

Russia develops advanced chemical weapons: US

WASHINGTON, June 24: The United States said Thursday there is growing evidence Russia is continuing to develop advanced chemical weapons and Moscow is failing to fulfil a promise to disclose full details of its programme, reports Reuter.

Despite this, the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon strongly pressed the Senate to ratify a treaty banning such arms.

Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, CIA Director James Woolsey cited "growing evidence that Russia has continued elements of an offensive programme."

In particular he cited recent comments by Russian scientist Vil Mirzayanov that Russia was continuing to de-

velop chemical agents and binary weapons, the Mirzayanov allegations have provided many fruitful leads to pursue in both intelligence and diplomatic channels," he said.

At the State Department spokesman Mike McCurry said US officials were still analysing data on chemical weapons stockpiles and programmes shared with Russia recently under a joint exchange. But he added "we are concerned about what appear to be omissions and inconsistencies in that data."

We have long known and believed that the Soviets... had developed binary chemical agents... the data we have received from Russia makes no reference to binary chemical weapons or agents, McCurry told a news briefing.

Nigeria faces political showdown over arrest of Abiola

LAGOS, June 24: Nigeria faces a political showdown over the arrest on Thursday of opposition leader Moshood Abiola, reports Reuter.

Hundreds of demonstrators staged a peaceful march in central Lagos on Thursday night demanding the immediate release of Abiola, who challenged Nigeria's military rulers on June 11 by proclaiming himself president.

Opposition groups, including pro-democracy movements, earlier threatened street protests after 24 hours if the authorities did not free the millionaire businessman widely believed to have won last year's annulled presidential poll.

But police, who stepped up security in Nigeria's biggest city after Abiola's arrest, did not expect any trouble.

"We are not worried at all. Lagos is calm and quiet and I believe it will remain so," police Deputy Inspector General Nuhu Aliya, who has been ensuring public order in Lagos for two weeks told Reuters.

Abiola was picked up in his Lagos home early on Thursday but news of the arrest was slow in spreading.

He was declared wanted on June 11 when he proclaimed himself president of Nigeria in defiance of the military authorities.

His arrest came only hours after he addressed a rally in

Lagos and climaxes a two-month stand-off between the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO) opposition alliance and the government.

Abiola joins dozens of politicians and human rights activists detained since NADECO began demanding that military ruler General Sani Abacha surrender power to Abiola in order to restore democracy in Africa's most populous nation.

Many false treason charges including former top politicians, Abiola, whose exact whereabouts were unclear, could face similar charges for which the punishment is life imprisonment.

Abiola's wife expressed

concern about his health in a letter to the police in which she pleaded that he should be allowed to see his personal doctor.

The campaign for democracy (CD) pressure group, which last year organised protests that forced the former military president Ibrahim Babangida to quit and has forcefully backed Abiola, gave the authorities an ultimatum to free him or face mass action.

Several other groups issued statement backing CD's action.

CD, an umbrella organisation of activists, groups has not successfully staged any protest since Abacha seized power in November.

Off the Record

Mayor sentenced to 190 yrs for pocketing \$ 1500

MANILA: An anti-graft court sentenced a mayor to 190 years in prison for pocketing 42,000 pesos (dlsr 1,500) in workers' wages in 1988, court officials said. Friday, reports AP.

"There are many other officials who pocketed millions and millions more than me, so why me?" Mayor Leopoldo Lacharon asked reporters.

The Manila court ordered him sent to jail Friday after the Supreme Court threw out his appeal.

Lacharon has been mayor for eight years of San Pablo in Zambanga del Sur province, about 815 kilometres (510 miles) south of Manila.

Lacharon, a member of President Fidel Ramos' ruling party, was found guilty in December 1992 of forging the payroll signatures of 19 laborers involved in several road projects in 1988.

'Miracle of the century'

COPENHAGEN: A German tourist survived a fall from the 15th floor of an apartment building after he bounced off an electric cable and onto a tree top before hitting the ground, police said Friday, reports Reuter.

