

India counts down to first lunar mission

AFP, Chennai

India began the countdown yesterday to the launch of its first unmanned mission to the moon that will mark a giant catch-up step with Japan and China in the fast-developing Asian space race.

The lunar-orbiting spacecraft, Chandrayaan-1, is scheduled to blast off aboard an Indian-built rocket at 6:20 am (0050 GMT) tomorrow (Wednesday) from the Satish Dhawan Space Centre in Sriharikota on India's southeast coast.

"Everything is going perfectly as planned," the centre's associate director M.Y.S. Prasad told AFP from Sriharikota, 80 kilometres north of Chennai, after the official countdown began in the early hours of Monday.

The launch is a major step for India as it seeks to keep pace with regional space competitors Japan and China. Last month, China became only the third country in the world to independently carry out a space walk.

All three countries have eyes on a share of the commercial satellite launch business and also see their space programmes as an important symbol of international stature and economic development.

Maoists kill 12 police in India

AFP, Raipur

Twelve paramilitary policemen were killed and six others injured in an ambush by suspected Maoist rebels in central India, police said Monday.

"About 40 to 50 personnel were on a patrol when some were caught in an ambush," Vishwa Ranjan, police director general of Chhattisgarh state, told AFP in local capital Raipur.

The gunfire took place in remote forests of the state's Bijapur district.

The rebels have a significant presence in Chhattisgarh state, which is one of India's poorest.

The Maoist insurgency grew out of a peasant uprising in 1967 and has spread to over half of India's 29 states.

At least 834 people were killed in Maoist-related violence nationwide last year. Prime Minister Manmohan Singh has described the rebels as the biggest threat to India's internal security.

Iran to remove fuel subsidies gradually

AFP, Tehran

The Iranian government has drawn up legislation to gradually remove subsidies on fuel and water but will compensate people with cash payments, the local press reported yesterday.

Under the bill, subsidies will be removed over the next three years on goods such as water, petrol, diesel, kerosene and liquefied petroleum gas, the Sarmayeh newspaper said.

But to compensate for the higher prices of such vital supplies, direct cash payments will be made to Iranians, it said.

The bill has yet to be approved by parliament but some MPs have already warned it could add to the problem of soaring inflation, which was running at 29 percent in September, according to official figures.

Direct and indirect subsidies for goods in Iran currently amount to as much as 100 billion dollars a year, Sarmayeh said.

British chef jailed for cannibalism

AFP, London

A British chef, a former Mr. Gay UK, who killed his boyfriend and then cooked a section of his flesh was sentenced to life in prison yesterday.

Anthony Morley, 36, will have to spend at least 30 years in prison for slashing Damian Oldfield's throat in April this year, stabbing him multiple times and cutting off portions of his flesh.

The court heard that Morley then cooked a piece of flesh in fresh herbs and olive oil before chewing it.

"Before this case I had associated cannibalism with eras long gone, with the tale of Robinson Crusoe," Judge James Stewart said, describing the case as "one of the most gruesome murders" he had ever dealt with.

"This was, in my judgment, a cold-blooded, savagely executed murder, carried out by cutting his throat as he lay in your bed and, when he fell to the floor, you stabbed him repeatedly and ferociously," he said.



Anti-government protesters march during a rally in Bangkok yesterday. About 1,000 anti-government protesters marched past Bangkok's upmarket shopping malls accusing police of brutality, upping pressure on the increasingly isolated prime minister.

Fresh protest calls for ouster of Thai premier

AP, Bangkok

Thousands of anti-government protesters marched through the streets of Bangkok yesterday, calling the prime minister a "murderer" and demanding he resign over the violent quashing of a previous rally.

The demonstrators have stepped up their protests against Prime Minister Somchai Wongsawat since a protest outside parliament Oct. 7 ended in a violent confrontation with police that left one demonstrator dead and hundreds of others injured.

Pressure on Somchai increased last week when the powerful army chief hinted he should resign, leading to fears the military would carry out its second coup in two years.

Somchai has brushed aside calls for his resignation, saying he would await the outcome of an investigation into the violence that was expected to conclude in the coming weeks.

Many of those marching Monday held posters of Somchai over the word "murderer." A huge banner on a sound truck showed pictures of the police crackdown, calling it "Murder at the Thai parliament."

"The government is killing the people. They ordered the police to kill the people and we want justice," said Nutt Thumpong, a 20-year-old student.

The anti-government People's Alliance for Democracy has called for Somchai's resignation since he took power last month, branding him a puppet of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, a telecommunications billionaire, accused of corruption and abuse of power. Thaksin fled to London to escape corruption charges.

Thaksin faces his first possible conviction Tuesday when the Supreme Court is scheduled to deliver a verdict in a corruption case against him and his wife, Pojaman. The case stems from Pojaman's 2003 purchase of a plot of land in central Bangkok from a government agency at a deflated price while Thaksin was prime minister.

