

India willing to hold talks with Kashmiri Muslim militants

SRINAGAR, India, Aug 10: The Indian government is willing to hold talks with Kashmiri Muslim militants on finding a solution to the separatist rebellion in the northern state, Home Minister Inderjit Gupta said Friday, reports AFP.

Gupta said meanwhile that 15 people were killed in continuing violence overnight in the strife-torn Himalayan province where militants also attacked a relative of the National Conference Party leader Farooq Abdullah.

Gupta, who is touring Kashmir ahead of next month's legislative elections, told political leaders in the town of Doda that the government was ready to open a dialogue with Kashmiri Muslim separatist groups.

"Our doors are open and the government is ready to have a dialogue with anybody within the framework of the constitution," Gupta said. "If you are ready to forget the past and wish to join the mainstream it is welcome."

"The gun culture is not going to solve any problems and solutions have to be worked out through negotiations only," he said.

The government's offer comes ahead of state assembly elections scheduled on September 7, 16, 21 and 30, the first since the Muslim insurgency began in late 1989. Kashmir has been under the direct rule of New Delhi since 1990.

"I appeal to the people to take the elections as a weapon to install their own representatives had restored democracy in the state," Gupta said.

Two-day strike in Pakistan begins

Opposition to force govt to withdraw new taxes

ISLAMABAD, Aug 10: Many shops and businesses were closed across Pakistan on Saturday as political opposition parties and industrial leaders began a two-day strike to protest new taxes, reports AP.

It was the latest in a series of strikes aimed at forcing the government to withdraw additional taxes introduced in the federal budget in June.

Doctors in southern Sindh province also went on a partial strike on Saturday to protest income taxes.

Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto defended the new taxes and said Pakistan had to come to grips with the growing budget deficit by providing additional government revenues.

"We don't pay taxes, but we have to change the tax culture," she told reporters.

More than 1.1 billion dollar in additional taxes were introduced in the budget to cut the deficit. Even with the added taxes, government spending still exceeds revenues by about 5.9 billion dollars.

Benazir accused opposition parties, led by former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's Muslim League, of using the tax issue to cripple the country.

Sharif last month formed a loose coalition of opposition parties with the common aim of ousting Benazir's government by the end of the year.

The government tax package and allegations of widespread corruption have led to growing discontent with Benazir.

Trade and export companies called for Saturday's strike to illustrate the damage

they claim new taxes will do to their businesses.

The All Pakistan Traders' Convention are demanding the withdrawal of taxes on export goods.

Police in the capital, Islamabad, stepped up security in anticipation of violence against shops that opened in defiance of the strike.

Most shops throughout the city were closed Saturday.

Truck drivers and other transportation workers walked off the job for three days at the end of July.

The strike was called off August 1 when the Benazir government gave in to union demands and revoked several taxes that the drivers said were tripling their operating costs.

Yeltsin names Lebed as his representative in Chechnya

MOSCOW, Aug 10: Russian President Boris Yeltsin today named Alexander Lebed as his representative in Chechnya, presidency spokesman Sergei Medvedev announced, reports AFP.

The appointment of Lebed, the secretary to the powerful Russian security council, to replace Oleg Lobov came as heavy fighting between Chechen rebels and federal troops for control of the Chechen capital Grozny entered a fifth day.

On Friday, Yeltsin said attacks by Chechen separatists would be suppressed, but insisted the war in the breakaway republic would only be ended by peace talks.

Lebed, who stood against Yeltsin in presidential elections before joining his team, has been a firm critic in the past of Russian policy in Chechnya.

Off the Record



US President Bill Clinton (C) First Lady Hillary Clinton (L) and daughter Chelsea, 16, depart from Los Angeles International Airport enroute to Jackson Hole, Wyoming, Friday for a week of vacation. — AFP/UNB photo

All-male set of quintuplets

MONTGOMERY, Alabama: A woman has given birth to five boys, a rare instance of an all-male set of quintuplets, reports AP.

