

BRIEFLY

Taiwanese PM reaches Prague:

Taiwanese Prime Minister Lien Chan arrived in Prague on Sunday for a private three-day visit, which may include unofficial talks with Czech leaders although the countries have no diplomatic relations, Reuter reports from Prague.

Nepalese flood toll rises to 69:

The death toll from floods and landslides in eastern Nepal has risen to 69 with eight more bodies recovered at the weekend and 41 still missing as rains continued to lash the country, a Home Ministry spokesman said yesterday, AFP reports from Kathmandu.

40 militants held in Pakistan:

Pakistan authorities arrested 40 Islamic militant protesters in the northwestern district of Swat on Sunday after they clashed with security men, official sources and witnesses said, Reuter reports from Peshawar.

Quake shakes Kobe again:

An earthquake registering 3.4 on the Richter scale jarred the Kobe area in western Japan yesterday but there were no immediate reports of casualties or damage, the Meteorological Agency said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

Forest fires rage in Russia:

Dozens of forest fires were raging Monday in the Russian Far East, the ITAR-TASS news agency reported, AP reports from Khabarovsk, Russia.

27 die in Chinese bus plunge:

Twenty-seven passengers died in an accident in central Jiangxi province Saturday when their bus veered off a highway and plunged into a river, a newspaper reported yesterday, AFP says from Shanghai.

Volcano creates island in Tonga:

An undersea volcanic eruption in the Pacific Ocean has presented Tonga with a brand new baby island that is getting bigger every day, AP reports from Suva, Fiji.

Fire claims 7 in China:

Seven people were killed and another four injured in separate fires that broke out at an entertainment centre and hotel in southern China's Guangdong province, reports said yesterday, AFP reports from Hong Kong.



Dozens of Palestinians arrested by Israeli border guards with their hands over their heads in the Old City of Jerusalem on Sunday after a Jew was stabbed while walking in the streets of the Old City. In the past week three Jews have been stabbed in the area.

International

Indian navy intensifies patrol in Palk Strait

Delhi blocks LTTE stronghold to help Colombo fight rebels

NEW DELHI, June 19: Since the ceasefire in Sri Lanka's civil war collapsed, India has begun using warships to blockade the Tamil rebels' stronghold, two Indian sources said Monday, reports AP.

However, India's top military spokesman denied that the navy had formed a blockade. He said it was simply working harder to prevent smuggling, poaching and terrorism off its coast.

India's navy has long patrolled its southern shores and the 25-mile-wide Palk Strait that separates India from Sri Lanka and the rebels' main fortification, Jaffna Peninsula.

But the two sources said on condition of anonymity that the stepped up patrols have focused on Jaffna. They also said that Indian ships and

aircraft are operating deep in the Indian Ocean to seal off Sri Lanka's northeastern coast.

Rebel boats on the peninsula have long collected weapons and supplies from Tamil supporters in southern India and from trading vessels arriving from countries such as Singapore and Thailand.

The Indian government often avoids publicity saying that it is trying to help Sri Lanka fight the Tamil rebels because 60 million Tamils live in the southern state of Tamil Nadu and many feel sympathy for their Sri Lankan brethren.

India also is concerned about rebel reaction.

The government blames the rebels for killing former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi during an election campaign in Tamil Nadu in May 1991. India also deployed 100,000 troops in Sri Lanka in 1987 to fight the rebels, and 1,165 of the soldiers were killed.

The Tamil rebels have been fighting for autonomy in northern and eastern Sri Lanka for 12 years, and the battles have intensified since they broke a three-month ceasefire in April.

India's top military spokesman, T G Nallamuthu of the Defence Minister, denied in an interview Monday that Indian forces are taking any unusual steps to help Sri Lanka fight the rebels.

"What we are doing is good and effective patrolling to protect our coast and see that there is no unauthorized movement," he said. "This not

Murayama won't reshuffle cabinet or call snap polls

PARIS, June 19: Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama said Sunday he had no immediate plans to reshuffle his cabinet or call for snap elections, as Tokyo faces mounting pressures to address domestic and foreign problems quickly, reports Reuter.

"We are facing urgent issues and the cabinet ministers are doing their best. I trust them. I have not considered a cabinet reshuffle," Murayama told reporters after arriving in Paris on Sunday for talks with French President Jacques Chirac and European Union (EU) officials.

The Socialist premier said his three-party coalition government had been successful in passing series of budgets for the current fiscal year starting April 1995 and saw no reason why it could not cope with pending issues.

"It's not good to dissolve the parliament when you are still tackling problems," he said.

Some of Japan's major concerns are possible trade sanctions from the United States and its fragile economic recovery which has been battered by surging yen and ailing financial institutions.

Murayama stressed that Japan needed to keep vigilant over its limping economy and said, he had instructed a committee of cabinet ministers to be established to monitor the economy and oversee implementation of past economic measures.

Japan also faces massive rebuilding after a devastating earthquake killed more than 5,000 people and destroyed most of port city of Kobe. National security is also at stake as series of violent incidents, like the nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway system, struck Japan.