Eduard Pattera, 19, was sitting on balcony railings when he was blown off by the wind. He suffered only bruises in the 50-metre plunge.

"It must be the miracle of the century," said a police spokesman.

Vegetarians less likely to die of heart disease

LONDON: Vegetarians are 40 per cent less likely to die of cancer than meat-eaters, researchers in Britain and New Zealand reported today, says Reuter.

The report, which supports other studies, also finds vegetarians are less likely to die of heart disease.

"Non-meat eaters had significantly lower standardised mortality ratios for all causes, ischaemic heart disease and cancer than meat eaters," the report in the British Medical Journal said.

Jim Ann at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand, studied 6,000 vegetarians and 5,000 of their meat-eating friends and relatives to try to make sure lifestyle, geographical and other factors did not affect the outcome.

He and colleagues compared death rates from cancer, heart disease and other causes over 12 years. After allowing for the effects of smoking, weight and social class, they found death rates were significantly lower for the vegetarians.

They also said that while their findings supported dozens of earlier studies, their techniques were unique.

BRIEFLY

Two Tajik policemen shot dead:

Unknown gunmen shot dead two policemen in the former Soviet Republic of Tajikistan, bringing to 21 the number of people killed in attacks on security personnel in the last month, officials said on Thursday. Reuter reports from Dushanbe.

The two policemen were killed in the southern outskirts of Dushanbe on Wednesday, military officials said.

"They were killed with automatic guns during the day," said one official, declining further comment.

Three police were killed and several others wounded in an ambush on Sunday.

Accord on HK airport likely:

Britain said yesterday it hoped an agreement ending a two-year dispute with China over funding Hong Kong's huge airport project could be reached by the end of this month, Reuter reports from Hong Kong.

"We will reach an agreement on the basis of the progress we have made," said chief British negotiator Hug Davies. "I hope we will reach agreement before the end of this month, if possible within the next few days."

Blast at Euro-Parliament office:

A bomb damaged the European Parliament offices in central Athens early yesterday, hours before the start of the EU summit on the Greek island of Corfu, police said, Reuter reports from Athens.

They said the blast caused panic in Syntagma Square, one of the most popular tourist spots, and smashed windows in nearby buildings, but there were no injuries.

No group has yet claimed responsibility for the attack. Police sealed off the area around the EU offices, fearing a possible second explosion.

Floods kill 3 in Philippines:

Three people were killed and another was missing and feared drowned in widespread flooding spawned by a tropical depression on Thursday, police and rescue officials said today, AFP reports from Manila.

A man was electrocuted in northern Pampanga province and another drowned while crossing a swollen river in Angeles city adjacent to Pampanga, the civil defense office said.

Hamas activist killed in Gaza:

A member of the Islamic Resistance movement Hamas was found shot in the head Thursday in a revenge killing, his family said, AFP reports from Gaza City.

Pinned to the body of Nasser Saluha, 20, who was kidnapped late Wednesday, was a note saying he had been killed "for the murder of our son."

An inquiry has been launched and it is thought the family of someone shot as a suspected Israeli collaborator could be responsible.

South Africa to rejoin UN:

Foreign Affairs Minister Alfred Nzo traveled to New York on Thursday to formally reclaim South Africa's seat in the UN General Assembly, AP reports from Johannesburg.

The seat has been vacant for 20 years, since the United Nations refused to accept South Africa's credentials in 1974 as part of an international protest of apartheid policies of racial discrimination.

A formal invitation to occupy the seat again came after the nation's first all-race election in April set up a democratic government led by President Nelson Mandela and his African National Congress.

Lukashenko moves into 2nd round of Belarus polls

MINSK, Belarus, June 24: A candidate known as the "Belarusian Zhirinovskiy" for his extreme nationalist views won a surprising 45 per cent of the vote and moved Friday into the second round of Belarus presidential election, reports AP.

Alexander Lukashenko, chairman of the parliament's anti-corruption committee, was shy of the simple majority needed to win.

