

UN fact-finding mission due in Liberia today

UNITED NATIONS Aug 17: Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali expressed concern Tuesday about the deteriorating situation in civil war-torn Liberia and said he was sending a fact-finding mission to advise him on what he should recommend to the Security Council, reports Reuter.

The mission, due to arrive in Liberia Thursday, will be headed by former Algerian Foreign Minister Lakhdar Brahimi, who served as the secretary general's peace envoy during the recent civil war in Yemen.

Three warring Liberian groups signed an agreement in Cotonou, Benin, in July 1993 to end a conflict that broke out in 1990 and is estimated to have taken more than 150,000 lives. But implementation of the accord is running well behind schedule and elections, due to have been held earlier

this year and postponed until September, will almost certainly be delayed again.

Only about 3,500 of an estimated 60,000 combatants have so been disarmed, as required under the agreement.

The secretary-general is increasingly concerned about the deteriorating situation in Liberia and the uncertain prospects for the UNOMIL and ECOMOG operations there, a UN spokesman said, referring to the 360-member UN Observer Mission in Liberia and a much larger force fielded by the economic community of West African states.

The secretary-general has accordingly decided to dispatch to Liberia fact-finding mission which, in consultation with his special representative Trevor Gordon-Somers of Jamaica and the Liberian National Transitional Government (LNTG), will review the situation in the country.

Muslims regain territory from Serbs in Bosnia

SARAJEVO, Aug 17: Bosnia's mainly Muslim government army is pushing back rebel Serbs in a shift from defensive to offensive operations its top general says, reports Reuter.

Government forces have wrested back dozens of square miles of territory in central and northern Bosnia against a foe militarily superior in all respects but motivation and tactical planning, according to its commander, General Rasim Delic.

"We are slowly moving from the phase where we solely defended ourselves to the offensive phase of territorial liberation in this war," the Muslim supreme commander told state television on Tuesday night.

"We are like a snowball get-

ting bigger as it rolls down from the top of a hill. If things continue as they are, the process of liberation will accelerate."

Bosnian Serb forces overran 70 per cent of Bosnia in 1992-93 in a revolt against a majority Muslim and Croat vote for independence from Yugoslavia.

The Serbs have rejected a final international peace plan requiring them to cede a third of their domain and awarding 51 per cent of Bosnia to a new Muslim-Croat federal entity.

To avoid tougher sanctions, Serbian-led Yugoslavia two weeks ago severed all political and economic ties with its Bosnian Serb protégés for their refusal to yield land.

Yugoslavia's abandonment of the Bosnian Serbs, apparently cutting off their main source of

arms and fuel, lent extra impetus to Muslim counter-offensives that unfolded in the weeks leading up to Belgrade's shock decision.

The Bosnian government's will to fight on has also been stiffened by a US move to have the Muslims exempted from the 1991 UN arms embargo on old Yugoslavia if Bosnian Serbs have not accepted the peace plan by October 15.

Analysts say even if the embargo goes — no sure thing in the light of resistance by America's European allies with peacekeeping troops in Bosnia — it will take the Muslims at least two years to acquire heavy artillery, tanks and military acumen on a par with the Yugoslav army-trained Serbs.

Officers in the UN protection force in Bosnia have also

warned it will be withdrawn if the arms ban is rescinded, exposing UN-protected Muslim enclaves to Serb onslaught.

But US and Western diplomats also believe the Bosnian Serbs' deepening isolation will gradually shift the strategic sands in the Muslims' favour, although not without much more bloodshed and civilian misery.

Delic said his troops had captured the important Nisic Heights in a southward thrust from Vares in central Bosnia to the verge of the main road between Sarajevo and the north-eastern Muslim city of Tuzla.

Government forces had also driven back Serbs on Mount Vlasic overlooking the central government town of Travnik

China-Vietnam border talks yield no results

HANOI, Aug 17: China and Vietnam have finished talks on border issues two days ahead of schedule, official sources said today, reports Reuter.

