

4 troops hurt in Pakistan suicide attack

AFP, Peshawar

A suicide bomber rammed his explosives-laden vehicle into an army check post in northwest Pakistan yesterday, killing himself and wounding four soldiers, police said.

"It was a suicide bombing. The attacker came in a Pajero jeep and detonated it at the check post," senior police officer Mohammad Alam Shinwari told AFP.

The post in a sensitive garrison area of Bannu town was damaged by the blast, the latest in a series of militant attacks in the country.

Bannu in North West Frontier Province is close to the tribal region where Pakistani forces have been battling Taliban and Al-Qaeda militants for months.

Pakistan's tribal belt became a haven for hundreds of Al-Qaeda and Taliban extremists who fled the US-led toppling of Afghanistan's hardline Taliban regime in late 2001.

Iran's Khamenei sees no easing of hatred for US

AFP, Tehran

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, ahead of the US elections and anniversary of the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran, said on yesterday that hatred of Washington was deep-seated.

"This conflict goes far beyond having differences over a few political issues," Khamenei told students in a speech, quoted by state television ahead of the 29th anniversary of the 1979 hostage-taking at the embassy.

The supreme guide said his country's "hatred towards the US government is deep-seated because of its plots against the Iranian people over the past 50 years."

Iran holds the United States responsible for a 1953 coup that deposed the administration of its then prime minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and restored the shah.

"Besides, they have not apologised yet and rather keep on their arrogant attitude," he said ahead of the November 3 anniversary of the embassy seizure that the Islamic republic marks with nationwide demonstrations.

Khamenei praised the "great move of students... to take over the centre of espionage."

Tensions rise ahead of polls in Zambia

AFP, Lusaka

Zambian police went on high alert for fear of violence surrounding the presidential election, as a retired diplomat and a fiery populist rallied thousands of people yesterday on the eve of the vote.

The two frontrunners, acting President Rupiah Banda and opposition leader Michael Sata, each drew thousands of people to rival rallies in Lusaka ahead of Thursday's vote which analysts say is too close to call.

Their supporters sang and danced through the afternoon as they waited for the candidates to address the crowds later in the evening, with Banda due to meet his supporters in a Lusaka slum while Sata filled a football pitch in an upmarket suburb.

Tensions in the race have grown as Sata, whose stinging rhetoric has earned him the nickname "King Cobra," has already announced that he will not accept the result if he loses and suspects vote-rigging.

Malaysia to hike cigarette prices to discourage smoking

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Malaysia will fix a minimum price of 6.00 ringgit (1.70 dollars) for a pack of 20 cigarettes to discourage smoking, a senior health ministry official said yesterday.

"The price has already been set and we are just waiting for it to be gazetted by the end of this year," the health minister's press secretary Lim Chau Leng told AFP.

"This minimum price will help discourage youngsters from buying cigarettes," he said.

Malaysia imposes high taxes on cigarettes to discourage demand and a packet costs about 9.00 ringgit but cheaper brands are available for 4.50 ringgit.

Lim said the minimum price will be implemented at the end of the year after the new ruling under the Control of Tobacco Products (Sale of Tobacco Products) Regulations 2008 was implemented.

Desperate search for Pakistan quake survivors as dead buried

AFP, Wam

Wailing villagers dug through rubble with their bare hands in a desperate search for loved ones missing since a devastating quake struck this village in southwest Pakistan.

The village of Wam was one of the worst hit by the powerful overnight quake, which destroyed almost all of its mud houses and triggered landslides of rocks and boulders while people slept.

An AFP reporter counted 15 bodies being buried in a local cemetery as more graves were dug. Officials said at least 75 bodies have been recovered from the destruction.

At least 160 people were killed when the 6.4-magnitude quake struck near the provincial capital of southwest Baluchistan province, Quetta, before dawn on Wednesday.

Aftershocks continued to pummel the area as army soldiers, local Red Crescent volunteers and other non-governmental organisations picked through the shattered remains of the village and medical teams treated the wounded.

Scores of cars and motorbikes thronged Wam, about 50 kilometres (30 miles) north of the historic hill town of Ziarat, as people rushed in from adjoining cities and towns frantic to know the fate of their loved ones.

Many survivors were wailing and shouting the names of their relatives as they dug through the debris.