Murayama has come under fierce attack for an alleged lack of leadership in addressing these issues.

Having survived a no-confidence vote just before the Group of Seven (G-7) summit meeting in Canada, he now faces an upper house election in July when he returns home.

Pak tribesmen demand strict Islamic law

ISLAMABAD, June 19: Tribesmen blocked roads and occupied government buildings to demand the enforcement of strict Islamic law in their remote corner of northwestern Pakistan, authorities said Monday, reports AP.

They said two people were killed and nearly 30 injured in clashes with police.

Hundreds of police and paramilitary troops moved into the Swat district, about 180 kilometres (108 miles) from the federal capital, on Sunday to try to dislodge demonstrators holed up in government offices in Matta, Kabbal and Mardyan.

Late on Sunday police arrested the leader of the demonstration, Maulana Sufi Mohammed, along with 40 followers. However, police said demonstrators still blocked several roads in the area, although most of the government offices had been cleared.



A marcher (C) tries to resist an arrest from the San Francisco Police after she allegedly tried to throw an egg at a group of right wing anti-gay protestors during the 25th Annual San Francisco Lesbian, Gay Bisexual Transgender Pride Parade on Sunday. San Francisco police estimated some 400,000 people turned out for the march.

Students called strike paralyses Kathmandu

KATHMANDU, June 19: Shops and schools across the Kathmandu valley remained shut and private vehicles stayed off the roads today in response to a strike by student groups against mid-term elections, eye witnesses and officials said, reports Reuter.

Representatives of the Nepal Students Union, who organised the strike, said they were protesting against the kingdom's communist rulers' recent decision to hold elections in November.

Police said stone-throwing protesters had damaged six vehicles, student leaders said about 500 protesters had been arrested. But police put the number closer to 40.

"The mid-term elections ordered last week are not in the interest of the country," student leader NP Saud told Reuters.

Chechens leave Budennovsk

MOSCOW, June 19: Chechen guerrillas with volunteers acting as human shields left the Russian town of Budennovsk today for Chechnya, Interfax news agency said, reports AP.

The guerrillas left at 2:32 pm (10:32 GMT), Interfax said, quoting Stavropol deputy district administrator Alexander Korobinikov.

It was not immediately clear whether they had hostages with them, although the government had demanded they release all hostages first. The Interfax news agency said all hostages had been released.

A spokesman for Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin told The Associated Press that the rebels would be accompanied by

about 80 volunteers, including local officials and members of the Russian parliament.

The rebels had demanded they be escorted en route to Chechnya by lawmakers and others to ensure their safety aboard the buses.

The six buses and the refrigerator truck pulled up early Monday in front of the hospital where the rebels had been holed up with the hostages since Wednesday. Efforts to free the hostages bogged down for more than six hours Monday while officials and rebels argued over who would escort the gunmen back to Chechnya. The government rejected a rebel demand to take 150 hostages with them.

At least two times early Monday, Chernomyrdin was shown on Russian television speaking by telephone with rebel leader Shamil Basayev.

"All hostages must be left in the hospital," Chernomyrdin told him. "The volunteers — that is another story. Shamil! Shamil! Wait a second! How can I guarantee you safe passage if you have some hostages with you?"

Early Monday, peace talks began in the Chechen capital, Grozny, between a high-level Russian delegation and a Chechen group sent by President Dzhokhar Dudayev.

The Russian military declared a ceasefire Sunday night in its combat operations in Chechnya. The Chechen delegation to Monday's peace talks was led by Usman Imaev, Dudayev's justice minister, and Aslan Maskhadov, the chief of staff of Dudayev's forces.

ROK president wants summit with DPRK

HONG KONG, June 19: President Kim Young-sam of South Korea says he will seek a summit with North Korea's new leader, Kim Jong Il, reports AP.

In an interview with Time Magazine released Monday, Kim said "the idea of a summit will be discussed" when Kim Jong Il formally succeeds his late father as North Korean president "some time in the future."

North and South Korean presidents have never met. A summit which was being arranged for last July was scuttled by the death of North Korean President Kim Il Sung.

Pakistan plans to buy jets alternative to F-16s

ISLAMABAD, June 19: Pakistan is considering acquiring military planes from Russia, France or Sweden as alternative to F-16 aircraft being denied by the United States Defence Minister Aftab Shaban Mirani said here, reports AP.

He told parliament late Sunday that Pakistan would look for Russian Su-27, French Mirage or an advanced Swedish aircraft Griffin in case it has to scrap the deal for 38 multi-role F-16 planes.

The deal has been in jeopardy since 1990 when the US clamped an embargo on military purchases by Pakistan over its controversial nuclear programme.

Pakistan, which has al-

Tories renew appeals for party unity

LONDON, June 19: Leaders of Britain's ruling Conservatives renewed their appeals for party unity amid mounting speculation that Prime Minister John Major might be ditched before the next general election, reports Reuter.

Major's authority took a battering last week when openly defiant Euro sceptic Conservative members of parliament attacked him over future policy towards the European Union.

