

6 killed, 50 injured in Srinagar blast

NEW DELHI, Aug 7: At least six people were killed and 50 injured when a powerful bomb exploded in the Kashmir state capital Srinagar, the Press Trust of India (PTI) said today, reports AFP.

The bomb concealed in a scooter-rickshaw ripped through a crowded market Saturday damaging nearby buildings and shops, the news agency said.

Eleven other people died overnight violence linked to separatist violence, officials said.

The injured from the bomb blast have been admitted to hospital and the condition of 20 people is reportedly critical, PTI quoted officials as saying.

No Muslim militant group

has claimed responsibility for the blast which coincided with the lifting of security checkpoints from the Hazratbal Mosque, Kashmir's holiest Islamic shrine.

The management of the lakeside complex, which had been cordoned off and guarded by Indian authorities after a month-long siege by Muslim rebels in November, was restored to a religious trust on Saturday.

Kashmiri Muslim believe the shrine houses a strand of hair from the beard of Prophet Mohammed, which was verified and proclaimed 'intact' by Muslim clerics following the evacuation of the mosque.

Kashmir's head cleric, Umer Farooq, said the mosque will be 'cleansed' during the weekend.

Jordan proposes Iraqi role in ME peace process

JERUSALEM, Aug 7: Jordan on Saturday proposed an Iraqi role in the Middle East peace process, saying it could join multilateral talks with Israel on security, economic cooperation and water, reports AFP.

"I think Iraq can play an important role in these matters, Jordanian Information Minister Jawad Anai told Israeli Radio.

"In Israeli's definition of regional security, it always refers to Iraq. We shall address the question to Israel if they want Iraq to be involved in the multilateral negotiations on issues like security."

There are also issues like economic cooperation and water. However, if Iraq will take such a decision, we will have to wait and see."

Anai's comments came after a report in the Israeli newspaper Yediot Aharanot on Friday that secret meetings had taken place between Iraqi and Israeli officials.

Iraq on Saturday denied the report.

No meeting took place between an Iraqi military official and an Israeli official, neither last month nor at any other date, a spokesman at the Iraqi Embassy in Amman told AFP.

The newspaper said that Baghdad vowed in the secret

meetings not to oppose the breakthrough in peace talks between Jordan and Israel, who last month signed a Washington declaration formally ending their state of war.

Iraq also offered to take part in the Middle East peace process in exchange for the lifting of the UN embargo imposed on Baghdad after its invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, according to Yediot Aharanot.

Iraq, a sworn enemy of Israel fired Scud missiles at Israel during the January February 1991 Gulf War which evicted Iraqi troops from Kuwait.

Reuter adds: Syria said on Saturday it had nothing new to offer US Secretary of State Warren Christopher, who has started a Middle East tour to break a deadlock in Syrian-Israeli peace talks.

It also slammed Jordan and the PLO for signing separate peace deals with Israel.

The government daily Al-Thawra dismissed talk that significant progress might be imminent.

Damascus rejected an Israeli proposal for a staged withdrawal from parts of the Golan over eight years in return for establishment of full normal relations.

Off the Record



Hungarian-born actor Mishu (L) occasional partner of US pop star Michael Jackson walks in front of Jackson and his wife Lisa Marie Presley-Jackson on their way to the Pal Heim Children Hospital on Saturday for a charity visit to the patients on behalf of the "Heal the Children Fund."

— AFP photo

Spirits free to roam among the living

SINGAPORE: Nobody seems overly worried, but people in Singapore believe that the gates of hell opened Sunday, reports AP.

Chinese tradition holds that the gates stay open during the seventh lunar month — August 7 to September 5 in the Western calendar this year — when the spirits of the dead are free to roam among the living.

Restless spooks with living relatives are said to visit their homes to share the comforts there. But the ghosts of those who died without descendants, or who were ignored by their kin while alive, may wander the streets, hungry and evious.

Unless appeased with food and entertainment before they return, these wayward spirits might cause mischief.

Open-air puppet shows, Chinese operas and pop concerts are staged for the dead and their descendants.

Ancestor-worshippers also burn 'Hell money,' mock currency issued by the Bank of Hell, to ensure the ghosts have enough cash.

Some provide the spirits with make-believe passports known as "permits for the souls."

Public feasts are arranged and the hungry ghosts are invited to partake. Chicken, pork, rice and fruit are the staples. The food and drink is later consumed by the living guests.

Candles and incense sticks burn throughout this city-state, where 76 per cent of the three million people are Chinese.

Not a formal holiday, the Festival of the Hungry Ghosts was celebrated in Singapore as early as 1836, according to the federation of Chinese Clan Associations.

Nowadays, the Tourist Promotion Board touts it's an attraction for visitors.

