

Russians seek buffer zone in Afghanistan

KABUL, Afghanistan, Sept. 1: A Russian delegation asked the Afghan government Saturday to establish a 25-kilometre (15-mile) demilitarized zone along its northern border in an attempt to curb an Islamic uprising in the Central Asian state of Tajikistan, reports AP.

A seven-member Russian delegation in the Afghan capital since last Thursday is pressing for the buffer zone, according to a government spokesman, who asked not to be identified.

No decision has been made, but few people expect the government to support the idea.

Russia claims Tajik militants are using northern Afghanistan as a staging area for their violent uprising against Tajikistan's pro-Moscow government.

It's not clear who would police the buffer zone which, according to the government official,

would be off-limits to both government forces and Tajik militants.

Russian soldiers have been sent to Tajikistan to bolster the government there and patrol the border with Afghanistan.

Most observers in Kabul say Afghanistan's new Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is unlikely to accept the buffer zone. While he denies Afghanistan is giving aid to Tajik militants, Hekmatyar has also said it is a religious obligation to support Muslim-led uprisings.

"We have come to discuss bilateral issues with the Afghan authorities, discuss the affairs of Tajikistan and the possibility of reopening our embassy," said Evgeniy Mikhailovsky, the head of the Russian delegation.

He refused to comment on the proposal of a buffer zone.

Yeltsin withholds approval of Lebed's peace pact for Chechnya

GROZNY, Sept. 1: A peace deal for Chechnya hung in doubt Sunday as President Boris Yeltsin withheld his key approval of the pact, signed by Russia's security chief and rebel leaders, to end the 21-month war, reports AP.

Scattered clashes were reported across the rayed mountainous republic Sunday. But in other parts of Chechnya, the peace process moved forward. Chechen rebels released 10 Russian prisoners in Gudermes, some 40 kilometres (24 miles) east of Grozny, the Interfax news agency reported.

Russian national security chief Alexander Lebed and top separatist commander Aslan Maskhadov signed a breakthrough agreement Saturday declaring an end to the war, which has killed more than 30,000 people.

But hours later, Yeltsin cast

doubt on the document's validity, saying it needed additional evaluation and assessment.

The peace deal needs the approval of Yeltsin, who sent troops into Chechnya in December 1994 to crush its independence bid.

Yeltsin spokesman Sergei Yastrzhembsky said the president was awaiting a detailed report from Lebed, so that government experts could examine the document.

Yeltsin, who is vacationing at a hunting resort outside Moscow, has distanced himself from Lebed since putting him in charge of the Chechen conflict on August 10.

Yastrzhembsky said Lebed changes to the peace plan from the version Lebed worked out with Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and other senior

officials on Thursday.

All previous accords to end the war have failed. But this one ventures further than the others on the key issue of Chechnya's political status, committing both sides to resolving the question by December 31, 2001.

Chechnya wants independence from Russia, which Moscow has said it will never allow.

But it wasn't clear whether the document alters Chechnya's current status, or whether it outlines a mechanism for the decision on Chechnya's sovereignty.

It calls for a joint Russian-Chechen commission to be created by October 1 to fight crime and rebuild Chechnya's shattered economy.

Lebed said Chernomyrdin will hold a special government meeting Monday to discuss the peace pact.

Meanwhile, nearly all remaining Russian and separatist forces pulled out Saturday from Grozny, leaving the charred and crumbling capital in the hands of joint Russian-Chechen patrols as part of an earlier military truce.

"It's a very important day for peace," said Col. Vladimir Kostenkov, a Russian representative of the joint command.

Elated Chechens, setting aside concerns about the political impasse with Russia, danced and shouted for joy in villages west of Grozny as convoys of rebel fighters drove out with fists up triumphantly.

Chechens also turned over an armed personnel carrier seized in an attack on Russian troops earlier this month, when rebels seized Grozny in some of the worst fighting to date. Interfax reported.

Lanka seeks foreign help to fight terrorism

COLOMBO, Sept. 1: Sri Lanka asked for foreign help to fight terrorism as British Foreign Secretary Malcolm Rifkind left here today after condemning the island's separatist Tamil Tiger guerrillas, reports AP.

