

Britain warns China not to meddle in Hong Kong affairs

HONG KONG, June 21: Britain has reacted strongly to comments by Chinese officials about the composition of Hong Kong's Executive Council by warning Beijing not to interfere in the British colony's affairs, the Sunday Morning Post reported, reports Reuter.

The Hong Kong newspaper said a Foreign Office minister summoned the Chinese ambassador on Friday to protest at remarks by a Beijing official who said China opposed including any liberals in the Council, which is appointed by the colony's governor as an advisory cabinet.

The minister made clear our concern at reports of comments by the senior Chinese representatives in the Joint Liaison Group (JLG)

about the membership of the Executive Council in Hong Kong," the paper quoted a Foreign Office statement as saying. The JLG was established in 1984 to discuss Hong Kong's transfer of power from London to Beijing in 1997.

A local spokesman for the British Foreign Office was not immediately available for comment.

Local newspapers last week quoted Guo Fengmin, who heads the Chinese side in the JLG, as saying China opposed any liberals or anti-Beijing elements in the Council.

Since then pro-Beijing newspapers in Hong Kong have demanded London discuss with Beijing appointees to the Council and said having any liberals on the body would sour Sino-British relations.

Blast aboard chemical tanker in Malaysia: 13 feared dead

PORT KLANG, Malaysia, June 21: Rescuers scoured a river mouth and seas off Malaysia's Port Klang on Sunday after an explosion aboard a chemical tanker left 13 people, mostly Indonesians, dead or missing, reports Reuter.

Seven Indonesians, a Singaporean and five Malaysians were dead or missing and rescuers had retrieved four bodies, Transport Minister Ling Liong Sik said. He said the bodies of two

Malaysians had been recovered. Police sources said the other two bodies were those of Indonesian crew members of the Singapore-registered Choon Hong. The ship was still burning more than 15 hours after bursting into flames on Saturday night.

Ling said rescuers feared 400 tonnes of Xylene, a highly flammable and toxic petrochemical, still inside the 997-tonne tanker could be discharged into the river mouth,

endangering a village nearby. "Things are improving but we are preparing for the worst scenario. If the ship topples, the whole river could be burning," Ling told reporters at the port, Malaysia's largest, which faces the Malacca straits.

He said fire-fighters were preparing booms to contain the Xylene if the ship, which is listing heavily to port, capsized. Foam would be sprayed to dissolve the Xylene.

About 600 tonnes of toluene, another chemical carried

by the tanker, had already been discharged to tanks at a depot.

"We have advised villagers — woman, old people and children — to vacate their homes. We are afraid to lose more lives," Ling said.

More than 1,000 people, mostly port workers and their families, were evacuated from the areas after the blast on the tanker at around 9 p.m. (1300 GMT) on Saturday sparked a series of explosions and a huge blaze at the depot.

Flames soared several hundred metres into the night sky, belching thick smoke and sending debris flying, witnesses said.

