

Ramos for US military role in Asia, Pacific

FORT MAGSAYSAY, Philippines, Nov 5: President Fidel Ramos visited Manila and American troops during maneuvers Friday and urged the United States to remain active in the Pacific despite the closing of US military bases here, reports AP.

"We would want the more powerful countries, particularly the United States, to continue with the policy of engagement and commitment in Asia and the Pacific region so that our region can remain stable and secure," Ramos said.

The Philippines and the United States really should continue to be engaged together in the Asia-Pacific area," added Ramos, a West Point graduate and former defense secretary.

Ramos' predecessor, Corason

Aquino, ordered US troops to leave the Philippines after the Philippine Senate refused a new lease for the Subic Bay naval base in 1991.

The last US troops left this former US colony in November 1992, ending nearly a century of American military presence. But a mutual defense treaty remains in effect, committing the United States to defend the Philippines against foreign aggression.

Ramos said he was encouraged that the United States was active in the Regional Defence Forum of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, of which the Philippines is a member.

The joint exercise, held annually since 1981, began Oct 19 and will end Nov 27.

New negotiator resumes talks to end Hazratbal siege

SRINAGAR, Nov 5: The government has appointed a new negotiator in the 21-day-old standoff at Kashmir's most sacred mosque to replace an official who was injured in a car crash, reports AP.

Mehmood-ur Rahman, a chief home secretary, negotiated Thursday night and Friday morning with militants occupying Hazratbal Mosque, which is surrounded by hundreds of Indian soldiers.

Rehman's predecessor, Wajhat Habibullah, remained in a coma in the Institute of Medical Sciences in Srinagar. He and retired Lt Gen Mohammed Ahmad Zaki, the top adviser on law and order in Jammu-Kashmir state, were driving through central Srinagar on Thursday when their car hit a military truck head-on.

Zaki has nine fractured ribs and a hemorrhage in his chest, but he is expected to survive the accident, doctors said.

Many people believe that Habibullah, a highly educated and soft-spoken negotiator, had nearly reached an agreement with the militants in the shrine the day before the accident occurred.

Rebels, who have many supporters in Jammu-Kashmir, the only state in Hindu-dominated India with a Muslim majority, say they took over the mosque to prevent soldiers from stealing or damaging a relic Muslims believe is a hair from Prophet

Mohammed's beard.

Soldiers say they surrounded the shrine, which many Islamic clerics use to deliver anti-India sermons, after they heard that militants had occupied it and planned to make off with the relic.

Indian forces have shot and killed about 60 people who have demonstrated in support of the militants since the standoff began.

Srinagar and many other towns and villages remain closed by government curfews and pro-rebel general strikes.

Most demonstrators have occurred on Friday, the day when Muslims worship. Militants and Islamic religious leaders have urged Kashmiris to march from their local mosques toward Hazratbal shrine in an effort to force Indian soldiers to withdraw from it.

But no marches or demonstrations occurred this Friday after religious ceremonies ended at local mosques, police said.

Government negotiators have been trying to persuade the militants to drop their weapons and leave the shrine. But the two sides reportedly can't agree on whether the rebels should be set free on put on trial for charges already pending against them.

Rebels in Jammu-Kashmir have been fighting for independence from India for four years, and more than 7,500 people have died.

Lockerbie affair a minor matter, says Gaddafi

SIDI BARRANI (Egypt), Nov 5: Libyan leader Moammar Gaddafi Thursday dismissed the Lockerbie affair as a "minor matter," saying he could not force two Libyans accused of the bombing appear before US or Scottish courts, reports AFP.

In defiance of western pressure, Gaddafi told reporters at this Egyptian military base that the December 1988 Lockerbie bombing was "a minor matter and not Libya's prime concern."

He was speaking during a joint news conference with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak at Sidi Barrani, 660 kilometres (400 miles) north-west of Cairo.

He said further UN sanctions against his country, inevitable if Tripoli does not hand over the two suspects in the bombing to the west, would be imposed by "colonial powers."

