

‘6 bombs planted on Indo-Pak train’

AFP, New Delhi

Detectives probing the deaths of 68 people aboard the India-Pakistan "Friendship Express" have found that a total of six bombs were planted in three carriages, a report said yesterday.

The police have also lifted a clear set of fingerprints from one of the two unexploded devices, The Indian Express said.

All the bombs were hidden in suitcases left by the entrances of the carriages, effectively sealing escape routes, it said.

While four bombs exploded in two carriages -- charring to death 68 passengers and injuring 12 on the night of February 18 -- two other devices in the third carriage did not explode due to a "timing" error.

Police had previously said the casualties were caused by just two bombs that went off in adjacent train cars.

"All the bombs were to go off at the same time -- at midnight," railways police superintendent Bharti Arora, told the daily.

British foreign secy meets Musharraf

AFP, Islamabad

British Foreign Secretary Margaret Beckett held talks with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf yesterday amid concerns about the spiralling Taliban insurgency in neighbouring Afghanistan, officials said.

Beckett's trip to Islamabad coincided with a surprise visit here by US Vice-President Dick Cheney as Pakistan's western allies ratchet up the pressure on Musharraf to crack down on militants in its border areas.

During talks with Beckett at the presidential palace, Musharraf "called for a comprehensive strategy and economic reconstruction for effectively dealing with the militant activities in Afghanistan", a government statement said.

Nepal to seize royal property: Minister

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's government will seize the property of King Gyanendra and punish him after he publicly defended his decision two years ago to grab absolute power, a minister told AFP Monday.

"The cabinet meeting on Monday agreed to take action against the king for his undemocratic and unauthorized message based upon the recommendation of the eight parties," said government spokesman and information minister Dilendra Prasad Badu.

He was referring to the seven-party ruling coalition and the former rebel Maoists, who have laid down their arms and joined the political process.

The government also agreed to form a committee to nationalise the property of the king and royal family.

"A committee comprising three ministers has been formed to bring the royal property under the state's

US renews offer of talks with Iran

Key powers seek united front, Tehran ready for unconditional talks

AFP, Washington/ London

On the eve of a big-power meeting on Iran, the United States reaffirmed its offer of direct talks with the Islamic Republic, if it suspends its work on uranium enrichment.

Key world powers grappling to contain Iran's nuclear ambitions sought yesterday to downplay signs of tension over how to keep pressure on Tehran, as Russia voiced concern at talk of a military option.

Britain, hosting a meeting of senior officials from six countries including the United States, insisted that the international community remains united in seeking to persuade Tehran to back down, despite its latest snub.

"I think Iran should not in any way mistake private discussions (which are) taking place for weakening of resolve, quite the reverse," said a spokesman for British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

"We're leaving open the track of negotiations, because the best way to resolve this would be to have Iran come to the table," Rice said in an interview on Fox News Sunday.

Iran would be ready to examine with a "positive eye" a request by the United States for talks but would not halt sensitive nuclear activities as a precondition, top nuclear negotiator Ali Larjani said on Monday.

"If the United States presents a request for negotiations through the official channels and it appears these negotiations are constructive and logical, we are ready to examine this request with a positive eye," he said in an interview with the state news agency IRNA.

But he added: "Fixing preconditions means that you have already determined the result of negotiations in advance and it is for this reason that such policies have produced no result up to now."

Iran and the United States have had no diplomatic relations since Washington severed ties in 1980 in the wake of the seizure of its embassy in Tehran by Islamist students.

Though earlier on Sunday, Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad insisted his government would press ahead with its uranium enrichment regardless of UN threats, comparing the programme -- which Tehran insists is aimed only at producing nuclear power -- to a runaway train.

"Iran has reached the technology to produce nuclear fuel and Iran's movement on this path is like a train on a one-way track with no room for stopping, reverse gear or

braking," he said.

"They don't need a reverse gear, they need a stop button," retorted Rice. "Then we can come to the table and we can talk about how to move forward."

Rice said UN and US sanctions imposed on Tehran since December after Iran refused to comply with an earlier demand it suspend its enrichment programme were beginning to fuel dissatisfaction among Iranians over Ahmadinejad's actions.

"People are looking hard at investment in Iran, at the reputational risk, the investment risk of dealing with a country that is under Chapter 7 status," she said, referring to the mandatory UN sanctions resolution passed in December.

14 Iranian troops killed in helicopter crash

AFP, Tehran

Fourteen Iranian military personnel were killed in a helicopter crash last week during an operation against rebels close to the Turkish border, the Revolutionary Guards confirmed yesterday.

A statement carried by the ISNA agency said that two commanders of the Guards' ground force and 12 other military personnel were killed in Friday's accident. Kurdish rebels had claimed they shot down the aircraft.

"Commanders Ghahari Said and Dorosti of the Guards' Hamzeh Army 3, along with 12 other members of the Islamic republic's army and the Guards, were martyred in the helicopter accident," the army statement said.

It said the operation against the "mercenary elements opposing the Islamic republic was carried out in the valleys close to the town of Khoy" 50km from the Turkish border.

Iranian state media had earlier reported that the crash was "an accident due to bad weather." The Revolutionary Guards had said on Saturday they killed 17 rebels in the operation after besieging them.

Pejak, a Kurdish rebel group fighting in Iran, claimed on Sunday that it had shot down an Iranian helicopter.

The group, linked to Turkey's outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), also claimed to have fought an hour-long battle with Iranian troops and to have killed 20 soldiers, including senior officers.

Pejak's statement, which was distributed to reporters in two cities in northern Iraq's Kurdish autonomous region, said the group had captured a survivor from the helicopter crash and killed the chief of the Iranian army's 3rd Corps.

