

Govt will pay Khmers ransom for hostages

PINOM PENH, Aug 20: Cambodia's government will pay for the release of three Westerners held hostage by the Khmer Rouge, military and police officials confirmed today, but they refused to say if any of the captives had already been freed, reports AFP.

"The only way to free the hostages is to pay the ransom," a senior military official requesting anonymity said. "We can't tell you how much money. But there is no other way to have the hostages released."

But he refused to comment on news reports that one of the three hostages — Australian David Wilson, 29, Briton Mark Slater, 28, and French national Jean-Michel Braquet, 26, — had already been released by the guerrillas.

Meanwhile, a woman in the town of Chhuok, in southern Kampot province, gave AFP a copy of a letter from one of the hostages requesting food and supplies and saying the three men were well and were trying to "keep hope."

The letter, written in French by Braquet, was dated

August 19 and requested food, cigarettes and vitamin C tablets, and was signed by the three hostages, who were captured on July 13 after a Khmer Rouge attack on a train in Kampot province.

The woman, who claimed to be a messenger between the government and the rebel camp, said she had seen the hostages on Thursday and that all three were in good health, but faced shelling by government troops.

"I last saw them on the 18th (Thursday), and they were in good health and none of them had malaria," said the woman, requesting anonymity.

She said that she had gone to the rebel camp on Friday with a cartload of food, but had not been allowed to see the prisoners because government troops had burned down two villages near where the hostages were being held.

Deputy Information Minister Khieu Kanarith said he would not confirm news reports Friday that one of the hostages had been released.

Chandrika asks supporters not to mar victory by lawlessness

COLOMBO, Aug 20: Post-election violence in Sri Lanka claimed at least two lives and Sri Lanka's day-old government extended an island-wide curfew today to prevent further mayhem, police said, reports Reuter.



Chandrika Kumaratunga

New Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga in a nationwide address warned her supporters, out of power for 17 years, not to mar their victory by lawlessness.

"We appeal to all of you, especially our party supporters, to refrain from acts of violence... We won't hesitate to take action against anyone who engages in acts of lawlessness," Kumaratunga said in a televised address to the nation on Friday.

"We know what our supporters have suffered but we must break the vicious circle of violence and terror... We must demonstrate that ideals prevail over the law of the jungle," she said.

Sri Lanka has a history of post-election violence.

Kumaratunga, whose mother, Sirima Bandaranaike became the world's first woman prime minister when

she was elected in 1960, said her top priority was to end the 11-year civil war with Tamil separatist rebels and stamp out corruption.

Kumaratunga also said her government was committed to free-market policies.

Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA) won Tuesday's poll ending 17 years of United National Party (UNP) rule. She was sworn in as Sri Lanka's second woman prime minister on Friday, along with the rest of the cabinet.

Meanwhile, one person was killed in the northwestern Chilaw district and another in the central Kegalle district in political violence on Friday, Deputy Inspector General of Police Merrill Gunaratne told Reuters.

The curfew, which was lifted at 5 am Saturday, will be re-imposed at 6 pm. Earlier, the curfew was to have been imposed at 12 noon.

The curfew has been re-imposed as a precautionary measure. About 75 incidents of arson, pelting stones and assault have been reported from various parts of the country, Gunaratne said.

He said that politicians were co-operating with police by appealing to their supporters to halt violence.

"The situation is well under control. We don't expect any escalation of violence," Gunaratne said.

Police said that on Friday three shops and two houses belonging to UNP supporters were set on fire in the north-central Anuradhapura district and a UNP supporter's house was burned in the neighbouring Polonnaruwa district.

Also on Friday, a UNP office in the eastern Batticaloa district was set on fire and troops prevented a mob from taking a bus in the western Gampaha district.

Arafat begins trip to Cairo, Geneva, Tunis

JERUSALEM, Aug 20: PLO leader Yasser Arafat left Palestinian ruled Gaza Saturday for short visits to Cairo, Geneva and Tunis, and his first meeting with a leader of a Gulf Arab state since 1990, a PLO official said, reports Reuter.

Sheikh Zaid Bin Sultana Al-Nahyan, president of the United Arab Emirates, was expected to hold private talks with Arafat in Geneva, said the official, who asked not to be identified.

The meeting would be Arafat's first with the leader of one of the Gulf States that have snubbed him since the PLO adopted a pro-Iraqi stance after Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. It was not immediately known when Arafat would arrive in Geneva.



Palestine Liberation Organisation Chairman Yasser Arafat (R) declines Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres (L) invitation to join him in his car as they leave for lunch in Gaza City, following their meeting on Friday.

Serbs reject peace plan again

SARAJEVO, Aug 20: The top UN official in former Yugoslavia failed Friday in a bid to persuade Bosnian Serb leaders to accept an international plan to end the war in Bosnia, reports AP.