"Such a resolution would not be adopted by the (UN) Security Council but by the colonial powers."

"Libya will never change its stance, whatever the sanctions imposed", Gaddafi said.

He said Libya's major concern was the cause of the Arab world and its role in the New World order.

The United States, Britain and France are seeking the extradition of two Libyan agents suspected to have planted a bomb on Pan Am jet that blew up over the Scottish town of Lockerbie in 1988, killing 270 people.

Mubarak hosted the three-and-a-half hour meetings in a tent erected specially for Gaddafi after the Libyan leader crossed the near by Sallum border post in a 10-car motorcade.

BRIEFLY

Five jail guards held in US: Five city jail guards for allegedly taking bribes to smuggle illegal cocaine and marijuana to inmates, AP reports from Washington.

The illegal drugs and other contraband were brought into the prison between May 1992 and August 1993 and federal investigators launched an undercover operation after being tipped off to the smuggling, US Attorney Eric Holder said Thursday.

Even though "we do pat searches" of the guards, "there are many, many ways" to bring in drugs, said District of Columbia Corrections Director Walter Ridley. "I think we have to continue to work and find better ways of selecting employees."

Castro hails UNGA vote: Cuban President Fidel Castro described as excellent an increased UN General Assembly vote against the US economic embargo of his communist-led country, Reuter reports from Havana.

"This is a great success for our country and I think it is a valiant decision by the United Nations, which is tiring of receiving orders from the United States," the state news agency Ain quoted Castro as saying Wednesday evening.

The UN vote earlier in the day on the Cuban-sponsored resolution for an end to the trade ban was 88 to four with 57 abstentions. The vote on a similar draft last year was 59 to three with 71 abstentions.

Road mishap claims 36 in Ecuador: A crowded bus sped off a mountain road in Ecuador Thursday, killing 36 people and leaving eight others seriously injured, police said, AFP reports from Quito.

The bus was speeding down a highway when it missed a bridge and shot over the Malacatus river, crashing into rocks on the opposite bank, authorities said.

Authorities said mechanical trouble was believed to be behind the crash, but could not immediately confirm the cause of the accident, which killed 19 men, 12 women, and five children.

Floods kill 3300 in China: More than 3,300 people have been killed in floods in various parts of China this year that have also caused direct economic losses of 63 billion yuan (11 billion dollar), it was reported Friday, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

The office of the state flood-control headquarters was quoted by the China-run China News Service as saying more than 17 million hectares (42 million acres) of land had been affected. A total of 1.8 million houses were also destroyed.

Cameroon frees 37 detainees: Authorities in Cameroon Thursday freed 32 members of the opposition Social Democratic Party (SDP) and five journalists who were detained Wednesday when police broke up a party gathering, reliable sources said, AFP reports from Yaounde.

The releases came after a meeting between Presidential Secretary Joseph Owona and French Ambassador Gilles Vidal, diplomatic sources reported.

The SDP activists and the journalists were taken into custody on Wednesday as SDP President John Fruendi was preparing to hold a press conference at the headquarters of another opposition party.

Peres, Hussein talk peace deal: Foreign Minister Shimon Peres has held secret talks with King Hussein of Jordan to prepare a peace treaty, Israeli officials said today, reports AFP from Jerusalem.

The meeting took place Tuesday in the Jordanian Red Sea port of Aqaba, Israel state radio reported.

The officials, who refused to be named, said Peres and the King went into the details of a "Draft peace treaty" following the agenda the two countries signed in Washington on September 14.

Quake hits Java, Jakarta: An earthquake measuring a preliminary 5.0 on the Richter scale hit parts of Western Java Friday including Jakarta, but there were no reports of casualties or serious damage, an official said, AP reports from Jakarta.

The quake was centered about 200 kilometres (120 miles) southwest of Jakarta in the Indian Ocean at a depth of 72 kilometres (43 miles), said Bambang Subandjo, an official in the government's Meteorology Office in Jakarta.