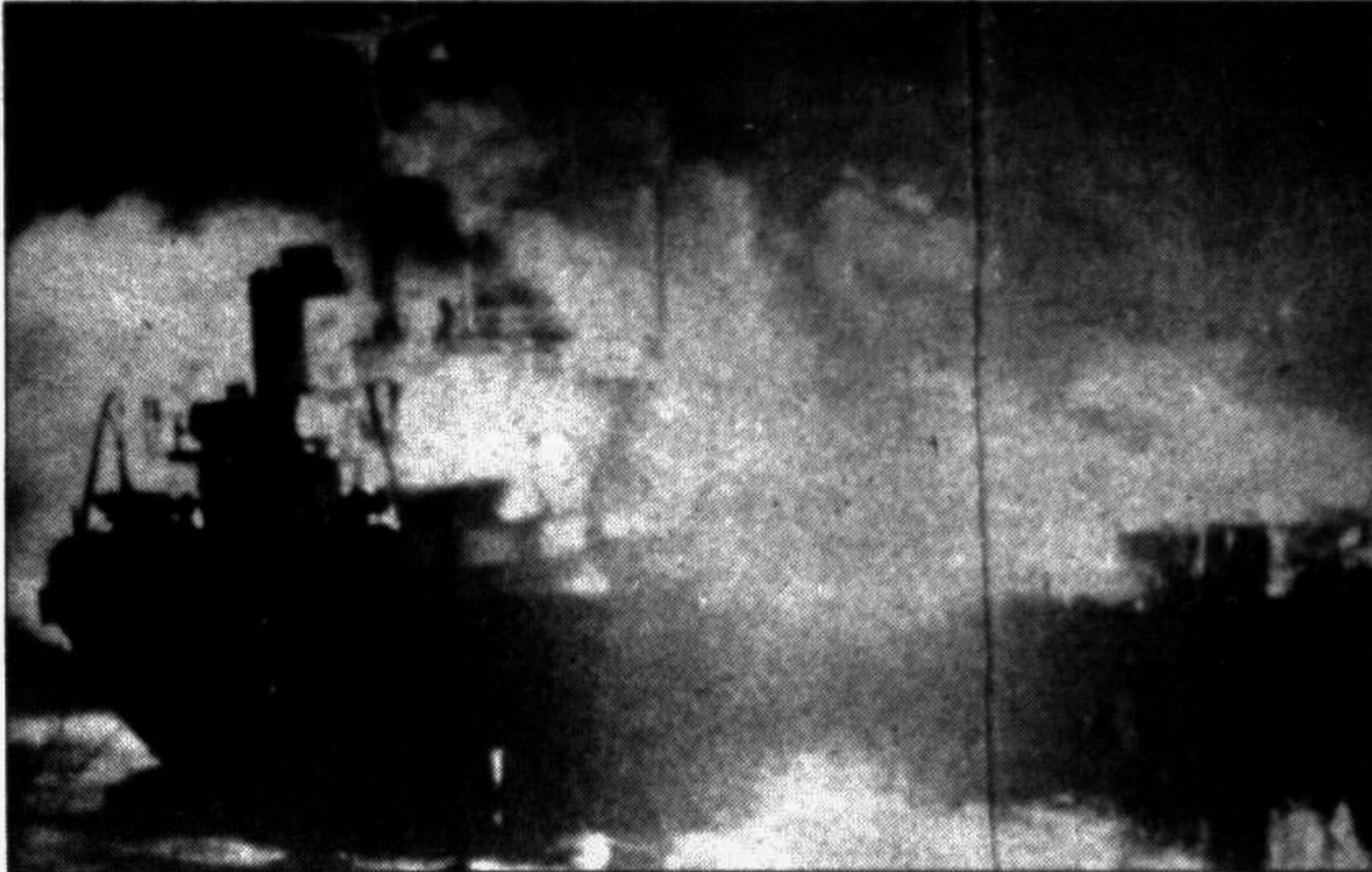
The blaze at the depot, which houses a blending plant owned by the royal Dutch/Shell group, was extinguished shortly before midnight.

Chris Knight, chairman of the Malaysian unit of Shell, said it was too early to assess damage.

Police sources in Port Klang said the bodies of the two Malaysians were those of Shell workers.

The tanker had 12 Indonesian crew members, including captain Mohammed Efendi Santoso, and a Singaporean, according to Huap Choon Offshore Supplies Pte Ltd, the Singapore firm which owns the tanker through its subsidiary Eximpet Enterprise Pte Ltd.

The tanker was chartered by operators, South Eastern Chemical Shipping Pte Ltd of Singapore, a south eastern official said.



PORT KLANG, Malaysia: Fire engulfs a Singapore registered oil tanker after it exploded early Sunday. The fire, one of the worst in the port's history, left four people dead and at least 16 missing. — AFP/UNB photo

UN running out of money to help Afghan refugees return home

ISLAMABAD, June 21: UN officials said Saturday that the money spent on Afghan refugees to help them return to their war-shattered homeland is running out, reports AP.

"We will run out of money in a few weeks if donors don't come through," said Pierce Gerety, deputy chief of missions for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in Islamabad.

UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali appealed two weeks ago for 180 million dollars. The United States gave an emergency \$15 million, which kept the "care package" programme of wheat and cash alive, said Gerety.

The care package is given to refugees who plan to head home. They get the wheat and cash by returning the UN ration cards they got when they fled their homes and moved into one of nearly 150 camps that litter northwestern Pakistan.

"These people are going back to villages that in many cases are virtually destroyed," said Gerety.

Nearly 2 million Afghans died in a protracted war that sent another 5 million into exile and shattered an already impoverished economy.

