

BRIEFLY



The People's Liberation Army Second Artillery troops drill in missile launching procedure in this photo released on Monday by China News Service under condition that the location was not revealed. China issued another stern warning on using military force against Taiwan, with Defence Minister Chi Haotian vowing the army would 'not sit idle' if the island moved towards independence. — AFP/UNB photo

UNSC extends Haiti mission: The UN Security Council UNSC voted Monday to extend the UN peacekeeping mission in Haiti until February, when the next president takes office in the impoverished Caribbean nation, AFP reports from United Nations.

A resolution passed unanimously praised the mission for helping the Haitian government maintain domestic stability, protect international workers, pave the way for elections and professionalise security forces.

44 escape Nigerian prison: Forty-four prisoners escaped from a high security prison in Matagalpa on Sunday with the help of one of the wardens police said in Managua Monday, AFP reports from Managua. Five of the convicts had been recaptured Monday morning by authorities who launched a wide scale search around the city located in a mountainous region some 140 kilometres (90 miles) north of Managua.

3 die in Beirut bldg collapse: Three Syrian construction workers were killed and seven others were injured on Monday when an apartment block collapsed in Beirut's old downtown, Lebanese police said, AFP reports from Beirut.

The workers were tearing down a building as part of reconstruction of Lebanon's shattered capital after the 1975-90 civil war, the police said.

Rains flood large parts of Bombay: Heavy overnight rains flooded large parts of Bombay, India's sprawling commercial capital. Tuesday affecting road and rail transport and disrupting normal life, officials and residents said, AFP reports from Bombay.

The city's suburban railway, which transports nearly five million people daily, suspended services after rain waters flooded the tracks in low-lying areas, railway officials said.

Typhoon claims 4 in China: At least four people working outdoors were killed when severe tropical storm Gary struck the eastern coastal areas of southern China's Guangdong province, it was reported Tuesday, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

Three of the victims, who were telecommunication workers, were electrocuted when the typhoon slammed into the country between Shantou and Chaozhou on Monday. The fourth victim was a bridge construction worker, the China-backed Ta Kung Pao said.

French House okays reform bill: The French Parliament easily passed constitutional reforms Monday that reorganise parliamentary sessions and reduce lawmakers' immunity to prosecution, AP reports from Versailles, France.

Legislators overwhelmingly voted 674-178 for the reforms, which needed 512 votes for passage. It was the first act of political reform by conservative President Jacques Chirac, who was elected in May.

Marcos Junior files appeal: The son of the late President Ferdinand Marcos described his tax evasion conviction as harassment and said he will cut short a visit to London to return home and file an appeal, AP reports from Manila.

Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. was convicted Monday of failing to file returns or pay taxes from 1982 until 1985 and was sentenced to nine years in jail.

Indonesia new UNSC president: Ambassador Nugroho Wisnurnarti of Indonesia takes over as president of the Security Council Tuesday succeeding Ambassador Gerardo Martinez Blanco of Honduras, Reuter reports from United Nations.

The post rotates monthly according to the English alphabetical order of the Council's 15 member delegations.

Russia to pullout troops from Chechnya soon

MOSCOW, Aug 1: Russia will start withdrawing its troops from Chechnya within 10 days following an agreement to halt the nearly 8-month-old war, a top military commander said Tuesday, reports AP.

Col. Gen. Yevgeny Podolzin said airborne troops would be the first to leave Chechnya, with motorised infantry and interior ministry troops remaining behind under an agreement signed Sunday with the rebels.

Podolzin told a news conference, the first troops could be withdrawn within a week to 10 days. Despite the military agreement, shooting continued in Chechnya.

LTTE vows to turn Jaffna into graveyard for troops

COLOMBO, Aug 1: The Tamil Tigers have launched a fresh fund-raising campaign and promised to turn their Jaffna stronghold into a graveyard for Sri Lankan troops, a rebel paper and Tamil sources said today, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) told Tamil civilians they were seeking 1,000 million rupees (20 million dollars) to boost their war effort against security forces, the sources here said.

The LTTE said it wanted to buy more surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) as a defence against aerial bombardments. Tigers have already downed two transport planes and a ground attack aircraft since firing the first missile in April.

They argue that the government increased a defence levy recently but there is no such tax imposed by the LTTE on Tamils in Jaffna, a Tamil source said. "Now they want Jaffna civilians to make contributions."

Rao rules out early polls

NEW DELHI, Aug 1: Indian Prime Minister P V Narasimha Rao, in comments published today, ruled out advancing general elections that are expected in March next year, reports AFP.

