

Malaysia bans Al-Arqam Islamic sect

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 5: Malaysia today announced an immediate ban on the Al-Arqam messianic Islamic sect, and said it would prosecute its followers who refuse to ban on what the clergy considers as deviationist teachings, reports AFP.

"At least six national laws, including one that governs security, will be used to enforce the nation-wide ban on the group and its activities," Hamid Othman, a senior official in Malaysian Premier Mahathir Mohamad's office, told a packed news conference.

All Al-Arqam's religious schools in the country will be closed and its vast business, social and cultural activities and publications disallowed with immediate effect, he said.

Al-Arqam, which began as a study group among Muslim scholars in predominantly Muslim Malaysia in 1968, has

blossomed into a powerful and wealthy missionary group with branches in 15 countries under its elusive self-styled leader Ashaari Muhammad.



Ashaari Muhammad, leader of Malaysia's Al-Arqam movement.

MPs loyal to Sonia blast Rao's handling of bank scam

NEW DELHI, Aug 5: India's ruling Congress Party, reeling under an opposition campaign over the nation's worst financial scandal, is also facing an internal revolt on the issue, politicians said today, reports Reuter.

They said Congress deputies, regarded as "Sonia loyalists" because of their closeness to Rajiv Gandhi's Italian-born widow, had launched a blistering attack against Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao's handling of the 1.28 billion US dollar scandal.

"There's a fracture," said senior politician Jaswant Singh, lower house deputy for the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party.

How serious it is will depend on how much strain is

put on the fracture," Singh told Reuters.

Some Congress deputies close to the family of Rajiv Gandhi, the head of a political dynasty who was assassinated in 1991, have openly criticised Rao's handling of a Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) investigation into the 1992 scandal.

The more dangerous ones are engaged in a whisper campaign," said Sharad Yadav, deputy of the centre-left Janata Dal.

Rao's critics accuse him of rejecting the all-party JPC's findings to shield senior colleagues, including Finance Minister Manmohan Singh, from criticism. The scandal involved brokers and bankers diverting funds from the market in government securities to

the Bombay Stock Exchange.

The issue has helped unite India's fractious opposition, which first paralysed parliament then boycotted it over its demands for the withdrawal of the "action taken report" containing the government's response to the JPC probe.

Congress dissent reached a flashpoint on Tuesday when Surinder Singh Ahluwalia, a Sikh deputy regarded as a Sonia loyalist, accused Manmohan Singh of harming the party by his approach to the scandal probe, deputies said.

They said the finance minister had gone to the extent of threatening to resign following Ahluwalia's criticism, but was later pacified by Rao.

Junior Interior Minister of State Rajesh Pilot, another

Rajiv loyalist, had earlier proposed the resignation of all the seven ministers criticised in the JPC. But this was apparently rejected by Rao, deputies said.

Analysts say the showdown with the opposition and the chances of an open revolt within Congress could force Rao to hold early polls.

"By holding early polls he could take the steam out of the Sonia threat," communist lawmaker Saifuddin Chowdhury said.

"If this issue lingers on, shell become stronger and might the demand a share in power."

The Times of India said Rao may have deliberately engineered the crisis to prepare for early polls, calculating it could put the opposition in a quandary.



An elderly Japanese woman prays for Hiroshima Atomic Bomb victims at the Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima yesterday, one day before A-Bomb memorial day.

— AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Dalai Lama to visit Britain: The Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual leader, will visit Britain between September 14 and 18, according to a statement issued late Thursday by the office of Tibet, AFP reports from London.

The Dalai Lama will take part in an inter-faith dialogue on Tibetan, Buddhist and Christian meditation at Middlesex University, London.

Israel, Jordan plan phone link: Israel and Jordan plan to link their telephone systems by next week, Israeli officials said Friday, carrying out a step foreseen under the peace proclamation signed by their leaders last month, AP reports from Kibbutz Eilat, Israel.

Officials close to the two negotiating teams said the connection is expected to be complete in time for US Secretary of State Warren Christopher to make the first call on Monday on a visit to Israel.

Attack on Turkish club in Munich: Fire-bombers attacked a Turkish cultural club in Munich overnight, German police said today. No one was hurt. Reuter reports from Munich.

Three men were seen throwing a petrol bomb into the club, the police said, adding that they were not ruling out a racist motive.

3 to die in China for robbery: A Beijing court has sentenced three individuals to death for illegal gun trading and armed robbery, the Beijing Daily said today, AFP reports from Beijing.