The effort by Yasushi Akashi, the representative of UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali, followed Thursday's shutdown of the Sarajevo airport by a mortar shell and reports this week that Serbs aimed a heavy gun at planes.

In northwest Bosnia, forces of a renegade Muslim leader were on the verge of collapse in Bihac, UN-sponsored talks on ending the intra-Muslim fighting were planned for Saturday, UN officials said.

Bosnian Serbs several times have rejected the peace proposal, which would require

them to surrender a third of the 70 per cent of Bosnia they now control to a Muslim-Croat federation. Akashi said their position has not changed.

"I emphasized the critical moment in which they (Serbs) find themselves and the importance of accepting the peace plan," he told The Associated Press after returning to Sarajevo from the Serb stronghold of Pale.

"There was a lot of reluctance. They complained about the injustice" of the plan's proposed division of Bosnia, Akashi said.

The independent Belgrade news agency BETA quoted Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic as saying: "We respect Mr Akashi's opinion, but if the plan is not changed, we will not accept it."

Residents of Serb-held

Bosnia are scheduled to vote Aug. 27-28 on the peace plan, which would reduce Serb holdings in Bosnia to 49 per cent and give the rest of the country to the Muslim-Croat federation.

Serb leaders also resisted pleas on reopening Sarajevo's airport routes and the airport at Tuzla in northeastern Bosnia, Akashi said. The Serbs closed commercial and civilian land routes in and out of Sarajevo on July 26.

Bosnia's minority Serbs launched the Bosnian war in the spring of 1992, when Muslims and Croats pulled away from Serb-dominated Yugoslavia. An estimated 200,000 people are dead or missing.

In Bihac, government troops made major gains Friday against the forces of

Muslim rebel Fikret Abdic, and were within 5 kilometers (3 miles) of his fortress in the town of Velika Kladusa, UN officials said.

But the rebel forces would "rather leave this area" than live under government control, Abdic aide Sead Kajmazovic told The Associated Press by telephone.

Meanwhile, Yugoslav President Zoran Djindjic criticized Bosnian Serbs for prolonging the war in Bosnia, Yugoslavia, consisting of Serbia and Montenegro, severed ties with Bosnian Serbs on Aug. 4 for rejecting the international peace plan.

In an interview to be published Saturday in Belgrade's newspaper Politika, Djindjic accused Bosnian Serb leaders of pursuing "their personal interests" rather than those of the people.

BRIEFLY

Clinton sends letter to Fahd: White House Counsellor Mack McLarty carried a letter from President Clinton to King Fahd of Saudi Arabia this week and held discussions concerning a range of Middle East issues, a White House official said on Friday, AP reports from Washington.

A White House official, speaking on condition he not be identified, said Clinton had been hoping for a face-to-face meeting with King Fahd and sent McLarty when that could not be quickly arranged.

Murayama to visit 4 Asian states:

Japanese Prime Minister Tomichi Murayama begins Tuesday an official eight-day visit to four Asian countries, a trip which may show how well the scars of history have healed, AFP reports from Tokyo.

12 Russians held in Cyprus: Twelve Russians were arrested on charges of illegal possession of arms and blackmail on Friday in the southern coastal resort of Larnaca, Cypriot police said, AFP reports from Nicosia.

They were rounded up in raids to investigate an alleged conspiracy to extort money from Russian businessmen and offshore companies in Larnaca, 45 kilometres (25 miles) south of Nicosia. Police said a loaded gun and cartridges were found.

Quake shakes Myanmar: An earthquake registering 5.7 on the Richter scale struck Myanmar yesterday morning north of the capital, Yangon, the Government Information Service (GIS) said, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

Ex-South Yemeni official held: A former southern official wanted on charges he helped start Yemen's nine-week civil war was arrested on Friday as he boarded a plane to flee the country, officials said, AP reports from Sanaa.

Ahmed Obeid bin Dagher, a prominent member of the Yemen Socialist Party, and 10 aides were seized at the international airport, according to security and aviation officials, who spoke on condition they not be named.

Nobel laureate Pauling dies: Two-time Nobel Prize winner Linus C. Pauling, a leader in the fight against nuclear weapons and an advocate of vitamin C to prevent cancer, the common cold and other diseases, died on Friday. He was 93, AP reports from Big Sur, California.

Pauling died at his ranch in the Big Sur area in central California about 7:20 pm (0220 GMT), according to the Linus Pauling Institute of Science and Medicine in Palo Alto. He had been in frail health for several months, according to the institute. Pauling was the only person ever to win two unshared Nobel Prizes.

