

Car bomb kills 18 in Baghdad

AFP, Baghdad

At least 18 people were killed and 64 wounded in a suicide car bombing in central Baghdad yesterday, medical officials told AFP.

The bomber detonated his explosives-laden vehicle in the Bab Al-Sharji area at around 2:00 pm (11:00 GMT), security officials said. Medics at Baghdad's three hospitals, Al-Kindi, Ibn Nafis and Medical City, confirmed the overall toll.

Soon after the blast police were searching the area for the bomber's accomplice, an AFP reporter at the scene said.

A local shopkeeper told AFP the two men parked their BMW car in front of his shop and one of them stepped out, while the other remained seated in the vehicle.

"I went up to the man in the car and asked him to move it. He said 'I will move in a minute as I am waiting for my friend.' A few seconds later the car exploded," the shopkeeper told AFP, adding that the blast happened just after he had returned to his shop.

"I fainted in my shop from the impact of the explosion. I woke up after somebody threw water on my face," he said.

More than a dozen shops in the vicinity were damaged, and the street was carpeted in broken glass.

Indian police arrest 100 Tibetan exiles

AFP, Dehra

Indian police yesterday arrested 100 Tibetan exiles trying to walk to their homeland as part of a major protest ahead of the Beijing Olympics, although the demonstrators vowed the march would go on.

The marchers were rounded up as they approached the border of Himachal Pradesh state's Kangra district, in defiance of a restraining order banning them from heading further north into the Himalayas and towards Chinese-governed Tibet.

"We have arrested 100 people," police official Atul Fulzele told AFP, adding that five women were among those arrested.

The march began on Monday in Dharamshala in the northern Indian district of Kangra, home to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile, and had reached Dehra, around 56 kilometres (35 miles) away, when the arrests took place.

Tibetan activists, who have vowed to step up their protests in the run-up to the Beijing Olympics, said they were saddened by the Indian government's position but insisted the arrests were only a temporary setback.

Four killed in Assam police firing

AFP, Guwahati

Four people were killed and four injured when police opened fire on a mob protesting the demolition of an office in the country's insurgency-hit northeast yesterday, an official said.

The incident occurred in Assam state, where more than 2,000 people clashed with officials over the planned demolition of an office said to have been illegally set up by a rebel outfit.

"Our officials tried to pacify the mob by agreeing to put the operation on hold, but the protesters resorted to large-scale arson," said P. Deka, additional district magistrate.

More than 10,000 people have lost their lives to the insurgency in Assam over the past three decades, with several rebel groups fighting for separate homelands.

Iranian army shells Iraqi border villages

AFP, Sulaimaniyah, Iraq

The Iranian military yesterday subjected three Iraqi border villages to an early-morning barrage of shelling, causing no injuries or damage but scaring residents, an Iraqi official said.

The shells were apparently aimed at bases of militant Kurdish rebel group Pejak, said the mayor of Zarawah, a frontier town in north-eastern Iraq.

Pejak (Party of Free Life of Kurdistan) is accused by Tehran of launching deadly attacks on security forces in northwestern Iran.

"At 6:00 am today, Iranian troops fired artillery shells at border villages inside Iraq," the mayor, Azad Wassu, told AFP by telephone.

"They used long range artillery for 30 minutes. Shells fell on three border villages. There were no casualties nor damage but residents were terrified," added Wassu, under whose jurisdiction the villages fall.



Anti-Musharraf lawyers demonstrate in Lahore yesterday demanding reinstatement of Supreme Court chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry and others judges. President Pervez Musharraf sacked Chaudhry on March 9 last year on misconduct charges but the Supreme Court reinstated him in July. In November, Musharraf again sacked Chaudhry and other judges under emergency rule.

Myanmar nationals stage anti-junta rally in Tokyo

Demand release of Suu Kyi, other political detainees

AFP, Tokyo

Hundreds of Myanmar nationals marched through Tokyo yesterday demanding the release of political detainees including opposition democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

Activists called demonstrations in Tokyo and other major cities around the world to mark the 20th anniversary of the incident that set off a 1988 uprising, which the military crushed killing more than 3,000 people.