"There is not a single reason for me to advance the elections," The Hindu and other newspapers quoted Rao as telling a meeting of MPs of his Congress (I) Party here late Monday.

"On the other hand, I could cite 100 reasons to hold them as scheduled," Rao added.

Rao's comments followed widespread speculation in the media that the premier, who is also the Congress President might urge the Election Commission to hold the parliamentary elections early, probably this year.

Ulysses flies near the top of the sun

PASADENA, California, Aug 1: The Ulysses spacecraft flew near the top of the sun on Monday, reaching the northern most point on a solar voyage that began five years and more than 1 billion miles (1.6 billion kilometres) ago, reports AP.

"It's never been explored before," said Diane Ainsworth, spokeswoman for the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, said of the sun's North Pole.

The Ulysses reached about 80 degrees north of the sun's equator, having travelled 1.86 billion miles (3 billion kilometres) since it was launched from the space shuttle Discovery on Oct 6, 1990.

The 810-pound (367-kilogram) craft is owned by the European Space Agency and managed by JPL under a contract with the National Aeronautics and Space Agency.

Scientists urge France to halt N-test

LONDON, Aug 1: More than 250 scientists from around the world have backed a call to urge France to postpone its nuclear tests in the South Pacific until an assessment of the area can be done, a British scientist said on Monday, reports Reuter.

Dr Paul Johnston of Greenpeace Research Laboratories, which is funded by the environmental pressure group of the same name, said the scientists support its plans for a three-month study of the Mururoa atoll in French plynisia to determine the risks of more nuclear testing to humans and the environment.

Ulysses carries nine instruments collecting data on solar wind, magnetic fields and particles, interplanetary dust and gas, and cosmic rays.

Members of Russia's Constitutional Court listen as Chairman Vladimir Tumanov (4th L) reads out the court's decision on the use of troops in Chechnya on Monday. The court ruled that one of President Boris Yeltsin's decrees ordering a massive military crackdown against Chechen separatist last December was "fully in accordance with the constitution". Between 15,000 and 30,000 people have died, according to various estimates, since Russian troops marched into Chechnya December 11, 1994. — AFP/UNB photo

Israelis protest peace talks with PLO

JERUSALEM, Aug 1: Thousands of Israelis protested against their government's peace talks with the PLO late on Monday, marching through Tel Aviv with Israeli flags, torches and posters with pictures of Israeli victims of Arab violence, reports Reuter.

The demonstrators, chanting slogans against Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, marched from the site of a Muslim suicide bombing nine months ago to the scene of another attack that took place last week.

US Senator tables Bill for sanctions against Myanmar

WASHINGTON, Aug 1: A US senator has introduced a bill calling for US sanctions against Myanmar, citing continued political repression there. It was announced here Monday, reports AFP.

to unilateral economic sanctions against Myanmar, saying they could not be effective unless they had broad international support.

Senator Mitch McConnell introduced his bill on Friday, saying he had seen "no apparent progress" in the promotion of democracy and human rights in Myanmar, despite the recent release of political opponent and Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi.

Lord also expressed concern that provisions of the proposed sanctions would violate international accords, adding that the United States should not penalise the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) when positive measure are being taken.



Japanese Foreign Minister Yohei Kono (L) shakes hands with his Chinese counterpart Qian Qichen (R) during their bilateral talks in Bandar Seri Begawan Tuesday. Foreign ministers of the two countries are here for talks on security issues under the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) regional forum. — AFP/UNB photo

Security in Kashmir tightened as Amarnath Yatra begins

SRINAGAR, India, Aug 1: India deployed massive security for tens of thousands of Hindu pilgrims who started an annual trek today through Kashmiri mountains where five Western tourists were kidnapped four weeks ago by militants, reports Reuter.