The origin of the festival is obscure, but ancestor worship as always been a part of Chinese culture.

Cactus juice remedy for round worms in pigs

KATHMANDU: Cactus juice is 100 per cent effective to make the pigs get rid of round worms, reports Xinhua.

This was found by the animal disease and analysis service section of an agriculture centre in Nepal, local press reported on Sunday.

According to the research work, one teaspoon or 0.15 grams of cactus juice administered to a pig weighing 25 kilograms will save the pigs from round worms.

But administration of a larger dose of cactus juice can cause loose motions, said the agriculture centre.

The new medicine will benefit the poor farmer of the remote and hilly regions of the country.

'Vampire' gets death sentence

MOSCOW: A 24-year-old man in the Central Asian nation of Uzbekistan has been sentenced to death for raping, killing and drinking the blood of four young boys, a newspaper reported Friday, says AP.

Akhmat Azimov was convicted in Andizhan, a city about 300 kilometers (190 miles) east of the capital, Tashkent, the daily newspaper Trud (Labor) reported Friday.

Azimov was sentenced to four years in prison in 1990 for deserting the army, but he escaped in 1992 and that "marked the beginning of Akhmat Azimov, the vampire," the newspaper said.

"I abducted handsome little kids, only boys," Azimov told the court. He said he raped and killed the youths, and afterward, "I drank their blood."

Azimov travelled throughout Uzbekistan, abducting boys in many towns, according to court testimony. He confessed that his first victim was a 5-year-old boy who was too weak to walk by himself.

He led away boys from schoolyards, bus terminals and even private homes, Trud reported.

"I got so used to that, I couldn't live without it," said Azimov, who did not appeal his death sentence.

Uzbekistan, like most other former Soviet states, carries out the death penalty with a single shot in the back of the head.

BRIEFLY

Hamas stages sit-in in Gaza: Seven hundred sympathisers of the Islamic resistance movement Hamas staged a sit-in in Gaza City on Saturday calling for the dismissal of the new head of the local authority, AFP reports from Gaza City.

Oun Al-Shawa was appointed to chair the Local council by PLO leader Yasser Arafat on July 27.

Tanker blast kills 2 in S Lebanon: A bomb concealed in a fuel tanker exploded near a police station in this southern Lebanese market town on Sunday, killing two people and wounding seven, police said, AP reports from Nabatiyeh.

The bomb went off at 10:20 am (0720 GMT) as the tanker, towed by a tractor, was negotiating a road bend in front of the police station at Nabatiyeh's Hussainiyeh Square. There was no immediate claim of responsibility.

3 climbers die in Pakistan: Three Ukrainian climbers have died during an expedition to K-2 mountain in northern Pakistan, a Pakistani newspaper said on Saturday, AFP reports from Islamabad.

The three climbers died last month during their descent of the 18,611-metre (28,416-foot) mountain, the world's second highest, the Nation newspaper quoted expedition leader Sviridenko as saying.

55 tonnes of drugs seized in Iran: Police seized 55 tonnes of drugs in four months up to July 21, a 10 per cent leap on the same period in 1993, the official IRNA news agency said on Saturday, AFP reports from Tehran.

According to official sources, some 10,000 drug traffickers — including 128 foreigners — and 15,000 drug addicts have been arrested since the beginning of this year.

11 die in El Salvador blast: Eleven people died and at least 16 were wounded on Saturday when a grenade exploded during a bus robbery in western El Salvador, law enforcement authorities said. Reuter reports from San Salvador.

The grenade apparently went off accidentally while eight shotgun toting men robbed the passengers of a bus on the highway near the town of Nahulingo about 40 miles (67 km) west of San Salvador, police spokesman Jose Maria Hidalgo told Reuters.

New party launched in Sikkim: The launching of a new regional party, United Liberation Front, by the former president of the Sikkim Pradesh Congress (I) A K Subba and revival of the dormant rising Sun Party by R C Poudyal have broadened the pre-poll political scenario in Sikkim, PTI reports from Gangtok.

So far, six political organisations — four regional and two national parties — are in the race for the assembly elections scheduled to be held in November.

Jordan-Israel phone links: Jordan's King Hussein and Israeli President Ezer Weizman formally inaugurated direct telephone links between their two countries on Sunday in a chat broadcast live on Israel's army radio, Reuter reports from Jerusalem.

During the short, awkward conversation, Weizman said he enjoyed watching the King's plane fly over Israel last week as Hussein returned to Amman from Europe, and twice invited the monarch to Jerusalem.

Shalikhvili, Tipper Gore in Goma: The chairman of the US joint chiefs of staff, General John Shalikhvili, accompanied by the US Vice-President's wife Tipper Gore, arrived in Goma yesterday, AFP reports from Goma.

