

UN unable to confirm chemical weapons use in Mozambique

UNITED NATIONS, June 24: One day after negotiators announced agreement on a worldwide ban of chemical weapons, Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali said Tuesday that UN investigators were unable to confirm allegations that rebels had used chemical weapons against government forces in Mozambique, reports AP.

Mozambique's government had charged that right-wing rebels of the Mozambique National Resistance, known by its Portuguese acronym Renamo, fired a chemical weapon at nearly 400 government troops on January 16 in the Ngungu region of Mozambique, close to the South African border.

The government soldiers suffered extreme heat, thirst, sore throats, chest pains and in some cases death, the UN investigators reported.

But after visiting the area in March, interviewing witnesses and taking samples, the UN team said it could not confirm use of a chemical agent. The team said too much time may have passed to detect traces of an agent. It said some symptoms were consistent with exposure to an atropine-like chemical warfare agent but

'Attack on Sarajevo barbaric' Baker for tougher US action against Serbia

WASHINGTON, June 24: Secretary of State James Baker called Tuesday for tougher US measures against Serbia, including the refusal to accept a Belgrade ambassador in Washington, reports AP.

Baker told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee he was recommending the measures to President George Bush because of the "humanitarian nightmare" and "barbarous" attacks by Serbian forces on the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo.

"It is hard to believe really in this day and age that armed forces will fire artillery and mortars indiscriminately into the heart of the city, flushing defenseless men, women and children out into the streets and then shooting them," Baker said of the Sarajevo attacks.

"It is an absolute outrage, it is barbaric, and it is inhuman," he added.

Bosnia and Croatia reiterated appeals Tuesday for international military interven-

tion to stop the bloodshed, after six civilians were killed and 80 wounded in a mortar attack on downtown Sarajevo Monday.

Baker said he would be recommending to President George Bush "that the United States no longer accept representation from Belgrade at the ambassadorial level."

He also said the last remaining Yugoslav consulate in the country in Chicago, Illinois, should be closed immediately. Two other Yugoslav consulates, in New York and San Francisco, have already been closed.

He also called for Washington to broaden its push for suspension of Serbia and Montenegro's participation in international organizations, saying they should be required to apply for membership in the world bodies and for diplomatic representations in the United States.

Serbia and Montenegro, all that remains of the Yugoslav federation, occupy the seat of the former Yugoslavia at the United Nations and other international bodies.

The new sanctions would "make clear our outrage and to further demonstrate conviction that the governments of Serbia and Montenegro cannot be member of a civilized community of nations," Baker said.

White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater said Baker's suggestions were under discussion.

"We are taking an increasingly concerned and hard line on that matter," Fitzwater said.

Washington recalled its ambassador in Belgrade, Warren Zimmerman for consultation in late May.

Serbia's ambassador to Washington, Djavad Mijatovic, has cancer and is expected to leave the United States at the end of June, a Yugoslav source said.

US and Yugoslav military attaches have been recalled, with the exception of the US air force attache who was left

Off the Record

Rushdie makes a surprise appearance

COPENHAGEN: British author Salman Rushdie, still under threat of death from Islamic fundamentalists over his novel 'The Satanic Verses,' appeared at a Danish writers' gathering here Tuesday, reports AP.

The Indian-born writer, making a surprise appearance at a meeting of some 50 writers at a Copenhagen Museum, reportedly to meet the German novelist Gunter Grass, called on western governments to play a more active role in supporting him.

At a press conference held aboard a boat moored in the Oeresund strait, Rushdie said he intended to speak out more freely now that the last two western hostages held in Lebanon had been released.

The continuing captivity of the German aid workers Heinrich Struwig and Thomas Kempfner — who were released last Wednesday — had meant that he could not speak freely, he said.

How Rushdie said, he hoped to rally support as widely as possible among western governments to condemn the Iranian government, not only for the death decree issued against him but for everyone threatened by state terrorism.

The Indian-born British writer arrived under close guard in Denmark on Monday, the local branch of the International Pen Club, which invited him, said.



'Dangerous' money to go to charity

LONDON: Michael Jackson said Tuesday that part of the proceeds from his current concert tour will go to a new charity for children, AP reports.

