

Japan goes to polls July 18 Ruling party may lose majority

TOKYO, July 4: Elections for Japan's House of Representatives, the 511-member lower chamber of parliament, were officially announced today and will take place on July 18, reports AFP.

Attention is being focused on whether a coalition government will be formed following the snap general elections.

Pundits speculated that the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) might lose a majority in the election, allowing a coalition government led by the LDP or its rivals.

The LDP won a comfortable majority of 286 seats in Lower House elections in 1990 and held 274 at the time of dissolution of the chamber on June 18.

The dissolution followed

the passage of a no-confidence motion against the cabinet of Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa who had been criticized by opposition parties and some LDP members for failing to carry out political reforms.

More than 50 politicians, dissatisfied with Miyazawa's stance toward political reform, left the LDP last month to form new political parties — the Sakigake and Shinseito.

The number of candidates in 129 constituencies across Japan is expected to reach some 950, news reports said.

Political ethics and reform are the main issues in election campaigning kicked off by some candidates Sunday.

Registration for candidates closes this afternoon.

Mercenaries join campaign for Kashmir secession: India

NEW DELHI, July 4: Hardened mercenaries from Islamic countries are increasingly plunging into the Muslim campaign for secession in Kashmir, giving it a dangerous and bloodier twist, police and Kashmiri sources say, reports AFP.

The foreign guerrillas have graduated from being "advisors" to the militant groups to staging spectacular attacks on Indian security forces in the Kashmir valley and neighbouring Doda region, they say.

The activities of the "Afghans," as they are known regardless of nationality, is causing alarm.

"Their steadily increasing numbers is definitely adding to an already complex scenario," General Singh, Director Prakash of the federal paramilitary Border Security Force (BSF) said in an interview here.

"We have evidence about the presence of nationals from

several countries, including the Middle East," said Singh, whose men form the main fighting arm of the Indian government against thousands of Muslim militants in Kashmir.

"We are quite capable of dealing with them," the BSF chief said. "They are well equipped no doubt but we do not suffer by comparison in terms of firepower or tactics."

"The only problem is we are short of intelligence about their locations, hideouts," he added.

Singh's comments came after 28 of his men and four Kashmiri policemen waged a gruelling 60-hour battle with some 150 Afghan and Sudanese fighters in a hill in Doda which ended on June 28.

The mercenaries were reportedly equipped with sophisticated weapons and repeatedly urged the BSF troops to surrender during the fighting which ended with the deaths of 10 BSF personnel and at least three attackers.

The rebels dragged away the bodies of their dead colleagues.

"We suffered casualties, but the fact that a small group of BSF held at bay not less than 150 well-trained men for almost three days is to be noted," Singh said.

"Logistically, my men were at a disadvantage," he added. "Yet they could not overrun our positions."

Singh said the number of mercenaries, including veterans of the Afghan war, in which New Delhi sided with Soviet-installed regimes, has been steadily increasing since 1992. "We do not know their exact number, but it should be at least 250."

Kashmiri sources said the mercenaries included mainly Afghans and Sudanese as well as a sprinkling of Bahrainis and Pakistanis.

"Some people say they total a few hundred," one source here said, adding the mercenaries were mostly assisting

the Hizbul Mujahideen, the dominant rebel group in Kashmir, India's only Muslim-majority state.

"Earlier they used to act only as advisors to the local groups," the source said. "But now they have taken the offensive, ambushing and attacking Indian security forces."

Police and rebel sources say the mercenaries have sneaked into Kashmir from Pakistan, which extends vocal support to the four-year-old Muslim campaign for independence. Earlier, they had fought against the Afghan regime.

"They are in Kashmir because they believe in the concept of one Islamic nation and think that Kashmir deserves to secede," added a Muslim source in the Kashmir valley.

Indian officials say half-a-dozen foreigners have so far been killed or captured in Kashmir, and that the others are entrenched in the remote mountains of Doda region.

Off the Record

Congress to save children from sexual abuse

CANBERRA: An international forum starts in Sydney on Sunday to draft legislation proposals to protect children from sexual abuse, reports Xinhua.

More than 700 judges and lawyers from over 40 countries are attending the world congress on family law and children's rights, which will conclude on Friday.