The babies ranged in weight from 2.14 pounds (1 kilogram) to 2.4 pounds (1.1 kilograms), and two of them are identical twins, Derrick said.

He said Mrs. Guttensohn and her husband, Eric, knew they were going to have five boys. He didn't say whether Mrs. Guttensohn had taken fertility drugs, which often lead to multiple births.

Dr. Louis G. Keith, president of the Centre for the Study of Multiple Births in Chicago, said he could not verify whether there has been another set of all-male quintuplets in the United States. But he said there was a well-known set of all-male quintuplets in Argentina in the 1950s.

While nothing that the babies low birth weight could be a problem, he did not fail to add: "Everybody should be congratulated."

Mubarak urges Netanyahu to lift closure of WB, Gaza

CAIRO, Aug 10: Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak urged Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to lift the crippling closure of the autonomous Palestinian territories, he told journalists Friday, reports AFP.

The president said he had appealed to Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister to lift the blockade and to start the final phase of negotiations said the government daily Al Akhbar in its Saturday edition.

Netanyahu replied that he had begun to ease the measure of the closure and he pledged his commitment to all the accords signed with the Palestinians.

The Egyptian leader told journalists, Mubarak was briefing journalists on the plane journey back to Cairo from an official visit to Saudi Arabia.

The military blockade of the territories was imposed on February 25 after the first of four Islamic militant suicide bombings in Israel which left 58 people dead.

Once and for ever

DUBAI, Aug 10: A newspaper said today United Arab Emirates' oldest man died days after his first visit to a doctor at the age of 135, reports Reuters.

Gulf News said, Obain Mubarak Bin Suwaidan Bal-Jalali's health began to deteriorate a week ago. "Only then was he forced to see a doctor. He had never visited one before," it said.

The former desert tracker died on August 6 in Dubai. The paper said at 135 he was the oldest man in the UAE since Ali Mater Bin Ghurair died last month at 136.

The Guinness Book of Records recognises French woman Jeanne Calment as the oldest person in the world with a birth certificate providing she is 121.

Bob Dole chooses Kemp as his running mate

RUSSELL, Kan, Aug 10: Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole has chosen former New York Congressman Jack Kemp as his vice presidential running mate, a Republican party source confirmed on Friday, reports Reuters.

Earlier, Dole's Press Secretary Nelson Warfield said that Dole had telephoned his choice and the offer had been accepted. But Warfield would not confirm that it was Kemp.

Dole telephoned Kemp from his hometown of Russell, Kansas, a formal announcement of the choice was scheduled for today in Russell.

Local television in Dallas, where Kemp had flown from Florida, showed him boarding a chartered airplane on Friday evening, apparently to Kansas to join Dole for the announcement.

All-day long speculation has centred on Kemp, the former New York Congressman who has been a rival of Dole's for years.

Signing of CTBT

France appeals to India not to prevent others

PARIS, Aug 10: France appealed to India on Friday not to prevent other countries from signing a treaty banning all nuclear tests, even if it refused to do so itself, reports Reuters.

Foreign Minister spokesman Yves Dautriaux said France was trying to persuade India to allow the draft of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty under negotiations in Geneva to be sent to the United Nations next month for signature.

"India has announced its intention not to sign the treaty. That is its sovereign right. But it cannot be in India's interest to block the transmission of the draft treaty to the General Assembly," he told journalists.

He said India was an important power concerned to promote nuclear disarmament and, with fellow "threshold powers" Pakistan and Israel, would have a say in the timing of the entry into force of the test ban treaty, along with the big five — the United States, Russia, France, Britain and China.

Dautriaux confirmed that the official nuclear powers had agreed this week on the conditions for authorising and international inspection of a suspect site.

Troops gaining ground over Chechens in Grozny

MOSCOW, Aug 10: Battles between separatist rebels and Russian forces raged for a fifth day in the centre of the Chechen capital today but federal troops were gaining ground, Russian media reports said, reports Reuters.

