

North Korea signals atomic shut down

AP, Seoul

Intelligence officials reported increased activity yesterday around North Korea's main nuclear reactor, indicating the country may be preparing to uphold its agreement to shut down the plant.

North Korea missed last Saturday's deadline for shuttering the reactor because of a dispute over \$25 million in North Korean deposits frozen in a bank blacklisted by Washington. The funds were allegedly linked to money laundering and counterfeiting.

The owner of the bank in the Chinese territory of Macau, Stanley Au, insisted the money had been unblocked. He noted however that North Korea had made no withdrawals from his Banco Delta Asia "because they cannot transfer the money out."

"There are no banks accepting the so-called black money," Au told The Associated Press. "The only thing they can do at the moment is to take the money in bank notes out of the bank."

North Korea promised the US and four other nations in February to dismantle its nuclear programs in return for energy aid and political concessions.

Meanwhile, South Korea said it will discuss food shipments to the North, despite earlier reports that Seoul was considering halting the aid in an apparent move to ratchet up pressure on the North, which has requested 400,000 tons of rice.

"The issue of food aid will be discussed" at meetings beginning Wednesday in Pyongyang, North Korea's capital, Deputy Unification Minister Kim Jung-tae told reporters.

South Korea periodically sends

rice and fertilizer to the impoverished North, but often faces criticism from conservatives here and abroad for being too lenient on its northern neighbour.

North Korea's Yongbyon reactor remained in operation Tuesday, but there was a high possibility that movement of cars and people at the site recorded in satellite photos could be linked to a shutdown, South Korea's Yonhap news agency reported, citing an unnamed intelligence official. The Dong-a Ilbo newspaper carried a similar report.

An official at the National Intelligence Service, South Korea's main spy agency, told The Associated Press they were "following and analyzing some peculiar movements" around the reactor in North Korea, without elaborating. The official spoke on condition of anonymity, citing policy.

World shocked at US university shooting

AP, New Delhi

Families in India and Israel yesterday mourned two professors among the 32 people killed in a shooting rampage at Virginia Tech, while the leader of Australia slammed US gun culture.

Monday's massacre was the deadliest shooting rampage in modern US history, with the unidentified gunmen cutting down his victims in two attacks before turning the gun on himself and taking his own life.

Liviu Librescu, 76, an engineering science and mathematics lecturer, tried to stop the gunman from entering his classroom by blocking the door before he was fatally shot, his son said Tuesday from Tel Aviv, Israel.

"My father blocked the doorway with his body and asked the students to flee," said Joe Librescu. "Students started opening windows and jumping out."

Librescu immigrated to Israel from Romania in 1978 and then moved to Virginia in 1985 for his sabbatical, but had stayed since then, said Joe Librescu, who himself studied at the school from 1989 to 1994.

Another foreign professor was also killed. Indian-born G.V. Loganathan, 51, a lecturer at the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, was felled by the gunman, his brother GV Palanivel told the NDTV news channel from the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu.

Palanivel said he was informed by Loganathan's wife, who had identified the body.

"We all feel like we have had an electric shock, we do not know what to do," Palanivel said. "He has been a driving force for all of us, the guiding force."

Loganathan, who was born in the southern Indian city of Chennai, had been at Virginia Tech since 1982.