Some 400 protesters, mostly those who fled junta-ruled Myanmar, marched to Yangon's embassy in Tokyo where they held portraits of leaders including Aung San Suu Kyi, who has spent 12 of the last 18 years under house arrest. Demonstrators held up banners

reading: "Myanmar needs a binding resolution" and "The Japanese government must put more pressure on the junta."

The military regime in September again broke up major anti-government protests in which the United Nations estimates at least 31 people were killed.

Myanmar has since announced plans for a constitutional referendum in May designed to pave the way for elections in 2010.

While China, Russia and some Southeast Asian nations call the referendum a step in the right direction, the United States and other Western countries say it aims to entrench the military's role.

The constitution would bar Aung San Suu Kyi from elections because she was married to a foreigner, while a new law limits her

party's ability to campaign by criminalising public speeches and leaflets about the referendum.

"We are against the constitution," said Phone Myint Tun, a demonstrator and refugee from Myanmar. "It is a constitution to select people and make laws favoured by the junta government."

"We want to see the Japanese government cut down its economic and political aid to the military government further," he said.

Japan maintains aid and cordial diplomatic ties with Myanmar, a rare break from its Western allies, which are pressing for further punishment of the regime.

But Japan cancelled nearly five million dollars in grants as a protest after September's crackdown in which a Japanese journalist was shot dead in Yangon.

Pakistan protests after US strike kills 4 civilians

AFP, Miranshah

Pakistan lodged a protest with coalition forces in Afghanistan yesterday after two Pakistani women and two children were killed by US fire from across the border, the army said.

The US-led coalition, which helped to topple Afghanistan's Taliban regime in late 2001, confirmed that it had launched a "precision guided" strike on Pakistani territory but said it targeted a militant compound.

The issue of foreign military intervention in Pakistan is sensitive, with President Pervez Musharraf, a key US ally, saying earlier this year that unauthorised actions would be treated as an invasion.

Chief Pakistani military spokesman Major General Athar Abbas said coalition artillery fire destroyed the victims' house in the troubled tribal region of North Waziristan, an alleged haven for Al-Qaeda and Taliban militants.

"The coalition forces were firing at a group of militants when five shells landed in Pakistan, destroying a house and killing two women and two children," Abbas told AFP.

"We have lodged a very strong protest with the coalition forces across the border," he said.

Hillary aide quits over race row

AFP, Chicago

A key Hillary Clinton ally quit her White House campaign on Wednesday after comments about Barack Obama stirred an ugly race row, as the Democratic foes dug in for a testy six-week haul to their next nominating clash.

Obama, vying to become the first African-American president, expressed frustration that race kept emerging as a campaign issue, and also rejected the former first lady's claims he is not ready to be commander in chief.

Fresh tensions simmered between the camps a day after Obama's landslide victory in Mississippi's primary - the last showdown before Pennsylvania votes next month - extended his lead in their epic White House struggle.

Geraldine Ferraro, a Democratic party icon, severed ties with Hillary's finance committee, campaign sources said, after a two-day row sparked by her comment that "if Obama was a white man, he would not be in this position."

11 die after downpour in Angola

AFP, Luanda

Eleven people died yesterday after a downpour in Angola's coastal province of Benguela, about 500 kilometres (300 miles) south of Luanda, state radio RNA reported.

The extent of destruction is still unknown as authorities are waiting for the rain to subside to enable relief and rescue work to start in the affected areas.

"It is mud everywhere and we can barely work. We are waiting for this (rain) to calm down to assess the damages," Dumilde Rangel, governor of Benguela, said on RNA radio.

"The people here are in need of shelter and food."

Schools were closed and workers stayed at home as flooded roads in affected towns made circulation virtually impossible.

41 Taliban killed in battle in Afghanistan

Suicide attack leaves 6 civilians dead in Kabul

AP, Kabul

Afghan and international forces killed 41 Taliban militants in a battle in southern Afghanistan, while a suicide car bomb attack targeting a convoy of US troops left six Afghan civilians dead in Kabul.

