

India to make free edn for children under fourteen

NEW DELHI, May 17: In an attempt to curb child labour, the Indian government has proposed to make it compulsory for all children below the age of 14 years to go to school, reports AP.

Education will be free and all parents must make sure their children are educated under a bill that could be introduced in Parliament in July, a month before the 50th anniversary of India's independence.

Compulsory and free education is currently only a suggestion in the constitution and cannot be enforced. The bill will amend the constitution to make it a fundamental right of children, a promise the United Front government made when it came to power last year, newspapers reported Saturday.

Children between the ages of 6 and 14 will be covered under the proposed bill, the Cabinet of Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral decided on Friday night.

Nearly 70 per cent of the country's 950 million population is illiterate, even though there's a school within a distance of 1 kilometre (1/2 mile).

LTTE pounds army posts with artillery fire

COLOMBO, May 17: Government forces were consolidating in an area captured from Tamil Tiger rebels in northern Sri Lanka with the latest offensive entering its fifth straight day Saturday, officials here said, reports AFP.

The guerrillas of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) pounded army positions with artillery fire blunting the military advance, officials said.

The casualties on both sides are high because of long range artillery and mortar bomb attacks, a defence official here said. The air force is providing close support to ground troops.

A Defence Ministry spokesman said Saturday that troops of the latest offensive code-named "Sure Victory" continued to consolidate their positions in the newly-captured Omanthal town.

However, the clandestine Voice of Tigers radio said they lost only 26 fighters, including two women and reported that

intense fighting was raging around Omanthal area for the fifth day.

The radio monitored in the northern town of Vavuniya from where the army offensive was launched on Tuesday said there was large scale destruction that rendered thousands homeless in the region.

Tamil sources in Vavuniya, 254 kilometres (158 miles) north of the capital Colombo, said they could hear intermittent shelling from army camps on rebel areas further to the north.

The shelling started early in the morning, a resident said over the telephone. "It has been continuing virtually non-stop."

Tamil sources also said that at least 13 civilians had been

killed in the past four days. Travellers from the region had earlier said that the LTTE had dug winding underground bunkers and deployed hundreds of guerrillas, including women, to defend Omanthal and block the advancing army.

An estimated 20,000 troops are involved in the latest military offensive aimed at capturing a key highway to the northern peninsula of Jaffna through rebel-held territory.

On Thursday, the LTTE, which is campaigning for a homeland in the north and east of the country, said the latest fighting 'could develop into one of the most callous of all Sri Lankan assaults on the north east.'

The military captured Jaffna town from the LTTE in December 1995, and since then had been ferrying supplies to the region from the mainland by air and sea because the only land route was under Tiger control.

Army will maintain security during polls campaign in Indonesia

JAKARTA, May 17: Indonesia's military has given an assurance that it will try to maintain security after incidents of mob violence during the nation's election campaign, the Jakarta Post newspaper reported today, says Reuter.

Armed forces (Abri) spokesman Brigadier-General Slamet Supriadi said that as of Thursday, 73 people had died, mostly in traffic accidents, since the campaign began three weeks earlier.

"Abri has made an all-out effort to maintain security so that people can go about their daily business without fear," Supriadi told reporters on Friday.

Government officials have said that campaigning has been marred by violations of strict rules designed to limit confrontation between supporters of rival parties and lessen the

risk of street violence. Indonesians on May 29 cast their votes in national, regional and district elections for candidates from the ruling Golkar, Muslim-oriented United Development Party (PPP) and Christian-nationalist Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI).

The government only recognises these three parties and has rejected the candidates of ousted PDI leader Megawati Sukarnoputri whose supporters continue to appear in campaigning for the government-backed PDI faction.

The official Antara news agency said Megawati supporters in the east Java town of Malang on Friday injured three members of the security forces in a clash after they tried to take down a Megawati banner at a local teacher training college.



Ole Skibnes (R), organiser of this year's International Moustache and Beard Festival, has an unidentified hairdresser (L) doing the final touches to his moustache, in Norway Friday. This year's meeting of admirers of facial hair is currently held in Trondheim/Norway along with competitions for the nicest beards and moustaches in various categories.

— AFP/UNB photo



South Korean rescue workers check survivors at the site of a collapse building in Seoul Saturday. One worker died and at least three others were seriously injured when a five storey building that being demolishing caved in Seoul.

— AFP/UNB photo

France signs partnership accord with China

BEIJING, May 17: France on Friday signed a landmark "global partnership" accord with China but also threw down the gauntlet over human rights by demanding the release of 17 dissidents, reports AFP.