Nearby peaks in the mountainous region bordering Afghanistan were seen spewing dust, causing fresh fear and panic among locals, the AFP reporter saw.

More than 200 wounded have been taken to hospitals in Quetta and elsewhere, officials and volunteers said.

For survivors, relief began to trickle into the village despite the overland route being all but impassable after the quake left huge cracks in the main 50-kilometre road from Quetta to Ziarat and sent massive boulders crashing down from the mountains.

Food was being served to survivors in a hastily-erected tent after four military helicopters flew into the area with relief supplies.



Pakistani survivors gather on the debris of collapsed houses in the historic hill town of Ziarat, about 50 kms north of the provincial capital Quetta yesterday. A powerful earthquake struck southwest Pakistan before dawn killing at least 160 people, destroying mud homes and sending survivors screaming into the streets in panic. At least eight villages were badly hit by the 6.4-magnitude quake, local police and officials said, warning the death toll could rise as rescue workers reached villages in the remote mountainous region bordering Afghanistan.

Thai parliament okays border talks with Cambodia

AFP, Bangkok, Phnom Penh

Thai parliament has given the government the green light to launch talks with Cambodia aimed at settling a long-running border dispute, which boiled over into violence, officials said yesterday.

The next round of talks aimed at ending a military stand-off on disputed land near Cambodia's ancient Preah Vihear temple will be held next month, after a border firefight on October 15 killed one Thai and three Cambodians.

"Parliament has granted the government two frameworks of negotiation," said Virachai Prasai, a foreign ministry official in charge of legal affairs.

"The two frameworks will allow the government to launch negotiations with Cambodia in order to solve the boundary and border issues," he told reporters.

Initial issues to be hammered

out, beginning when the two sides meet from November 10 to 14, are the redeployment of troops on disputed land near Preah Vihear and removing landmines from the area.

In the longer-term, Virachai said, the two countries would try and settle ownership of patches of disputed land along Thailand and Cambodia's 798-kilometre shared border.

The Cambodian-Thai border has never been fully demarcated, in part because it is littered with landmines left over from decades of war in Cambodia.

Tensions between the neighbours flared in July when the 11th century Preah Vihear was awarded United Nations World Heritage status, rekindling long-running tensions over ownership of the surrounding land.

Two rounds of emergency talks after the October 15 clashes made little progress, with both sides only

agreeing not to fire on each other again.

Meanwhile Cambodia will double its military budget next year to about 500 million dollars following a deadly firefight with Thailand at their disputed border this month, a lawmaker said yesterday.

Parliament is set to approve the new military budget in a session in early November, said Cheam Yeap, head of the parliament's finance commission.

"We need our soldiers to have enough capacity to protect our sovereignty and territorial integrity and have proper equipment and weapons," he told AFP.

"We also want our soldiers to have better training and to be better equipped with weapons and other military tools," he said.

The lawmaker added that Cambodian soldiers also needed new bases and better pay from the government.

UN chief to visit South Asia this week

AFP, New Delhi

UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon is to visit India, Nepal and Bangladesh on his first official trip to the region, officials said yesterday.

He will arrive Thursday in New Delhi on the first leg of his tour and is due to discuss "regional and international issues" including pushing democracy in India's eastern junta-ruled neighbour Myanmar, officials said.

Ban, who began his diplomatic career in South Korea's embassy in New Delhi and has visited India as his country's foreign minister, will meet Premier Manmohan Singh and Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee, among others, Indian and UN officials said.

India, with its 1.1 billion-plus population and strong economic growth, will push for UN reforms including expansion of the Security Council. India has been pushing for a seat on the Security Council.

During a speech at the UN General Assembly in New York last month, Singh criticised scant progress made since world leaders decided three years ago to forge an agenda for early and meaningful reform of the UN.

India along with Brazil, Germany and Japan has been campaigning hard for enlargement of the 15-member council to make it more representative and reflective of today's global realities -- with no success.

The council's makeup has remained largely unchanged since the establishment of the United Nations in 1945.

A UN official, who preferred to remain unnamed, added the talks in New Delhi would cover the global financial crisis and the UN's peacekeeping operations.

India contributes 8,000 personnel to various operations, behind Bangladesh and Pakistan, a defence ministry spokesman said.

