

Palestinian prisoners begin hunger strike

JERUSALEM, June 22: Hundreds of Palestinian prisoners launched a hunger strike Tuesday demanding to be released and protesting that the PLO leadership had "abandoned" them, Israeli officials said, reports AFP.

The prison authority announced the strike had started, but said it was not followed everywhere.

"About 800 prisoners are refusing to eat," said one official who refused to be named, but predicted that most would not eat for long.

International aid groups estimate that about 7,000 Palestinians are still in Israeli jails, including 680 common criminals.

In the West Bank town of Bethlehem, the Palestinian Prisoners' Association held a press conference on the strike, but admitted they did not know how many had stopped taking food.

The prisoners themselves put out a statement on Monday

reclaiming an indefinite hunger strike under the slogan: "No peace without unconditional release."

They called for sit-ins outside Red Cross offices and for a hunger strike outside the new Palestinian authority in the self-enclave of Jericho.

Jailed members of Yasser Arafat's Fatah Movement issued their own statement urging a boycott of celebrations planned to mark the return of the PLO chairman to the autonomous area, which is expected in late June or early July.

In Bethlehem, Ahmad al-Sayad, a lawyer representing prisoners' said: "the responsibility for what is happening falls on Arafat and those who are negotiating the prisoner issue in the peace talks."

Meanwhile, the first public meeting between Jordan's King Hussein and Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin could take place in Washington in October, a Jordanian official told AFP Tuesday.

North Korea agrees to hold pre-summit talks with South

SEOUL, June 22: In a step that could help defuse nuclear tensions, North Korea agreed Wednesday to hold talks with rival South Korea to prepare for an unprecedented summit between their leaders, reports AP.

In a telephone message, the North accepted a South Korean proposal that the talks be held at the border village of Panmunjom on June 28. "We welcome and agree to your side's proposal," the message said.

The summit, if held, is expected to focus on suspicions that the Communist North is developing nuclear weapons. It is likely to have an important impact on Washington's handling of the nuclear crisis.

During a visit by former U.S. president Jimmy Carter last week, North Korean President Kim Il Sung expressed a willingness to meet his South

Korean counterpart, Kim Young-sam, who accepted the proposal "gladly."

South Korea then proposed that officials meet next Tuesday to plan the summit talks.

South Korean officials are cautious, however, about whether the summit will actually be held. Past proposals for summits have not succeeded.

Many South Koreans believe the North suggested the summit to head off U.S.-led moves in the United Nations to impose sanctions for North Korea's refusal to accept full inspections of its nuclear facilities.

North Korea has reportedly indicated that it hopes to hold the summit in its capital on August 15, the anniversary of the Korean Peninsula's liberation from Japan's 1910-45 colonial rule.

But on the same day, the North also plans to hold a national unification rally that Seoul officials say is anti-South Korean. That may make it difficult for the South Korean president to agree to a meeting that day, officials say.

The presidents of the two Koreas have never met since the division of the peninsula in 1945. Lower-level talks between the countries have been held on and off since the 1970s, but no significant progress has been made.

Meanwhile, South Korea's largest militant student group, ignoring a government warning, said Wednesday it will send a representative to North Korea to promote unification.

Police said any students involved in the trip would be punished. The display of a student delegate to North Korea in 1989 touched off a severe

government crackdown on student activism in South Korea.

South Koreans cannot visit North Korea, considered an enemy country, without prior government approval, which is rarely given.

The student group, headquartered in Seoul, said Choi Jong-nam, 25, a South Korean student currently in Berlin, Germany is to leave for the North in a few days to appeal to North Korean leaders for national unification.

Choi plans to discuss ways of unifying the divided peninsula, it said.

The announcement came as South Korean police were stepping up a crackdown on violent student activism. This week, 109 students were arrested for staging violent anti-government protests that injured more than 100 people.

Off the Record



A woman dressed as a Brazilian samba dancer participates in the opening ceremonies of the first World Cup match at Stanford Stadium in California on Monday.

— AFP photo

Lavish wedding in a morgue

BEIJING: A Chinese man spent 20,000 yuan (2,300 dollar) for a lavish wedding, including music, a ring and a pink dress for his bride — but the ceremony was held in a morgue and she was in a coffin, reports Reuters.

The Economic Evening News reported on Tuesday the story of how relatives forced 25-year-old Ge to marry the corpse of former girlfriend. Ge had broken off their relationship, causing 22-year-old Yu to commit suicide.

