

Islamabad on alert after deadly blast

AP, AP, Islamabad
Pakistan's capital was on high alert yesterday and embassies reviewed security measures after a bomb struck an Italian restaurant crowded with foreigners, killing a Turkish aid worker and wounding at least 12 other people.

U.S. and British embassy personnel were wounded in what appeared to be the first attack targeting foreigners in a recent wave of violence in Pakistan, which has been battling al-Qaida- and Taliban-linked militants. The Saturday attack also came at a politically sensitive time parliament is due to convene Monday, bringing to power foes of U.S.-allied President Pervez Musharraf. This was the first attack in which foreigners have been targeted in Islamabad since 2002 and it shows a new trend, a top security official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

22 burned alive in Iran bus fire

AFP, Tehran
Twenty-two university students were killed in a fire when their bus collided with a vehicle transporting fuel in western Iran, the official IRNA news agency reported yesterday.

The bus, which was taking the male students back home to northeastern city of Mashhad, crashed with the heavy goods vehicle on Saturday evening on a road between Khuzestan and Lorestan provinces. According to the student news agency ISNA, the local police said the reason of the accident was "the speeding of the sleepy and driver driving the fuel vehicle." Seven people were injured. Iran's roads are among the most dangerous in the world. At least 100,000 people in the country of 70 million have died in road accidents over the past five years.

Escaped JI suspect still in S'pore

AFP, Singapore
An alleged Islamic extremist leader who escaped last month from a detention centre is still in Singapore amid a massive man-hunt for him, authorities were quoted as saying in local media yesterday.

Mas Selamat bin Kastari, the alleged Singapore head of the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) militant group, is likely hiding his time before trying to escape from the city-state, said Wong Hong Kuan, operations director with the Singapore Police Force, according to the website of TV broadcaster Channel News Asia.

"Based on our intelligence analysis of the person, it further strengthens our belief that he's still in Singapore," Wong was quoted as saying.

Search go on for victims in Albania blast

AFP, Tirana
Rescue workers yesterday resumed the search for victims of a series of powerful blasts at an army depot housing communist-era munitions near Tirana, killing at least seven people and injuring over 200, according to the latest toll.

"Operations to secure the village of Gerdec (where the depot is located) began at 8 am (0700 GMT)," Interior Minister Bujar Nishani told AFP. Two new victims were found early Sunday, taking the toll to seven dead, while 10 people were listed as missing, Health Minister Nard Noka told AFP.

At least 1,500 soldiers and policemen were being deployed in the disaster zone to guard against possible further explosions and define the area, Nishani said.

Zimbabwe to screen foreign journalists

AFP, Zimbabwe
Zimbabwe plans to closely screen foreign media intending to cover upcoming elections amid suspicions uninvited observers and security personnel might imperil Western journalists, state media reported yesterday. Accreditation of some 300 foreign reporters who applied to cover the country's March 29 general elections will be closely supervised, as the government was aware of "the machinations to turn journalists into observers," George Charmba, information secretary, told the state-run Sunday Mail.

Tibet death toll goes up to 80

Dalai Lama calls for int'l probe

AP, BBC ONLINE, BEIJING

At least 80 people have been killed in unrest following protests by Tibetans against Chinese rule, the Tibetan government in exile says.

Indian-based officials said the figure was confirmed by several sources, even though China put the death toll at 10.

The Dalai Lama called for an international inquiry into China's crackdown, accusing it of a "rule of terror" and "cultural genocide".

The demonstrations were the fiercest challenge to Beijing's rule in the region in nearly two decades, leading to sympathy protests elsewhere and embarrassing China ahead of the Olympic Games.

Along with 80 killed, some 72 people were injured in the protests, said Thubten Samphel, a

spokesman for the exiles. He said the figures were confirmed by multiple sources inside Tibet who had counted corpses. China's state media said 10 people died.

Chinese troops were out in force in Lhasa, Tibet's main city, on Sunday.

