

Franco-German corps may weaken NATO

LONDON, June 15: British Defence Secretary Malcolm Rifkind expressed fears today in an interview with London's Financial Times newspaper that the recently-created Franco-German military corps might weaken NATO, reports AFP.

The paper said that while Rifkind states he is a "good European," he upholds British policy that the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation should be the main defender of Europe, whatever the degree of EC defence cooperation.

Although he said he was not opposed in principle to the new corps, he questioned the German argument that it will reconcile France with NATO, whose integrated military command structure France left in 1966.

"As an aspiration, we can obviously see it as an attractive objective."

Caste obstacle to consensus candidate

NEW DELHI, June 15: Indian political parties are fighting over whether caste or pure merit should influence the choice of president, adding an intriguing twist to the July 13 presidential vote, reports AFP.

Just 10 days remain before the deadline for nominations, both the ruling Congress (I) party and the main opposition groups have still not named their candidates for head of state.

All had seemed to be moving towards a smooth consensus in favour of Vice President Shankar Dayal Sharma to replace President Ramaswamy Venkataraman before the caste factor moved in 10 days ago to complicate matters.

The highly-educated and erudite Sharma, with degrees from Harvard and Cambridge universities and a spotless political career, seemingly has all the qualifications to be the next occupant of the presidential mansion.

But like Venkataraman he is a Brahmin, a member of the highest caste in the rigid Hindu hierarchy, a factor hampering Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao's efforts to forge a consensus that no longer looks possible.

Former Prime Minister Vishwanath Pratap Singh is insisting India's 10th president should be a member of the underprivileged backward castes, and has the backing of more than 100 centrist MPs.

And the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) says it will field its own candidate if Rao does not manage a consensus in favour of a common candidate.

"We want a consensus but it looks difficult," admitted a senior member of the Congress (I) close to Rao.

"Caste cannot be the sole criterion in a presidential election," he said. "All things being equal between two candidates, caste may act as a swing factor but not in this case."

He said the 70-year-old prime minister would name a candidate — almost certainly still Sharma — after he returns from the Earth Summit in Brazil on Tuesday and before he leaves on a visit to Japan on Saturday.

The president, who holds office for five years and whose post is largely ceremonial, is elected by an electoral college comprising federal MPs and provincial lawmakers. Caste has played no rolls in nine past polls.

VP Singh, whose caste-oriented job reservation policy in 1990 led to widespread protests and the suicide deaths of more than 50 high-caste students, says it is time it does.

"If the Congress (I) does not put up a suitable candidate, I will plead with my own party to do so, and if I don't succeed in that, I shall quit parliament," he told a news conference June 5.

A backward-caste president would signal "to the oppressed classes they are respected in this country," said VP Singh, referring to the rigid divides between high, middle, low and "outcaste" which pervade Indian society.

Senior members of VP Singh's party endorsed his stand on Friday with a resolution that said "oppressed and downtrodden sections of the society" needed recognition, but named no candidate.

But not even the powerful communist party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) an ally, agrees with his stand, and it is still taking a wait and see attitude.

"Our stand is that a nominee should be of high stature and have secular and democratic credentials," said a member of the CPI-M's

decision-making politburo, adding that caste could not be a sole criterion.

Leaders of lower castes, which form an influential voting bloc, claim that though they form about 52 per cent of India's 860 million population, upper caste Hindus dominate politics, the bureaucracy, business and education.

Congress (I) sources said they hoped for a tradeoff-offering a lower-caste vice-presidential candidate like former diplomat and minister K R Narayanan in return for consensus favouring Sharma as president.

But JP Mathur, a senior leader of the BJP, the main opposition party, calls Rao's consensus effort a "trick" to get his party's candidates elected to both posts.

"We do not want to abdicate our responsibility as an opposition party. Our duty is to oppose the government," he said.

To maverick politician Swami Agnivesh, the whole argument is misguided.

"A backward caste president will be at best a tool in the hands of a high-caste prime minister," he said, adding that opposition parties would do better to win the next election and have their own Prime Minister instead.

Gaidar acting head of Russian govt

MOSCOW, June 15: Russian President Boris Yeltsin appointed his economic czar Yegor Gaidar acting head of the Russian government on Monday, a spokeswoman said, reports AP.

Galina Agayeva said Yeltsin issued the decree shortly before he was to leave for a summit meeting in Washington with President George Bush. Gaidar was deputy prime minister and chief economics advisor.

The appointment appears to strengthen Gaidar's position in the Russian government and is likely to send a signal to Western governments that Russia intends to stick to its radical market reform programme.