The Beijing Intermediate People's court passed down the death penalty Thursday on Wen Feng Jun, Li Chunyou and Zhang Baochang, while their accomplices received prison sentences ranging from two years to life.

4 Thai teenagers killed: Four Thai teenagers were killed late on Thursday night during an illegal motorcycle race involving as many as 30 machines in central Bangkok, police said. Reuter reports from Bangkok.

The two men and their two women passengers, aged 17 to 20, were killed when their motorcycles skidded out of control.

Hezbollah rockets Israeli post: The pro-Iranian Hezbollah movement early yesterday said it had launched a rocket attack on an Israeli army position in southern Lebanon, hours after an Israeli air strike in the region killed eight civilians, AFP reports from Tyre, Lebanon.

Security sources in the area confirmed that five Katyusha rockets targeted an Israeli position on the western edge of Israel's "security zone" in southern Lebanon but caused no casualties.

China to buy Russian arms tech: China is to buy military hardware and technology worth five billion US dollars from Russia as part of a plan to streamline its armed forces, a pro-China monthly magazine said on Thursday, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

China's State Council has already approved a military request to import advanced Russian weapons and technology, including jet fighters, production facilities for battle tanks, and anti-missile systems, Mirror Magazine said in its latest edition.

Bus mishap claims 20 in China: Twenty people died and 40 were injured when a bus ran into a cargo train in China's remote northeastern city of Harbin last month, the China Daily said yesterday, Reuter reports from Beijing.

The accident occurred on July 24, the newspaper said. It gave no other details.

Quake shakes Indonesian island: A strong earthquake rocked the eastern Indonesian island of Moluccas yesterday but there was no immediate report of casualties or damage, an official said, AFP reports from Jakarta.

Ibnu Purwana of the Jakarta Meteorology and Geophysics office said that the earthquake, measuring 5.9 on the Richter scale, hit Tual in southeastern Moluccas at 7.15 AM (2215 GMT on Thursday), causing panic among residents.

Iranian riots leave 3 dead: Three people were killed and about 50 injured in two days of riots in the Iranian city of Qazvin over demands that it be turned into a province, a journalist in the city said on Thursday, Reuter reports from Tehran.

"So far three people have been killed and about 50 injured. Clashes continue more or less... sporadic gunfire is heard," the Iranian journalist said by telephone from Qazvin late on Thursday.

Floods kill 9 in Afghanistan: Floods have killed at least nine people and destroyed houses and crops in Afghanistan's northern provinces of Takhar and Badakhshan, the official Kabul radio said on Thursday, Reuter reports from Islamabad.

Epidemics are also spreading in areas where offices of government utility services have been destroyed by the floods in the past few days, said the broadcast monitored in Islamabad. More than 3,000 families suffered property damages in Badakhshan Province, it said.

ROK's ex-trade minister held: South Korea's former Trade Minister Ahn Byong — who has been arrested on bribery charges connected with the country's nuclear power plant projects, the prosecutor general's office said yesterday, Reuter reports from Seoul.

Ahn, 63, was accused of accepting 200 million won (dollar 250,000) from a local agent of the Atomic Energy of Canada Ltd (AECL), contractor for three nuclear power plants under construction in South Korea, while he was the president of the state-run Korea's Electric Power Corp.

1435 AIDS cases in China: The number of people testing positive for the AIDS virus in China has risen to 1,435 more than 70 per cent of them intravenous drug users, an official report said Friday, AP reports from Beijing.

Experts, however, estimate that the number of people actually carrying the AIDS virus, HIV, may be eight times the official figure, which represents those positively identified through official testing by the end of last month.



Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati (C) speaks with (unidentified) members of his delegation on Thursday during the meeting of the Islamic Ministers to discuss the Bosnian Serb's decision to reject an international peace plan. The meeting called by the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) wants the sanctions lifted against the Bosnian Muslims.

— AFP photo

2500 Rwandan refugees dying daily in Zaire

PARIS, Aug 5: The medical charity MSF said on Thursday up to 2,500 Rwandan refugees were still dying every day in eastern Zaire, a figure higher than that given by the United Nations, reports Reuter.

MSF (Medecins Sans Frontieres) said in a statement the daily death rate was 25 per 10,000 in the region's best organised refugee camp at Katala.

"Extrapolating to the million refugees in the Goma area, the estimated daily death toll would be between 2,000 and 3,000," it said.