The congress, the first of its kind, will also bring pressure on governments to take affirmative action on child abuse issues, said Stuart Fowler, co-chairman of the congress, in a statement.

The congress has been supported by the International Bar Association, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and some national bar associations.

There is heavy sexual exploitation and abuse of children by tourists, particularly in Asia, which urgently needs solutions, Fowler said.

Only to avoid press

WASHINGTON: President Bill Clinton's daughter, Chelsea, will not be going to the Tokyo summit on July 7-9, reports Reuters.

"She didn't want to be a big object of press interest", Clinton was quoted as saying by the Washington Post on Saturday.

There had been some talk of 12-year-old Chelsea going and taking a few friends along. Instead, she plans to stay in California and meet her parents for a vacation in Hawaii.

Clinton said Chelsea, who has been studying German at Summer Camp in Minnesota, had a great interest in Japan but that this was not the way to see it, the newspaper reported.

Accord to restore democracy in Haiti

NEW YORK, July 4: Ousted Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide signed an agreement Saturday with Haiti's military to restore the country's democracy, reports AFP.

The UN-brokered accord reached after a 21-month political stand off, marks the first time in the Americas that a President deposed by the military would be reinstated by peaceful means.

Haitian army leader General Raoul Cedras signed the international mediated agreement earlier Saturday. Cedras led the coup that toppled Aristide September 30, 1991.

The United Nations and Organization of American States (OAS) plan calls for Aristide's return in October 30 and Cedras' early retirement shortly before that. It also includes an amnesty for military officials.

Aristide and Cedras signed after seven days of negotiations between their aides and UN-OAS mediator Dante Caputo on Governors Island in New York Harbour. The two political enemies never sat down face to face.

And Aristide put pen to paper after a nine-hour delay only after his delegation had

worked out a side agreement that calls for the United Nations to reimpose its embargo if the world body determines human rights are not being respected.

S Korea denies fire at North's watchtower

SEOUL, July 4: South Korea denied today that its troops had fired machine guns at a North Korean watchtower inside the demilitarised border zones, reports Reuters.

"The reports are not true and we have not been informed of any incident like that," a Defence Ministry spokesman said.

The state-run North Korean Central News Agency, monitored in Tokyo, said earlier the South Korean army had fired at a civil police post on Saturday.

This shooting incident was a premeditated provocation intended to deliberately aggravate the situation in the DMZ (demilitarised zone) area," the agency said.

It did not say if there were any injuries.

Last brigade of Soviet troops leaves Havana

HAVANA, July 4: The last brigade of troops from the former Soviet Union sailed out of Havana's harbour aboard the cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin on Saturday, ending three decades on the island nation, reports AFP.

The troops and their families totalling about 500 people boarded the ship late Friday watched by Cuban security forces and crowds of foreign journalists and photographers.

Cuba's armed forces chief of staff General Ulises Rosales Del Toro and other officials paid their respects to the Russian troops before their departure. The mechanized infantry brigade was deployed in Cuba after the October 1962 missile crisis between the Soviet Union and the United States.

Cuba had hoped that an agreement could be struck requiring that Russian troops be withdrawn as US troops were pulled out of the Guantanamo naval base. But that was not to be.

In mid-May, Rosales complained that Russia had not consulted Cuba when it decided in September 1992 to withdraw its troops. Cuban officials have since

tried to put a better spin on Russia's withdrawal.

"It doesn't make sense for this military unit to be on our national territory," the government said in a statement.

"Its previous functions and the role that it occupied can be assured and performed by the Cuban military and the people of Cuba."

The brigade totalled 2,800 troops in 1963, and as late as last September 1,500 Russian troops were still in Cuba.

Kohl, Clinton agree on aims of next week's G-7 summit

BONN, July 4: German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and US President Bill Clinton agree on the aims of next week's Group of Seven (G7) summit in Tokyo, a German government spokesman said on Saturday.

"President Clinton called on the Chancellor on Friday night and both agreed in a detailed telephone conversation on the aims of the G7 economic summit," the spokesman told Reuters, without giving further details.

4 hurt as police fire on Caribbean parade in Montreal

MONTREAL, July 4: Four people were injured by gunfire Saturday when two men opened fire on a Caribbean parade in downtown Montreal, police said, reports AFP.

