

US condemns coup in Sierra Leone Sporadic shooting echoes around Freetown

FREETOWN, May 27: Sporadic shooting echoed around Sierra Leone's capital on Monday, a day after the army announced a takeover, and Freetown residents reported talk of a counter-coup, says Reuter.

Troops of the West African ECOMOG force stationed as peacekeepers in neighbouring Liberia said they had sealed the land frontier and naval units were patrolling coastal waters.

In the Liberian capital Monrovia, port officials and military sources said two naval boats left with hundreds of battle-ready troops of the Nigerian-dominated force on Sunday night, presumably heading for Sierra Leone.

Freetown residents said the new Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), led by Major Johnny Paul Koroma, appeared not to have the full backing of the army and the success of the coup had depended on support from prisoners freed from jail early on Sunday.

Troops searched houses looking for ministers of the former civilian government, and military sources said five

former ministers were detained at the military headquarters.

ECOMOG deputy force commander Brigadier-General Joe Kwateng told reporters in Monrovia that peacekeeping soldiers deployed in Liberia's western Grand Cape Mount county had been ordered to seal the Sierra Leone border.

Staff at Freetown's main hospital said at least 18 people were killed in Sunday's fighting. Lebanese Foreign Minister Faris Bouez said the dead included two Lebanese.

AP adds: US officials have called on leaders of a military coup in Sierra Leone to return power to the West African nation's elected government.

The United States condemns the coup which overthrew Sierra Leone's first democratically elected government in three decades, and calls on those claiming power in Freetown to return authority promptly to the country's elected leadership and parliament.

State Department spokesman John Dinger said Monday in a statement.

NATO's expansion a strategic mistake, says Yeltsin

PARIS, May 27: In an historic step, Russian President Boris Yeltsin signs an agreement Tuesday acknowledging NATO's expansion into Central and Eastern Europe. In a nod to concerns about Russia's commitment, President Clinton said NATO expects to have a "a good partner in Russia," reports AP.

Yeltsin has called expansion "a strategic mistake," but said "the negative consequences of NATO's enlargement will be reduced to the minimum" through the NATO-Russia deal he was signing today.

The pact — officially called the Founding Act of Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security — is between the Russian Federation and the 16 nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

President Clinton, the driving force behind NATO's plans expand into central and Eastern Europe, was asked about perceptions that Russia will have veto power over NATO actions.

"I think we all understand what we're doing here and it's a

good thing," Clinton said, as the leaders gathered to sign the agreement in the Elysee Palace here. "NATO will come out of it unimpaired and with a good partner in Russia and that's what we want."

The first new members will be designated at a NATO summit July 8-9 in Madrid, Spain. Leading candidates are believed to be Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic. Romania and Slovenia also have been mentioned.

NATO officials say they doubt any more than five countries will be invited in the first phase of expansion. The candidate nations must be approved by the parliaments of all 16 current NATO members.

US critics are concerned about the cost to American taxpayers and that US forces will be committed to defending the new NATO members.

The ratification process probably will take about two years but still could meet Clinton's desire to welcome the new members to the fold by 1999, NATO's 50th anniversary.

French President Jacques Chirac (R) talks with NATO Secretary General Javier Solana, Monday at the Elysee Palace, in Paris. Russian President Boris Yeltsin who arrived Tuesday in Paris, and the heads of state or government of the 16 Atlantic alliance member nations scheduled to sign the so-called Founding Act — a treaty defining relations between Russia and NATO.

International

Suu Kyi's supporters barred from celebrating polls victory

YANGON, Myanmar, May 27: Heavily armed riot police blocked roads leading to the homes of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and her deputies Tuesday to prevent supporters from commemorating their 1990 election victory, reports AP.

Police also used barbed wire barricades to seal the office of the National League for Democracy, the party Suu Kyi heads. The party won 82 per cent of the seats in a parliament the military refused to convene.