Sri Lankan troops capture rebel town

AP, Colombo

Sri Lanka Sri Lankan troops captured a small village in northern Sri Lanka on Wednesday, pushing ahead with their offensive against the Tamil Tigers hours after the rebel group launched a brazen airstrike on the capital, the military said.

Soldiers fought for hours with the rebels, known as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, before taking control of the town of Jayapuram and cutting off yet another small part of the rebels' de facto state in the north, military spokesman Brig. Udaya Nanayakkara said.

"The LTTE have retreated due to the resistance of the army," he said.

The government, which has pushed deep into the Tamil Tigers' heartland, has vowed to destroy the rebel group by the end of the year and win the 25-year-old civil war plaguing this Indian Ocean island nation.

However the rebels have repeatedly shown they retain the capacity to carry out startling attacks on the government.

Late Tuesday, the Tamil Tigers' rudimentary air force bombed a power station on the outskirts of Colombo, taking the fight to the government. The military raked the sky over the capital with anti-aircraft fire and scanned the skies with searchlights.

The attack marked the first time rebel planes bombed the capital in more than a year.

The bombing damaged some turbines at the power station, officials said. A worker hospitalized after the attack died on Wednesday, said Nanayakkara.

The military, embarrassed by the continuing bombing runs by the rebels' tiny fleet of small planes, said it was searching for the attacking aircraft, which apparently escaped back into rebel-held area after the attack.



People from many religions, Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and Christian, pray during the third anniversary of the 2005 bomb blast at Sarojini Nagar market in New Delhi yesterday. At least 61 people were killed and 188 injured after explosions rocked the Sarojini Nagar and Paharganj markets, filled with shoppers for the Hindu festival of Diwali, as well as a bus in the city's Okhla industrial district in 2005.

Eggs recalled, exports halted as China's food crisis worsens

AFP, Beijing

Chinese retailers pulled eggs off shelves yesterday and a supplier was ordered to stop exports, amid fears the toxic threat of the chemical melamine was far more widespread than first reported.

Dalian city in northeast China said it had imposed an export ban on Hanwei Group, which sold to Japan and other parts of Asia, after some of its products were found to contain melamine.

"We have told Hanwei to immediately recall all problem eggs, and we have halted the company's exports for the time being," said a statement issued by the city government of Dalian, where Hanwei is based.

The problem emerged over the weekend when Hong Kong authorities said eggs from Hanwei were tainted with melamine, the same chemical that was mixed into China's milk products and led to

the deaths of four babies.

Officials and China's state-controlled press reported yesterday that eggs from other suppliers had also been found to be contaminated with melamine, which can give food the appearance of higher protein levels.

Against this backdrop, some supermarkets in Beijing, Shanghai and other cities announced they were recalling various brands of eggs, although others appeared unsure what to do with the central government yet to give directives.

A staff member at the Parkson Shopping Centre's supermarket in Beijing said eggs from Hanwei were no longer on sale.

In Shanghai, a spokeswoman for the Lotus Supermarket chain said all the Kekeda brand of eggs from Hanwei had been removed from all its outlets across the city.

Meanwhile, authorities in Hong Kong and the eastern Chinese city of Hangzhou reported eggs contaminated with melamine had

been detected in brands other than Hanwei, and that they came from different areas of China.

The discovery of melamine in eggs has raised concerns that the chemical could be infecting much of China's food chain.

Initially, the problem was believed to be isolated to milk and other dairy products.

The discovery of the chemical in eggs raised concerns that it could be in many other Chinese foods, with the suspicion that it was mixed into livestock feed to also give it the appearance of high protein.

Authorities in Dalian said Wednesday melamine may have been mixed into chicken feed and led to the contamination of Hanwei's eggs.

The United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation in China told AFP on Tuesday that melamine may be present in a wide range of other farm-raised foods such as meat and fish.

MALDIVES POLL Gayoom loses to political prisoner

AP, Male

Asia's longest-serving ruler conceded defeat yesterday to a former political prisoner in the Maldives' first democratic presidential election.

President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, 71, congratulated Mohamed Nasheed in a nationally televised concession speech, saying he fully supported the opposition leader and "the introduction of a new age of democracy."

"In this change we are approaching, I assure you we will make this a peaceful process," Gayoom said. "My prayer is that God gives prosperity to the Maldives and shows us peaceful and affluent days."

