

Croats agree to pull back from UN buffer zones

ZAGREB, Croatia, May 8: Croatian forces have agreed to pull back from confrontation with Serbs in UN buffer zones in tense eastern and southern Croatia, the UN chief envoy said Monday, reports AP.

Although there was no immediate timetable or confirmation from the Croatian army, the report was the first break in a week of rising anxiety over the risk of a wider Balkan war.

"The Croat government has ordered its troops in the zone of separation in Sector North, Sector South and Sector East to withdraw from that zone," Yasushi Akashi, the top UN official in former Yugoslavia, told Associated Press Television.

Territory captured by rebel Serbs during a 1991 war was divided into four UN-protected areas called sectors. Outside each sector is a band of territory called a buffer zone, set up by the United Nations to keep the warring parties away from

each other. Croatian forces this week recaptured the area of western Slavonia, also called Sector West. It is highly unlikely that Croatian forces will pullout from that sector.

Croatian troops also moved into UN buffer zones near the three other sectors, located along the border with Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Serb forces countered with their own buildups, and UN officials have said a small spark could set off a wider war, possibly melding with the fighting raging in neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina to the south.

"Being in those zones is a violation of the March 29, 1994 agreement," Akashi said. He was referring to a hard-bargained ceasefire agreement that established the UN buffer zones and provided for talks.

Serbs, based in the southern Croatian city of Knin, have conditioned their pull-back on withdrawal first by the Croatian forces.



Prince Charles (L) and his estranged wife Princess Diana (R) chat as son Prince William sits between them Sunday. They met up during celebrations held in Hyde Park to mark the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II in Europe. — AFP/UNB photo

LTTE surprise attack leaves 19 police commandos dead

COLOMBO, May 8: Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels killed 19 Special Task Force police commandos in a surprise attack on a jungle patrol near the eastern town of Amparai today, police and army sources said, reports Reuter.

Three of the dead were officers. Special Task Force Commander Lionel Karunasena said.

The attack happened five miles (eight km) southwest of Amparai, when Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam surrounded commandos on a rebel flushing-out operation called Golden Waters Phase Three, police sources said.

At least 200 to 300 commandos were involved in the

operation, which was still going on, the sources said.

"There's a heavy concentration of Tamil Tigers in the area," one said. "The commandos were attacked unawares from behind."

Muslim villagers continued to flee the northeastern village of Pulimoddai today after soldiers killed five civilians, police said.

The killings followed a Tamil rebel attack on an army sentry post which killed five soldiers.

"The villages are either in the mosques or in their homes or they are fleeing," said sub-inspector L W Ranwera, the officer in charge of the area.

Najeeb Majeed, a member of parliament for Trincomalee

district, said on Sunday the army had shelled Pulimoddai and opened fire on innocent civilians, prompting villagers to flee. He feared a mass exodus.

Army spokesman brigadier Sarath Munasinghe said that as far as he knew, the soldiers had acted responsibly but that any complaints would be investigated.

The mainly Hindu Tamil Tigers are fighting for a separate homeland in the north and east of majority Buddhist Sinhalese Sri Lanka. More than 30,000 people have been killed since the war began in 1983.

Muslims make up about seven per cent of the overall population.

Top Indian prison reformer again transferred

NEW DELHI, May 8: One week after India's top prison reformer was dismissed as the warden of the country's largest jail she was demoted a second time, newspapers reported Monday, reports AP.

Kiran Bedi became internationally famous by introducing pay-for-work schemes, literacy classes and meditation programmes for prisoners at high-security Tihar Jail in New Delhi.

But Gov P K Dave, who often questioned her programmes, dismissed her on Wednesday, saying she had compromised the jail's security by allowing journalists, tourists and relatives to meet with many of the 9,000 inmates there.

He transferred her to the training unit of the New Delhi police force. But Sunday night, Dave reduced her powers again by dividing that department into two branches and leaving her in charge of one, India's top newspapers reported.

Before removing her from Tihar Jail, Dave accused her of actively encouraging journalists to write about her, and going after invitations to foreign countries.

Ms Bedi says the charges are motivated by jealousy for her prison reforms, which won her last year's Magsaysay award, which is given out in the Philippines each year to social reformers.

Israel frees 258 Palestinians to mark Eid

JERUSALEM, May 8: Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres announced late Sunday the release of 258 Palestinian prisoners to mark the Eid-ul-Azha today, Israeli Radio reported, says AP.

