

Maoists blockade eastern India over economic zones

AFP, Ranchi

Maoist rebels in eastern Indian blew up a section of railway track, attacked trains and paralysed public transport at the start of a 48-hour blockade aimed at derailing government plans to establish special economic zones.

The rebels called the strike in the impoverished states of Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Bihar as part of an increasingly violent effort to prevent the setting up of the low-tax business hubs.

India's government is planning to build about 250 SEZs across the country, hoping the projects will attract foreign investors, radically improve infrastructure and create new jobs while maintaining the country's blistering economic growth figures.

The latest strike by the Maoists -- who say they are fighting for the rights of neglected tribes and landless farmers and are active in half of India's 29 states -- has seen government forces again step up security in the east.

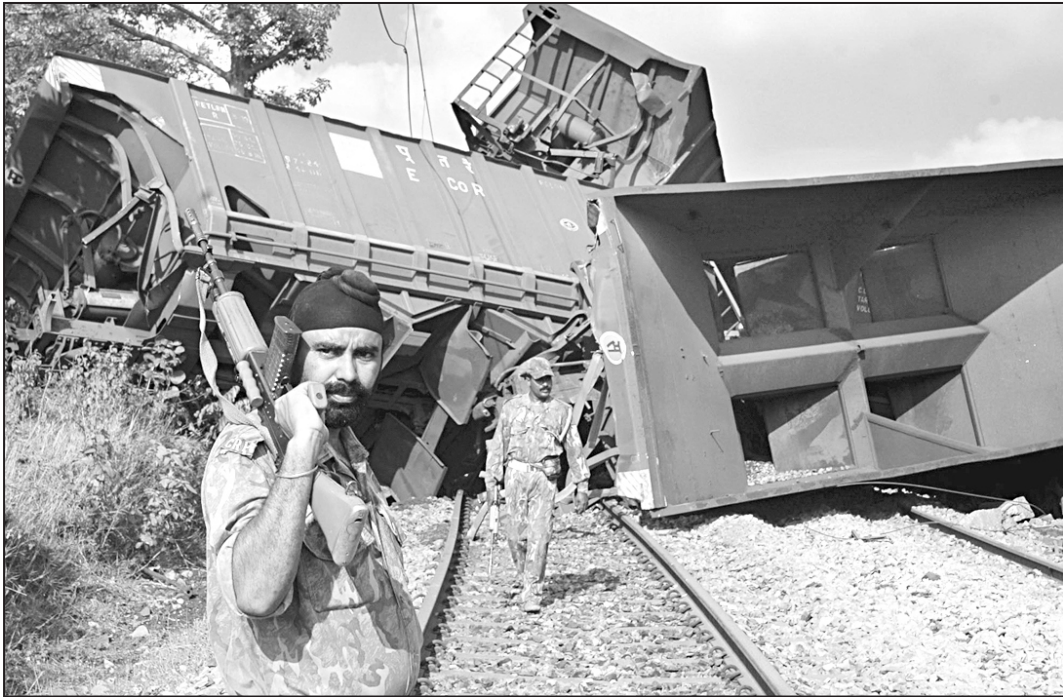


PHOTO: AFP

Central Reserve Police Force Jawans inspects the site where a goods train was blown up by a land-mine near Chetar railway station in the Lathehar district of the eastern state of Jharkhand yesterday. Maoist insurgents in eastern India blew up a section of railway track, attacked trains and paralysed public transport at the start of a 48-hour economic blockade, police said.

Pivotal vote looms on US immigration

AP, Washington

US Senators urging the passage of a bill that would legalise millions of illegal immigrants hope to revive bipartisan support for the embattled measure and push it to passage by week's end.

President Bush's team is predicting victory Tuesday on the effort to allow the bill among the president's top domestic priorities to go forward.

"We're optimistic," said Joel Kaplan, Bush's deputy chief of staff. "Our intelligence suggests that there will be the votes there."