Sri Lanka's Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar said only "joint action" would be effective against terrorism "whether such acts were in Atlanta, in Manchester, in Tokyo or in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo."

Kadirgamar in a banquet speech in honour of Rifkind said Britain's initiative to prevent the abuse of asylum and the sharing of expertise and information was warmly welcomed by Sri Lanka which is plagued by violence.

"Our government is looking forward to exchanging views with your government on these valuable ideas," said Kadirgamar, a member of Sri Lanka's

minority Tamil community.

"We cannot yield to terrorism," Kadirgamar said. "Terrorism cannot be justified by any political objective."

Rifkind who arrived here on Saturday on a brief visit as part of a five-nation Asian tour, accused the island's dominant Tamil separatist group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) of staging terrorist attacks.

But unlike the United States Rifkind stopped short of dubbing the Tiger movement a "terrorist organisation" and said there wasn't sufficient evidence to prosecute LTTE activists who operate an office in Britain.

"Clearly they (the rebels) have indulged in terrorist activities and we unreservedly condemn that," Rifkind told reporters here shortly after a meeting with Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga Saturday.

Pakistan still wants to get US F-16 jets: Benazir

ISLAMABAD, Sept. 1: Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto said on Saturday that Pakistan still wanted to get US F-16 jet fighters, although Washington blocked an earlier deal, but was looking at other options, mainly French Mirages, reports Reuters.

She made the remarks while formally receiving a second consignment from long-delayed weapons released by the United States after easing an arms embargo against Pakistan.

The consignment did not include any F-16s and Washington is seeking to sell 28 F-16s to other countries to reimburse the 658 million dollars that Pakistan has already paid for them.

"We are informed that efforts are being made to sell these warplanes and the negotiations are underway with Indonesia, Jordan and some other countries," Benazir, quoted by the APP news agency, told reporters at Chakiala air base near Islamabad.

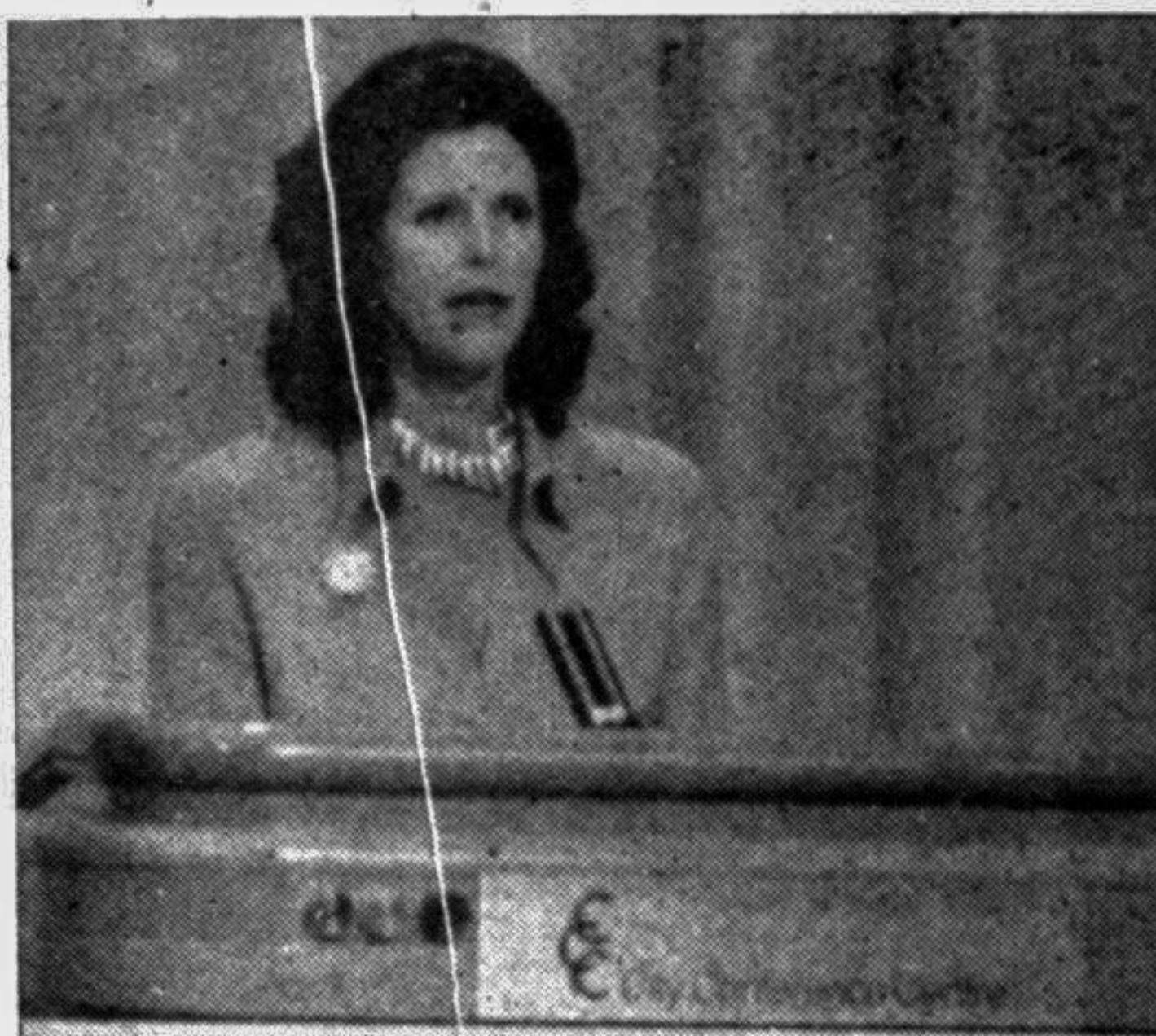
But I am eager to get F-16s for my country. It not only cost us less but also we will be able to save a reasonable amount."