Turnout in Thursday's election was high with 79 per cent of the country's 7.3 million eligible voters casting ballots in the former Soviet Republic's first presidential election since independence in 1991.

Prime Minister Vyacheslav Kebich, considered the front-

runner, finished second with a humiliating 17 per cent, Alexander Abramovich, head of the Central Election Commission, said Friday.

The results were preliminary, and official results would be announced within 10 days, he said.

Lukashenko won national fame and comparison to Russia's infamous ultra-nationalist lawmaker Vladimir Zhirinovskiy for his populist views and fervent attacks on political enemies.

In a stormy campaign, he vowed to "defeat the mafia, which like an all-devouring octopus has ensnared all government organs with its tentacles."



Japanese Empress Michiko (L) waves to well-wishers as she arrives at Hickam Air Force Base in Honolulu Thursday as Emperor Akihito looks on. The royal couple are in Hawaii on the last leg of their two-week visit to the US. — AFP photo

Lankan parliament dissolved, elections August 16

COLOMBO, June 24: Sri Lanka's president dissolved Parliament Friday and called for an election in August, six months ahead of schedule, a presidential aide said, reports AP.

The proclamation by President Dingiri Banda Wijetunga set the election process in motion as of next week, when nominations open for parliamentary candidates. The election was set for Aug. 16.

The proclamation, which Wijetunga signed in his office without ceremony, will be officially published later Friday and the legislature will be dismissed effective midnight, the aide said on condition of anonymity.

Wijetunga's United National Party has governed Sri Lanka for 17 years, but will face its strongest challenge since taking office from the opposition Sri Lanka Freedom Party.

Parliamentary elections had been scheduled for February, but Wijetunga decided to move them forward ahead of the

separate presidential election, which must be held no later than November.

Wijetunga took office last May after the assassination of President Ranasinghe Premadasa.

He is considered to have less voter appeal than Premadasa, while the opposition has promoted a new firebrand leader, Chandrika Kumaratunga, daughter of former Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike.

This spring, an election

campaign led by Mrs. Kumaratunga devastated the ruling party in a regional council vote in the south.

Officials in the ruling party say a successful campaign in the general election would boost Wijetunga's chances to retain the presidency.

Earlier Friday, the legislature broke into an uproar and was forced to adjourn for 20 minutes after six opposition lawmakers announced their defection to the United National Party.

Governing party members shouted protests that the defection was unconstitutional. Under the law, defectors are expelled from their party and should give up their seats, but the move apparently was designed to gain maximum publicity before the president's anticipated announcement dismissing the house.

The defecting lawmakers accused the opposition party of sidelining them for advocating free-market policies rather than follow the socialist tradition of the opposition.

PLO, Israel to resume talks Monday

JERUSALEM, June 24: Israel and the PLO will resume talks next week, "probably in Cairo," Foreign Minister Shimon Peres said Thursday, reports AP.

Talks with the Palestinians will begin next week probably in Cairo, Peres said at a meeting in Jerusalem of the World Zionist Organisation, according to the Israeli agency Itim.

The agency added that the talks were due to start on Monday to discuss some issues not resolved by the May 4 autonomy accord signed in Cairo such as crossing points from the autonomous zones of Gaza and Jericho to Jordan and Egypt.

They would also look at the outlines of roads linking the self-rule enclave of Jericho in the West Bank to the Gaza Strip.

PLO official casts doubt over Arafat's Jericho trip

JERUSALEM, June 24: The PLO's leading official in the Israeli-occupied West Bank cast doubt today over whether PLO leader Yasser Arafat would visit the Palestinian-administered enclave of Jericho in the near future, reports Reuter.

Faisal Al-Husseini said Arafat could not go to Jericho under present conditions.

Asked by Israeli radio if Arafat's expected visit to Jericho might be put off until Palestinian self-rule-implemented in the West Bank town of Jericho and most of the Gaza Strip in May — was extended to all the West Bank, Hussein said.

"Not exactly, but I think that there is something to say on the issue: Yasser Arafat cannot come under existing conditions."