MSF President Philippe Biberon said the death rate was similar to that in the worst humanitarian disasters, in Somalia, Ethiopia or southern Sudan.

Ray Wilkinson, spokesman for the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), said a UNHCR Health Coordination Committee reported that the death rate from cholera was falling, but deaths from dysentery were rising.

He said the estimated death rate, before dysentery reached full force, was continuing to fall with 500 people now dying

each day in the Goma camps compared with 2,000 last week.

Wilkinson said some 24,000 refugees had died since flooding into Zaire three weeks ago. Epidemiologists expect the dysentery epidemic to kill another 20,000 refugees in the next month or two.

AFP adds: The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) called on Thursday for the urgent despatch of African troops to Rwanda to replace French troops due to wind up Operation Turquoise in the war-ravaged country.



Britain's Queen Mother waves to well-wishers, flanked by Queen Elizabeth II (L) and Prince William (R) on her 94th birthday on Thursday outside her London residence Clarence House.

— AFP photo

US may lift arms embargo against Bosnian Muslims

WASHINGTON, Aug 5: Issuing a fresh threat to Bosnian Serbs, the White House warned on Thursday that the United States may defy the international arms embargo in Bosnia despite objections from United States' allies, reports AP.

An increasing number of Congress members feel the embargo favours the Bosnian Serbs, who have been supplied by Yugoslavia's Serb-dominated government and enjoy an overwhelming superiority in heavy weapons.

The United States is trying to force an agreement between the Bosnian Serbs, the Muslim-led Bosnian government and the Croats.

Lifting the embargo without the support of US allies "would be a last resort," Press

Secretary Dee Dee Myers told reporters. "But the pressure may build to the point that we are forced to take that step."

Chief of Staff Leon Panetta told CNN that the Bosnian Serbs must agree to a peace settlement or "we will seek a multilateral lifting of the embargo, and if necessary a unilateral lifting of the embargo. But first we want to put maximum pressure on them to come around."

The comments came after word that Yugoslavia had severed all political and economic ties with the Bosnian Serbs, who rejected the latest international peace plans for a third time Wednesday.

Myers called the announcement from Yugoslavia "a positive step." She said the US will look for signs that

Yugoslavia keeps its word. "We'll have to watch and see if that border actually seals up," she said.

For months, Clinton has sought to lift the embargo but said doing so without support from US allies would undermine peace talks and the NATO alliance.

Sen. Sam Nunn, the chief Senate negotiator, suggested that the US could withhold any financial or technical assistance to the United Nations-imposed arms embargo, according to congressional sources familiar with the negotiations. As a further step, the Pentagon could train Bosnian Muslims in the use of defensive weapons and, eventually, provide the weapons themselves.

Benazir names 3 women HC judges

ISLAMABAD, Aug 5: Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto has named three women as the first High Court judges in Pakistan, reports Reuter.

The women, all lawyers, were among 20 additional judges for the Lahore High Court in the country's most populous province Punjab whose formal appointment by President Farooq Leghari was announced in a government statement on Thursday night.

Most of the 17 other new judges were also lawyers, including some prominent members of Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party, while some were promoted from the lower judiciary.

More women judges in the superior judiciary are likely to be appointed later in other provinces as part of Bhutto's plans to increase women's representation, government sources said.

Dynamite blast kills 73 in South China

BEIJING, Aug 5: Up to eight tonnes of dynamite exploded at a south China mine, killing at least 73 people and injuring another 99 in what officials today called Guangxi Province's worst mine disaster, reports Reuter.

The death toll could rise as rescue workers continued to shift through the rubble of miners' barracks and buildings flattened by the blast which happened just before midnight on Tuesday, a police spokesman said.

Miners inside the barracks died instantly, as did many people outside who were knocked down by the shock wave.

French police arrest 11 Muslim fundamentalists

PARIS, Aug 5: French police arrested 11 Muslim fundamentalist today suspected of being close to Algeria's outlawed Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and served them with orders placing them under house arrest, Interior Ministry sources said, reports Reuter.

The police operation in Paris, the Lyon region, province and northern France, ordered by hardline Interior Minister Charles Pasqua, came two days after suspected Muslim guerrillas shot dead five French government employees in a Beirut-style car bomb attempt on an embassy housing complex in Algiers.

Pasqua said on television on Thursday night that French authorities would take all necessary measures and maintain "a state of vigilance" towards the Algerian fundamentalists.

