

Indonesia wages war against Aceh rebels

Talks fail in Tokyo, martial law slapped in province

THE STRAITS TIMES/ ANN, Banda Aceh
Indonesian attack planes on Monday fired rockets at a rebel base in Aceh province...

northern town of Lhokseumawe, an area with a heavy concentration of rebels. Earlier on Monday, the Indonesian military said it was ready to 'ambush and paralyse' separatist rebels in Aceh...

12km outside the city. Monday's attack using US-made OV-10 Bronco attack planes was the first time in several years that the military has used air-to-surface missiles in Aceh. It was unclear if there were any casualties in the attack...

oil- and gas-rich in province after a rebel delegation in Tokyo rejected Jakarta's demand to lay down their weapons and accept autonomy instead of independence. Meanwhile, Japan said that it is willing to host more peace talks between Indonesian government and rebel leaders...



Heavily armed Indonesian troops patrol the streets of Banda Aceh, the capital of Aceh on Monday after the Indonesian government declares martial law across Aceh province. Indonesian troops began military operations against the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM) after peace talks between the two sides broke down in Japan over the weekend. The sign at right says 'Carry Muslin Law in Aceh'.

Singapore fails WHO's SARS test as Taiwan's woes deepen

AFP, Hong Kong
The World Health Organisation (WHO) said Sunday it would not yet remove Singapore from its list of SARS-affected countries as the city-state had hoped, while Taiwan reported a record number of infections for the second straight day. In China, courts began to announce prison sentences for rioters opposed to local quarantine facilities to prevent further spread of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), while Hong Kong received some positive news with only three new infections. A last-minute case on Sunday shattered Singapore's dream of being stricken off the WHO's list of SARS-affected countries after a 39-year-old man was diagnosed as infected with the disease. "With this development, Singapore will not be classified as a SARS-free country," Health Minister Lim Hng Kiang said at a news conference. "We have not established the

source of his infection, we are still investigating," he said. Lim identified the new case as Lee Chong Kian, a Malaysian who is a permanent resident in Singapore where he works as a surveyor. He was warned at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, the SARS-designated treatment centre, after coming down on May 11 with fever, a symptom of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome. "We'll have to find out what is the source of this case, WHO will have to evaluate," Lim said. Singapore, where SARS has killed 28 people, had been aiming to be removed from the WHO's list of SARS-affected countries on Sunday -- 20 days after the last local transmission was reported. A clean bill of health by the global health watchdog should lead to a return of travellers to the city-state, where the SARS health scare has wrought havoc on tourism-related industries.

Iraqi parties see US sidelining them on political future

AFP, Baghdad
Two of Iraq's main parties blasted the United States on Sunday, accusing Washington of going back on what they said was a firm US commitment to give Iraqis a free hand in running the country. Officials from one of the two main Kurdish factions and the leading Shiite movement said the new US overseer, Paul Bremer, turned back the clock on months of talks that began before the war to prepare a post-Saddam Hussein government. The charges stem from a meeting Friday night at which they said Bremer had announced he planned to prolong the US coalition's control over the country and sideline Iraqis from the political decision-making process. "What we're hearing now from Bremer is what we heard several months ago," said Abdul Mahdi, a political advisor from the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic

Revolution in Iraq (SAIRI), the top Shiite movement. "It's a return to square one," he said, referring to negotiations before the war about the role of anti-Saddam Hussein groups in a future government. Abdul Mahdi and other officials interviewed by AFP said they were angered by Bremer's handling of the meeting, his first announced talks with the groups since taking over as US administrator last Monday from Jay Garner. They said Garner and Zalmay Khalilzad, the White House envoy involved in talks with anti-Saddam parties since before the war, pledged just two weeks ago to give those parties a leading role in forming a future Iraqi government. But that commitment, they said, was rejected by Bremer, a career diplomat who now oversees Garner, Khalilzad and the entire US civilian administration governing the country since Saddam's ouster.

New chief takes over al-Qaeda

REUTERS, Singapore
The Egyptian who guards the elusive Osama bin Laden has taken over as al-Qaeda's military commander following capture of Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the mastermind of September 11, a terror expert said on Monday. Saif al-Adel, who is believed to have turned 40 last month, has a \$25 million price on his head on the FBI's list of most wanted terrorists. The United States had indicted him over the 1998 bombings of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Al-Qaeda turned to al-Adel after Mohammed's arrest in Pakistan in March removed the military commander whose careful years of planning resulted in the devastating September, 2001 strikes on New York and Washington, said Rohan Gunaratna, author of "Inside al-Qaeda: Global Network of Terror." "They chose him because he is their most competent man and he fits into the typical al-Qaeda, Islamic jihad mindset," said Gunaratna, now based in Singapore. Al-Adel has shown ruthless efficiency in his role as chief of al-Qaeda's security and above all in protecting bin Laden, the world's most wanted man, said Gunaratna.

