

Resignations of provincial MQM MPs will be accepted

ISLAMABAD, July 26: Deputy Speaker of Sindh Provincial Assembly Moham-mad Marri has decided to accept the resignations of 10 provincial legislators belonging to the Mohajir Qaumi Movement (MQM), reports Xinhua.

The Deputy Speaker was quoted by today's local press as saying that the notification about the resignation would be issued today and the election commission would be informed.

The decision about the acceptance of resignations was taken after consultation with Chief Minister of Sindh Province Muzaffar Husain Shah on Saturday.

Earlier, the members of provincial assembly had written letters to chief election commissioner of Pakistan to seek his intervention in the non-acceptance of their resignation by the Deputy Speaker of the Sindh assembly.

The MQM parliamentarians requested the chief election commissioner to issue a notification of acceptance of the resignation and fix a date for by-elections.

24 out of 28 MQM legislators of the provincial assembly submitted their resignations on June 27 in protest against the "victimization".

Rao gov't faces tough questions over bank scandal

Cong allows Ayodhya issue to harass BJP

NEW DELHI, July 26: India's minority government was facing tough questions over its radical economic reforms and a one billion dollar bank scandal when a 100-year-old religious row resurfaced this month, reports Reuters.

The controversy over the start of construction of a Hindu temple on the site of a 16th-century mosque at Ayodhya pushed all other issues into the background.

At any other time, the resignations of Commerce Minister Palaniappan Chidambaram and a top Planning Ministry official for investing in a company at the centre of the bank scandal would have been a hot political issue.

But opposition leaders in parliament shouted down attempts to conduct any business not connected with Ayodhya. Nothing got done as parliament was adjourned in Pandemonium.

Political analyst Asian Nandy said the dispute was a classic case of how to make trivial issues politically fruitful for all parties.

He said leftist and centrist parties seized on the Ayodhya dispute to try to embarrass the government because they feared attacks on the economic reforms and the bank scandal would reap little benefit for them.

The Congress Party of Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao allowed this to happen because it felt the opprobrium was directed at the pro-Hindu Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The BJP, the main opposition party, is allied to the Hindu campaign in Ayodhya and controls the government of Uttar Pradesh state where the town is located.

For Rao's minority government, one section of the opposition attacking the other reduced the chances of a unified challenge to its rule.

Nandy said Rao's talks with hardline Hindu leaders on Thursday, which led to their calling

off the campaign for three months, were a master stroke.

"The Congress wants the support of the BJP but wants to keep it on a leash," he said. "The BJP will be like the Congress's lapdog for the next few months."

"It is sad our politics has come to this."

For the BJP, the campaign resurrected its flagging fortunes.

The party came to power in four North Indian States and emerged as the largest opposition group in parliament because of the emotions generated by Ayodhya during the 1991 general elections.

Hindus, 82 per cent of India's 850 million people say the mosque was built on the spot where their venerated God-king Rama was born. Muslims, a 100 million-strong minority in the country, say there is no proof of the claim.

The religious divide and the BJP's appeal had

seemingly dwindled in Rao's one year in office, as he embarked on a revolutionary turn round of the protected economy.

The radical liberalisation programme had come under fire in recent months because opposition members felt it was contributing to double-digit inflation.

They also said the open economic policies had helped spawn the bank scandal, in which funds from securities transactions were channelled into the stock exchange.

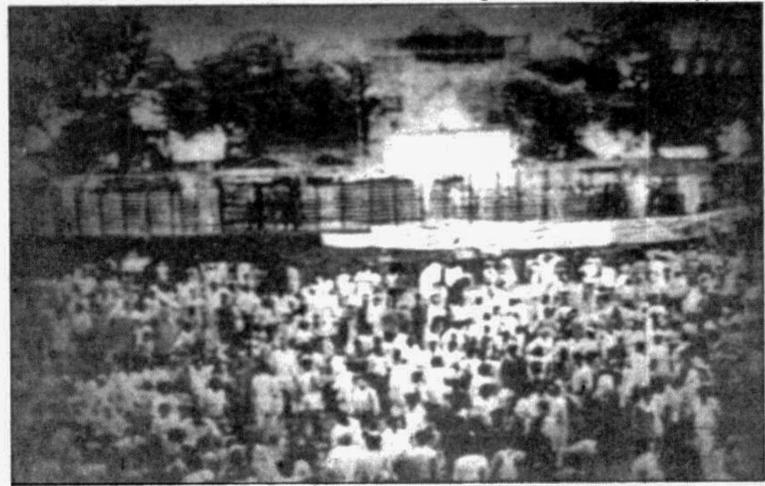
The opposition brought a no-confidence motion against Rao earlier this month, citing mismanagement of the economy as a prime factor. But by the time the debate was held, Hindu leaders had started their latest Ayodhya campaign and that was the only issue which interested politicians.