There was no immediate official statement from either government, and the early end to the talks indicated they had failed to resolve border disputes on land and in the South China Sea.

Vietnamese state radio said the two sides would meet again in Hanoi on September 15.

The two sides are striving to resolve their disputes through negotiations, according to the radio, monitored by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) on Tuesday.

Delegations led by deputy foreign ministers Tang Jiaxuan of China and Vu Khoa of Vietnam began talks on Monday and had been scheduled to continue meetings, punctuated by tourist trips for the Chinese team, until Thursday.

Wildfire engulfs fresh areas in California

ATASCADERO, Calif. Aug 17: A fast-moving wildfire set by an arsonist spread to 32,000 acres (13,000 hectares) in central California Tuesday, forcing the evacuation of hundreds of families and threatened homes in several communities, officials said, reports Reuter.

Television pictures showed a large mansion going up in flames. Neighbours who had evacuated the area said the home had been unoccupied for some time.

The blaze which fire officials said was deliberately set also forced the closure of the California State Polytechnic College in nearby San Luis Obispo.

More than 1000 firefighters, some from as far away as Los Angeles, 150 miles (240 km) to the south east, fought the raging fire that was fuelled by thick, tinder-dry brush.

San Luis Obispo county sheriff's department spokesman Lieut Pat Hedges said it was the first wildfire in the area for 30 years.

A spokeswoman for the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection said that the fire was only 10 per cent contained as of 8 am PDT (1500 GMT).

Off the Record



The cover of this week's issue of Hello! magazine published in London on Tuesday, featuring the first posed photographs of signer Michael Jackson and his wife Lisa Marie Presley.

— AFP photo

Stepfather of alleged victim sues Jackson

SANTA MONICA, California: The stepfather of a boy who accused Michael Jackson of molestation is suing Jackson, claiming he broke up the family by plying the boy and his mother with thousands of dollars worth of gifts, reports AP.

The lawsuit was filed Tuesday on behalf of the stepfather, who lives in Santa Monica, and his 6-year-old daughter. It claims that in order to gain access to the boy, Jackson took him, his sister and his mother on no-limit shopping sprees and trips to Florida, Las Vegas and Jackson's Neverland Ranch.

The "classic paedophilic strategy" disrupted and split the family, said the stepfather's lawyer, Danny Davis.

The stepfather and his wife learned of the 13-year-old boy's molestation claim in August 1993, then separated in October or November after eight years of marriage, Davis said.

The boy now lives with his biological father and uses his last name.

Jackson's lawyer Howard Weitzman said the entertainer has maintained that he did nothing inappropriate. "This lawsuit is an attempt to take advantage of his fame and notoriety in order to get money," he said.

Cult leader raped 200 women as part of infertility cure

NEW DELHI: Indian police have arrested a Hindu cult leader for allegedly killing eight women and young girls and raping 200 others as part of a cure he prescribed for infertility, the Press Trust of India (PTI) said on Tuesday.

The news agency quoted the head of the Delhi police crime branch as saying they arrested Ram Prasad after his sister, with whom he had sex for 16 years, claimed he raped and killed a 10-year-old girl in September 1993.

Prasad's sister had helped him lure the girl named Laxmi to the New Delhi region. After murdering the girl he fled the capital to offer his 'cure' in neighbouring districts, PTI said.

It quoted police official Maxwell Pereira as saying Prasad used to lure women by giving them a supposed charmed talisman to cure their sexual problems, including infertility.

He later raped them as part of his professed cure.

'Oestrogen doesn't cause additional breast tumours'

CHICAGO: Breast-cancer patients who take oestrogen do not appear to increase their risk of additional tumours, say doctor who reviewed studies on the subject, reports AP.

Most women diagnosed with breast cancer get chemotherapy, which hastens menopause. But doctors commonly withhold oestrogen, which could ease the discomfort of menopause, for fear the hormone could reactivate the cancer.

