

Talks underway to avert attack by Nigerian-led force in Sierra Leone

FREETOWN, May 31: Sierra Leone's coup leaders have said negotiations are under way in a bid to avert a possible attack by a Nigerian-led regional force to restore the ousted civilian government, reports Reuters.

The Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC) tried to reassure Sierra Leoneans late on Friday night there was no cause for alarm despite a statement by a veteran politician that Nigerian troops planned a military strike today.

Nigeria has been playing in jeeps, armoured personnel carriers and troops to join its forces already based in Sierra Leone under a regional peace-keeping arrangement. There were signs that Ghana and Guinea would join in.

"The AFRC wishes the public to know that while it is aware of a possible threat to public security, negotiations are continuing within (the country)," said a statement broadcast by state radio.

The public therefore have no reason to be unduly alarmed," it added.

Last Sunday's violent coup

Turkish generals to ask PM to report on steps to curb radical Islam

ANKARA, Turkey, May 31: Turkey's top generals on Saturday will ask the Islamic prime minister to give them a progress report on carrying out their orders to curb radical Islam, reports AP.

The powerful National Security Council, which brings together military and government leaders, will hold its monthly meeting amid rising tensions between the Islamic government and secularists.

The Council on February ordered Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan to halt his moves at giving Islam a higher profile in Turkey's public life and to take measures against radical Islamic movements.

Erbakan and his Islamic Welfare party have generally resisted the directives, which include reducing education in religious schools from six to three years.

Some analysts fear the military's unhappiness with him could provoke a coup. The military, which sees itself as the guardian of Turkey's secular traditions, has staged three

Yeltsin declares his salary, wealth

MOSCOW, May 31: President Boris Yeltsin declared his salary and personal wealth Friday in what he hoped was an example in the fight against corruption among civil servants, reports AP.

Yeltsin, who signed a decree on May 15 obliging state officials to declare their wealth, earned 243 million roubles (43,000 dollars) in 1996 in salary, bank interest and book sales, a presidency statement said.

The Russian president also owns property worth an estimated 210.00 dollars, the statement said.

Some of his money has been placed in an account with the Sherbank, the Russian savings bank.

Chernomyrdin to visit US, China: Russian premier Viktor Chernomyrdin will make working visits to the United States and China at the end of June, the Interfax agency reported Friday, AFP reports from Moscow.

Thai ex-general jailed for 30 yrs: A former general in the Royal Thai Army has been sentenced to 30 years and five months in prison for his role in a heroin smuggling conspiracy, AP reports from Eugene.

Honduran president accused of corruption: Former President Rafael Angelon Callejas, himself facing corruption allegations, has accused his successor of being involved in a massive passport scam, AP reports from Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

President Carlos Roberto Reina "is neither moral nor ethical," Callejas told reporters Friday, urging that courts call the president and his two brothers to testify in the passport scandal. Callejas did not detail his allegations against the Reina brothers, but said they had benefited from a 1990 law, in effect during Callejas' administration, that for 18 months legalised the sale of Honduran passports for 25,000 dollars each. Some 2,000 people took advantage of the programme.

Taliban claim to have recaptured Jebul Siraj

KABUL, May 31: Fighting raged north of the beleaguered Afghan capital as Taliban soldiers claimed Saturday to have recaptured a strategic town along Afghanistan's only north-south highway, reports AP.

Opposition troops had taken Jebul Siraj, 90 kilometres (54 miles) north of Kabul on Friday and were heading toward nearby Charikar when the Taliban launched its counter offensive.

Former defence chief Ahmed Shah Massoud was commanding the anti-Taliban troops.

In Kabul a Taliban official, who wouldn't be identified, said the Islamic militia had reversed its losses by early Saturday and were pounding opposition soldiers.

"We repelled a massive attack by Massoud in Jebul Siraj and the northern Salang Highway," he said.

He said Massoud's soldiers had suffered heavy losses and the front line was strewn with bodies. In the capital there was evidence that the Taliban also had suffered casualties.

At least five trucks carrying dead and wounded Taliban soldiers were seen arriving in the Afghan capital.

The Taliban Islamic army also was under heavy attack in the northern half of the country, where they are battling opposition forces who had thrown them out of Mazar-e-Sharif last Wednesday.

