

US ultimatum to Haitian generals

WASHINGTON, July 7: Haitian ruling generals must step down within six months or face possible US military intervention, a senior US official said Wednesday as the number of Haitian refugees picked up at sea grew to 14,000, reports AFP.

The State Department said meanwhile that approximately 2,900 Haitians in 46 boats were picked up Tuesday by US coast guard ships off Haiti, bringing the total to 14,000 since the United States began screening for political refugees June 15.

We don't expect the military regime to be there six months from now. We believe that the dictatorship will step down, will leave, William Gray, President Bill Clinton's special adviser for Haiti told ABC television.

If they don't then there are options that are open. The president has made it very clear that the military option is just one of those options.

Nigeria's political crisis deepens

LAGOS, July 7: Nigeria's political crisis deepened after the military government charged opposition leader Moshood Abiola with treason and powerful oil unions vowed to hold more strikes in pursuit of democracy, reports Reuter.

Abiola the tycoon businessman widely believed to have won last year's annulled presidential election, was arraigned on Wednesday before a court in the inland capital Abuja.

The 57-year-old philanthropist, backed by an alliance of pro-democracy groups, politicians and retired generals, proclaimed himself president last month in defiance of Nigeria's military rulers.

Abiola who faces life imprisonment if convicted of treason, pleaded not guilty. He also complained to the judge of

mal-treatment.

The judge fixed July 14 for a ruling on his lawyers' request for bail. The authorities have not revealed where he is being detained.

Abiola's arrest on June 23 heightened tensions in Africa's most populous nation. The junior oil workers' union Nupeng began a strike on Monday to press for his release and reinstatement as president.

The strike has disrupted domestic fuel supplies creating long queues of vehicles at filling stations which are likely to lengthen as more fuel stations run dry.

Nupeng's General Secretary Frank Kokori was arrested on Wednesday. The union said it has called an emergency meeting of its leadership to finalise the next line of action.

BRIEFLY

Columbia lifts off today: The weather was the sole concern for Friday's planned launch of space shuttle Columbia, AP reports from Cape Canaveral.

Columbia is due to lift off on the laboratory research mission at 12:43 pm (1643 GMT). The shuttle will carry seven astronauts and thousands of aquatic animals, including fish, newts, toad eggs and baby sea urchins.

Shuttle weather officer Ed Prisielac said rain and thunderstorms were likely early Friday afternoon. He put the odds of a Friday launch at 60 per cent.

One killed in Mexican clash: Rival Indian group clashed in a gun battle Wednesday that left one man dead and at least three others seriously wounded in a dispute that began with hostage taking, AP reports from Mexico.

The 20-minute shooting exchange underscored the simmering tensions of an unresolved guerrilla uprising that led to 10 days of fighting between Indian guerrillas and the army in early January. But no rebels were reported involved in the latest violence.

Protestant Indians who were expelled from San Juan Chamula, a town 30 miles (50 km) north of San Cristobal de Las Casas, took Mayor Domingo Lopez Ruiz hostage Tuesday and brought him to a government Indian affairs office in this city.

'Deng in good health': Chinese senior leader Deng Xiaoping is now in Beijing and is in good health, one of his daughters said Thursday. AP reports from Beijing.

Deng Nan, speaking to reporters at a conference on the environment in Beijing where she is a delegate, did not give any other details.

There are regular rumours that the 89-year-old Deng is ailing or dead, and with equal regularity China or his children report that he is well.

Gen Wimol slates ex-US envoy: Thailand's army chief called former US ambassador Morton Abramowitz a 'devil' and an 'enemy of the Thai people' for contending Thailand is still helping Cambodia's Khmer Rouge guerrillas. AFP reports from Bangkok.

Abramowitz is 'not an ambassador but a devil,' General Wimol Wongwanich told reporters Wednesday evening.

Mandela tries to end war in Angola

PRETORIA, July 7: President Nelson Mandela launched his first foreign peacemaking effort Thursday, hosting Angolan President Jose Eduardo dos Santos and two other African leaders in talks on ending Angola's 19-year civil war, reports AFP.

Mandela also plans to meet soon with Angolan rebel leader Jonas Savimbi in hope of setting up face-to-face talks between Savimbi and dos Santos.

And advance team from Savimbi's National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) rebels would visit South Africa next week to set up the Mandela-Savimbi meeting, a spokesman for Mandela said Thursday.

Savimbi, who reportedly refuses to leave Angola for security reasons, has accepted Mandela's offer for a meeting in South Africa 'in principle' according to the Portuguese news agency LUSA. Citing unidentified sources it said the date still must be decided.

Concern over growing harassment of journalists in India

NEW DELHI, July 7: The public beating of two reporters by police under the command of India's 'supercop' has sparked concern over the growing harassment of journalists in the world's largest democracy, reports AFP.

Human rights groups, the media, lawyers, and political parties have taken up the cudgel on behalf of the battered pair to focus attention on what many of them describe as 'systematic suppression' of the press by the state.

The Indian government is bracing itself for protests since the June 30 thrashing of the newspaper reporters by men serving under Punjab Police Chief K P S Gill, and has offered to launch an investigation into the incident.

Rahul Banerjee and Abhijit Das, reporters for The Statesman, were beaten after a press conference called by Gill at a luxury hotel here to discuss his appointment as chief of India's field Hockey Federation.

The government's offer to investigate the incident had been dismissed.

The effort seems to be to obfuscate the issue," said C R Imani, chief editor of The Statesman.

Others have said the beating should be seen in the perspective of growing state intolerance of the media.

"It is high time we take action to stop the hectoring of the state," said a spokesman for the Delhi Journalists' Association, who has long complained that many Indian publications bear official harassment without a murmur.

Most of India's 28,400 listed publications are heavily dependent on state advertising.

About 100 journalists held a protest march to parliament here Wednesday chanting 'stop bashing reporters' and carrying signs proclaiming 'journalists are not terrorists.'

Gill has claimed the beating occurred after he has left the press conference and accused the media of 'blowing it out of all proportion.'

The government's offer to investigate the incident had been dismissed.

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