Peres announced the release of 250 men and eight women from Cairo, where he was holding talks with the Palestinian Minister for International Cooperation Nabil Shaath on more autonomy for the West Bank.

The radio said that in addition to this gesture of goodwill Peres said Israel would reimburse 100 million shakhs (33 million dollars) to the Palestinian authority in Gaza, representing taxes levied on Palestinian workers.

The Israeli Foreign Minister also said Israel would soon erect border terminals to handle goods passing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt and the Gaza Strip and Jordan.

Next week a special commission will meet in Beersheba, southern Israel, to continue negotiations on the fate of Palestinians displaced by the 1967 Middle East war, Peres said.

Beijing mayor calls for stability

BEIJING, May 8: Beijing's mayor has called for stability in the capital as high-ranking officials fall in an anti-corruption drive led by the Communist Party, a report said Monday, says AP.

Last month, the party secretary of Beijing, Chen Xitong, resigned to take the blame for corruption scandals being uncovered in city government.

Chen, a former mayor, is the highest Communist Party official to fall in the latest anti-corruption campaign.

The current mayor, Li Qiyang, told a city government meeting that the central Communist Party's anti-corruption organisation should have the full support of all city officials, the Beijing Daily reported.

Some analysts say Li's position also could be in jeopardy as the anti-corruption drive reaches high levels of city government. Many see the move against corruption in the capital as an attempt by President Jiang Zemin, party general secretary and senior leader Deng Xiaoping's handpicked successor, to move against rivals and consolidate his position before Deng's death.

Li said officials should use their full powers to "uphold stability in the capital" and step up a "severe fight" against all kinds of corruption activities.

Kashmiri militant group threatens to hit Indian interests worldwide

ISLAMABAD, May 8: A militant group fighting Indian rule in Kashmir accused New Delhi on Sunday of trying to eliminate its leader there and threatened to hit Indian interests worldwide if anything happened to him, reports Reuter.

Yasin Malik, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front's president in the Indian-ruled part of the disputed Himalayan region, said on Saturday that Indian troops had assaulted and fired at him in the state summer capital of Srinagar.

The JKLF's Pakistan-based senior vice-chairman, Raja Muzaffar, said in a statement that the Indian government "wants to eliminate Yasin Malik from the scene to pave the way for holding elections in Indian-held Kashmir."

He said the JKLF would "make targets of Indian interests all over the world if any-

thing happens to Malik." The JKLF is fighting Indian rule over two-thirds of Jammu and Kashmir state. Pakistan controls the remaining third of the region, over which the two countries have fought two of their three wars.

US sends weaponry to S Korea

SEOUL, May 8: The US military is shipping in Abrams tanks and other weaponry to modernise its 37,000-strong troop contingent here, officials said on Monday.

But they said there was no significance to the timing of the move, which comes as North Korea is threatening to restart its suspect nuclear programme after talks broke down over implementing a 7-month old agreement with Washington, reports AP.

Off the Record

They find themselves dead in voter list

MAGALANG, Philippines: About 100 Filipinos in this town north of Manila were unable to vote in Monday's election after learning to their surprise that they were dead, reports AP.

Witnesses said the voters were turned away after election officials found their names on a list marked "deceased." Some of the "dead" angrily accused President Fidel Ramos' coalition of monkeying with the registration rolls in communities where opposition candidates were strong.

Such practices are widespread in the Philippines during elections, and it could not be determined whether any of the group actually presented identification papers of voters who were really dead.

In Manila, the Commission on Elections said it was receiving numerous reports of vote-buying and other irregularities.

Voters were choosing 12 senators, 204 House of Representatives members and thousands of regional and local officials in Monday's balloting, seen as a test of strength for the Ramos administration.

Abortive efforts

TEHRAN: An 80-year-old Iranian man was arrested in Tehran after his landlady complained about the love letters he sent to her each day, the Kayhan newspaper said on Sunday, reports AP.

"Every day he knocked at the door of my apartment to give me a letter expressing his feelings," said the 60-year-old woman in her complaint.

The unnamed man appeared before a judge who ruled he should be temporarily released pending an investigation, the newspaper said.

Devilish

CAPE TOWN, South Africa: Four baboons have been spotted with missing front paws from apparent mutilations to provide medicine for witch doctors, an environmental official says, reports AP.

