

Colombian rebels ready to free govt troops

CARTAGENA DEL CHAIRA, Colombia, June 15: Their army and police uniforms with machetes on the hips and ask travellers for IDs at road and river checkpoints. Some women rebels, rifles slung over their shoulders, sport earrings and painted fingernails, reports AP.

The leftist guerrillas of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the country's largest rebel group, are the only law in a huge chunk of demilitarised southern jungle as they prepare to free 70 government soldiers on Sunday.

For Colombia's military, the release will close perhaps the most humiliating chapter in a low-level war that is already more than three decades old and shows no sign of ending soon.

The soldiers pulled out of their base in Cartagena de Chaira last month to meet a rebel demand for the captives' freedom. Within hours, villagers were stripping their hill-top base of wooden planks. Cattle's took to grazing on the land-

ing spot for army helicopters.

For guerrillas yearning to be political players, the carefully orchestrated release is a publicity stunt to win legitimacy long ago taint by fading ideology and involvement in extortion and kidnapping.

The rebels seek neither dialogue nor demobilisation, wrote columnist Enrique Santor Calderon in the Bogota newspaper El Tiempo: "they're simply saying: Here, we're returning your little soldiers so you can take stock of the deed — and the war continues."

White streamers fluttered from lampposts and "Peace" T-shirts were on sale in this riverside town in Caqueta state.

Russian-made government helicopters festooned with International Red Cross banners ferried some of the soldiers to an undisclosed location near Cartagena del Chaira on Saturday.

Half a dozen European ambassadors, as well as delegates from Costa Rica and Guatemala, are expected to at-



Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina confers with her Turkish counterpart Nemettin Erbakan (L) after her arrival in Istanbul on Saturday. — AFP/UNB photo

Kabul calm following overnight bombing raid

CHARIKAR, Afghanistan, June 15: Kabul was calm Saturday following an overnight bombing raid by an opposition jet with no action reported from the northern frontlines, reports AP.

Late Friday a jet swooped low over Kabul to drop at least one powerful bomb, which locals said exploded in or around the airport on the northern city limits.

There was no immediate official report about casualties or damage, but Kabul airport was not closed to civilian traffic Saturday.

The bomb-blast and staccato anti-aircraft fire was a grim reminder to the slumbering capital that while the infantry frontlines were some 80 kilometres to the north, The ugly face of war still peered over Kabul.

This jet raid, the first over Kabul in months, was presumably carried out by the anti-Taliban alliance flying from a northern Afghan base under the control of ethnic Uzbek General Abdul Malik.

Last May Malik mutinied in support of the Taliban, but later switched sides again to rejoin with opposition commander Ahmad Shah Masood, and the Shi'ite Hezb-i-Wahdat faction leader Karim Khalili.

No action was witnessed on the frontlines around Jabul Siraj, 77 kilometres (48 miles) north of Kabul Saturday, where the Taliban and Masood forces now appear to have reached a stalemate.

There was neither an exchange of artillery fire nor any infantry activity on this front-line midway, but this may have been because of the raw summer's heat.

Taliban were seen on hilltop posts guarding the entrance to the Ghorband Valley, which further west at the strategic Shibar Pass is under the control of Khalili's Hezb-i-Wahdat.

Just south of the mouth of the Ghorband Valley, the bazaar of Parwan provincial capital Charikar, 65 kilometres (40 miles) north of Kabul, was shattered and looked abandoned, although it was not entirely void of civic activity.

The Taliban have warned locals to evacuate Charikar and surrounding areas to avoid the potential dangers of coming battle.

BRRIFFLY

Chirac opens Paris Air Show: French President Jacques Chirac inaugurated the 42nd Paris Air Show on Saturday with a warning to the United States that France would fight to remain a big-time player in the world's warplane market. AFP reports from Paris.

No doubt thinking of the controversial merger of the Boeing Company and McDonnell Douglas Chirac signalled that he regarded fighter jets and attack helicopters as jewels in the French industrial crown.

France is a great power that must conserve its capacity to produce combat aircraft, Chirac declared as he inspected an exhibition stand set up by Dassault Aviation, accompanied by French Army officers in Smart Kevlar.

Cohen meets King Fahd: US Defence Secretary William Cohen met Saudi Arabia's King Fahd on Saturday and told reporters Washington was "hopeful but sceptical" that Iran would give up its support of international terrorism following a recent election. Reuter says from Jeddah.

But he also said in an interview on his plane en route to Jeddah that the United States would not soften its headline policy toward Iran unless there were signs it had changed its attitude toward the West and its opposition to the Middle East peace process. The recent election of moderate cleric Mohammad Khatami as Iran's President had raised hopes that Tehran would soften its own tough policy towards the West.

3 die in China hotel fire: Three people were killed in a hotel fire in northeastern China's Liaoning province, it was reported yesterday. AFP says from Hong Kong.

Firemen found the burned corpses of two men and a woman in the nightclub of the hotel in Benxi where the fire believed to have started on Friday. The China-backed Wen Wei Po said. The report did not give the cause of the fire, adding only that the hotel had suffered serious damage.

Gunmen kill 6 tribesmen in Punjab: A group of armed men opened fire on a bus carrying members of a rival tribe, killing six people and injuring four in the Pakistani province of Punjab, police said Saturday. AFP reports from Multan.

