

Nepal renames airport after Everest pioneers

AFP, Kathmandu

Nepal has renamed the airport that serves as the gateway to Mount Everest after late pioneer climbers Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary, the country's tourism minister said yesterday.

"The Lukla airport will now be known as the Tenzing-Hillary Airport. The cabinet approved the renaming of the airport on Sunday," Tourism Minister Prithvi Subba Gurung told AFP.

Set up with help from Hillary's Himalayan Trust in 1964, Lukla airport, 140 kilometres (87.5 miles) northeast of Kathmandu, is one of the busiest in the country during the spring and autumn trekking and mountaineering seasons.

"A part of the trail to reach the Everest Base Camp will also be named as Tenzing-Hillary route," the minister said.



Pakistani election workers carry transparent ballot boxes at the election commission office in Rawalpindi yesterday. A suicide bomber killed at least ten people, including an election candidate, and wounded 13 others in Pakistan's tribal region of North Waziristan.

Suicide blast kills 10 in Pakistan

Election candidate among dead, PPP leads Pak election race

AFP, Miranshah

A suicide car bomber killed an election candidate and nine other people in northwest Pakistan yesterday, fuelling fears about the increasingly bloody campaign for key national polls in a week's time.

The blast highlighted the dangers of campaigning in the troubled Islamic republic, with candidates keeping a low profile since the assassination of opposition leader Benazir Bhutto at an election rally in December.

Police said Monday's attack in the tribal region of North Waziristan, bordering Afghanistan, targeted the convoy of a candidate named as Nisar Ali as he travelled to a political meeting.

"It was a suicide attack, a miscreant rammed his car laden with explosives into the candidate's convoy," a tribal police official told AFP after the attack in the village of Aidak, near the major town of Mir Ali.

"Ten people were killed, including the candidate and an administration official, while 13 others were wounded."

It was not clear which party the candidate was linked to. Candidates must, by law, stand as independents in Pakistan's semi-autonomous tribal zones but are often affiliated to political groupings.

The bombing is the latest in a wave of suicide attacks across nuclear-armed Pakistan that has so far this year left nearly 100 people dead, all blamed by the government on al-Qaeda and Taliban militants.

A suicide bombing at an election rally held by a small nationalist opposition party in the northwest town of Charsadda on Saturday killed at least 25 people.

The killing of ex-premier Bhutto has also been blamed on an al-Qaeda-linked militant commander based in the tribal region of South Waziristan, which borders the area

where Monday's suicide attack took place.

The spiralling violence caused US Defence Secretary Robert Gates to warn a day earlier that the Taliban and al-Qaeda pose a direct threat to the Islamabad government.

In a further illustration of the challenge facing Pakistan authorities, a top Afghan Taliban commander, Mullah Mansoor Dadullah, was captured and wounded Monday by security forces in a southwestern village, police and the army said.

Opposition parties have accused the government of playing up security threats to politicians in a bid to dampen campaigning in favour of parties that favour Musharraf, but rallies have gathered pace in recent days.

Lawyers across the country launched a boycott of courts until the elections and held protests inside courtrooms in major cities to call for the restoration of the

country's deposed chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry.

Musharraf sacked Chaudhry under a state of emergency in November. He remains under house arrest.

Later Monday hundreds of supporters of Musharraf's key allies, the former ruling Pakistan Muslim League-Q (PML-Q) party, arrived in a fleet of buses in the capital and held a rally in front of parliament, witnesses said.

Meanwhile, two surveys by US-based groups said that the sympathy effect of Bhutto's death in a suicide and gun attack in the northern city of Rawalpindi had boosted the chances of her Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in the election.

Fifty percent of Pakistanis said they would vote for the PPP, against 22 percent for Sharif's party, said one poll by the International Republican Institute released on Monday. The PML-Q were chosen by only 14 percent.

Senior Taliban figure killed in Pakistan

AP, Quetta

Pakistani security forces killed a top figure in the Taliban militia fighting US and Nato forces in Afghanistan and captured four other militants yesterday, a military official said.

Mansoor Dadullah, brother of slain Taliban military commander Mullah Dadullah, was among five militants caught after a shootout near a seminary in southwestern Baluchistan province around 10 am, a local intelligence official told The Associated Press.

A senior military official said Dadullah died of his wounds while being flown to a hospital with the other four injured men.

Both officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorised to speak to journalists. Pakistani army and government spokesmen could not immediately be reached for comment.

Dadullah rose in the militia's ranks as an important commander in southern Afghanistan after his brother was killed during a military operation in Afghanistan's Helmand province in May. Mullah

Dadullah was the highest-ranking Taliban commander killed since the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.

But in late December, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid announced that Dadullah had been dismissed from the movement for "disobeying orders" and conducting activities "against the Taliban's rules and regulations."

On Monday, Mujahid said Dadullah was still part of the Taliban movement, but that he was no longer an operational commander in southern Afghanistan. Mujahid said he had no comment on Dadullah's reported capture and death.