Benazir said the equipment received on Saturday, worth 49 million dollars would help to keep Pakistan's existing fleet of F-16s operational.

The United States halted military sales to Pakistan in 1990 because of its alleged programme to develop nuclear weapons. The US Congress later approved an exemption to let Pakistan get military equipment it had already paid for, but not the F-16s.

Benazir said Pakistan was looking at other options to replace the blocked F-16s but she indicated that the government would go for more expensive Mirage 2000-5s from France. She said Pakistan had no option but to buy Mirages after Russia refused to sell it SU-27 fighter-bombers.

BRIEFLY



World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children

Swedish Queen Silvia delivers her speech closing the first World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Stockholm, on Saturday, calling for increased "collaboration, coordination, and cooperation" to end the children's plight.

— AFP/UNB photo

Kashmir blizzard death toll now 240:

The death toll from a devastated Hindu pilgrimage in the Kashmir Himalayas has reached 240, an official spokesman said today, AFP reports from Srinagar.

Kashmir government spokesman K B Jindal said the toll of 240 was the final figure given by rescuers who ended a search Sunday for more bodies on the blizzard-hit route to a Hindu pilgrimage site in the Anarnath Cave.

Israeli FM in Egypt: Israel's Foreign Minister David Levy flew to Egypt for talks with President Hosni Mubarak yesterday saying he hoped to improve the atmosphere between the two countries for the sake of Middle East peace, Reuters reports from Jerusalem.

"This is an opportunity to brief the Egyptian president and to have... a general discussion about the entire region and Egypt's responsibility, together with Israel's responsibility towards the peace process," Levy said.

"I hope that I will be able to change the atmosphere because if we want to continue the peace process... there must be a mutual will," he told Israel radio before flying to Alexandria.

Arafat for Arab League meeting: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has requested an extraordinary meeting of the Arab League to discuss the expansion of Israeli control over Jerusalem and its impact on the peace process, a Palestinian official said Saturday, AFP reports from Cairo.

Arafat has asked Arab League Secretary General Esmat Abdel Megid to set up the meeting of foreign ministers from Arab League countries and fix the date, the Palestinian representative to the League, Mohammed Sobeh, told AFP.

44 feared drowned in India: At least 44 people were feared drowned when their vessel capsized in the Nagavalli river in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, the United News of India said yesterday, Reuters reports from New Delhi.

It quoted official sources as saying the boat was carrying some 50 people, mainly tribes people, when it sank on Saturday. Six people swam to safety it said.

