

Blast at Iran's Revolutionary Guard base kills 18

AP, Tehran

Iran yesterday said 18 members of the powerful Revolutionary Guard were killed in an explosion that struck the force's base in the country's west a day earlier.

The state IRNA news agency said 14 other Guard troops were wounded in Tuesday's blast in the city of Khorramabad, some 300 miles (500 kilometers) southwest of the capital, Tehran. The injured were taken to hospitals in Khorramabad.

The report said the blast was caused by a fire that had reached the ammunition storage area, but there was no word on what had ignited the blaze. In their first reports of the blast late Tuesday, most Iranian media said the explosion was an accident.

Although Khorramabad has not seen violence recently, it is geographically close to Kurdish-populated areas that have been the scene in recent months of several attacks by Kurds disgruntled with

the central government.

Iran is battling armed militant and separatist movements in the remote southeast along the border with Pakistan and in the far northwest along the border with Iraq.

On Sept 12, a blast at a military parade in Mahabad, near Iraq, killed 12 people and prompted a cross-border retaliatory raid by Iranian forces. They blamed the attack on Kurdish separatists and followers of former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein.

Tehran has accused the U.S. and Britain of provoking ethnic unrest to undermine Iran's security, charges both Washington and London have denied.

The Guard Iran's most powerful military force, created after the 1979 Islamic Revolution as an ideological bulwark to defend the clerical rule, has been at the helm of the government's efforts to battle ethnic and religious insurgencies, as well as opposition groups.

In time, the Guard became a vast

military-based conglomerate, amassing a network of economic and political power that extends to virtually every aspect of life in Iran.

The force has been targeted by the latest U.N. sanctions imposed on Iran over its refusal to halt nuclear enrichment program the West fears could lead to an atomic weapon. Iran denies ambitions to build nuclear weapons, and insists its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only, such as electricity generation.

The Guard has had large number of casualties in the past.

Last October, a suicide bomber killed at least 42 people, including five senior Guard commanders and more than a dozen other troops, near the Pakistani border in the heartland of a potentially escalating Sunni insurgency. It was the most high-profile strike against the force in the outlaw region of armed tribal groups, drug smugglers and Sunni rebels known as Jundallah, or Soldiers of God.

India appoints 3 experts to ease Kashmir unrest

AFP, New Delhi

India yesterday appointed three experts to lead a dialogue process in Indian Kashmir with the aim of defusing simmering anger in the region after months of deadly protests.

Home Minister P. Chidambaram said the government had selected senior journalist Dilip Padgaonkar, professor MM Ansari and academic Radha Kumar to hold talks with Kashmiri separatists and common people in the restive state.

"I would appeal to all sections of people of (the state of) Jammu and Kashmir to engage with the interlocutors," Chidambaram told reporters in New Delhi.

Indian-administered Kashmir has seen some of its worst rioting and demonstrations over the last four months, which have left 110 civilians dead, mostly in police firing.

Poster girl of Taliban oppression gets new nose

IANS, London



Aisha said: 'Thank you so much.'

She now has a prosthetic nose and doctors hope to give Aisha a more permanent solution. That may involve rebuilding her nose and ears using bone, tissue

and cartilage from other parts of her body.

When Aisha was just 12, her father pledged to repay a debt by promising her in marriage to a Taliban guerrilla, the media report said.

She was abused and forced to sleep in a stable with animals. Caught while trying to escape, Aisha's nose and ears were cut off by her husband as punishment.

She told CNN: 'When they cut off my nose and ears, I passed out... In the middle of the night it felt like there was cold water in my nose. I opened my eyes and I couldn't even see because of all the blood.'

She then managed to reach her grandfather's house and was taken to an American medical facility. She was later flown to the US.

5 bodies found as plane slams into Afghan mountain

AP, Kabul

Five charred bodies were recovered from the wreckage of a cargo plane that slammed into a mountaintop east of Afghanistan's capital Kabul with eight people aboard.

Searchers scoured the blackened site high up the mountainside for three other crew members missing and feared dead, said police Gen Zulmayi Horya Khalil.

The plane went down east of the capital shortly after take-off from Bagram Air Field, the main US military base in Afghanistan, at about 8 pm (1530 GMT) Tuesday. The cause of the crash wasn't immediately known. Weather conditions were clear at the time.

An Associated Press photographer near the scene saw wreckage ablaze on the mountainside Tuesday night.

Hundreds of Afghan security forces in fatigues carrying M-16 rifles gathered at the bottom of the mountain Wednesday.

'Self-driving car' unveiled in Germany

AFP, Berlin

German scientists unveiled yesterday the latest self-driving car, a phenomenon that its proponents say will sharply reduce accidents, help the environment and transform cities.

The car, dubbed the "Made in Germany (MIG)" by its engineers at Berlin's Free University (FU), uses cameras, laser scanners and satellite navigation to "see" other vehicles and pedestrians and deal with traffic situations.

"Cars that use sensors to recognise other vehicles, pedestrians and bikes will in future drive more safely than people, who lose concentration and get tired," the FU said.

The technology will sharply reduce the number of cars on the road, because people will no longer need their own vehicle so much, using instead driverless cars pooled in car-share schemes, the MIG's developers believe.

Thai police detain 15 Pakistanis on terror link

AFP, Bangkok

Police in Thailand said yesterday they had arrested 15 Pakistani nationals involved in suspicious fundraising activity and were investigating possible links to a terrorist organisation.

A bank in the southern province of Yala alerted authorities after one of the suspects tried to transfer money to a person in Pakistan on a blacklist "related to a terrorist group", said Police Colonel Piyawat Chalemsri.