Conservative critics who paint the measure as amnesty for law-

breakers, however, said their efforts to stop the legislation were gaining momentum.

With GOP conservatives determined to block the legislation, backers need 60 votes to clear procedural hurdles and resurrect it Tuesday. Just 45 senators only seven of them Republicans supported such a move two weeks ago.

Bush has mounted an unusually personal effort to diffuse bitter Republican opposition to the bill, appearing at a Senate party lunch earlier this month and dispatching two Cabinet secretaries to take up near-constant residence on Capitol Hill to push the compromise.

Still, after a chaotic several

weeks in which the measure survived several near-death experiences, it remains buffeted by intraparty divisions. Bush's aides say they are lobbying hard to persuade Republicans that the measure deserves support.

"We're in the phase now, as (senators) head into the final tally of the votes, of making the case and explaining why we think the status quo is unacceptable," Kaplan said.

Jim Manley, spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nevada, said the Senate's top Democrat is hopeful that there will be enough converts to push the bill forward.

Arrest warrant issued against Sunni minister

AP, AFP, Baghdad

Iraqi authorities issued an arrest warrant against the Sunni culture minister and raided his home yesterday after he was accused of ordering an assassination attempt against a secular Sunni politician more than two years ago, officials said.

Culture Minister Asad Kamal al-Hashimi, who was not home when the raid occurred, was identified by two suspected militants as the mastermind of a Feb. 8, 2005, ambush against then-parliamentary candidate Mithal al-Alusi, according to governmental spokesman Ali al-Dabbagh. Al-Alusi escaped

unharmd but two of his sons were killed.

"The two who planned and carried out the killings of Mithal al-Alusi's two sons confessed that they took orders from him," al-Dabbagh said, adding that al-Hashimi was a mosque imam at the time but declining to elaborate further.

Al-Hashimi was the first full Cabinet minister to face arrest, although Iraqi authorities have arrested other senior officials, including the deputy health minister who was linked to Shia militiamen loyal to radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr.

N Korea, IAEA to talk N-reactor shutdown

AP, Pyongyang

UN nuclear monitors arrived in North Korea on Tuesday to discuss the communist nation's plans to fulfill its long-delayed pledge to shut down its main nuclear reactor.

International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Olli Heinonen told reporters at the airport in Pyongyang that his delegation would be "negotiating arrangements for verification of the shutdown and sealing" of the North's main reactor during the five-day trip.

Heinonen said North Korean officials gave his delegation a friendly reception at the airport and appeared ready for discussions.

Rift appears in BJP-Shiv Sena ties over presidency

PTI, New Delhi

Rift appeared yesterday between the BJP and the Shiv Sena as the saffron party accused its oldest ideological ally from Maharashtra of entering into a deal with the Congress by supporting UPA-Left Presidential candidate Prathibha Patil.

BJP General Secretary Gopinath Munde alleged that the Shiv Sena has betrayed his party by not backing NDA-supported candidate Bhairon Singh Shekhawat.

"This is a betrayal. The Shiv Sena is into a deal with the Congress," Munde remarked, alleging the alliance partner had agreed to throw its weight behind Patil in exchange for a promise that its former Sena leader Narayan Rane would not be appointed chief minister of Maharashtra ever.

New Palestinian govt is 'lackey', says Iran

AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad yesterday dismissed as a "lackey government" Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas's emergency cabinet headed by Salam Fayyad, the official IRNA news agency said.

"For the past 60 years those who claim self-determination and democracy have used all the power to kill and displace people and install their lackey government in Palestine," Ahmadinejad was quoted as saying.

"They have removed the popular government of this people and they have installed their lackey government and they want to take decisions for the people, but with these actions they only trample on human dignities," he added.

Cyclone kills 14 on Pakistan coast

AFP, Quetta

A powerful cyclone lashed Pakistan's southern coast yesterday, killing at least 14 people, leaving dozens more missing and forcing tens of thousands to flee their homes, officials said.