In the two years before Rao took power, Ayodhya was a political time-bomb. Two governments fell because they could not straddle the contradiction between attempting to maintain India's secular policies and avoid antagonising what was perceived as a Hindu vote bank.

At least 2,000 people were killed in Hindu-Muslim clashes over those years over a dispute that started back in 1958, according to historians.

"Given the strong emotions aroused, one can understand members getting worked up over it and a certain amount of heat being generated in parliament," the independent Indian express newspaper said of the Ayodhya issue on Saturday.

"But the country can ill-afford such prolonged disruptions of parliamentary proceedings, particularly at a time when scandals like the financial scam and matters like an evaluation of the new economic policy require serious scrutiny."



Militant Hindus building a temple near Babri Mosque in Ayodhya. — STAR TV Photo

Chinese media hail Pawar's visit

BEIJING, July 26: In a further sign of warming relations between China and India, the Chinese state-run media today hailed the goodwill visit of Indian Defence Minister Sharan Pawar, reports Reuters.

Pawar, the first Indian Defence Minister to visit China, held talks on Saturday with his Chinese counterpart General Qin Jiwei, the New Hina News Agency reported.

"His visit is regarded as a big event in the history of friendly contacts between the Chinese and Indian armed forces," the official news agency said.

"In the talks, the two defence ministers exchanged views in a friendly atmosphere on a wide range of international, regional and bilateral issues."

"Both sides believe that the talks promoted mutual understanding and helped increased friendly exchanges between the two armies," the agency said, adding that Qin accepted an invitation to visit India.

President Ramaswamy Venkataraman in May became the first Indian head of state to visit China. During his visit, Chinese Premier Li Peng said he believed a long-running border dispute could be solved.

BRIEFLY

Geagea evacuates HQ: The head of the disbanded Christian Lebanese forces militia, Samir Geagea, on Saturday evacuated his former headquarters near Beirut following a 20-hour standoff with the army, LF sources said, reports AFP.

Army troops backed by tanks entered the Quarantina compound on the northern outskirts north of here in a pre-dawn operation with government orders to recover a building seized illegally by the LF during the 16-year civil war.

The move prompted an outcry from the head of Lebanon's powerful Christian Maronite Church, Patriarch Nasrallah Sfeir, who accused the government of bias, and prompted thousands of demonstrators to rally in support of Geagea.

LF sources said Geagea, his wife, family members and 30 aides left the compound for an unspecified destination.

20 killed in Lima truck mishap: A crowded truck plunged into a ravine in the Peruvian andes, killing at least 20 people, police reported Saturday, AFP says from Lima.

The cause of the crash, which occurred Friday, was not immediately known and no witnesses to the accident were located. Police said a rural worker contacted them Saturday after passing the ravine and spotting "a crushed truck and several bodies."

Rescue crews were working at the crash site near the town of Lucumapato, 200 kilometers (125 miles) southeast of Lima, and police did not report immediately that there were any survivors.

Officials said they feared the death toll could climb since trucks meant for use in transporting food and livestock routinely run routes to remote mountain towns that buses do not serve, crammed with coastal city-dwellers.

Fire in NZ Parliament: New Zealand's Parliament building were ablaze Sunday sending a thick pall of smoke over the capital city, AFP reports from Wellington.

Radio New Zealand reported that 25 fire appliances were fighting the blaze which broke out on the top floor of the turn of the century building.

Although fire spokesman Mike Houghton said they were close to bringing the fire under control, flames could still be seen leaping from the building and four firefighters have been injured. The buildings are currently empty ahead of major reconstruction due to begin Monday. It had become an earthquake risk.

The radio said the blaze began in an area formally occupied by the office of the Leader of the Opposition and had spread through the roof of the turn of the century building.

5 escape French prison: A hijacked helicopter plucked five convicts from a prison yard Saturday before guards even had a chance to react, but authorities captured two of the escapees within hours, police said, AP reports from Marseille, France.

The helicopter touched down twice in a courtyard of Marseille's Baumettes Prison during mid-afternoon and flew off with the five, witnesses said. No shots were fired because guards were caught by surprise, police said.