Yeltsin, currently both president and prime minister, has said he would step down as prime minister by the end of the year.

BRIEFLY

Gorby meets with Shamir, Levy:

Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev on June 14 met separately with Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir and Foreign Minister David Levy, apparently on the Middle East peace talks, according to Israeli Army Radio, reports Xinhua from Jerusalem.

This is Gorbachev's first visit to the Jewish state. Though the tour was described by Israeli officials as personal Gorbachev and his wife Raisa received a formal welcome at the Ben-Gurion Airport outside Tel Aviv.

After his talks with Shamir, Gorbachev spoke briefly to reporters before leaving Shamir's office. We had a good dialogue, he said.

According to Israeli Army Radio, their talks focused on Middle East Peace Talks which Gorbachev helped launch in Madrid late last October.

Romanians block traffic: Several hundred demonstrators blocked traffic in central University Square for the second day Sunday to commemorate a violent crackdown on protests two years ago, AP reports from Bucharest.

Yelling "Down with Iliescu," they accused President Ioniliescu of maintaining Communist practices and betraying the December 1989 revolution that toppled dictator Nicolae Ceausescu.

Thousands of miners descended on Bucharest in June 1990, when Iliescu called for "civilian democratic forces" to defend the government after weeks of protests.

Human chain to show unity in LA:

More than 10,000 people linked hands to form a 10-mile (16-km) human chain on Sunday in a show of racial unity in neighbourhoods hardest hit by the Los Angeles riots, Reuters reports from Los Angeles.

"Hands across LA," Sponsored by a number of religious groups, involved members of all racial groups in an effort to help heal the wounds of rioting that killed 60 people and caused more than one billion dollars in damage, organisers said.

Organisers had originally estimated that up to 100,000 residents would turn out for the event, but police put the attendance at closer to 10,000.

As a result, the chain was broken in places as it snaked from the city's Korea town section to south-central Los Angeles past the charred ruins of dozens of buildings destroyed in the riots.

Georgian PM in Iran:

Iran and the former Soviet Republic of Georgia on Sunday expressed support for a transport network linking the Black Sea and the Persian Gulf, Iranian television reported, says AFP from Tehran.

"Georgia wants access to the Persian Gulf via Iranian territory and can offer Iran access to Europe through Georgian ports (on the Black Sea)," Georgian Prime Minister Tengiz Sigua said in Tehran after a meeting with Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati.

Velayati also stressed the importance "Of a link between Iran and Eastern and Western Europe" and said Iran could in turn provide Georgia with an opening to Asia and the Middle East.

Sigua arrived in Tehran earlier Sunday to start an official visit.

Quake rocks Japanese island:

A strong earthquake rocked a southern Japanese island with a preliminary reading of 5.2 on the Richter scale Monday morning. There were no immediate reports of damage or casualties, reports AP from Tokyo.

The quake hit at 10.46 am (0146 GMT) 50 kilometers (31 miles) under the sea floor off the Izu Peninsula, the Central Meteorological Agency said.

It registered a 5 on the Japanese scale of seven on the island of Kozu, population 2,300, about 170 kilometers (105.4 miles) south of the capital.

A tremor measuring five on the Japanese scale can crack walls and overturn gravestones. The Richter scale measures the magnitude of a quake at its epicenter, according to ground motion as recorded on seismographs. An earthquake of 5 on the Richter scale is considered "very strong," a 6 "severe," capable of widespread damage near the epicenter.

Chinese FM in New Zealand:

Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister Qian Qichen arrived in Auckland Monday to start his three-day visit to New Zealand, reports Xinhua from Auckland.

Qian, who is also a State Councillor of China, was greeted at the airport by Richard Notage, Secretary or top administrator of New Zealand's Ministry of External Relations and Trade, Chinese Ambassador to New Zealand Li Jinhua and Consul General of the Chinese Consulate-General in Auckland Chen Qidao as well as representatives of the Chinese community in the country.

Presidential election in India July 13.



Rio De Janeiro: Brazilian President Fernando Collor de Mello (R) acknowledges the applause June 14 after giving the closing speech for the Rio '92 Earth Summit. At left applauding are the conference Secretary General, Maurice Strong, and UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali (2nd L).

Pak army admits killing of 9 Sindhis

3 army commanders removed

RAWALPINDI, Pakistan, June 15: The Pakistani army took the blame on Sunday for the deaths of nine villagers in Sindh province and removed three commanders from their posts, reports Reuters.

But the army seemed to face further embarrassment after a third man died in military custody during a two-week-old crackdown on crime in the southern province bordering India.

Sindh's state government on Sunday paid compensation to the families of the dead nine villagers it had earlier dismissed as bandits and saboteurs.

