

Lankan army plan major offensive against LTTE

COLOMBO, May 10: The Sri Lankan military is planning a major offensive to capture a sprawling Tamil Tiger bastion in the island's north, rebel radio said today, reports AFP.

A big military operation is about to start, the clandestine voice of Tigers radio said in a broadcast monitored in the northern town of Vavuniya, 254 kilometres (158 miles) from here.

The radio, the mouthpiece of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said the government's aim was to seize the Wanni region which consists of Mullaitivu, Vavuniya and Mannar districts.

"People in the area are tensed," the broadcast said.

LTTE controls the whole of Mullaitivu, a coastal region

densured with farms and thick forests, and parts of Mannar as well as Vavuniya districts.

The radio accused the military of shelling civilian areas from its camps at Vavuniya and Killinochchi an Elephant Pass, which are located further north.

It gave no reports of damages or casualties.

There was no confirmation of the radio claims from the military here.

Tamil sources, however, confirmed a military build-up was on in Vavuniya, beyond which vast areas are controlled by the LTTE.

Tamil sources say both the Sri Lankan military and the Tigers are bracing for a major battle.

"About 30 buses arrived in



Rwandan Hutu refugees, weakened by a long walk and hunger, sit Friday in a hospital set up by the French humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders at the Biaro camp, 40 kms south of the eastern Zairean city of Kisangani. Talks have opened in Kisangani between Rwandan officials, Zairean rebels led by Laurent-Desire Kabila and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to discuss the repatriation of the 30,000 refugees now at the camp.

Hold talks with ULFA, Assam govt urges Delhi

NEW DELHI, May 10: Assam government yesterday urged the centre to hold talks with the "topmost leadership of north-eastern insurgent outfits and sought total exemption from payment of dues for fighting insurgency in the region as has been done for Punjab," reports PTI.

Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta told a press conference here that he had met Prime Minister I K Gujral yesterday and urged for moratorium on repayment of central loan along with an ad-hoc grant of Rs 500 crore "to wipe out the chronic budgetary deficit."

Stating that the prime minister will pay a five-day visit to the north-east from May 20, Mahanta said Gujral had agreed to set up north-eastern cell in his office to monitor developmental activities in the entire region.

He said the prime minister had also assured speedy implementation of projects amounting to Rs 6,100 crore in the entire region, including projects worth Rs 1,850 crore in Assam.

On the insurgency issue, Mahanta said some rounds of discussions had been held with insurgent outfits including ULFA and Bodos at the district level earlier, but hinted that talks should be carried out at the topmost level with these groups to find lasting solution.

Replying to questions, he said talks had also reportedly been held between the NSCN (IM) top brass and former prime minister H D Deve Gowda in Europe. That process is still on now," he added.

Mali goes to polls today

BAMAKO, May 10: Malians vote on Sunday in the second presidential polls since the country restored political freedom in 1991 after a dictatorship of more than two decades, reports AFP.

In a country where around 60 political parties are courting the support of five million voters, the preparations for the polls have been marked by bitter wrangling and escalating tension.

BRIEFLY

Clinton arrives in Bridgetown: US President Bill Clinton arrived in Bridgetown late Friday for a summit between the United States and Caribbean leaders, AFP reports from Bridgetown.

Barbados is the last stop on the president's one-week Latin American trip, his first to the region since taking office in 1993. Accompanied by his wife, Hillary, Clinton arrived in Bridgetown from San Jose, where he met with leaders of six Central American nations.

5 militia members held in US: Five reputed militia members who authorities said were planning terrorist acts in Southern California were arrested as police seized enough weapons and ammunition to "wage war", as one officer put it, AP reports from Los Angeles.

The investigation into the militia, allegedly led by a reserve police officer, began two years ago with the Oklahoma City bombing, authorities said. "A militia cell was brought to its knees today by these arrests," said Cmdr. Tim McBride.

China seizes S Korean trawler: China has seized a South Korean trawler and detained all 11 crew members on board, an officer at the maritime police said yesterday, Reuter reports from Seoul.

