

International

Troops edge closer to LTTE-held junction town Chandrika drops key ally in cabinet reshuffle

COLOMBO, June 9: President Chandrika Kumaratunga dropped a key ally in a Cabinet reshuffle Monday, reports AP.

The reshuffle, the first since Mrs. Kumaratunga's Peoples' Alliance came into power in August 1997, "is an effort to inject new blood, revitalize the government and get things going," said Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu, a political analyst.

The reshuffle expanded the number of ministers to 30 from 23, including the president and prime minister. Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the president's mother, retained her post.

Srimani Athulathmudali, leader of the Democratic United National Front, was dropped from the Cabinet and her portfolio — transport, environment and women's affairs — was split and given to two ministers.

Mrs. Athulathmudali in recent months has had a series of disagreements with the president and the government. She entered politics after her husband Lalith was killed allegedly by Tamil rebels in 1993 while addressing an election rally in Colombo.

The country's constitution

prevents Mrs. Athulathmudali's party, which has five lawmakers in parliament, from voting against government policy.

The president retained the portfolios of defense and finance and planning, but handed over the portfolios of ethnic affairs and national integration to Lakshman Perera, the president's office said. Perera also remains the minister of justice and constitutional affairs.

Lakshman Kadiragamar retained the foreign affairs portfolio while the key portfolio of media has been handed over to a confidant of the president, Mangala Samaraweera, who is also minister of posts and telecommunications.

Mrs. Kumaratunga's seven-party alliance has a single-seat majority in the 225-seat parliament. The main opposition United National Party holds 84 seats, and other seats are held by minority Tamil parties that support the government.

Earlier Reuter adds: Sri Lankan troops overcame stiff resistance from separatist Tamil Tiger guerrillas to edge closer to a rebel-held junction

town in the island's north, the Defence Ministry said today.

Troops, backed by artillery and tanks, on Sunday took the village of Periyamadu in the rebels' northern Wanni heartland, just south of the town of Puliyankulam, a ministry spokesman told Reuters.

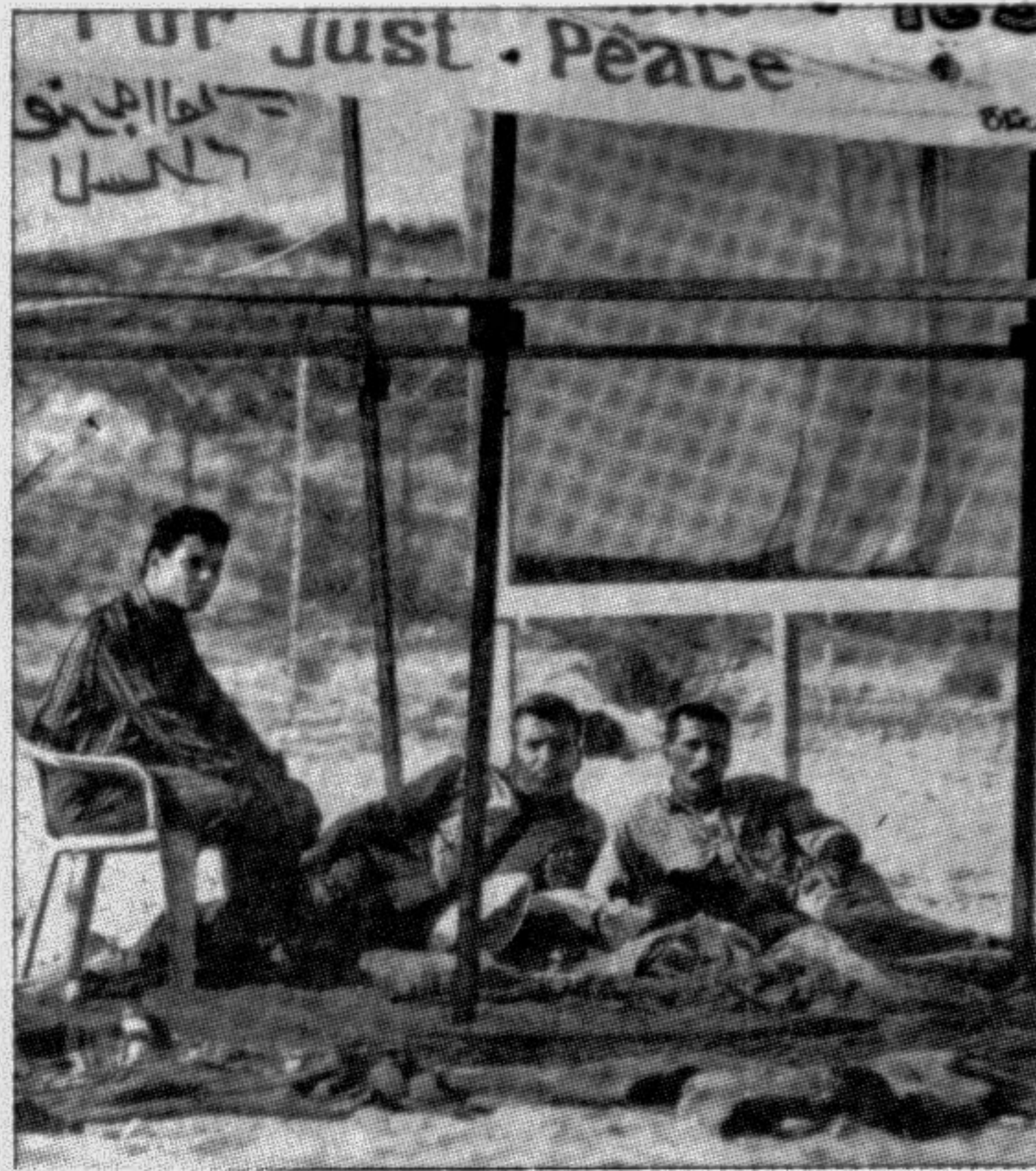
"Our artillery and air attacks caused heavy casualties among the terrorists," the spokesman said.