However, a review of studies on the subject found no evidence that oestrogen promotes additional breast tumours, and any possible risk may be outweighed by oestrogen's benefits, said Dr Melody Cobleigh, director of the Comprehensive Breast Center at Rush-Presbyterian-St Luke's Medical Center in Chicago.

Sudan defends decision to extradite Carlos

KHARTOUM, Sudan, Aug 17: A top Sudanese official defended his government's decision to hand over Carlos to France, saying Khartoum felt no outside pressure to extradite the accused terrorist, reports AP.

The army had targeted three strongholds of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in the diamond mining district of Kenema 240 kilometers (145 miles) east of Freetown. Captain Dominic Sewa told AFP without saying if the offensive had succeeded.

He said the RUF rebels had been exploiting the diamonds in the area "to generate funds for their terrorist activities."

At the end of July, the RUF besieged Kenema, a major industrial town, for several days. Two European engineers were injured when they fell into a rebel ambush.

The RUF rebellion erupted in May 1991 under the leadership of corporal Foday Sankoh. The rebels occupied the east and south of the country before being driven back to a few enclaves along the Liberian border.

However, since the beginning of this year, the rebels have staged several raids far from their bases even pushing into central Sierra Leone.

— AFP photo

12 die in Chinese train blast:

At least 12 people were killed and nearly 50 people injured in a train explosion in Southern China's Guangxi province, a newspaper reported yesterday. AFP says from Hong Kong.

The explosion occurred Saturday on a train bound for the scenic tourist centre of Guilin from Zhanjiang on the southern tip of Guangdong province, the Sina Tao daily said.

A UN fact-finding mission will arrive in Liberia on Thursday to implement a peace agreement between the government and rebel forces said Fred Eckhard, a spokesman for Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali.

Ethnic violence claims 7 more in Karachi

Benazir leading country toward civil strife: sharif

ISLAMABAD, Aug 17: Pakistani opposition leader Nawaz Sharif, accused Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto Tuesday of leading the country towards civil strife and economic collapse, reports AFP.

Addressing a press conference at the Parliament Building, former Prime Minister Sharif branded Benazir's 10-month-old government as "incompetent, corrupt and anti-national."

If this regime continues, the future of Pakistan will be endangered, Sharif said, two days after setting a deadline for her to resign or be ready to face the "wrath" of the masses.

Addressing a large public meeting in Karachi on Sunday, Sharif threatened to launch a jihad (holy war) against Benazir if she did not resign by September 11 to pave the way for fresh elections.

Sharif's bitter attack came after a day of a planned opposition rally in Islamabad Wednesday to observe the sixth anniversary of the death of military ruler General Mohammad Zia

U Haq.

Zia persecuted Benazir and her Pakistan People's Party (PPP) during more than a decade of rule after seizing power in a 1977 military coup. The coup toppled Benazir's father, former Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, who was executed two years later.

— AP reports: Gunmen shot and killed seven people, including a police officer, in the latest outbreak of ethnic violence.

8 Assam Rifles men killed

IMPHAL, Aug 17: At least eight Assam Rifles jawans were killed and four others injured when suspected activists of the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (M) ambushed at different places in Manipur and Assam in the past 12 hours, reports PTI.

Official sources said about 40 armed activists attacked an Assam Rifles patrol party at Chassad area in Manipur's Ukhrul District at Wednesday.

Hundreds of people have been killed since the Refugee Movement split over a leadership dispute two years ago.

Police said the bullet-riddled bodies of the first two victims were found Tuesday afternoon. They had been kidnapped from their home in a western suburb of Karachi earlier in the day, according to police.

On Tuesday, more than 80,000 left-wing activists were detained briefly by police for blocking roads nationwide on the first day of their three-week "civil disobedience movement" against Rao's economic policies, which have opened India to foreign investment.

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