"Our children are the most beautiful, most sweet, most treasured of our creation and yet every minute at least 28 children die," Jackson, 33, told a news conference at London's Heathrow Airport.

He said some of the money earned by his 18-month "Dangerous" tour would benefit the Heal the World Foundation.

Jackson posed with a huge symbolic check for dollar 1 million from the tour's sponsor Pepsi-Cola.

Pepsi said the check symbolized what it hoped to raise by sponsoring fund-raising events connected with the Jackson tour.

The charity's executive director Kendall Lockhart said the Pepsi contribution, plus several million dollars donated by Jackson would help launch the charity.

Lockhart also announced the establishment of the Michael Jackson International Children's Prize, which will award dollar 65,000 a piece annually to six individuals, or groups — one from each continent — who have done the most at the grassroots level to help children.

Jackson left the news conference, held in an airplane hangar, in dramatic fashion: a wall slid away, to reveal an airplane, he climbed in, saluted the crowd and flew off to Munich where the European leg of his world tour begins on Saturday.



Bosnia, Croatia seeks int'l military action

BELGRADE, June 24: Bosnia and Croatia again pleaded Tuesday for international military intervention to stop the continuing bloodshed in their republics, while the European Community said talks to try and end the civil war would resume today, reports AP.

The EC sponsored talks would be attended by Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic and Croatian Leader Franjo Tudjman, a spokesman for EC negotiator Lord Carrington said.

Although President Alija Izetbegovic of Bosnia-Herzegovina had accepted the invitation to the talks, given the situation in Sarajevo, maybe the won't come in person and will send a representative," the spokesman added.

Bosnian Foreign Minister Haris Silajdzic, in an appeal to UN Security Council Monday night, said, "Bosnia-Herzegovina has been transformed into a concentration camp."

"Shells, missiles and chemical weapons (are) used against the civilian population while famine is claiming lives because of the blockade on towns," he said.

His appeal urged "the use of military force to end Serbia's aggression against Bosnia-Herzegovina," according to the Bosnian news agency BH, which said the same message was sent to the conference on security and cooperation in Europe.

17 torture cells found in Karachi MQM leader arrested on criminal charges

KARACHI, June 24: Security forces Tuesday arrested the leader of a powerful ethnic body on charges of involvement in cases of murder, kidnapping and torture as he tried to flee Pakistan, officials said here Tuesday, reports AP.

The army brought Salim Shehzad, Senior Vice-President of the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM) and a member of Pakistan's National Assembly, here from Baluchistan capital Quetta, where he was trying to cross the border after party dissidents took over MQM offices Friday, they said.

Altaf Hussain, founding father of the organization, which claims to represent Urdu-speaking settlers from India in Pakistan's southern Sindh province, has also been named in one of three cases of murder, kidnapping and terrorism along with party secretary general Imran Farooq.

Provincial Minister Safdar Baori was also implicated, but Shehzad is the only party leader to have been arrested.

Troops moved in Friday after the violence between the rival MQM groups Friday left

Australia unveils plan to help Aborigines

CANBERRA, June 24: The government on Wednesday unveiled a five-year, 250-million-dollar programme to help Aborigines escape the poverty in which many are trapped, reports AP.

The plan the government's response to a study of the deaths of 99 Aborigines in police custody in 1980-89 — is the second part of an overall 400-million-dollar (dlsr 300 million) plan for Aboriginal advancement.

It concluded that Aborigines face entrenched racism in their dealings with police and the broader Australian community. It found that Aborigines do not die at a greater rate in custody than Australia's majority European population.

His statement came after army discovered 17 torture cells in the city allegedly used by MQM for torturing opponents and dissidents.

MQM is a dominant political force in major urban centres. It is also a partner in the ruling coalition in Islamabad and in Sindh.

Torture persists in Greece: AI

Torture and ill-treatment of prisoners persists in Greece and the perpetrators are not punished, Amnesty International said in a report released Tuesday, reports AP from London.

The Greek government said it had nothing to hide, but that any outside investigation of the allegations would be "a grave insult" to the nation and its people.