A Defence Ministry statement said troops confirmed between 15 to 20 Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebels had been killed and more than 60 wounded in Sunday's fighting.

Five soldiers were killed while one officer and eight soldiers had been wounded, the statement added.

The LTTE's clandestine Voice of Tigers radio, monitored in Vavuniya, said army artillery shells had landed at Mankulam, about 40 km north of Puliyankulam, along the army's path of advance.

It said seven civilians were killed and at least 15 were wounded. Casualties would have been higher had the town's market been open, it added.



Palestinian protesters protect themselves Sunday from the sun in the shade of a banner that reads: "No for settlement, Yes for a just peace," on a piece of land confiscated by the Israeli army in Rafah, south of Gaza City. The army plans to open a road for the settlers of the 'Moraj' Jewish settlement in the southern Gaza Strip. Palestinians have been protesting against the Israeli plan for the past seven days. — AFP/UNB photo

US should not press for quick 'solution' to Kashmir dispute

Aziz Haniffa writes from Washington

Criticising the U.S. government's lack of a clear policy towards South Asia, experts at a conference here differed on what this should be, but advised Washington not to try to force a settlement of the India-Pakistan dispute.

Addressing a conference organised by the Woodrow Wilson Centre here to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Indian and Pakistani independence, outgoing State Department official in charge of South Asia Robin Raphael acknowledged that during her tenure the agenda was broadened, but there was "no single focus."

Experts said one way of showing that South Asia mattered to Washington was for either the Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, or President Bill Clinton, to be present in South Asia on August 14 and 15 to join independence celebrations in Pakistan and India respectively.

The deliberations, which examined Washington's policy towards New Delhi and Islamabad, were important as they came on the eve of the India-Pakistan foreign secretary level talks this month.

The experts, who have followed the India-Pakistan dispute closely, pointed out that it was not realistic to expect a quick breakthrough and warned that the U.S. should not press for a quick "solution" to the Kashmir problem.

Rather it should "work to create the conditions under which such a solution, satisfactory to a wide range of the political community in both countries, can emerge," said Prof. Stephen P. Cohen, a leading authority on South Asia.

The Director of the Programme in Arms Control, Disarmament and International Security at the University of Illinois at Urbana, Prof. Cohen said "change will not come quickly" and for movement to occur on Kashmir, or even Siachen, "a process of internal debate and dialogue will have to proceed in both states."

A major regional goal of Washington should be "to promote strategic normalisation between New Delhi and Islamabad," he said. "Strategic normalisation has direct and important consequences for America's concerns over the spread of nuclear weapons in

South Asia," he added.