The officer in the western port city of Inchon said the 69-tonne boat sent a radio message that it had been seized. It was fishing for crabs 200 miles (320 kms) south of South Korea's southern Cheju island. "We are not sure why they were captured," he said. "It was a radio message from the fishing boat that it had not entered waters controlled by China."

DPRK defector arrives in Seoul: A North Korean worker who sought asylum in South Korea has arrived in Seoul, the Agency for National Security Planning said yesterday, Reuter reports from Seoul.

The defector, a 40-year-old man, was working in unnamed third country, landed at Seoul's Gimpo Airport on Friday. An agency statement said it was questioning Kim on details of his identity and reason to defect.

Policeman executed in China: A police official in the northeast China province of Liaoning has been executed for accepting more than 20 million yuan in bribes to facilitate projects in a local economic zone, the Liberation Daily said yesterday, Reuter reports from Shanghai.

The newspaper said Zhao Guoli was the deputy police chief of the zone in Jinzhou city, and from 1993 faked certificates and receipts in return for cash from various companies operating in the zone. It gave no further details.

Explosion claims 12 in China: Twelve people were killed in an explosion at chemical works in the southwestern Chinese city of Chongqing, the Yangcheng Evening News reported yesterday, AFP reports from Beijing.

The explosion, at the Chongqing Long Life industrial chemical factory, was set off by unauthorised welding on the morning on May 4 which set fire to a vat of paint, the newspaper said.

Taiwan donates \$ 1m to Liberia: Taiwan has donated one million dollars to help organise elections in war-ravaged Liberia where arch rival China also has a diplomatic mission, Reuter reports from Monrovia.

"This cheque will go a long way in helping with the work of the independent elections commission," said Nigerian Foreign Minister Tom Ikimi on Thursday as he received the money. Ikimi represented the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) which brokered a peace plan last year under which elections are scheduled for this month.

China floods death toll rises to 43: The death toll from the heavy rains that engulfed South China on Thursday has risen to at least 43, with several dozens missing, the China Daily reported yesterday, AFP reports from Beijing.

Other newspaper reports said that 100,000 people living north of the Guangdong provincial capital Guangzhou were made homeless by the rain which flooded fields, destroyed dykes and devastated houses. All electricity and telephone links to the region were severed and emergency aid of one million yuan (120,000 dollars) was already being distributed by soldiers, the China Youth Daily said.

Albanian rebels ready to relinquish power

TIRANA, Albania, May 10: A rebel leader said Friday that insurgents who control much of southern Albania were ready to obey a call by the main political parties to relinquish power, reports AP.

In another move that may help ease months of anarchy, the Democratic Party of President Sali Berisha and the Socialists of Prime Minister Basko Rado, though bitter rivals, agreed to changes in the electoral law that would allow a vote to take place sometimes in June.

It was initially unclear if the southern rebels would recognise Friday's agreement, which calls for rebel committees in charge of large swaths of the south to be dissolved 46 days before the elections. They previously said they would break up their committees only a day after Berisha formally sets the date for elections — something he has yet to do.

But in Vlora, the cradle of the insurrection, rebel leader Albert Gjajdari said the rebel committees welcomed the agreement between the two parties and would obey the call for dissolution.

Southerners generally support the Socialists and oppose Berisha. Most blame the president for condoning, if not encouraging, the shady investment schemes whose collapse stripped tens of thousands of Albanians of their life savings, sparking unrest in January that quickly grew into armed insurrection.

The north, Berisha's home turf, tends to support him and his Democrats.

While commerce and links to the outside world have been restored in some parts of Albania following the worst of the violence, the rebellion in the south simmers on. The government has yet to investigate the cause of the failed investment schemes and Berisha — the object of the insurgents' ire — remains in power.

International envoy Franz Vranitzky, who negotiated the compromise on behalf of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, told reporters that a new electoral law will be worked out and voted on by parliament next week. European Union experts would help draft the legislation, he said.

The Democratic Party favours a direct vote, which usually gives large parties the most seats in parliament. The Socialists and other opposition parties want proportional representation, which benefits smaller parties.

War on drugs US wants talks with Pakistan

WASHINGTON, May 10: Responding to the apparent tit-for-tat arrest in Pakistan of a US government employee, the State Department emphasised Friday that the two nations need to continue cooperating in the war on drugs, reports AP.