"Fighting began again at 6.30 am (0230 GMT) in Grozny, but it is of a completely different nature from previous days — the federal troops have started entering the town and forcing out the separatists," ITAR-Tass news agency said.

But the fighters have also become more active," it quoted its correspondent Sergei Trofimov, trapped with journalists and civilians in the middle of the battle, as saying.

He said a column of tanks was making its way towards the central market about two km (one mile) away after a night of attacks by Russian helicopter gunships and fighter planes.

The rebels raided Grozny on Tuesday and have seized large parts of the city, trapping thousands of Russian forces and civilians and fighting battles in which hundreds of people have been killed or wounded.

The fighting is the worst in months in Chechnya, where more than 30,000 people have been killed since President Boris Yeltsin sent troops to crush the southern region's independence drive in December 1994.

Meanwhile Russian President Boris Yeltsin declared today a day of national mourning for hundreds killed in this week's fighting in Grozny that wrecked plans for a triumphal visit to his second term in the Kremlin.

In the devastated Chechen capital, mourning seemed premature as the battle raged on late on Friday despite tentative discussions on a ceasefire to evacuate the wounded.

Gowda postpones visit to Nepal

KATHMANDU, Aug 10: Indian Prime Minister H D Deve Gowda has postponed a visit to Nepal because of his mother's death, a Nepalese foreign ministry official said here Saturday, reports AFP.

The official said the visit, scheduled to begin August 18, had been postponed to September.

Gowda's mother, 87-year-old Devamma Doddegowda, died August 5 while he was visiting Kashmir, the official said.

The cancellation would not affect Nepalese foreign minister Prakash Chandra Lohani's trip to India on Monday at the invitation of Indian External Affairs Minister I K Gujral, he said.

One of the priorities of Lohani's visit was to set the agenda for Gowda's trip to Nepal.

BRIEFLY

Nepali FM to visit India tomorrow:

Nepal's Foreign Minister Prakash Chandra Lohani will visit India on Monday to discuss bilateral trade with the new United Front coalition government, an official statement said, Reuters reports from Kathmandu.

The statement said Lohani will meet officials from India's trade, tourism, civil aviation and water resources development ministries. New Delhi had recently eased restrictions on import of Nepali products to help the Himalayan kingdom to ease its 304 million dollars trade deficit with India.

More Khmer guerillas defect to govt:

Another major division of Khmer Rouge guerillas has defected to the Cambodian government, co-premier Hun Sen said yesterday, AFP reports from Phnom Penh.

"Division 519 has now declared that they will join the two other divisions," he said, referring to rebel divisions 450 and 415, which late Thursday declared themselves no longer be loyal to the Khmer Rouge central leadership.

3 publicly beheaded in KSA:

Saudi Arabia Friday publicly beheaded three citizens found guilty of sodomy, an Interior Ministry statement said, Reuters reports from Dubai.

It said the three had kidnapped a young boy and committed sodomy with him by force after threatening to kill him. The statement was carried by Riyadh's Ra'oo and reported by Gulf Arab news agencies. Friday beheadings bring to 23 the number of people executed in the conservative kingdom so far this year for various crimes.

25 more executed in China:

China has executed another 25 people accused of various crimes in the southern city of Guangzhou, according to the Guangzhou daily seen yesterday in Beijing, AFP reports from Beijing.

Those executed were found guilty of murder, injury leading to death and repeated theft, the newspaper said. More than a thousand people have been executed in China since the launch of the strike hard campaign against crime at the end of April.

US blamed for prolonged Pacific War:

A Japanese politician has said that the United States was partly to blame for the prolonged Pacific War, which ended on August 15, 1945 with Japan's unconditional surrender, a report said Saturday, AFP reports from Tokyo.

There is a view of history that Japan is solely responsible for the Pacific War, but the US side also has a pro-war attitude of trying to bring Japan into war, Tokuchiro Tamazawa of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), the main force of the ruling coalition was quoted by the Yomiuri Shimbun as saying.