But Prof. Cohen thought that South Asian nuclear capabilities were an important stabilising factor. He said it was unlikely that Pakistan or India would "give up nuclear weapons in the next ten years, but a realistic goal would be to create the conditions in which neither sees any gain in moving their programmes forward."

"Anti-proliferationists may be right in their assessment of the disruptive role of nuclear weapons elsewhere, but in South Asia they provide Pakistan with the confidence to deal with India, and India an additional incentive to normalise its ties with Pakistan."

Selig Harrison, a senior fellow at the Woodrow Wilson Centre, too thought that Washington's non-proliferation approach towards South Asia was not realistic. He said it was quixotic to think it was possible to "restrain India and Pakistan's nuclear development within a South Asia context alone."

The key to what South Asia will do doesn't lie in South Asia.

— India Abroad News Service

BRIEFLY

Air crash claims 30 in Congo: A passenger plane crashed in eastern Congo, killing all 30 people aboard, Congo state television reported Sunday, AP reports from Kinshasa.

The Bazar flight crashed near Irumu in north eastern Congo soon after takeoff on Friday, the television said. The apparent cause of the crash was a fire in the cabin, it said. It did not identify the type of aircraft or the people on board except to say that Bazar's proprietor was among the dead. It was not immediately clear whether the plane had taken off from Irumu, or where it was headed.

Indian Mig-21 jet crashes: An Indian air force Mig-21 plane crashed at Chursoo village in Pulwama district this morning, IAF sources said, PTI reports from Srinagar.

The pilot, the lone person aboard, was rescued with the help of local villagers, they said. The plane, which was on a routine training flight, crashed at 0942 hours, they added.

3 executed in China: Three migrants from southwest China have been executed for the murder of five members of a family in central Hunan province, the Legal Daily reported Monday, AP reports from Beijing.

The Huaihua District Intermediate People's Court sentenced the three, all from Guizhou province, earlier this month after finding them guilty of premeditated murder and robbery, the newspaper reported.

The verdict said the three killed five people from three generations of the family of a video and audio store manager last June, it added.

40 militants held in Egypt: Police have arrested 40 people accused of belonging to an outlawed Muslim militant movement, security officials said Sunday, AP reports from Cairo.

The officials said the men, including four lawyers, were suspected of belonging to the al-Gamaa al-Islamiya, or Islamic Group. The arrests were made in the past few days, said the officials. They spoke on customary condition their names not be used.

Hashimoto to attend Earth Summit: Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto will attend the UN Earth Summit in New York and then meet EU leaders in Holland and Nordic leaders in Norway after attending the Denver G7 summit, his spokesman said yesterday, Reuter from Tokyo.

Hashimoto will leave Tokyo on June 19 to take part in the summit of the Group of Seven (G7) nations plus Russia in Denver, Colorado, from June 20 to 22, spokesman Seiroku Kajiyama said. The Group of Seven is made up of Japan, Italy, Britain, France, Germany, Canada and the United States. Russia has been accepted as a full member in the political dialogue of the annual forum.

Radioactive waste leaks from Japan: A small of radioactive water leaked from a nuclear power plant in northeastern Japan but it posed no threat to people or the environment, a company spokesman said Monday, AP reports from Tokyo.

The leak from a valve of the reactor's coolant water-supply pump occurred Sunday at the Tokyo Electric Power's No. 1 Fukushima nuclear power plant at Okuma, and is being investigated, the company said. Okuma, a Pacific coastal town, is 228 kilometres (140 miles), northeast of Tokyo. An estimated 100 litres (26 gallons) of coolant leaked, said Tokyo Electric Power spokesman Hiroaki Ishibashi. He said levels of the radioactivity were no higher than usual.

2 ASEAN officials visit Cambodia: Two senior officials from the Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN) arrived Phnom Penh yesterday for a brief visit to officially inform the Cambodian government it will be admitted into the grouping in July, AFP reports from Phnom Penh.

ASEAN Secretary-General Ajit Singh and Malaysian Foreign Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi went immediately upon arrival to a meeting with Cambodian Foreign Minister Ung Huot.

Rains trigger landslides in India: 28 killed

GANGTOK, India, June 9: Heavy rains triggered landslides and building collapses that killed at least 28 people in eastern India overnight, a news agency reported Monday, says AP.