The helicopter was found about an hour later in a field. The pilot said a couple who had rented the aircraft in the nearby town of Castellat produced a rifle and ordered him to fly to the prison.

Police set up roadblocks and caught two of the convicts and one of the hijackers about three hours after the escape. Police did not provide the names of those recaptured, or specify how they were caught.

Newsman jailed in India: An Indian court sent a former reporter of a popular daily to prison for four months Saturday for a story he filed 15 years ago when the country was under internal emergency, officials said, AFP reports from New Delhi.

Magistrate VK Maheshwari also admonished S Mugaonkar, now retired from post of Editor of the Indian Express, for letting reporter Javid Latif file the story on demolitions of shanty towns in central Delhi in April 1977.

Latif went to prison for quoting slain Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's close aide, Jagmohan saying during the demolition of Muslim homes that he would not allow another Pakistan to come up in New Delhi.

New bid to relieve Gorazde will be folly: UN official

SARAJEVO, July 26: Any new attempt to relieve besieged Gorazde would be folly, a UN official said Saturday after mines and bullets turned back his relief convoy, reports AP.

Fabrizio Hochschild, director of relief operations in Sarajevo for the UN High Commissioner for refugees, spoke after the convoy straggled back to base Saturday.

"The road to Gorazde is not safe. A horrible, terrible, incredibly stupid war is going on there," Hochschild said. "To go back now would be incredibly stupid."

Serbian media from Belgrade reported that the convoy was attacked by Bosnian Muslims. Muhamed Zlatan Hrnecovic, a spokesman for the Bosnian Defense Forces in Sarajevo, blamed the Serbs.

Gorazde, 70 kilometers (40 miles) southeast of Sarajevo, is surrounded by Serbian forces, the last government stronghold in eastern Bosnia. The population of 40,000 has been swollen by an estimated 30,000 ethnic Muslim refugees.

For weeks, residents have been appealing to the world via ham radio for assistance, saying they are under constant shelling and in need of food and medicine.

The relief mission left UN headquarters in Sarajevo on Thursday morning: two trucks carrying 20 tons of food and medicine, one light vehicle and two UN armored personnel carriers. It was accompanied by 13 UN troops.

After leaving Sarajevo the convoy was joined by a Serbian armored personnel carrier, said Hochschild.

"As we passed Sokolac about 24 kilometers (15 miles east of Sarajevo) it became clear that we were entering gray areas," he said.

The convoy pressed on until

they neared a point where two hours earlier three Serbs had been killed. It soon found the mangled bodies in an overturned car.

On Friday morning, the convoy finally reached Jabuka — 12 kilometers (8 miles) short of Gorazde — and UN headquarters in Sarajevo reported it had sent out a rescue convoy with mine-clearing experts.

Hochschild concluded it was time to turn back. "I felt we had stretched far enough."

Meanwhile Reuter adds: Britain issued a call for an international peace conference in London in August.

Among 12 people killed in the Bosnian capital on Saturday were three waiting in line at an aid distribution point near the city's old market, local radio journalists said. Seven more civilians were killed in the same area.

250 Somalis prevented to disembark

MOMBASA, Kenya, July 26: More than 250 Somali refugees who were denied permission to disembark at Mombasa remained on the high seas Saturday, reports AP.

Mbuo Waganagwa, the provincial commissioner, said Kenyan officials and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees were trying to resolve the matter.

Meanwhile, other UN officials who said this week that about 1.5 million people are on the brink of starvation in Somalia were in the ravaged Somali capital of Mogadishu this weekend for talks with clan warlords.

A team of unarmed ceasefire monitors planned to begin patrols Monday.

Tens of thousands of Somalis are believed to have died from malnutrition and factional fighting in their country, and hundreds of thousands more have fled.

In Kenya the Daily Nation newspaper reported Saturday that the Jamaica-registered cargo ship with the 250 refugees aboard arrived the previous day. The paper quoted Waganagwa as saying the Somalis were prevented from disembarking because a nearby refugee camp was congested.

Telephone calls to UNHCR offices in Mombasa and Nairobi were not answered.

Fresh move to bring peace in Kabul

KABUL, July 26: Defence Minister Ahmad Shah Masood has appointed three deputies from the often feuding guerrilla factions in Kabul in an effort to bring peace to the Afghan capital, reports Reuter.

Masood had previously worked without deputies in one of the most difficult government posts since the Mujahideen guerrillas took power in Afghanistan in April.