Cyclone Yemyin packed winds of up to 130 kilometres (80 miles) an hour as it made landfall over the southwestern province of Baluchistan, said the director general of the Pakistan meteorological department, Qamar-uz-Zaman Chaudhry.

At least two Pakistani fishing boats were reported to have sunk in the Arabian Sea and several more were missing with their crews, sparking a desperate search by navy and coast guard helicopters and ships.

Yemyin barreled in three days after another violent storm killed at least 235 people in the southern port city of Karachi and sparsely-populated Baluchistan.

Forecasters said a 7.6-metre (25-feet-high) storm surge was feared.

"The cyclone is likely to cause widespread destruction and coastal flooding along the Baluchistan coast due to extremely heavy rainfall, gale (force) winds and associated storm surge," Chaudhry said.

Hamas ready for talks with Abbas

ME Quartet mulls Blair appointment

AFP, AP, Gaza City/ Jerusalem

Sacked Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniya yesterday repeated his readiness for talks with Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas to end the crisis stemming from his movement's seizure of Gaza.

Speaking to reporters, Haniya welcomed a call from Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak for inter-Palestinian dialogue made at a four-way Middle East summit in Egypt late on Monday.

"We warmly welcome the call for dialogue made by President Mubarak to the Palestinian people. We think this call mirrors a good understanding of the complexities of the situation, which can be resolved only through dialogue.

"From now on we have made it known we are ready for dialogue," added Haniya, who has refused to step down from his position despite Abbas's unceremonious sacking of him and his Hamas-led government on June 14.

Mubarak made a call for inter-Palestinian dialogue to mend the rift at the summit of Middle East leaders including Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert in Egypt's Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh.

"Our deliberations today affirmed the parallel need to end disagreements, and unify the Palestinian ranks through dialogue," the Egyptian leader said.

"The resumption of dialogue between all the children of Palestine, and the achievement of a common position that speaks for its people and its cause, is an immediate requirement that can bear no delay," he added.

More than 110 people were killed in the factional fighting between Hamas and Fatah which effectively destroyed a 15-month-old Hamas-led government and split the Palestinians into two rival entities in Gaza and the West Bank.

Meanwhile, international Middle East negotiators yesterday searched for ways to revive peace

talks after Hamas' takeover of the Gaza Strip, and US officials said they were expected to name outgoing British Prime Minister Tony Blair as a senior envoy.

The gathering of the so-called Quartet of Middle East peace makers came a day after the Israeli, Palestinian, Egyptian and Jordanian leaders held a summit in a unified stance against Hamas.

Representatives of the Quartet the US, EU, UN and Russia met for nearly three hours at the American Consulate in Jerusalem.

Heading into the meeting, UN spokesman said the envoys had "no set agenda" and would discuss "recent developments and the way forward." The talks were the first by the Quartet since Hamas took control of Gaza, a development that has complicated peace prospects. The Islamic militant Hamas is sworn to Israel's destruction.

Participants left without releasing details of the talks.



PHOTO: AFP

A man walks through floodwaters in Hull, northeast England yesterday. Hundreds of people in northern England were evacuated from their homes Tuesday after torrential rain that has so far claimed three lives and threatened to cause a dam to collapse.

Europe hit by deadly drought and floods

AFP, Bucharest

A searing heatwave has killed at least 40 people across southern Europe while in Britain torrential rain has killed three people and forced hundreds to flee a creaking dam.

Twenty-nine deaths have been blamed on the heat in Romania where temperatures on Tuesday hit 45 degrees Celsius (113 Fahrenheit), four in Greece, three in Albania and at least five in Bosnia, Croatia and Turkey.

Record temperatures have been recorded in several countries while violent winds have spread wildfires and stretched emergency services across much of southern Italy.

Bucharest was Europe's hottest capital on Tuesday with temperatures at 45 Celsius (113 Fahrenheit) but a heat alert was sounded for much of the south of the country.