are for defensive purposes and Russia wants to go ahead with the deal.

"We hope and we trust that that

deal will not go forward," said Burns of the Tor deal.

Burns, who met in Moscow this week with officials from Russia, China, Germany, France and Britain to plan strategy against Iran, said nations must pressure Iran individually as well as collectively at the UN Security Council.

Washington has failed to convince veto-wielding nations China and Russia to adopt sanctions against Iran and Russia said on Friday the Security Council should only consider such measures if it had proof Tehran was trying to build a bomb.

It could take months before the United Nations might act against Iran and Burns said a group of countries could work together outside of the Security Council to

isolate Iran diplomatically and economically.

Burns played down divisions between Russia, China and even some European allies over how to tackle Iran and said there was a "sense of urgency" among nations at the Moscow meeting to stop Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, especially after it announced last week it had begun the enrichment of uranium.

Russia has also rejected a call from the United States, which has long maintained its own trade embargo on Iran, to halt work on the Islamic Republic's Bushehr nuclear power station.

Russia's state atomic energy agency is contracted to help Iran build the \$1 billion reactor.

The State Department's arms control chief, Robert Joseph, said

the Iranians had "both feet on the accelerator" in terms of their nuclear programme.

"We are very close to that point of no return. And I think that's a view that is shared by many others," said Joseph, who lobbied Arab nations last week to isolate Iran.

A meeting among political directors from the six countries is expected to take place in Paris on May 2 and the group would try then to reach an agreement on what diplomatic action to take next against Iran, Burns said.

In addition, he said the Group of Eight industrialised nations would focus on Iran at their July summit.

Naga rebels agree to extend truce

AFP, New Delhi

The Indian government and tribal separatist guerrillas agreed to extend a truce in the northeast by another year -- just days before it was due to expire, a rebel leader said yesterday.

There were fears the five-year-old truce in Nagaland state, slated to run out April 28, could collapse.

But home ministry officials and leaders of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland's S.S. Khaplang faction (NSCN-K) met in New Delhi Friday and agreed in principle to extend the ceasefire by 12 months, Kughalo Mulatou, one of the rebel leaders, told AFP. There was no immediate government comment.

The NSCN-K, an influential Christian Naga group fighting for an independent homeland in Nagaland, struck the truce with New Delhi in 2001.

Its fate was in doubt after the group accused Indian soldiers of backing a rival group headed by Isak Chishi Swu and Thuingaleng Muivah.

US, UN welcome Nepal king's pledge to hand over power

AFP, Washington

The international community has welcomed a pledge by Nepal's embattled king to hand power back to the country's political parties, but said more needed to be done for democracy to take hold.

The United States and the United Nations -- tough critics of King Gyanendra since he seized absolute power in the Himalayan nation in February 2005 -- both said the monarch's move on Friday was the first step on the road to democracy.

"We welcome the idea, welcome the proposal that the king would now turn to the political parties to form a government, to select a prime minister, to hold elections," US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told foreign journalists.

"That's extremely important." "We were outspoken about the need for Nepal to return to a democratic path," she said, adding that she expected the king to live up to his pledge.

On Friday, King Gyanendra

4 Canadian soldiers killed in Afghanistan

AFP, Ottawa

Four Canadian soldiers were killed in a roadside bomb blast in southern Afghanistan on Wednesday, local media reported yesterday.

The explosion struck an armoured vehicle carrying the soldiers to a remote base near Gumbad, some 75km north of Kandahar, broadcaster CTV said.

Three soldiers were killed at the scene. A fourth was flown to Kandahar and died in hospital, the Canadian broadcaster reported.

In February, Canada took over command of an international force charged with hunting down the fundamentalist Taliban militia in southern Afghanistan. Ottawa has some 2,300 troops in the region.

Militants loyal to the Taliban regime toppled by a US-led offensive in late 2001 are still carrying out attacks on foreign and Afghan targets, mostly in the south and southeast.

Since 2002, 15 Canadian soldiers have been killed in Afghanistan. A Canadian diplomat was also killed in a car bomb attack earlier this year.



PHOTO: AFP

Indian voters wait in line to exercise their franchise at a polling station at Domjur, some 30kms west of Kolkata yesterday. The second phase of five phases of voting in 294 state assembly constituencies has started under tight security in India's Marxist bastion of West Bengal, where leftist parties are expected to win big and gain strength on the national scene.

No WMD in Iraq, CIA warned Bush

Says retired official

AFP, Washington

The Central Intelligence Agency warned US President George W. Bush before the Iraq war that it had reliable information the government of Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction, a retired CIA operative disclosed.

But the operative, Tyler Drumheller, said top White House officials simply brushed off the warning, saying they were "no longer interested" in intelligence and that the policy toward Iraq had been already set.

The disclosure, made in an interview with CBS's "60 Minutes" programme due to be broadcast late Sunday, adds to earlier accusations that the Bush administration used intelligence selectively as it built its case for the March 2003 invasion of Iraq and the toppling of Saddam's regime.

The administration claimed in the run-up to the war that Baghdad had extensive stockpiles of chemical and biological weapons and was working

clandestinely to build a nuclear arsenal, therefore, presenting a threat to the world.

An extensive CIA-led probe undertaken after the US military took control of Iraq failed to turn up any such weapons. But Bush and other members of his administration have blamed the fiasco on a massive intelligence failure and vehemently denied manipulating information they had been provided.

However, Drumheller, who was a top CIA liaison officer in Europe before the war, insisted Bush had been explicitly warned well before an invasion order was given that the United States may not find the suspected weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. The information about the absence of the suspected weapons in Iraq, according to excerpts of Drumheller's remarks, was clandestinely provided to the United States by former Iraqi foreign minister Najib Sabri, who doubled as a covert intelligence agent for Western services.

Asian anti-terror drive risks alienating Muslims

AFP, Cebu

An anti-terrorism drive by Asian governments risks alienating moderate Muslims and pushing them towards extremism, experts warned yesterday.

Governments should seek the help of Islamic clerics and community leaders to reverse the "ideology" of hatred, they told an international conference here.

"Terrorist networks, their affiliates and ideology are a clear and present danger," said Brigadier General Javed Iqbal Cheema, head of the national crisis management cell in Pakistan's Interior Ministry.

But while there is a need to crush terrorism "with all the military force at every level globally," Cheema said extremism was a state of mind "that should be handled with care."

Part of the strategy should be "enlightened moderation" by governments by who can help the economic development of Muslim communities and help them resolve political disputes, he said.

Rohan Gunaratna of Singapore's Institute of Defence

and Strategic Studies said some domestic conflicts had become breeding grounds for militant cells.

"In your response to terrorism, you shouldn't create extremists," Gunaratna said.

"You have to address the ideology that is driving the jihadis," he added, calling on the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia to seek help from moderate Muslim clerics to solve their problems with militants.

Southeast Asia is a trouble-spot for Islamic extremism with the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia all plagued by long-running insurgencies.

Cheema said anti-terrorism strategies can only work if governments "objectively identify and address" the conditions that breed extremism.

"Since terrorism is not confined to a single country or one region, there is a need for evolving consensus at global level on a strategy incorporating both short-term and long term measures that work in tandem," he said.