A further two injuries were reported when some people tripped in the confusion as riot police moved in to break up the parade.

None of the six injuries was serious, police said.

The crowd, estimated at 5,000, broke up into several different groups and police reported that several store windows were broken and at least one store was looted.

Police said one man had been arrested in connection with the shootings and several others, including a news photographer, had been arrested for not obeying police orders to disperse.

BRIEFLY

Ciampi visits injured soldiers: Italy's Prime Minister Carlo Azeglio Ciampi on Saturday visited wounded soldiers who were flown back from Somalia earlier in the day after fighting in which three Italians died, reports Reuters from Rome.

Sources at his office said Ciampi would also be at Rome's Ciampino military airport when the coffins were brought back later on Saturday night.

The three will be buried with full military honour after a funeral service in Rome on Monday due to be attended by both Ciampi and President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro.

Israeli troops hurt in Gaza: Four Israeli soldiers were wounded when a hand grenade was thrown at army headquarters in the occupied Gaza Strip Saturday, Israel radio said, reports Reuters from Jerusalem.

It said two soldiers were wounded moderately and two lightly. They were evacuated by helicopter to hospital in Israel. "A terrorist threw a grenade at a guard post at the entrance to the army's Gaza Strip headquarters in the centre of (Gaza) city. Soldiers returned fire, but the terrorist escaped," the radio said.

Four executed in China: Authorities in China's largest city have executed four "evil-hearted" criminals for crimes ranging from murder to robbery and rape, the official Wen Hui Bao said Saturday, reports Reuters from Shanghai.

The newspaper said Qiao Xianzhi, the newly-appointed head of Shanghai's middle court, presided over a mass sentencing rally on Friday which imposed a total of eight death sentences, four of which were carried out immediately.

"This group of criminals, which received the harshest punishment, were evil-hearted and sharp-handed," the newspaper said. "They committed every extent of evil."

Thais plan attack on bandits: The Thai army plans to use heavy artillery to attack the hideouts of Cambodian bandits along the northeastern Thai-Cambodian border in a drastic operation to start soon, reports Xinhua from Bangkok.

It will be the first time that heavy artillery is to be used in suppression of the border banditry and the Suranaree task force of the Thai army will be the key unit to launch the operation, local English newspaper "The Nation" yesterday quoted an highly-placed source as saying.

The Thai border provinces to be covered by the operation include Si Sa Ket, Buri Ram and Surin.

Hungarians commemorate Kadar: More than 10,000 people gathered in a Budapest cemetery Saturday to commemorate the fourth anniversary of communist leader Janos Kadar's funeral, reports AFP from Budapest.

The crowd applauded and shouted "We respect him" whenever a speaker of the organising Labour Party, the successor of the former Communist Party, mentioned his name.

Kadar died in 1989 after 33 years spent as head of the pro-Soviet Hungarian Socialist Workers Party he took over in 1956 when he called on Soviet troops to put down a Hungarian uprising against authoritarian communism.

"He was later respected for turning Hungary into the happiest barracks" of Soviet satellite states.

Lebanon blast claims four: Four pro-iranian guerrillas were killed and four others wounded Saturday in an accidental blast which rocked a hilltop Hezbollah position in eastern Lebanon, Syrian military sources said, AFP reports from Baalbeck.

It was not immediately clear what caused the blast in the Ain Berdal hills overlooking Baalbeck, a Hezbollah stronghold in Lebanon's Syrian-controlled Bekaa valley.

The Muslim fundamentalist militants had occupied the Sheikh Abdallah, Lebanese army barracks near the site of the explosion from 1983 until 1992, when they withdrew.

Rebels' rockets kill 2 in Kabul: A barrage of rockets hit the Afghan capital Kabul Saturday, killing at least two people and injuring five, the state-run Radio Kabul said, reports AFP from Islamabad.

The broadcast, monitored in Islamabad, said eight rockets, fired from southwest of Kabul landed in residential parts of the city.

Recovery of corpses continues

MANILA, July 4: The grisly recovery of corpses from the Bocaue river north of here continued today, nearly 40 hours after a barge sank killing 350 people in the worst river accident in the Philippines, radio reports said, according to AFP.

