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79 killed as goods train rams Maoist-derailed coaches

Mamata Banerjee says blast led to accident in West Bengal; DGP points to sabotage on track

Raktima Bose

SARDIHA (PASHCHIM MEDINIPUR DISTRICT): A goods train rammed 13 derailed coaches of the 2012 UP Howrah-Kolkata Gyaneshwari Express between the Khemashuli and Sardiha stations in West Bengal in the small hours of Friday, killing 79 persons and injuring nearly 150 people.

Both Railway Minister Mamata Banerjee, who visited the site, and the West Bengal government suspected the involvement of Maoists, though they differed on how the incident was staged.

While Ms. Banerjee said that left-wing extremists had triggered an explosion on the track, resulting in the derailment, Director-General of Police Bhupinder Singh said that the rebels had removed pandrol clips and fishplates from both up and down lines leading to the accident.

Mr. Singh told *The Hindu* that the death toll could rise as several bodies were still trapped in the wreckage — mainly in coaches S3, S4, S5, S6 and S7 that have been badly mangled and crushed.

According to eyewitness accounts, the accident occurred around 1.30 a.m. when



most of the passengers were fast asleep.

"The train stopped with a jolt and within a few seconds our coach started tilting towards the down line. It stayed like that for some minutes before we heard a loud bang and everyone and everything tumbled on to another," an injured Sheikh Moniruddin, an embroidery artist travelling in the most-affected S4, said.

Railway officials present at the site said the goods train, which was proceeding at high speed on the up line, rammed the derailed coaches of the Jnaneshwari Express before its driver could raise an

alarm. Due to the impact of the collision, the goods train engine jumped the track and ploughed into the field — completely crushing S3, S4, S5 and S6 coaches in the process. The assistant driver of the goods train died on the spot and the driver was critically injured. The driver of the passenger train has filed an FIR that he had heard the sound of an explosion before the derailment.

After assessing the situation, Ms. Banerjee said: "It was a calculated attack on the railways since it is the lifeline of the nation. I have requested the Union Home Minister to investigate the matter and book the culprits."

She announced an ex gratia of Rs. 5 lakh and railway jobs to the relatives of the dead and Rs. 1 lakh to the injured.

Five Ministers of the State government, highly placed officials of the State police, the South Eastern Railway and the State's Criminal Investigation Department visited the spot.

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TRAGEDY ON TRACK: The body of a child being brought out from a bogie of the derailed express train at the site of the collision near Sardiha, about 150 km west of Kolkata, on Friday. — PHOTO: AP

BRIEFLY

Charges framed against Sajjan

NEW DELHI: A Delhi court on Friday framed charges of murder, criminal conspiracy and spreading enmity between two communities against Congress leader Sajjan Kumar and others in a 1984 anti-Sikh riots case.



Canada expresses regrets on visa row

NEW DELHI: Canada on Friday expressed "deep regret" over the language used by its officials against Indian security and intelligence establishments while rejecting visas to some senior and retired officials. Page 12

Jaya Bachchan turns down re-nomination

NEW DELHI: MP Jaya Bachchan has turned down her re-nomination to the Rajya Sabha by the Samajwadi Party, citing family reasons. The party leadership was surprised at her decision, as she was re-nominated after being consulted, sources said.

METROPLUS WEEKEND

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80 killed in terrorist attacks on two Pakistan mosques

Anita Joshua

ISLAMABAD: Eighty people were killed and 70 injured in a coordinated attack by terrorists on two mosques of the minority Islamic sect, Ahmadi, in Lahore during Friday prayers.

Armed with grenades, the gunmen held people hostage in the mosques for nearly three hours in the afternoon

before security personnel managed to take control of the besieged premises.

Donning suicide bomb jackets, the terrorists struck at the mosque in the pre-partition vintage upmarket Model Town locality and another in Garhi Shahu across the city within minutes of each other. While the former was cleared in about three hours, room-by-room search operations

were on at the latter till evening and people were asked to remain indoors though the firing had stopped.

According to the District Coordination Officer of Lahore, Sajjad Ahmed Bhutta, three suicide bombers detonated themselves inside the Garhi Shahu mosque as security personnel closed in. One suspected terrorist was reportedly caught alive by the

police.

The Interior Minister later indicated that the Tehreek-e-Pakistan (the Taliban wing in the country) and organisations like the Lashkar-e-Jhawi and Jaish-e-Mohammad could be involved in the attacks.