In a rare gesture of openness, an army spokesman said the killings, near the central Sindh town of Jamshoro on June 5, were the responsibility

of an army major now in custody.

Three senior commanders in the area were removed on Sunday by Army Chief General Asif Nawaz, Vice-Chief of General Staff Major General Jamshed Malik told reporters at army headquarters in Rawalpindi, near the capital Islamabad.

He described the death of the three men in army custody as a "very odd coincidence" but denied that interrogators were harsh.

"Maybe the fear of the military was too much (for them)," One of the three was young opposition politician Mohammad Yusuf Jakhrani, leader of a small provincial party.

Two landlords arrested in connection with the Jamshoro killings died while they were

being questioned by security forces last week, the police said.

Malik said the cause of these deaths had not been determined.

He acknowledged that the Jamshoro killings were a setback for the army operation, which the Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's federal government had ordered to last six months.

"But we are doing a certain damage control," he added.

Both the civilian and army authorities as well as the official media had called the nine people bandits or saboteurs trained in neighbouring India.

But later other villagers of the area said the nine men and a tenth man injured were innocent people caught up in a scheme planned by local land-

Filipino army to accept Ramos as president

MANILA, June 15: The military chief said Monday he would accept Fidel Ramos if Congress proclaims him the new president and an election official said fraud allegations were insufficient to justify a new balloting, reports AP.

A congressional committee is still certifying results of the May 11 election, although unofficial counts show Ramos won the seven-member race.

The committee hopes to finish this week and then ask the full Congress to proclaim a successor to President Corason Aquino, who leaves office June 30 after a six-year term.

Election Commissioner Haydee Yorac said the irregularities uncovered so far on tally sheets were largely technical, such as erasures and absence of required initials.

lords with the help of some army personnel.

Malik said army chief general Asif Nawaz had removed the area's divisional commander, a brigade commander and a battalion commander from their posts.

The Sindh government on Sunday paid 300,000 rupees (dollar 12,000) to each of the families of the dead as compensation, the official APP news agency said.

The government also promised to give each family 25 acres of land, it said.

Opposition leader Benazir Bhutto, who challenges the legitimacy of the state's civilian government, says there will be no improvement in her home province until Sindhis are given their due rights.

Mandela's move to woo Indian voters

DURBAN (South Africa), June 15: Nelson Mandela on Sunday lambasted attempts by the ruling National Party (NP) to woo Indian voters, the domestic news agency SABA reported, says AFP.

Touring the Indian township of Phoenix near this east coast city, a garlanded Mandela told several thousand Indian South Africans that the NP had instituted laws which stripped Indians of their houses for very little or no compensation, to get them out of areas earmarked for whites.

Yet since its decision in October 1990 to open its doors to all races, the NP was presenting itself as the friend of Indians, Mandela said.

"It is the National Party that wants your vote, and unfortunately they have a lot of money, and they have been able to bribe a lot of Indians," Mandela said.

Off the Record

"Only lord can command me to resign"

MOSCOW: President Boris Yeltsin went to church Sunday seeking "cleansing" before his trip to Washington this week and said "only the Lord" can make him resign, a news agency said, reports AP.

Yeltsin is scheduled to arrive Monday in Washington, where he will spend three days speaking with President Bush and addressing a joint session of Congress before departing for Canada with a stop in Kansas.

His main goal during the summit will be to secure a promised dollars 24 billion Western aid package by convincing Washington lawmakers that he has not abandoned his economic reform programmes.

"I came here today to undergo cleansing before a long journey," ITAR-Tass quoted Yeltsin as saying following a service in the Trinity Cathedral in the ancient town of Sergiev Posad, formerly Zagorsk.

"I hope that upon obtaining a blessing today, I will successfully accomplish my mission," Yeltsin told the church audience on Trinity Sunday, a Russian Orthodox holiday. He also appealed for patience, humility, and purification, ITAR-Tass said.

Western economists are worried because Yeltsin has slowed his reforms in an attempt to quell widespread domestic discontent and avert unrest, sending the inflation rate to more than 300 per cent so far this year.



Georges, France: Princes, a young cat, mothers three baby squirrels at her owner's home near Dijon, France. The three-month-old babies were abandoned by their natural mother in Princes's garden a month ago, when she adopted them.

Clinton's remark angers Jesse Jackson



NEW YORK: Bill Clinton is sticking by his criticism of a black rap singer, even though his remarks drew fire from Jesse Jackson and raised eyebrows among some of his own rank-and-file supporters, reports AP.