Recent floods claim 355 in India:

At least 355 people have been killed and hundreds of thousands rendered homeless in recent weeks as swollen rivers flooded thousands of villages in three India states, domestic news agencies said Saturday, AFP reports from New Delhi.

Twenty-four people were killed Saturday in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, taking the toll in the season's floods-sparked by heavy monsoon rains about two weeks ago — there to 198, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported. The Ganga, which Hindus consider a holy river, wreaked havoc across the sprawling state, inundating hundreds of villages, official said in Lucknow, the Uttar Pradesh capital.

Mudslide death toll 22 in Malaysia:

The death toll in a killer mudslide at a Malaysian Aborigine settlement in northern Perak state rose to 22 yesterday, while 20 others, mainly children, were still missing, police said, AFP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

"Search resumed early Sunday after being called off late Saturday," said police in the nearby town of Kampar monitoring the disaster that occupied late Thursday. Of the 22 bodies recovered, 21 have been identified, among them eight women, seven men, four children, all Aborigines — as well as two ethnic Chinese, a man and a seven-month-old girl.

Voting begins in Beirut:

Beirut's began voting yesterday in the third round of Lebanon's election in which billionaire Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri is seeking a parliamentary seat for the first time, Reuters reports from Beirut.

Some 4,000 troops in some in armoured personnel carriers with helmets flack jackets and automatic rifles, patrolled the streets of the capital as polls opened at 7.00 am (0400 GMT).

Pakistan accused of pushing Islamic mercenaries in to Kashmir

NEW DELHI, Sept. 1: Indian Home Minister Inderjit Gupta on Saturday accused Pakistan of pushing Islamic mercenaries into Kashmir to foil elections in the Himalayan state next month, reports AP.

Gupta told a meeting of his Communist Party of India (CPI) activists in Calcutta that Pakistan would send more mercenaries into Kashmir ahead of the first round of balloting on September 7.

But he asserted that the staggered month-long elections to pick a local government in Kashmir, where a bloody Muslim separatist campaign has left more than 12,000 dead, would take place as scheduled.

"People in Kashmir are fed up with terrorism," the Press Trust of India (PTI) quoted him as saying. "They want peace. The confidence among the people to fight terrorism has also increased."

Arafat frees 72 Hamas, Jihad activists

NABLUS, West Bank, Sept. 1: Defying Israel's new hardline government, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat released 72 Islamic militant detainees Saturday after telling his people to hold onto the spirit of resistance, reports AP.

The freed prisoners are all activists in the Islamic militant Hamas and Islamic Jihad organisations, said the Palestinian minister of public works, Azam Ahmad.

Most of them were detained after a series of bombings by the groups in Israel in late February and early March. Arafat arrested hundreds of activists under pressure from Israel.

Ahmad said 36 prisoners were released in Nablus, 14 in the West Bank town of Tulkerem, and 22 in the West Bank prison of Jenin. He said the Jenin prison was now empty.

'Pak soldiers down Indian military helicopter'

NEW DELHI, Sept. 1: A newspaper here today claimed an Indian military helicopter which crashed last Monday in Himalayan Kashmir had been shot down by Pakistani soldiers, reports AP.

The Indian Express daily, quoting "top level" defence sources, said the air force helicopter carrying six personnel was brought down on the Siachen Glacier by a shoulder-fired missile.

"It is still not clear how exactly they brought down the chopper, but it appears the Pakistanis fired a missile," the mass-circulation daily quoted a defence source here as saying.

An Indian army spokesman, however, on Tuesday attributed the crash on the 18,000 foot (5,454-metre) high glacier to mechanical failure.

Tigers kill 7 soldiers

COLOMBO, Sept. 1: Tamil rebels killed seven soldiers and wounded another in eastern Sri Lanka when the guerrillas ambushed the troop patrol, a military spokesman said Sunday, reports AP.

It was unclear if the rebels suffered any casualties in the attack late Saturday at Riddipokuna village, about 190 kilometres (119 miles) east of the capital, Colombo.



Russian national security chief Alexander Lebed (R) hands the signed document to the representative of the OSCE in Khasavyurt late Friday as Chechen rebel military commander Aslan Maskhadov (L) prepares to sign during the signing ceremony of a landmark peace accord between Russia and Chechnya postponing a decision on Chechnya's political status until 31 December 2001.