Senior Conservatives responded by calling for new moves to boost the popularity of the party now trailing the opposition Labour Party by record levels in the opinion polls.

UK company supplied arms to both Iran, Iraq during war

LONDON, June 19: A British company linked to a serving Cabinet Minister broke an arms embargo against warring Iran and Iraq by supplying weapons to both sides and training them in their use, The Times reported today, says AFP.

The paper quoted Gerald James, former Chairman of BMARC, a company of which current Treasury Secretary Jonathan Aitken was a director at the material item. Aitken has always denied earlier reports that he knew about illegal arms sales by the company.

James said BMARC sold several hundred Swiss made Skyguard anti-aircraft systems

Manila resumes talks with MNLF

MANILA, June 19: The Philippines resumed peace talks with autonomy-seeking Muslim guerrillas today amid warnings of renewed war in the country's south if they failed, a government negotiator said, reports AP.

The negotiations, which started in the southern city of Davao, are expected to focus on the possible integration of certain members of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) into the military, said Congressman Eduardo Ermita, vice chairman of the government panel.

The MNLF waged a bloody war for secession in Mindanao and other southern islands of mostly Roman Catholic Philippines in the early 1970s.

Aideed appoints 60 ministers

MOGADISHU, June 19: Somalia's main warlord General Mohamed Farah Aideed has appointed a cabinet of more than 60 ministers and deputy ministers in his first decree since being elected president of Somalia at a conference of his supporters Thursday, reports AP.

In the decree released here Sunday night, General Aideed said a few more ministers would be appointed later.

Aideed headed the United Somali Congress/Somali National Alliance (USC/SNA) faction until he was sacked and replaced by his former financier Osman Hassan Ali 'Ato' at a conference organised by a river USC/SNA faction in southern Mogadishu on June 11.

Once important PLO HQs now wrapped in terrible silence

TUNIS, June 19: The most striking feature of the PLO headquarters in Tunis is the quiet. The only bustle comes from the kitchen, where mint tea and thick, black coffee are brewed, reports AP.

The lack of activity underlines the fading influence of the Palestine Liberation Organisation, which once controlled a billion-dollar financial empire and had a guerrilla army equipped with tanks, artillery and missiles.

Yasser Arafat, who headed the movement since 1968 from Jordan, then Lebanon and finally Tunisia, has allowed the PLO to wither since the Israel-Palestinian accord was signed September 13, 1993.

Power and money have

gradually shifted to the Palestinian authority, the self-rule government that Arafat set up to run the West Bank region of Jericho and the Gaza Strip where he is now based.

"Yasser Arafat has Palestine in his briefcase. Wherever he goes, it goes with him," said Ahmed Abu Ismail, who works at the PLO's propaganda office.

The PLO headquarters in Tunis — once so important that the Israelis bombed it in October 1985, killing 73 Palestinians and Tunisians — is now a skeleton scattered in four or five villas across Tunis.

Once numbering more than 1,000, the PLO staff has shrunk to less than 100. The old fighters-turned-bureau-

crats who stayed behind oppose either the peace accord or the way Arafat is implementing it.

"The Palestinian Authority is a local government that was set up as an adventurous experiment to test Israel's intentions for peace," said Fraouk Kaddoumi, the PLO's foreign minister. "A year has passed since the accord was implemented. It has not achieved anything. It has only proved that Israel does not want peace."

Most PLO offices have closed. Its 90 embassies will be reduced because the organisation cannot pay for them. PLO diplomats in Geneva were ejected from their offices because they could not pay the rent. The phones at some

Tunis offices occasionally are shut off because the bills have not been paid.

One sign that Arafat has no plans to spend time in Tunis is his own villa. Tiles covering a section of its facade are unwashed, the white walls are peeling, plants in the tiny garden are dry.

The lack of work has given PLO officials time to help out at home — they change diapers, feed their children, do housework. They anxiously wait for travelers from Gaza, lapping up gossip — and jokes — about the doings in the self-rule zones.

They also live in constant fear their salaries will stop.

"We're jobless employees now," said Hamad Abu Ismail, who works in the propaganda

office surrounded by bored colleagues spending office hours smoking and drinking coffee.

Arafat's supporters say the disgruntled bureaucrats have not done enough to keep the PLO in the limelight.

All they do is sit in front of the television and criticise us," said Yasser Amro, minister of education in the Palestinian authority.

"I may make mistakes. But at least I'm working," he added. "If you just sit in Tunis drinking tea, people will forget you."

After its creation in 1964, the PLO put the Palestinian cause on the world stage. With the backing of Arab oil money, it won international recognition, placing at least as

many diplomatic missions abroad as Israel. It also acted as a unifying umbrella for eight rival Palestinian factions.

Most of all, the PLO set as its main goal the return of the 2 million Palestinian refugees and their descendants who were uprooted from what is now Israel in 1948 and from the Gaza Strip and West Bank in 1967.

The fear in Tunis and other points outside Gaza and the West Bank is that the goal is in jeopardy. Talks on the final status of refugees are set for 1996, but dissidents contend the self-rule government is too weak to fight for the refugees in negotiations with Israel.

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