President Jacques Chirac signed the declaration mapping out a vision of a new world order after talks here with President Jiang Zemin, who described the pact as an "historic document."

Chirac also met Chinese Premier Li Peng who said the French president and Jiang had opened a new chapter in Sino-French relations, the Xinhua news agency said.

The accord was "of far-reaching significance for promoting the trend of multi-polarisation of the world and the formation of a new international pattern," Xinhua reported Li as saying.

For China, its most sought-after achievement was Chirac's clear statement in the document that human rights, although a universal principle, are dependent on national circumstances.

But there was a sting in the tail later when Chirac revealed his Foreign Minister Herve de Charette had submitted a list of 17 Chinese and Tibetan dissidents to counterpart Qian Qichen.

"This was done verbally and in writing," said Chirac, the first French president to visit China for 14 years.

For France, the major

achievement of the document was the promise of more economic cooperation in aviation, space exploration and nuclear power.

"France and China have decided to reinforce their industrial and commercial partnership in the aircraft and space sector," the document said.

"China is in favour of the continuation of the participation of French industrialists in the Chinese nuclear development programme," it added.

Chirac and Jiang witnessed the signing Thursday of aviation contracts worth 1.7 billion dollars, which included a Chinese order for 30 European Airbus.

But sensitivities over human rights continued to plague the meeting, with China's Foreign Ministry categorically denying any discussion in the Jiang-Chirac meeting, while French sources said Chirac had urged China to begin talks with the Vatican and with the Dalai Lama on the future of Tibet.

Beijing, which considers the Dalai Lama a top public enemy, has said it will not consider talks with the spiritual leader until he ceases his alleged separatist activities.

Opposition rejects new law

Albanian parliament dissolved

TIRANA, May 17: Albanian President Sali Berisha late Friday dissolved parliament and called early legislative elections for June 29, defying opposition threats of a poll boycott, reports AFP.

In a statement Berisha said the move took into account "the wishes of the political forces expressed in the political contract signed May 9 between the political parties and the representative of the OSCE", referring to the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)'s special envoy Franz Vranitzky.

It follows his promulgation earlier Friday of an electoral

law passed overnight by parliament.

The opposition had immediately rejected the new law — as it had a similar one passed Tuesday — on the grounds it favoured Berisha's ruling Democratic Party by maintaining a majority voting system.

Vranitzky had continued mediation efforts in Tirana Friday but failed to find a compromise between the democratic Party — which dominates the parliament — and the opposition Socialist Party concerning the electoral law.

A peaceful end to the crisis gripping Albania since January depends heavily on the outcome of these negotiations.

Pakistan foils bid to smuggle in 65kg heroin

ISLAMABAD, May 17: Pakistani authorities Friday foiled an attempt to smuggle in 65 kilograms (143 pounds) of heroin from neighbouring Afghanistan, state-run television said, reports AFP.

A squad from the Anti-Narcotics Force (ANF) intercepted a minibus in western Peshawar near Afghan border and recovered the contraband drug concealed in cavities of the vehicle, it said.

The haul was described the biggest heroin seizure in the country since the beginning of this year.

The arrested driver of the vehicle's Javid told his investigators the heroin was brought from Afghanistan and that he was paid 15,000 rupees (365 dollars) to take it to eastern Lahore, bordering India, the ANF zonal chief Brigadier Bahram Shah told reporters in Peshawar.

Blast in mosque leaves 3 dead in Nigeria

LAGOS, May 17: A bomb blast timed for Friday Muslim prayers left three worshippers dead in the market town of Onitsha, Nigerian radio reported, signaling an intensification of an apparent anti-government bombing campaign, reports AP.

The blast, and another earlier bomb timed for rush hour, were the first targeting civilians since the bombing campaign began last year.

The second blast went off soon after worshippers gathered inside one of the city's few mosques, blowing apart the bodies of three worshippers and leaving another 17 injured — some critically — the radio reported.

The earlier blast left no injuries. It was unclear from the radio report where in Onitsha, an opposition stronghold about 200 miles (320 kms) east of the commercial capital of Lagos, the first blast took place.

Left, centre-right neck-and-neck in French polls campaign

PARIS, May 17: The left and the centre-right are neck-and-neck in the French parliamentary election campaign a little over a week ahead of the first-round vote, according to a poll made public early today, reports Reuter.

The Louis Harris Survey for LCI French television found the combined left and the centre-right government tied on 39 per cent each in the first-round vote of the May 25 June 1 election.

