



PHOTO: AFP
Pakistani relatives mourn over the coffins of a "Samjhauta Express" train firebomb victims after Indian officials handed them over to Pakistan in Karachi early yesterday.

Samjhauta Express blast probe widens to several states

REUTERS, New Delhi

The hunt for the bombers of a train from India to Pakistan spread to several north Indian states on Thursday as investigators said they were pursuing new clues and had detained two people for questioning.

The Sunday midnight blasts on the Samjhauta Express -- which connects New Delhi to the Pakistani city of Lahore -- sparked a fire, which killed 68 people about an hour after the train had left the Indian capital.

Although no group has admitted responsibility, New Delhi suspects the attack was the work of Muslim extremists opposed to a peace process correspondent for the liberal Haaretz daily.

While two bombs placed in

suitcases exploded on two coaches of the train, two others failed to go off and investigators have been pursuing leads offered by them.

"We have formed some teams to go to Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Delhi and Punjab," said R.C. Mishra, a top police officer in Haryana, where the attack took place.

"We have some specific information but have to wait for the investigation process to get over," he said, adding that police were also verifying passengers' passports.

Police in Rajasthan said they had detained two people, including a 44-year-old woman, for questioning in the border district of Bikaner but it was not yet clear if the people had any links to the attack.

'Syria moves troops to Israel border'

AFP, Jerusalem

Syrian armed forces appear to be moving closer to the border with Israel and the military is being strengthened with Iranian help, an Israeli newspaper reported yesterday.

"The Syrian armed forces are being strengthened in an unprecedented way in recent memory with the help of generous funding from Iran," wrote Zeev Schiff, the military affairs correspondent for the liberal Haaretz daily.

"The main emphasis of the efforts has been missiles and long-range rockets to compensate for the weak air force," he added.

"It appears that the Syrians have moved forces closer to the border with Israel on the Golan Heights."

Schiff pointed to similar movements prior to a Syrian offensive on the same front during the Arab-Israeli Yom Kippur War in October 1973.

Reserve general Amos Gilad, an adviser to Defence Minister Amir Peretz, told public radio there was nothing to indicate an imminent Syrian attack but neither did he deny the Haaretz report.

"There is no information indicating that the Syrians are preparing to attack us in the coming months,"

said Gilad.

"The fact that Syria is strengthening its military capabilities does not mean we're going to be attacked tomorrow but certainly we need to be prepared," he said.

He denied any comparison between the troop movements reported by Haaretz, and Egyptian and Syrian deployments prior to their two-pronged simultaneous assault on Israel in October 1973.

"There is no danger of war. There is no deployment of forces indicating that Israel would be threatened by an offensive tomorrow," the official said.

Damascus has repeatedly demanded the return of the Golan, a strategic plateau, which Israel captured from Syria in the 1976 Arab-Israeli war and unilaterally annexed in 1981. It is now home to more than 15,000 settlers.

Peace talks between Israel and Syria collapsed in 2000, in part because of disputes over the return of the strategic plateau.

The Haaretz report came a day after Israel launched war games on the Golan Heights in what Peretz said was a bid to learn the lessons of last summer's conflict in neighbouring Lebanon.

Hamas encouraged by Quartet's position

REUTERS, Gaza

The Islamic militant group Hamas accused the United States yesterday of trying to undermine European efforts to ease an economic blockade of a new Palestinian unity government.

Hamas cabinet spokesman Ghazi Hamad said the group, which took control of the Palestinian government in March after winning parliamentary elections, was encouraged by what it called a "wait and see" approach by the so-called Quartet of Middle East mediators.

The Quartet, comprising the United States, the European Union, Russia and the United Nations, repeated a demand on Wednesday that any Palestinian government renounce violence, recognize Israel and respect interim peace deals.

Israel pointed to the statement as a sign that the Quartet was firm on its three conditions. "They're not obstacles to peace, they are prerequisites for a suc-

cessful peace process," Israeli Foreign Ministry spokesman Mark Regev said.

The unity government deal between the ruling Hamas movement and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah faction has widened divisions within the Quartet.

The United States wants to continue to shun the government if it does not meet the three conditions, whereas Russia and other European governments favour a softer line.

"It (the United States) aims to undermine the European and Russian efforts in order to continue the siege imposed on our people," said Palestinian Information Minister Youssef Rizqa of Hamas.

The US-led boycott of the Hamas-led government has pushed the Palestinian Authority to the brink of financial collapse and raised poverty rates in the Gaza Strip and occupied West Bank.

Norway offers help to revive Lanka peace

Civilians flee fearing fresh offensive

AFP, Colombo

Norway's top peace broker in Sri Lanka, Erik Solheim, yesterday offered to go the extra mile to revive the stalled process on the eve of the fifth anniversary of a moribund truce.

Solheim, who is also Norway's international development minister, expressed the hope that Sri Lanka's government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), would recognise the need to implement the truce.