At least 316 members of Suu Kyi's party planning to attend the commemoration meeting have been arrested by Myanmar's military government, Tin Oo, the party's vice-chairman, said Monday.

Tuesday morning, troops surrounded his home.

More than 200 members from around the country made it to Yangon in hopes of participating in the congress at Suu Kyi's lakeside compound, said an NLD member who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Suu Kyi, the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner, has consistently called for the military to honour the results of the 1990 election since she was released from six years of house arrest for her political activities in

1995. All were turned back Tuesday morning by riot police, plainclothes military intelligence officers and traffic police as they tried to approach their leaders' homes.

Ten members of the NLD's central executive committee had already arrived at Suu Kyi's compound before it was sealed off.

No one was arrested, however, as they attempted to reach the meeting points.

Another NLD member said all the party leaders in his district had been arrested before leaving for Yangon but lower-level members had slipped into the capital.

They planned to wait a few days to see what will happen before returning home, said the party member who demanded anonymity.

Suu Kyi, the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner, has consistently called for the military to honour the results of the 1990 election since she was released from six years of house arrest for her political activities in

1995. The United Nations has also called on the military government to accept the election results and return power to the people.

Although the military has kept guards around Suu Kyi's home since September last year to prevent her from giving weekend speeches to the public and stop party members and journalists from reaching her, it has allowed her to have several hundred supporters as guests on public holidays.

Although Myanmar's military government has said it is moving toward a multi-party democracy, it has never allowed the NLD to hold a party congress and has pressured those elected in 1990 to resign from the party.

Suu Kyi planned to use the congress to debate articles of a constitution the NLD is drafting as an alternative to the government's drawing up.

The military has threatened to arrest anyone attempting to write an alternative constitution.

The government has denied

it has arrested anyone. It made the same denial after detaining 262 members of Suu Kyi's party in 1996. About two dozen party members the government insisted it never arrested are now serving long prison terms.

The United States, Japan, Britain, Germany and several other western governments have condemned the arrests.

Myanmar's neighbours have remained silent about the oppression as they increase their investment in the country.

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Floods claim 34 lives in Manila

MANILA, May 27: At least 34 people were left dead after rains from a tropical depression hit metropolitan Manila, disaster relief officials and news reports said today, says AFP.

Residents in the Philippine capital received a respite from Monday's rains as the weather cleared today. The weather bureau said that the tropical depression was moving away from the northern Philippines.

In metropolitan Manila, nine persons were killed when they drowned in flood waters that inundated most parts of the capital, making roads impassable.

The death toll in Manila also included three people crushed by a collapsed wall and a father and his six-month-old baby who were buried under a collapsed garbage dump which was weakened by an overflowing creek, and a woman killed in a landslide, relief agencies said.

Eight people were reported killed after stepping on live electrical wires felled by the flood, various police reports said.

The dead also included six people killed and one missing when a boat carrying 19 holidaymakers capsized off the central island of Cebu on Saturday, police said, two people are still in critical condition from the incident.

NLD member jailed in Myanmar

YANGON, May 27: Myanmar said on Monday that it had sentenced a member of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) to four years in jail on a charge of falsifying documents, reports Reuters.

Myo Khin, 39, NLD secretary for Yankin township in Yangon, was arrested on May 12 and charged with fraudulently altering a family registration list and citizen registration card, the Myanmar government said in a statement faxed to Reuters.

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Indo-Bangla Sunderbans a global priority for tiger conservation

Ela Dutt writes from Washington

The Sunderbans in India and Bangladesh have the best preserved habitats for tigers and should therefore be maintained as a global priority to conserve the big cats, according to a report by major environmental organisations.

Brought out jointly by the U.S. World Wildlife Fund and the Wildlife Conservation Society in association with the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, the report points out that the tiger "is threatened with extinction in the wild" if countries do not eliminate trade in tiger products and act to conserve the ecosystem that breeds tigers.