The quake struck at 2:02 pm (0702 GMT) Friday, he said.

The open-ended Richter scale measures the total energy released by an earthquake. A quake registering 5 is considered strong and can cause considerable damage in populated areas near the epicenter.

8 Cambodian troops killed in mine blast

PHNOM PENH, Nov 5: At least eight Cambodian soldiers were killed and 27 injured when their truck hit an anti-tank mine planted by Khmer Rouge guerrillas in north Siemreap Province, survivors said today.

The huge explosion occurred at 7 am on Thursday en route between Samrong and the frontline base at Kon Kriel.

Khmer Rouge guerrillas planted the anti-tank mines, survivors told Reuters.

"The truck hit an anti-tank mine between Kon Kriel and Samrong — it killed or injured 35 soldiers on the truck," said Sergeant Thron, 26, who suffered severe facial lacerations.

"I can't remember exactly but a few soldiers died on the spot," he said.

Other survivors said at least eight people had been killed. Speaking from his hospital bed, Thron said survivors were evacuated by Cambodian air force helicopter and brought to Phnom Penh but two soldiers died on the way.

70 pc Malibu wildfire contained, 350 structures burned

MALIBU, Calif., Nov 5: Alice Kavalidgian cried as she trudged through the ashes of her home. "This is it," she said, pointing to the clothes she was wearing. "I don't even have a sweater," reports AP.

Kavalidgian was among thousands of residents chased from the celebrity enclave of Malibu by an arson wildfire that roared out of the Santa Monica Mountains on Tuesday and burned 350 structures, most of them houses. One person was killed.

Some returned Thursday to see whether their houses were still standing. Others waited at roadblocks put up to allow firefighters to continue battling stubborn hot spots.

By Thursday, firefighters had contained 70 per cent of the 18,500-acre (7,500-hectare) wildfire, one in a series of blazes that have destroyed 1,150 homes, blackened 200,000 acres (81,000 hectares) and injured nearly 200 people in Southern California since Oct. 26. Several were blamed on arson.

The Malibu fire claimed actor



Giant cut-outs of Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao (L) and slain former Premier Rajiv Gandhi (R) overlook a New Delhi intersection yesterday in the run-up to today's polls. Balloting to elect a city government is being held here after three decades. — AFP photo

5.7m to vote in today's Delhi assembly polls

NEW DELHI, Nov 5: The stage was set today for voters in the Indian capital to elect a local government in polls seen as a straight fight between Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao's ruling party and Hindu revivalists, reports AFP.

Some 5.7 million people are eligible to vote in tomorrow's elections for the Delhi assembly to decide who will govern the capital, a federal territory. A total of 1,361 candidates are running for the 70 seats.

A hectic campaign ended Thursday evening abruptly silencing loudhailers blaring party propaganda in a month-long assault on the ears of the electorate.

Candidates fanned out with last-minute door-to-door appeals for support in the polls which precede more crucial provincial elections this month in the northern heartland.

More than 35,000 police will ensure security during the Delhi balloting.

Rao's Congress (I) and the Hindu-fundamentalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian Peoples' Party) are contesting all 70 seats for control of what the ruling party calls the "International driving room of India."

The 72-year-old premier on Thursday told a public meeting that only a Congress (I) administration could ensure the development of the overcrowded city of nine million people he described as the "mirror of the country."

The BJP, he said, was dividing Indians on religious lines and harming national unity.

The BJP has been harping on administrative corruption under successive Congress (I) regimes at the centre, and promised a "clean, corruption-free, competent and responsive" government to halt the capital's decay.

Delhi has often been described as India's most pampered city. But over the years it has deteriorated into an overcrowded, polluted metropolis suffering from endless power, water and housing shortages.

It has more vehicles than Bombay, Calcutta and Madras put together, spewing 2,000 tonnes of pollutants into the air daily.

Some three million of its residents suffer from respiratory disease and it has the worst road accident record of any Indian city, illegal slums have mushroomed as a result of a ceaseless influx of migrants in search of work.