There were claims that thousands of Taliban had been taken prisoner, including the foreign minister Mohammed Ghous and the Governor of western Herat Abdul Razzak.

An opposition spokesman in Mazar-e-Sharif, Gen. Humayun Powzi, said his forces were holding "10,000 Taliban fighters and about 100 of their high ranking officials."

Powzi said the Taliban was carrying out air raids on its positions and it would kill prisoners if it continued.

"If the Taliban continues to bombard our positions in the north, the life of those prisoners will be in danger," he said.

The Taliban was under attack in at least three northern provinces, according to foreign residents in the area. There was fighting in Balk, Samangan and Kunduz, where just last week the Taliban white flags were flying.

Powzi said the Taliban had lost control of all three provinces, but it appeared the fighting was continuing.

The Taliban rule the southern two-thirds of Afghanistan before sweeping into the north last week in an alliance with ethnic Uzbek soldiers who had toppled northern warlord Rashid Dostum.

But the alliance fell apart when the Taliban tried to disarm its new allies and force its strict brand of Islamic rule.

Most of northern Afghanistan is inhabited by the country's minority ethnic groups, the Uzbeks, Tajiks, Shites and Ismaili Muslims.

The Taliban by comparison belong to the country's majority Pashtun ethnic group.

The Taliban retreated from Mazar-e-Sharif of Wednesday, just five days after their troops poured in without a fight. It was the first time the Taliban were forced out of a city it had captured.

At least 300 Taliban soldiers were killed in the bloody two-day battle between the Taliban and its former Uzbek allies.



Congolese, ex-Zaireans, carrying banners of the opposition Democratic Union for Social Progress (UDPS), protest Friday against self-proclaimed President Laurent-Désiré Kabila in Kinshasa as soldiers of the ruling rebel alliance look on. Kabila was sworn in as head of state Thursday and banned all political activity after assuming quasi-total powers by decree. — AFP/UNB photo

Noble peace laureates sign code of conduct on arms sales

Suman Guha Mozumder writes from New York

A group of Noble Peace Laureates, including the Dalai Lama, have signed a code of conduct for international arms sales that would make it difficult for countries with bad democratic and human rights records to buy arms.

The "International Code of Conduct on Arms Transfers" was signed here yesterday to ensure a "comprehensive, international effort to monitor and regulate international arms transfers for the benefit of humankind."

At a ceremony at the Cathedral of St John the Divine, Dr Oscar Arias, a Nobel Peace laureate and former President of Costa Rica, launched the initiative on arms transfer control, which has been "fully endorsed" by 11 Nobel laureates, including Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa.

The code, once implemented, would obligate governments to uphold internationally recognised standards of democracy, human rights and peaceful international relations.

Arias said the code, prepared by the commission of Nobel Laureates, would require arms exports to be based on internationally recognised standards of human rights, democracy and peaceful international relations. "Once in effect, this code would prevent undemocratic governments from building sophisticated arsenals," he said.

"As we approach the turn the century, our common future is threatened by regional conflict and arms races that are raging

NY City imposes ban on Myanmar

NEW YORK, May 31: New York on Friday became the eleventh US city to impose sanctions on Myanmar, as Mayor Rudy Giuliani signed a law barring contracts with companies operating in the military-ruled country, reports AP.

The "Burma Law," which takes effect in 30 days, passed the City Council without dissent on May 15. Giuliani's office had opposed the measure, but a two-thirds majority in the council would have overridden a veto.

"We want to see major changes in Burma," Giuliani said Friday, describing conditions in there as "beyond what the human conscience can tolerate."

Critics of the Junta that has ruled Myanmar since 1988 have long viewed such a ban in New York City, the US financial capital and seat of the United Nations, as major symbolic victory.

China's supporters reply that these actions are being misunderstood.

They say that the legislature had to go because it was elected under rules China never consented to, but that all parties, even Lee and his Democrats, will be free to run for a new, elected legislature in mid-1998.

They say the civil liberties changes will merely restore laws the British amended without China's agreement.

Tung Chee-hwa, the shipping tycoon who will succeed the last British governor July 1, maintains that Hong Kong society has become polarized in the last years of British rule and needs a breathing space in which to focus on pressing problems like housing and welfare.