"In 1991 alone Amnesty International received information on some 45 cases in which Greek police and prison guards had allegedly tortured or ill-treated individuals or groups of people in their custody," the international human rights organization said.

While not every case had been authenticated, the report said medical reports confirmed some accounts of torture.

"The consistency and frequency of the allegations indicate that the scope of the problem goes beyond a few isolated incidents," the report said.

Indonesia to build N-power plants

JAKARTA, June 24: Bucking a global trend away from commercial nuclear energy, Indonesia plans to build new reactors on Java, an island known for earthquakes and volcanoes, reports AP.

Officials say nuclear power is needed to sustain economic development in the world's fourth most populous country. They insist there will be no safety or environmental problems.

Critics say Indonesia risks a disaster on the scale of Chernobyl, and that other sources of energy can fill the nation's needs.

More than half of Indonesia's 180 million people live on the island of Java. Officials say the energy problem is not that Indonesia lacks resources, but that they are far from Java — much of the coal, oil and natural gas are hundreds of miles (kilometers) away in the northern part of the island of Sumatra.

In 1987, the government announced it was postponing studies on a nuclear power plant to focus on developing other energy sources.

But President Suharto reversed this policy two years later, citing dwindling oil reserves and power shortages on Java.

In Jakarta, the capital, there are frequent brown-outs which last for hours, and the government worries about the effect on foreign investment. Foreign embassies have been told they can get no preferential treatment.

Indonesia, an archipelago of 13,677 islands, stretches across part of the Pacific "rim of fire" and contains several geological fault lines associated with volcanoes and earthquakes. Java, an island the size of Portugal, has 28 active volcanoes.

The proposed site of the first plant is near Mount Merapi, a dormant volcano in Central Java, 286 miles (460 kilometers) east of Jakarta.



CHAUFFOUR, FRANCE: Tractors block a motorway behind a line of blazing tyres on Tuesday. Farmers protesting against EC agricultural policy are blocking main roads around the capital.

Mafia boss gets life-term for murder

NEW YORK, June 24: Mafia boss John Gotti, head of America's most powerful crime family, was sentenced on Tuesday to life in prison for murder and racketeering, triggering a near-riot as 1,000 supporters tried to storm the courthouse, reports Reuter.

Gotti, 51, was sentenced in a 13-minute hearing where he refused to speak, outside the marble building, supporters yelled "free John Gotti," overturned one car and smashed the windows of five others in a melee in which eight policemen were injured and seven demonstrators arrested.

When the crowd tried to storm the Brooklyn courthouse, officials locked the doors.

Palestinians welcome Rabin's victory

RAMALLAH, Occupied West Bank, June 24: Palestinians on Wednesday welcomed the Labour party's upset victory over herd-line Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir as a boost to the Middle East peace process, reports AP.

The Palestine Liberation Organization hailed Shamir's defeat and called for Israel to hold direct talks with the PLO. It vowed, however, to continue pushing unrest in the occupied territories.

Throughout the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, Palestinians watched Israel Television into the wee hours to hear election results.

"It sure is a dramatic change in the mentality of the Israelis. I hope this victory means the Israelis are now serious about peace," said Yacoub Fares, a 35-year-old Ramallah blacksmith.

Zuhair Awad, a 32-year-old factory worker from the Kalandia refugee camp near Ramallah, was also hopeful.

"Things will be much different and easier with Labour," he predicted. "It is clear they are ready to make some compromises for the sake of peace and their own people. I hope Labour will stick to its promises."

Labour leader Yitzhak Rabin, who commanded the army that seized the West Bank and Gaza Strip 25 years ago, has said he would negotiate Palestinian autonomy.

Iranian envoy in Baghdad

An Iranian envoy flew to Baghdad on Tuesday for talks on resuming the exchange of prisoners from the 1980-88 Gulf War, the official Islamic Republic News Agency reported, says AP from Nicosia.

IRNA, monitored in Cyprus, said Ali Khorram of the Iranian Foreign Ministry will spend two days in Baghdad "probing into the cases of the remaining Iranian and Iraqi prisoners of war."

It gave no details.