Political sources said Masood had made a clever move in choosing deputy ministers from hardline Ittehad-I-Islami and mainly Shi'ite Muslim Hezb-i-Wahdat groups.

Members of the two groups fought each other in the streets of Kabul last weekend and about 500 people were wounded in some of the worst violence since the Mujahideen takeover.

The third deputy minister came from the hardline Hezb-i-Islami party of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar which has taken part in rocket attacks on the city in the past.

An operation to clear Kabul of armed groups proceeded slowly in the west of the city but a ceasefire between Ittehad and Hezb-i-Wahdat seemed to be holding.

"We are just going very slowly," the Defence Ministry spokesman said. "The situation is still very tense in the area."

Cluj mayor to run for presidency in Romania

BUCHAREST, July 26: The mayor of Cluj, known for his antipathy toward Romania's sizeable Hungarian minority, will run for the country's presidency in fall elections, state radio said Saturday, reports AP.

The candidacy of Gheorghe Funar, 41, was announced at a time of rising tensions between Transylvania's ethnic Hungarian minority and Romanians in the country's northwestern region.

He was nominated for the September 27 elections Friday by the ultra-right Romanian National Unity Party, which is emerging as a national power.

Funar, a former economist, won nomination in secret balloting at his party's national convention in the ethnically tense city of Tirgu Mures in Transylvania, said the radio report.

Indian Navy's exercises conclude

NEW DELHI, July 26: Indian Navy's biggest ever tactical exercises in the Bay of Bengal concluded Friday, after a fortnight of successful mock battles, according to Press Trust of India (PTI), reports Xinhua.

Official sources said yesterday that the combined exercises, in which 15 warships, including an aircraft carrier and two submarines, a host of fighter bombers of the Indian Air Force were involved, were aimed at testing the preparedness of men and equipment.

The massive fleet, lined up in the Bay off the Madras Coast, was divided into two groups and fought mock battles under simulated war conditions.

The sources said that the exercises were highly successful and helped the navy identify grey areas in the fleet's war preparedness.

The simulated exercises extensively tested the reaction time of the men and their responses while conducting highly tactical manoeuvres. The exercises were conducted in two stages. The ships returned to Madras harbour after the first few days and went out to sea again to complete the operation Friday evening.

Election in Japan a test for ruling party

TOKYO, July 26: Japanese went to the polls under mostly sunny skies today in nationwide upper house parliamentary elections that will test support for the long-entrenched ruling party, reports Reuter.

The Governing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has set target of winning 64 seats just over half of the 127 up for renewal. But latest surveys show it likely to win most of the 76 it is defending.

Half the chamber's 252 seats are being contested in a regular six-yearly rotation. A 127-seat is also being fought following the resignation of the sitting member.

A total of 93.8 million voters are eligible to vote at 52,000 polling stations in schools and municipal buildings. The stations opened at 7 am and early results are expected to be known by midnight (1500 GMT Sunday).

The socialist party, the largest opposition force, is expected to keep most of the 22 seats it is defending, according to newspaper surveys.

Off the Record

Criminal conspiracy by Reagan?

WASHINGTON: Independent counsel Lawrence E. Walsh will decide within 10 days whether to start moves that could lead to an indictment of former president Ronald Reagan and several close advisers in connection with the Iran-Contra scandal. The Washington Post reported Sunday, says AP.

Citing unidentified sources, the newspaper said that if Walsh decided to bring a case it would involve an alleged criminal conspiracy by Reagan and to aides in November 1986 to hid from federal and congressional investigators the US role in a year-earlier arms-for-hostages shipment by Israel to Iran.

The shipment involved US-made Hawk antiaircraft missiles.

The newspaper said that since obtaining an indictment on June 16 against former Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger, Walsh has been using a new grand jury to gather information from colleagues and former aides to three other top Reagan administration officials — former Attorney General Edwin Meese III, former Secretary of State George P. Shultz and former White House Chief of Staff Donald T. Regan.

The report said Walsh will try to get one or all of the top former Reagan advisers to be a witness to the alleged conspiracy rather than be indicted themselves.



Only thing left at home was a table

FRANKFURT: Cindy Meden is angry. Her husband, a US Army major, learned that his military career was over just as the family was being transferred to a new post in Germany, reports AP.

"The movers had everything in our house boxed up and two-thirds of our stuff was on the truck," she said. "The only thing left at our home was a table."