The report, entitled "A Framework for Identifying High Priority Areas and Actions for the Conservation of Tigers in the Wild," said, "The ideal conservation strategy would be to protect all blocks of natural habitat containing tigers and to stop all illicit trade of tiger products."

But it concedes that this is

not possible due to limited financial and human resources. Therefore priority areas are identified and among them the Indian subcontinent needs a major effort to count the tiger population and dramatically increase habitat conservation efforts.

The report admits, "the only prime example of a Tiger Conservation Unit (TCU) that conserves a representative unit of tigers living in mangrove ecosystems is the Sunderbans" on the India-Bangladesh border. Other mangrove areas in Indochina or Southeast Asia "are mere remnants of mangrove habitat and tiger populations are severely depleted."

"Thus, the Sunderban TCU emerges as a global priority for tiger conservation," the authors assert.

Poaching of tigers to feed the demand from Chinese and East Asians is a major reason for the demise of tigers, the report pointed out. Trade controls were urgently needed and the

— India Abroad News Service



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— AFP/UNB photo

Britain to rejoin UNESCO after 12 years

PARIS, May 27: Britain announced Monday it will rejoin UNESCO on July 1 — 12 years after dropping out, reports AP.

The announcement came at the opening session of the 151st executive board meeting of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation in a message by secretary of state for International Development Clare Short.

"We are now at a new beginning. Building new alliances for change throughout the world is our watchword," said the message, read to the board.

Britain dropped out of UNESCO in 1985, a year after the United States.

Washington had complained the organization was poorly managed, and opposed reform and Western free press principles.

All political party activities banned in Kinshasa

KINSHASA, Congo, May 27: The new leaders of Congo on Monday extended a ban on all political party activities to the capital, threatening to prosecute offenders "to the fullest extent of the law," reports AP.

"We are banning political party activities in Kinshasa, not the parties themselves," Deo Bugera, the secretary-general of the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo, told The Associated Press.

That would make Kinshasa different from Kisangani, the second-largest city, and other areas where Laurent Kabila had banned political parties outright during a 7-month sweep that ended when he toppled dictator Mobutu Sese Seko from power and declared himself president on May 17.

Off the Record

Abortion boom

TIRANA: In Albania, there is one abortion for every two births and the rate can be expected to increase in view of the country's dire political and economic difficulties, the head of the Albanian Family Planning Association, Valentin Leskai told AFP.

"In our hospital in Tirana, we carry out between 30 and 40 abortions a day and the figure is going up," one gynaecologist said.

Abortion was harshly punished during the era of Stalinist dictator Enver Hoxha, who like his counterpart Nicolae Ceausescu in Romania, ordered women to have as many children as possible.

But despite the risk, clandestine abortions were widespread and in the period from 1980 to 1990, it was the main cause of death among Albanian women, according to Health Ministry statistics cited by Leskai in an interview.

"We don't actively promote abortion, because every abortion means a failure of family planning efforts, but we consider all the same that freedom of choice is a basic human right," she said.

While it was "regrettable" that abortion remained the main way of regulating births, she said condoms were not popular in Albania and efforts by the Family Planning Association to get state television to screen advertisement for them had run into obstruction and disinterest.



General Abdul Malik whose revolt against Abdul Rashid Dostam last week led to the fall of Uzbek warlord's freedom in the north to the Taliban militia, sits under the portrait of his brother Rasul Pehelwan at his office Monday. Pehelwan was murdered last year amid reports of a row with Dostam who has since fled to Turkey.

— AFP/UNB photo

61 kidnappers held in China:

Police in northern China have arrested 61 members of a gang that kidnapped children and sold them, the People's Daily said yesterday, Reuter reports from Beijing.

Police in Handan City in northern Hebei province recently rescued 51 kidnapped children in Hebei and the southwestern provinces of Sichuan and Yunnan, the newspaper said.

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