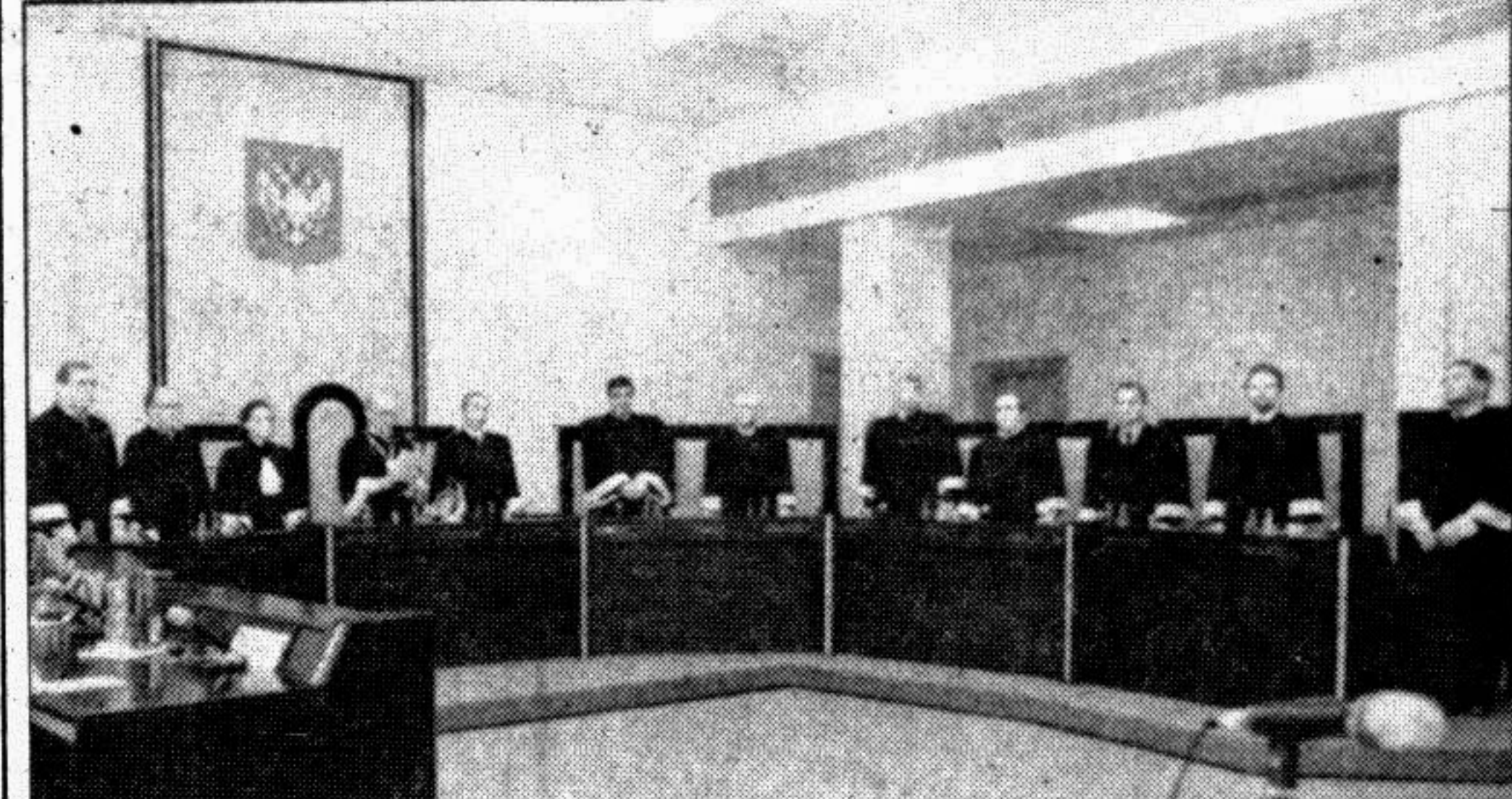
Thousands of soldiers and paramilitary forces threw a security cordon along the 345-km (210-mile) route leading from Jammu, winter capital of India's Jammu and Kashmir state.

A Muslim militant group called Harkat-ul-Ansar has threatened pilgrims and taken responsibility for two bomb blasts this month which killed 18 people in Jammu.

The pilgrimage celebrating the Hindu god Shiva leads to the Amarnath Cave, where pilgrims worship an ice stalagmite which devotees consider to be the god's "lingam" or phallus.

"Please ensure that no pilgrim is allowed to travel unescorted," said a government order to security forces following Harkat-ul-Ansar's threats.

Indian officials say the previously unknown Al-Faran group, which has claimed responsibility for capturing the Western tourists, has links to Harkat-ul-Ansar.



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Off the Record

For a hen only!

CAIRO: Six members of one family drowned trying to rescue a hen that had fallen into a well in their village in southern Egypt on Monday, police said, reports AFP.

Allam Sabet al-Sayyed, his two brothers Sayyed and Ahmed, their sister Zeinab and two cousins perished in the village of Nazlet Emarah, 500 kilometres (310 miles) south of Cairo, the police said.

Allam went into the well first and when he failed to climb out again, Sayyed became worried and went down to get him. He failed to come out so a third brother, Ahmed, went down, followed by their sister and two other family members, police said.

Other villagers then alerted firefighters, who recovered the six bodies and the hen, which was uninjured, they said.

He was preaching to some satans

MOSCOW: Children stole nearly 4,000 dollars from an American missionary while he was preaching Christian virtues to them at a children's camp in Russia's Far East, Interfax news agency reported Monday, says AFP.