The pair came from Harbin, capital of the northern province of Heilongjiang, the paper said.

Her enraged family demanded a proper wedding with photographs, music and cars bringing family members.

Ge was unable to resist the family's pressure and arranged the May 10 ceremony in the morgue of a Harbin city hospital.

Collegeboy guilty of sending e-mail threat to Clinton

LUFKIN, Texas: A college student pleaded guilty to sending an electronic mail message to President Clinton threatening to "blow your little head off," reports AP.

Matthew M. Thomas, 19, faces up to five years in prison and a 250,000 dollars fine. A sentencing date has not yet been scheduled.

Thomas admitted Tuesday that he used his former roommate's name and Social Security number to gain access to the Internet computer network at Stephen F. Austin University in April 1993.

While on the university's system, he sent an electronic message to a Maryland company hired by the White House to receive e-mail transmissions addressed to President Clinton.

Assistant US Attorney Allen Hurst said the message read: "One of these days, I'm going to come to Washington and blow your little head off. I have a bunch of guns. I can do it."

The message also contained a threat to kill the president's wife and daughter "because they deserve to die as well," Hurst said.

Knocked out and robbed

VIENNA: Two Slovak women named Maria and Magdalena have confessed to robbing 40 men in Vienna after inviting them to bed and administering knock-out drops, police said on Tuesday, reports Reuters.

The dodge had been going on for two years until one of the victims recognised the pair in a Vienna bar last week.

Police said they were also looking for two more Slovak girls calling themselves Jana and Vicky, who apparently used the same methods. Victims have been assured of police discretion if they provide further information.

AI wants US to rethink foreign military aid

WASHINGTON, June 22: Amnesty International wants the Clinton administration to reevaluate its foreign military assistance on grounds the aid is helping at least 19 countries commit human rights abuses, reports AP.

In an annual report, the human rights group singled out Colombia and Turkey as being particularly aggressive violators and said they appear to be using US military aid for future military attacks on civilians and other abuses.

"The US government must announce to recipients of security aid that torture and murder have consequences, that impunity is unacceptable and that if there is no justice there will be no security aid," said William Schulz, executive director of Amnesty International USA.

The report said Washington should ensure that US-provided weapons "are not put in the hands of people whose own governments refuse to prosecute them for acts of torture and killings."

In the case of Turkey, helicopters and warplanes — supplied by Germany, France and the United States — were used to kill civilians in south-

eastern Turkey where tensions with the Kurdish minority have resulted in persistent violence, the report said.

The Clinton administration is requesting 558 million dollars in military training and loans and economic aid for Turkey in the coming fiscal year, and planning military sales worth 1.3 billion dollars to Turkey.

In Colombia, most of the US aid has been anti-narcotics assistance, with the administration requesting congressional approval for an anti-narcotics programme of 40 million dollars in the coming year, plus 25 million dollars in military sales.

Colombia was cited by Amnesty International for widespread abuses by its military, including assassinations, torture and rapes and killings and harassment of human rights workers.

The group said it has evidence of US anti-narcotics money going directly to military forces for attacks on political opponents in Colombia. Other countries cited by the group as military aid recipients who have poor human rights records are: Israel, Egypt and Kuwait.

BRIEFLY

Russia, India finalise Mig deal:

Russia offered India the most advanced Russian military aircraft of Mig-29 and Soyuz-30 at favorable terms, according to local English press. The Observer of Business and Politics, on Tuesday, Xinhua reports from New Delhi.

The deal was finalised by visiting managing director Fedorov of Ilkuts Aircraft Production Association and Indian officials.

It included sale of 30 Mig-29 and 20 Soyuz-30 fighters and subsequent manufacture of the Mig planes in India, the newspaper said.

14 killed in Indian bus mishap:

At least 14 people were killed and 20 injured, when a bus carrying them skidded off the road near Bachedi Khal village on Rishikesh-Baddinath road early Monday, reports PTI from Lucknow.

The bus was carrying pilgrims to Baddinath shrine, reports said. Most of the pilgrims belonged to Madhya Pradesh.

The injured were admitted to various hospitals.

Ex-Sudanese PM arrested:

Former Prime Minister Sadek El-Mahdi was arrested with three senior officials of his dissolved Umma Party on charges of "conspiring" against the regime of General Omar El-Beshir, state-run television said; AFP reports from Khartoum.

The announcement made Monday night gave no details.

