

7 Afghan cops, official killed by bombs

AP, Kabul

Three separate roadside bombs killed seven police and a government official in a spate of attacks around Afghanistan, officials said yesterday.

A bomb in Khost province on Saturday killed the chief government official in Nadir Shah Kot district, said Wazir Pacha, spokesman for the provincial police chief. Militants fired at the official's car after the explosion, he said.

Three others riding in the car, including one of the official's sons, were wounded, Pacha said.

Elsewhere in Khost, another roadside bomb killed three border police on Friday, said Sher Ahmad Kochi, a police commander.

In the south, a third roadside bomb hit a police vehicle and killed four policemen on Friday in Kandahar province, provincial police Chief Matiullah Khan Qatah said.

Hamas accuses Israel of 'backtracking' on truce talks

AFP, Gaza City

The Islamist Hamas movement accused Israel on Saturday of "backtracking" on Egyptian-brokered truce talks by demanding an open-ended agreement and stepping up attacks on the group's Gaza enclave.

"The shelling and escalation has coincided with a backtracking in the Zionist position related to the length of the truce," Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhum said in a statement. "(Israel) has demanded a long-term, open-ended truce and not an 18-month truce as had been (previously) established," he said.

The two sides have been struggling to reach a formal truce in the wake of a devastating three-week war that killed some 1,300 Palestinians and 13 Israelis before it was halted by separate ceasefires on January 18.

At the same time Palestinian militants have fired more than 40 rockets and mortar rounds at southern Israel and the Jewish state has carried out several air strikes targeting suspected militants, arms caches and smuggling tunnels.

On Saturday, the Israeli army said a longer-

range Grad-style rocket fired by Gaza militants had evaded its early warning system and struck the seaside town of Ashdod, 38 kilometres (23 miles) north of Gaza.

The rocket was believed to have been fired on Friday evening, as militants launched shorter-range rockets and a mortar round, prompting a series of Israeli air strikes that killed one militant and wounded nine other people.

Hamas chief Khaled Meshaal told AFP on Friday that the talks had encountered a "complication" that could prevent the planned announcement of a truce on Sunday but did not elaborate on the problem.

Israel has not commented on the truce talks, and last week held general elections in which right-wing parties -- which have vowed tough action against Hamas in Gaza -- made major gains.

The Islamist group -- which won 2006 Palestinian parliamentary elections but remains blacklisted as a terror group in the West -- seized power in Gaza in June 2007 after routing forces loyal to Palestinian president Mahmud Abbas.



A Palestinian boy carries an old door amid the rubble of a destroyed workshop following an Israeli airstrike on Jabalia refugee camp in the northern Gaza Strip yesterday. Six people were wounded when two Israeli airstrikes hit targets in the northern Gaza Strip.

'US may adjust missile defence plans if Russia helps on Iran, N Korea'

AFP, Moscow

The US may adjust controversial missile defence plans if Russia helps in eliminating threats from North Korea and Iran, US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns was quoted Friday as saying.

"We hope also that Russians understand that no US president can afford a situation in which the United States is vulnerable to potential nuclear weapons on missiles from countries like North Korea or Iran," Burns told the Interfax news agency.

"And as we pursue the issue of missile defence, we obviously have to take into account a number of factors, whether the system works and whether it's cost-effective, and what's the nature of the threat," Burns said.

"If through strong diplomacy with Russia and our other partners we can reduce or eliminate that threat, it obviously shapes the way at which we look at missile defence," Burns said.

The United States has been negotiating with Poland and the Czech Republic to install 10 missile interceptors and a radar system on their territories.

The move has angered Russia as it sees the system as a threat to its security, while Washington argues the proposed shield is only directed at "rogue states," primarily Iran.

Russia had threatened to deploy Iskander missiles to Kaliningrad, a Russian enclave wedged between Poland and Lithuania, both NATO and EU members, if Washington did not halt its shield plans.

Residents return to fire-destroyed Australian town

AP, Buxton

Residents of the town worst hit by Australia's wildfire disaster made a brief and emotional return yesterday but were not allowed to stay because the entire village is being treated as an arson crime scene.

About 300 people from Marysville were loaded on buses with fire and police officials and driven through the town exactly one week after waves of blazes swept southeastern Victoria state, killing at least 181 people and razing 1,800 homes in a matter of hours.

One man has been arrested and charged with arson causing death and deliberately lighting a wildfire in connection to one of the fires, though not the one that destroyed Marysville. The suspect, also charged with possessing child pornography, is in custody pending a court hearing Monday.

Washington moves toward dialogue with Damascus

AFP, Washington

The United States has opened the door to a dialogue with Syria with a visit to Damascus by a high-ranking congressional delegation and the lifting of certain sanctions, even while firmly insisting on its continued support for Lebanon.

Senator John Kerry, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, will travel to Syria next week as part of a tour of the Middle East, his spokesman Frederick Jones said.

Kerry, the Democratic presidential candidate in 2004, is expected to meet with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. According to the Wall Street Journal, Kerry will be

accompanied by Howard Berman, his counterpart in the House of Representatives.

The delegation will not officially represent President Barack Obama, but it could open the way for later contacts with the Syrians on the part of administration officials.

Kerry met with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton Thursday morning over breakfast, presumably to discuss the upcoming trip to Damascus, State Department spokesman Robert Wood said.

And unlike House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who went to Damascus in April 2007 to meet with al-Assad against the wishes of president George W. Bush, Kerry said he had received a green light from Clinton.