Pakistan reviews 'mango diplomacy' with India

ISLAMABAD, Aug 5: Pakistan said on Thursday it was reviewing its so-called "mango diplomacy" with arch-enemy India after a controversy over crates of mangoes sent to Indian leaders on behalf of Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, reports Reuter.

Some opposition politicians criticised Bhutto after press reports said she sent gift crates of quality Chausa mangoes to Indian Prime Minister PV Narasimha Rao and 40 other Indian politicians despite tense relations between the two countries over the disputed Kashmir region.

A Foreign Ministry spokesman told reporters and inquiry had been instituted into what he called a "slip-up" but he said the matter did not affect Pakistan's policy towards India.

Off the Record

Man fined for eating expensive pet cat

JOHANNESBURG: A hungry man trapped, clubbed to death and ate an expensive imported pet cat that was like a child to a disabled couple, a South African court heard, reports Reuter.

James Rameraki, 41, was fined 100 rand (30 dollars) after pleading guilty in court on Thursday to trapping the couple's 3,000 rand (850 dollars) Maine coon cat, the South African press association reported.

A tearful Mady Van Hees said the well-fed 10 kg (22 lb) cat was like a child to her and followed her wheelchair around the yard. Rameraki told the court he thought the cat was either wild or stray, it tasted like chicken, he said.

Bacteria-Backdoor of the cafeteria!

MANILA: How does Vice President Joseph "Erap" Estrada define the word "bacteria"? "It's the backdoor of the cafeteria," reports AP.

Estrada, a former actor and one of the country's most colourful politicians, was in rare form Friday as he autographed copies of the new book "ERAPtion," subtitled "How to speak English without really trying."

Estrada is among the few Filipino politicians who prides himself on his ability to speak English — badly. Instead, he prefers to speak in Filipino, the country's national language favoured by millions of ordinary Filipinos.

"English is just a second language," Estrada told reporters as he autographed copies of the book. "I'm proud to speak my native tongue, which is Filipino."

The book, written by Emil Jurado and Reli German, is a humorous collection of fractured English attributed to Estrada.

Samples: — "A pronoun is a noun that's no longer an amateur." — Asked why he patronises a certain restaurant, Erap says "I like the ambulance."

— On being praised for easily remembering peoples' names, Erap says, "I have a pornographic memory."

Despite the jokes, Estrada won the seven-way 1992 vice presidential election with nearly twice as many votes as President Fidel Ramos.

Voters in the Philippines cast ballots separately for president and vice president.

Crackdown on women displaying bellybuttons

SEOUL, South Korea: Provincial city police said Friday they would continue to crack down on women whose shirts reveal their bellybuttons in spite of a recent court ruling that found the shirts legal, reports AP.

The hottest summer in nearly a century has made the short shirts hot fashion items. But some Koreans still feel revealing one's bellybutton in public is lewd and unacceptable.

The decision to continue the crackdown came after repeated phone calls from citizens asking the police to curb the "distasteful display," they said.

Last month, police in Kwangju, a southern city known for its conservatism, arrested two women wearing the so-called "bellybutton T-shirts" under a statute that bans public display of immorality.

Police appealed the decision after the court ruled in favour of the women.

47 killed in Russian military plane crash

MOSCOW, Aug 5: A Russian military transport plane carrying dozens of officers crashed while attempting to land in eastern Siberia early Friday, killing all 47 people aboard, officials said, reports AP.

It was the third major aviation disaster in Siberia so far this year.

The four-engine An-12 was approaching a military airport when it went down 5,000 meters (yards) short of the runway, said Col Gen Viktor Kot, the acting air force commander. He spoke to the Itar-Tass news agency.

Another military official, military district commander Valery Tretyakov, told the Interfax news agency that the plane spun around and crashed. Other officials said one or more engines had burst into flames.

The crash occurred at about 9:45 am (2345 GMT Thursday) in Bada, 225 kilometers (140 miles) west of the city of Chita in eastern Siberia. Chita is 4,800 kilometers (3,000 miles) east of Moscow.

Officials said all 47 people aboard the plane, including six crew members, were killed. Not told Itar-Tass that in addition to the crew, there were 39 officers and two of their wives. The officers were on their way to a staff meeting.

Authorities said the flight began in Chita, with a stopover in Dzhida, 275 kilometers (170 miles) west of Bada. "Officials with Russia's weather service said there were unstable conditions in the area at the time, although it was not immediately known whether that played a role in Friday's crash."