Both Iraq and Iran are believed to still hold several thousand POWs.

They started exchanging prisoners in August 1990, after Saddam Hussein, bogged down in his invasion of Kuwait, gave in to Tehran's cease-fire demands to secure his eastern flank while he faced the US-led coalition in the Gulf.

But the exchange collapsed with each side accusing the other of not handing over all the prisoners they held.

Thousands of Iraqi prisoners, mostly Shiite Muslims like the majority of Iranians, defected during the conflict that ended with a UN-sponsored cease-fire in August 1988.

Balts want former Red Army to leave

PAPLAKA HELICOPTER BASE, Latvia, June 24: The three Baltic nations want the former Red Army to leave their soil, but many of the soldiers are not willing to go home and even risk defying their superiors, reports AP.

"Military chiefs in Moscow told us to leave Paplaka," said Col Nikolai Shilovski, who commands the base at Paplaka, 200 kms (125 miles) west of Riga, the Latvian capital.

"But we're not going anywhere until we have at least 400 apartments (at home) for officers and their families stationed here," Shilovski said, gesturing toward a group of 15 helicopters and their pilots.

Since winning independence after the failed Soviet coup last August, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania have demanded repeatedly that all personnel of the former Soviet military be withdrawn. More than 100,000 soldiers are stationed in the Baltics.

In May, Latvian officials said all troops must leave Riga in five months and all of Latvia by September 1993.

Russia, which has taken command of the forces in the Baltics, has said it will keep some soldiers in Latvia until 1999. The Russian military says it does not have enough housing for all the soldiers returning from eastern Europe.

"We cannot tolerate such a position," is the Latvian response, as expressed by Georgs Stiprals of the Defense Ministry. "Foreign troops must leave next year at the latest."

During 50 years of occupation, Soviet forces had more than 600 posts and bases in Latvia, including facilities for more than 330 warships, Stiprals said. They often took the best property and farmland.

In 1953, soldiers emptied a 21,000-hectare (52,000-acre) area in Zvarde, near Paplaka, that included 500 houses, two churches and five cemeteries. The Kremlin sent the residents to detention camps in Siberia and turned their home into a bombing range.

"It was a real hellhole in there, with tangled metal, broken gravestones and unexploded bombs," said Olgerts Bombrovskis, 67, who visited the site two years ago.

Russian bombers still use Zvarde. "We have to practice somewhere, so we drop bombs here twice a week," said Lt Col Yevgeny Yupin, leaning on a gate that carried the warning in Russian: "Stop or we shoot."

Yupin acknowledged that civilians had been killed when planes missed their targets, but added: "What can you do? It happens."

The Baltics insist that the Red Army leave property and arms behind to cover estimated damages of dlsr 200 billion done by the military in the three countries since the Soviet Union occupied them in 1940.

Russia will hand over some equipment, "but not for free," said Maj Vladimir Karelik, stationed at a radar base near the port of Liepaja, 30 kms (20 miles) west of Paplaka.

"It's expensive equipment and the Latvians will have to pay for it," he said.

More than 40 warships, including eight submarines, are docked at a naval base in Liepaja.

"We could leave some ships behind for the Latvians, such as the minesweepers," said Nikolai Ronyancev, a chief warrant officer who has served in Liepaja for 20 years. "But we also want access to service facilities for Russian ships here in the future."

Troops have vacated some Estonian bases, but it is not clear whether they left the country or just moved elsewhere in Estonia, said Toomas Puura, the deputy defense minister.

"In any case, they are taking out equipment and are devastating military sites," Puura said. "If these activities don't stop, we have to intervene."

Estonian border guards seized two partly deserted bases in May.

Perot faces questions about his character

DALLAS, Texas, June 24: US billionaire Ross Perot, ahead of President George Bush in many polls and facing growing questions about his character, on Tuesday scheduled his first formal news conference since he began his unofficial campaign for president, reports Reuter.

Perot will answer questions from the press today in Annapolis, Maryland, after a rally expected to draw as many as 80,000 people.

Perot has said he did not want to be overexposed to the media, but a stepped-up series of attacks by Bush's republican administration and several negative news stories in the past few days.