Hong Kong Cable TV reported that about 200 military vehicles, each carrying 40 to 60 armed soldiers, had driven into the city.

Loudspeakers broadcast messages, such as: "Discern between enemies and friends, maintain order."

US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Saturday urged China to "exercise restraint" in dealing with the protests. She spoke as pro-Tibet demonstrations were held in Nepal, New York, Australia and several European cities.



A Chinese armored tank and military personnel occupy a street in the Tibetan capital Lhasa yesterday as Tibet's government declares a "people's war" to erase support for the Dalai Lama and end any independence aspirations of the people.

China's Wen re-elected for 5 years

AFP, Beijing
Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao was re-elected yesterday for five more years as simmering unrest in Tibet threatened to badly tarnish his government's image just months before the Olympics.

Wen, 65, was the sole candidate for the job. Xinhua news agency which reported from the National People's Congress, or parliament, did not immediately give the number of votes cast in favour of Wen.

His re-election completes the top leadership line-up for the next half-decade, the legislature having given President Hu Jintao another five-year term on Saturday.

The unrest could not have come at a worse time as the world's focus on China is as intense as ever, and likely to build further, as the August start of the Beijing Olympics approaches.

Another source of embarrassment is the Wen administration's pet project of building up a "harmonious society", which clashes with the situation in Tibet today.

Dealing with international public opinion will prove harder than putting down the dissent in Tibet, analysts said.

Former Lankan parliament speaker dies

AFP, Colombo
Sri Lanka's former parliament speaker and son of two prime ministers, Anura Bandaranaike, died yesterday after a brief battle with liver cancer, a family friend said.

Bandaranaike, 59, was hospitalised after he defected from the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse in December over political differences. He was the national heritage minister at the time.

"Anura passed away today," a close family friend said. He was speaker of the national parliament from 2000 to 2001.

Bandaranaike is the younger brother of former president Chandrika Kumaratunga and the son of two late prime ministers -- Sirima Bandaranaike, the world's first elected woman premier, and Solomon Bandaranaike, who was assassinated in 1959.

PPP stands for free judiciary: Zardari

THE DAWN, Islamabad

PPP co-chairman Asif Ali Zardari reiterated on Saturday that his party is committed to the Murree Declaration that pledges to restore deposed judges and make judiciary independent.

Zardari was talking to a 70-member delegation of the People's Lawyers Forum (PLF) which met him at the Zardari House on Saturday.

According to a party handout, Zardari said the PPP stood for making the parliament supreme and it would not allow any other institution to undermine the parliament's sovereignty.

He said the party would provide justice to all, including the deposed judges and judiciary which had long been neglected in the past.

The PPP co-chairman said he himself had been a victim of a "pliant judiciary," held hostage by the Executive. He said no other

party or pressure group had rendered greater sacrifices for the independence of judiciary than workers and leaders of the PPP.

"No one, therefore, has the right to make tall claims on this issue," he said.

Zardari said that scores of PPP workers had lost lives, some of them had their legs amputated and crippled for life while fighting for the cause of judiciary.

"How can some individual or groups claim to lead the fight for the independence of judiciary than the PPP," he asked.

Zardari said that conspirators had not stopped hatching new conspiracies against the party and they had indeed stepped up their plots.

Meanwhile, a PPP spokesman said that the party would name a new prime minister next week, according to news agencies. A decision was imminent, Farhatullah Babar said, adding: "Our party will come up with a name next week."

Pakistan parliament set for Musharraf showdown

AFP, Islamabad

Pakistan's new parliament is set for a bruising confrontation with President Pervez Musharraf when it meets today after the key US ally's supporters lost heavily in elections, analysts say.

Musharraf's political future will be left hanging in the balance when a hostile coalition government led by slain opposition leader Benazir Bhutto's party and the grouping of former premier Nawaz Sharif takes over.

"Parliament will meet amid fears of a confrontation between Musharraf and the parliament because Musharraf appears determined to hold on to power at any cost," political analyst Hasan Askari said.

