

India temple stampede Kills eight

BBC ONLINE At least eight people have been killed and 10 others injured in a stampede at a temple in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, officials say.

The incident happened in the remote Karila village, 260km (160 miles) from the state capital Bhopal.

The stampede occurred as thousands of devotees were making their way into the temple during an annual fair.

In January 2005, 265 pilgrims were killed in a stampede near a temple in the western Maharashtra state.

"It was simply an accident as people who attempted to enter the temple by climbing over a railing fell," senior government official Geeta Mishra was quoted by news agency Reuters as saying.

The stampede took place late on Wednesday.

The BBC's Faisal Mohammad Ali in Bhopal says the temple draws a large number of pilgrims from the neighbouring states of Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

Authorities have sealed the temple gates and are investigating.

Fireworks blast claims 25 lives in China

AFP, Beijing Journalists and police officers were among 25 people killed in a fireworks explosion in a remote part of northwestern China, state media reported.

The explosion occurred on Wednesday night as authorities were trying to destroy eight truckloads of fireworks in the Gobi desert near Turpan city in Xinjiang, the official Xinhua news agency reported.

Twenty-two people were killed immediately, and three died later, Xinhua said.

Five people are still missing and two others are in hospital with serious injuries, Xinhua said, citing a local official.

The victims include police officers, staff of a local explosion, detonation company and journalists covering the event, Xinhua said.

Seven of the eight trucks that were used to transport the fireworks were destroyed, the report said, but no details were given as to how the explosion occurred. China has a huge fireworks industry that is notorious for its lax safety standards.

Israel to open West Bank police HQ

AFP, Jerusalem Israel is set to inaugurate a new police headquarters for the occupied West Bank in an area outside Jerusalem that is at the heart of a bitter land dispute.

"The building, which can house hundreds of police, will be inaugurated on Monday," a spokesman for the public security ministry said.

The police station is located in the 12-kilometre (7.5-mile) E1 corridor between Jerusalem and Maale Adumim, the largest Jewish settlement in the West Bank.

Continued settlement activity in the territory is seen as one of the major stumbling blocks in slow-moving peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians.

Israel insists that building the police station is not linked to the settlement issue as it is a security installation.

Palestinian officials warn that Israeli construction in E1 would completely block the narrow corridor of land running east of Jerusalem that is crucial for any future connection between the southern and northern West Bank.

Britain still top US ally: Bush

AFP, Washington President George W Bush Wednesday said Britain was still the United States' "greatest ally," despite having scaled back its military presence in Iraq, in an interview with foreign media including the Times of London.

"I have always said that the relationship with the United Kingdom is a special relationship. And that relationship was never as special as it was during times of conflict," Bush said when asked if France would take Britain's place as top ally.

British Prime Minister Gordon Brown in October announced plans to cut British troop numbers in Iraq from 4,100 to around 2,500 early this year, while French President Nicolas Sarkozy on Wednesday said France planned to send more troops to Afghanistan.



Followers of radical cleric Moqtada al-Sadr staged demonstration in Baghdad's impoverished district of Sadr City yesterday against a crackdown on Shiite fighters in Basra, as the southern oil hub was rocked by a heavy fighting.

Sarkozy offers more troops for Afghanistan

AFP, London President Nicolas Sarkozy said Wednesday that France will boost its military presence in Afghanistan, a move welcomed by his allies in Britain and the United States.

Sarkozy put no figure on the number of extra troops for Nato's battle against Taliban insurgents -- details may be confirmed next week at a Nato summit in Bucharest -- but sources in Paris said it would be more than 1,000.

France currently has some 1,600 soldiers in the country, mainly in the relatively peaceful capital Kabul. It is unclear if the new French troops will deploy to the volatile south of the country, or other less dangerous areas.

The United States, Canada and Britain have long pressed their

European Nato allies to stomp up more forces in Afghanistan to face down the threat of a Taliban spring offensive in the violence-scarred country.

"France has proposed to its allies in the Atlantic alliance a coherent and comprehensive strategy to allow the Afghan people and their legitimate government to build peace," Sarkozy said.

"If these proposals are accepted, France will propose at Thursday morning's British press, with the Daily Telegraph writing that it 'will have been music to the government's ears'.

"Mr Sarkozy said the two countries were stronger when they stood with, rather than against, each other," the paper's editorial read.

Britain has some 7,800 soldiers stationed in Afghanistan, and has long pushed for other countries to do more, particularly in the south, where British troops in Helmand Province have suffered increasing casualties.