United News of India said that according to police, the dead included eight people who were buried when a four-story building and two government residences collapsed in Gangtok, capital of Sikkim state, about 1,100 kilometres (about 700 miles) east of New Delhi. Others were killed elsewhere in the state.

P.C. Sharma, director general of police in Sikkim, told UNI that 24 bodies had been recovered by Monday morning.

Jailed NLD MP dies in Myanmar

YANGON, June 9: A jailed opposition Member of Parliament died of heart disease in Myanmar on Sunday, a government statement said, reports Reuter.

Tin Shwe, 67, MP for the northern Mandalay division, was jailed in 1991 on charges of instigating civil unrest and attempting to form a parallel government to the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), said the statement, which was released today.

He died at Yangon General Hospital.

Tin Shwe was among scores of members of Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy Party (NLD) who were arrested.

Blair to answer questions of ordinary Britons

LONDON, June 9: Britain's new Prime Minister Tony Blair is to take part in 90-minute question-and-answer sessions with the public in a bid to keep in touch with ordinary people, reports Xinhua.

Downing Street sources were quoted as saying on Sunday that the question-and-answer sessions will be held each month on a Friday and the first experiment session is expected to start on Friday with the focus on crime.

Blair, whose Labour Party won a landslide victory on May 1 election, is committed to staying in touch with ordinary British citizens and will not become isolated in Westminster (British parliament), the sources said.

Mediators report progress in reviving ME peace talks

CAIRO, June 9: A top adviser to President Hosni Mubarak reported "some progress" in talks Sunday between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators aimed at reviving the Middle East peace process, reports AP.

But the adviser, Osama el-Baz, also cautioned that further sessions were needed to get peace talks between the two sides back on track.

He spoke with reporters after a 2 and half hour, closed-door session at Mubarak's Unity Palace and a private dinner with the delegates.

Yitzhak Molcho, Israel's chief negotiator, said before leaving from Cairo Airport: "The talks were constructive. They were good talks, and there will be a continuation." He declined to give further details.

The Palestinian delegates could not be reached for comment. Egypt has been trying to get Israeli-Palestinian negotiations restarted after US diplomatic efforts failed. It has proposed a six-month moratorium on Jewish settlement construction to get the Palestinians back to the table, but this has been rejected by Israel's government.

El-Baz said Sunday's session "was held in a very positive atmosphere, and some progress was made."

He added: "We need some more talks in order to bridge the gaps."

El-Baz said that both sides had agreed to further meetings — with Egyptian mediation — but did not say when or where such talks would be held.

Israeli negotiator Dani Naveh told reporters only that "I couldn't agree more with what Dr. el-Baz told you."

Also Sunday, PLO leader Yasser Arafat met with King Hussein in Jordan to try to coordinate the Arab side in peace talks. Neither spoke with reporters.

The Israeli-Palestinian talks almost failed to come off. On Saturday, Israeli media reported that the two sides had reached a tacit agreement to freeze settlement construction — which would contradict repeated statements by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Both sides stated the reports were false.

But on Sunday, Netanyahu's office threatened to cancel the Cairo meeting unless the Palestinians formally denied one Palestinian official's comment quoted by Israeli radio stations that Israel had accepted "a pause" in construction.

150 feared dead in landslide in China

BEIJING, June 9: At least 150 people are believed dead after a landslide in a mountainous area of China's southwestern Sichuan province, a local official said today.

"We no longer have any hope of recovering survivors," Meigu county official Gao Mingjie told AFP, adding that three people were confirmed dead and 147 still missing from the disaster in the early hours of last Thursday.

The torrent of mud and rocks fell after two days of heavy rain. It turned parts of four villages in the Yangshanzhou region in to a lake of mud, he said.

It carried the bodies that were recovered "very far" from their villages, he said, adding that 84 houses were destroyed and 223 other damaged.

Those left homeless had been evacuated to shelters in neighbouring areas.

All 1,527 inhabitants of the villages were members of the Yi ethnic minority. Gao said. The risk of further landslides was expected to remain high for another three or four days.

Militiamen make gains amid pandemonium Foreigners flee Brazzaville as battles still raging

BRAZZAVILLE, Republic of Congo, June 9: Four days into urban warfare between government troops and a private militia, foreigners fleeing Brazzaville on Sunday said the militiamen had made gains amid otherwise unchecked pandemonium, reports AP.