Murderer hanged in India: A villager who murdered his wife, whom he suspected of being unfaithful, and their five children six years ago was hanged on Saturday in the Indian city of Jaipur, the Press Trust of India reported, AFP says from New Delhi.

Bhairu Singh, convicted for the multiple killings committed in June 1988, was calm as he walked to the gallows, the news agency said.

Algerian quake toll now 164: The death toll in the killer quake, which hit Mascara region on Thursday rose to 164 when rescue squads pulled 16 other corpses from under the debris, MENA reports from Algiers.

The Algerian authorities have issued strict orders that the Red Crescent be the only quarter to raise money to help families of the victims.

Taiwan buys 4 US minesweepers: Taiwan's navy has bought four minesweepers from the United States and expects to induct them into its fleet by October, the government-owned Central Daily News said yesterday, Reuter reports from Taipei.

The four US-built aggressive class minesweepers began service between 1954 and 1956 and will replace older US minesweepers in the Taiwanese navy, the newspaper said.

Blast kills Filipino church worker: A grenade exploding on the roof of a Roman Catholic convent killed a church worker and wounded another, police in this southern Philippine city said yesterday, Reuter reports from Marawi.

It was not known who carried out the attack. Lydia Macas died as she was watching television in a room of St Mary's convent on Friday night.

21 drown in India as boat capsizes: Fifteen school children were among 21 people who drowned when their boat capsized in the Western Indian state of Maharashtra Friday, the Press Trust of India reported yesterday, says AFP from New Delhi.

The boat sank in Chulband River when the children were taking a pleasure ride, officials were quoted as saying.

11 Pak policemen dismissed: Eleven policemen have been sacked for involvement in drug trafficking, the official Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) reported yesterday, AFP says from Islamabad.

The dismissed men, a sub-inspector and 10 constables, had been working at police stations in the district of Sahiwal in Punjab province.

Top Kohl aide in Moscow: A top aide of Chancellor Helmut Kohl left Bonn yesterday for Moscow for two days of talks with Russian officials on stopping plutonium trafficking, reports AFP from Bonn.

Bernard Schmidbauer, Kohl's chief of staff, was scheduled to meet with the head of federal Russian counter espionage service (FSK) Sergei Stepashin and officials from Atomic Energy Ministry.

Off the Record

John Bobbitt's Hollywood debut

LOS ANGELES: The director might guard against yelling "cut" for this one: John Wayne Bobbitt is starring in an adult movie about himself, reports AP.

He's making his Hollywood debut in "John Wayne Bobbitt... Uncensored," produced by Leisure Time Entertainment, a leading pornographic filmmaker.

Bobbitt became famous in June 1993 when his wife, Lorena, severed his penis while he slept in their Virginia home. She told police she did it because Bobbitt sexually assaulted her.

Bobbitt will play himself in the movie, his manager Aaron Gordon said Friday. Filming was scheduled to begin soon, and the movie was due to be released in September.

Bobbitt's penis was reattached surgically, and he was acquitted of marital sexual abuse in November.

A jury in January found Lorena Bobbitt innocent by reason of insanity of mutilating her husband.

"I believe I have something to prove," Bobbitt said. "I want everyone to know Lorena failed. She wanted to take my manhood and hurt me for life."

Together forever!

BRISTOL, England: Cliff Tenzell devoted the last six years of his life to restoring his beloved 1964 Thunderbird convertible. So, when the 52-year-old lorry driver died of cancer last week his widow, Cheryllyn, vowed to fulfil his last wish: to be buried with his car, reports AFP.

Cliff is to be cremated next week. The Thunderbird will be crushed into a compact cube of junk metal and they will be laid to rest in a common grave in Filton cemetery, which gave special permission for the unusual burial.

Although the classic American car is said to be worth some 30,000 pounds (45,000 dollars), Cheryllyn said she wouldn't dream of allowing anyone else behind the wheel.

"It meant so much to him and I have to give him his last wish," she said.

Army officer fined for double exposure

LONDON: An adulterous British army officer who twice posed semi-nude on the front-page of a national newspaper has been fined 1,200 pounds (1,800 dollars) for her double exposure, military officials said Friday, reports AFP.

Captain Angela Jackson, 35, compounded her modelling offences by telling the paper about her affair with her 34-year-old lover, a sergeant whom she described as "the best lover in the universe."

The Sun newspaper claimed that the wronged husband, a 45-year-old lieutenant-colonel, had threatened to have Jackson court-martialled if she did not leave her non-commissioned lover.

Jackson complained that double standards were still operating in the army.

"A woman should be beyond question and pure, but for a man it is still all right to play the field," she told a television station Friday.

Military officials, who said last week they had ordered the woman to stop seeing her lover, said they would now be "watching Jackson's behaviour" to see "whether any further transgressions appear."

