

Peacekeepers arrive in East Timor

AP, Dili

Fierce gunbattles raged in East Timor's capital Thursday, killing at least three people and wounding more than a dozen, as international troops arrived in the tiny nation to help it quell a rebellion by disgruntled ex-soldiers.

A South Korean bystander was shot in the neck and rushed to a hospital, Yonhap news agency said, as dozens of foreigners fled the country on the third day of fighting between soldiers loyal to the government and recently dismissed troops.

Abbas sets deadline for Hamas to end rivalry

AFP, Ramallah

Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas gave Fatah and Hamas a deadline yesterday to end their deadly rivalry or else he would call a referendum, which could lead to a new national unity government.

Abbas's shock announcement came on the first day of cross-party talks aimed at drawing a line under divisions between his Fatah move-

ment and the Islamists of Hamas who now head the government after winning a January election.

The so-called national dialogue in Ramallah was called in the face of an upsurge in violence between Fatah and Hamas that has left 10 people dead since the beginning of the month.

As widely expected, both Abbas and Hamas prime minister Ismail Haniya urged the armed groups to

stop turning their guns on each other and avoid a descent into civil war.

But Abbas's warning that they had 10 days to agree on a common platform or he would submit to a referendum a proposal from jailed faction leaders on how to end the Palestinian crisis caught everyone off guard.

"If not, I will submit the document to a referendum in 40 days," he said.

The initiative drawn up by the jailed faction leaders and made public on May 10 sets out ways to "preserve Palestinian unity" while reiterating "the right of the Palestinian people to independence".

The blueprint proposes that activities be "confined to the territories occupied in 1967" -- which could signal an end to attacks inside Israel -- and suggests the creation of a

national unity government.

It also calls for an independent state in territory occupied by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war.

In an initial reaction from Hamas, its speaker in parliament Aziz Dweik said that "we accept the right of the Palestinian to determine their fate and they should have their say on this crucial question."

A survey by the Ramallah-based Near East Consulting group released Thursday showed 80 percent of Palestinians support the prisoners' agreement.

The same survey also revealed that only a narrow majority believe civil war is likely to be avoided given the mounting tensions between the factions.

Abbas began his speech with an appeal for all sides "not resort to arms because Palestinian blood is sacred".



PHOTO: AFP
Palestinian President Mahmud Abbas (C) greets leader from different political parties at his Muqataa headquarters in the West Bank town of Ramallah yesterday. Cross-party crisis talks aimed at putting a lid on deadly Palestinian factional rivalry began yesterday with appeals for unity in the face of mounting economic and political pressure.

Brain waves control robot!

AP, Tokyo

In a step toward linking a person's thoughts to machines, Japanese automaker Honda said it has developed a technology that uses brain signals to control a robot's very simple moves.

In the future, the technology that Honda Motor Co. developed with ATR Computational Neuroscience Laboratories could be used to replace keyboards or cell phones, researchers said Wednesday. It also could have applications in helping people with spinal cord injuries, they said.

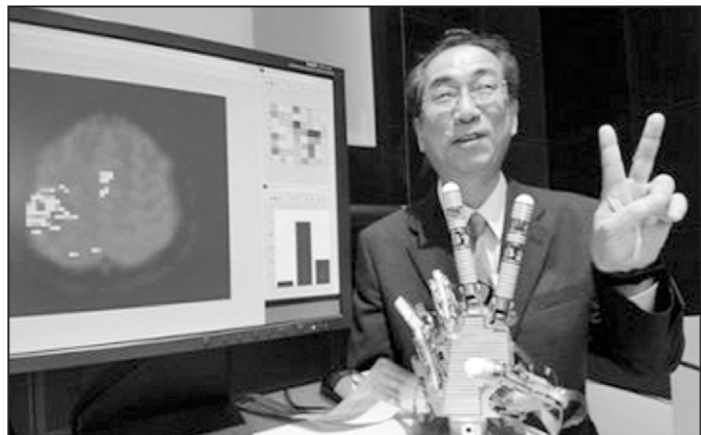


PHOTO: AP

Honda Research Institute Japan Co. President Tomohiko Kawanabe flashes a V-sign as he explains Honda's new robotic technology researched with ATR Computational Neuroscience Laboratories in Tokyo on Wednesday.

