

Combined attacks launched against Tamil rebels

COLOMBO, June 28. Security forces today launched a major air, sea and land attack against Tamil guerrilla positions just outside their bunker lines in curfew-bound northern Sri Lanka, military officials here said, reports AFP.

Ground troops backed by helicopter gunships and naval fire advanced into territory held by the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) at Vettialkerni coastal area, a military spokesman said.

He said there had been little or no resistance during the first hour of the operation. "We cannot give more details because the operation is still in progress," the spokesman said. Troops last year established a beach head at Vettialkerni to lift an LTTE siege on the nearby army garrison at Elephant Pass, which is strategically located on the key land route to the Jaffna peninsula, the stronghold of the Tigers.

Israel-trained commandos for anti-terrorist operation in Punjab

NEW DELHI, India, June 28: Indian intelligence agents trained in Israel are preparing to launch a counter-terrorist campaign against Sikh separatists in Punjab, a newspaper reported Sunday, said AP.

The 100 officers who were trained in intelligence gathering and combat would launch their strike in winter, the Pioneer newspaper reported, quoting unnamed sources.

Some of the officers had set up roadside snack bars and workshops to mingle with people and gather intelligence near the strongholds of militant groups fighting to make Punjab an independent nation for Sikhs, the paper said.

The commandos were equipped with Israeli communication equipment, it said. The newspaper did not give details of the proposed operation or identify the location.

About 20 senior army officers recently attended an Israeli workshop on counter-terrorism last month, the paper said.

A special commando force being raised in Punjab would soon be sent to Israel and the United Kingdom for further training, the paper said.

India and Israel established diplomatic links in January, clearing the way for military and commercial links. Sikhs militants say successive federal governments have denied the Sikhs their cultural and religious freedom. Sikhs constitute barely 2 per cent of India's 844 million people, but they are in a slight majority in Punjab.

AFP adds: Israeli diplomats in India and officials from the Indian and Uttar Pradesh governments could not be reached for comment. Indian upgraded its relations with Israel to full diplomatic status in January.

Since then, Indian officials have hinted that they are seeking both military and counter-terrorism technology from Israel.

The Pioneer also said members of a special commando force being raised in Punjab would be sent to Israel and Britain for similar training. But sources in the state police said they were unaware of any such plan.

There is no programme on the line as far as we know," a senior Punjab intelligence officer told AFP in Chandigarh, the capital of Punjab, where Sikh militants are fighting to set up small restaurants and engineering workshops on the highways in Uttar Pradesh to gather intelligence on the movements of Sikh separatists.

Pakistan, Uzbekistan sign accords

ISLAMABAD, June 28: Pakistan and Uzbekistan signed yesterday three agreements in Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan, to strengthen bilateral cooperation, reports Xinhua.

The treaty on the principles of the interstate relations and cooperation to develop and promote political, economic, cultural, scientific and other links was signed by Prime Minister of Pakistan Nawaz Sharif and Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov.

The other two agreements on mutual cooperation in the fields of economic and trade, culture, health care, science and technology were signed by the concerned ministers of the two countries.

Nawaz Sharif and Karimov described the accords as a historic step towards greater understanding and friendship between the two countries.

The Pakistan prime minister arrived in Tashkent on Saturday afternoon on a two-day official visit to the newly independent Central Asian Republic at the invitation of Uzbek President Karimov.

EC warns Serbia of military action

LISBON, June 28: European Community leaders have warned Serbia that the EC might back international military action to break its siege of Sarajevo, capital of the former Yugoslavia republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, reports Reuters.

But a hard-won consensus at a two-day EC summit in Lisbon on the issues was immediately overshadowed when French President Francois Mitterrand flew to Yugoslavia on a dramatic peace missions on Saturday.

Mitterrand's intention was to end the Serb siege of Sarajevo and arrange relief for its starving inhabitants, he flew to Croatia's Adriatic port of split en route to Sarajevo and talks with Bosnian President Alija Izetbegovic.

At the Lisbon summit, Mitterrand had pleaded for "strong action" to end the fighting in Bosnia.

The summit agreed to support the United Nations, which has already imposed trade sanctions on the rump Serb-dominated Yugoslav state, if it decided to use force to break the siege.

On other matters, the EC leaders, stung by Denmark's rejection of the Maastricht treaty, agreed to try to make the EC more appealing to its people, but the meeting ended in an unseemly squabble over money.

At an acrimonious final session on Saturday, the 12 heads of government ducked tough decisions on the future of the EC budget, aid to poor member states and were to site key institutions such as the planned European Central bank.

The summit also agreed to open EC membership negotiations with Sweden, Finland, Austria and Switzerland, but only once the community has solved its budget row and ratified its blueprint for political and monetary union.