But Hong Kong is a society made up largely of refugees from communism, who are instinctively skeptical of any

Regaining HK China's proudest event in its history

HONG KONG, May 31: Of all the phrases coined to define a city, none seems as apt as Hong Kong's: "a borrowed place, living on borrowed time," reports AP.

On the first of July, 156 years after it became a part of the British Empire, the borrowed place is being returned to China in a social, political and economic undertaking so vast that even the oldest of Old China Hands can only guess how it will all turn out.

For Asia and the West, the change of flags will be a defining moment: China, once humbled and bullied by the ascendant West, will recover a piece of the motherland that was ripped from its grasp in 1841 and transformed into a standing reproach to its turmoil and backwardness.

Poised to become a superpower in the 21st century, China will treat the change of

Russia, Ukraine agree to sign friendship treaty

KIEV, May 31: The presidents of Russia and Ukraine met Saturday before the scheduled signing of a friendship treaty that Boris Yeltsin has said will bring "enormous political force" to bear in improving relations between the neighbouring Slavic nations, reports AP.

After laying wreaths at a rain-soaked Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and speaking to World War II veterans in Kiev, Yeltsin and Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma were slated to talk for 45 minutes and then sign what they call "the big treaty" on friendship.

"Without a doubt I consider this a historic event," Kuchma said Friday after an initial meeting with Yeltsin, who had postponed his first official visit to Kiev and the friendship treaty signing six times since he was first invited more than three years ago.

The long delay was largely prompted by the ongoing dispute over the former Soviet Black Sea Fleet and particularly the status of its main base, the Crimean Peninsula port of Sevastopol, which became part of an independent Ukraine when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.



Iraqi Oil Minister Amer Mohamed Rashid announces to reporters, Friday, in Baghdad, that Iraq has so far exported 120 million barrels of crude oil since a UN oil-for-food deal came into effect in December. Under UN resolution 986, Iraq can sell 2 billion dollars worth of oil every six months under tight international control to raise money for food and medicine. — AFP/UNB photo.

Lankan minister's son under probe for alleged involvement in murder

Sugeeswara Senadhira writes from Colombo

Colombo, May 30 - The son of a senior Sri Lankan minister has been taken into investigative custody for his alleged connection with a sensational murder, putting an end to weeks of speculation and rumours over alleged attempts at cover-up.

Lohan Ratwatte, son of Energy and Power Minister Anura Kumara Ratwatte, is a suspect in the murder of Papua New Guinea rugby coach Joel Pera in Colombo on May 1. A local magistrate remanded him to investigative custody till June 4.

The case is being closely followed by Sri Lankans and the people of Papua New Guinea as Minister Ratwatte is a relative of President Chandrika Kumaratunga and Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike. News of the murder had sent shock waves through the sports and political circles in the capital, where Pera was a popular socialist, and in Papua New Guinea.

Immediately after the May 1 murder in Colombo's top casino club, newspapers reports, quoting eyewitnesses, said Lohan Ratwatte and his bodyguards were present at the time of the shooting.

An eyewitness was quoted as saying that a few minutes before the killing, Joel Pera had an argument with Bobby de Silva, son of the casino owner, and Lohan Ratwatte, who is a close friend of de Silva. Police arrested three suspects including a shareholder of the casino, but did not initially apprehend either Bobby or Ratwatte. A few days later de Silva surrendered.

Colombo police chief D.M.T.H. Dissanayake, who was supervising investigation in the case, said Lohan Ratwatte telephoned him and offered to give the fullest cooperation. "But we do not have any evidence to show Lohan Ratwatte's involvement in the killing," he said. "Hence there is no reason for us to record a statement."

However pressure from the public and the government of Papua New Guinea mounted and the Criminal Investigations Department (CID) took over the probe from the Colombo police.

On May 28 the opposition asked in Parliament why Lohan Ratwatte was not arrested. An opposition spokesman said a no-confidence motion would be tabled against Minister Ratwatte over the issue.

On the same day police visited the Ratwatte residences in Colombo and Kandy, but failed to find Lohan. That night however the minister's son surrendered and was remanded to custody yesterday.

Quoting the Sri Lankan High Commissioner in Canberra, Mr Elmo Seneviratne, the ministry said, "There have been no threats, damage to vehicles, property or bodily injury to any Sri Lankan residents in Papua New Guinea."