Wally Petersen, ecologist for the Kommetjie Environmental Awareness Group in Cape Town, said Sunday the paws appeared to have been neatly severed from the baboons living in mountains above Cape Town.

Baboon paws are considered powerful medicine by some traditional healers, known as witch doctors in the West. According to Petersen, people in cars use food to lure a baboon into putting its arm inside. Closing windows then trap the arm, and the paw gets cut off.

Schools are hazardous now!

ATLANTA: School can be hazardous to a teen's health, according to the government's first nationwide survey of school yard violence, reports AP.

More than one in 10 high school students said they carried a weapon on school property, and nearly one-fourth of those surveyed said they were offered, sold or given drugs on campus.

Polls violence claims 18 Filipinos

MANILA, May 8: Filipinos voted Monday in national elections seen as a referendum on Fidel Ramos' presidency. At least 18 people were killed and 27 injured in violence hours before the polling began, reports AP.

Election Chairman Bernardo Pardo said between 70 per cent and 80 per cent of the 36 million registered voters cast ballots for half the country's 24 senators, all 204 members of the House of Representatives, provincial governors, mayors and other local officials.

Those running for various offices included the widow and son of the late President Ferdinand Marcos as well as numerous figures involved in coup attempts against his successor, Corason Aquino.

Polls closed at 3 pm (0700 GMT) but complete results could take weeks due to poor

communications and a laborious counting system.

In a statement Monday, Ramos said "honest, orderly and peaceful elections" would signal that the Philippines could tackle "the formidable challenges of the future."

Despite scattered violence, Pardo described the voting as "generally peaceful." But police said voting had to be suspended in the largely Muslim town of Lumba-Bayabao in Lanao Sur province because precinct workers were afraid of attacks by Islamic extremists and failed to report.

Elsewhere, there were numerous reports of killings, arson, beatings and vote-buying.

The marine garrison in Jolo, 960 kilometers (600 miles) south of Manila, came under a mortar attack that killed one civilian and wounded three marines late Sunday.

BRIEFLY

Tornado kills 3 in Oklahoma :

Tornadoes ripped through southern Oklahoma on Sunday evening, killing three people, injuring four and causing heavy damage to businesses and homes, authorities said, AP reports from Ardmore.

In Texas, a tornado near Amarillo early Sunday morning snatched a man from his front porch and dropped his body 130 feet (35 metres) away, one of 18 deaths caused by a string of powerful storms in the state since Friday night.

7 PKK rebels die in Turkey :

Seven rebels from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) were killed in government military raids in southeastern Turkey, officials in Diyarbakir province announced on Sunday, AFP reports from Ankara.

A statement issued by the regional police station in Diyarbakir, which is in charge of coordinating the government's bid to crush the PKK rebels said the military operations were carried out in the regions of Hakkari, Sirkani and Bitlis, the statement did not say when the raids took place.

Moderate quakes shake Kobe :

Several earthquakes registering up to 3.3 on the Richter scale, shook the Kobe area in western Japan, which was devastated by the January 17 earthquake, the Meteorological Agency said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

There were no immediate reports of damage or injuries, the agency said. A tremor occurred at 2:36 a.m. (1736 GMT on Sunday) with a magnitude of 3.3 on the Richter scale and was followed by a minor quake which measured 2.5 at 4:56 a.m. (1956 GMT on Sunday).

10 die as lorry capsizes in India :

Ten children were killed and several others were injured when the sand laden lorry on which they were travelling, capsized near Gorur Cross in Hassan district on Sunday evening, reports received in Bangalore said, PTI says from Bangalore.

The Karnataka director general of police, R. Ramalingam when contacted, told PTI Sunday night that a marriage party was travelling to a village sitting on the sand in the lorry.

Fire kills 13 in China:

A fire in a hotel has killed 13 people and injured eight others in the southeastern Chinese city of Quanzhou, an official Chinese news agency reported Monday, AP says from Hong Kong.

Rescuers saved 35 people from the fire, which broke out early Wednesday at a dance hall in the hotel in Quanzhou, a coastal city in Fujian province, the China News Service quoted the Quanzhou Evening News as saying. It said the fire was caused by an electric short circuit in one of the rooms' wooden ceilings.