British Foreign Secretary David Miliband also welcomed Sarkozy's pledge. "A stronger French contribution will be more than welcome," he told AFP shortly after the address.

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French President Nicolas Sarkozy (L) and his wife Carla Bruni-Sarkozy (2nd L) bid farewell to Britain's Queen Elizabeth II (2nd R) and Prince Philip (R) as they leave Windsor Castle in south-east England yesterday. Britain and France are expected to seal agreement on co-operation in the development of a new generation of nuclear power stations in the UK.

Hillary's popularity has plunged to 7-year low: Poll

AFP, Washington Hillary Clinton's popularity has plunged to a seven-year low, while her Democratic White House rival appears to have escaped unscathed from controversy over his outspoken pastor, a poll suggested Wednesday.

According to the NBC/Wall Street Journal poll, Hillary received a 37 percent positive rating among the sample of registered voters, her lowest rating since March 2001, two months after she first took office as New York senator.

Meanwhile her opponent saw no significant change among respondents in his positive rating, which was down only slightly to 49 percent from 51 percent two weeks ago.

He also stood strong against Republican candidate John McCain, who 58 percent of voters said would be successful in uniting the country, compared to 60 percent for Obama and 47 percent for Hillary.

Obama, a senator from Illinois, gave a landmark speech on race in America last week in a bid to smooth controversy over his pastor Jeremiah Wright's incendiary comments on racism and American foreign policy.

While 55 percent of respondents acknowledged being "disturbed" by the oft repeated footage of the angry preacher circulating on the Internet and cable television, 45 percent of whites and 67 percent of blacks said Obama had sufficiently addressed the matter.

According to Democratic pollster Peter Hart, the survey of 700 voters with a 3.7 percent margin of error is a "myth-buster" showing that the race row is "not the beginning of the end for the Obama campaign," the Wall Street Journal said.

And the race for the Democratic presidential nomination appeared as tight as ever, with Obama and Hillary each drawing 45 percent support from Democrats nationwide.

US, China press N Korea over N-arms declaration

AFP, Washington US President George W Bush and his Chinese counterpart Hu Jintao pressed North Korea Wednesday to come clean over its nuclear arms programme as South Korea warned that time and patience were wearing out on Pyongyang.

In a day of intensive diplomacy, the White House said Bush telephoned Hu to help get North Korea to make a full declaration of its nuclear arms program, while Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice met with her South Korean counterpart to keep up the heat on the Stalinist state.

"The two presidents pledged to continue to work closely with the other six-party partners in urging North Korea to deliver a complete and correct declaration of all its nuclear weapons programs, and nuclear proliferation activities and to complete the agreed disablement," a statement said.

"Bush expressed appreciation to President Hu for the important role China has played within" the

six-party talks, which it chairs and are aimed at ending North Korea's nuclear weapons drive, added the statement.

North Korea has refused to make a "complete and correct" declaration of its nuclear weapons program and alleged proliferation activities as part of an aid-for-disarmament deal agreed to by the six parties -- the United States, China, the two Koreas, Japan and Russia.

"It's time to bring this to a conclusion," Bush's national security adviser Stephen Hadley said of the ongoing effort by the parties to get North Korea to come forward with a full declaration. "This has been going on for a while."

The declaration was supposed to have been made by the end of 2007 under the nuclear deal, which would reward North Korea with energy aid as well as diplomatic and security guarantees.

North Korea, which has already closed its main nuclear reactor complex and is in the process of disabling it as part of the six-party

pact, submitted a list last November. But the United States says it has not accounted fully for a suspected uranium enrichment program and allegations of nuclear proliferation to Syria.

"It was time, I think, for the president to signal to Hu Jintao that it's time for all of the parties of the six-party talks, including China, to re-engage with North Korea," Hadley told reporters.

Rice said Pyongyang's reluctance to provide the declaration was holding up the six-party talks, which had to lay the groundwork for North Korea to dismantle its nuclear arsenal -- the final phase of its denuclearization effort which Washington wants concluded before Bush retires in January 2009.

"It is really time now for there to be movement on the declaration so that with that declaration we have, we can move forward on the next phase," Rice told reporters after talks with South Korean foreign minister with Yu Myung-Hwan.

"I think time and patience is

running out," Yu warned. "I hope North Korea will submit the declaration as soon as possible so as not to lose good timing," he said.