Husseini, speaking Hebrew, said Arafat, who is based in Tunis, would never suffer restrictions like those put on PLO chief negotiator Nabil Shaath during his visit to Jericho earlier this week.

Taiwan invites China for fence-mending talks

TAIPEI, June 24: Taiwan offered Friday to waive its long-standing boycott of China and invite a Chinese representative to the island for fence-mending talks, reports AP.

The move was aimed at easing a crisis in the fragile relationship between the two governments, both of which claim to be sole ruler of all China and refuse to have official contact.

A visit by Tang Shubel, vice chairman of the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits, would be unprecedented, since he was vice director of the Taiwan Affairs Office of the Chinese State Council.

Until now, Taiwan has rejected Beijing's suggestion of a visit by Tang, suspecting he still holds the State Council position and that his presence here would stake a symbolic claim of sovereignty over Taiwan, said Shi Hwei-yow, deputy secretary general of the semi-official Straits Exchange Foundation.

China regards Taiwan as a renegade province occupied by

the losing side in the 1949 civil war. But since the late 1980s the two sides have forged extensive trade and tourism links.

These ties are supervised by Taiwan's foundation and Tang's Beijing-based association, which are described as semi-official bodies so that China and Taiwan can meet without formally recognizing each other's legitimacy.

The foundation said it wrote to Tang inviting him to Taipei July 16-19 for talks with its secretary general, Chiao Jen-ho.

Its letter said: "We should meet to help promote peaceful and stable progress in cross-strait relations, which have been seriously impaired by the Thousand Islands Lake Incident."

The lake is where 24 Taiwanese tourists and their eight crew were found dead April 1 in a burned-out pleasure boat.

China initially claimed the deaths were accidental. Taiwan was outraged, suspecting a cover-up of military complicity.



The Atomic-Bomb Dome (foreground) stands before the Peace Memorial Park in the centre of Hiroshima City in western Japan. — AFP photo

Strike cripples Kashmir

NEW DELHI, June 24: A strike called by Muslims to protest the assassination of a top Kashmiri religious leader crippled the Kashmir valley today, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported, reports AP.

Shops and businesses were closed and almost all traffic went off the roads in Srinagar, the state's summer capital.

The shutdown was called by the Freedom Conference, an umbrella grouping of 34 Muslim groups that backs the four-year-old drive to secede Kashmir, the only Muslim-majority state in India.

Unidentified gunmen shot dead Nissar, 50, the chief priest of south Kashmir in Anantnag town on Monday.

Nearly 10,000 people have died in Kashmir in the separatist campaign.

North Yemeni troops bomb residential areas in Aden

ADEN, June 24: Northern Yemeni forces hit the southern city of Aden with its heaviest bombardment since the start of Yemen's civil war, ahead of planned meetings between the UN chief and ministers from the two sides in the conflict, reports Reuter.

Shells and Katyusha rockets rained down on Aden throughout Thursday, residents said. Northern Yemeni troops besieging the city were targeting almost all of its residential areas for the first time since the civil war broke out on May 4.

The wailing of ambulance sirens, echoed through the streets of the port city, capital of a self-declared Southern state seeking to break away from a four-year union with the North.

Wooden shops and houses in the poorer northern districts of Aden which are less than 20 km (12 miles) from the northern front lines, were set ablaze during the bombardment.

Officials at Aden's main Al-Jomhouriya Hospital, said, 130 dead and wounded people had been admitted between sunrise and noon on Thursday alone.

The hospital cannot cope. The wounded are lying on the floor in the corridors, one doctor said. This is "barbaric."

Several attempts at a ceasefire have collapsed with North and South both blaming the other.

UN chopper comes under fire in south Lebanon

TYRE, Lebanon, June 24: An unarmed UN helicopter came under fire as it evacuated an ailing Nepalese peacekeeper to a field hospital in south Lebanon, UN sources reported Friday, says AP.

They said the helicopter was not hit when unidentified gunmen fired a rocket-propelled grenade at it at 11 pm Thursday as it flew over Kafra, a Shiite Muslim village on the edge of Israel's so-called "security zone."