Lebanese wave national flags and carry a poster showing the portraits of parliament majority leader Saad Hariri (bottom) superimposed on his slain father former prime minister Rafiq Hariri (top) in downtown Beirut yesterday, during a rally to mark four years since Rafiq's killing.

Hillary vows to deepen US bonds with Asia

AFP, New York

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton pledged Friday to deepen US bonds with Asia in order to tackle the global economic crisis and climate change as well as prevent nuclear proliferation.

On the eve of her tour of Japan, Indonesia, South Korea and China, her first foreign trip, Hillary Clinton said in a speech she is "ready to deliver a message about America's desire for more rigorous and persistent commitment and engagement."

She added she is "ready to work with leaders in Asia to resolve the economic crisis... (and) to strengthen our historic partnerships and alliances while developing deeper bonds with all nations."

In her first foreign policy speech, which she delivered before the Asia Society, a non-profit educational institution, Hillary Clinton said she also is "ready to help prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons in Asia."

Hillary Clinton added that North Korea's nuclear programme remains "the most acute challenge to stability in northeast Asia."

She said President Barack Obama's administration would build a strong relationship with the reclusive Stalinist regime if it scraps its nuclear programme, which alarmed the world in 2006 with the test of a nuclear device.

If Pyongyang "completely and verifiably" eliminates the programme, Washington "will be willing to normalize bilateral relations, replace the peninsula's longstanding armistice agreements with a permanent peace treaty."



Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton speaks to members and guests of the Asia Society on Friday in New York City.

VALENTINE'S DAY IN INDIA Saffron brigade, cops play spoilsport

CNN-IBN, New Delhi

Valentine's Day has turned out to be very grim day for lovers in many parts of India. There have been many instances of young couples being beaten up, humiliated and some of them have even been forcibly married off by the moral police.

In one of the most shocking incidents a Sub-Inspector of Haryana Police posted in Jind has been suspended after he allegedly beat up a couple and dragged the

girl by her hair to the police station.

Sub Inspector Moola Ram dragged a young woman by her hair along with her boyfriend on to the street and took them to the police station only because both were found together in a friend's room whom they had gone to meet.

However, on reaching the police station, Ram could not figure out a relevant IPC section under which to book the couple, whom he had already abused and beaten up.

Zimbabwe swearing-in of unity govt marred by treason charge

AFP, Harare

The swearing-in Friday of Zimbabwe's new unity government was marred by the arrest of a top aide to Prime Minister Morgan Tsvangirai whose party said he was then charged with treason.

Roy Bennett, who returned last month from three years of self-imposed exile in South Africa -- where he had fled to escape charges of plotting to kill President Robert Mugabe -- was arrested at a Harare airport, Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change said.

Bennett was later taken to the eastern city of Mutare where, according to the MDC, he was charged with treason.

"Police have again charged charges on Roy Bennett. They have now charged him with treason," the MDC statement said.

Small bomb hits UN office in Nepal

AFP, Kathmandu

A small bomb was thrown at a United Nations human rights office in southwest Nepal late Friday, but the minor explosion caused no casualties, police said.

"Some unidentified people hurled the bomb at the regional office of the OHCHR but the blast caused no damage," senior police officer Sudhir Raj Shahi told AFP from Nepalgunj town, 400 kilometres (250 miles) from Kathmandu.

"We don't know who is behind this blast" at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the police official said, adding that search operations had been intensified in the area.



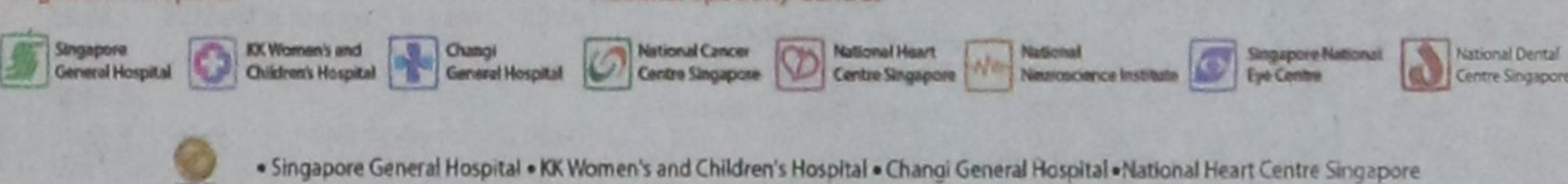
A couple attached to a cable over a cliff show their marriage certificate on Valentine's Day in Prachinburi province yesterday. Wedding over the cliff is being held as part of the celebration of Valentine's Day in Thailand.

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Pioneer in Cochlear Implant

A person with very severe sensorineural hearing loss will be unable to hear well even with a hearing aid. In such instances, they may benefit from a cochlear implant. A cochlear implant does not function like a hearing aid to amplify sound, but instead bypasses the damaged part of the inner ear to stimulate the remaining auditory nerves.

SGH is the pioneer in cochlear implants in Singapore, in both adults and children. SGH ENT surgeons are among the most experienced in the region, and have performed cochlear implants since 1997.



1st in Asia to perform Robot-assisted Laparoscopic Radical Prostatectomy (LRP)

Robot-assisted LRP (also popularly known as da Vinci Robotic Surgery) is a minimally invasive procedure used for complex, intricate surgery required in urological problems such as prostatectomy, or removal of the prostate gland in prostate cancer. Robot-assisted LRP allows for greater surgical precision, minimising damage to surrounding tissues and nerves.

SGH Urology Centre is the largest dedicated centre for urology and is the first in Asia to perform robot-assisted LRP for prostate cancer.



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