Israel-Syria talks making steady progress: Clinton

WASHINGTON, Aug 20: President Bill Clinton said Friday he saw steady progress in peace talks between Israel and Syria but acknowledged that "serious problems" remain, reports AFP.

"I believe that we are still on a path of steady progress in the hope of achieving an agreement to resolve the differences between Israel and Syria," Clinton told a news conference.

The attempt to end 27 years of hostilities between the two countries has been the thorniest part of efforts to nail down a comprehensive peace in the Middle East.

"Serious problems remain but I think significant advances are being made," Clinton said.

Clinton also played down what he called "operational

difficulties" in implementation of the Israeli-PLO agreement on limited Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank town of Jericho and Gaza Strip.

He said much of the problem stemmed from the fact that the Palestine Liberation Organisation had never run a country before, with all its minute details of administration.

"I think we are making some headway there," Clinton said. "I don't want to minimize the difficulties but I don't expect them to be so great as to derail what we are doing."

Meanwhile, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, on a landmark visit to PLO leader Yasser Arafat's headquarters in Gaza, said on Friday Israel will begin extending elements of Palestinian self-rule to the rest of the West Bank next week.

DPRK against planned US-ROK war games

TOKYO, Aug 20: North Korea today warned that relations with Seoul would worsen if planned US-South Korea military exercises go ahead, reports AFP.

The planned exercise is a "deliberate move to drive the situation of the Korean peninsula to a dangerous phase and aggravate North-South relations," said Minju Joson, a North Korean government journal.

"Should the puppets commit adventurous military actions... they will meet a shameful end, incurring bitter denunciation and rejection from the people at home and abroad," the journal was quoted as saying by the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA).

The Ullji focus lens joint military exercise between South Korea and the United

States, scheduled for August 22 to September 4, will feature a sophisticated computer-simulated game, but will not involve military troops in the field. It is aimed at testing command-post procedure and communications.

The KCNA dispatch, monitored here, quoted Minju Joson accusing South Korea of "seeking to present military threat to the North" by staging the joint drills.

KCNA said today that the formula proposed by South Korean President Kim Young-Sam to reunify the two Koreas was nonsense.

Noting that the reunification formula was unveiled on August 15, KCNA said: "Its criminal purpose is to unify the country by prevailing over communism."

Tutu criticises Mandela govt

CAPE TOWN, Aug 20: Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu delivered a stinging criticism on Saturday of President Nelson Mandela's government for its members' high salaries and for continuing to make weapons, reports AP.

"I have been deeply disappointed that one of the first actions of the new parliament was to vote themselves those large salaries," the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize winner said.

Tutu's questioning of the integrity and credibility of the Mandela government came as the country's first black president marked 100 days in office.

People's movement to save Taj from pollution

NEW DELHI, Aug 20: Indian environmental activists began today a people's movement to save the Taj Mahal, India's best known monument which is under threat from industrial pollution, reports Reuter.

The 17th century monument which Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan built for much loved second wife, Mumtaz, is also the country's favourite tourist destination, attracting 1.5 million visitors every year, a third of them foreign.

Experts say the monument in Agra, some 200 km (125 miles) from Delhi, faces chemical and carbon pollution from neighbouring industries, causing "marble cancer"

which is yellowing the Taj's glittering white facing.

Scientists, lawyers and environmentalists are leading a campaign to protect the mausoleum.

Mahesh Chandra Mehta, a lawyer who has been fighting a 10-year old Supreme Court case to close a state-run refinery and chemical, glass and foundry units, told a seminar that one million signatures would be collected to save the monument.

He said the signature appeal will go to India's prime minister and president, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), which

has declared the Taj as a world heritage monument.

"If marble can get cancer, you can imagine the plight of children in the area," said Mehta, adding that the polluters must close as they had not obeyed court orders to adopt clean technology.

Activists say the government is going slow in halting the polluting industries because jobs are at stake. They also argue that the pollution is threatening the Taj's tourism.

Tourism can be 10 times more important than industries," said Maneka Gandhi, a former Environment Minister and the sister-in-law of the late former Prime Minister

Rajiv Gandhi.

The activists plan seminars across the country to back up the signature campaign.

Tourism Minister Gulam Nabi Azad said three of UNESCO's world heritage monuments — all built by the Mughals — were in the Agra area.

"Any form of tourism to be sustainable in the long-run must be environmentally sound," he said.

The government says it is serious in saving the Taj, but activists are unhappy.

"Bureaucrats and politicians are not interested in saving the environment. It is for the people to react," said Shivaji



Two girls wait with their mother, father and older brother on the coast of Cojimar, Cuba on Friday as they prepare to sail to Florida looking for a life "more human," said the mother. Strong winds and high waves are forcing some refugees to wait until nightfall to sail.

—AFP photo