The 10 boys and girls, aged 13 and 14, shared out the money among themselves but they were later detained and the sum was returned to the missionary, a US citizen, the agency said.

Bush nearly drowned during a fishing trip

HOUSTON: Former US President George Bush nearly drowned earlier this month when he fell into a peat bog during a fishing trip in remote eastern Canada, a spokesman for Bush said on Thursday, reports Reuter.

Spokesman Jim McGrath in Houston said Bush was taking a walk through the woods in Newfoundland province when he sank up to his armpits in the bog.

He was freed by secret service and royal Canadian mounted police, who struggled for several minutes before they were able to pull him out.

McGrath said Bush was able to stop sinking in the muck by the time help arrived.

"He said all the ground up there looks the same. It's all peat. And the next thing you know, you are up to your armpits in it," McGrath said.

Newfoundland helicopter pilot Craig Dobbin told the Canadian press news agency that "I wouldn't be truthful if I didn't indicate he was in very serious situation."

"It was a matter of seconds before he was in over his head," said Dobbin, who as ferrying the Bush entourage on its fishing trip.

Dobbin said Bush was unfazed by the incident and continued with the fishing trip.

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Despite the military agreement, shooting continued in Chechnya.

Iran softens anti-US stance for normalising ties

LONDON, Aug 1: Is Tehran finally backing out of its defiant anti-US stance and showing signs of making up with Washington?

That is what some political analysts have been asking since Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in July called for an easing of tension between his country and the United States, reports IPS.

Indeed, Rafsanjani's move heralds a conciliatory shift in Iran's policy toward the superpower.

At the same time, however, Iran's importance as a test case by which other major powers namely Russia, China and India — can challenge US policies in world politics, has not lessened.

Rafsanjani's placatory tone must be viewed against the backdrop of the hardening attitude of the US Congress toward Tehran and the deteriorating economic situation in Iran.

The US Congress is considering toughening the action President Bill Clinton took against Iran in April when he banned US investment in, and trade with Iran because of what Washington views as Iranian support of international terrorism and harbouring of nuclear armament ambitions.

Elsewhere, Iran has emerged as the touchstone of independence for such leading world and regional powers as Russia, China and India.

Russia argues that the nuclear reactors it would sell to Iran are the same type as the ones South Korea intends to supply to North Korea under an agreement hammered out by Washington.

The United States is also pressuring China not to equip Iran with nuclear power plants toward this end, Washington is using the Missile Technology Control (MTC) guidelines as leverage, as US law requires imposition of sanctions against any country that breaks them.

In June, the New York Times reported that the US central intelligence agency (CIA) believed China had delivered dozens of missile guidance systems and computerised machine-tools to Iran. This was done ostensibly to help Iran improve the accuracy of its North Korean-made ground-to-ground missiles.

At 20,700 billion cubic metres, Iran has the world's second largest natural gas reserve. At the current daily consumption rate of 158 million cubic metres, it will take Iran 360 years to exhaust it. Iran's oil reserves stand at 92.9 billion barrels, at the present extraction rate, these will last 70 years.

Iran's geopolitical importance also figures largely in the policies of the foreign and defence ministries of Russia, China and India.

Iran is the most strategically located country in the world: It occupies the entire eastern coast of the Persian Gulf, making it for all practical purposes a neighbour of the six oil-rich Gulf states.

It borders Pakistan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey and Iraq, and its shares in Caspian Sea littoral with Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Russia.

Iran's strategic position enables it to reward those who stand by it. For instance, in the dispute about exploiting the offshore oil fields in the Caspian Sea, Iran sided with Russia against Azerbaijan.

On the diplomatic front, Tehran has declared that the secession of Chechnya, a Muslim-majority autonomous Russian Republic, is an internal affair of Russia. This has helped Moscow down play the religious aspect of the Chechen conflict.

While Iran's assets — natural resources and geostrategic appeal — are valuable in the medium term, its economic crisis is immediate. It stems from the low price commanded by its chief export, oil, and the present value of the currency in which it is traded, the US dollar.

Since Tehran has no control over either, pragmatism requires that it should show moderation towards the United States for now.

Benazir defends Islam at female lawmakers confce

ISLAMABAD, Aug 1: Islam is not to blame for the inequality faced by women in Muslim countries, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto said Tuesday at a conference of female Muslim lawmakers, reports AP.

More than 100 women — some wearing black shrouds, colourful African headdresses or western designer outfits — represented 35 countries at the three-day conference.

In her inaugural speech, Benazir defended Islam as a religion that preaches equality.

"Unfortunately if women are backward in Muslim countries it is not because of our religion," she said.