

BRIEFLY

Storms claim 270 lives in China : More than 270 people have been killed and millions of hectares (acres) of farmland damaged by violent rainstorms that have hit wide areas of China in the past month, an official report said Saturday, AP reports from Beijing.

The Ministry of Civil Affairs has reported 4,700 people injured and 34.3 million people affected by storms that have hit eight provinces along the Yangtze and Huaihe rivers in central China since mid-May, the China Daily reported.

The Communist Party newspaper, the People's Daily, ran a front-page report and photograph of Premier Li Peng visiting affected areas in coastal Anhui province.

Nearly 4.2 million hectares (10 million acres) of summer crops have been damaged or destroyed, and grain output in those areas could be reduced by as much as one-third, the ministry said.

The storms caused 127,000 buildings to collapse, damaged 860,000 others and wiped out communication, transportation and water facilities in many areas.

Sichuan province, in southwest China, and central China's Hubei and Hunan provinces were hardest hit, the China Daily said.

Fresh attack on Baltic border posts: The three separatist Baltic Republics said Soviet troops renewed attacks on their border posts, vandalising seven of them early Friday, reports Reuters from Moscow.

Official news agencies of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia said the soldiers set fire to the posts, stole documents and money, humiliated border guards, fired bursts of automatic fire and in one case threw a grenade.

Five border guards were injured or beaten up, they said. Lithuania and Estonia have formally protested to Moscow but there was no immediate comment from the Soviet government.

Kurds block gates of US base : More than 1,000 Kurds blocked the gates of the US military base on Friday and pleaded with troops not to withdraw from the city today as scheduled, Reuters reports from Dahuk.

The crowd chanted outside for more than an hour, leaving only when an Allied Commander, Major-General Jay Garner, promised they would be protected despite the pullout.

They chanted "Yes, Yes, Bush" and held banners reading "Please finish what you started" and "Leave peace behind you when you go."

Dahuk is a Kurdish-controlled city in northern Iraq where the protecting presence of American soldiers has overlapped the limits of the west's "safe haven" for Kurdish refugees. Iraqi forces are 15 km (nine miles) away.

Colombian peace talks put off : Colombian government and rebel negotiators who have been holding talks in Caracas for the past week aimed at bringing about a cease-fire agreed Friday to suspend negotiations until June 19, sources said, AFP from Caracas reports.

The cease-fire agreement is the first item on the agenda of the talks between representatives of President Cesar Gaviria and the Simon Bolivar Guerilla Coordinator (CGSB), a rebel group umbrella organization.

Postponing the talks will allow both sides to study proposals put forward during the week, including the bilateral cease-fire put forward by the CGSB and the government's plans for establishing "cease-fire zones".

Rebels kill 2 cops in Peru : Leftist rebels killed two policemen in the Andean city of Cuzco, a popular tourist area that has not been the scene of political violence until recently, police said, AP reports from Lima.

Police said Friday that five rebels, led by a woman, machine-gunned a police sergeant and a private Thursday morning when the two policemen were guarding the house of the regional governor.

Two of the rebels were dressed in police uniforms, police said. The rebels took the dead officers' weapons and then escaped in a waiting getaway car, police said.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility. Both the Maoist Shining Path and the smaller, pro-Cuban Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement have carried out similar attacks in the area.

Major urged Bush against truce : A new biography of Prime Minister John Major says that he tried to stop US President George Bush from calling a ceasefire in the Gulf war. The Times of London reported Friday, reports AP from London.

The newspaper said political journalist Bruce Anderson wrote in the biography that it was Major, not US Commander Gen H Norman Schwarzkopf, who wanted the allies to continue hostilities for at least 24 hours.

The aim, according to the Anderson's "John Major: The Making of the Prime Minister," was to encircle retreating Iraqi troops in southern Iraq. The book is to be published next week.

The Times said sources at Major's 10 Downing Street office have confirmed Anderson's story.

France conducts fourth N-test : France conducted its fourth nuclear weapons test of the year Friday at its testing site on an atoll in the South Pacific, military headquarters said, AP from Paris reports.

It was the first test conducted at Mururoa since France's announcement early this month that it would sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. France also proposed further international efforts toward disarmament, but said it will conduct about six to eight tests annually to ensure the effectiveness of its weapons.

On May 30, France detonated a nuclear device with a force of between 100 and 130 kilotons, which the defence ministry said was one of the most powerful ever in the testing programme. The energy released by Friday's explosion was less than 30 kilotons, the military headquarters said in a communique.