Dadullah told the AP in a phone interview in January that he remained a Taliban commander and had asked the militia's supreme leader Mullah Omar to dispel "rumours" of his dismissal.

He also claimed that he had met with al-Qaeda's No. 2 Ayman al-Zawahiri a few months ago but had never met with Osama bin Laden. He said Taliban and al-Qaeda fighters in Helmand were fighting alongside each other and sharing tactics.

Peace deal unlikely in 2008

Says Israeli minister

AFP, Jerusalem

A top Israeli minister said on Monday the Jewish state was not aiming for a peace treaty with the Palestinians this year, but only a declaration of principles.

"I believe it is possible to reach a declaration of principles ... Nobody is expecting a detailed agreement on the first of January," Deputy Prime Minister Haim Ramon told reporters.

At a US-hosted meeting in Annapolis in November, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas agreed to try to conclude a peace deal by the end of 2008.

And in his annual State of the Union speech last month, US

President George W. Bush reiterated his hopes of reaching a peace agreement this year.

"I assured leaders from both sides that America will do, and I will do, everything we can to help them achieve a peace agreement that defines a Palestinian state by the end of this year," he said.

But Ramon, Olmert's closest government ally, appeared to scale down hopes of reaching a comprehensive deal.

"I believe President Bush is expecting a declaration of principles. If it will be more detailed or less detailed is less important," he said.

"Nobody is really expecting a very detailed (agreement) until

the last detail between Israel and the Palestinians. It has to be detailed enough in order to be implemented in the years after 2008, two or three years after."

Last month, top Israeli and Palestinian negotiators began talks on the thorniest issues at the heart of the Middle East conflict, but Ramon said the declaration of principles will only include an outline of their solution.

"In a declaration of principles, you will have to deal with the issue of Jerusalem, for example. You have to say what will be in Jerusalem but not in details, not what will be exactly in the Old City and so and so forth. It is the same thing about refugees, about borders," Ramon said.



Seriously wounded East Timor President Jose Ramos-Horta is seen on a stretcher as he is transferred from an ambulance to the Royal Darwin Hospital Emergency Department after arrival in Darwin yesterday. Ramos-Horta was evacuated to a Darwin after being shot and seriously wounded by rebel soldiers in an attempt to assassinate the nation's leaders, and was airlifted to Australia for emergency treatment.

NLD activists reject Myanmar charter, fear violence

AFP, Bangkok

Pro-democracy activists in Myanmar yesterday warned the ruling junta could unleash a new wave of violence to ensure victory in a constitutional referendum, urging voters to reject the regime's charter.

The junta late Saturday made a surprise announcement that it would bring its proposed constitution before the public for approval in May, setting the stage for elections in 2010.

If held, the elections would be the first since 1990, when Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) won a landslide victory that was ignored by the junta.

The 88 Generation Students, a coalition of leading democracy activists, said the regime was trying to use the referendum to abolish its dictatorship in the country formerly known as Burma.

Ahmadinejad scorns West, domestic critics on nukes

AFP, Tehran

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said yesterday the West was only "playing with pieces of paper" in its pressure over Iran's nuclear programme and launched a bitter tirade against his domestic opponents.

Ahmadinejad said Tehran would refuse to "back down an inch" in the four-year standoff over its atomic drive and claimed his opponents at home were handing

over information to Iran's enemies. "Thanks to God, the Iranian nuclear dossier has been closed. The enemies of the Iranian revolution can only play with pieces of paper. They can do nothing more," he said in a speech to mark the 29th anniversary of the Islamic revolution.

The United States and its allies have been working to agree a third UN Security Council sanctions resolution to punish Tehran for its continued nuclear defiance.

10 years for US sniper who killed unarmed Iraqi

AFP, Baghdad

A US army sniper was on Sunday sentenced to 10 years in prison after being convicted of killing an unarmed Iraqi civilian and planting a rifle on his body, the American military said.

Sergeant Evan Vela was found guilty by a court martial in Baghdad of unpremeditated murder in the killing of an Iraqi man south of the capital on May 11, 2006, a military official said.

He was also found guilty "of wrongfully placing an AK-47 on the remains of a deceased" and making a false statement, said media officer Lieutenant Patrick Evans.