About 3 million Afghans fled to Pakistan after Soviet soldiers invaded their country in 1979. Nine years later, the former Red Army withdrew in line with a UN accord but most refugees refused to go home until Marxist President Najibullah left.

But last April when guerrilla leaders swept into Kabul and took power from Najibullah the floodgates were opened for the return of the world's largest refugee population.

Exiles who had lived for nearly 14 years in squalid camps that resembled giant dustbins began returning to their homes.

Gerety estimated that one million refugees will return

home before the end of this year.

On Wednesday the UN recorded its largest single-day return of refugees, when 2,220 families — estimated to average about six members — cashed in their ration cards, said Gerety.

Each week about eight thousand families return, most to eastern Afghanistan, the closest but probably the worst affected area, Gerety said.

An estimated 2 million more refugees live in Iran. They too have begun returning home, but so far there's no UN assistance going their way. Tehran is reporting about 2,000 refugees leave for Afghanistan daily.

Gerety feared continued fighting in the Afghan capital between rival rebel factions will scare away donors. Almost 1,400 people have been killed or wounded in street battles between warring guerrilla factions since April.

Clashes leave 5 dead in Egypt

CAIRO, June 21: Five people died, one of them a policeman, in a series of clashes between Muslim fundamentalists and security forces in upper Egypt on Friday and Saturday, according to press reports here, reports AFP.

The semi-official newspaper Al-Ahram said in its Sunday edition that two of the dead were leading Muslim activists, Arafat Mahmud Darwish, 35, and Hani Abdel Rahman Qotb, 22.

The paper said the violence started when they were killed at Sanabou, 500 kilometres (300 miles) south of Cairo in Assiut province, after Friday prayers.

The following day, members of a fundamentalist group killed two Coptic Christians in the same town in an attack linked to Friday's violence. A policeman also died in the clashes.

Similar clashes in Sanabou have left some 20 people dead since March.

Armenian troops take control of two villages

LONDON, June 21: Armenian forces have taken control of two more villages in Nagorno-Karabakh in fighting with Azeri forces over the enclave, the Russian news agency RIA reported by the BBC reported late Saturday, says AFP.

In a report from the Armenian capital Yerevan, RIA said the Armenians had taken Nakhichevanik and Pirdzhamal near Askeran, and that fierce fighting continued in the region.

The agency said the situation in Yerevan was highly charged, and that protesters were demanding the resignation of the government.

Meanwhile, RIA reported that according to a news conference given in Azerbaijan's Defence Ministry, 21 Armenians are being held hostage by Azeris.

Efforts to exchange them for captured Azeris fail, they will be handed over to the red

cross or allowed to leave for a destination of their choice without hindrance, the organisers of the news conference reportedly said.

One of the hostages was quoted as saying they were being treated properly.

The suspension dealt a major setback to negotiators' hopes of opening the Minsk peace conference by the end of the month and imposing a ceasefire in the enclave where a major Azeri offensive has been underway since June 12.

No agenda has been set for the next Rome meeting and no proposals are on the table.

"It's just a date to keep the bridges from being cut completely. It's a last chance, but we are at a dead end," said Armenia's chief delegate Christian Der Stepanian.

His Azerbajjani counterpart, Nadir Mekhtiev, said there was still some hope left for the Minsk conference.

Lankan troops kill 4 Tigers

COLOMBO, June 21: Security forces ambushed and shot dead four suspected Tamil Tiger guerrillas in separate incidents in eastern Sri Lanka, the military said here today, reports AFP.

Troops gunned down one suspected activist from the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at a village in coastal Batticaloa district Saturday, a military spokesman said.

Three more suspected LTTE men were killed in a neighbouring village as security forces kept up patrols in the region, he added.

The LTTE is leading a guerrilla campaign to establish a separate state for Sri Lanka's two million Tamil minority concentrated in northern and eastern regions and thousands have died during the 20-year-old struggle.

India concerned at safety of Hindus, Sikhs in Afghanistan

NEW DELHI, June 21: India on Saturday expressed concern over the safety of Indians and people of Indian origin living in Afghanistan following reports of attacks on them because they were Hindus or Sikhs, Indian news agencies reported, says Reuter.

They said Minister of State for External Affairs Eduardo Faleiro conveyed India's concern to his Afghan counterpart Mohammad Sadiq Saljoqi during a lunch with the visiting minister.

Saljoqi was passing through the Indian capital on his way back to Kabul after a foreign trip.