Last year, in a reversal of a 15-year-old policy, France decided to make official announcements of its tests. Before that, the tests were disclosed by New Zealand, which detected them at monitoring stations.

US backs Pak N-free zone plan but silent over embargo on aid

WASHINGTON, June 15 : The US State Department endorsed Friday a Pakistani proposal to bring China and the Soviet Union into talks aimed at preventing an India-Pakistan nuclear arms race, reports AP.

But an official department statement was noncommittal about Pakistan's plan for a South Asian nuclear-free zone, and was silent on whether US aid to Pakistan will be unfrozen.

A US source said on condition of anonymity the eight-month freeze would continue under a law that requires the president to certify Pakistan has not acquired a nuclear weapon before the aid can be released.

"We discussed the concept of holding consultations among the US, the Soviet Union, China, Pakistan and India, a concept we support," department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler said in a formal summary of four days of high-level US-Pakistani talks.

The talks concluded with a



Nawaz Sharif: A victory for his proposal

meeting Friday between Secretary of State James Baker III and Pakistani Senate Chairman Wasim Sajjad.

The United States "found constructive" Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's recent proposal on "nonproliferation of mass destruction weapons and a balanced regional reduction of conventional weapons," Ms Tutwiler said.

The talks also continued

the dialogue between Pakistan and the US on nuclear issues," she said in the summary.

Without mentioning disagreement over aid and presidential certification, the summary described the meetings as "forthright and cordial, reflecting... the mutual desire to resolve outstanding differences."

US aid to the South Asian country was cut off after President George Bush informed Congress last October he could no longer provide the annual certification that Pakistan did not have nuclear weapons.

The freeze halted assistance in the pipeline plus new aid totaling more than 500 million dollars.

Sajjad, accompanied by Foreign Affairs Secretary-General Akram Zaki, also met Vice President Dan Quayle, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft and two undersecretaries of state, Richard Kimmitt and Reginald Bartholomew.

Bartholomew is to go to Beijing this weekend to try to dissuade Chinese leaders from concluding sales of surface-to-surface missiles to Syria and Pakistan.

Premier Sharif's June 6 proposal, circulated here by Sajjad's delegation, asked China, the Soviet Union and the United States to join Pakistan and India to agree to outlaw atomic weapons or all weapons of mass destruction in the South Asian region.

Sharif used the example of the Latin American nuclear-free zone established by the Treaty of Tlateloco, the United States, which is not a signatory to that treaty, nevertheless approves of it in a rare exception to US opposition to the idea of such regional zones.

US Defense Undersecretary Paul Wolfowitz said last week the United States continues to regard such zones as contrary to its global nuclear deterrent policy but added, "I think we're prepared to look at everything afresh."

US drops ban on entry of left sympathisers

WASHINGTON, June 15: The United States has dropped rules under which it barred foreigners from entering because of their politics under a system created in 1952 at the height of the cold war and anti-Communist with hunts led by Senator Joe McCarthy, reports Reuters.

The State Department said in a statement on Friday, that under new legislation which took effect on June 1, 33 grounds for exclusion of foreigners seeking entry had been revised into nine categories. They included health, criminal and security grounds and inability to support oneself financially.

The regulations had been used in the past to exclude a number of eminent people. Among those barred because of alleged left-wing sympathies were British novelist Graham Greene, French singer-actor Yves Montand and Nobel Literature prize winners Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Pablo Neruda.

"Membership in a totalitarian party will only bar appli-

cants for immigrant visas and only if membership has been relatively recent, and will not bar applicants for non-immigrant visas," the statement said.

State Department spokeswoman Margaret Tutwiler said there were 2.7 million people listed on the so-called lookout system under various categories.

"Of the total, there were 300,000 names listed as ineligible for ideological or political reasons, 120,000 of which have already been purged from the system," she said.

The rest were being checked on a case-by-case basis to see if there were grounds for retaining them under the new system. If not, their names were also being deleted from the system.

"You do it literally case by case. For instance, what if an ideological person is also a terrorist? That name will not be purged," said Tutwiler.

Tutwiler could not say whether the new regulations meant that Palestine Liberation Organisation chief Yasser Arafat would be granted tourist visas to visit the United States or whether he would continue to be excluded on other grounds.

