



France's TGV V150 Train.

French train tops 350 mph to break record

AP, Aboard Train V150

A high-speed French train with a souped-up engine and wheels broke the world speed record Tuesday for conventional rail trains, reaching 357.2 mph.

The black and chrome train with three double-decker cars, named the V150, bettered the previous record of 320.2 mph, set in 1990 by the French fast train. However, it fell short of the ultimate record set by Japan's non-conventional magnetically levitated train, which sped to 361 mph in 2003.

I've gambled career for peace with Maoists

Says Nepali PM

AFP, New Delhi

Nepal's elderly Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala said yesterday he had gambled his 60-year political career to strike a deal with Maoist rebels and bring peace to the Himalayan country.

The veteran leader's comments came after former rebels were sworn into a new interim government Sunday, a major step in a peace process that ended a decade of civil war.

"We have managed to bring the Maoists to the mainstream. A new chapter is going on in Nepal," Koirala, seen as an elder statesman of national politics, told a conference of South Asian nations in New Delhi.

"I have gambled 60 years of my political career," Koirala said in a speech on the opening day of the

two-day South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (Saarc) conference.

Koirala recalled how he felt strongly that discussions with the Maoist rebels were needed to end the conflict, which claimed more than 13,000 lives.

"I wanted to have a dialogue with the Maoists but was told by many that 'terrorists are not to be believed'," he told leaders of the eight nations belonging to Saarc which includes India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.

Now "they (Maoists) have come within the democratic framework" and "the situation has calmed down," said the veteran Nepalese leader.

The 85-year-old Koirala, who has been in poor health, said he had travelled to New Delhi against the advice of his doctors to bring

news of developments in his homeland.

"Doctors had told me not to attend Saarc because of my ill health but I could not resist the temptation to come here," he said.

Former Maoist rebels hold five portfolios in a cabinet tasked with steering impoverished Nepal into new elections on June 20, which will lead to a decision whether the country keeps its monarchy.

Koirala said that as a democrat he could not be merely a silent spectator.

"I thought, if I fail, the nation should not fail as it would be my personal loss," he said.

As well as fighting for democracy in Nepal, Koirala was also involved with the Indian independence movement against British colonial rule.

Pakistan wants to settle row with Afghanistan

Says Pak PM

AFP, New Delhi

Pakistan's Prime Minister called yesterday for more talks with Afghanistan to settle differences between the two neighbours after Kabul accused Islamabad of harbouring the Taliban leader.

"This merely says that we need to engage more and communicate more," Shaukat Aziz told a press conference.

He said he expected to meet President Hamid Karzai on Wednesday during the summit of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc), which opened in the Indian capital on Tuesday.

"On the sidelines, we will be talking to each other. We believe that dialogue, discussion interaction... when you are neighbours you have to learn to live together."

Karzai accused Pakistan's intelligence agencies of sheltering the fugitive Mullah Mohammad Omar.

In an interview published Sunday, he said Omar, who has been on the run since being toppled by a US-led coalition five years ago, was hiding in the Pakistani city of Quetta.



Indian Prime Minister and incoming Chairman of Saarc Manmohan Singh (L) walks past Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz during the opening session of the 14th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) Summit in New Delhi yesterday.

Ukraine rivals meet amid power struggle

AFP, Kiev

Ukraine's pro-Russian Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovich held crisis talks with his western-backed rival President Viktor Yushchenko yesterday over a power struggle that has spawned mass protests.

Yanukovich defied an order by Yushchenko to dissolve parliament, telling an emergency session of the legislature that the president had made "a fatal mistake" and urging legislators to keep working.

He later threatened to force an early presidential election if the dissolution order was not rescinded.

Russia's foreign ministry called on all sides to seek a compromise, voicing concern over the crisis that is the culmination of a long-running battle between the rival leaders.

The two met as thousands of chanting, flag-waving protesters gathered outside parliament to voice

opposition to the president's decree.

Yushchenko announced the dissolution of parliament in a dramatic televised speech late Monday, calling snap legislative elections for May 27.

The decree came into force when it was published Tuesday in the official gazette, but Yanukovich called on parliament to stand fast.

The only possible way "of remedying the president's fatal mistake is waiting for a decision by the constitutional court," he told legislators in a session broadcast live on television.

"Until such a decision is made, the government should work as usual," he said.

Speaking later to supporters, Yanukovich said the president should understand that failure to rescind the dissolution would make presidential elections "inevitable."

Nepal govt appeals for arms handover

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal's home minister said yesterday that all illegal weapons in the country must be handed over to police within a week as part of a security plan for the first national polls in eight years this June.

"In order to improve the peace and security situation in the country ahead of constituent assembly elections the government has brought in new security measures," Home Minister Krishna Prasad Sitaula said in a statement.

Former rebel Maoists took five posts in a coalition government on Sunday to cement a peace deal that ended a decade of civil war and paved the way for June 20 polls to elect a body to rewrite Nepal's constitution.

The home minister said that for the polls to be held peacefully "all

groups, organisations and political parties who possess unauthorised weapons and explosives to submit them to the local administration or police offices by April 8," or face prosecution.

In some parts of rural Nepal violence has been a feature of past elections, with criminal gangs working for political parties stealing ballot boxes and intimidating voters.

Sitaula also said patrols would be increased on Nepal's long and porous 1,700 kilometre (1,062 mile) border with India and "quick action teams" would be formed to maintain law and order.

The former rebels and government signed a landmark peace pact in November last year, that paved the way for the Maoist's entry into government for the first time on Sunday.

Iranian diplomat seized in Iraq released

AP, Tehran

An Iranian diplomat in Iraq seized two months ago by uniformed gunmen in Baghdad has been released, Iran reported yesterday.

Jalal Sharafi, the second secretary at the Iranian Embassy in Baghdad, will return to Tehran later Tuesday, the official Islamic Republic News Agency reported, citing "informed sources." The report gave no indication of why or how Sharafi had been freed.

23 Tigers killed in fresh Lankan fighting

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan security forces have killed at least 23 Tamil Tiger rebels in fresh fighting in the island's east following a deadly bus bombing, the defence ministry claimed yesterday.

"In the limited humanitarian operation on the west and south of Batticaloa, we have found 10 bodies of the LTTE cadres," spokesman Prasad Samarasinghe said. "Altogether, 23 Tigers have been killed in the fighting yesterday."

He said one soldier was also killed in the confrontation.

Last week the government said its troops had moved into the restive area

without meeting any guerrilla resistance.

The claim came a day after 16 people were killed and 25 wounded when a bomb blast ripped through a bus in the island's east.

The defence ministry immediately accused Tamil Tiger rebels of setting off the bomb, which coincided with a key Buddhist holiday, while the guerrillas denied they were responsible.

In Geneva, the international Red Cross on Tuesday condemned a bus bombing on Sri Lanka's eastern coast which left 16 people dead, including three children, and injured 25 others.



PHOTO: AFP

US Assistant Secretary of State for South Asia Richard Boucher extends his hand to an unseen delegate ahead of the Inaugural Session of the 14th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc) Summit in New Delhi yesterday. South Asian nations must "root out terrorism" to turn around the fortunes of their underperforming trading bloc, India's Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said in his inaugural speech.