Nasheed won 54 percent of the vote to Gayoom's 46 percent, according to provisional results from the nation's elections commission. A final official count will be released later this week.

Hundreds of opposition supporters gathered on the streets of the capital, Male, to dance, hug and cheer as the results were announced.

"We have embraced democracy for the sake of the next generation and the people of the Maldives," said acting opposition party head Ibrahim Hussein Zaki.

Nasheed is expected to be sworn on Nov. 11, 30 years to the day that Gayoom took office in 1978 in the Indian Ocean archipelago.

The election was viewed as a referendum on Gayoom, 71, who is hailed by supporters for bringing development and tourism dollars to this tiny nation of 370,000, but is criticized by opponents who brand him a despot who violently suppressed opposition.

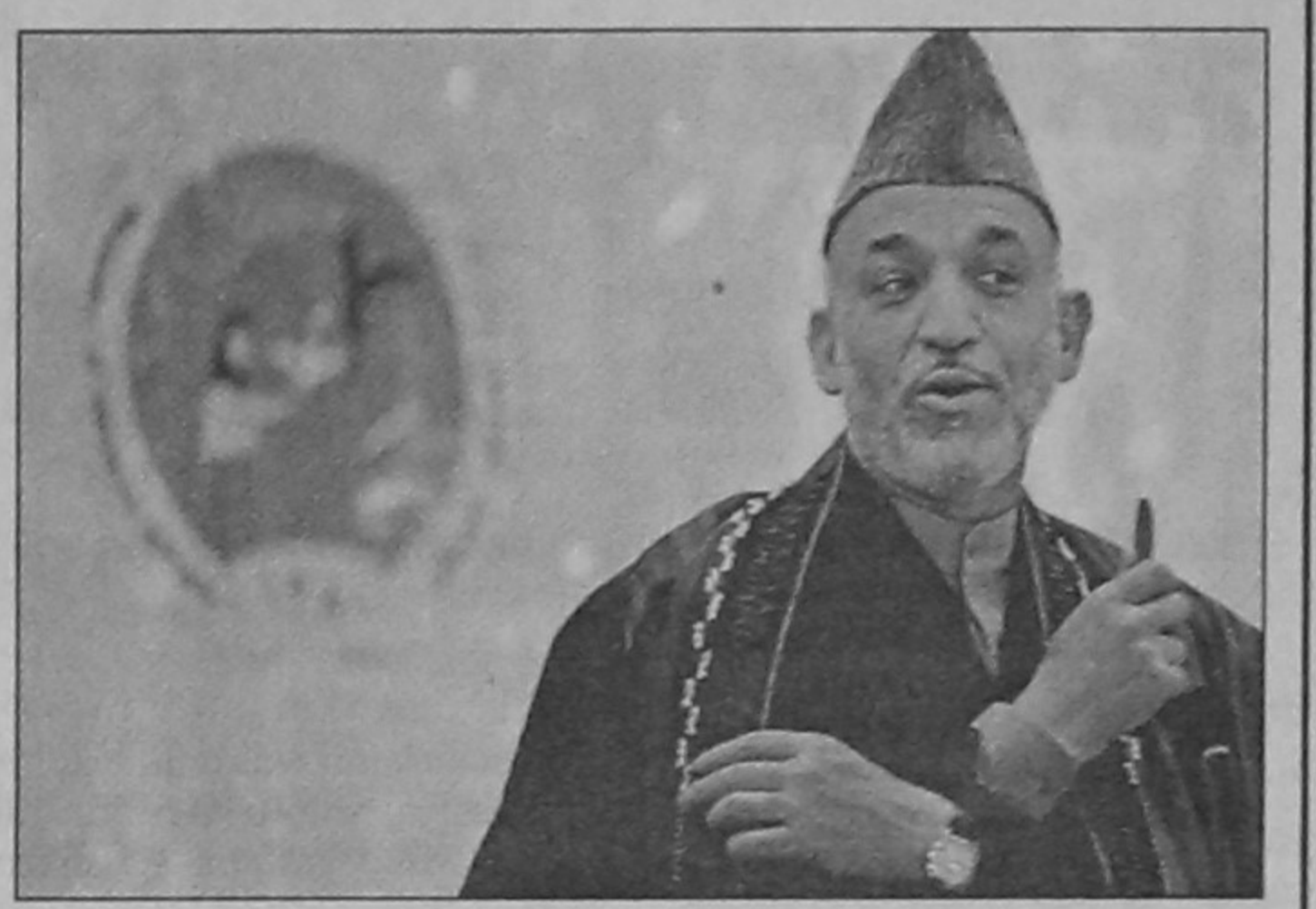
Nearly 87 percent of the nation's 209,000 registered voters cast ballots in the run-off election.