"The political situation is uncertain," Askari, who is teaching at the School of Advanced International

Studies at Johns Hopkins University in Washington DC, told AFP.

Pakistan is reeling from a series of attacks by Islamic militants.

But the biggest threat facing Musharraf, who seized power in a military coup in 1999, is the vow by the Bhutto and Sharif parties to restore some 60 judges whom Musharraf sacked in November under a state of emergency.

Musharraf deposed his arch-foe, chief justice Iftikhar Muhammad Chaudhry, and the rest of the judiciary to ward off legal challenges to his re-election as president by the outgoing loyalist parliament in October.

But if the judges are restored, the Supreme Court could overturn Musharraf's re-election -- leaving him high and dry.

Musharraf's popularity has slumped in recent opinion polls

and his power has been weakened by his resignation as army chief in November.

NEWS ANALYSIS



President Pervez Musharraf

Another bone of contention is the coalition parties' declared intention to "scrap" presidential

powers to dissolve parliament and to undo a raft of other amendments Musharraf made.

Meanwhile, Sharif, the man Musharraf ousted in 1999, has hinted that parliament could pursue impeachment of the president.

Political analyst and newspaper columnist Shafiqat Mahmood said Musharraf would find it almost impossible to weather the storm and would be out of office within months.

"Musharraf will be a nuisance, an interventionist and hang heavily over the parliament as a threat," said Rasul Baksh Rais, a political scientist at the Lahore University of Management Sciences.

In the end, Rais said Musharraf's best course was for a graceful exit since he "has no chance to survive a confrontation with an assertive parliament."

Indonesia's ex-president to run for post again

AFP, Jakarta

Former Indonesian president Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid said yesterday that he intends to run in next year's presidential elections, areport said.

"I am making myself available to run as a presidential candidate to once again lead this Indonesian state and nation," he told a rally of his National Awakening Party (PKB) in Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan, according to the state Antara news agency.

The ex-president, the country's fourth, was kicked out of office and impeached in July 2001 amid accusations of incompetence and unproven allegations of corruption.

Wahid is the third politician to formally announce his intention to run in the polls. So far, his former vice president Megawati Sukarnoputri, who replaced him, and ex-Jakarta governor Sutiyoso have said they were prepared.

The current president Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono has not yet stated whether he will run.