German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, a passionate advocate of European Union, said he had won backing for his view that the community must press ahead towards closer integration, undeterred by Denmark's "no" to the Maastricht Union treaty.

BRIEFLY

47 Chinese held in Mexico : A group of 47 Chinese were arrested in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas after illegally crossing the border from Guatemala, the state News Agency Notimex reported Saturday, says AFP from Mexico City.

Twelve Hondurans were also taken into custody, according to authorities, who said the illegal aliens were heading toward Mexico City and then on to the United States.

Immigrations officials also arrested a Mexican suspected of charging the aliens 500 dollars each to take them to the capital.

Peru PM invites opposition to talks: The Prime Minister Saturday invited leaders of opposition political parties to meet with him as part of a national dialogue designed to rebuild Peru's democracy, reports AP from Lima.

The opposition did not immediately react to the invitation. President Alberto Fujimori closed Congress and suspended the constitution April 5, saying corruption had shackled his reform efforts.

The opposition has been insisting that Fujimori open direct talks with them and has refused to participate in a broad national dialogue open to the public.

The invitations sent Saturday from Prime Minister Oscar de la Puente invited them to meet individually with the prime minister from June 30 to July 3.

Shangkun leaves for Morocco : President Yang Shangkun left Beijing Sunday on a two-week state visit to Morocco, Tunisia and Ivory Coast, reports Xinhua from Beijing.

The visit, the first one ever paid by a Chinese President to these countries, constitutes an important event in the relations between China and these countries and Africa as a whole.

According to Chinese sources, Yang will have talks with leaders of the three countries on bilateral relations, world situation and major international issues of common concern.

Yang is accompanied on the visit by State Councilor and Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, Vice Minister of Foreign Economic Relations and Trade Wang Wendong and other senior officials.

Quake rocks Southern California : A strong earthquake shook Los Angeles before dawn Sunday, reports AP from Los Angeles.

The quake knocked radio stations off the air temporarily, threw people out of bed and set off car alarms.

The tremor started with a slow shake and built in about five seconds to large undulating waves, witnesses said. By some accounts, it lasted about half a minute.

Fire trucks were rolling throughout Los Angeles.

Algerian minister threatens war: Algerian Defence Minister Khaled Nezzar threatened all-out war against Islamic fundamentalists who take up arms against the government, in an interview in Sunday's edition of El Moudjahid, reports AFP from Algiers.

He said the army would "wage implacable war, until (the armed fundamentalists) complete eradication."

Major General Nezzar, who is a member of the collegial presidency disclosed that 17 soldiers had deserted since a state of emergency was declared in February.

Three of the 12 recaptured had been sentenced to death by the military tribunal at Blida, he said.

Polls in Mongolia begins : Mongolians began voting today in an election likely to end the uneasy coalition of ex-communists and democratic reformers which has run this vast central Asian nation into economic ruin, reports Reuters from Ulan Bator.

Voters are being offered a choice between the ruling Mongolian People's Revolutionary Party (MPRP) -- former hardline communists who say they have changed their ways -- and a range of opponents, led by the Democratic Coalition, who say that they haven't.

Hamas leader's condition worsens: The condition of a jailed leader of the Muslim fundamentalist group Hamas has worsened seriously the Union of Arab Lawyers said in Cairo Saturday, reports AFP from Cairo.

Sheikh Ahmad Yassin who is serving a life sentence for murder in Israel is in "alarming condition after his health deteriorated seriously over the past weeks," the union said in a communiqué of which AFP received a copy.

"Human rights organizations must intervene immediately to save the life of Sheikh Ahmad Yassin," it said.

Yassin, 57, heads Hamas, the acronym for the Islamic resistance movement.

Volcano erupts after 39 years : A volcano erupted on Saturday sending a 30,000-foot (9,144-metre) ash plume into the Alaskan sky after 39 years of sleep, Reuters reports from Alaska.

No injuries or damage were reported following the 7:04 AM local time (1504 GMT) eruption of Mount Spurr 80 miles (129 km) west of Anchorage, Alaska's largest city.

The eruption came weeks after scientists warned increasing earthquakes under the mountain indicated that it was rumbling back to life.



SARAJEVO: A man supports the head of a woman badly injured by a mortar fire as she is transported in the back of the car to hospital on Saturday. Hungry Sarajevo citizens sheltered from further fighting Saturday in spite of a Sunday evening deadline for Serbian shelling of the Bosnian capital to stop set by UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali.

Palestinians defy Rabin's threat

JERUSALEM: Palestinians defied Labour leader Yitzhak Rabin's threat to show no mercy in cases of attacks on Jews a day before he was to meet Israel's President for consultations on forging a government coalition, reports Reuters.