Gary Meden, a 1978 graduate of West Point, is among thousands of American officers and enlisted men being "laid off" under the RIF, or Reduction in Force, prompted by the Cold War's end.

Former career soldiers will have to start over back home in a depressed job market, and some have unmarketable skills. Who, for example, has an opening for a tank gunner?

The US military withdrawal from Germany is taking on such whirlwind proportions that hundreds of soldiers and their families leave each day, the luckier ones to new military assignments.

The US Defense Department is slashing troop levels in Europe from 314,000 in 1989 to 150,000 by 1995 and congress wants an even deeper cut, to 100,000. The army has sent home 79,000 of its 213,000 soldiers, most of whom were based in Germany.

Even before American forces started leaving, officials in western Germany were eagerly making plans to use the real estate and buildings left behind. Many Germans hope one result will be to alleviate western Germany's shortage of affordable housing.

Such an unexpected change is hard on people who had counted on military careers that could lead to retirement at half pay after 20 years. Spouses and children also feel the stress.

Boudiaf's assassin was sympathiser of fundamentalists

ALGIERS, July 26: The killer of Algerian Head of State Mohamed Boudiaf was a known sympathiser of Algerian and Foreign Muslim Fundamentalist Movements, the spokesman for an official inquiry said on Saturday, reports Reuter.

The spokesman criticised those responsible for protecting Boudiaf.

The "Pro-fundamentalist ideas" of the assassin, a member of the security forces who shot dead Boudiaf, were known to his friends, he said.

Boudiaf was gunned down in a cultural centre in the eastern town of Annaba on June 29.

Voter dissatisfaction with Quayle widespread as Gore shines

WASHINGTON, July 26: Voter dissatisfaction with Vice President Dan Quayle is widespread while Democratic vice presidential candidate Al Gore enjoys substantial popularity, according to polls released Saturday, reports AP.

And Bill Clinton continues to hold a comfortable lead over President Bush, although one poll shows the margin narrowing.

A survey by Time magazine and Cable News Network showed Clinton leading Bush by a 2-1 margin: 53 per cent to 26 per cent among 855 registered voters who were surveyed July 22-23.

A Newsweek poll gave Clinton a 55 per cent to 37 per cent lead over Bush among

Clinton held in a sample taken July 17, the day after the Democratic National Convention ended.

Clinton's running mate received high approval ratings in both surveys.

But Quayle, whom Bush last week insisted would be on the ticket this fall, continued to suffer low favourable ratings from voters.

Fifty-nine per cent said they had a favourable opinion of the Tennessee senator while 56 per cent viewed Quayle unfavourable, Newsweek said. In addition, 45 per cent of the voters said they had lowered their opinion of Quayle during his 3 1/2 years as vice president.

The Time-CNN poll found

that only 8 per cent said they would not be more likely to vote Democratic because of Gore's presence on the ballot.

By contrast, only 7 per cent said they would be more likely to vote for Bush because Quayle was on the ticket.

In answer to another question about Quayle, 49 per cent told the Time-CNN poll that Bush should find another running mate while 37 per cent said the vice president should be kept on the Republican ticket.

Quayle's support actually improved since the Time-CNN poll's June sampling. At that time, 55 per cent said Bush should dump him from the ticket and 32 per cent said he should be kept as the vice presidential running mate.

The Newsweek poll, conducted by the Gallup Organization, showed voters were evenly split on whether Quayle should be kept on the GOP ticket — 46 per cent to 46 per cent.

The survey found that 37 per cent of the registered voters would be less likely to vote for Bush if he dropped Quayle while 34 per cent said they would be more likely to support the president.

Quayle's remarks about the abortion issue had little effect among the electorate, according to a survey Friday of 511 voters by the Newsweek poll.

The vice president created a flap last week when he told a television interviewer that if his daughter became pregnant and had an abortion he would support her decision. The next day Quayle insisted that he still opposed abortion.

Both polls showed declines in Bush's approval rating in the wake of the Democratic convention.

Former Re-Contra chief killed

MANAGUA, July 26: The former head of the Nicaraguan "Re-Contra" movement Jose Angel Moran was killed by the Nicaraguan Army near the Honduran border, according to military sources quoted in The Daily Barricada, reports Reuter.

The Pro-Sandinista newspaper said Moran, known as "The Indomitable," was killed on July 19 by special troops of the popular Sandinista Army (EPS) as he tried clandestinely to enter the country from Honduras.

Neither Nicaraguan resistance nor EPS officials could confirm the newspaper account. "We have no official version with respect to this."