The former prime minister has been called in for questioning several times over the last year but was quickly released on each occasion. It was the first time he was actually arrested on charges of conspiring against Sudan's military junta.

Tajik forces kill 12 rebels:

Tajik forces killed at least 12 rebels and wounded seven in one day of fighting as part of a major government operation, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported Tuesday, AP reports from Dushanbe.

Four government soldiers were killed and nine wounded in the operation in three regions of the former Soviet republic, ITAR-Tass said. The 10-day sweep ended on June 17.

Tajikistan's Russian-backed government has been fighting Islamic rebels for control of the Central Asian country since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The government claims the rebels are heavily supported by Afghan Mujahideen across the border.

The rebels have been launching almost daily attacks on Tajik police and army servicemen as well as Russian border guards over the past several weeks.

George Michael loses court case:

British rock star George Michael on Tuesday lost a court case against Sony launched to break his contract with the recording company which he accused of failing to actively promote his latest albums, AFP reports from London.

The case at the High Court of London was the first of its kind and triggered much interest in the music industry which feared a series of copy-cat claims if Michael's claim was upheld.

Blast at US chemical plant:

An explosion shocked a chemical plant in suburban east US city of Philadelphia Tuesday, injuring at least 29 people, including 11 firefighters, US press here reported yesterday, Xinhua reports from Washington.

Fire and smoke formed a thick cloud over the nearby interstate highway 95, the area's main artery. A five-mile stretch of the highway was closed and nearby evacuations were forced.

The blast occurred just before noon at United Chemical Technologies Inc in Bristol township and started a fire that burned for nearly three hours before firefighters controlled it, according to an AP report.

Rabbani ready to talk peace with opponents

KABUL, June 22: President Burhanuddin Rabbani said Tuesday he was ready to discuss peace with his opponents and warned that without foreign aid Afghanistan could become a haven for the narcotic trade and international extremism, reports Reuters.

Addressing a seminar in the war-shattered capital Kabul, Rabbani called for a nationwide assembly to decide who should rule Afghanistan when his two-year term expires on June 28.

"It is not lawful that eight party leaders should alone decide the fate of the nation," he said, referring to the main guerrilla parties that formed the fractious Islamic coalition government in April 1992 after the collapse of the Soviet-installed administration.

"I support the idea of a nationwide Shura (assembly) to choose the next president," Rabbani said.

Rabbani said he was prepared to attend a peace conference planned for the western city of Herat in the next few days to try to narrow the bitter differences between the President and his arch-rival Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Rabbani has been under

siege in Kabul by Hekmatyar since new year's day, when the prime minister launched a blistering offensive on the city to try to topple the president. More than 1,500 people have been killed and thousands injured.

"I will go to Herat on condition that all other leaders of the parties in Afghanistan attend the meeting," Rabbani said.

A meeting in Kabul between representatives of the president and the prime minister that was postponed on Monday failed to take place Tuesday, officials said. They gave no reason.

The meeting is being brokered by Ismail Khan, powerful governor of the western province of Herat, to try to negotiate a ceasefire for Kabul and to determine whether Hekmatyar will go to the talks in Herat on a permanent peace.

Rabbani has said he will not step down unless he is in a position to hand over power to a legitimate alternative administration, while Hekmatyar has threatened to intensify his attacks if the president does not go on time.

Rwandan rebel leader says French intervention will spread war to other countries

PARIS, June 22: Rwanda's rebel leader said French intervention would save the government and cause the war to spread to other countries, but he remained open to negotiation, a newspaper reported Wednesday, says AP.

"If France intervenes militarily, this war will change and expand to worsen," Alex Kanyarengwe, president of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, said

in an interview with the French daily Liberation.

"The population that the French government wants to protect will themselves become victims of the intervention," he said in rebel-held territory near the Ugandan border.

"In addition, it risks engulfing the entire region. In Zaïre as in Burundi, there are the same types of population,"

he said.

The ethnic Tutsi rebels have seized two-thirds of Rwanda from the Hutu-led government since the mysterious plane crash April 6 that killed the president who agreed to a power-sharing agreement with the rebels pending elections.

An estimated 200,000 people have died in the fighting, most of them civilians,

and France says its mission is strictly humanitarian to stop the bloodbath. Many of the massacres have been blamed on Hutu militias.

French troops are assembling on the Zaïrean border facing Rwandan government-held territory. But previous French intervention was seen as propping up the government, and the rebels are wary of the new mission.