Russia against use of force in Georgia

COPENHAGEN, Nov 5: Russian troops deployed in Georgia to not intervene militarily there, Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin pledged in the Danish capital late Thursday, reports AFP.

Speaking hours after 500 marines set for Moscow arrived in the strife-torn country, Chernomyrdin said Russia "will not participate in any military operation in Georgia" and that the troops had been dispatched solely to provide technical assistance.

But he warned after a meeting with his Danish counterpart Poul Rasmussen that "necessary steps" would be taken if Russian forces were attacked.

Chernomyrdin, who arrived in Denmark earlier Thursday on a three-day visit to mark the 500th anniversary of a friendship treaty between the two countries, told journalists Russian troops were deployed in three areas of Georgia "following an accord reached with the leaders of that country."

The marines made landfall in the port of Poti in western Georgia, where government forces have been fighting a rebellion for more than two

months.

"We are aware that there are problems but we do not understand the reasons why we are being rejected."

Referring to the deployment of Russian troops in the Baltic Republics, Chernomyrdin said Moscow had "no interest" in prolonging its military presence there.

But he stressed the need to consider the rehousing of Russia's contingent and the rights of the Russian minority in the three Baltic states.

On the issue of closer ties with the west, Chernomyrdin stressed that Russia "wants to enter the (European) community."

"We are aware that there are problems but we do not understand the reasons why we are being rejected."

At the very last Moscow wanted to secure closer cooperation with the EC on an equal footing and full access to western European markets, he added.

Rasmussen said Denmark had done everything it could during its tenancy of the revolving EC presidency in the first half of 1993 to speed up plans for a partnership accord between Brussels and Moscow.

UNSC okays 22 liaison officers for Cambodia

UNITED NATIONS, Nov 5: The Security Council has approved 20 military liaison officers for Cambodia and extended mine clearance operations through the end of the month, reports AP.

As the UN operation in Cambodia was ending, the 15-member council voted unanimously Thursday to establish a 20-member team of liaison officers for six months. They would be assisted by 123 locally recruited staff and would report on security and maintain contact with the new Cambodian government.

India asks Belgium to extradite Amanullah

BRUSSELS, Nov 5: Indian has asked Belgium to extradite a Kashmiri separatist who was arrested here last month after having been given an entry visa by mistake, the Belgian Foreign Affairs Ministry said here Thursday, reports AFP.

A ministry spokesman said the Indian request, concerning Amanullah Khan, chairman of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), was being studied by Belgian justice authorities.

Khan was arrested on October 18 while in the Belgian capital at the invitation of the socialist group of the European

Off the Record

Wild boar bumps into a woman

TOKYO: It took three police cars and a dozen policemen to apprehend a wild boar which ran amok through Japan's ancient capital of Kyoto, police said Friday, reports Reuter.

A passer-by who saw the young boar, one metre (three feet) long and weighing 50 kg (110 lb) running madly about downtown early on Thursday, was the first to report it to police.

Clearly confused, the animal later collided with a moving taxi and then bumped into a 67-year-old woman before police cornered it in a sports field near the Kyoto Imperial palace and caught it with a tennis court net.

Police said it was later released into nearby mountains by Kyoto city zoo officials.

Kyoto, Japan's capital and home to the imperial family from 794 to 1868, boasts some of Japan's most glittering historical relics including temples, gardens and palaces.

Mayor's romp with sin

BEIJING: When the Deputy Mayor of a south China city visited prostitutes recently, his romp with sin ended up costing him dearly, reports Reuter.

Communist Party officials, invoking the rule that prostitution is one of the six evils, stripped Yang Zhaoping of his coveted party membership, threw him out of office, fined him 5,000 yuan (880 dollar) and sentenced him to six-months' education, the Yangcheng Evening News said in an edition seen on Thursday.

The newspaper said Yang, Deputy Mayor of Shaoguan, was invited for a night out by Hong Kong business contacts.

After sleeping with one prostitute, Yang made his way to a second lady of the evening and was caught on the spot by police.