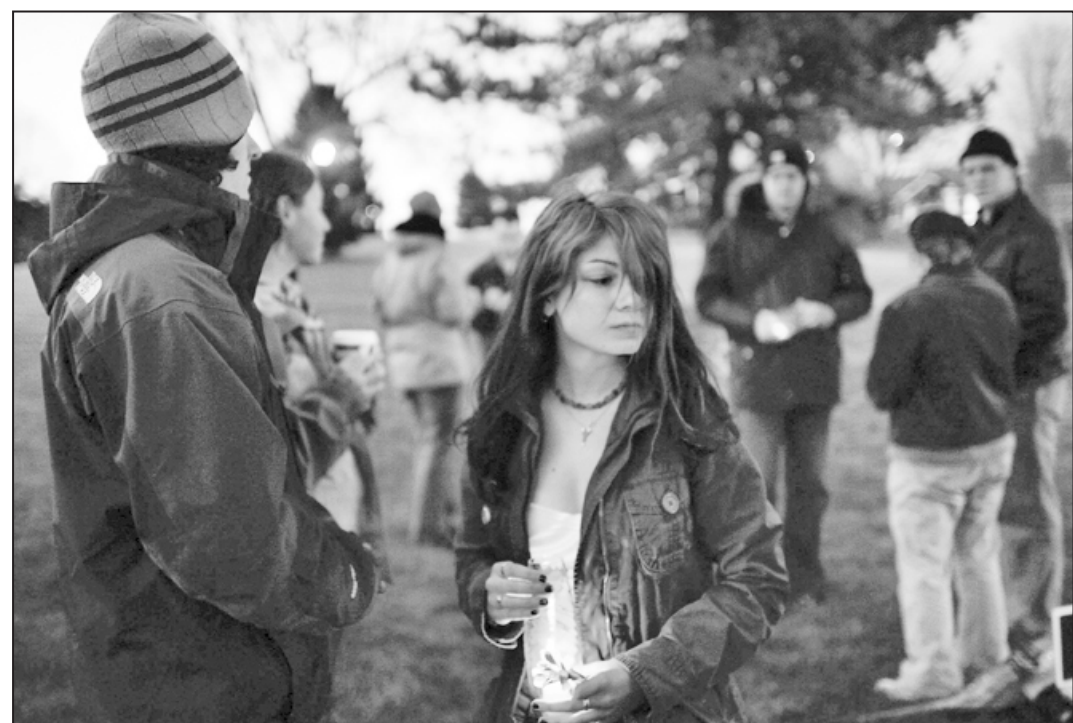


PHOTO: AFP

Sixteen year-old Jessica Hill takes part in a vigil for victims of the mass killing at Virginia Tech on Monday night in Blacksburg, Virginia. A gunman opened fire on classrooms at the university killing at least 32 people before turning his gun on himself in the bloodiest school shooting in US history.

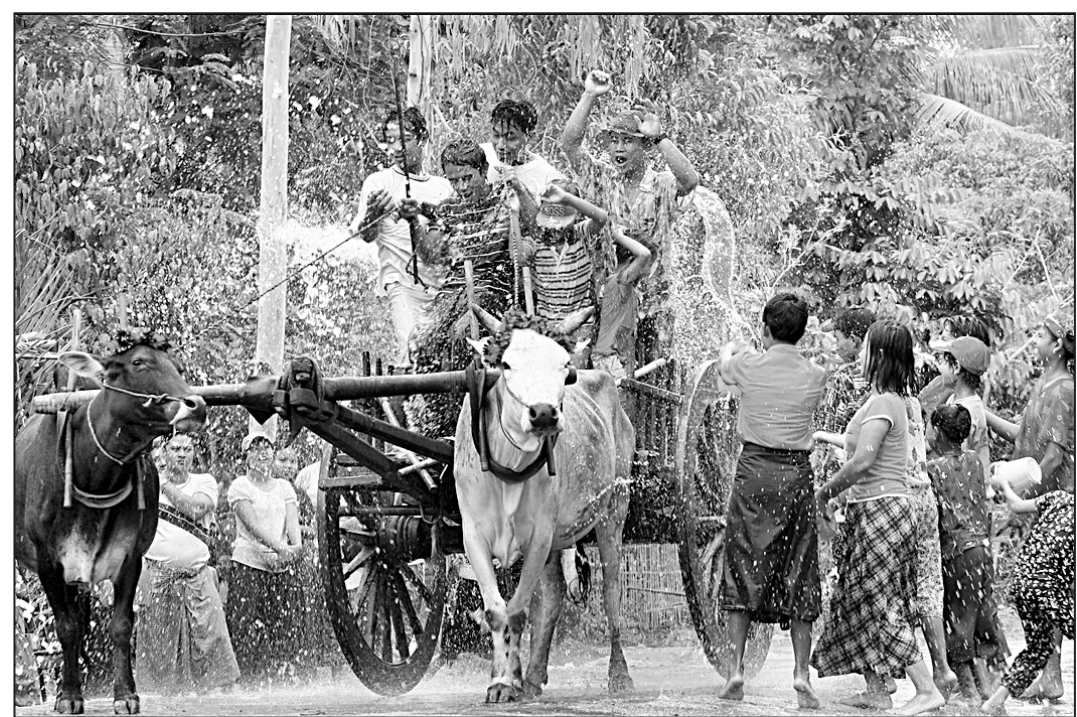


PHOTO: AFP

Villagers celebrate festivities of the Buddhist New Year by throwing water on each other in the outskirts of Myanmar's capital city Yangon Monday. The five-day celebrations of the New Year across the Buddhist Southeast Asia concluded yesterday as people head to temples and monasteries to offer food to monks and release birds to bring good fortune for the coming year.

World must do more for fleeing Iraqis

Says UN chief

AFP, Geneva

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon yesterday urged countries to keep their borders open to the growing flood of Iraqi refugees, amid warnings that hosts Jordan and Syria had reached their limits.

His appeal came at the opening of a two-day UN conference on the plight of some four million Iraqis who have fled their homes, including nearly 800,000 since sectarian violence intensified in Iraq just over a year ago.

Aid agencies warned that legal escape routes for refugees were being cut off by several nations just as regional authorities inside Iraq started to turn away displaced people, potentially fuelling the exodus from the country.