Saddam pledges to withdraw forces from north Iraq warns US to keep out of its Kurdish north

BAGHDAD, Sept. 1: Iraq warned the United States today to keep out of its Kurdish north, vowing to turn the area into another Vietnam if Washington intervened, reports Reuters.

"The Iraqi people, in the forefront Iraqi Kurds, are ready to provide an example that will inevitably remind the Americans of the Vietnam complex," the government newspaper Al-Jumhuriya declared in a front-page editorial.

"Beware of the wrath of Iraqi Kurds... they should not believe that what happened can be controlled by force," the paper said in the editorial signed by editor-in-chief Salah al-Mukhtar.

Iraqi troops, backed by heavy armour and artillery, intervened on Saturday on the side of Massoud Barzani leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, to recapture the Kurdish stronghold of Arbil from Jalal Talabani of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

It was the first Iraqi military thrust in the region since the United States and its Western allies set up an air umbrella over northern Iraq to protect rebel Kurds from possible attacks by Iraqi armed forces.

Iraq said early today it would withdraw the troops it sent to back Bazani, Washington has expressed scepticism over Baghdad fulfilling this pledge.

AP adds: After launching a large-scale offensive in northern Iraq into the Kurdish area protected by US-led forces, Saddam Hussein has reportedly pledged to withdraw his forces to their previous positions.

In its biggest offensive in five years, Iraq sent tanks, troops and helicopters on Saturday to capture Irbil, the main Kurdish city in the north. Iraq said it launched the attack because the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan had been cooperating with Iraq's long-

time enemy Iran. The rival Kurdistan Democratic Party supported the mission, the state-run Iraqi News Agency said.

Iraqi forces will return to their positions soon, Iraq's deputy UN ambassador, Saeed Hasan, told CNN late Saturday. He said a schedule has been agreed upon, but he would not give the timetable. The Pentagon said it had no information on whether Iraqi troops were showing any signs of pulling back.

Earlier, the state-run Iraqi News Agency quoted an unidentified government spokesman as saying Iraqi forces "would return to their former positions very soon." He did not elaborate.

A quick withdrawal could avert a showdown with Western forces, which have policed the Kurdish enclave since the end of the Gulf War in 1991.



King Hussein of Jordan (L) welcomes Omani Sultan Qaboos ibn Said upon his arrival at Aqaba Airport on Saturday. Qaboos is in Jordan on a three-day visit to discuss regional developments and boosting bilateral relation.

— AFP/UNB photo

Peace deal brings hope for Muslim-Christian ties in Philippines

COTABATO CITY, Philippines, Sept. 1: On a recent trip here, President Fidel Ramos and a group of former generals travelled by night through what were once bloody battlefields in their fight against secessionist rebels. Just three years ago, that might have been a deadly mistake, reports AP.

But Ramos and his generals felt secure because of his government's peace settlement with Nur Misuari, chairman of the main Muslim rebel group, the Moro National Liberation Front.

The agreement will be signed on Monday by Ramos and Misuari, officially ending more than a quarter-century of fighting that killed more than 120,000 people and forced hun-

dreds of thousands from their homes and farms.

During the 1970s, the government of then-President Ferdinand Marcos lost so many soldiers that their bodies were shipped surreptitiously out of the southern battle front at night to hide the extent of the fighting.

The rebels, who sought a separate Muslim state, accused the Manila government of colonialism and of waging a war of genocide against Muslims. About 200,000 Muslims fled to the nearby east Malaysian state of Sabah, where many live today.

The peace agreement is a crowning achievement for Ramos' administration. Just four years ago when he took office, the Philippines was torn by three insurgencies — Muslim, Communist and right-wing military. He has worked hard to end the conflicts by drawing the rebels into the political mainstream.

Both Ramos and Misuari also realise that neither side is likely to win a prolonged war.

But the peace pact won't erase centuries of mutual distrust between Muslims and Christians in the Philippines. The rebellion was a continuation of centuries-old Muslim resistance to Christian settlers taking over traditional Muslim homelands in the main southern island of Mindanao, and nearby Archipelagoes.