The bloated corpses of two women floated from the sunken remains of the Pagoda-shaped altar and were promptly retrieved by military frogmen who continued the search for more than 30 people still unaccounted for, a radio report said from the scene.

Navy frogmen recovered 310 bodies in the first 24 hours after the ceremonial barge, serving as a religious float, went down with an estimated 500 people aboard during a Roman Catholic Riverine procession late Friday.



PHILIPPINES: A rescuer carries the body of an unidentified boy recovered by frogmen from the bottom of the river Bocaue on Saturday. —AFP/UNB photo

Army deployed in Turkey to keep order

SIVAS (Turkey), July 4: Soldiers armed with machine guns patrolled the streets of Sivas in central Turkey on Saturday to keep order after 35 people were killed in riots over Salman Rushdie's novel "The Satanic Verses", reports Reuters.

A curfew has restored calm in the town. The soldiers were stopping cars but few people ventured out.

"All security measures have

been taken. The people need not give in to provocations," Prime Minister Tansu Ciller said.

In London, Rushdie said the torching of a Sivas hotel by Muslim fundamentalists was a form of religious terrorism and he urged leaders of the Group of Seven industrial nations to condemn it.

The riots erupted on Friday over publication of parts of "The Satanic Verses" in a

Turkish newspaper by writer Aziz Nesin, who was attending a cultural festival at the hotel Madimak.

Fundamentalists clashed with police then set the hotel ablaze, killing 35 people. Many of the dead were intellectuals and poets attending the festival. At least 60 people were injured.

Local officials said the bodies would be flown to Ankara today for burial.

Staff at Nesin's newspaper Aydinlik told the Anatolian News Agency he was safe and expected to hold a news conference today. His whereabouts were not disclosed.

Rushdie's novel is banned in Turkey, which is secular but mainly Muslim, but Nesin challenged the 1989 government decree by publishing excerpts.

Turkish newspapers said Nesin further inflamed tempers in Sivas with a speech

7 burnt to death, 2 shot dead in Natal violence

DURBAN, July 4: Seven blacks were burnt to death and two others shot dead on Friday night in South Africa's volatile Natal province, police said on Saturday, reports Reuters.

They said five dwellings were set alight in the attack, which occurred in the province's Richmond area. The victims — three women, five young girls and a boy — all died at the scene.

Four other people, including a seven-year-old child, were wounded.

No further details were immediately available and police were trying to establish a motive.

At least 22 people were killed in several attacks by gunmen in Natal on Thursday.

About 9,000 people have died in political violence since reformist President F W De Klerk began dismantling apartheid three years ago.

Many of the deaths have been from factional fighting in Natal between supporters of Nelson Mandela's African National Congress and the Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party.

COLOMBO, July 4: A Sri Lankan minister has for the first time disclosed differences between slain President Rajasinghe Premadasa and his widow in an apparent bid to block her entry into politics, reports AFP.

Minister of State for Information A J Ranasinghe was quoted by newspapers here today as saying that Premadasa's wife Hema and many others who pretended to be close to the former president only embarrassed him.

"Even his wife and many of these people embarrassed him, not embraced him. That was why he did not live even one day in the president's house (palace) after becoming president," the flamboyant Ranasinghe said.

Until his assassination on May 1 by a suicide-bomber, Premadasa resided at his private residence here rather than the colonial-style presidential palace. Ranasinghe, who was one of Premadasa's most trusted associates, said.

Ranasinghe's remarks came amid reports that Hema, known for her fashionable and extravagant living, was to launch her own political career with the formation of a new party.

The widow raised eyebrows at her husband's funeral when

Hema only embarrassed Premadasa?

she violated Buddhist traditions by delivering an oration in which she vowed to continue Premadasa's policies. Women in this Buddhist nation are not expected to speak at

the funeral of their husbands.

Ranasinghe, no relative of the former president, said that he had warned Hema against delivering the speech but she had replied that no one could stop her from doing so.

"We know what he (Premadasa) thought about his kith and kin and what he told us. But we don't want to tell those things. It's not our business. They are family matters. But the whole nation knows," Ranasinghe said.

Premadasa was "very gullible" and a great believer in the occult, Ranasinghe said. "What I am telling you now may offend some people. But I don't care," the Sunday Island quoted Ranasinghe as telling reporters.