In separate incidents Palestinians stabbed and wounded two Jewish settlers in the West Bank on Saturday. The attackers escaped.

Rabin on Friday vowed to show no mercy to attackers, "If someone is mistaken, and thinks we won't use an iron fist against the murderers... he will learn," he declared.

President Chaim Herzog has invited Rabin and Labour Party leaders to meet him on Sunday

in informal consultations with political parties that won parliamentary seats in a general election on Tuesday.

By law, Herzog must choose the party leader he thinks has the best chance of forming a government. He is not expected to make his decision until after the election results are officially authorised in the middle of the week.

But Herzog's choice seems obvious, Rabin's Labour crushed Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir's Likud Party by 44 seats to 32. With the leftist Meretz Bloc and Arab Parties, Labour commands 61 seats, in the 120-seat parliament.

Likud leaders are to meet with Shamir on Sunday after the weekly cabinet meeting to discuss how to pick his successor as Likud head, Israel radio said.

Shamir has said he intends to resign, but has not set a date. Defence Minister Moshe Arens has said he will leave politics when the new government is formed.

Rabin has vowed to freeze all Jewish settlement of lands captured by Israel in the 1967 Middle East war except those he deems necessary for security on the Golan Heights and in the Jordan valley. He would continue building around Jerusalem.

He wants limited West Bank and Gaza Strip Palestinian self-rule within a year, the autonomy would last for five years to be followed by a permanent peace agreement.

Rajiv received funds from Soviet Union

NEW DELHI, June 28: Former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi received secret funds routed through trade organizations of the former Soviet Union, a newspaper reported Sunday, reports AP.

The Times of India reported that the former chief of the KGB, the intelligence outfit, in a letter to the communist party said Gandhi expressed deep gratitude for help received through commercial deals of a firm his family controlled.

Details of the letter were first published in the Russian daily, Izvestia, the news reports said.

The letter, which was made public recently, did not give details of the firm, the amount of money or the date it was allegedly paid to it.

The letter said: "In a confidential message, Gandhi informed that the major part of these resources were used to support the (Congress) party of Gandhi."

Spokespersons of the Congress and Gandhi's family were not immediately available for comment.



Rao celebrates 71st birthday

NEW DELHI, June 28: The Prime Minister, PV Narasimha Rao, is 71 today, reports PTI.

The President, R Venkataraman, the vice president, Dr. Shanker Dayal Sharma, and members of the council of ministers called on Rao this morning to wish him many happy returns of the day and many more years in the service of the nation.

Rao enters his 72nd year and also his second year in office.

Rao has preferred to celebrate a quiet birthday at his residence. No functions were organised or celebrations held to mark the occasion.

Among the callers on the Prime Minister were AICC (I) office bearers and chief ministers who happened to be in town.

While most Democrats support abortion rights, there are some vehement opponents in the party's ranks -- including Pennsylvania's Governor Robert Casey.

Clinton has not hesitated to back pro-choice forces, claiming Bush is out of touch with the majority of Americans, Perot, who is hoping to beef up his weak support among women, has said publicly "it's a woman's decision."

But both have said minors seeking abortions should be required to obtain permission from their parents, a fence-straddling tactic that abortion rights advocates believe would lead to an increase in illegal abortions.

Israel evacuates Jews from Moldova

JERUSALEM, June 28: Hundreds of Jews in Moldova have been taken by bus from fighting zones in the first wave of an Israeli-sponsored evacuation from the former Soviet republic, an official said Saturday, reports AP.

The rescue is being carried out by the Jewish Agency, a privately funded organization that handles immigration for the Israeli government.

Agency spokesman Yehuda Weinraub said there are an estimated 40,000 Jews in Moldova, with about 13,000 living in the war-torn areas of Tiraspol and Bendary.

Battles between Moldovans and Russian-speaking separatists have escalated in recent days. Report say up to 300 people have been killed and hundreds more wounded.

Weinraub said the agency established a special rescue center in Tiraspol to receive aid requests and help those who want to leave.

"A fleet of buses has been sent to Tiraspol for evacuation if necessary," Weinraub said. The agency also sent emergency food and medical supplies.

Of the Jews who chose to leave, 280 were bussed to Odessa in neighbouring Ukraine, and 170 said they would continue to Israel. About 100 Jews went to Kishinev, the Moldovan capital.

Thousands of other Jews "are still waiting to see if the fighting dies down" following a cease-fire announced on Saturday, Weinraub said.

About 400,000 Jews from the former Soviet Union have

immigrated to Israel since 1989. The immigrant flow has slowed drastically because of high unemployment among newcomers to the Jewish state.

