

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 Reuter.

The Armed Forces Revolutionary Ruling 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

by junior officers led by Major Johnny Paul Koromah has provoked international condemnation and there have been mounting calls for the restoration of deposed civilian President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, who fled to neighbouring Guinea.

Earlier AFP says, the new military rulers in Sierra Leone sealed the country's borders on Thursday night and banned all aircraft from flying over the territory.

The move came as Western countries stepped up the evacuation of their nationals from the West African country where the army seized power Sunday amid an orgy of violence and looting that has left the capital in shambles.

The Armed Forces Revolutionary Council set up by the coup leaders said the overnight ban would take effect "immediately."

For "security" reasons, the AFRC had also decided to re-close the country's land, sea and air borders, a communiqué said.

Witnesses earlier reported seeing a Nigerian military aircraft fly over the capital twice.

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

Taliban claim to have recaptured Jebul Siraj

Afghan capital.

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 north Charikar when the Taliban launched its counter offensive.

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

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

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

He said Massood'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

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, Shi'ite 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.

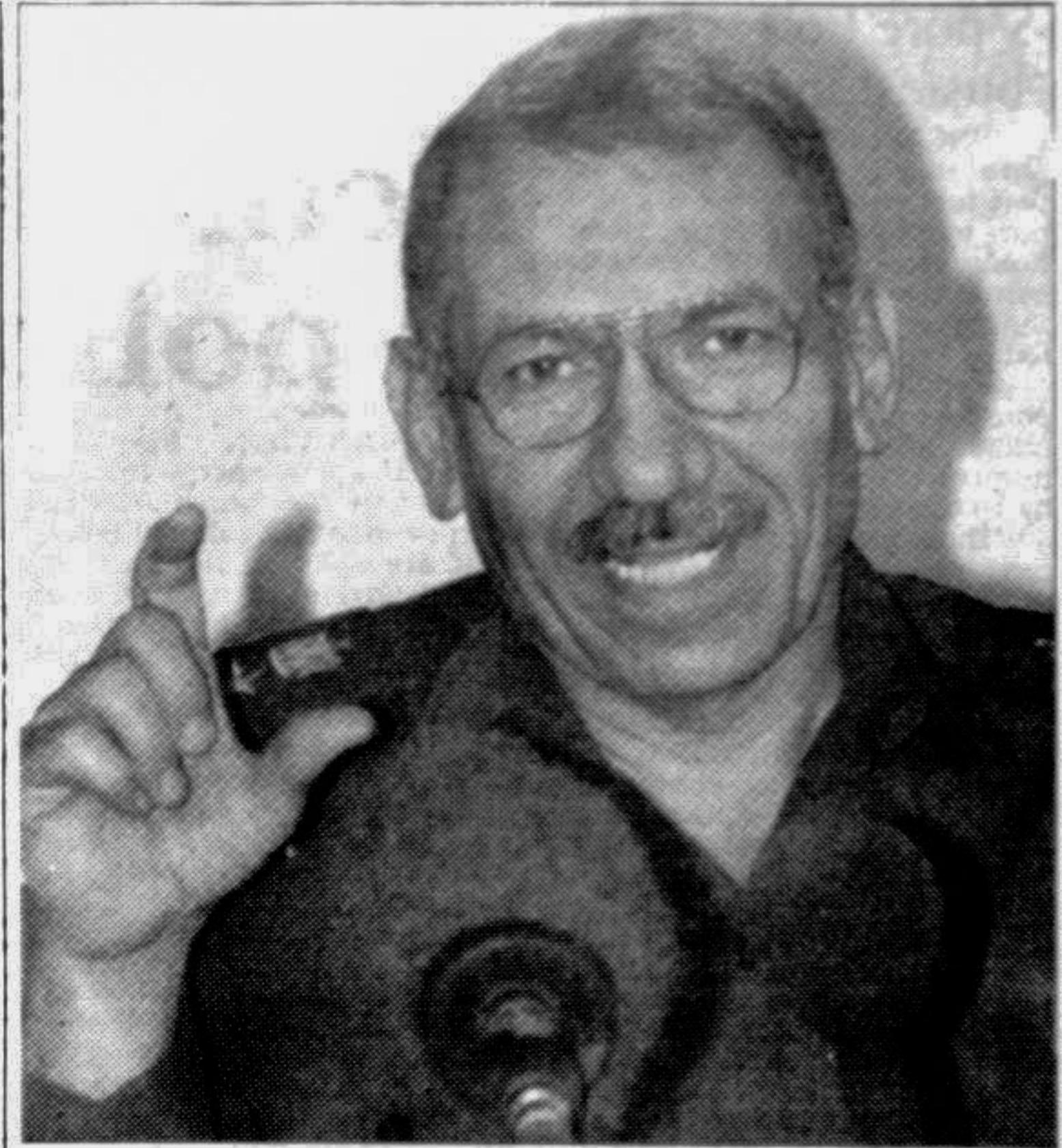
Russia, Ukraine agree to sign friendship treaty