The Italian pilot carried on with the evacuation to the border town of Naqoura, headquarters of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon, the sources said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

French troops pledge not to pick a fight with Rwandan rebels

GOMA, Zaire, June 24: French marines and foreign Legionnaires are in Rwanda to try to stem the ethnic slaughter that has horrified the world. They pledged not to pick a fight with rebel forces who view them as enemies, reports AP.

The commander of the small UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda said Thursday he hoped the French would stay away from front lines between troops of Rwanda's Hutu-dominated government and the mainly Tutsi rebel movement. Overnight, the rebels continued their advance on Kigali, the capital, where the international UN force was based.

Some 100 kilometers west of Kigali, a small group of French soldiers in armoured

vehicles met no opposition and was welcomed by residents on Thursday after advancing several kilometers into western Rwanda, a military spokesman said in Paris, speaking on condition of anonymity.

The Rwandan army is believed to control the western third of the small central African nation. The rebels have won control of the eastern two-thirds since the war resumed April 6 after a suspicious plane crash killed Rwanda's Hutu president, who had reached a power-sharing accord with the Tutsi minority.

About 40 Foreign Legion paratroopers protected by helicopter gunships crossed the border from Bukavu, 100 kilometers south of Goma, the military said. Their goal was to

secure a refugee camp nearby at Cyanguu, to protect 8,000 Tutsis from the widespread slaughter being inflicted on Tutsis by Hutu militias.

The United Nations and aid groups estimate more than 200,000 Rwandans have died in the past two months, most of them civilians.

A reconnaissance team of French marines also headed from Goma for the northwest region of Gisenyi. French state radio reported, quoting an unidentified government source.

"The role is only to protect refugees," said Col. Andre Schill, a French spokesman in Goma. He said French troops would use their weapons only if threatened or to protect refugees.

"We are not out here to make a new war, but to protect people. We are not here to shoot," he told reporters.

The French government said it was sending 2,500 soldiers and marines for the two-month mission authorised Wednesday by the UN Security Council as a stopgap until a larger, all-African peacekeeping force can deploy.

Schill said 500 French soldiers already were in Goma, including marine infantrymen, supply troops and combat engineers. About 250 paratroopers were in Bukavu, he said. French troops were turning the airport at Kisangani, Zaire, into an air base to support the mission, dubbed "Operation Turquoise."

In Kigali, reporters noted heavy rebel fire on Camp Kimburura, the base of the Presidential Guard and artillery units in eastern Kigali, and on government positions to the north on the foothills of Mt. Kigali. Government forces returned fire only sporadically.

The rebels may have succeeded in surrounding Camp Kimburura. UN Observers reported that fresh rebel troops were shipped into east Kigali overnight.

Maj Gen Romeo Dallaire, the Canadian commander of the 450 UN peacekeepers in Kigali, spoke by telephone Thursday night with a senior French officer, an aide said.

The aide, UN military spokesman Maj. Jean-Guy Plante, said Dallaire and the

French officer made no firm plans for cooperation or coordination.

Although the French government says the operation is a strictly humanitarian mission, the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front is suspicious because French intervention blocked a rebel offensive in 1990.

"We have no doubt whatsoever that their intentions are far from being humanitarian," Theogene Rudasingwa, secretary general of the Patriotic Front, told journalists in Paris.

The rebels representative in Paris, Jacques Bihozagra, said rebel forces would not seek out French troops. But he warned the rebels would "treat them as invaders" if they did make contact.

MNLF faction joins Filipino Muslim rebels

ZAMBOANGA, Philippines, June 24: A breakaway faction of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) has joined forces with the Muslim extremist Abu Sayyaf group in its fight against Philippine troops, officials said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

Lieutenant-General Orlando Soriano told reporters he was confident the main force of the rebel MNLF would not join with the faction and Abu Sayyaf, which together have an estimated strength of less than 200.

Soriano said the offensive around Sampit town, where the guerrillas have made their last stand, has been gaining ground.