The poll gave the ecologists seven per cent of the first-round vote and the far-right National Front 15 per cent.

US envoy returning with no ME peace deal

JERUSALEM, May 17: Despite two last-minute meetings with the Israeli and Palestinian leaders, American special envoy Dennis Ross is returning to the United States without settling the problem of Israeli construction in Jerusalem, reports AP.

The Palestinians blamed Ross Friday for not aggressively tackling Jewish settlement expansion on disputed land.

"What Mr Ross needs to do is get on a helicopter, and go around the territories and see the land that is being stolen for Israeli settlement purposes," Palestinian negotiator Nabil Shaath said.

Ross met Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu a day after Arafat snubbed Ross amid complaints the US envoy was not pushing the Israelis hard enough to freeze Israeli construction.

But Ross was criticised by the Palestinians as simply being a messenger between the sides, and he failed to win any

concessions from the Israelis. While the Clinton administration has criticised Israeli settlement-building in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, it has appeared unwilling in its position as mediator to push for specific concessions.

Arafat had called off a meeting with Ross at nearly midnight Thursday, saying he was too busy talking to Palestinian negotiators. Then, on Friday, Arafat ordered Palestinian officials not to attend a meeting Ross had arranged with the Israelis to discuss resuming police cooperation, suspended two months ago when construction began on a new Jewish neighborhood in Jerusalem.

Arafat's snubbing of Ross was unwise, US consul general in Jerusalem Edward Abington said.

"I think that when Arafat does not want to see Ross, he is saying he does not want to see the president of the United States, and that is not good", Abington said.

4 jailed in China for arms smuggling into US

BEIJING, May 17: A Chinese court has sentenced four people to prison terms of up to 14 years for smuggling into the United States the largest cargo of contraband automatic weapons in US history, state media said today, reports Reuter.

The gun smuggling ring, uncovered early last year, was initially reported to involve China's largest government-run ammunition merchant, Duowei Science and Technology Co Ltd in Beijing, for illegally exporting the firearms to the United States, the China daily said.

The court in the northeastern port city jailed three others, Lu Yilun, Qin Qixiu and Guo Chengkun, employees of NORINCO, for three and four years for dereliction of duty.

US federal agents last May seized the 2,000 AK-47 rifles and 4,000 ammunition magazines, with a street value of 4 million dollars, the biggest haul of smuggled automatic weapons in US history.

Kabila's only dream is to do better

NAIROBI, May 17: As his dream of toppling Zaire's dictator neared reality, rebel leader Laurent Kabila traded his combat fatigues for pinstriped shirts and handled with businessmen more often than with soldiers, reports AP.

Kabila has kept his eye on the future during his seven-month rebellion to oust Mobutu Sese Seko, saying that military victories were easy compared to rebuilding Zaire's economy.

"If I can't do better than Mobutu, then our rebellion will have been a failure," Kabila said.

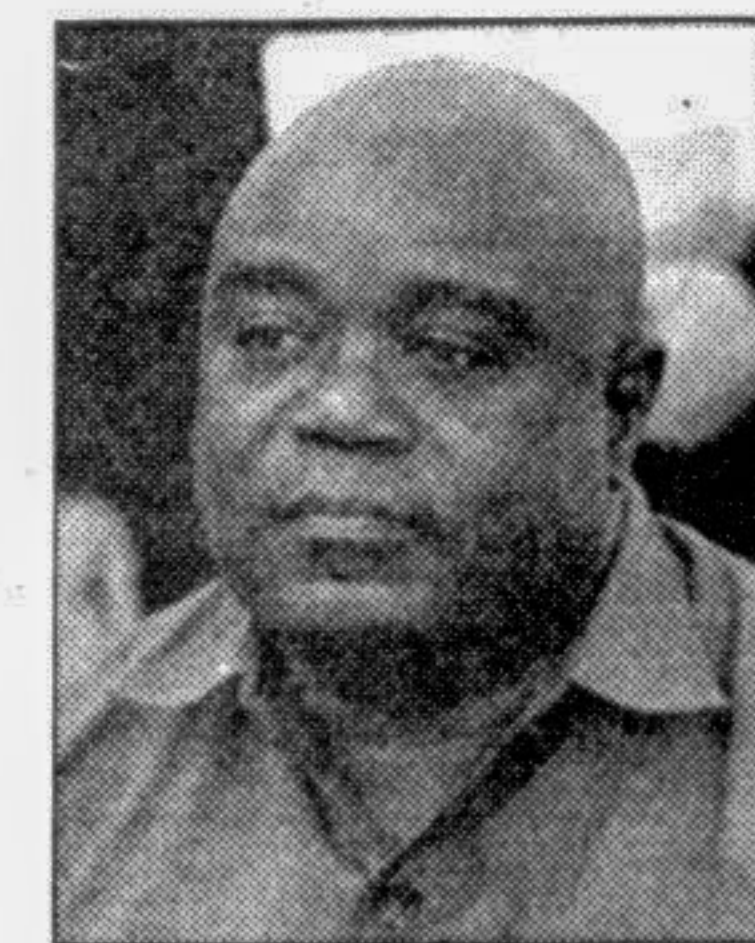
So, as his forces swept westward across Zaire, Kabila made it a priority to begin repairing the economy that Mobutu had plundered for more than three decades to become one of the world's richest men.