"I hope this conference will galvanise international support to provide them with more protection

and assistance and I hope it will mobilise resources in establishing much needed protection space," Ban Ki-moon said in a video message.

"For neighbouring countries this means keeping borders open and upholding the principle of no forced return," Ban added, while also extending his appeal to more distant asylum countries.

Jordan and Syria together host nearly two million Iraqi refugees out of a total of some four million displaced by the current conflict and Saddam Hussein's regime.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies warned that hospitals, clinics and schools in the two countries "have now reached their limits." It appealed for 15 million dollars (11.1 million euros) in funding to help 100,000 Iraqi refugee families there.

Up to 50,000 Iraqis flee sectarian violence every month, according to the UN.

"Iraq is not just a deeply controversial political and security issue, but a profound and no doubt lasting humanitarian crisis affecting millions of civilians," UN humanitarian chief John Holmes said.

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres welcomed Jordan and Syria's "generosity" so far, underlining that the two neighbouring countries had provided refuge "without any meaningful support from outside."

"It is time that the international community responded with genuine solidarity and unstinting aid to displaced Iraqis and to the states hosting them," he told the conference.

Guterres said also raised the possibility of resettling Iraqi refugees in other unspecified third countries to spread the burden.

Musharraf hails 'best ever' India ties

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf said that relations with India have never been better amid three-year-old peace talks between the nuclear-armed rivals, an official statement said Tuesday.

The comments, made at a meeting of Pakistani military chiefs, come as the South Asian neighbours finalise dates for a meeting between Musharraf and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh later this year.

India and Pakistan have fought three wars since independence six decades ago, but in January 2004 they embarked on a peace process focused on their dispute over the Himalayan territory of Kashmir.

"Relations between Pakistan and India have never been better," a statement quoted General Musharraf as telling a conference of commanders in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, near Islamabad, on Monday.

"There is positive movement in resolution of issues of conflict, especially Kashmir," Musharraf said, adding however that Pakistan's national interests "will not be lost sight of."

Military ruler Musharraf added that there had been an increase in economic activity with India and that "confidence-building measures" had boosted cultural and sporting ties.

6 killed as rival rebel groups clash in India

AFP, Guwahati

Hundreds of security forces were deployed yesterday in India's restive northeast after six people were killed in gunfights between rival separatist groups, police said.

Three people were shot dead Tuesday in retaliation for the killing of three others Monday in the north-eastern state of Nagaland, police said.

The outbreak of violence between two rival factions of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN) occurred despite a ceasefire between the government and the separatists.

"Security forces have now been fanned for area domination to bring the situation under control. We are still not out of the woods," LL Doungel, Deputy Inspector General of Nagaland Police, told AFP by telephone.

5 killed as blast hits UN vehicle in Afghanistan

AFP, Kandahar

Five United Nations security guards including four Nepalese nationals were killed yesterday when a roadside bomb blast ripped through their vehicle in southern Afghanistan, police said.

The attack occurred in the southern city of Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban movement that has waged an increasingly fierce insurgency against targets including civilians since being ousted in 2001.

"Four Nepalese and an Afghan who were working for the UN security services were killed in a very powerful remote-controlled explosion," Kandahar province police chief Esmatullah Alizai told AFP.

The bomb almost completely destroyed the armoured UN vehicle and its smoking wreckage lay across a road near the centre of the city. Police were trying to remove two bodies trapped inside, an AFP reporter witnessed.

"We're investigating what type of explosive was used. It was a very powerful blast," Afghan interior ministry spokesman Zemarai Basharay said while confirming five people had died in the blast.

UN spokesman Aleem Siddique

said there was a "roadside bomb explosion against a UNOPS (UN Office for Project Services) convoy which was travelling to its base in Kandahar" but had no details of casualties.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attack, but previous blasts have been blamed on the fundamentalist Islamic Taliban militia.

Meanwhile, four Afghan employees of a US-owned private security firm were killed by a motorcycle-borne suicide bomber on Sunday at Kandahar airfield, a base for the Nato-led International Security Assistance Force.

Human Rights Watch said in a report published Monday that civilian deaths from "war crimes" and other attacks by Taliban-led insurgents have soared in the past 15 months.

At least 669 Afghan civilians had died since the start of 2006, the report said.

A would-be suicide bomber wearing an explosives-filled vest was detained on Monday night in the eastern city of Khost, where eight policemen were killed in a powerful suicide blast on Saturday, Khost police chief Mohammad Ayoub said.



PHOTO: AFP

Visiting Prime Minister of Pakistan, Shaukat Aziz (L.) stands beside his Chinese counterpart Wen Jiabao (R), during a review of the guard of honour ceremony yesterday at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. Aziz arrived in the Chinese capital for an official visit during which the close allies are due to sign a raft of bilateral agreements.