"We believe that both the United States and Pakistan will benefit... from the prevention of drug trafficking, and we want to discuss ways to work together better on that very important issue," department spokesman Nicholas Burns said.

On Thursday, the state-run news agency in Pakistan reported that a Pakistani employee of the US Drug Enforcement Agency was jailed on drug trafficking charges.

Several local newspapers carried stories speculating the move was in retaliation for the arrest on April 9 in the United States of a Pakistan Air Force officer on the same charge.

Pakistan has asked for the extradition of the officer, squadron leader Farooq Ahmed Khan.

Pakistani police have taken into custody another officer, Maj Qazim Bhatti, who allegedly was working with Khan to use military aircraft to move heroin outside the country.

Mobutu postpones plans to return to his country

LIBREVILLE, Gabon, May 10: Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seko postponed plans to return to his country, raising speculation that he will go into exile instead of confronting rebel forces advancing on Zaire's capital, reports AP.

Despite repeated assurances by his aides that Mobutu would return to Kinshasa on Friday, diplomatic sources said he would remain in neighbouring Gabon at least until Saturday.

The 66-year-old dictator, dying of prostate cancer and losing a seven-month civil war, has agreed to long-delayed elections and acknowledged he is too ill to be a candidate.

Rebel leader Laurent Kabila agreed during a meeting Friday with South African Deputy President Thabo Mbeki to meet Mobutu next Wednesday aboard a South African ship for a second round of talks in Pointe Noir, Congo.

Mobutu has "got to be at the meeting," said Mbeki, after arriving Friday night in Libreville, where he will meet with the Zairian leader.

Rebel foreign minister Bizima Karaha in Lubumbashi said Friday that Kabila was only going to meet Mobutu to secure his resignation.

US efforts on to revive stalled ME peace talks PA, Israel still far apart

JERUSALEM, May 10: High-level Israeli and Palestinian security officials met for the first time in weeks in an effort to restart the stalled Middle East peace process. But the two sides remained far apart on returning to the negotiating table, reports AP.

Israeli and Palestinian security officials met in Tel Aviv in the presence of American representatives, a Palestinian condition, and US envoy Dennis Ross held talks with Yasser Arafat for the second time in two days.

Ross has been shuttling between Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu since arriving in the region on Wednesday.

After meeting with Arafat late Friday night in Ramallah, Ross said: "We still have work to do, but there is a genuine interest on both sides to find solutions."

Arafat spokesman Marwan Kanafani told reporters that the Palestinians "did not receive from Ross any commitments, and no clear initiatives or solid ideas."

He said Arafat "made it very clear once again that there is no way that the Palestinians will return to the negotiations while settlements still continue in the West Bank and in Jerusalem."

Following a Palestinian Cabinet meeting in Ramallah, minister Nabil Shaath said: "What has put the peace process in jeopardy is expansion of settlements. We see no opening except the freezing of settlements."

Meanwhile, the Israeli Cabinet issued a statement Friday saying Netanyahu's government was acting "to strengthen settlements."

In the West Bank city of Hebron, Palestinian youths hurled rocks, petrol bombs and empty bottles at Israeli soldiers, who responded with rubber bullets and tear gas. Five Palestinian protesters and one Israeli soldier were injured in the clashes, and Palestinian police detained two demonstrators.

Peace talks and security cooperation between Israel and the Palestinians broke down in March, when Israel began construction of a housing project for Jews on captured Arab land in Jerusalem.

Arafat insists Israel to stop expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and construction of the housing project, while Netanyahu refuses to stop the building and insists the Palestinians resume security cooperation.

In the meantime, Arafat has agreed only to occasional meetings of the security chiefs and only in the presence of an American official.

Reuter adds, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Friday "important progress" was made during a secret meeting with Jordan's King Hussein over a water dispute.

Top Myanmar general meets UN envoy

YANGON, May 10: One of Myanmar's top generals consented to meet with a special envoy of the UN secretary general just hours before the diplomat's four-day peace mission to Myanmar ended on Saturday, reports AP.

Assistant UN Secretary General Alvaro de Soto met with Gen. Khin Nyunt, Myanmar's intelligence chief and a leading member of the State Law and Order Restoration Council, the group of 21 generals that rules Myanmar the government news agency reported.