China protests US label of 'credible threat'

AFP, Beijing

China has strongly protested at a Pentagon report which says Beijing's rapid military build-up poses a credible long-term threat to the United States.

"The US Defence Department's report, which exaggerates China's military strength and expenditure and continues to spread the 'China threat theory', is based on 'Cold War mentality' and ulterior motives," said foreign ministry spokesman Liu Jianchao.

"This seriously violates principles governing international relations and rudely interferes in China's internal affairs."

"The Chinese side expresses strong dissatisfaction and firm opposition to this," Liu added, in a statement posted on the ministry's website late Wednesday.

The Pentagon said Tuesday in its annual report on China's military power that the pace and scope of military modernization gave it the greatest potential of any nation to compete militarily with the United States.

It has already altered military balances in the Asia-Pacific and could pose a threat to regional armed forces, according to the report.

38 killed in renewed Somalia fighting

AP, Mogadishu

Fighting between rival militias intensified yesterday in the Somali capital, with battles spreading across the city and at least 38 people dead and 90 wounded, medical sources and a militia commander said.

The latest fighting comes despite a May 14 cease-fire between Islamic militias and a rival alliance of secular warlords, who have been vying for control of the city. Witnesses say the fighting has spread from northern Mogadishu, which had been the scene of fierce battles in recent weeks, to the southern and eastern parts of the capital.

Soldiers search for bodies in Thailand

AP, Uttaradit

More than 1,000 soldiers searched for bodies under a sea of mud and debris Thursday in northern Thailand following flash floods that were believed to have killed more than 100 people.

The Public Health Ministry reported 51 people dead and 87 missing from the flooding that began Monday after several days of torrential rains. More than 250 people were injured in landslides.

But Boonriang Chuchai-saengrat, chief health officer of Uttaradit province, said he feared more than 100 perished in his province alone.

The troops were dispatched early Thursday to Uttaradit, where teams searched for bodies in the province's hard-hit Tha Pla district, an area where more than 40 villagers were reportedly washed away by flash floods, but only two bodies have been recovered, Maj. Lertchai Khaithong said.

Rescue teams also brought sniffing dogs to the area to search for bodies covered by mud.

Local and government officials have released conflicting numbers, with some reporting more than 300 missing. Officials have been slow to release updated figures because of communication problems.

Cheney may be called in CIA leak case

AP, Washington

Could Vice President Dick Cheney be a star prosecution witness in the perjury trial of his former chief of staff?

Special Counsel Patrick Fitzgerald suggested in a court filing Wednesday that Cheney would be a logical witness for the prosecution because the vice president could authenticate notes he jotted on a copy of a New York Times opinion column by a critic of the US-led war in Iraq.

Fitzgerald said Cheney's "state of mind" is "directly relevant" to whether I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, the vice president's former top aide, lied to FBI agents and a federal grand jury about how Libby learned CIA officer Valerie Plame's identity and what he later told reporters.

35 die while siphoning off petrol in Benin

AFP, Cotonou

At least 35 people were killed overnight in northern Benin when a fuel truck burst into flames while they were trying to siphon petrol from it, hospital sources told AFP yesterday.

"We spent the whole night recovering charred cadavers. Our workers counted 23 dead," a hospital official told AFP by telephone from the town of Tanguieta.

Twelve people died of their injuries after being hospitalised, Tanguieta hospital director Boniface Samdieni later told AFP, taking the total number of known fatalities to 35.

30 quarantined in Indonesian bird flu village

AFP, Jakarta

Health experts in an Indonesian village hit by an unprecedented bird flu outbreak have asked more than 30 people to quarantine themselves to contain any potential further spread, officials said yesterday.

People who had close contact with any of seven relatives who have died since last month in the North Sumatran village are being monitored for signs of illness, World Health Organisation (WHO) spokesman Dick Thompson told AFP.

"The focus right now is contact tracing, identifying those people who may have been in contact with this cluster," Thompson told AFP by telephone.

"We will monitor their health and encourage them to self-quarantine themselves."