Huckabee determined to fight to the end

AFP, Washington

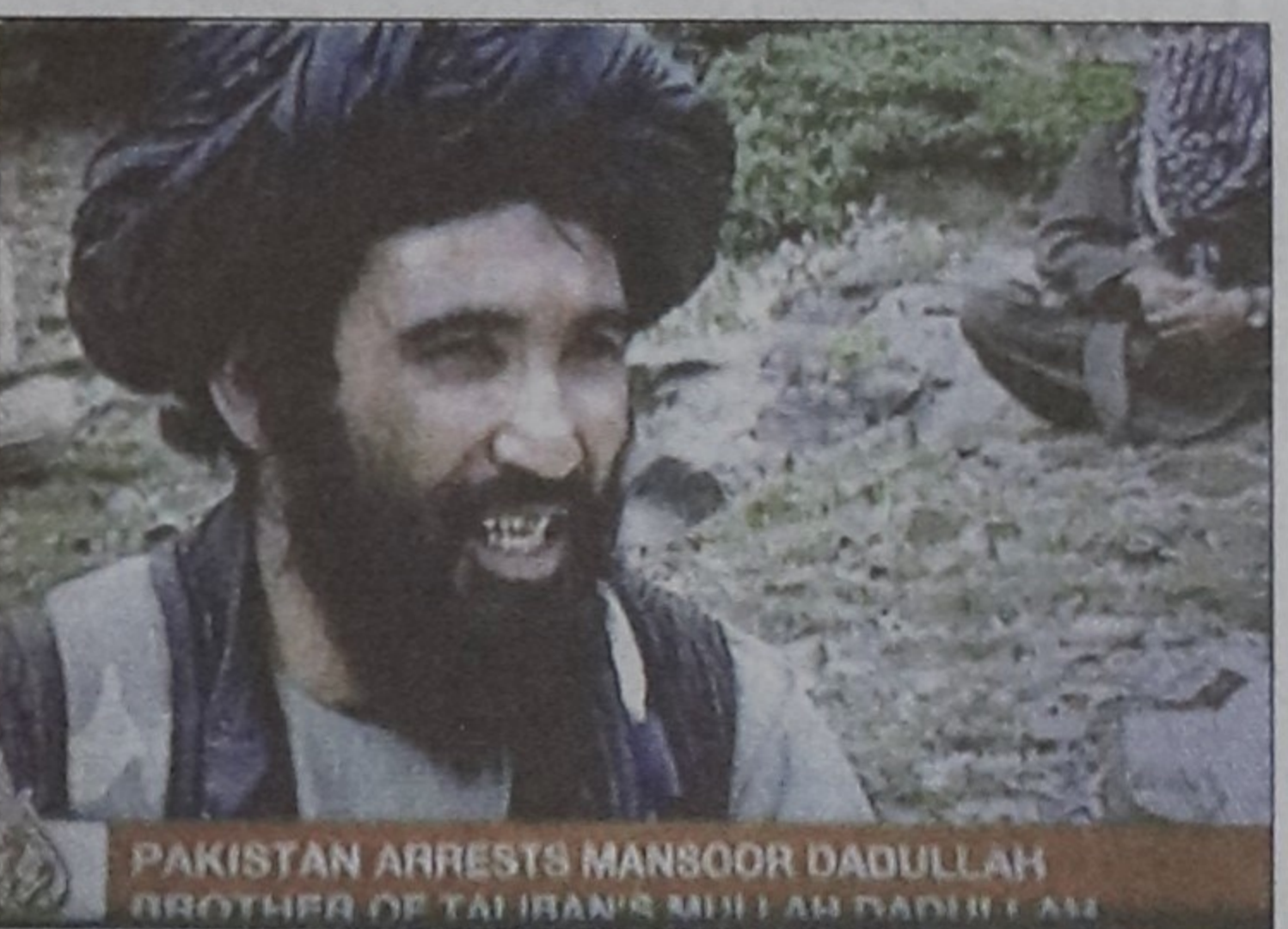
Mike Huckabee may still be a long shot in the race for the Republican presidential nomination, but his weekend victories in Kansas and Louisiana proved he is likely to be a thorn in the side of frontrunner John McCain for some time to come.

Despite McCain's solid lead in the battle for delegates to the Republican nominating convention, which analysts call nearly impossible to overcome, Huckabee insisted Sunday he was going to fight all the way to the wire.

That stance could increase pressure on moderate McCain to turn rightward, but also exacerbate the divisions in the party when it needs unity against the powerful Democrats.

"When I hear people say it's practically impossible, nothing is impossible," the former Arkansas governor and Baptist preacher told CBS television Sunday when asked about his chances.

"This country was built on the impossible. And it's impossible that I'm still in the race. That's what most people would have said a few months ago."



In this undated TV Grab taken from the Aljazeera channel, Mullah Mansoor Dadullah talks during an interview at an unknown place.



Out on bail, Dutt marries girlfriend

AFP, Mumbai

Bollywood superstar Sanjay Dutt, jailed last year for illegal weapons possession and links to Mumbai's underworld, has tied the knot with his long-time girlfriend while out on bail, a friend said.

Dutt had a secret court wedding with former starlet Manyata Dilnawaz Shaikh in a Goa beach resort on Thursday and was celebrating formal Hindu nuptials in Mumbai Monday, a friend who was present told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The 48-year-old actor, who was sentenced to six years in prison, was released on bail in November pending an appeal against his conviction to India's Supreme Court.

When he was freed, Dutt had served nearly three months of his sentence handed down for purchasing weapons for the plotters of the 1993 Mumbai bombings that killed 257 people.

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