Iran's north-western West Azerbaijan province, which borders Turkey and Iraq, is the scene of regular armed clashes between Iranian border guards and Kurdish militant parties, Pejak in particular.

Gore's Oscar sparks new presidential speculation

AFP, Hollywood

Flush with an Oscar for his environmental jeremiad "An Inconvenient Truth," Al Gore faces growing speculation whether he might ride the winds of political climate change to a new bid for the presidency.

The Democrat insists he has no plans to run for the White House in 2008, eight years after being edged out by George W. Bush in a bruising recount battle that still smarts today.

But the former vice president's bandwagon may be gaining steam, fuelled by an Academy Award on Sunday for best documentary and a global warming issue whose time appears to have come.

Gore, 58, did little to curb expectations as he appeared on stage at Sunday's ceremonies with heart-throb Leonardo DiCaprio to hail the use of "environmentally intelligent practices" in producing the awards show.

Prodded by DiCaprio whether he had any other major announcement to make, Gore started to mock a "my fellow Americans" declaration of his intentions -- only to be drowned out by the orchestra and hustled off stage.

Some political commentators see Gore as a solid compromise candidate for Democrats if frontrunners Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama and John Edwards battle to a stalemate in next year's nomination tussles.

The London-based Economist magazine dubbed Gore an "ideal" choice for Democrats, with his early opposition to the Iraq war, his environmental credentials and a grudge to settle with Bush.

"What better way of wiping out the Bush era than replacing him with the man who should have been president," the weekly said in its latest issue.

Iraqi VP, minister hurt in bomb attack

12 killed in violence

AFP, Baghdad

Iraq's vice president and its public works minister were both slightly hurt yesterday when a bomb hidden in the ceiling of the ministry building exploded, a lawmaker in their party said.

Four other people were killed in the attack, medics said.

The senior Shiite officials were quickly released from a US military hospital after doctors established that they had only received "scratches," the lawmaker said.

Vice President Adel Abdel Mahdi was arriving for a meeting with his fellow Shiite minister Riyadh Ghraib when the attack took place, but was only lightly hurt and was later released from hospital, Jalal al-Din al-Saghir said.

"The vice president got a scratch on his foot," the Shiite lawmaker said.

"He went to Ibn Sina Hospital and he was given the normal tests. He left immediately afterwards and he's in his office," he told AFP.

"The explosion happened when the party arrived at the meeting room. It appears that according to the first reports we have that the bomb was in the ceiling of the room," he added.

"The minister was wounded in the same way. He went to hospital and left later. He also just had scratches," he said.

Security officials and medics said that at least four people were killed -- including a senior ministry official -- and 26 more were wounded.

Meanwhile, five policemen and three civilians were killed on Monday in a series of bombings and mortar and gun attacks in Baghdad and the surrounding region, an Iraqi security official said.

Two policemen were killed in a bombing while on early morning patrol in the southeastern district of Rustumiyah, a security official said, adding that the explosion also injured another officer.

A bomb attack on another police patrol in the Madaen region southeast of the capital killed three policemen and injured two, the official said.



PHOTO: AFP

Bosnians demonstrate yesterday in front the premises of the International Court of Justice in The Hague. The International Court of Justice ruled Monday that the 1995 massacre of nearly 8,000 Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica was genocide, as it considered the question of Serbian responsibility.

Srebrenica massacre was genocide, rules UN court

AFP, The Hague

The International Court of Justice ruled yesterday that the 1995 massacre of nearly 8,000 Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica was genocide, as it considered the question of Serbian responsibility.

It is the first time that the ICJ, the UN's top court set up to deal with disputes between states, has ruled in a genocide case. Genocide was made an international crime under a 1948 treaty.

Bosnia has accused Serbia of masterminding the widespread "ethnic cleansing" of Bosnian Muslims and Croats during the brutal inter-ethnic war in the former Yugoslavia from 1992 to 1995.

The Bosnian government has demanded reparations while Serbia has insisted the ICJ has no jurisdiction in the matter.

If Serbia is found guilty it would be a moral victory for Bosnia and could lead to reparations amounting to millions of euros (dollars).

The 16-judge ICJ panel is expected to take several hours to read the verdict, which will be final with no room for appeal.

In the initial part of its ruling, it said the massacre at Srebrenica in eastern Bosnia was an act of genocide but that other mass killings during the war were not.

It said Serbia had made "considerable military and financial support" available to the Bosnian Serb leadership during the war but the court did not make any immediate comment about its alleged involvement in genocide.

Proving genocide requires establishing intent to destroy a group, in whole or in part, as well as demonstrating that genocidal acts such as the Srebrenica massacre took place.

"Whatever the court may rule, Bosnia and Hercegovina vs Serbia and Montenegro is a historic case because there has been no previous ruling," said Geraldine Maltoli, an expert with the Human Rights Watch group.

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the UN's ad hoc war crimes court, has already ruled that the Srebrenica massacre was an act of genocide and has convicted two former Bosnian Serb military officers for aiding and abetting the slaughter.

But Monday's ruling will be the first from an international court on whether the genocide was the policy of the government of Serbia, a former Yugoslav republic neighbouring Bosnia.

Serbia under then-president Slobodan Milosevic was the main backer of ethnic Serb forces in Bosnia, and Milosevic is seen as the architect of their campaign to forcibly expel non-Serbs from swathes of the Bosnian countryside.

He died in UN custody last year before any verdict could be reached on the genocide and war crimes charges against him in the ICTY. He maintained his innocence to the end, saying genocide was not the policy of his regime.



PHOTO: AFP

Davis Guggenheim (3rd R) and former US vice president Al Gore (3L) pose with other crew members and their Oscar statue after being named Best Documentary Feature for "An Inconvenient Truth" at the 79th Academy Awards in Hollywood, California, on Sunday.