Kanyarengwe said he supports democracy but not one "under ethnic cover in which privilege dominates and exclusion reigns. That's the regime France has supported and is trying again today to maintain at all cost."

Still, the rebel leader said he planned to meet Wednesday with a French envoy. "Any contact is interesting," he said.

A Hutu moderate who was to be the prime minister of an interim government under the so-called Arusha accord of August 1993 was also skeptical of the French mission.

Faustin Twagiramungu, head of the Movement for a Democratic Republic, wondered whether the French sought to protect Rwandan military personnel.

"But if the French go there to stop the massacres as they say, by trying to tame the militias that kill, by trying to master the famous presidential guard they themselves trained. It would be positive in the end," he told Liberation.



A Rwandan woman cries as she holds her dying child on Tuesday in Kabuga, near Kigali. Nearly 200,000 people are believed to have been killed in the ethnic fighting which erupted over two months ago.

— AFP photo

Strike paralyses Kashmir

Thousands attend Nissar's funeral

SRINAGAR, India, June 22: A Kashmiri Muslim separatist leader was buried Tuesday at a funeral attended by tens of thousands of mourners as a strike called to protest his assassination paralysed the Kashmir valley, reports AP.

Qazi Nissar, a Muslim cleric, politician and senior leader of the Kashmiri Muslim separatist movement, was buried in the "martyrs' graveyard" in the town of Anantnag, 35 miles (57 kilometers) south of here, witnesses said.

Nissar, 50, the chief priest for southern Kashmir, was shot

dead near Anantnag on Monday by unidentified gunmen.

The Indian authorities accused Kashmir's dominant Muslim separatist group, the Hizbul Mujahideen, of killing Nissar. But the Hizbul, which wants Kashmir to merge with Pakistan, said the murder was staged by Indian agents.

On Monday, as news of the Nissar's murder spread, residents of Anantnag, in a rare display of anti-militant sentiment, chanted slogan condemning Pakistan and the Hizbul Mujahideen.

There was no such slogan-

shouting at Tuesday's funeral although cries of "Allah-u-Akbar" (God is great) and other Islamic slogans rang out as Nissar was laid to rest at a ceremony attended by an estimated 70,000 people.

Trucks, buses and cars arrived throughout the day carrying people from nearby towns and villages for the funeral and the near-hysterical mourners wailed and tore their clothes as Nissar was buried in scorching heat.

Before the ceremony, thousands queued up for hours for a chance to glimpse or shower

flower petals on his body, placed on slabs of ice, at the town's main mosque.

The assassination has been condemned by all Kashmiri Muslim separatist groups and many sent a representative to the burial. Indian troops and state police provided tight security but no incidents were reported.

Meanwhile, all shops and offices were closed and streets were deserted in Srinagar, Kashmir's summer capital, and other Muslim-majority towns in the Kashmir valley, police and residents said.

Guerillas attack Israeli patrol in South Lebanon

MARJAYOUN, Lebanon, June 22: Guerillas attacked an Israeli patrol with rockets, machine guns and mortars overnight in South Lebanon but caused no casualties, a pro-Israeli radio reported Wednesday, reports AP.