Rice said the declaration and any associated documents should show the full range of the North Korean nuclear programs and activities "so that there can be an effort to verify and to deal with anything that has happened concerning North Korean programs and proliferation and the like."

"We've been concerned about North Korean proliferation for quite a long time. The six-party framework should be able to deal with this problem or these problems so that we can stay on course to the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula," she said.

The two ministers also discussed a proposed visa waiver program for South Koreans visiting the United States and agreed to expedite the process.

"I hope it will be done as quickly as possible, hopefully within this year," Yusaid.

Indian minister's China visit cancelled over Tibet row

AFP, New Delhi

New Delhi has cancelled a proposed visit to Beijing by Trade Minister Kamal Nath after China's early morning summons of the Indian envoy over Tibetan protests here, a report said yesterday.

Nath was due to travel to Beijing on April 1 to take part in discussions on a trade agreement between the two Asian giants, The Times of India reported.

But the Indian government called off Nath's trip to protest the Chinese foreign ministry's summoning of India's ambassador to Beijing early Saturday over Tibetan protests in India, the newspaper reported.

China's foreign ministry called Indian ambassador Nirupama Rao at 2:00 am and handed over details of plans of more Tibetan demonstrations in India, after protesters broke into the Chinese embassy compound in New Delhi last Friday.

CRACKDOWN ON TIBETANS EU ministers to mull boycott of Olympics opening in protest

AFP, Brussels

EU foreign ministers will discuss a possible boycott of the Beijing Olympics opening ceremony in protest against China's crackdown in Tibet when they meet for talks in Slovenia today.

Integration of Balkan nations into the European Union, relations with Russia and the Middle East situation are also on the agenda for the two days of ministerial talks which begin today at Brdo pri Kranju, near the Slovenian capital Ljubljana.

Public pressure has been mounting on European leaders to discuss China's crackdown on protests in Tibet which Karma Chopel, the head of the Tibetan parliament-in-exile, said in Brussels Wednesday had left at least 135 people dead, 1,000 injured and 400 arrested.

The protests against China's rule of Tibet began in Lhasa on March 10, the anniversary of a failed 1959 uprising.

China says rioters subsequently killed 18 innocent civilians and two police officers in what it describes as the biggest challenge to its rule of Tibet in decades.

Several European leaders have already spoken of a possible Olympic boycott of some kind, with most attention focused on staying away from the opening ceremony in the Chinese capital on August 8.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced Thursday that he will not attend the games' opening.

"My opinion is clear, the presence of politicians at the inauguration of these games to me seems inappropriate," he said. Czech President Vaclav Klaus also said he will not attend the games at

all. On Tuesday, French President Nicolas Sarkozy left open the possibility of boycotting the opening ceremony.

The EU's Slovenian presidency, conscious of the European public's strong reaction to the Chinese crackdown, agreed to make Tibet a late addition to the foreign ministers' agenda, with discussion on the matter likely over lunch on Saturday.

"I guess much can be said about Tibet," said Slovenian Foreign Minister Dimitrij Rupel, whose country holds the European Union's rotating presidency until France assumes the helm from July 1.

Exiled Tibetan parliamentarian Chopel highlighted the other pressures on European leaders to foster ties with China and its massive market place.

Civilians will lead govt after elections, says Myanmar junta chief

AFP, Yangon

Myanmar's junta chief Than Shwe said yesterday that civilians would take the reins of government after elections in 2010, once a constitution is approved giving broad powers to the military.

But he did not say when the public would be allowed to see the final version of the proposed constitution, nor did he announce an exact date for a planned referendum to approve it.

"As the new constitution has already been drafted, it will be put to a national referendum in forthcoming May, and subsequently the multiparty general elections will follow in 2010 in line with the provisions of the constitution," he said to 13,000 soldiers at a military parade in the new capital Naypyidaw.

The 74-year-old general said his military government did not "crave for power," insisting on the

junta's "ultimate aim to hand over the state power to the people."