The meeting took place at the Ministry of Defence, but the agency gave no information about the length of the conference or what was discussed.

Clinton to meet Tony Blair in three weeks

WASHINGTON, May 10: President Clinton will meet this month with Britain's new Prime Minister, Tony Blair, in London, where they are expected to discuss the resumption of peace talks on Northern Ireland, reports AP.

The May 29 meeting will be Clinton's first with Blair as prime minister, which he became May 1 in national elections that ended 18 years of Conservative Party rule.

Clinton's London visit, announced Friday, will mark the end of a longer European trip for important events that could become milestones in the post-World War II history of Europe.

If negotiations with Russia go as planned, Clinton will be in Paris on May 27 to sign a charter codifying Russia's formal relationship with NATO. The next day, the president and leaders of the 15 other members of the Atlantic alliance are to hold a summit meeting in the Netherlands to mark the evolution of Europe since the Cold War.

A year ago, Clinton and Blair exchanged compliments at the White House for each other's efforts to bring peace to Northern Ireland, where peace talks were then being prepared. The talks were adjourned in March for the British elections but are scheduled to resume June 3.



The Prince of Wales (C) celebrates with the members of the British chart-breaking all-girls pop group "The Spice Girls" at a Royal Gala the 21 years of the Princes' Trust at the Opera House in Manchester Friday evening.

Talks with India during SAARC summit Pakistan for inclusion of agenda on Kashmir

ISLAMABAD, May 10: Pakistan warned Friday that normalisation talks with rival India would come to a deadlock if New Delhi did not agree to discuss a solution to the 50-year-old Kashmir dispute, reports AP.

"Talks will achieve some results... if India concedes to the fact of bringing Kashmir on the agenda," Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub Khan told state-run television in an interview.

"If Kashmir is not on the agenda, and we are not going to discuss it, then there will be a limit to the number of sittings and meetings we can have and unfortunately we will come to, more or less, a deadlock," he said.

Khan was speaking before his departure for the Maldives' capital, Male, where the seven-nation South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is to hold its 9th summit on May 12-14.

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif is due to hold a meeting at Male with his Indian counterpart Inder Kumar Gujral on Monday during the SAARC conference.

The meeting is expected to set the tone for a second round of talks between the foreign secretaries of the two countries who held the first session in New Delhi March 28-31 after a gap of three-and-a-half years.

Missing POWs US delegation optimistic about accord with DPRK

NEW YORK, May 10: A US delegation holding talks with North Korean officials here on the fate of 8,100 American servicemen missing since the Korean war is "not optimistic" about an agreement, an official said Friday.

Defence Department spokesman Larry Greer told AFP that "the signs are not encouraging," referring to the talks in New York between a Pentagon delegation and North Korean team underway since Sunday.

US officials had hoped to reach agreement with the North Koreans by Friday on plans to investigate alleged sightings in North Korea of US Prisoners of War (POWs), the resumption of joint excavation of war crash sites, and access to North Korean war archives.

Newsman barred from entering courtroom Nigeria begins treason trial against dissidents

LAGOS, Nigeria, May 10: A treason trial in which several dissidents could face the death penalty began Friday in the absence of many of the defendants, reports AP.

In the United States, exiled playwright Wole Soyinka said he and other dissidents facing treason charges in Nigeria refused to recognise the courts under the control of the military government of Gen. Sani Abacha.

"I know that Abacha is prepared to go ahead with this charade of a trial," said Soyinka, who was in New York for a Nigerian pro-democracy meeting. "As far as the democratic opposition is concerned, we do not recognise his courts or his regime."

"Our position is that it's he and his cohorts who should be on trial for treason against Nigeria."

The trial formally began Friday, then adjourned until Tuesday, when the court was expected to debate whether to continue the proceedings.

Journalists were not allowed into the courtroom, but relatives of some of the dissidents were reported entering and leaving the building.

Soyinka, who won the Nobel Prize in literature in 1986, fled his homeland more than two years ago after learning that authorities planned to arrest him for criticising military rule.