None of the four American troops traveling in the two armoured vehicles of the convoy were badly wounded in yesterday's attack, said Lt Col David Johnson, a spokesman for US forces. The troops were travelling in one SUV and one truck, he said. Most US vehicles are armoured.

Six Afghan civilians were killed and up to 20 others were wounded in the blast, Deputy Interior Minister Munir Mangal said. The attacker was driving a white Toyota Corolla, he said, a favourite among suicide car bombers.

In a mobile phone text message to an Associated Press reporter in Pakistan, Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid identified the suicide bomber as Abdullah. The suicide car bomb turned into a fiery hull that burned on the main airport

road long after the attack, which also damaged several other vehicles. US troops and international security contractors surrounded the area after the blast.

Insurgents detonated 160 suicide attacks in 2007, a record number, the UN has said. Last year was the deadliest in the country since the 2001 US-led invasion with more than 8,000 insurgency-related deaths, the UN said.

In southern Helmand province, Afghan and international forces attacked Taliban militants Wednesday morning as they were traveling by motorcycle toward the Pakistan border, said Ghulam Dastagir Azad, the governor of neighbouring Nimroz province.

The troops employed airstrikes during the four-hour battle and killed 41 militants, including 17 from Nimroz, he said. A Taliban commander from Nimroz was among the dead.

US-led coalition could not confirm the attack. NATO said they were looking into the report, but did not immediately have any information. In other violence: In Helmand, US-led coalition and

Afghan forces killed nearly a dozen suspected militants during a clash Tuesday in Garmsir district, the coalition said in a statement. The troops had been searching compounds for Taliban traffickers of weapons and foreign fighters when they were caught under fire.

In Wardak province, a remote-controlled bomb hit a police vehicle yesterday in Saydabad district, killing one policeman and wounding four others, said district police investigator Mohibullah Khan.

In Zabul province, Afghan security forces and NATO troops launched an operation Wednesday against Chechen fighters meeting in Daychopan district, said district chief Fazel Bari. The ensuing two-hour gun battle left three Chechens dead and six wounded, he said.

On Wednesday in Farah province, authorities recovered the dead body of the Pusht Rod district police chief, a day after he was kidnapped along with five other policemen, said Bariyalai Khan, spokesman for the Farah provincial police. There was no information on the fates of the five other men.

Iran eyes big turnout in today's parliament polls

AFP, Tehran

Conservatives are expected to tighten their grip on Iran's parliament in an election dismissed by the United States but seen by its leaders as the chance to send a defiant message to the West.

Campaigning was banned yesterday for the final day before the elections, where reformists are expected to make only a limited impact after pre-vote vetting disqualified hundreds of their candidates.

Top officials and state media have made every effort to emphasise the importance of a massive turnout to show national unity at a time of mounting tension with the West over the Iranian

nuclear programme.

State television has been repeatedly playing patriotic music and pictures of long queues of people voting in past elections, as well as running interviews with ordinary and famous Iranians emphasizing the importance of voting.

"Iranians will take part in the elections today more gloriously than the past and will thwart plots of bullying powers to undermine the Islamic system," said supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in a speech.

The authorities will be hoping there is no repeat of the slack turnout in the last legislative vote in 2004 when barely half the electorate voted nationwide and less than 40 percent in Tehran.

The United States - Iran's arch enemy which accuses Tehran of seeking nuclear weapons technology and of meddling in Iraq - dismissed the elections as likely to be a sham.

"All I can say is we have very low expectations that people will be able to actually express themselves and their will because the Iranian people really don't want to be isolated, and unfortunately the current regime further isolates them by their actions," said White House spokeswoman Dana Perino.

Reformists have admitted the disqualifications mean they can only contest half the available seats, leaving a clear run for conservatives to retain control of the chamber.



Afghan policemen and foreign investigators inspect damaged vehicles at the site of a suicide attack in Kabul yesterday. A suicide car bomb attack against foreign forces in the Afghan capital killed six civilians, Kabul's police chief told AFP.

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Senegalese security forces on the ground of Hôtel Meridien in Dakar where the summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) began yesterday.