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

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 tensions are also wearing on the True Path party, the junior partner in Erbakan's coalition government.

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 210,000 dollars, the statement said.

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



Congolese, ex-Zaireans, carrying banners of the opposition Democratic Union for Social Progress (UDPS), protest Friday against self-proclaimed President Laurent-Desire 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

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 Anuruddha Ratwatte, is a suspect in the murder of Papua New Guinea rugger 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 socialite, 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 from him."

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.

— India Abroad News Service

BRIEFLY

New int'l envoy in Bosnia: Former Spanish foreign minister Carlos Westendorp will be the new international envoy in Bosnia, countries charged with overseeing the implementation of peace there agreed on Friday, AFP reports from Sarajevo.

English 2nd nat'l language in Thailand: Thai Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchayudh promised to make English and "computer speak" the second and third national languages after Thai, Xinhua reports from Bangkok.

Chavalit made the pledge during the police cadet academy's annual meeting in Bangkok Friday. He also said the education ministry's budget would be greatly increased next year. Chavalit said all of the country's problems could be eradicated if all Thais had equal access to a good education, adding that the average times spent at school in Thailand is only five-and-a-half years.

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.

Chernomyrdin will travel to New York to attend the closed session of the UN General Assembly, and then travel directly on to China.

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.

Thanad Paktipatt, 58, a former member of the Royal Thai Armed Forces Supreme Command, was convicted July 26 1996 of conspiring to import 107 pounds (48.5 kilograms) of heroin from Thailand to the United States. Paktipatt, then an active member of the Thai military, masterminded the operation, US District Judge Michael Hogan said Friday.

Honduran president accused of corruption: Former President Rafael Leonardo 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.

Noble peace laureates sign code of conduct on arms sales

Suman Guha Mozumder writes from New York

A group of Nobel 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 oblige 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 up sophisticated arsenals," he said.

"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.

broadcast live via satellite throughout North America.

Those present at the Cathedral included U.S. Reps. Cynthia McKinney, Benjamin Gilman, Mr. Eliel Wiesel and Ms. Betty Williams (both Nobel Peace laureates). "The U.S. as a world leader must do better and put an end to dictators' licence to kill," Ms. McKinney said.

"World leaders must make human security the priority for the 21st century. In contrast to the traditional concept of security linked to military capacity and economic power, human security represents the degree to which human beings are protected from ignorance, sickness... neglect and persecution," Mr. Arias said.

"Until the demands for human security are met, discord will continue to boil in all regions of the world, periodically escalating into violent confrontations," he added.

The code of conduct, Mr. Arias has, been supported by former president of the erstwhile Soviet Union Michael Gorbachev who said, "The initiative is critical in this time of continuing instability."

Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter has described the initiative as a "critically important step towards defining moral benchmarks which all countries in the world can and should strive to meet."

We have hatred and anger... and problems are bound to occur. But we must find a way to overcome problems without violence," he said.

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Clinton urged to ensure China's MFN status

WASHINGTON, May 31: Former national security advisor Brent Scowcroft 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 uncleared 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 Parayankulam, 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.

Canada to elect new parliament Monday

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, reporters AFP.

No single issue gripped the party leaders or 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.

The fighting has forced tens of thousands of Tamil civilians

some form of commitment on the subject of food aid.

"We have not rejected their (the North Koreans) appeal to talk about food; quite the opposite," he said. "But we have not allowed the peace talks, as a proposal, to be overtaken or overshadowed by this North Korean priority."

Another issue complicating food aid to North Korea is the lack of transparency in that country, according to Kartman.

"The North Koreans themselves could do so much to assist this simply by opening themselves up to more international observation, more monitoring," he said. "But because the country remains very closed, the full dimensions of the food shortage in North Korea are not known with any precision, and so there's a range of opinion about this problem that I believe is adding to confusion."