Shalikhvili said he had come "to thank our soldiers and anybody deeply involved" in the international operation to deal with the 850,000 Rwandan refugees who remain in the Goma region.

He was welcomed at Goma Airport by the commander of the French humanitarian mission in Rwanda, general Jean-Claude Lafourcade.

70 British troops leave for Rwanda: Seventy British troops left overnight for Rwanda as part of a planned 600-strong force to provide medical, logistical and technical aid to the UN mission there, the Defence Ministry said, AFP reports from London.

The engineers and medical personnel travelled on transport planes loaded with construction equipment and troop carriers.

They will join around 60 British troops who have been in northwest Rwanda since Tuesday.

Magic festival in Bihar Aug 21: Nearly 70 magicians from different countries will participate in the three-day magic festival beginning at Boaro in Bihar on August 21, PTI reports from Bokaro.

The secretary to the Magic Society of Bokaro, J C Dhar, a renowned magician, told PTI here that magicians from the USA, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and India were expected to participate in the festival to be organised for the first time in Bihar.



Opposition leader Mohinda Rajapakse (dark shirt, C), waves to crowds outside his house decorated with his cut-outs as he sets off on his election campaign in Tangalla, Sri Lanka. Next to him stands one of several Buddhist monks who have joined the opposition ahead of the August 16 parliamentary election.

— AFP photo

France on collision course with Algeria's fundamentalists

PARIS, Aug 7: The French government has put itself on a collision course with Algeria's fundamentalist Muslims by carrying out a highly-publicised crackdown on suspected Islamic militants, analysts said, reports Reuter.

Algerian expert Benjamin Stora said it was "certainly possible" that fundamentalist guerrilla networks existed and could mount attacks within France.

"We are in a very complex, difficult and dramatic situation," Stora told LCI television. The Daily Liberation said France's policy "underlined the differences between France and its allies in their approach to a solution to the Algerian drama."

The French government took action against suspected Algerian Muslim militants on

its territory after five French officials were killed on Wednesday in a guerrilla attack on a French embassy housing compound in Algiers.

It rounded up 17 suspected activists and interned them under heavy guard at an army camp in the village of Folembray northeast of Paris.

Tokyo rally demands release of Suu Kyi

TOKYO, Aug 7: Some 30 Myanmar dissidents demonstrated here today to demand the release of political prisoners in their country, a news report said, says AFP.

The protesters marched in front of the Myanmar embassy in central Tokyo to call for the immediate release on Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi.

Hardline Interior Minister Charles Pasqua said they had been served with expulsion orders but would be detained indefinitely in France because of the threat they would face if returned to Algeria.

Government officials said the crackdown had two goals, to impress on the French people that it was acting firmly after the Algiers killings and to tell Muslim activists that it would not tolerate the planning within its borders of guerrilla actions.

The Algerian Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), military wing of the banned Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), threatened reprisals unless those interned were freed.

But Interior Ministry officials said France expected such threats when it decided to round up the suspected activists.



A Lebanese Shiite family sits in a shelter at Ein Bousour village in South Lebanon on Saturday during an Israeli bombardment. Families are heading to safer areas in fear of Israeli reprisals for rocket attacks on northern Israel.

— AFP photo

US asks Rwandan govt to allow int'l tribunal

KIGALI, Rwanda, Aug 7: US officials are urging Rwanda's new government to allow an international tribunal to try the worst cases of genocide, saying an impartial look at the massacres is crucial to future stability, reports AP.

The United States has also asked the new government to investigate scattered reports of vigilante justice against refugees returning from Zaire, US Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights John Shattuck said Saturday.

It is necessary for those responsible for genocide and other grave violations of international humanitarian law to be brought to justice," said Shattuck, who met with the ministers of justice, defence and reconstruction. "Trials by an impartial international body are critical for peace, stability and legitimacy. They will establish a clear precedent that those who committed genocide and other grave violations will be held accountable by the international community."

Bosnian presidency urges Serbs to choose peace

SARAJEVO, Aug 7: President Alija Izetbegovic has called on the Bosnian Serb people to defy their authorities as they move towards a general mobilisation in the war, Sarajevo radio said, reports AP.

The Bosnian collective presidency on Saturday called on Serbs in Serb-held areas of the republic to choose peace.

"All of you who did not dirty your hands with the blood of the innocent, defy those who push you to further war and suffering," the presidency said in a statement.

It came as the Bosnian Serbs are preparing to put their people on a full war footing with general mobilisation after neighbouring Serbia cut ties with their former patrons.

This punishment came after the Bosnian Serbs defied Serbia.