The ministry however admitted that some Sri Lankan families had to be evacuated from the Mt. Hagen area, the birth place of Joel Pera, as there was some tension during the time of the funeral. "But they have returned to their homes since then and the situation is calm," the ministry claimed.

— India Abroad News Service

Clinton urged to ensure China's MFN status

WASHINGTON, May 31: Former national security advisor Brent Scowcroft Friday urged President Bill Clinton to make it clear he is determined to fend off any efforts by Congress to revoke China's Most Favoured Nation (MFN) trading status, reports AP.

"The president should act decisively to take MFN off the political agenda for the next 12 months," said Scowcroft, who was national security advisor in the Gerald Ford and George Bush administrations.

Indonesian army capture 30 rebels in East Timor

DILI, May 31: The army has captured 30 rebels in East Timor after a series of pre-emption attacks that killed as many as 22 people, police said Saturday, reports AP.

Residents described the attacks as the worst episode of violence in years in the former Portuguese colony, where rebels have been fighting for independence since Indonesia invaded in 1975.

Four rebels were reported killed during the attacks Wednesday, a day before Indonesians voted for a new parliament to end the violence, many East Timorese voted Thursday as thousands of police and soldiers patrolled the territory.

The rebels captured included 18 in Dili, East Timor, 10 in the town of Los Palos and two in Ainaro, East Timor police chief Col. Jusuf Mucharam told The Associated Press.

Aid workers ready to send food for Tamil civilians

COLOMBO, May 31: Relief workers Saturday prepared to send food trucks to tens of thousands of Tamil civilians displaced by the military's latest offensive in northern Sri Lanka, officials said, reports AP.

Preparations began after the Defence Ministry approved a Red Cross request to escort the food trucks to regions that are still under Tamil rebel control said Kandiah Ganesh, a government administrator in northern Vavuniya Town.

Initially, 12 trucks loaded with 120 tons of rice will be sent to Kilinochchi. The military has closed the highway to the north since the offensive began on May 13, halting the daily convoy of 40 trucks that carry food to half a million displaced Tamils.

The military is trying to wrest control of a 80-kilometre (55-mile) highway to the isolated Jaffna Peninsula. Control of the highway would open a land route to the area, at present accessible only by air and sea.

"Depending on the ability of trucks in uncluttered areas, 40 trucks are expected to be sent on Sunday with rice and flour," said Ganesh, contacted by telephone. Trucks from rebel-held regions will drive up to a border village of Parayanankulam, where supplies are checked by soldiers and loaded.

The Red Cross had earlier offered to escort the food trucks after local relief workers expressed concern about food supplies for Tamils displaced by the fighting.

The fighting has forced tens of thousands of Tamil civilians to flee into the jungles. The rebels claim that "women, men and children are crying with hunger and are fear-stricken."

The government has dismissed the rebels claims and accused the guerrillas of siphoning off substantial amount of food that was regularly sent to the displaced people.

Independent accounts are not available since government has barred journalists from the area and there are no communication links to the area.

The rebels are fighting for a homeland for minority Tamils, who account for 18 per cent of Sri Lanka's 18 million people.

OTTAWA, May 31: Canadians will elect a new parliament and government on Monday following a six-week election campaign which has been remarkable for its blandness, reports AP.

No single issue gripped the party leaders nor the electorate in a poll which has been called one and a half years earlier than required under the constitution.

Opinion polls suggested before the campaign began that 60 per cent of the voters did not want an election now and nothing appears to have changed in that regard.

The only certainty at the start of the campaign was that Prime Minister Jean Chretien and his governing Liberal Party would be returned to power for a second mandate.

'Talks won't be connected to food aid to DPRK'

WASHINGTON, May 31: The proposal for four-party peace talks to replace the armistice between North and South Korea should not be connected to any way with food aid to North Korea, according to Charles Kartman, acting assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific affairs, reports AP.

"Our policy and our view was that we should deal with the humanitarian needs in North Korea on the humanitarian basis. It is the North Korean side that has tried to create linkages, and we have tried to avoid that," Kartman said at a May 29 news briefing at USA's Foreign Press Centre.

Kartman said that the proposal for four-party peace talks between the United States, China, North Korea and South Korea "is still on the table" but added that "the principal stumbling block has been the North Korean insistence on linking