The Minister also said the federal government had information about a possible terrorist strike in Lahore and

had alerted the Punjab government accordingly twice this month.

Eye-witnesses said the terrorists lobbed grenades as they entered the mosques and began shooting indiscriminately. Once the worshippers were held hostage and police reached the mosques, there was a steady exchange of fire as the two areas were cordoned off and the media kept

at bay.

Before the area was cordoned off, some television channels got footage of terrorists firing at policemen from the minarets of the mosque in Garhi Shahu. Though the Ahmadi sect in Pakistan has been declared by law as a non-Muslim community, and are barred from calling their places of worship mosques and propagating

their faith, a large congregation of the faithful had gathered at the mosques when they were attacked.

Secretary-general of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRC/P) I.A. Rehman said the Model Town mosque had received threats over the past year.

Photograph on Page 16

Jagan defies party fiat, held after clashes

Special Correspondent

HYDERABAD: Defying his party's direction, Congress MP Y.S. Jaganmohan Reddy went ahead with his 'odaru yatra' in Warangal district on Friday.

But the programme had to be abandoned as clashes broke out between Telangana supporters and Congress workers at Mahabubabad, culminating in the police opening fire.

Mr. Reddy was taken into preventive custody aboard the Secunderabad-Guntur Inter City Express by which he was travelling to Mahabubabad and escorted back in a bulletproof vehicle to his residence at Banjara Hills here. He, however, vowed to undertake the 'yatra' at a later date, even as the Congress high command decided to initiate disciplinary action by serving a show-cause notice on him.

The 'yatra' was meant to console the families of those who died after the death of his father, Y.S. Rajasekhara Reddy, in a helicopter crash.

Mr. Reddy's detention followed pitched battles between supporters of the Telangana Rashtra Samithi (TRS) and his followers at the Mahabubabad railway station, located on the Hyderabad-Vijayawada route. The violence left 24 persons injured, including a protester who is in a critical condition with bullet injuries.

DGP R.R. Girish Kumar said nine Telangana activists sustained bullet injuries when the official gunmen of Congress MLA Konda Surekha, her husband and MLC Konda Murali and local MLA M. Kavita opened fire.

Stir hits traffic to and from Kerala

Tamil Nadu Bureau

COIMBATORE: Traffic between Kerala and Tamil Nadu was disrupted for about two hours on Friday as Marumalarchi Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (MDMK) workers organised roadblocks at key border points to protest the Kerala government's move to build a new dam across the Mullaperiyar.

Bus services and goods movement were affected between Palakkad and Coimbatore, Parassala and Nagercoil and Kumili and Cumbum.

The blockade resulted in vehicles piling up on either side for more than 20 to 30 km near Coimbatore. Move-

- Protest intended to caution Centre, says MDMK leader Vaiko
- 4,657 persons arrested in Coimbatore and Tirupur districts

ment of vehicles was restored after police removed the protesters.

The MDMK, along with other political outfits, had called for blocking all roads to Kerala. A total of 4,657 persons were arrested in Coimbatore and Tirupur districts, of which 3,886 were removed by police from six spots in Coimbatore district. In Thenni, Tamizhar Desiya Katchi leader P. Nedumaran, along with 1,600 MDMK cadre, was

arrested when they picketed all three link roads to Kerala.

At Bodi, 600 MDMK, Forward Bloc and Poriyar Dravida Kazhagam cadre took out a rally from the Thevar statue and picketed the Bodi-Munmar highway, disrupting traffic for more than two hours.

Addressing a gathering of MDMK cadre and other organisations at a road blockade agitation at Kande Gounden Chavadi on the Coimbatore-Palakkad stretch of National

Highway 47, Mr. Vaiko said: "The people of Kerala are not our enemies and Tamil Nadu has always wanted a cordial relationship and bonding with Keralites."

He said the protest was not aimed at the DMK government but was intended to caution the Centre which was acting in favour of Kerala and failing to render justice to Tamil Nadu.

He accused Kerala of throwing the Supreme Court order to the winds and the Centre of remaining a mute spectator. "If Kerala fails to mend its ways and act in a fair manner, then public outrage in Tamil Nadu will lead to a series of agitations of various dimensions."

Stellar show by Chennai region

Liffy Thomas

CHENNAI: In a stellar performance in the All India Secondary School Examination, students of the Chennai region, which comprises southern and western States, recorded a qualifying percentage of 96.18. This was the highest among all regions and they were toppers for the second consecutive year.