"It is my strong hope that both parties will recognise the need to secure the full implementation of the ceasefire agreement as a first step toward reaching a political solution," Solheim said in a statement sent here.

He said Norway remained in regular contact with the Colombo government and the LTTE despite the failure of the last meeting

between the warring parties in October.

"Norway is willing to go the extra mile to assist their peace endeavours at their request," Solheim said. "As soon as the parties renew their peace efforts, we will be ready to do all we can to help."

Solheim's statement came a day after Norway's ambassador here, Hans Brattskar, called for a fresh commitment from the two sides to maintain the peace brokering efforts.

Brattskar said neither Colombo nor the Tiger rebels had abrogated the truce that was arranged and put in place by Oslo from February 23, 2002. But he said he hoped both would see the need to fully implement it.

The LTTE and the Sri Lankan government are regularly accused of violating the ceasefire agreement, which temporarily halted

fighting for about two years, then began to fall apart.

More than 60,000 people have been killed in Sri Lanka's 35-year-old Tamil separatist conflict, 4,000 of them in the past year alone, according to official estimates.

Meanwhile, hundreds of villagers in northern Sri Lanka have fled their homes fearing a fresh military offensive against rebel-held territory, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam said Thursday.

The rebel LTTE said hundreds of men, women and children from half a dozen villages along the de facto border line between the two sides were on the move and seeking refuge deeper inside rebel territory.

"About a thousand people have already become refugees," LTTE spokeswoman N. Selvy said by telephone from the rebels' political headquarters in Kilinochchi, 330km north of the capital, Colombo.



PHOTO: AFP
Indonesian rescuers and port officials help to transport injured victims of a ferry fire at Jakarta port yesterday. At least 17 people were killed when a ferry carrying more than 300 passengers caught fire shortly after leaving the Indonesian capital.

US-led forces face 'dirty bomb' attack in Iraq

AFP, Baghdad

As a joint operation by US and Iraqi troops to win control of Baghdad made more progress yesterday, their insurgent foes were fighting back with deadly new tactics, including poison gas attacks.

Iraqi medics were treating dozens of patients poisoned by chlorine after militants targeted civilian areas with trucks rigged up as dirty bombs, said Qais Abdulwahab, director of the Kadhimiya Hospital.

Meanwhile, US commanders are investigating the loss of the latest in a series of helicopters after a Blackhawk came down on Wednesday in fields north of the capital after coming under fire from the ground.

"Operation Fardh al-Qanoon" (Imposing Order) has scored some successes. Murders are down in Baghdad and more than 90,000 US and Iraqi troops have met only token resistance as they fan out through flashpoint districts.

Three suspected al-Qaeda insurgents were killed north of Baghdad in clashes on Thursday and overnight raids in the city netted five "rogue" members of the Shiite Mahdi Army militia suspected of kidnapping and murder.

But daily bomb attacks on civilians continue, and the use of chlorine and anti-aircraft tactics has underlined what US commanders say is the insurgents' main strength - their ability to rapidly adapt their strategy.

"One of the things we see as we deal with this is that, as one technique works in one part of the country, we tend to see copycat attacks in other parts of the country," said US spokesman Lieutenant Colonel Chris Garver.

On Tuesday, a truck carrying chlorine gas exploded in Taji, just north of Baghdad, killing six people on the spot but also poisoning scores more as the toxic gas spread through the area, overcoming women and children.

On Wednesday, the dirty bombers struck again, in the suburbs of Baghdad, in a less successful attack that nevertheless spread panic.

"The material used is poisonous," said Abdulwahab. "During the explosion it changes into a mist that spreads through the air, causing poisoning in the breathing system, breathing difficulties and acute coughing."

"It's the first time we have seen such poisoning cases," he told AFP, comparing the injuries to the internal burns suffered by children who drink

chlorine-based cleaning products.

Kadhimiya Hospital treated 90 patients poisoned in Tuesday's attack -- seven of whom died -- and 21 more on Wednesday, Abdulwahab said.

The Martyr Mohammed Baqir al-Hakim Hospital in Shula treated 66 cases after the Taji blast, and all survived, said medical official Abu Murtadha.

"They've adapted the car bomb tactic," Garver said. "It shows some of the maliciousness with they are adapting those tactics."

"It was not a chlorine tanker it was just a tank in the back of a truck. The use of canisters with something in them is not new, they've tried using regular acetylene tanks to increase the size of the explosive," he said.

"So that's not new, we do look for canisters already, but obviously we are going to pay more attention now to any kind of canister," he said.

Meanwhile, US commanders are examining the threat to their helicopters, eight of which -- two operated by a private security outfit -- have been lost since January 20, most of them shot down by insurgents.



PHOTO: AFP
Demonstrators participate in a protest against US Vice-President Dick Cheney's visit to Australia in Sydney yesterday. Hundreds of protesters demonstrating against Cheney's visit to Australia clashed with police in downtown Sydney.