Drive against Pak bandits: 23 killed

KARACHI, June 15: At least 23 people have been killed in a five-day-old police drive against bandits in the southern Pakistan province of Sindh, police said Friday, reports Reuters.

The dead included two officers who were killed when bandits ambushed police patrols in the Dadu and Hyderabad area on Friday, police said in the provincial capital, Karachi. The remaining 21 were all bandits, locally called dacoits.

More than 400 people have been arrested since the anti-bandit operation was launched on Tuesday, the police said.

The bandits mostly operate from forest hideouts along the Indus River. Kidnapping for ransom is common in the area.

The drive follows the release of three kidnapped Chinese engineers and three Japanese students, and the death of a kidnapped Swedish engineer in Sindh.

6 to die in Kuwait for helping Iraq

KUWAIT, June 15: A martial law court today sentenced six people to death for working for the Iraqi newspaper Al-Nidaa (the call) during Baghdad's occupation of Kuwait, reports Reuters.



MOSCOW: Boris Yeltsin making a point at a meeting of the CPSU here. —IAN photo

Yeltsin's victory places USSR on path of reform

MOSCOW, June 15 : The overwhelming victory of Boris N Yeltsin in the Russian republic's presidential election placed the Soviet Union irrevocably on the path of reform, reports AP.

Any Communist Party or military hard-liners contemplating a coup now must reckon with 44 million citizens who voted for Yeltsin and might resist being overruled.

With 60 per cent of the vote, Yeltsin also got a ringing endorsement for his platform: ending Communist Party domination, switching quickly from a planned to a market economy and allowing private ownership of factories and land.

As chairman of the republic's legislature for a year, Yeltsin pushed through more than 150 economic reform laws. He has had trouble implementing them, however, because of opposition from the central Soviet government of President Mikhail S Gorbachev.

Another possibility created by the lopsided win is a

formidable alliance of Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Foreign Minister, who won global respect through his pivotal role in ending the Cold War.

Shevardnadze resigned in December, warning that a dictatorship might be near. His words seemed prophetic when Soviet troops attacked unarmed demonstrators in Lithuania three weeks later. Fourteen people were killed.

On Friday, with election results showing tremendous victories for radical reformers and humiliating defeats for Communists, Shevardnadze was far more optimistic.

"We have gone through a very important period," he told reporters in Vienna. "I think now we can talk really about forming a democratic movement that can give a guarantee that reforms continue."

He said the danger of dictatorship had not disappeared completely, but the elections brought "a shift in power relations."

Aides to Yeltsin describe his victory as a mandate for radical

reform. The numbers appear to explode Gorbachev's argument that most Soviets want to go slowly.

Yeltsin's closest rival, former Premier Nikolai Ryzhkov, got only 16 per cent of the vote. He advocated the slow change favoured by the Communist Party.

A Gorbachev aide, Vadim Bakatin, attracted 3 per cent of the vote, according to still-preliminary figures, and Col Gen Albert Makashov, a hard-liner, got less than 4 per cent.

"Society is becoming more democratic," Yeltsin said. "I think there will be difficulties, but it seems to me that Communists and honest Communists are starting to understand the system is beginning to collapse and there is no way to save it."

"The old system really is discredited" by the election results, a senior Western diplomat said, on condition of anonymity. "The last six months have brought a turnaround."

"If Gorbachev moves in the direction of reform, he will see support out there, unlike last fall, when the reformers were not visible," he said.

Last autumn, Gorbachev agreed with Yeltsin on a 500-day plan for economic reform, then rejected it under pressure from hard-liners. He tried to reverse many of his reforms,

Heavy fighting in Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD, June 15 : Fighting intensified this week between Afghan government forces and Mujahedeen fighters around Maidan Shahr in Wardak province, creating hardship for civilians, rebel sources said Friday, reports AP.

State run Radio Kabul monitored here said the armed forces killed 32 rebels Friday during an operation in Wardak southwest of the Afghan capital.

A spokesman for the rebels in Peshawar said the fighting has forced many people to leave the area, following air bombing and shortage of staple food supplies.

The government is trying to enlarge the security belt around Maidan Shahr 30 kilometers (19 miles) southwest of Kabul, he said.

Five Mujahedeen were killed in the fighting, he added, adding that Mujahedeen have captured 13 soldiers and five tanks. The casualties among government troops were not known.