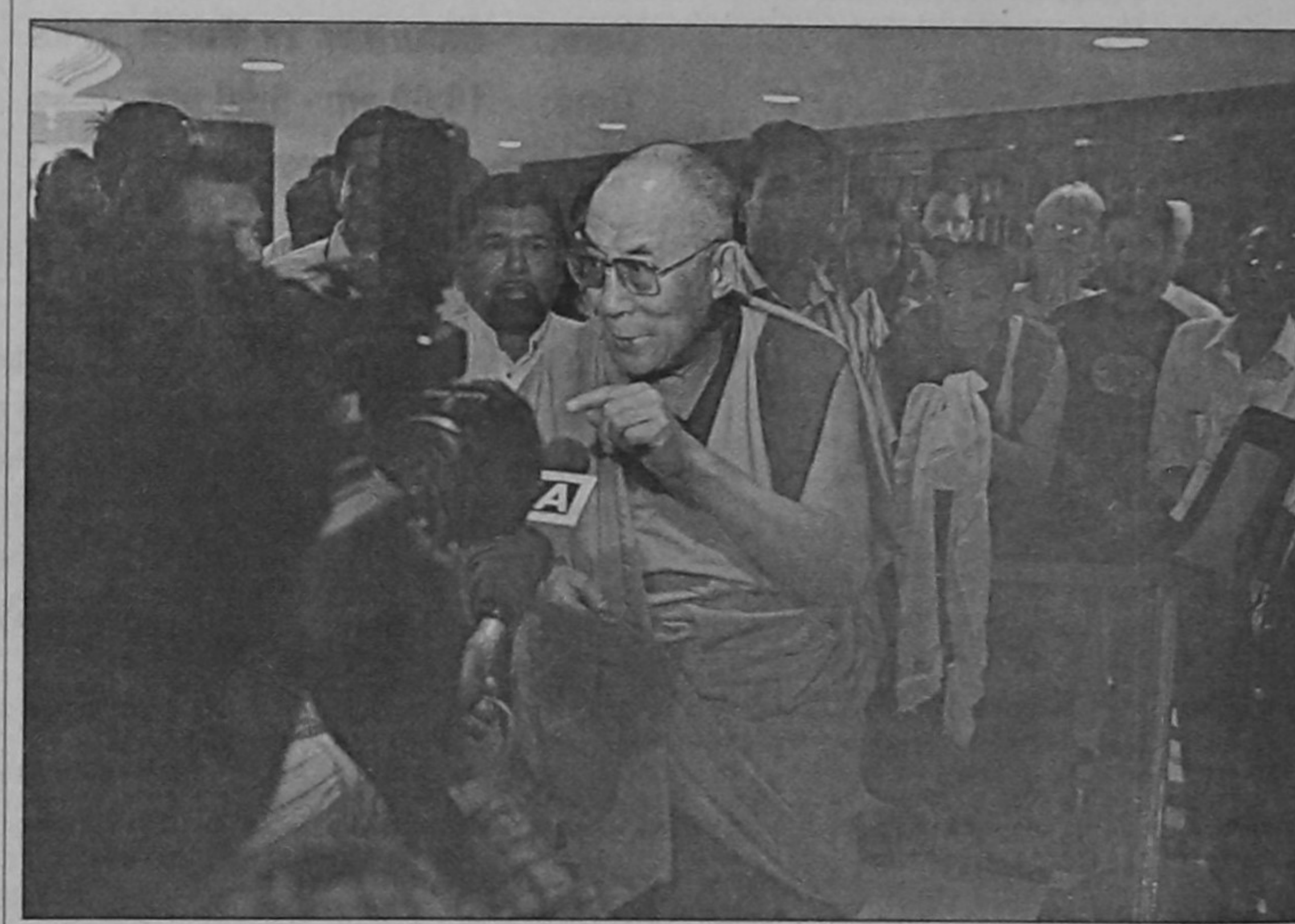
Foreign journalists were denied visas to report on the event, which came six months after a deadly crackdown on pro-democracy protests led by Buddhist monks.

Than Shwe made the remarks in a 15-minute speech during a ceremony to mark Armed Forces Day, the most important holiday on the military's calendar.

The event took place in a remote military compound under a scorching sun at a parade ground lined with towering statues of ancient Burmese kings.

Despite concerns about his health, Than Shwe appeared strong as he inspected the troops while riding in an open-topped limousine.

He stood on a open stage at a podium to deliver his speech, smiling and waving to foreign military attaches as he left.



Tibetan spiritual leader the Dalai Lama talks to journalists as he arrives to attend a session of a week-long meditation workshop at a hotel in New Delhi yesterday. China requires the Dalai Lama to stop sabotaging the Olympics as a condition for talks, Chinese President Hu Jintao told his US counterpart George W Bush, according to the Chinese foreign ministry. Hu's demand, made in a telephone conversation with Bush yesterday, appeared to mark a new addition to a list of actions the exiled Tibetan leader must undertake before China is willing to talk with him.

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