Berlusconi may face serious setback

ROME, May 8: A centre-left coalition forming to challenge media magnate Silvio Berlusconi at Italy's next general election tasted fresh success on Sunday in the second round of local elections, computer projections showed, reports Reuter.

The projections, for Rai public television, pointed to another setback for Berlusconi's centre-right Freedom Alliance, which appeared to have lost heavily in several large towns after a disappointing showing in regional elections last month.

Some 31 million Italians — more than 60 per cent of the national electorate — had been eligible to vote in run-off races for mayors of 182 towns and for presidents of 54 provinces where no clear winner emerged in a first round two weeks ago.

The Abacus Institute projection forecast comfortable centre-left victories in nine of the

12 biggest towns, including two where a first round lead for the centre-right was reversed.

The ex-communist Democratic Party of the Left (DPS), main force on the centre-left, said it figures also showed clear wins in the provinces, including Milan, Venice and Turin.

The result shows that the majority of moderate Italians have voted for the centre-left, PDS leader Massimo D'Alema said.

He said the projections showed Italy did not want to be governed by the right and augured well for a general election, which is expected in October.

The centre-left victories appeared to have been achieved with backing from voters of the federalist Northern League and the far left party Communist Refoundation, neither of which is formally part of the coalition. Turn out was low.



Passers-by help to evacuate an injured man after he was hit by sharpshells when several mortars hit the entrance of the tunnel in Butmir Sunday, a suburb near Sarajevo Airport. At least nine people were wounded and an unconfirmed number killed. — AFP/UNB photo

Casualties from hidden mines on in Afghanistan

KABUL, May 8: Although the Afghan capital Kabul is quiet, the city's hospitals continue to receive civilian casualties because of the hidden nightmare of countless landmines, reports AP.

As many as 176 people died in the first three weeks of April, doctors here said, while in the countryside an estimated 1,000 people die every month as bombs continue to explode in the war-ravaged country.

N-sale to Iran may risk Russia's own security: Clinton

WASHINGTON, May 8: Looking ahead to a trip to Moscow this week, President Bill Clinton complained on Sunday of Russian policy towards Iran and Chechnya, but said US-Russian relations must not be held "hostage to any one issue," reports Reuter.

Clinton leaves today to observe 50th anniversary ceremonies at Moscow's Red Square marking the end of World War II. He will also hold a summit meeting with Russian President Boris Yeltsin at a time of strained relations between the two former Cold War enemies.

The president sounded a conciliatory tone — at a time when congressional leaders are calling for tough action — in remarks prepared for a Sunday night speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, a pro-Israel lobby group.

The White House released Russia-related excerpts from the speech in which Clinton said it was important now more than ever for the United States to support Russia's efforts towards economic and democratic reform.

"We must not hold our relationship hostage to any one

issue," he said. "Crises come and go. But interests endure. And the interests of the American people are best served by supporting Russia's transition to a more free and open society."

The United States and Russia are at odds over Iran, Chechnya and NATO expansion. Washington wants Moscow to give up a 1 billion dollar contract to provide Iran with two nuclear power reactors but Russia is refusing.

The United States is also concerned about continued fighting between Russian troops and rebels in the

Chechnya region. Russia is concerned that expanding NATO to include former Soviet satellite states could endanger its security, a charge Washington denies.

Clinton called the war in Chechnya tragic and said "continued fighting can only spill more blood and further decrease international support for Russian reform."

In his remarks, Clinton took the position Russian would be endangering its own security by selling reactors to Iran which Washington considers a leading promoter of state-sponsored terrorism.

Washington is concerned the spent uranium fuel rods could be reprocessed to produce plutonium-grade materials for weapons if Iran has the proper equipment.

"If this sale goes forward Russian national security can only be weakened in the long term," Clinton said.

White House chief of staff Leon Panetta was tougher in an interview on CNN television. Saying Clinton "has made very clear to the Russians that we cannot in any way tolerate the sale of technology that would give Iran a nuclear capacity."

Ruling party leading in Ethiopian polls

ADDIS ABABA, May 8: Vote-counting is taking place after Ethiopia's first multi-party general election with the ruling coalition looking virtually sure of a landslide victory, reports Reuter.

President Meles Zenawi, a former guerrilla who celebrated his 42nd birthday yesterday, is almost certain to become prime minister with strong executive powers following the Sunday poll. But Nebiya Samuel, head of the small Ethiopian National Democratic Party (ENDP) complained of irregularities.