India bans N-material export to Iran

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA, New Delhi

India has imposed a ban on export of any material and technology to Iran that could be used in development of the Persian Gulf country's nuclear weapons and delivery systems.

The decision is in "compliance" with the UN Security Council resolution adopted last year.

A notification issued by the Indian Director General of Foreign Trade said "direct or indirect export and import of all items, materials, equipment, goods and technology which could contribute to Iran's enrichment-related, reprocessing or heavy water-related activities or to the development of nuclear weapons delivery system whether or not originating in Iran, to/from Iran is prohibited".

However, there will be some exception such as equipment meant for light water reactors and low-enriched uranium when it is incorporated in assembled nuclear fuel elements for such

reactors, it said.

Iran's controversial nuclear programme has been a bone of contention for the Congress-led UPA government in India with its key ally the Left parties opposed to New Delhi's stand at the International Atomic Energy Agency board of governors meeting.

The Indian ban on the export of the materials came ahead of New Delhi and Washington resuming negotiations to operationalise Indo-US civil nuclear deal passed by the US Congress last year.

India's External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee had visited Iran recently and Tehran's nuclear issue was among the subjects, which figured high in his talks with Iranian leaders.

India, along with Pakistan, is in talks with Tehran for importing natural gas via a pipeline from the Gulf country. But the negotiations are stuck on the issue of pricing of the gas.

Indonesian passenger ferry fire kills 17

AP, AFP, Jakarta

A fire broke out on an Indonesian ferry carrying 300 passengers Thursday, killing at least 17 people and sending scores of passengers jumping into the sea, officials said. One woman slipped beneath the waves while clutching her 18-month-old daughter.

More than a dozen people remained unaccounted for following the country's second major maritime disaster in as many months.

The pre-dawn fire started in a truck on the Levina 1's car deck, hours after the 2,000-ton vessel left the capital, Jakarta, for the north-western island of Bangka, said port official Sato Bisi.

Aerial footage showed flames and heavy black smoke pouring from the 27-year-old ferry as authorities launched a massive rescue operation, plucking 275

survivors from the Java Sea and the ship's charred hull.

A cargo hand said a woman handed him her 18-month-old baby and then jumped overboard.

"I tried to scale a rope, but was knocked into the water by a falling passenger, still clutching the baby," said Heru, 29, who like many Indonesians goes by only one name. "I swam to a water cooler and then spotted the mother clinging to another cooler nearby."

"The baby was crying 'Mama! Mama!' and she insisted I hand over the child," he said, adding that 15 minutes later, large waves pulled them both under. "Now they're gone. I still haven't seen them."

Two warships, three helicopters, a tug boat and nine cargo ships were taking part in the rescue operations, scouring surrounding waters for more survivors, said Hambar Wiyadi, another port official.

Italy president in crisis talks after Prodi quits

REUTERS, Rome

Italy's president holds crisis talks with political leaders on Thursday to see if Romano Prodi, who resigned as prime minister after nine months in power, can still head a government or must be replaced.

Prodi, who won the narrowest election in Italy's post-war history last year, quit on Wednesday after he was defeated in the Senate on foreign policy -- a constant source of friction in his nine-party, Catholics-to-communists coalition.

"Comrades, all go home," crowed

the headline in right-wing daily Il Giornale run by the brother of Silvio Berlusconi, the tycoon former prime minister who hopes to return to power if new elections are held.

Under the constitution, President Giorgio Napolitano now must find a way out of the impasse.

He will spend Thursday in consultations with party and parliamentary leaders -- a process one newspaper called a "Russian roulette" for Prodi, as the unpredictable result will determine his political future.

There are three main scenarios.



Prince Harry to serve in Iraq

AP, AFP, London

Prince Harry will be sent to Iraq, Britain's Ministry of Defence said yesterday.

He will join his regiment, the Blues and Royals, in Iraq as part of a long-planned rotation of troops. The Defence Ministry has said he might be kept out of situations where his presence could jeopardize his comrades.

He will become the first royal to see combat since his uncle, Prince Andrew, served in the Falklands war against Argentina in 1982.

A regimental source said the prince was "over the moon" about the news.

Harry's deployment comes as Britain hands over more responsibility for security to Iraq's security services.



NZ fishermen catch world's largest squid

AFP, Wellington

A New Zealand fishing boat has landed what is believed to be a world record squid weighing an estimated 450 kilograms (990 pounds), officials said yesterday.

The gigantic sea creature is about 10 metres (33 feet) long and about 150 kilograms heavier than the next biggest specimen ever found.

The fishing vessel San Aspiring was long lining in the Ross Sea near Antarctica, and the squid was dining on a hooked toothfish when it was hauled from the deep.

"He just appeared as a great, big, dark shape coming out of the depths. He was wrapped around a 30-kilogram toothfish and he was just munching away on it," the ship's captain, John Bennett, told AFP.