India rejects third party mediation on Kashmir

AFP, New Delhi
India has once again rejected third party mediation to resolve its longstanding bloody dispute with arch-rival Pakistan over the Himalayan region of Kashmir. In an interview published in the Indian Express Monday, Finance Minister Jaswant Singh, who swapped portfolios with Foreign Minister Yashwant Sinha less than a year ago, said no third party would have the "instinctive understanding" of the problem. Citing past examples of mediation to solve the Kashmir dispute which had not worked, Singh said: "Do you realise that when you talk of a third party, you assume whoever it may be, the United Nations or anybody else, will have the instinctive understanding of what we are talking about? "It will not." India and Pakistan on the other hand "understand each other's nuances, which a foreign entity will never understand. "India, Pakistan and

Bangladesh are born out of the same womb," Singh said referring to the emergence of India and Pakistan as independent nations at the end of British colonial rule in 1947. Bangladesh became an independent country following the partition of Pakistan in 1971. "We know not only each other's language, but the pulse beat and blood flow of each other's veins," said Singh, who charted the course of India's foreign policy since December 1998. Singh said he was "mindful" of the fact that "Pakistan and India learn to absorb their differences and are able to at least chart a route map -- on which to keep moving -- to forsake bloodshed. "Let Pakistan flourish and prosper within the borders of its political sovereignty but let it come to terms with its own identity and not seek that identity in a kind of atavistic and compulsive hostility to India," he said. Dialogue between India and Pakistan has been stalled for about 17 months after tensions spiralled

following an attack on India's parliament complex in December 2001. India blamed the attack on Pakistan-based Islamic extremists and the two sides deployed a million troops to their borders. The troops began to pull back in October after India said Pakistan had promised a US envoy it would stop support for an Islamic insurgency against Indian rule in Kashmir. A thaw in relations began last month with Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's surprise offer of a "hand of friendship" to Pakistan. Vajpayee's initiative was reciprocated by his Pakistani counterpart Zafarullah Jamali, who telephoned the Indian leader and has proposed the two countries restore diplomatic, transport and sporting relations. India accuses Pakistan of training, arming and funding Islamic militants battling New Delhi's rule in Kashmir, which is divided between the two nuclear rivals and claimed in full by both.



Heavy vehicles travel through the partly submerged Ratnapura town in south-central Sri Lanka on Sunday after torrential rains set off flash floods and mudslides. About 200 people were killed in the worst flooding in 56 years prompting Sri Lanka to appeal for international support to handle a proper search and rescue operation.

India, China close to deal over Sikkim

AFP, New Delhi
As Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee gets set to visit China next month, Beijing appears ready to give ground on the thorny issue of the sovereignty of the state of Sikkim, a report said Monday. China, which strongly opposed the merger of the Himalayan province with India in 1975, has been signalling since the late 1990s that it was ready to acknowledge Indian sovereignty over Sikkim, the Hindu newspaper said. If India and China could reach an understanding on the issue, it would give "significant political substance" to Vajpayee's visit to Beijing, the first by an Indian prime minister in a decade, the report said. "New Delhi and Beijing know that resolving the Sikkim question would open the doors for wide-ranging bilateral cooperation across the Himalayas, boost political confidence and alter the atmosphere for Vajpayee's visit," it said.

Shiites in Iraq protest move for puppet govt

AP, Baghdad
In the biggest anti-US demonstration since the end of the war, thousands of Shiite Muslims marched peacefully through the capital on Monday to protest the US occupation and reject what they feared would be a US-installed puppet government. US forces watched the rally but let it go on. Up to 10,000 rallied in front of a Sunni Muslim mosque in the capital's northern district of Azimiyah, then marched to the nearby Kadhamiya quarter, home to one of the holiest Shiite shrines in Iraq. Some carried portraits of the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran and other noted Shiite clerics. "We decided to gather outside a Sunni mosque to show unity between Shiites and Sunnis," said Rashid Hamdan, an organizer.

