

Train crushes six children to death in Pakistan

REUTERS, Multan

Six children playing on a railway track were crushed to death by a train in Pakistan yesterday, police said.

The children, aged 8 and 9 years, were hit by the train near Bahawalpur, a city around 350 km southwest of the capital, Islamabad.

"The children tried to escape but they could not. All of them have been killed," Mohammad Aslam, a local police officer told Reuters.

Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said later that increased rail traffic and the spread of residential areas near railway tracks had increased the risks of such accidents.

He said he would suggest that the cabinet approve fencing of railway tracks in populated areas.



Mahathir nominated for Nobel Peace Prize

AFF, Kuala Lumpur

Bosnian groups have nominated Malaysia's former premier Mahathir Mohamad for the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for helping the country after its bloody civil war, the Star newspaper reported Sunday.

It said that he was nominated by four civil groups in Bosnia spearheaded by former president Ejup Ganic.

Mahathir was described in their nomination paper as the developing world's "most courageous advocate," the newspaper said.

Under Mahathir, Malaysia provided economic, political and humanitarian aid for Bosnia while it reeled from the trauma of conflict and ethnic cleansing in the 1992-95 civil war.

Mahathir will this week host a conference on exposing war crimes, which he hopes will encourage governments to criminalise war.

When asked to comment on his nomination at a press conference on Sunday, Mahathir simply laughed and tried to brush the question aside.

INDEPENDENCE DAY

Lanka asks Tiger proxies to join talks to end war

AFF, Colombo

Sri Lanka marked its independence anniversary yesterday with President Mahinda Rajapakse inviting Tiger rebel proxies in parliament to join his effort to end decades of ethnic bloodshed.

Rajapakse asked the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) to join the "All Party Conference" to prepare a political solution to the conflict, which has claimed more than 60,000 lives since 1972.

"I also wish to make this appeal to the Tamil National Alliance represented in parliament, who have so far not entered into dialogue or understanding with us," he said in an address to the nation marking the 59th anniversary of freedom.

"It is only by joining with us that the innocent Tamil people of the north can be liberated from terrorist intimidation and the misdeeds of violence," he said in an nationally televised speech from Colombo.

The speech came as police and troops stepped up the already tight security in the capital following the discovery of a powerful bomb hidden in a taxi at a garage near a stadium where thousands of troops were billeted.

The TNA, which consists of moderate Tamils who have accepted the Tamil Tigers as sole representatives of minority Tamils, has 22 seats in the 225-member parliament.

If the TNA joined in an all-party effort, the government would be within striking distance of cobbling together the two-thirds majority

needed to change the constitution after 18 opposition legislators defected last week, analysts said.

Any deal with the Tamils would require an amendment to the constitution.

The president's latest offer came a day after a similar invitation to the Tiger rebels to resume direct peace negotiations, which stalled in October.

Diplomatic attempts led by Norway have failed to keep the warring sides at the negotiating table.

During a visit to the restive east of the island Saturday, Rajapakse also asked the Tigers to lay down their arms.

Rajapakse vowed to "defeat separatism" during his speech on Sunday and asked the media to "act with responsibility."

"I appeal to the working people of this country not to supply oxygen, consciously or not, to terrorism that is gasping for life. I also call on the media to also act with responsibility in this regard."

He inspected a military display of firepower on the anniversary marking Sri Lanka's independence from Britain in 1948 at the seafront Galle Face promenade here.

The battle-hardened military displayed some of their most lethal weapons against the Tigers, including multi-barrel rocket launchers, while the air force flew their Israeli-built Kfir jets and MiG-27 attack craft.

Earlier in the day, 100 girls clad in white traditional cloth and jack-ets sang the national anthem.



PHOTO: AFP

Sri Lankan military forces display their artillery during the island's 59th Independence Day celebrations held along the seafront Galle Face promenade in Colombo yesterday. Rajapakse invited Tiger rebel proxies, the Tamil National Alliance or TNA represented in parliament, to join efforts to end decades of bloodshed.

India successfully tests missile

REUTERS, Bhubaneswar

India successfully testfired a short-range ballistic missile yesterday, the head of the test operation said.

The Brahmos supersonic cruise missile, developed by India and Russia, was launched off the coast of Orissa.

"Mounted on a mobile launcher, the missile was test-fired at 12.15 pm today ... off the Orissa coast as part of its user trial," said AK Checkar, director of Integrated Test Range, the body which manages ballistic missile tests.

The three-tonne Brahmos, which has a range of 290 km is an anti-ship missile, but also has the capability to engage land-based targets.

It is 8 metres in length and carries a conventional warhead weighing about 200 kg.

Brahmos can reach a speed of Mach 2.823 (970 metres per second), almost three times the speed of sound, and can be launched from land, ships, submarines and aircrafts.

This is the thirteenth test-fire of the Brahmos since 2001.

Taliban leader killed in Nato airstrike

AP, Kabul

Nato-led troops killed a senior Taliban leader with a precision airstrike near a southern Afghan town overrun by militants, a spokesman for the alliance said yesterday.

Col. Tom Collins said the airstrike near Musa Qala on Sunday morning killed a senior Taliban leader riding in a car.

Musa Qala on Thursday was overrun by an estimated 200 Taliban fighters who disarmed local police, ransacked the district centre and

hoisted their trademark white flag.

The town had been subject to a peace deal brokered last October between village elders and the Helmand provincial government that prevented Nato, Afghan and Taliban fighters from coming within 3 miles of the town centre.

Collins said the Taliban leader was killed within that 3-mile zone with the approval of the Afghan government. He said no Nato or Afghan forces were on the ground in Musa Qala.

2 ethnic protesters die in Nepali clashes

AFF, Kathmandu

Two people died yesterday when police opened fire on a crowd protesting for political rights in south-east Nepal in continued violence that has claimed 17 lives, police said.

Both of those killed and another five injured were from the Mahadhesi People's Rights Forum, said Birendra Shrestha, deputy superintendent of police at Malangawa, about 250km south-east of Kathmandu.

"The town remained tense throughout the day," said Shrestha, adding that police opened fire after hundreds of protesters vandalised houses and defied curfew orders.

Other towns in the region, a low-land plain bordering India to the south, saw sporadic violence, and a day-long curfew has been imposed throughout the area, Shrestha said.

The deaths came as the group representing the Mahadhesi ethnic community demanded at the weekend that the region be turned into an autonomous state to end the unrest.

Half a billion Asians crammed into urban slums: Aid group

AFF, Singapore

Asian countries must strive to provide decent housing for more than half a billion urban slum dwellers left behind by the region's robust but uneven economic growth, an international aid group said.

With 1.15 billion more people expected to move from rural areas to cities in the next 30 years, the situation is set to worsen if not addressed early, US-based Habitat for Humanity said in a report released at the weekend.

This will have a severe economic, social and political impact, as most of the migrants are poor people seeking a better life in the city.

"The Asia Pacific region is in the midst of a dramatic rural-urban transition that is shaping the demand for low-income housing," the report said.

"Whether and how this demand will be met over the next 30 years will have (a) profound bearing on the further economic, social and political direction of the region."

Asia, led by China's sizzling 10.7 gross domestic product expansion last year, has been a favourite region for foreign investment because of strong economic growth.



PHOTO: AFP

Afghan President Hamid Karzai, (C), outgoing commander of the International Security Assistance Force (Isaf), British General David Richards (R) and incoming US Army General Dan K McNeill (L) attend the change of command ceremony at Isaf headquarters in Kabul yesterday.