The Press Trust of India (PTI) quoted Faleiro as saying that armed raiders belonging to various groups in and around Kabul had been attacking and robbing Indians and people of Indian origin.

In one incident, a three-member Afghan family of Indian origin had been murdered, Faleiro told Sadiq.

News agencies said that there are about 40,000 Afghan nationals of Indian origin in Kabul and other Afghan towns.

Off the Record

Love affair with a violent city

Northern Ireland: Robert McLiam Wilson made an unlikely escape from Belfast's most soul-destroying ghetto. But the writer has returned to take on the hometown that won't let go of him, reports AP.

"While I love Belfast, I hold everybody in it responsible. I love the people but I want to smack them on the head. They all allow it to happen. It's their fault this place has suffered so much," said Wilson, surrounded by the modest comfort of his apartment in leafy south Belfast.

The 28-year-old author of a brash, poignant first novel, "Ripley Bogie," is one of the rising prose stars of Ireland — or of Britain. The confusion is symptomatic of a land geographically Irish but politically British.

"Just say I'm a British writer from Ireland — or French," he suggested. "I'm a Belfast writer."

Wilson grew up on the militarized streets of Catholic west Belfast, a bitter hotbed of Irish Republican Army sympathy and British army patrols.

"West Belfast is murdered twice — by violence, and by deprivation. I think they're happy companions. They open the door for each other. They're too polite."

Wilson is not. He is, by turns, vulgar and profound, an idealist who breaks into scathing satire.

"Manfred's Pain," published this month, is his second novel. He describes it as "not Irish at all."

"It's about this old Jewish guy in London who's dying," Wilson said. "The book goes through his life briefly. He fights in the war and then marries this beautiful Czech girl who'd survived the Birkenau camp. Then bad things happen."

Gay rights parade

BERLIN: Thousands of German lesbians and homosexual men marched down Berlin's elegant Kurfuerstendamm boulevard on Saturday, singing, whooping, blowing whistles and dancing in a gay rights parade, reports AP.

Marchers came from across Germany to demand equal rights for gay men and women, and an end to violence against homosexuals.

Samba and rock rhythms echoing along the famous shopping stretch. Marchers threw confetti, held hands with one another and gyrated to the music. At least one topless woman shimmed to the beat with her partner in tow.

Transvestites, many dressed as brides in white, also joined in the parade in the German capital. One man riding atop a truck was dressed as a priest, another as a nun. Plenty wore leather. Other costumes ranged from brilliant plumes to a pink cardboard replica of a washing machine.

Beer and champagne flowed freely, while some people brought children along with them.

The marchers carried dozens of banners, among them proclaiming "We want Gays to Get their Rights." Another read "Jewish lesbians," while yet another proclaimed "Iranian Gay and Lesbian Organization."

One of the dozens of floats was sponsored by the Berlin AIDS support group. Several people were rolled along in wheelchairs, although it was not known whether they were afflicted with the disease.

The march was part of "Christopher Street Day Berlin," named after what is considered the heart of New York City's gay community.



PHNOM PENH: David Huxley from Canberra, Australia, Weighing in at 125 kilograms, pulls a 45-ton Boeing 737 as a publicity stunt for a Thai TV programme Saturday. The event was staged in Cambodia as Bangkok airport was too crowded. — AFP/UNB photo

Rebels kill 17 in Peru

Shining Path guerrillas killed 17 soldiers and six civilians, the highest toll in a single attack in the Ayacucho region since they began the insurgency 12 years ago, military sources said on Saturday, reports Reuter from Ayacucho.

A column of Maoist guerrillas ambushed the troops and civilians travelling with them late on Friday on a 4,500-meter-high peak in Cagallo province about 400 kms (240 miles) southeast of Lima.

In nearby Victor Fajardo Province, another Guerrilla column killed three peasants in the district of Huancaraylla and later entered the villages of Lucta and Circamarca, killing five others.

The attacks came as the Shining Path's call for an "armed strike" on Friday to mark the sixth anniversary of a prison massacre which left hundreds of guerrilla inmates dead virtually paralyzed Ayacucho's capital and surrounding towns.

ROK tanker blast: 4 bodies found

Four bodies have been recovered from the fire that engulfed a South Korean tanker and three chemical tanks at a jetty in Port Klang, port officials and police said Sunday, reports AP from Kuala Lumpur.