Political analysts saw the minister's remarks as a serious blow to the widow's chances of entering active politics. The 57-year-old widow and her son Sajit have indicated that they had political ambitions.

Last month the Sri Lankan government withdrew 17 of the 22 cars given to the former first lady's household in a move seen here as a bid to clip her wings.

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Muslims have also contrasted the Western hands-off policy over Bosnia with US use of Cruise missiles to demolish Iraqi intelligence headquarters in Baghdad on June 26 in retaliation for an alleged plot to kill former President George Bush.

"There is a feeling that American rockets are very smart when they pick on Arabs, but totally stupid when it comes to Serbs," Badawi said.

Muslim and western analysts agree that the rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the Muslim world, while partly explained by economic difficulties and lack of political freedom, is also

linked with foreign policy failures on issues like Bosnia.

Muslim militants have put the pro-western government of Egypt under pressure with a string of attacks on foreign tourists over the past year, and the fundamentalist Hamas movement has growing influence among the Palestinians.

Aside from Bosnia, a major cause of frustration has been the deadlock in the 21-month-old US-sponsored Arab-Israeli peace negotiations, whose 10th round ended in Washington last Thursday with little progress.

Arabs already see the Bill Clinton administration as second only to that of Ronald Reagan as the most pro-Israeli since the creation of the Jewish state in 1948.

For conspiracy theorists, there is no lack of other proof — ranging from violence against Turkish immigrants in Germany to advances by Christian Armenians against Muslim Azeris in the Trans-Caucasus — of an anti-Islamic crusade in the West.

Moderate Muslims believe talk of a crusade is exaggerated. But they do fear that the West, having seen the collapse of communism in the former Soviet bloc, has picked on Islam as the new threat to its security.

Repatriation of Lankan Tamils resumes in Aug

MADRAS (India), July 4: India said on Saturday it hoped to resume the repatriation next month of thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils who had fled to southern India, reports Reuters.

C N Ramdas, who is in charge of refugee affairs in Tamil Nadu state, told reporters the UN High Commissioner for Refugees agreed to make two ships available for repatriating the Tamil refugees from ethnic violence on their island.

The first group of Tamils will leave for Trincomalee in eastern Sri Lanka on August 15, Ramdas said.

Ramdas said those being sent back were from 7,000 Tamils who volunteered to return out of an estimated 80,000 refugees.

'West has abandoned Bosnians because they are Muslims'

LONDON, July 4: By failing to intervene on behalf of the hard-pressed Muslims in Bosnia, the West risks the stability of friendly governments in the Islamic world, western and Muslim analysts said, reports Reuters.

A dangerous gap is opening up, they say, between the sympathy of Islamic public opinion for the Bosnian Muslims and the inability or unwillingness of Islamic governments, many of them pro-western, to take serious action to help them.

Rightly or wrongly, according to the analysts, many ordinary Muslims believe the West has abandoned the Bosnians "because they are Muslims," as Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati told a conference in Switzerland last month.

"What is being said in the coffee-shops of the Islamic world is that if the tables were turned and the Muslims were attacking the Christians, the West would have intervened to roll them back," says retired British diplomat Sir Anthony Parsons.

"I don't believe that, but that's what I think the majority of Muslims believe," said Parsons, a former envoy in the Middle East and Ambassador to the United Nations.

A resolution to exempt the Muslim-led

Bosnian government from an arms embargo, to allow it better to resist Christian Serbs who are besieging Muslim enclaves, failed to win adoption by the Security Council last Tuesday despite US backing.

Following the abstention of European and other members, the resolution fell short of the required nine votes out of 15.

European states argued that lifting the embargo would worsen the bloodshed in Bosnia. Western countries say their refusal to intervene militarily is due not to anti-Muslim feeling but fear of becoming bogged down indefinitely in the conflict.

Many Muslims see it differently. "People may disagree about other things but there is total unanimity about Bosnia," says Zakir Badawi, Principal of the Muslim College in London.

"A Muslim community is being slaughtered, and the West is holding the ring for the Serbs to slaughter them."

But action by Islamic governments to stop the killing has largely been limited to declarations, like the one — urging the lifting of the arms embargo — that Muslim countries forced through a world human rights conference in Vienna last month.