The resistance bred deep prejudice on both sides, with even Christian Filipinos far away from the fighting teaching their children that "a good Muslim is a dead Muslim."

The Muslims' resistance succeeded in isolating their communities from the central government in Manila during nearly 350 years of Spanish colonialism, through American rule from the turn of the century and succeeding Filipino administrations after World War II.

Now, because of their isolation and years of neglect by the central government, the Muslim-dominated provinces are the poorest in the Philippines, the hardest to reach and communicate with.

Ramos said the government can now concentrate on alleviating poverty in Muslim areas and attracting more investment to the resource-rich south. The 51-nation Organization of Islamic Conference has also promised aid.

Under the agreement, a rebel-led peace council will oversee economic development projects in 14 southern provinces for three years. A plebiscite will then determine which provinces will join a new autonomous region.

Christians who oppose the peace agreement believe it gives the rebels too much power.

The president is stupid, said 92-year-old Florencio Munko of Zamboanga City. "He and Misuari — they have unholy desires to rule the country. I

don't like it. I don't want the devils to rule us."

On Friday, a new radical Christian group set off explosions in a southern town to show their opposition to the agreement, warning Ramos and Misuari that "blood will flow in Mindanao" if they include Christian areas under the rebel-led council.

On the other hand, Misuari himself is facing opposition from more extremist Muslim factions, and even from some of his own guerrillas.

"I know it is a matter of explaining to them the wisdom of associating ourselves to this process of peace," Misuari said. "We believe that between peace and war, people will choose peace if given the chance."

Off the Record

'Excessive use of lipstick prelude to illicit sex'

KUALA LUMPUR: The Islamic government of Malaysia's Kelantan state has defended its recent ban on the excessive use of lipstick by women, saying that such practices were a prelude to illicit sex, reports Reuters.

"The early move by the (UMNO) leadership to stop money politics is similar to the ban on excessive use of lipstick which is an early step towards fighting illicit sex," Kelantan Chief Minister Nik Aziz Nik Mat was quoted on Sunday by the National Bernama News Agency as saying.

Nik Aziz, who was speaking on Saturday night, was referring to the dominant United Malays National Organisation's ban on all forms of campaigning for party elections and its efforts to stamp out vote-buying.

Nik Aziz is also head of the northeastern Kelantan state's Malaysia Islamic Party, known by its initials in Malay as PAS, which seeks to create an Islamic society in Malaysia's only opposition-ruled state.

Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's government adamantly opposes the setting up of an Islamic state in multi-cultural but predominantly Muslim Malaysia.

Nik Aziz said the prohibition on excessive use of lipstick was part of Islamic teachings and should not be viewed lightly, Bernama reported.

Elephants rock India's air security!

NEW DELHI: Authorities in eastern India may want to rethink security measures at military installations to protect against a BIG threat — elephants, reports AP.

Two adult elephants strayed from their herd on Saturday and wandered toward an air force base at Kalaikunda, a key military installation close to the Nepalese and Chinese borders, a newspaper reported Sunday.

The animals crashed through three security fences and began smashing through everything in their way when they spotted several parked fighter jets.

By the time night, the elephants were unable to overturn the jets, the English language Sunday Times reported.

It was unclear whether the elephants caused any serious damage to the jets.

Kalaikunda is about 250 kilometres (156 miles) north of the eastern city of Calcutta.

An angry adult bull elephant, at upwards of 5,400 kilograms (6 tons), can cause extensive damage, the newspaper quoted forestry officials as saying.

Air force personnel, reluctant to kill the elephants, waited for forestry officials to arrive on the scene and drive the animals back to the surrounding jungle.

There has been a spate of bull elephant rampages in the area in recent weeks, said Somnath Mukherjee, a district forestry officer.

Charles faces struggle in getting Camilla

LONDON: Prince Charles may be determined to get his subjects to accept his relationship with the woman who broke up his marriage with Princess Diana — but he faces an uphill struggle, a poll published Sunday showed, reports AP.

And one report said that until they can make their relationship more public, Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles are stealing moments together in the back seats of a movie theater.

The MORI poll, published in The Mail on Sunday newspaper, showed that 51 per cent of Britons believe Charles should succeed his mother, Queen Elizabeth II as monarch as things stand right now.