Chechen govt asks opposition to surrender arms

MOSCOW, Aug 7: The Chechen government today called for opposition parties to surrender weapons or face strong sanctions, as three security officials in the Russian breakaway republic were killed, Interfax reported, says Reuter.

The government added that the distribution of anti-government tracts would now be punished by prison sentences of up to 10 years, Interfax said.

The three security officials were killed Saturday, probably by militants opposed to the current separatist government, Chechen security services said, quoted by Interfax.

The three were killed in the region of Nadzheshny in the north of the republic, the stronghold of the provisional council which on Tuesday declared the dismissal of Chechen President Dzhokar Dudayev, according to the head of the security services Sultan Gueliskhanov.

ROK newspaper report North Korea may possess enough plutonium

SEOUL, Aug 7: North Korea may possess enough plutonium, the main ingredient for a nuclear weapon, to build three or four nuclear warheads, a Seoul newspaper said today, reports Reuter.

The influential Chosun Ilbo quoted an unidentified senior government official as saying the North had halted the operation of its five megawatt reactor at Yongbyon, north of Pyongyang, three times since 1990.

The official said the stoppages were for 71 days in 1989, a month in 1990 and 50 days in 1991.

US-led invasion will be bloody, says Haitian army chief

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Aug 7: Haiti's military chief Raoul Cedras said in an interview aired on Saturday that a US invasion was inevitable and predicted it would be bloody, reports AFP.

"I don't think that any arrangement can be made to avoid an invasion of Haiti," he said in an interview with the Haitian capital with CNN television.

"It has been decided to invade and we are awaiting this moment," Cedras said, adding: "We are getting ready, as soldiers we have sworn to defend our country."

The United Nations approved a resolution last Sunday giving the green light for a US-led invasion of the Caribbean

nation to force the military to step aside and reinstate ousted President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

"If they (the US military) intervene, it will be bloodshed on both sides," Cedras said through an interpreter. "It will be to kill a lot of military and a lot of civilians also."

Cedras said the crisis sparked by the 1991 coup which toppled Aristide could be resolved through negotiations, but added: "We would need much dialogue and many exchanges."

He noted that there was support for holding new elections but would not say whether Aristide should be allowed to run.

President Bill Clinton's spe-

cial advisor on Haiti echoed Cedras, saying the United States and Haiti were on a collision course that could lead to the use of force.

William Gray ruled out dialogue with Haitian military leaders except on one point, "When will you step down, what time, and where will you go?"

As long as the military refused to step down and restore democracy, said Gray in an interview with CNN. "I believe we are on a collision that lead to the use of force."

The White House has set no deadline for an invasion and continues to pursue a course of diplomatic and economic pressure, Gray said.

A Time/CNN poll, mean-

while, showed a majority of people in the United States — 61 per cent — remains opposed to sending US forces for an invasion, up from 52 per cent in June.

Cedras' resignation to an invasion was reflected in the hard line the military-backed government has taken since UN Security Council resolution 940 authorised military intervention.

After imposing a state of seize Monday, the government announced Thursday that the minister of justice had begun legal proceedings to charge Aristide with high treason.

Aristide was accused of sending a letter July 29 to UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, which served as

the basis for the Security Council resolution.

Colombia, meanwhile, closed its embassy "temporarily," and Argentina sent its five diplomats and nine guards to the neighbouring Dominican Republic after Argentine ambassador Carlos Carrasco received death threats, diplomatic sources said.

In Buenos Aires, Deputy Foreign Minister Fernando Petrella said Argentina was taking a wait-and-see stance for now.

"We still have a long month and a half for the solution to be found," Petrella said, adding that the UN resolution "really helps a peaceful settlement to be possible."

Haiti's government also has

turned a deaf ear to a rising clamour of calls from local political leaders for a peaceful settlement of the crisis.

Leside Manigat, a Christian Democrat who briefly served as president, contended that both camps were "irreconcilable" and that the only way out was for both Aristide and Cedras to step down.

That view was echoed by the speaker of the chamber of deputies, Frantz Robert Monde, who said the resignation of both Aristide and Cedras was "the only consensus possible now."

But the likelihood of a negotiated solution appeared more distant as a last-ditch diplomatic initiative by Venezuela has crumbled.

Former political prisoners go on fast in Albania

TIRANA, Aug 7: More than 2,500 former political prisoners in Albania are now on hunger strike to press demands for millions of dollars in compensation for their treatment by the former Stalinist regime, a spokesman for the strikers said, reports Reuter.

About 100 ex-political prisoners began fasting in Tirana on Thursday.

"We have reports that there are now at least 2,500 hunger strikers throughout Albania... and it appears that police are trying to prevent more from joining in," Kim Basha, a member of the strike committee said in Tirana on Saturday.