Israel has also stepped in to rescue Jews from Yugoslavia, but only several hundred of estimated 5,000 Jews have chosen to seek refuge in Israel.

In May 1991, Israel airlifted 14,000 Jews from Ethiopia.

Another report adds: A UN team arrived in the Moldovan capital on Saturday as sporadic fighting between loyalists and Slavic separatists reportedly claimed seven more lives in the Trans-Dniester region.

Fighting was also reported in the former Soviet republics of Azerbaijan and Georgia, where a cease-fire was to go into effect Sunday.

Abortion a burning issue in US election

WASHINGTON, June 28: Abortion, always a political hot potato, is likely to become a determining factor in what could turn out to be a close three-way race for the White House in November, reports AFP.

While abortion has never before been the central issue in US elections, a pending Supreme Court decision on a Pennsylvania law severely limiting access to abortion has put it on the front burner.

The Conservative Court, where most of the justices have been appointed by former President Ronald Reagan and President George Bush -- both openly opposed to abortion -- is expected to hand down a decision as early as Monday

upholding the law. Pennsylvania's law, which imposes a 24-hour waiting period and forces women seeking abortions to obtain consent from their husbands, is considered by some as an attempt to ban abortion altogether.

Allowing the law to stand would not completely overturn the 1973 Roe vs. Wade Supreme Court decision guaranteeing a woman's right to an abortion anywhere in the United States, but it would allow states to severely limit access to abortion.

Consensus of the attention brought to the issue because of the elections, abortion rights foes and supporters began lobbying the candidates months ago.

Off the Record

It's anti-God MILWAUKEE: More than 500 anti-abortion protesters jammed sidewalks outside a women's clinic Saturday, waving photos of dismembered fetuses, singing hymns and shouting Bible verses. More than 75 people were arrested, reports AP.

About an equal number of abortion-rights advocates surrounded the clinic's entrance and escorted 16 women with appointments inside.

Some of the protesters gathered in groups to pray. Others wept as women entered the Summit Women's Health Organization clinic.

"It's anti-God," said Jim Minnema, 46, an electrician who lives 60 miles (100 kilometers) north of Milwaukee. "As Christians, we must rescue those going to the slaughter or we will have to answer for it."

Some protesters ran across the street in front of the clinic, dropped to the sidewalk and tried to crawl through the legs of police officers guarding entrances.

Piano ends its 175 years tour

LONDON: This time the piano toured, rather than the pianist, reports AP.

Ludwig van Beethoven's British-made grand piano was back in England after 175 years, having travelled from its home in Hungary's National Museum via Austria and Germany. Franz Liszt gave it to the museum; here it dates from 1717.

The piano has been on the road in a sealed truck, inside a specially made, metal-lined, thermostatically controlled wooden box, covered with a pink and white duvet and with its own burglar alarm.

The piano is probably the world's most valuable, estimated at 27 million dollars.

David Winston, an American who lives in England, got the delicate job of restoring the Beethoven grand and went to Budapest for the assignment.

"When I played it, Eszter Fontana the museum curator and I both had the same feeling: that Liszt seemed to be playing and that Beethoven was in the room," the 41-year-old Winston said in an interview.

Fifth set of quintuplets

ARGENTINA: A woman gave birth to Argentina's fifth set of quintuplets Saturday, and the five baby boys all were faring well, hospital officials said, reports AP.

The babies born to Ana Fallvene, 33, and Oscar Guerra, 38, were in good condition, and only two of the infants required respiratory assistance, said Neonatologist Maria Ester Gutierrez.

Fallvene, who had experienced difficulty conceiving a child, underwent hormone treatments, officials said.

Friends congratulate 'homosexual couples'

ITALY: Ten homosexual couples, all but one of them men, were 'married' on Saturday in a civil ceremony in Milan attended by over 1,000 people, reports Reuters.

Friends and well-wishers threw confetti and congratulated the couples after the ceremony conducted by town councillor Paolo Hutter in a central square.

The marriages were organised in protest at Italy's refusal to recognise in law marriages between couples of the same sex.

Roman Catholic church groups earlier described the mass wedding as "repulsive."

Diana pushes for formal separation

LONDON: Two British tabloids reported Saturday the Princess Diana is pushing for a formal separation from Prince Charles by the end of the year, reports AP.

Buckingham Palace refused comment on the reports in The Sun and Daily Mail, which have engaged in an increasingly bitter circulation war as they try to outdo one another in covering the alleged royal rift.

The end of the 11-year royal marriage could spark a constitutional crisis, The Sun and the Daily Mail said. Both quoted unnamed sources.