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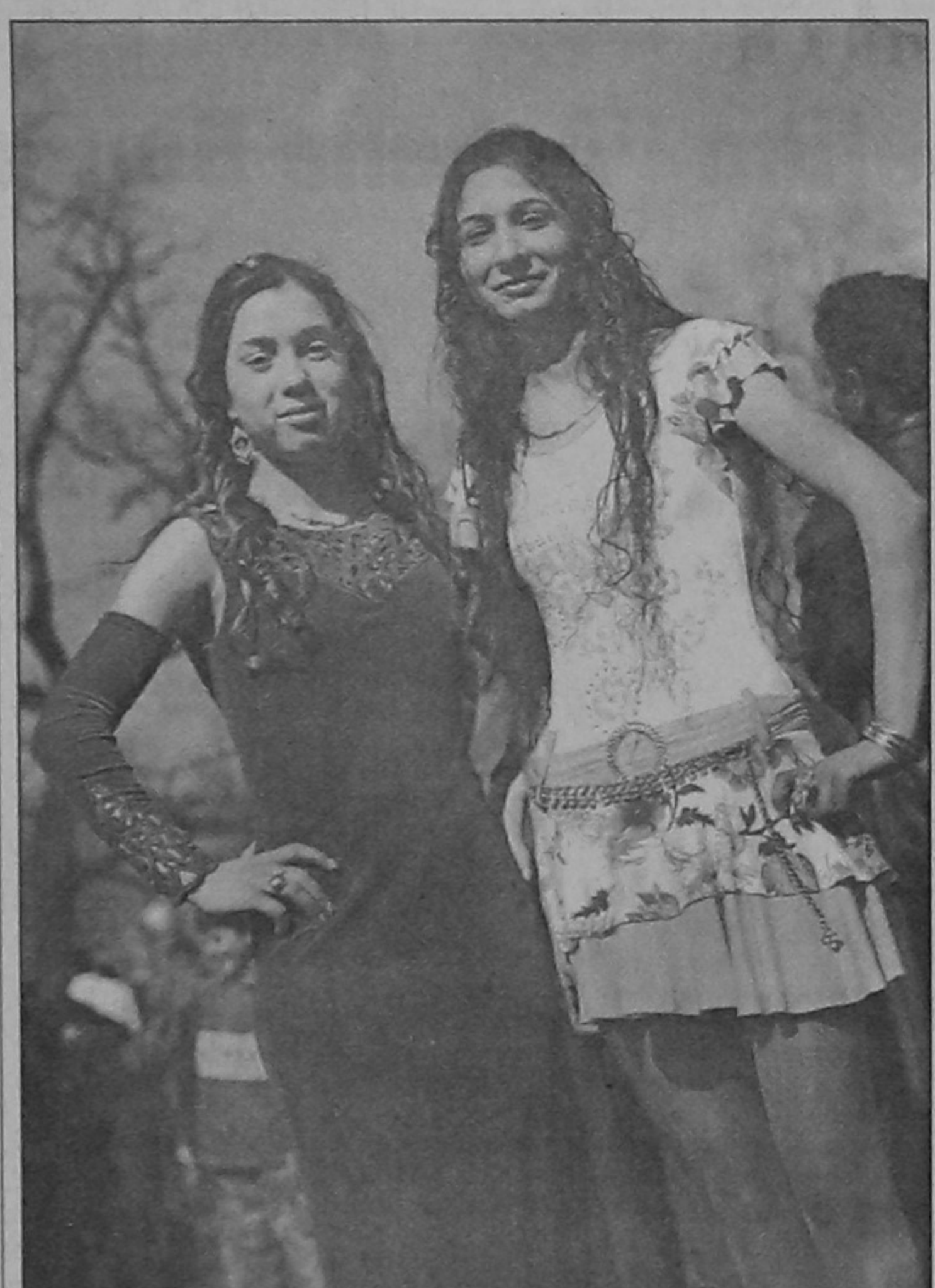
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Gypsy girls from the Gypsies tinker minority waits to be sold by the elders of their family as brides during the open-air market for Gypsy brides on Saturday in the town of Stara Zagora, some 231km east from the capital Sofia. Once a year the Gypsies tinker minority from around the country gather only on the Todorov's Day /Gypsy horse Easter holiday in the town of Stara Zagora to keep the ancient tradition of wedding rituals. The young girls and future brides are presented to the elders of the Gypsies tinker minority who pick and choose wives for their sons and grandsons.

Anwar accuses govt of stoking racial tension

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia's opposition figurehead Anwar Ibrahim has accused ruling party leaders of stoking racial tensions over plans to dismantle discrimination policies favouring ethnic Muslim Malays.

Anwar's Keadilan party is a member of a three-party opposition alliance which made major gains in March 8 elections, seizing control of four states and more than a third of parliamentary seats.

The alliance's plans to transform the New Economic Policy (NEP), introduced in 1971 to boost majority Malays, has drawn criticism from the ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) which led a protest in northern Penang state.

Anwar said the opposition

wanted to reform the NEP so that it uplifted all poor Malaysians, no matter what their race, and accused elements in UMNO of inciting fear among Malays over the plan.

"I am... deeply concerned with the attempt being made by certain elements to stoke the flames of racial hatred" in the aftermath of the elections, Anwar said in a statement late Saturday.

"This vicious campaign is being orchestrated by a small number of very wealthy Malays and UMNO leaders who are themselves guilty of squandering and abusing the NEP."

At least 1,000 people led by UMNO figures defied a police ban to gather outside the office of the newly appointed chief minister of Penang on Friday.

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