Violence erupted last week in the riverside capital of the Republic of Congo when government troops, fearing attempts to disrupt next month's presidential elections, tried to disarm members of a 5,000-strong militia loyal to former leader, Gen Denis Sassou-Nguesso.

Battles were still raging Sunday, Sassou-Nguesso's men had expanded their control from their northern strongholds to the city centre and also taken the radio and television. At least one French soldier and two government soldiers have died in the fighting.

The US embassy was forced to suspend an operation rescuing its citizens from danger zones because of the fighting. Americans flown across the

river aboard private planes hired by the US Embassy said Brazzaville was out of control. They said terrified residents were covering in their homes, surrounded by random shooting and artillery exchanges.

Since Friday, soldiers loyal to President Pascal Lissouba have been arming citizens and looting homes, witnesses report. Barricades had been set up in every street.

American missionary Joseph Harvey watched from a window as a constant stream of people ran past his home, with television sets, refrigerators, furniture, "even kitchen sinks" balanced on their heads.

"It seemed everybody had a gun," Harvey said. "Women were standing by watching and laughing. It was like a party."

A US embassy official in Kinshasa, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said embassy personnel in Brazzaville had collected Americans from unsafe neighbourhoods and taken them to secure places in the city — until fighting brought the operation to an end.

About half of the estimated 100 Americans in Brazzaville had arrived in Kinshasa by Sunday, when the embassy suspended the flights because of the fighting.

About 24 Americans had taken refuge in the US embassy, which had been hit by gunfire, but apparently was not targeted, the official said.

The French embassy has also been collecting people from embattled areas and helping some leave the country.

French citizens, who number about 2,500 in Brazzaville, have in some cases been targeted for looting by troops loyal to Lissouba, who apparently associate them with Sassou-Nguesso's pro-French policies.

Lissouba won multi-party elections in 1992, ending Sassou-Nguesso's 13-year one-party leadership.

The French government has advised its nationals since Friday to remain indoors.

There were also plans to reinforce about 450 French troops who had been stationed in Brazzaville.

Irish opposition alliance sweeps parliamentary election

LONDON, June 9: Ireland's main opposition alliance, including the Fianna Fail and the Progressive Democrats, has snatched a cliffhanger election victory by snatching 81 of the 166 seats in the lower house of parliament, reports Xinhua.

However, the Fianna Fail leader Bertie Ahern, who is set to become the country's new prime minister, is expected to have to woo some support from smaller parties or independents in an effort to form a working majority in parliament.

Ahern was quoted by press reports from Dublin as saying that he was confident that the parliament would elect him as Ireland's new prime minister when it reconvenes on June 26.

But he ruled out the possibility of enlisting electoral support from Sinn Fein, the political wing of Irish Republican Army (IRA) guerrillas, which won one seat and will take its place in the Irish parliament for the first time since the 1920s.

Air Malta plane hijack drama ends peacefully

COLOGNE, Germany, June 9: Two men who hijacked an Air Malta airplane en route from Malta to Turkey surrendered to police early Monday and freed about 80 crew and passengers on board, reports AP.

An airport spokesman said that there were two hijackers, and that both surrendered their weapons and left the aircraft at about 7:40 am, nearly three hours after it landed in Cologne.

All of the passengers and crew were released without injury.

Airport spokesman Heinz Gumbel credited the pilot with playing a constructive role in the negotiations.

Both of the hijackers were armed, but officials did not immediately have information on what type of weapons. One of the hijackers had claimed earlier to have a bomb.

Five passengers, including an elderly woman with heart trouble, were released about an hour after the flight landed.

Police carried out negotiations with just one of the hijackers, who had demanded a Turkish translator, which was supplied, and a television crew, but the drama ended before any demands for interviews were met.

The motive for the hijacking was still unclear, but airport spokesman Wolfgang Klappor said they had brought up the name of a Turk jailed in Italy for shooting the pope in 1981 during the negotiations.

The German television network ARD reported that the hijackers had demanded Mehmet Ali Agca's release from Italian prison.

The airport was notified by the pilot around 3:30 am that the Boeing 737 en route from Malta to Istanbul had been hijacked and was headed to Cologne, a spokesman said.

Earlier AFP says, a Malta Air Boeing 737 was hijacked to Germany overnight while on a flight from Malta to Istanbul in Turkey. German police said early today.

The plane carrying around 80 people landed at Cologne-Bonn airport.