Nasheed, head of the Maldivian Democratic Party, is a charismatic democracy activist who had been jailed by Gayoom's regime. He promised to push through deeper democratic reforms for the nation.

Polling went more smoothly than during a chaotic first round earlier this month when six candidates were on the ballot.

As the polls closed, Elections Commissioner Mohamed Ibrahim said just over 1,000 complaints had been received and were being processed. Anyone waiting in line was permitted to cast a vote.

Gayoom, who has been the only candidate on the ballot in previous elections, began a democratic reform program in 2004 in the face of large-scale street protests and growing international pressure.



Afghan President Hamid Karzai talks during the first Afghan Women's Council gathering in Kabul yesterday.

Karzai admits failure in securing Afghanistan

AFP, Kabul

President Hamid Karzai said yesterday violence had surged in Afghanistan, admitting his government's internationally backed efforts to secure the country had failed.

Security had even deteriorated since the Taliban regime was ousted in 2001, the US-backed leader said in an address to hundreds of women gathered from all over Afghanistan for a meeting in Kabul.

Since his government took power after the fall of the Taliban, "we have achieved major success", Karzai told the gathering.

"But one of the nation's biggest wishes was full security ... which we have not brought. It has even dropped," Karzai said.

"Our roads are not safe, you can't go to Kandahar, to Herat. You can't take the road from Kabul to Paktia," he said, referring to key provinces outside of the capital.

Road travel outside of the capital, notably to the south, is risky with Taliban insurgents and bandits regularly attacking and sometimes kidnapping or killing travellers.

"When we came, life was good, but now it's not," Karzai said. "We are still a nation deeply in pain and misery."

Karzai was installed by US

and other Western allies after the US-led invasion that drove the Taliban from government. He became Afghanistan's first democratically elected leader in a 2004 poll.

A Taliban insurgency to topple Karzai and take back power has grown steadily since then with attacks at record levels this year despite the efforts of 60-70,000 international troops helping the Afghan security forces.

Crime has increased with wealthy Afghans or their relatives, as well as expatriates, being kidnapped most often for ransom.

The intelligence agency this week released video and pictures of hostages being tortured that were made by kidnappers to send to their families with ransom demands.

One showed a hostage being brutally beaten and another victim appeared to have part of his ear cut off.

Some of the women in Karzai's audience called for kidnappers to be publicly hanged. The president responded that he is supporting the death penalty but would not allow public executions.

The 1996-2001 Taliban government had executed people publicly, including by stoning, and cut off their limbs for certain crimes.

Migrant worker beaten to death in India

AP, Mumbai

A north Indian laborer was beaten to death on a train by unidentified people in what is believed to be the latest attack on migrant workers in India's financial and entertainment capital, police said yesterday.

Police have registered a case of murder and detained two people for questioning, said K. P. Raghuvanshi, additional director-general of Railway Police.

Dharamdev Rai, 25, and three other laborers from the impoverished Uttar Pradesh state were attacked on Tuesday afternoon by more than a half a dozen people on board a local train, Raghuvanshi told The Associated Press.