The detainees, who have been charged with working illegally, said they came to Thailand in September to raise funds to help flood victims in Pakistan.

"We haven't found any link or evidence related to terrorism yet but as this area is very sensitive we will investigate further," said Piyawat.

Authorities did not say to whom the suspects were



A plain-clothes policeman tries to stop photos being taken outside the house of the wife of jailed Chinese Nobel Peace laureate Liu Xiaobo in Beijing yesterday. Liu slammed the government for keeping her under "illegal house arrest" since her husband won the award last week. In the inset, Liu Xiaobo (L) and his wife Liu Xia (R) posing for a picture.

PHOTO: AFP

Chinese Communist elders issue free speech appeal

AP, Beijing

wrote about corruption in the resettlement of farmers for a dam project.

"We want to spur action toward governing the country according to law," Wang said in a telephone interview.

"If the constitution is violated, the government will lack legitimacy. The people must assert and exercise their legitimate rights," he said.

Coming on top of Liu's Nobel Prize, the letter further spotlights China's tight restrictions on freedom of speech and other civil rights, although Wang said the two events were not directly related. Work on the letter began several days before the prize was awarded, and drafters decided against including a reference to Liu out of concern the government would block its circulation.

Liu, a 54-year-old literary critic, is now in the second year of an 11-year prison term after being convicted of inciting subversion over his role in writing an influential 2008 manifesto for political reform.

China's government has denounced Liu's prize as an attempt to interfere in its political and legal systems and said it would harm relations with Norway, where an independent committee presents the Nobel Peace Prize each year.

The letter called on the National People's Congress, China's legislature, to scrap restrictions on publications and implement a system of post-facto review as many other nations did long ago.

"Our current system of censoring news and publications is 315 years behind Britain and 129 years behind France," the letter said.

Censorship has become so reflexive and restrictive that even passages urging political reform were expunged from official media reports on speeches by Premier Wen Jiabao, the letter said. Wen has drawn attention in recent weeks with a series of unusually direct calls for the communist system to evolve.

"Not even the nation's premier has freedom of publication," the letter said.

Palestinians call on US, Israel to set borders

AFP, Ramallah

The Palestinians yesterday called on the US administration and Israel to define Israel's borders after Washington invited proposals to get peace talks back on track.

"We officially demand that the US administration and the Israeli government provide a map of the borders of the state of Israel which they want us to recognise," senior Palestinian official Yasser Abed Rabbo told AFP.

His remarks came after the US State Department asked the Palestinians to extend a counter-proposal to Israel's call for recognition as a Jewish state in exchange for a possible extension of a freeze on settlement building.

The Palestinians rejected the offer, saying recognition of Israel as a "Jewish state" had no relation to the peace process.

They have meanwhile demanded that the US administration set the 1967 lines as the starting point for negotiations about final borders.

"We want to know whether this (Israeli) state includes our lands and houses in the West Bank and east Jerusalem," Abed Rabbo said, referring to Palestinian lands occupied during the 1967 Six Day War.

"If this map is based on the 1967 borders and provides for the end of the Israeli occupation over all Palestinian lands... then we recognise Israel by whatever name it applies to itself in accordance with international law," Abed Rabbo said, without providing further details.

British author in surprise Booker Prize win

AFP, London

British author Howard Jacobson was named the surprise winner of this year's prestigious Booker Prize for literature for his comic novel about love, loss and Jewishness.

Jacobson's work "The Finkler Question" defied the odds Tuesday to pick up the award and 50,000 pounds (80,000 dollars, 55,000 euros) prize money for his tale of two old schoolfriends and their teacher.

The London columnist and writer -- twice previously long-listed for the Booker -- beat favourite Tom McCarthy and double winner Peter Carey to the prize.

Almost as well known for his ability to narrowly miss out on major literary prizes as for his writing skills, Jacobson joked about the long wait he had faced for such recognition as he picked up the award.

Rapturous welcome for Ahmadinejad in Lebanon

AFP, Beirut

Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad arrived to a rapturous welcome in Beirut yesterday for a contentious visit that takes him to the border of arch-foe Israel and is seen as a boost for key ally Hezbollah.

The hardline leader was greeted by tens of thousands of Hezbollah supporters as his convoy made its way from the airport toward the presidential palace under a shower of rice, sweets and rose petals.

"The enemies of Lebanon and Iran are terrified when they see the two nations standing alongside one another," Ahmadinejad told parliament speaker Nabih Berri, who greeted him at the airport, the official Iranian news agency IRNA reported.

"Today is a new day for us and I am proud to be in Lebanon," he added.

Ahmadienjad waved and smiled to the men, women and children who lined the roads outside the airport screaming "Khosh amadi" (welcome in Farsi) and "Allahu akbar" (God is greatest) as they waved Iranian flags.

But although he is being received with open arms by Hezbollah and its allies, the two-day official trip has sparked criticism among Lebanon's pro-Western parliamentary majority who see it as a bid to portray the country as an Iranian base on the Mediterranean.

"The United States and Israel, which have sought to isolate Iran over its nuclear programme, have also expressed concern.

Ahmadienjad's first visit since his election in 2005 will highlight the clout Iran wields in Lebanon through Hezbollah, considered Tehran's proxy and by far the most powerful military and political force in the small Mediterranean country.



People wave the Lebanese national flag, the Iranian flag and portraits of Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as Ahmadinejad (C) crosses in a motorcade the airport high-way after arriving in Beirut yesterday, on his first trip to Lebanon, the highlight of which will be a tour of Lebanon's volatile border with his arch-enemy Israel.