In the cities and provinces that the rebels call the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kabila reduced duties on most imports and exports, trimmed the civil service and tried to stop corruption.

He even began to dress the part to woo foreign investors. The 56-year-old Kabila stopped wearing fatigues early in the rebellion. Then as victory drew within reach, he replaced his a crisply pressed safari suit, baseball cap and white Nike shoes with more Western attire — black pants, a pinstriped shirt and leather shoes.

If his aim was to help calm fears that he is a wild-eyed revolutionary intent on snubbing the West for its longtime support of Mobutu, it appeared to succeed.

A mining firm agreed to give the rebels 50 million dollars as a down payment on a deal to big for what could be the world's largest copper and cobalt deposits. About 30 investment bankers visited rebel headquar-



Laurent Kabila

ters in southeastern Lubumbashi to talk with Kabila about possible investments.

After their uprising began in September as a protest against an attempt to expel ethnic Tutsis from eastern Zaire, Kabila's rebels faced only occasional resistance from mostly ragtag government forces. That allowed them to advance swiftly across Africa's third-largest country to within striking distance of Kinshasa.

So far, Mobutu has turned over power only to his own government — not to Kabila. It appears only a matter of time, however, before Kabila is running the country, and doubts already have arisen over his commitment to democracy.

Kabila has said that he expects to step down after a year-long transition to elections. But he has banned all political parties except his own, the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire, the same thing Mobutu did after seizing power.

His reputation has been tarnished, too, by allegations that his soldiers have massacred Rwandan Hutu refugees.

BRIEFLY

800 kg marijuana seized in Cambodia: Cambodian police seized about 800 kg (1,760 lb) of marijuana at a Phnom Penh home yesterday and arrested two policemen, officials said, Reuter reports from Phnom Penh.

Police General Skavday M Ly Roun said the wife of one of the two arrested was also being held in connection with the case. Drug processing equipment was also seized. The marijuana had a street value of up to 2.4 million dollars, officials said. Skavday said the seizure could be linked to the seizure of 706 kg (1,550 lb) of marijuana on Thursday.

Floods affect 20,000 in Afghanistan: Some 20,000 people have been affected by massive flooding that has swept across 10 provinces in the north of Afghanistan, the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent said Friday, AFP reports from Geneva.

Many have lost their homes or belongings across a vast area, and several committees of the Red Crescent have arrived with initial aid. Sub-delegations of the Federation of the International Committee of the Red Cross at Mazar-i-Sharif have distributed blankets, clothing and food, and an evaluation of requirements in the worst-hit areas is underway.

10 CIS newsmen die this year: Ten journalists have died in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) since the start of the year, and 16 others are still missing, the journalists protection group Glasnost Defence Foundation reported Friday, AFP reports from Moscow.

Six journalists were killed in Russia, two in Kazakhstan and two in Ukraine, it said. Among the missing are seven Russian journalists seized in recent weeks in the breakaway republic of Chechnya. The seven are 'still alive' said Oleg Panfilov, a Glasnost Defence Foundation spokesman.

Ex-New York FBI chief dies: James Fox, who as head of the FBI's New York office sent mob boss John Gotti to jail, died Friday morning. He was 59, AP reports from New York.

Fox, an executive of the Mutual of America insurance company since leaving the FBI, fell ill a week ago with bacterial peritonitis and died at Mount Sinai Hospital, his assistant, Maria Aleman, said. Fox left the FBI in 1993, a year and a half after nailing Gotti on racketeering and murder charges. Gotti is serving a life prison term. "Jim Fox was an outstanding and courageous man who responded his entire life in an exemplary fashion," said William Sessions, the former FBI director.