The Chennai region was followed by Ajmer (93.51 per cent) and Panchkula (89.14 per cent). The results of the Class X examination conducted by the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) were declared on Friday, with students being graded on a nine-point scale for the first time. Grade AI stands for marks between 91 and 100; A2 (81-90); B1 (71-80); B2 (61-70); C1 (51-60); C2 (41-50); D (33-40); E1 (21-



CLOSE LOOK: Students checking the results of CBSE Class X examinations, in Chennai on Friday. — PHOTO: R. RAVINDRAN

32); and E2 (20 and below). Announcing the results, N. Nagaraju, Joint Director, CBSE, Chennai region, said it was a unique system in which there were no 'pass, fail and compartment'. "Education-

ists have concluded that grading is a better way to evaluate students as there is no race for marks," he said. Kerala S.S.L.C examination is probably the only other school board that accords grades.

A total of 1,16,927 candidates appeared for the examination this March, of which 1,12,465 qualified. About 4,461 students, who obtained E1 or E2 grade in one or more subjects, have been placed in 'eligibility for improvement of performance (EIOP)' category.

They will be given five attempts to improve grades, re-examination for which will be conducted from July 16 onwards. Except Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep, the other States and Union Territories in Chennai region have notched a qualifying percentage of above 95. Puducherry topped with 99.50 per cent, followed by Karnataka (99.15 per cent), Kerala (99.18 per cent) and Tamil Nadu (98.98 per cent). The qualifying percentage among girls was 96.47, against 95.96 among boys.

Shahpur search throws up cache of explosives

Manas Dasgupta

AHMEDABAD: Though the riot-hit walled city areas of Ahmedabad remained incident-free but tense on Friday, a

huge cache of explosives and other inflammatory materials were found in a search during the day. As the situation was slowly returning to normalcy, the police launched a

massive combing operation at Shahpur and searched the houses at Rangaela Chowky and in other areas and unearthed petrol bombs, kerosene bombs, and knives.

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Carried by helium balloons man crosses English Channel

‘Exceptional, quiet, peaceful experience’



FLYING WITHOUT WINGS: American cluster balloonist Jonathan Trappe holds onto his balloons after landing on a farmland in Moeres, France, on Friday. — PHOTO: AP

LONDON: In a goofy, yet mesmerizing stunt, an American adventurer crossed the English Channel on Friday, carried by a bundle of helium balloons, ending a quiet and serene flight by touching down in a French cabbage patch.

Jonathan Trappe, 36, of Raleigh, North Carolina, was strapped in a specially equipped chair below a bright cluster of balloons when he lifted off in the morning from Kent, in southeast England.

About five hours later, he lowered himself into a French field by cutting some of the balloons away.

“It was just an exceptional, quiet, peaceful experience,” Mr. Trappe told the Sky News television.

Asked why he went, Trappe replied: “Didn’t you have this dream, grabbing on to a bunch of toy balloons and floating off? I think it’s something that’s shared across cultures and across borders — just this wonderful fantasy of grabbing on to toy balloons and floating into open space.”

However, the Channel crossing wasn’t a matter of just grabbing a few balloons. Mr. Trappe says on his website that he made a scouting trip in March and gained clearance from French and British aviation authorities and from customs and immigration offices on both sides.

His equipment list didn’t stop at balloons and a chair, but included an aircraft transponder, oxygen system,

aircraft radios, emergency locator beacon, in-flight satellite tracking and a radio tracker.

“He had all the correct authorisation and I believe he even gave something to the owner of the land where he came down by way of damages,” said a spokesperson for French police.

Last month, Mr. Trappe claimed the record for the longest free-floating balloon flight after spending 14 hours blowing in the wind over North Carolina and travelling 109 miles. On another flight, his website says, he ascended to 17,930 feet, just below controlled airspace.

“There are risks and we work to methodically reduce the risk so we can have a safe and fun flight,” said Mr. Trappe, who is certified for balloon flight by the United States Federal Aviation Administration. “Because really it’s only about dreams and enjoying an adventure, and that’s only enjoyable when it is safe.”

His crossing was much less eventful than the first balloon crossing of the English Channel in 1785.

The pioneering French balloonist Jean-Pierre Francois Blanchard and John Jeffries, an American doctor who paid for the flight, set off in a hydrogen balloon which started leaking in flight. The pair dumped all their ballast and most of their clothes into the water and just managed to stay airborne and land in Calais. — AP