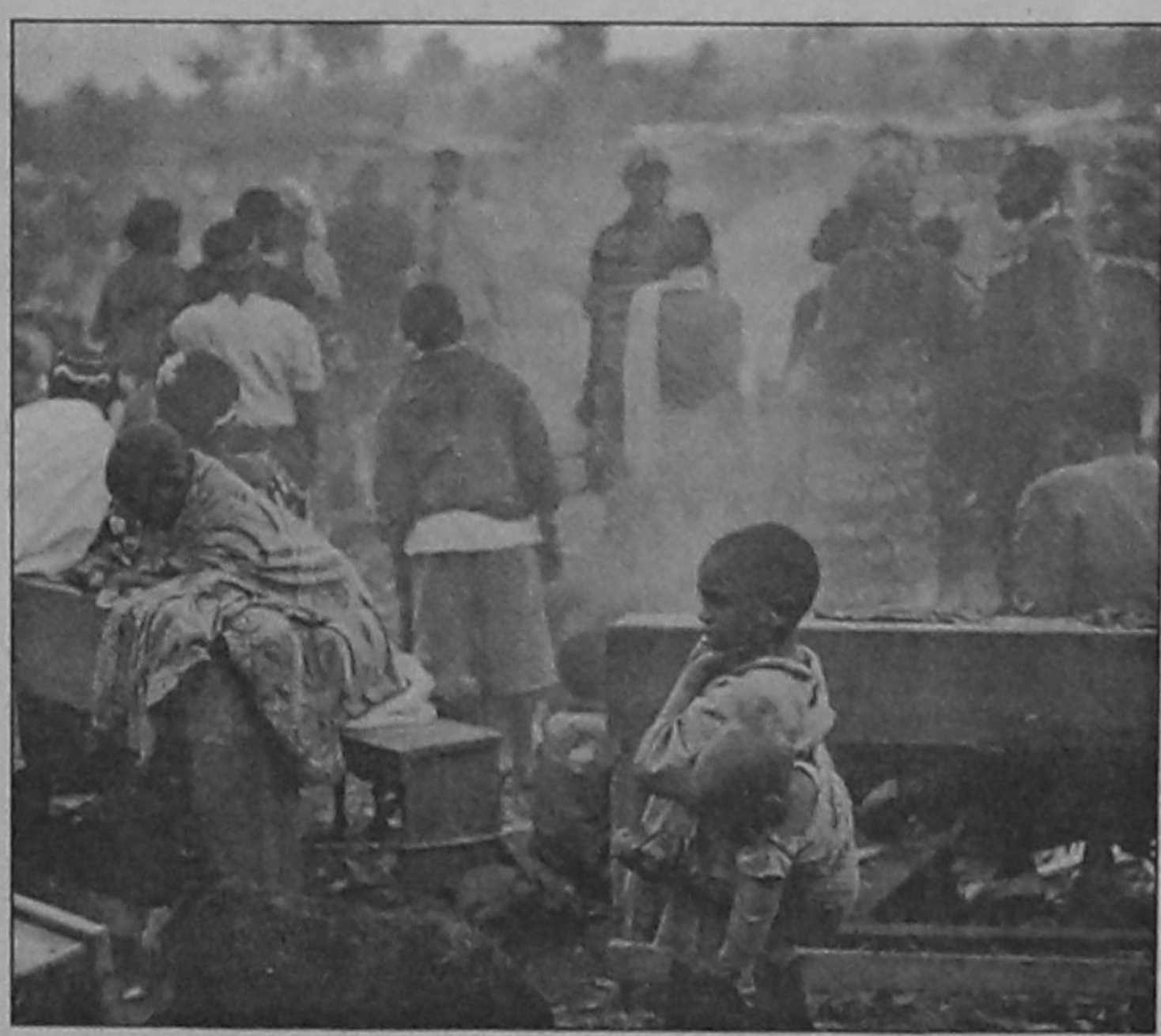
Tension has been building up for nearly two weeks in Mumbai since supporters of a fiery local politician attacked students from northern India, many of them from the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, who had traveled to Mumbai to apply for jobs on the railways.

Police were investigating whether those involved in Tuesday's attacks belonged to the hard-line Maharashtra Reconstruction Party, which claims migrant workers are taking away jobs from local Maharashtra people.

"After the train left the station, some people entered our compartment. They asked us where we were from. When they learned we were from Uttar Pradesh state they made us sit separately. Then they first verbally abused us and then started beating us up," Dharamdev Rai's friend Virendra Kumar Rai told CNN-IBN.

Government Railway Police Commissioner A. K. Sharma told the television channel that Dharamdev Rai died from injuries to his liver.

The attack came a day after police shot and killed an armed man who tried to commandeer a bus in Mumbai while demanding to speak with Raj Thackeray, the founder of the Maharashtra Reconstruction Party.



Kibati, Democratic Republic of the Congo: Congolese people gather in an improvised Internally Displaced People (IDP) camp in Kibati, about 25 kilometres north of the provincial capital of Goma yesterday. UN peacekeepers deployed combat helicopters as fierce fighting raged between government and rebel forces in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, an AFP correspondent stated.