Radio Kabul said the operation continued for the fourth consecutive days

4.2 m Soviets were victims of political purges : KGB

MOSCOW, June 15: More than four million people were victims of political purges in the Soviet Union between 1920 and 1953, the head of the KGB security police, Vladimir Kryuchkov, said on Friday, reports Reuters.

He gave the first KGB figures on the scale of dictator Josef Stalin's prison camp network at a meeting with

representatives of victims' associations, according to Soviet Television and the official news agency Tass.

Kryuchkov said 4.2 million people had "suffered repression," but did break the figure down into those killed and those imprisoned.

He said 100 graves of political prisoners had been found and more were sure to be discovered in future.

The KGB and its predecessors have taken the principal role in repressing political opposition and arresting dissidents since the Communist Revolution of 1917.

But Kryuchkov said it was now the organisation's duty to rehabilitate innocent victims and prevent any recurrence of political persecution, Tass said.

About 1.2 million people had been rehabilitated between 1988 and October 1990, he said.

Official Soviet historians, while acknowledging the massive purges under Stalin, tend to date their accounts from the assassination of leading Communist Sergei Kirov in 1934.

But the period cited by Kryuchkov began in 1920, when revolutionary leader Vladimir Lenin was still in charge. It ended in 1953, the year of Stalin's death.

Kryuchkov said relatives of victims were being given access to KGB archives, according to Tass.

But permission was withheld in cases where prisoners had given evidence against themselves and the revelation could cause psychological damage.

Iraq to return stolen Kuwaiti property

UNITED NATIONS, June 15: Iraq is complying with demands that it return property plundered when its troops invaded Kuwait last August, a top UN official said Friday, reports AP.

The return of stolen Kuwaiti property was one of the terms laid down in the Security Council's cease-fire resolution of April 3. Other conditions included cooperating in the destruction of non-conventional

weapons in its arsenal and paying compensation to war victims.

The United States and other Western nations have opposed the lifting of UN economic sanctions against Iraq, saying that Iraq is not fully complying with the terms of the cease-fire resolution.

UN Undersecretary-General Dick Foran disclosed that Iraq and Kuwait reached agreement on Thursday on the return of plundered Kuwaiti gold, civil aircraft, museum antiquities and the emirate's national library.

He attributed much of the delay in returning Kuwaiti property to poor communications in Baghdad.

Violence-ridden Indian polls draw to a close

Coalition govt in the offing?

NEW DELHI, June 15: One of the most troubled and uncertain elections in India's history drew to a close Saturday after a three-week interruption caused by the assassination of former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, reports AP.

Polls indicated no single party would win a majority in parliament, but Gandhi's Congress Party has been hoping for a sympathy vote that could restore it to power — even if that means coalition with other parties.

The voting, after a campaign and two previous rounds of balloting in which more than 250 people died, got off to an ominous start. Shortly before the polls opened Saturday, one man was reported killed and at least five injured in a fight between supporters of the Congress Party and loyalists of its chief rival, the Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party.

The clash occurred in western Gujarat state in the district where Bharatiya Janata leader Lal Krishna Advani is seeking election to Parliament, Press Trust of India said.

The dead man was an Advani supporter, Press Trust said. It did not say how he died.

The elections, which are for parliament's policy-making lower house, started May 20. Subsequent rounds of voting were postponed when Gandhi was assassinated May 21 by a suicide bomber at a campaign rally near the southern city of Madras.

So far, four people have been arrested on suspicion of aiding the young woman who was blown to bits by the bomb that killed Gandhi and 16 other people.

Investigators are still searching the man they believe masterminded the assassination: a Sri Lankan Tamil rebel commander named Muthuraja. Also wanted is a rebel intelligence officer known as "One-

eyed Jack" because he is thought to have lost an eye in a bombing in his native island nation.

Exit polls conducted in some of the 326 districts which voted before Gandhi's death and earlier this week indicated no clear winner would emerge, forcing the world's largest democracy into a spell of political instability.

On Saturday, 165 more districts voted.

The poll, published by newspapers on Friday, said that if the earlier trend continued, Gandhi's Congress Party would emerge with just over 200 of the 511 seats at stake. To form a government, a winning party or its alliance will need 256 seats.

The Congress Party's most likely partners would be drawn from small communist and socialist blocs.



MADRAS: A bicyclist rides by a pro-Sri Lankan LTTE painting June 14 depicting LTTE leader Prabhakaran with an AK-47 gun. After the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, unknown persons set fire to the painting. —Photo AFP/UNB