Judge presides over a kangaroo court

TULSA (Oklahoma): For a few moments at least, Judge Allen Klein presided over a real kangaroo court, reports AP.

Carlene Hall, who is suing over the death of her kangaroo, took a live marsupial to court against Klein's orders Thursday to show to the jury.

The judge declared a mistrial and picked a new jury.

Ms. Hall claims two dogs ran amok on her 80-acre exotic animal farm, frightening one of her kangaroos so badly it ran into a fence and collapsed in shock. The animal later died.

For smoking in school

TOKYO: A high school student in western Japan was hospitalised after being subjected to three days of questioning by teachers who suspected him of smoking, the school's principal said Thursday, reports AP.

The 15-year-old freshman was treated for vomiting and fever apparently caused by anxiety, but was soon released, according to Junzo Matsushige, principal of Matsubara High School.

Matsushige said teachers confronted the boy, whom he refused to name, after they discovered one of his friends had brought a pack of cigarettes to school.

He said the grilling, which lasted a total of 18 hours, took so long because although the boy at first denied breaking the school's no-smoking rules, he later changed his story several times.

Ashrawi to head PLO mission in Washington

AMMAN, Nov 5: Hannan Ashrawi, spokeswoman for Palestinian Middle East peace negotiators, has accepted a PLO offer to head the organisation's new mission in Washington, Palestinian officials said today, reports Reuter.

Ashrawi, who was asked by Palestinian Liberation Organisation Chief Yasser Arafat to head the mission, was in Washington to prepare for its reopening.

The United States lifted the ban on contacts with the organisation after Israel and the PLO signed a Palestinian-self rule deal in Washington on September 13.

US Senate okays \$ 22.2b bill to fight crime

WASHINGTON, Nov 5: The Senate voted 94 to 4 late Thursday to pump 22.2 billion dollars into the fight against violent crime, approving a bipartisan amendment to put 100,000 new police officers on the streets and build prisons nationwide, reports AP.

A vote on the full Brady Bill is scheduled for next Wednesday.

The Brady Bill requires a five-business-day waiting period and a background check on would-be handgun buyers. However, it would phase out as criminal records became computerised and instantly accessible.

parliament to take part in a debate on the situation in Kashmir.

The Belgian ambassador in Islamabad, Ernest States, was subsequently recalled to Brussels for having incorrectly issued Khan with a visa.

Khan had been sought by Interpol for several murders committed in 1990, under an international arrest warrant issued at the request of the Justice authorities of Jammu, a northern Indian province.

The Indian authorities consider the Islamabad based JKLF to be a terrorist organisation.

At that point, instant checks would be required before purchases of both handguns and long guns.

"I can say this is by far and away the most significant federal effort to deal with violent crime in America that has ever been undertaken in the US Senate," said Sen Joseph Biden, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee as the agreement was announced between Senate Republicans and Democrats.

The bargain on the amendment between key Senate Republicans and Democrats was struck shortly after the House Judiciary Committee sent the Brady gun control measure to the full House on a vote of 23-12.

James Brady, the former presidential press secretary for whom the bill is named, sat through the nearly four-hour committee meeting. Brady, shot in the head in the 1981 assassination attempt on President Reagan, said he was still concerned about the outcome in the full House.

President Clinton has repeatedly urged Congress to pass the bill, vowing to sign it when it lands on his desk.

The Brady bill approved by the House committee Thursday is basically the same as that negotiated in the last Congress by Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell of Maine and Dole when it was part of a sweeping anti-crime package.

That package died after Republicans threatened to filibuster over new rules on appeals to federal courts by death-row inmates.

The anti-crime agreement, crafted by Senate Appropriations Chairman Robert Byrd, to the Senate Crime bill, uses an innovative financing mechanism.



A cement head from a statue lies in the ashes of a burned-out home in the Malibu hills, California Thursday. The Santa Ana winds that drove the fires Tuesday have died down, and authorities have declared the fires 70 per cent contained. — AFP photo