He said the procession was organized by religious groups from Baghdad's al-Thawra suburb -- formerly known as Saddam City, where an estimated 2 million Shiites live. Since Saddam Hussein's ouster by coalition troops last month, there has been a spate of smaller gatherings, some of them hundreds strong, demanding the occupying forces' withdrawal. But Monday's march was the biggest in terms of numbers. The crowd chanted "No Shiites and no Sunnis, just Islamic unity," sang religious songs, and carried banners reading "No to the foreign administration," and "We want honest Iraqis, not their thieves." That appeared to be a reference to Ahmad Chalabi, head of the Iraqi National Congress and one of the key players in current round of US-led discussions to form a new government. He was convicted in

1992 by a Jordanian court of embezzlement and fraud, and some Iraqis have criticized him harshly. Chalabi says he was set up. The noisy but peaceful protest appeared to be well-organized. Organizers sprayed participants with water to cool them off, and monitors followed the crowd to ensure that no violence occurred. "What we are calling for is an interim government that represents all segments of Iraqi society," said Ali Salman, an activist. At one point the crowd swelled to about 10,000 people, but many participants soon wandered off. At the end of the march, about 5,000 gathered in front of a shrine to Musa al-Kazim, a 9th-century Shiite imam. Small groups of US infantrymen watched the procession but did not intervene. Several soldiers were stationed on the rooftops around the shrine to observe the rally.

Chandrika eyes deal with Marxists to topple govt

AFP, Colombo
Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga's party is set to clinch a long-awaited deal with a Marxist party in a bid to topple the coalition government as the country was locked in a constitutional crisis, officials said Monday. The Marxist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, announced Monday it had finalized a memorandum of understanding with Kumaratunga's People's Alliance which is the main opposition party in parliament. JVP spokesman Wimal Weerawansa said the policy-making central committee of his party would ratify the deal on Friday while Kumaratunga's People's Alliance party is expected to do the same four days later. Weerawansa, who is also a member of parliament, declined to

give details of the deal with the president, but said the plan included measures to "revive and rebuild the nation." "We had a discussion at the president's house yesterday and we have reached a finality on most of the matters relating to the MOU," Weerawansa told reporters here. "The talks have been very satisfactory and we have made progress. We will announce the details later." The opposition has been talking about an alliance between Kumaratunga's party and the JVP for more than six months after they opened talks in a bid to topple the government of Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe. The latest announcement came as Kumaratunga and her coalition government are locked in a tense stand-off over her taking the

functions of a minister. The prime minister has refused to recognise the president's takeover of the Development Lottery Board which is under the Economic Reforms Ministry, but Kumaratunga argues that her move is constitutionally valid. The JVP Monday said they supported Kumaratunga's move and wanted her to take over more functions of ministers and entire ministries arguing that some ministers had been working against the national interest. It was not immediately clear if the JVP and Kumaratunga's party could move to take power. The president has the constitutional power to sack parliament and call snap elections. Arguably, she also has the power to sack the prime minister and appoint an opposition member to the post.

Israel toying with idea of exiling Arafat

AFP, Jerusalem
In the wake of three suicide bombings which left nine people dead apart from the bombers, Israel was once again toying with the idea of exiling Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, but doing so could create more problems than it solves, analysts cautioned Monday. Enraged by the three bombings which took place in the space of less than 12 hours, Israel lashed out at the veteran Palestinian leader, accusing him of inciting militants to carry out such attacks. Speaking after the third bombing on Sunday, Israeli government spokesman Avi Pazner charged that Arafat had formed an alliance with radical Islamic movements like Hamas and Islamic Jihad in a bid to sabotage peace efforts led by his rival, Palestinian prime minister Mahmud Abbas, also known as Abu Mazen. "What we have here is... a fatal alliance between Palestinian terrorist organisations and Arafat, who is doing everything he can to scuttle Abu Mazen and Ariel Sharon's efforts to rekindle the peace process," he said. Despite such allegations, Israel held off from a massive military response so as not to destabilise the government of Abbas, and instead raised the possibility of Arafat's disappearance from the political stage, if not the occupied territories altogether. "The Palestinians haven't had the opportunity really to see what it means to live, or to behave or to act without Yasser Arafat calling the shots, literally," Sharon's spokesman Ranaan Gissin said, evoking the US removal of the Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Deputy Defence Minister Zeev Boim was even more explicit.



Miss Taipei 2003 Szu Yu Chen (2nd R) and Miss Thailand 2003 Yaowalak Traisurat (R) light a candle on Sunday during a vigil in Panama City. Participants in the Miss Universe 2003 competition attended the vigil as part of an International AIDS Candlelight Memorial.