7 killed in ROK chopper crash:

Seven people were killed when a rescue helicopter crashed in driving rain to the foot of Mount Chiri in southern South Korea late Friday police said, AFP reports from Seoul.

The helicopter from a fire station in the southern city of Chinnju was on its way back after picking up an injured climber and his friend from a shelter on the mountain when it went down in storm weather the police said.

Tamil families from north of Lanka fleeing to India

COLOMBO, Aug 10: Tamil families from the war torn north of Sri Lanka are fleeing to India, raising the prospects of another refugee exodus, foreign aid workers said today.

"Some Tamil families have been seen crossing the Palk Straits on Indian trawlers," an aid worker told Reuters, "if this continues, it could become a serious issue."

Aid workers said the people were feared to be leaving from Sri Lanka's northwestern island of Mannar due to alleged harassment by Tamil rebels and government troops there.

"It does not seem to be linked with the food shortages," another aid worker said. "It's probably a desperate bid to get out of a bad situation."

Twenty-one Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka landed by boat in southern India this week, K K Rajasekharan Nairem, director general of police in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, told Reuters.

Some 50,000 Sri Lankan Tamil are living in camps in Tamil Nadu since they fled the country in the 1980s.

Separately, the International Committee of the Red Cross said a halt to food shipments to the northern Wanni region, dominated by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), could trigger a crisis for some 200,000 Tamils who fled from the Kilinochchi area, where the army has launched a major operation.

The army has not allowed food shipments into the northern areas for more than two weeks as troops and LTTE guerillas engage in fierce fighting near Kilinochchi for the 16th day today, aid officials said.

AP adds: The military attacked rebel positions with artillery fire on Saturday as it tightened its siege of guerillas' northern stronghold.

NATO to destroy unauthorised Serb ammunition storage site

SARAJEVO, Aug 10: NATO said on Friday it would destroy the contents of a large unauthorised Bosnian Serb ammunition dump discovered by Italian peacekeepers this week, reports Reuters.

The site was never authorised NATO spokesman major Brett Boudreau said.

It is our intent to destroy the material. The sheer volume and variety of ammunition and mines held at this one site make this destruction and involved operation."

The ammunition dump is in a school in Markovici, near Sokolac in eastern Bosnia.

The NATO led peace force first believed the contents would be 200 ten-tonne trucks but has since revised its estimate to a total of 300 tonnes.

Saddam's prospect for holding onto power declining: CIA

WASHINGTON, Aug 10: The CIA has concluded that Saddam Hussein's prospects for holding onto power are declining, but the assessment is not shared by two other agencies, reports AP.

A key element of the CIA analysis appeared to be that talks between Saddam's regime and the United Nations to ease the international embargo on Iraq would fail. Negotiations on arranging emergency oil sales succeeded after the CIA report was compiled.

The agency said it sees no immediate threats to the Iraqi President but reported

"change could come suddenly and violently, as it has throughout Iraq's history."

The CIA, the State Department and the Defence Intelligence Agency provided written responses on foreign policy in May to the Senate Intelligence Committee. The panel recently released the assessments.

All three agencies agreed that signs Saddam's regime is weakening and disaffection are intensifying. But only the CIA suggested Saddam may not survive a year. The State Department said he still could be in power a year from now, and the CIA said he was likely to continue ruling Iraq in the coming year.

The reports preceded the recent agreement between Iraq and the United Nations that slightly eases an international embargo. It allows Iraq to sell \$2 billion worth of oil every six months to buy food and medicine and pay reparations for the 1991 Gulf war.

The CIA said talks on resuming the sales helped relieve pressure on the regime and produced a temporary upswing in the economy. But the spy agency expected the negotiations to fail and took that view into account in its conclusions.