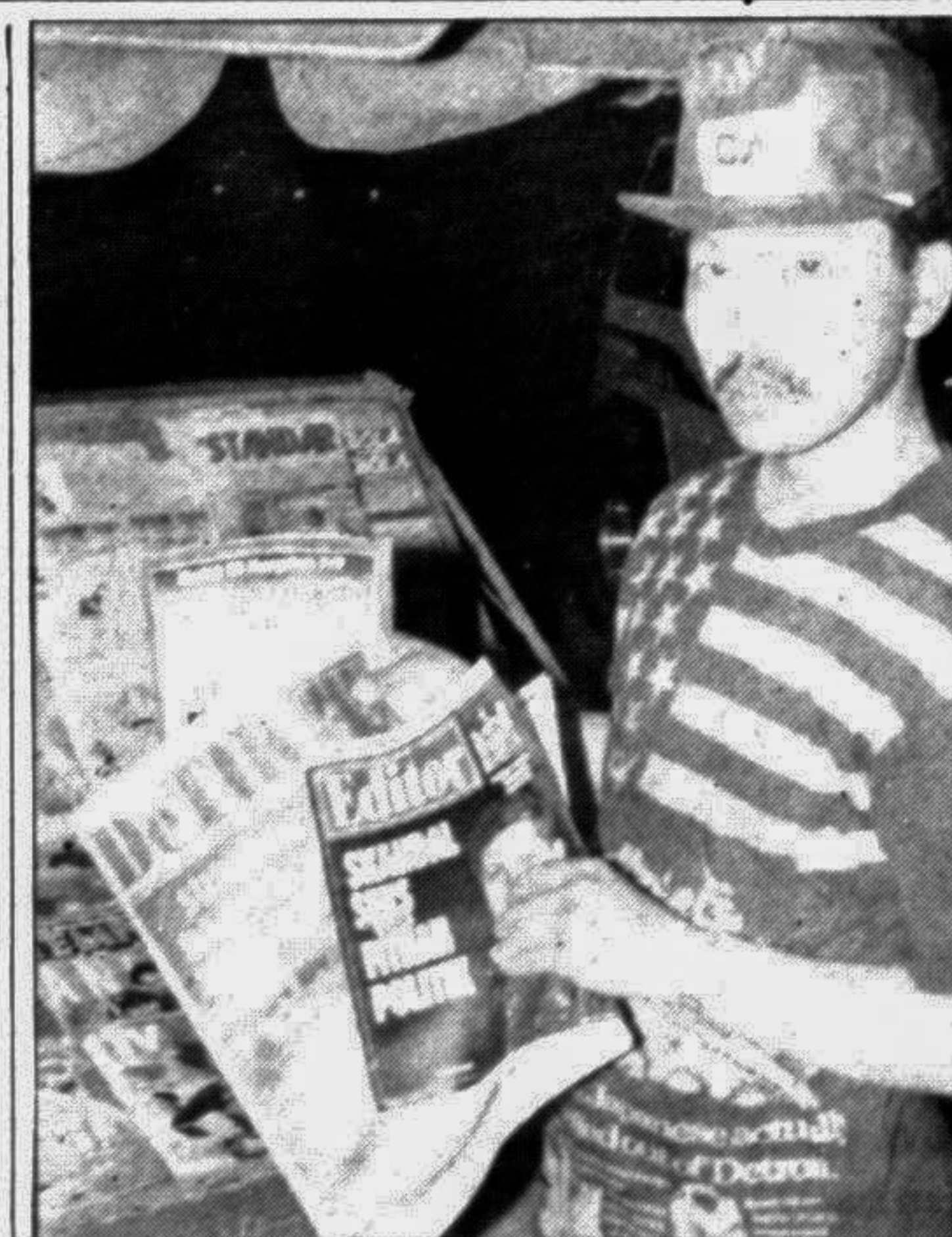
The patrol was heading for Tallusse, an outpost controlled by Israel's proxy South Lebanon Army (SLA) militia on the outskirts of the western sector of the "security zone" controlled by Israel along the two countries' border since 1985, the radio said.

Guerillas fired rockets, machine guns and volleys of 120 mm and 81 mm mortar causing no casualties among the soldiers, Sawt al-Junub (Voice of the South) radio reported.

Israeli soldiers and SLA militiamen retaliated by pounding villages facing Tallusse, the radio added.

Security sources in South Lebanon reported that the Israeli army had been deploying reinforcements overnight over the past three nights near SLA outposts on the edge of the zone to protect them against any attack.

Israeli warplanes have blasted positions of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah in south Lebanon Monday and Tuesday



A roadside newspaper vendor in Jakarta shows the latest editions of Indonesia's three most popular news magazines — Tempo, Editor and Detik — on Tuesday shortly after the government banned the weeklies for ignoring warnings to tone down their reporting.

— AFP photo

Filipino army attack rebels' hideout, kill 13

MANILA, June 22: Thirteen Muslim gunmen and six soldiers were killed when the military mounted an air and ground assault in the southern Philippines against bandits who massacred 15 Christian captives and are holding a Roman Catholic priest, a senior official said Wednesday, reports AP.

Twelve other combatants were wounded in Tuesday's fighting, which began with helicopters pounding the bandits' Forest hideout in Balian, followed by a ground assault involving marines and special forces. Lieutenant General Orlando Soriano said over the radio here.

Soriano, the military commander for the southern Philippines, said the army was unaware of the fate of Father Ciril Acorda. The assault was launched after the government and the church leadership rejected a three million peso (US\$1.1 million) ransom.

The bandits kidnapped a group of Christian commuters near the provincial capital of Isabela on June 8. They executed 15 men, freed 20 captives and kept the priest as a hostage. One other wounded captive escaped after the massacre.