



PHOTO: AFP
Japan Exploration Agency's (JAXA) H-2A rocket, carrying Japan's first lunar orbiter "Kaguya", launches from the Tanegashima Space Centre on the small island of Tanegashima off the southern tip of Kyushu Island, southern Japan yesterday.

Japan launches moon probe

AP, Tokyo

Japan's space agency launched its much-delayed lunar probe Friday, beginning what it calls the largest mission to the moon since the US Apollo flights.

The Selenological and Engineering Explorer or SELENE probe was launched aboard one of the space programme's mainstay H-2A rockets from its launch-pad on remote Tanegashima island.

Footage of the launch carried live over the Internet showed the rocket racing upward through slightly hazy skies to the south-east. Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency said the craft's engines and navigation systems appeared to be operating normally.

India adopts 3-pronged strategy to end deadly Kashmir insurgency

AFP, Srinagar

India has adopted a three-pronged strategy, including stepping-up operations against Muslim rebels, to end a deadly insurgency in Kashmir, New Delhi's top representative says.

The separatist revolt fought by Islamic militants erupted in 1989 and has claimed at least 42,000 lives. Human rights groups put the toll at 60,000 dead and 10,000 missing.

New Delhi has launched a "three-pronged strategy: intensifying military operations against ultras, ensuring economic development and taking psychological initiatives" to end the revolt, Governor S.K. Sinha said.

asserting themselves which holds a hope for a better tomorrow," Sinha said.

Hopes for peace in Kashmir have risen with a ceasefire holding since November 2003 between India and Pakistan along a de facto border dividing the disputed Himalayan region.

Nuclear-armed India and Pakistan each hold part of the territory but claim it in full.

The daily insurgency-related death toll has fallen to two in 2007 from 10 in 2001 and India and Pakistan have persisted with a slow-moving peace process to solve all mutual disputes, including the one over Kashmir.

"Unfortunately this great heritage got trampled during the peak days of militancy in the (Kashmir) valley but now the people are

Duma endorses Putin's choice as PM

AP, Moscow

Russia's lower house of parliament confirmed President Vladimir Putin's choice as prime minister on Friday, approving the previously obscure official Viktor Zubkov in a vote whose result was a foregone conclusion in the Kremlin-controlled chamber.

Lawmakers voted 381-47 to confirm Zubkov, whose surprise nomination stunned Russians and deepened the uncertainty surrounding Putin's expected choice of a favoured successor and his plans for the country following the end of his term next spring. Eight legislators abstained.

When Putin dismissed premier Mikhail Fradkov on Wednesday, Russians had widely expected him to be replaced with a more prominent figure, most likely former Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov in a signal that the person tapped would run as his chosen successor in the March presidential vote.



PHOTO: AFP

Pakistani special army commandos guard the suspected suicide blast site in Tarbela Ghazi about 70km north-west of Islamabad yesterday. Twenty elite commandos were killed in a suspected suicide blast at a high-security army camp in the latest violence to rock crisis-hit Pakistan.

Clash in Afghanistan kills 75 people

AP, Kabul

some fighting positions, it said. The coalition said more than 45 Taliban were killed.

Nato's International Security Assistance Force said Wednesday that insurgents increased attacks during Ramadan last year and that the same may happen this year.

"On the eve of the holy month of Ramadan, the enemies of Afghanistan have shown they will shun peaceful coexistence in favor of attacking government forces," said Army Maj. Chris Belcher, a coalition spokesman.

"Fortunately this great heritage got trampled during the peak days of militancy in the (Kashmir) valley but now the people are

Aid rushed to quake victims in Indonesia

AFP, Arugamakur

Rescue workers in Indonesia rushed aid Friday to Sumatra's west coast after massive earthquakes killed 13 people there and scared thousands of survivors into sleeping outdoors.

President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono said Indonesians should be grateful they were spared catastrophic damage following the major quakes, including the initial 8.4-magnitude tremor on Wednesday.

The Indonesian military and local officials began distributing food and medical aid to survivors without too many constraints, said an official from the national disaster mitigation agency.

"The local infrastructure has not been seriously damaged and we can still deliver aid by land," the official, Soetrisno, told AFP.