Some 300 South Korean protesters burn an effigy of Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto and Japanese cigarettes Mild Seven in Seoul on Saturday during the anti Japanese protest. They demanded an apology from Japanese Prime Minister for visiting the controversial Yakusuni Shrine to Japan's war dead. — AFP/UNB photo

Yeltsin begins second term under cloud of doubt

MOSCOW, Aug 10: Boris Yeltsin is beginning his second presidential term under a cloud of doubt about his health and ability to lead Russia for four more years, reports AP.

Yeltsin spoke in a strong, deep voice when he delivered the presidential oath, which lasted less than a minute. But he gave no inaugural address, looked weary, and seemed to slur his words at times. He stood woodenly throughout the 20-minute ceremony Friday in the State Kremlin Palace.

Aides said the president, who has made few public appearances since the end of June, is exhausted from his energetic re-election campaign and now plans a long vacation.

Yeltsin looked better at a reception later in the day — and made some upbeat comments about his second term — but opposition leaders have openly questioned whether he

can finish his four-year term, or deal with the many challenges it poses.

Yeltsin has promised to pay back wages and raise Russia's standard of living — without breaking the budget. He faces a Communist-dominated parliament, which begins considering his nominee for prime minister on Saturday.

And just this week, a new round of bloodshed engulfed Chechnya, where a rebel offensive caught Russian troops flat-footed.

Yeltsin is Russia's first democratically elected president, and this was the first inauguration since Russia became independent from the Soviet Union.

"While carrying out my duties as president of the Russian Federation, I pledge to respect and uphold the rights and freedoms of the individual and the citizen," the 65-year-old president said, his hand resting on a copy of the constitution.

Standing before thousands of dignitaries, he smiled broadly when the presidential order was placed around his neck. Soldiers in blue-and-black ceremonial uniforms flanked him as a band played the national anthem and a choir sang.

Kremlin bells pealed and a 30-gun salute was fired from the fortress grounds. Patriarch Alexy II, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, blessed Yeltsin and the audience gave standing ovation.

At the reception, Yeltsin pledged to continue the reforms he began five years ago.

"The people's support gives me the right to act resolutely and firmly," he said, smiling. "I will use that right in the interests of all Russians."

He also promised to bring "prosperity and order" to every

home, and pledged closer ties with other ex-Soviet republics, many of whose leaders attended the ceremony.

During his campaign, Yeltsin promised to end the war soon, but peace efforts have since collapsed amid mutual accusations of bad faith. This week, separatist forces captured parts of the Chechen capital in an attack that appeared timed to embarrass the president.

Yeltsin returned to work only this week, after abruptly going on a "working vacation" at a health resort outside Moscow in mid-July.

Earlier plans calling for an inaugural speech were scrapped as aides trimmed down the event. They explained they were saving money and avoiding pompousness.

But the cuts also resulted in a shorter, simpler ceremony that demanded less of the president. Yeltsin first took

the oath of office in 1991, in a simpler ceremony before Parliament.

Aides have said Yeltsin, who suffered two bouts of serious heart trouble last year, is simply worn out after his long, gruelling re-election campaign, which transformed him from an underdog early this year into the victor on July 3.

Communist leader Gennady Zyuganov, whom Yeltsin defeated at the ballot box, attended the inauguration but declined to comment on the president's appearance. "This is a formal ceremony," he said.

Ultranationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy said Yeltsin looked good.

"Calm, confident, with great Russia behind him," Zhirinovskiy said.

Shortly after the ceremony, Yeltsin's office announced he had formally nominated Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin to head the new government.

Parliament was expected to raise objections but ultimately approve the nomination.

Yeltsin declined a request from parliamentary leaders to appear in person to nominate Chernomyrdin.

The Communists have said they intend to press the government hard on improving social services and ordinary people's living standards. Although Russia's market reforms have brought wealth to some people, others have lost their savings, jobs and sense of security.

Yeltsin's re-election campaign added new strains to the budget. He promised hundreds of millions of dollars in repaid debts and lavish new projects.

The International Monetary Fund, which has strongly backed Yeltsin with huge loans, has begun withholding payment until his government improves its performance.