Thirteen other people, including most of the crew of the 650-ton Singapore-registered Chong Hong III, were missing and feared dead, said Hussain Abu Bakar, senior fire officer at Malaysia's biggest port, 30 kilometers (18 miles) east of Kuala Lumpur of Malacca and chemicals. About 210 families of port workers were evacuated for several hours, officials said.

The captain and one crew member survived by jumping overboard after toluene, an inflammable chemical used for manufacturing dyes, exploded, igniting the ship and three tanks on shore about 9 pm (1300 GMT) Saturday, Assistant Port Manager Raja Saharuddin bin Raja Hamzah said.

Yeltsin back home

MOSCOW, June 21: Russian President Boris Yeltsin returned to Moscow today after a visit to the United States and Canada dominated by disarmament and talks on aid to bolster his reforms. Itar-Tass news agency reported, reports Reuter.

His trip was highlighted by an agreement with US President George Bush on making deep cuts in their nuclear arsenals.

The Russian leaders talks in Washington and Ottawa also focused on financial aid to Moscow and negotiations to secure funds from the International Monetary Fund to proceed with reform.

Khieu Samphan threatens to boycott Tokyo confce

TOKYO, June 21: Khmer Rouge leader Khieu Samphan made a new threat today to boycott a crucial Tokyo conference on aid to war-ravaged Cambodia — a move certain to deepen the movement's isolation and further disrupt the UN-brokered peace accord.

The Pol Pot regime will score a big defeat and be further isolated if they boycott the conference, a Japanese Foreign Ministry official told Reuters. "We made this clear to them."

Khieu Samphan, speaking after a meeting of Cambodia's Supreme National Council (SNC) in Tokyo today, was quoted as telling reporters he would not attend Monday's ministerial conference session. He arrived here on

Saturday, raising hopes he would attend the conference after an earlier boycott threat.

The conference, which held a first, working session on Saturday, aims to raise about 600 million dollar to rebuild Cambodia after more than a decade of civil war.

It is being attended by delegates from 32 countries, 12 international organisations and the European Commission.

Apart from the financial aspects of reconstruction, the participants also discussed on Saturday implementation of the UN-brokered peace agreement.

"If the Khmer Rouge boycotted Monday's conference, all participating countries would adopt a resolution to blame them," the Japanese

Foreign Ministry official said.

"Even China has been putting pressure on them to cooperate with the peace process. The Khmer Rouge will soon have no supporters left," he added.

Khieu Samphan visited the Chinese Embassy in Tokyo on Saturday night shortly after his arrival.

The extreme communist guerrilla group refuses to abide by the crucial second phase of the Paris peace accords — the disarmament of the country's four rival armies.

Khieu Samphan said today his presence at the conference "could lead to misunderstanding."

At today SNC meeting, Council President Prince

Norodom Sinhanouk and the leaders of the other, non-communist factions urged the Khmer Rouge to lay down their arms in compliance with the Paris agreement.

While confirming his position of respecting the Paris accord, the Khmer Rouge leader said there were discrepancies in its interpretation. He called for another conference to group the Paris signatories and 18 other countries concerned.

Yasushi Akashi, head of the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) told a newspaper the UN Security Council would take a tougher stance towards the Khmer Rouge if they continued obstructing UN peace efforts.

A frustrated Akashi sounded

a tough note in his interview with the Japanese daily Mainichi Shimbun.

"I think that if the Khmer Rouge continue their non-operative attitude (towards the UN peace process) the UN security council will escalate its attitude," he said.

"It would not be good if (the question) were not resolved in two or three weeks."

The Japanese government shares his frustration.

"We have done everything we could to help bring peace to Cambodia," said the Tokyo Foreign Ministry official. "But it is the Cambodian people finally who hold the key."

Street fighting in Sarajevo

BELGRADE, June 21: Heavy shelling, street fighting and machinegun fire continued unabated in besieged Sarajevo early on Sunday as Serb militias and their Muslim-Croat foes ignored a UN peace-keeper's call for a ceasefire, reports Reuter.

"There's no ceasefire, just continuous heavy firing," Sarajevo radio journalist Iroslav Simovic told Reuters by telephone.

The UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) Chief negotiator in Sarajevo, General Lewis Mackenzie, had appealed for a clear 48 hours of truce starting at 1600 GMT on Saturday.

It was the minimum condition before he would recommend proceeding with operations.