But he said the delivery of supplies to the Mentawai island group off Sumatra's west coast had been delayed, though helicopters were soon to be used to access them. Some 150 houses were reported to have collapsed on the islands.

More than 70 medical personnel have been dispatched from the capital Jakarta and South Sumatra to affected areas, said Rustam Pakaya, who heads the health ministry's crisis centre.

Lanka claims killing 10 Tigers

AFP, Colombo

Sri Lankan security forces yesterday shot dead at least 10 Tamil Tiger rebels who tried to attack an army position in the northern Jaffna peninsula, the defence ministry said.

"Army sources have confirmed by intercepting LTTE communication that 10 terrorists were killed," the ministry said, adding that two of its soldiers were injured in the clash.

The report came one day after the military claimed it had inflicted "severe losses" in a combined sea and air attack against suspected Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) boats off the island's north-eastern coast.

Bush must face trial over Iraq: Khamenei

AFP, Tehran

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said on Friday that US President George W. Bush had been defeated in his Middle East plans and would one day stand trial for "atrocities" committed in Iraq.

Khamenei's withering personal attack on the US president in a Tehran prayer sermon to mark the onset of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan came one day after Bush once again accused Iran of undermining the Iraqi government.

"I have a firm belief that one day this current US president and the American officials will be tried in a fair international court for the atrocities committed in Iraq," he said.

"They have to be held accountable. The United States cannot ignore its responsibility," Khamenei told worshippers, who

India forced to stall 'blasphemous' sea lane project

AFP, New Delhi

Hinduism in particular, in the context of the present case," Additional Solicitor General Gopal Subramanium told the Supreme Court in a hearing on Friday.

The move to shelve the plan was, he said, because the government wanted to "bring society together rather than cause any disruption."

The possible shipping lane -- dubbed India's Suez Canal -- would cut the sea journey between the Arabian Sea and the Bay of Bengal by more than 30 hours.

The controversy sparked nationwide protests this week in Hindu-majority but officially secular India.

Tensions peaked after it emerged this week that the Archaeological Survey of India -- acting on behalf of the government -- told the Supreme Court there was "no tangible material evidence" to prove Ram and his simians existed.

The leader of the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Lai Krishna Advani, said the government was "blasphemous and arrogant."



PHOTO: AFP
Indian opposition BJP activists shout anti-government slogans during a protest in New Delhi yesterday against the proposed construction of the Ram Sethu Samudram Shipping Canal Project in the Palk Strait between India and Sri Lanka. The Hindu nationalist party has intensified its agitation against the ship canal project, which would create a sea lane bypassing Sri Lanka to protect the mythical Ram Setu also known as 'Adam's Bridge' which is seen as one of Hinduism's holiest sites.

'US pullout will hasten Iraq's demise'

AFP, Baghdad

The killing of one of his key Iraqi allies on the day he announced a troop pullout from Iraq came as a stark reminder to US President George W. Bush of just how precarious the situation still is in Iraq.

Political analysts believe the country will unravel even further, hastened by Bush's decision to withdraw some 21,500 combat troops by next July.

The withdrawal, they warn, is likely to reinforce the power struggle between the country's political factions, sectarian militia and ethnic groups.

"I think the civil war will start. It

will escalate," said Joost Hiltermann, Middle East director of the independent think-tank International Crisis Group.

The assassination on Thursday of Sheikh Abdul Sattar Abu Reesha in Iraq's western Anbar province exposed the perilous situation in Iraq, despite frequent assurances by the US military that matters are improving.

The murder of the sheikh who shook hands with Bush 10 days earlier also showed how little Washington can do to protect its allies.

It was timed to send shockwaves just a few hours before Bush went on national television to

announce the first stages of the troop withdrawal, due to begin before the end of this month.

The decision, which only partially satisfied Bush's opponents in Congress who want a far speedier retreat, is limited but still carries risks.

"The surge has managed to control the civil war," Hiltermann told AFP, referring to the extra 28,500 US troops deployed in Iraq since February in a bid to quell the sectarian fighting that has killed thousands of Iraqis.

For Hiltermann, there is no doubt that Iraq will slide into civil war if a total withdrawal of American forces begins.



PHOTO: AFP
Anti-war protesters demonstrate outside the White House as US President George W Bush gives his address to the nation on September 13 in Washington, DC.