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Spain remains al-Qaeda target: report

AFP, Madrid

Spain remains a target for al-Qaeda four years after the Madrid bombings that killed 191 people, the intelligence service said in a report quoted by a Spanish newspaper yesterday.

"The counter-terrorist activities by the state security forces since the March 11, 2004 attacks shows that Spain remains a target of the al-Qaeda network and its allies as well as a source of human resources," the intelligence service said in a report, a copy of which was seen by the El Pais daily.

"al-Qaeda has not lost sight of the global jihad and, in exchanges with the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), it has told them to quickly attack local targets and reminds them that their real goal is to cross into Al Andalus," it said.

Al Andalus is the Arabic name for the parts of the Iberian peninsula that were under Muslim, or Moorish, control for almost 800 years until the late 15th century.

The GSPC last year changed its name to al-Qaeda's Branch in the Islamic Maghreb.

Six killed in South Korea killing spree

AP, Seoul

A financially strapped South Korean man went on an arson and stabbing rampage in Seoul yesterday, leaving six people dead and seven others wounded, police said.

The 31-year-old suspect, identified only by his surname, Jeong, first set fire to his room in a low-cost lodging facility in southern Seoul and then stabbed other residents with a sashimi knife while fleeing the fire, police said.

Five people were stabbed to death and another died after jumping out of a window to escape the blaze, police said.

Seven others were wounded, including four seriously, and the death toll could rise, according to police.

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Pak troops kill 35 militants near Afghan border

AP, Islamabad

Pakistani forces killed up to 35 militants near the Afghan border, as the region's provincial chief called for "peaceful dialogue" in a meeting with a US State Department official.

The US embassy would not comment on US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher's meeting with North West Frontier Province Chief Minister Amir Haider Khan Hoti, other than to say his trip had been planned for some time and that he was meeting a range of government officials.

Boucher's trip comes amid strains between Islamabad and Washington over suspected American missile attacks targeting

militants inside Pakistan. Washington wants Islamabad to do more to root out the al-Qaeda and Taliban fighters based inside Pakistan whom they blame for rising attacks on U.S. troops in Afghanistan and other targets.

In a statement, Hoti said he told Boucher during the meeting in Peshawar that he wanted to "to resolve all political problems through peaceful dialogue, but there wouldn't be any compromise on maintaining the writ of the government."

Pakistani soldiers are battling militants on three fronts in the northwest of the country. In the past, the government has tried unsuccessfully to make peace deals with the insurgents, drawing criticism from the United States.

In the latest fighting, Pakistani fighter jets bombed insurgents in the northwest's Swat Valley, killing up to 25, the army's media center said Monday. The bombs hit an ammunition dump, causing extensive damage.

In nearby Bajur district, seven more insurgents were killed when jets bombed their positions, said Muhammad Jamil Khan, the No. 2 government official there.

Security official Fazl Rabi said three militants were killed in other parts of Bajur when they tried to attack security posts.

It was not immediately possible to independently confirm the casualties. Reporters cannot visit the area because of poor security and government restrictions. No Taliban spokesman was available for comment.

Top US diplomat warns 'no blank cheque' for Pakistan

AFP, Islamabad

The top US diplomat for South Asia met Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari yesterday and warned that international donors would only give carefully targeted aid to the troubled country.

US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher visited Pakistan as its leaders face a growing Islamic militant insurgency and major economic difficulties.

But Boucher warned that no handouts would be available from the "Friends of Pakistan" - a group of nations, including China, the US, Britain and the UAE, which have pledged to help the country stabilize.

"There is no money on the table," Boucher told reporters in Islamabad. "The goal is to put the money where it belongs. It is not a cash advance."

Pakistan has denied being at risk of defaulting on its foreign loans or suffering a balance of payments crisis.

Shaukat Tareen, the new finance adviser to Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani, repeated at the weekend there was "no danger" of a loan default.

However, he admitted "plan C" was a loan from the International

Monetary Fund. Boucher's visit came after a series of US missile strikes into the country's tribal regions that have strained bilateral relations.

He and Zardari had discussed the "war on terror" and Pakistan's worsening economic problems, a Pakistani government official told AFP on condition of anonymity.

The United States says insurgents striking international troops

in Afghanistan are based in Pakistan's border tribal belt, and has stepped up its missile attacks since a new government came to power in Islamabad in March.

Ties between the allies were further tested last month by US special forces in Afghanistan launching a raid into Pakistan that killed several Pakistanis.



Former Pakistani premier Nawaz Sharif (R) speaks to US Assistant Secretary of State Richard Boucher during a meeting in Islamabad. Boucher held talks with other Pakistani leaders as well.

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