

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 Reuters.

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 Bouze 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 move, 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 "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.

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.

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 hundreds supporters as guests on public holidays.

This is the second straight year, however, that the government has arrested hundreds of NLD members to prevent them from commemorating the 1990 election.

The poll was a major embarrassment to the regime, which came to power after gunning down more than 3,000 democracy demonstrators in 1988.

A military-backed party won only 10 of 485 seats in that election. Most soldiers voted against military rule.

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.

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 presided over 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 one the government is drawing up.

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

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.



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.

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

report identifies 11 priority tiger range countries and four priority consumer nations in which to target efforts.

The experience in India, Nepal and Russia shows that reducing and eliminating poaching pressure and protecting large tracts of habitat can lead to a relatively rapid increase in tiger numbers, the report notes.

The total of 11 TCUs in the Indian subcontinent require immediate surveys to obtain up-to-date information including some that have large tiger habitats. These include Kaziranga-Meghalaya, Melghat, Panna-Son Ghariel, Ratapuri-Singhori, and Manas-Narandapha, Kanha-Panch, Dandeli-Bandipur, Nagarjuna Sagar, Periyar-Kalakad and Bagdara-Haziribagh.

Apart from site-specific conservation efforts, the report calls for recycling ecotourism dollars back to local development initiatives.

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BRIEFLY

KSA recognises Taliban govt:

Saudi Arabia on Monday recognised the Taliban Islamic regime in Afghanistan, the second country to do so after Pakistan, the official Saudi agency SPA said, AFP reports from Jeddah.

"The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has decided to recognise the government of the Taliban after the council of ministers discussed the developments in this country," said Saudi Information Minister Fuad ibn Abdessalam al-Farsi. The Saudi government hopes the government of the Taliban succeeds in re-establishing order, security, peace and stability in our brother country Afghanistan and expresses hope for a strengthening of bilateral relations." The minister said after the weekly cabinet meeting in Jeddah.

Rapist hanged to death in India:

Forty-four-year-old Kamta Prasad Tiwari was Monday hanged to death for raping a minor girl, the 15th prisoner to be hanged in the central jail here since 1911. PTI says from Jabalpur.

A hangman, requisitioned specially from Lucknow, executed the sentence early Monday morning in the presence of SDM Narendra Dubey, Jail Superintendent AK Khare and several medical personnel. Tiwari's mercy petitions had been rejected by the President, the State Governor, the High Court and the Supreme Court.

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. Reuters 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.

39 Serbs sentenced in Croatia:

A court in split, southern Croatia, sentenced 39 Serbs to between five and 20 years imprisonment on Monday after finding them guilty of war crimes during the Serb-Croat conflict, AFP reports from Zagreb.

Only 12 of the 39 former Serb paramilitaries were in the dock. The others were tried in absentia. The accused were found guilty of committing crimes against civilians, prisoners of war and the wounded and of looting and destroying villages in the southern region of Sinj.

Albanian doctors threaten to quit:

Doctors and nurses at Tirana's main military hospital threatened to resign on Monday unless President Sali Berisha identified the Republican Guards who opened fire on the hospital and terrorised its staff, Reuters reports from Tirana.

Some 500 hospital workers held a two-hour demonstration to protest at what they called the "unprecedented violation" of the hospital where hundreds of people are treated every day. "Hands off the white uniforms, we are here for saving people," they shouted, while trade union leader Margarita Minai told reporters they would quit if authorities failed to stop the violence.

Taliban victory will bring trade access to Central Asia

Tariq Butt writes from Islamabad

Pakistan has welcomed the Taliban's control over most of Afghanistan as it would enable Islamabad to open trade links with Central Asian nations, officials said.

Sources here said the Taliban, which now controls 27 of Afghanistan's 32 provinces, is pushing its way into Takhar and Badakhshan provinces. Takhar is said to be a stronghold of rebel commander Ahmad Shah Masood and Badakhshan, which is former President Burhanuddin Rabbani's home province, is at present governed by the latter's supporters.

The Taliban will take over the remaining provinces in the next few days," the official said. "With their effective and total control over Afghanistan, all hurdles in the way of Pak-

istan's access to the Central Asian countries, because of the unending Afghan fighting and turmoil, will go away," sources told IANS.

"We have formally recognised the Taliban government because it now deserves de jure recognition," a senior official said. Pakistan is the first country to accord recognition to the Taliban government.

But the Taliban's victories are not welcomed by Iran, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Russia, which have accused Pakistan of actively supporting the fundamentalist militia. Islamabad has denied the charge.

During the recent summit of the 10-member Economic Co-operation Organisation (ECO) held in Ashgabat in Turkmenistan, Pakistan signed two major agreements with the host

country for laying \$4.5 billion worth oil and gas pipelines which would pass through Afghanistan. The contract for laying the pipelines has been awarded to an American firm, UNICAL.

Uzbekistan had strongly criticised Pakistan at the summit for allegedly supporting the Taliban. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said in turn that Pakistan "has no favourites" in the Afghan battle and it adheres to the policy of neutrality and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries.

Much to Pakistan's chagrin Iran, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan had made Prof. Rabbani participate in the summit as the Afghan President, a post he had been ousted from when the Taliban captured Kabul last year.

Tehran opposes the Taliban on sectarian grounds and has been encouraging and giving refuge to Afghan players like Prof Rabbani and former Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar against the militia.

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan oppose the Taliban as they fear that the militia's strong brand of religious fundamentalism would find its way into their territories. Afghanistan has a large population of Uzbeks and Tajiks — ousted warlord Rashid Dostum is an Uzbek and Prof Rabbani is a Tajik.

The Taliban movement, which emerged on the Afghan scene in 1994 when the militia captured Mewand in Kandahar province, has extended its control faster than most expected.

A Peshawar-based Taliban leader told IANS the movement

began in order to "save Afghanistan from falling apart and impose a true Islamic order in the country."

The fight and victory for the control of Spin Buldak district of Kandahar against the formidable and well-armed Mujahideen commanders gave the Taliban a high ground both morally and militarily.

The Taliban developed a good rapport with the people under its control by ensuring peace. The war-stricken Afghans surrendered their many liberties to the strict, often puritanical rules laid down by the Taliban in return for the provision of the much-needed security to their life and honour.

The Taliban movement continued its struggle and was able

to oust powerful Afghan warlords and extended its rule to the whole of Kandahar, Helmand and Zabul provinces the same year. In the following year they took control of Herat province that shares borders with Iran.

It scared Iran to a great extent. Tehran promptly invited former governor of Herat Ismail Khan to take refuge in Mashad and collect his shattered force once again to take on the Taliban. But Khan did not succeed in his plans to stage a comeback. He was arrested by General Abdul Malik in Faryab province and handed over to the Taliban for trial. He has been shifted to Kandahar, the headquarters of the Taliban.

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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, Valentian 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