Volcano erupts in Indonesia: About 300 villagers on a remote island fled their homes after a volcano erupted sending rocks, ash and hot mud high into the air, the newspaper Kompas reported Saturday, AP reports from Jakarta.

Houses were damaged and crops destroyed, but there were no reports of casualties. The newspaper said Hill Adulo, a 700-metre (2,296-foot) high volcano on Nias island, 1,250 kilometres (780 miles) northwest of Jakarta, exploded on Wednesday.

Money changers robbed in Karachi: Four men disguised as police officials robbed two money changers of 50.9 million rupees (around 1.2 million dollars) police said yesterday, AFP reports from Karachi.

Then men wearing police uniforms intercepted the money changers carrying packs of foreign and local currency in the parking area of Karachi International Airport late Friday.

The robbers told the money dealers they suspected them to be drug smugglers took them to a deserted place and blindfolded them after snatching the cash, police said.

Voting begins in Cameroon: Cameroon votes for a new parliament yesterday with President Paul Biya's party counting on opposition divisions to bring it victory, Reuter reports from Yaounde.

Biya's Cameroon People's Democratic Rally (RDPC) says it is aiming for an absolute majority of 91 of the New National Assembly's 180 seats.



Miss Venezuela, Marena Bencomo (L), Miss USA, Brook Mahealani Lee (C), and Miss Trinidad and Tobago, Margot Bourgeois (R) smiles after being picked as the three finalists of the Miss Universe 1997 Pageant in Miami Beach, on Friday Mahealani Lee went on to win the beauty pageant.

Zaire potentially rich enough to light up African continent

KINSHASA, May 17: Zaire, a sprawling but volatile republic strategically placed at the heart of Africa, is potentially one of the continent's richest nations, reports Reuter.

Blessed with vast mineral wealth, fertile soil and rivers able to generate enough power to light up the whole continent, its more than 40 million people from numerous ethnic groups should be the envy of their neighbours.

But a combination of rampant corruption, administrative chaos and bitter ethnic and political rivalry have made them among the poorest on the world's poorest continent.

At the height of the 19th century, European scramble for Africa, what became Zaire caught the eye of Belgian King Leopold, who duped rivals into thinking his intentions were humanitarian and turned it into a private commercial monopoly.

The huge nation straddling three time zones has lurched from one crisis to another since

independence from Belgium in 1960.

Veteran strongman Mobutu Sese Seko, taking advantage of superpower rivalry, ruled, virtually unchallenged from 1965 until a combination of foreign and domestic forced him to embrace multi-party politics in 1990.

Elections, repeatedly postponed, were promised by July 1997.

Mobutu, presenting himself as the one symbol of national unity in a nation where individual regions such as copper-rich Shaba and diamond-rich Kasai enjoyed de facto autonomy, had planned for stand.

But prostate cancer surgery in Europe in August 1996 and a revolt by Tutsi-dominated rebels who took up arms in October have weakened his grip on Africa's third largest nation.

He had recently said he would not take part in the elections. On Friday, it was announced in Kinshasa that Mobutu had left the government in charge of national policy, but

would retain his title as head of state.

Rebels, led by Laurent Kabila, control three quarters of Zaire, including its economic heartland with its diamonds, copper, cobalt and gold.

Some key facts about Zaire A Belgian colony that became independent in 1960.

Africa's third largest country after Sudan and Algeria.

Spectacular rivers the mighty Zaire (Congo) river is the world's eighth longest — dissect tropical rainforest, plateaux, savannas and mountains.

Its population is 43.8 million (UN 1995 estimate).

Its capital is Kinshasa, which has five million people.

Most Zaireans are nominally Christian, half Roman Catholics.

Its official language is French, its main local tongue Lingala.

Its currency is the New Zaire. Diamonds, copper, cobalt, gold and others minerals are its

main source of wealth.

19th-century explorer Henry Morton Stanley, who won fame tracing missionary David Livingstone in the African jungle, spearheaded European colonisation of what became modern-day Zaire.

English novelist Joseph Conrad based his bleak classic "Heart of Darkness" of its river and jungles.

The deadly ebola virus is named after a river there.

Latin American revolutionary Che Guevara fought there briefly with rebels, including Laurent Kabila, in the 1960s, he left questioning their revolutionary resolve.

UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld died in mysterious plane crash in neighbouring Zambia in 1961 while trying to help ease Zaire's independence birth pangs.

Its musicians and music — the late Franco and his okay jazz rumba rhythms at the forefront — are renowned throughout Africa.