Renegades open borders, stage peace rally Sierra Leone's coupmakers fear foreign intervention

FREETOWN, June 9: Sierra Leone's coupmakers say they fear that foreign military intervention to restore ousted civilian President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah is imminent and are concerned about the loss of life and property it would cause, reports Reuter.

With regional giant Nigeria reinforcing in the West African country and the UN Security Council due to meet on the crisis today, the leaders of the May 25 coup made a veiled appeal to the international community to rally against any attack.

But the army dissidents, rebel allies who have flooded into the capital since the coup and who took control of an airport near a key Nigerian military base on Friday, said Nigerian troops should leave Freetown at once.

If Nigerian troops attack the positions of the People's Army we will fight them to the death, rebel commander Captain Johannes Roberts said on Sunday at Hastings Airport, which Nigeria had been using to fly in troops and supplies.

Earlier AP adds: The soldiers who seized control of Sierra Leone in a violent coup

two weeks ago staged a rally to appeal for reopened borders and a peaceful solution to the crisis.

Saying they regretted the violence, the coup leaders appealed to the international community Sunday not to use military force to return the civilian regime to power.

Reinforcements continued to arrive Sunday for a West African force led by Nigeria. The force, which seeks the reinstatement of democratically-elected President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, launched an offensive last week that led to fighting which left more than 50 dead in this impoverished West African nation.

"Let us agree that the diplomatic option will be the answer to the problem," coup leader Maj Johnny Paul Koroma told The Associated Press. "We are not prepared for military intervention."

Koroma has admitted that his force would not be able to face the Nigerians down.

Since seizing power May 25, Koroma and his Armed Forces Revolutionary Council have yet to bring stability to the capital.

In addition to being preoccupied with a possible attack by

the Nigerians, they have also been hindered by their inability to stop marauding troops who continue to loot and harass civilians.

Fear of such soldiers — many of whom are former rebel fighters who poured in from the bush after Koroma's coup — has kept civilians from returning to work, further hampering Koroma's attempts to restore some sense of normalcy to Freetown.

Koroma hopes a UN Security Council meeting on Monday will do what no other international body has done — count out the use of military means to restore Kabbah.

The Organisation of African Unity, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and a number of other countries have said that force might be the only option to remove the soldiers from power.

Koroma's government "is fighting two giants of the UN mafia," the chief of defense staff, Brig Samuel Koroma, said bitterly. He was referring to Kabbah's career with the UN Development Programme and Sierra Leone's ambassador to the United Nations, James Jonah, who has called the Koromas "dogs."



Democratic Republic of Congo President, Laurent Desire Kabila (R), and US Ambassador to the United Nations, Bill Richardson, pose for photographs in Lubumbashi Saturday. Kabila agreed to allow a UN probe into allegations that his forces massacred refugees while fighting their way across Zaire and into power in Kinshasa. — AFP/UNB photo

Off the Record

Cow forced to drink whiskey!

VILLARDEFRADES, Spain: The death of a cow that was forced to drink four bottles of whiskey during a village festival has set off a storm of controversy and a police investigation, a Spanish newspaper reported, reports AP.

Police are questioning a group of men about the incident in Villardefrades, a village 125 miles (200 kilometres) northwest of Madrid, the daily El Pais said.

Villardefrades Mayor Mateo Perez told El Pais that the men didn't have the required permits to use the cow in the June 1 celebration.

Animal rights activists have announced they will file a lawsuit against the responsible parties under a Spanish law protecting animals, the report said Friday.

Bid to boost her husband's future

BANGKOK: The wife of Thai Prime Minister Chavalit Yongchaiyudh took a fortune-teller's advice and moved house to boost her husband's future, press reports said Monday, reports Reuter.

An aide said in a telephone interview that Khunyeng (lady) Pankrui had moved out of the couple's plush and spacious residence in suburban Bangkok Monday morning.

Although Pankrui told reporters that her decision to move out of their plush and spacious residence in suburban Bangkok was to allow its renovation, most press reports said it was based more on her superstitious beliefs.

"I fear the house may collapse. That is the sole reason for moving out," Pankrui told reporters late on Sunday.

The Yongchaiyudhs are renting another big private luxury house for 50,000 baht (1,923 US dollar) a month instead of occupying, without any expense, an official residence at Baan Phitsanulok in central Bangkok.