"I didn't injure her credibility," Clinton said Sunday, heading to New York for another stop on the talk show circuit — a two-hour appearance Monday fielding call-in queries on "CBS This Morning."

Monday's show was the latest in a series of TV appearances that Clinton strategists think are among the Democratic presidential candidate's best opportunities for going straight to voters.

On Sunday, Jackson challenged Clinton to focus on plans for rebuilding America rather than engaging in "diversions" such as his criticism of the rap singer.

The Arkansas governor, asked if his criticism was inappropriate, said: "Goodness no. Why would it be? — I didn't say anything that I hadn't been saying since I first started running."

Clinton said Sister Souljah had used "very divisive rhetoric and I think it's wrong."

Bandaranaike denies receiving funds from KGB

COLOMBO, June 15: Sri Lanka's main opposition party has denied allegations that the KGB funded its election campaign in 1989, a newspaper said Monday, reports AP.

Sirimavo Bandaranaike, leader of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, said allegations that aid from the intelligence agency of the former Soviet Union had helped the party boost its seats in Parliament from eight to 67 were nonsensical.

Bandaranaike also told The Island newspaper that she is not aware of anyone receiving such financial aid.

US may use military force to protect UN relief efforts

NEW YORK, June 15: The US Defence Department is drawing up plans to use military force to protect United Nations relief efforts in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Newsweek reported, says AP.

The idea of US military involvement in the besieged former Yugoslav republic reached a turning point last week during high-level White House meetings, Newsweek said in the June 22 edition that hits the newstands Monday.

Citing unnamed sources, the magazine said that at a meeting of top officials from the national security council, the Defence and State departments and the CIA, Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Adm David Jeremiah said it was unlikely a stable cease-fire could be reached in order to allow UN relief operations to proceed.

Jeremiah told his colleagues that if US troops were involved in the relief efforts, American military force should be used to protect them, Newsweek said.

The magazine said that some White House officials thought Jeremiah may have been offering a worse-case scenario to deliberately scuttle any move to involve the US military in the Yugoslav crisis.

Meanwhile: Shelling was reported in the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo, hours after a cease-fire was to take effect Monday between the republic's army and Serb forces.

"There was shooting overnight and this morning. Shells were coming from Serb-held positions around Sarajevo," Rasim Borcuk, a Sarajevo TV journalist told the Associated Press by telephone.

He also said anti-aircraft fire from the Serb-held suburb of Vrace set two houses on fire.

The Belgrade-based Tanjug news agency said the airport area and other Serb-controlled areas in Sarajevo were peaceful overnight and early Monday.

The latest UN sponsored cease-fire agreement between the Bosnian government and ri-

val Serb forces was signed late Sunday. It was to take effect at 6 am on Monday. More than a dozen previous truces have failed.

Radovan Karadzic, the Serb leader in Bosnia, declared a unilateral cease-fire, also to take effect at 6 am.

Borcuk also said the latest reports from Mostar, an embattled town in southwest Bosnia-Herzegovina, indicated Muslim-Croat forces were advancing, defeating Serbian fighters on the left bank of the Neretva river.

"Heavy fighting is now going on around the Serb stronghold at Mostar airport," Borcuk said.

Despite the prospect of a cease-fire, Tanjug reported on Sunday that 17 people were killed in the Sarajevo area in the 24-hour period before fighting stopped early Sunday morning.

More than 15,000 people have been killed since June last year in short-lived fighting in Slovenia, and the Croatian and Bosnian civil wars. All three republics, along with

Macedonia, have declared their independence from Yugoslavia.

Meanwhile, UN negotiators tried to organize the withdrawal of Serbian soldiers and arms from around the Sarajevo airport to reopen it to humanitarian flights. The results of the first UN technicians' inspection said the airport was in a good condition, Belgrade TV reported late Sunday.

The Bosnian capital has been forced to the brink of starvation by a nearly 3-month-old siege by Serb fighters.

In Belgrade, the Serbian capital, students scheduled a three-hour protest in front of the main university building starting at noon and asked Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic to address the gathering.

Humanitarian groups said they hoped to get more food into Sarajevo in coming days following Saturday's arrival of a three-truck convoy carrying five tons of food for the city's main Kosevo hospital.

3000 additional Palestinians to back Jordan

AMMAN, June 15: An extra 3,000 Palestinian repatriates are expected to return to Jordan this month after their work contracts with two Gulf countries terminate, reports Xinhua.

According to the sources, the Qatari government has decided to terminate contracts of some 300 foreign employees, mostly Palestinians.

Meanwhile, the government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) will dismiss 200 Palestinian teachers and servicemen by the end of this month at the latest, the sources said.