"We totally ignore these proceedings, it's a diversion," he said of the trial that began Friday. "Of course, we're concerned with the fate of those who are in Abacha's hands."

A year ago, Soyinka joined Nigerian opposition groups who met in Norway and agreed to form a united front against the Abacha regime. But he said their strategy did not include an armed rebellion.

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UN body finds fault with Israel's methods of interrogation

GENEVA, May 10: A UN human rights committee said Friday that Israeli interrogation methods such as prolonged sleep deprivation and violent shaking amount to torture and should be halted immediately, reports AP.

The Committee Against Torture also denounced the use of death threats, loud music and other interrogation methods Israel uses on suspected terrorists.

"This conclusion is particularly evident where such methods of interrogation are used in combination, which appears to be the standard case," committee member Peter Thomas Burns said.

Israel on Friday complained that its honesty with a UN human rights committee had backfired and led to the accusations.

It denied torturing Palestinians and other detainees in an address to the committee on Wednesday, and said its interrogation methods were justified because they helped prevent 90 terrorist attacks in the last two years.

More than 20 Palestinians have died in Israeli prisons since 1987.

"The responsibility of the government of Israel is to protect its citizens from terrorist attacks," Israeli representative Yosef Lamdan said. "It is faced with the agonizing dilemma of seeking information from terrorist suspects in order to save human lives, while at the same time implementing the Convention Against Torture in full."

But Burns disagreed, saying that as a signatory of the Convention Against Torture, Israel was not entitled to plea "exceptional circumstances as justification for acts the convention prohibits."

Amnesty International, the London-based human rights group, also welcomed the committee's conclusions and urged Israel to halt its interrogation methods immediately.

Sorensen cited an autopsy report on a 29-year-old Palestinian prisoner, Abdel Samad Harizat, who died in custody in 1995, which concluded that Harizat died of violent shaking during interrogation by Israeli security officials.

Israel is among countries under periodic review before the committee, which meets in Geneva twice a year to discuss adherence by nations that have signed the Convention Against Torture.

The committee urged Israel to provide information taken in response to the conclusions and recommendations no later than September 1, 1997.

and committee chairman Dipanda Mouelle acknowledged that as a result its "voice was a weak one," with only moral obligations.

"We cannot but express disappointment at the conclusions of the committee," said Israeli representative Lamdan. "It is absolutely not the case that Israel uses torture."

He said the UN panel had accepted "hearsay" from non-governmental organisations over the Israeli government's official testimony. Committee member Bent Sorensen said that the conclusions were based also on medical reports and Israeli court records.

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Off the Record

Punishment indeed

LUCENA, Philippines: A 14-year-old boy signed an agreement to be chained like a canine as punishment for killing a local businessman's guard dog, the government's commission on human rights said Friday, reports AFP.

The commission got wind of the cruel arrangement, which had been brokered by a local official, in time to stop it, human rights commissioner Rolando Ingles told reporters here.

As punishment for killing local coconut trader Fernando Salazar's guard dog in this city, southeast of Manila, Roel Adriano signed an agreement drawn up with the aid of a district official that he would be chained up in the businessman's front yard for a month to replace the slain animal.

The boy agreed to an arrangement by which the businessman would only remove the chain to allow him to deliver coconut meat to a trading centre, Ingles said.

"Chaining the boy would constitute a blatant violation of human rights," Ingles said, adding that Salazar and the town captain agreed not to implement the punishment.

Missing book found after 233 years!

CAMBRIDGE, Massachusetts: Harvard university has recovered a book it was missing for 233 years a spokeswoman said on Friday, reports Reuter.

The third volume of "A Complete History of England" by Bishop White Kennett, published in 1706 and given to the university in 1709, was out on loan when a fire destroyed almost all of Harvard's collection in 1764.

"We simply don't know where the book was all this time," Harvard spokesman Debbie Ruder said. "But it's definitely Harvard's you can tell from the flyleaf."

Over the winter, a bookseller contacted one of Harvard's history professors whom he knew to be a collector of rare books and offered to sell the call-bound, two-inch thick folio back to the school.

The Dean of faculty found anonymous donor to cover the cost of the volume, which was not disclosed. In March the first edition was returned to Harvard and placed in the Houghton Library, Ruder said.