Another six passengers were kidnapped in the incident with took place Friday near the town of Rojhan, 280 kilometres (175) miles west of here, they said. The attack was linked to an old feud between groups from the ethnic Baluch tribes of Bugti and Dad Esami, the police said.

Lava claims 3 in Indonesia: Close to 400 people have been evacuated from the slopes of Mount Karangtang on the northern Indonesian island of Siau which had been spewing lava and hot smoke and has killed three people, a report said yesterday. AFP says from Jakarta.

At least 392 people from the same village in the immediate danger zone on the higher slopes of Mount Karangtang have been evacuated to safer villages on the eastern side of the island, the Antara news agency quoted a local administration official, N Bawengan, as saying.

4 Indians killed in Bahrain: Four Indians were killed in an arson attack on a carpet store in the Bahraini capital Manama, according to media reports Saturday. PTI says from Dubai.

According to Gulf Daily News, L V Paulose, 41, his wife Aleyamma, their 10-year-old son Sandeep and his friend Ranjit were killed in the blaze on June 13. Paulose's two daughters were saved but a fifth person, a Philippines national, was seriously injured in the fire, the paper said.

80 peace researchers in Sweden: Some 80 peace researchers from around the world including the Dalai Lama, gathered in Stockholm on Saturday for a seminar on how to promote peace and prevent genocide, organisers said. AFP reports from Stockholm.

"We are talking about what solutions civilised countries should have in case of situations which can trigger and explosion in societies where there is a risk of genocide, as in Rwanda," said Claes Cronstedt.

Cronstedt is the chairman of the Swedish chapter of the Friends of Raoul Wallenberg, which organised the seminar.

Moderate quake hits N Japan: A moderate earthquake with a preliminary magnitude of 5.1 hit northeastern Japan on Sunday, the Meteorological Agency said. AP reports from Tokyo.

The quake occurred in Kushiro on the northernmost main island of Hokkaido, the agency said. No damage or injuries have been reported.

The focus of the quake was 100 kilometres below the southern Kushiro area, the agency said.

Hezbollah men nab 3 UN soldiers: Iranian-backed Hezbollah guerrillas apprehended three UN soldiers during a weekend trip to Beirut and held them for eight hours in the first such incident of its kind, a UN statement said Saturday. AFP reports from

Two Italian and one Irish soldier from the UN Interim Force in South Lebanon (UNIFIL) were videoing a street decked with colourful banners and flags in the Shi'ite Muslim suburb of Bourj Barajneh when they were approached by a group of men calling themselves Hezbollah security," the UNIFIL statement said.

and watch the tiger and lion fight each other." Second Prime Minister Hun Sen said. "Let them be injured first so we can capture them. Then we can consider our options."

Sporadic fighting has already reportedly broken out between the two groups. Whatever the outcome, the Maoist-inspired movement appears to be finished.

First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh said that the infighting, sparked by Pol Pot's execution of his former defence chief, Son Sen, for trying to negotiate a large-scale defection to the government, signalled "the veritable end of the Khmer Rouge."

Gen. Nhek Bunchhay, deputy army chief of staff, told a news

World's airlines need to improve safety record to avert mishap

LONDON, June 15: The world's airlines are expected to suffer a serious accident a week by 2010 unless they take effective action to improve their safety record, according to a leading aviation insurer, reports Xinhua.

Chairman of the Lloyd's Aviation Underwriters' Association Richard Maylam was quoted by the Financial Times Newspaper as saying that although airline safety had improved over the past 25 years, the rise in air travel meant greater steps were needed to prevent the accident rate rising to unacceptable levels.

Maylam explained that the figure of one crash a week was based on the existing rate of serious accidents registered across the world.

"This clearly is totally unacceptable, and due to the understandably high profile given by the world press to major airline losses, this could undoubtedly cause a crisis of confidence among the traveling public," he said.

'52 Indian troops punished for HR violations in Kashmir'

JAMMU, India, June 15: More than 50 Indian troops have been punished for human rights violations in Indian Kashmir over the past seven years, an army official said here on Saturday, reports AP.

Lieutenant-General S Padmanabhan said 52 soldiers were either court-martialled or demoted but added that allegations of rampant abuse in the state, where a Muslim separatist campaign has claimed more than 20,000 lives since 1989, were frivolous.

Human Rights groups, Muslim separatists and the media accuse thousands of Indian soldiers and paramilitary forces deployed in Kashmir of random rapes, kidnappings, torture and murder.

Most of the allegations are motivated to defame our troops," he said adding that out of 584 allegations of violations only 22 had proved correct.

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Polling begins in PNG

PORT MORESBY, Papua New Guinea, JUNE 15: Papua New Guinea began the long process of determining a new government Saturday when voting began in the fifth general election since receiving its independence from Australia, reports AP.

Officials said there were some protests and disruptions near polling stations, but there were no major problems as the two-week-long voting began.

A result is not expected for up to two weeks after the voting ends on June 28. The new parliament is not scheduled to be sworn in until July 15.

A record 2.6 million have registered out of an estimated 3.4 million eligible voters in the South Pacific country of 4.3 million. There are 2,370 candidates seeking 109 seats.

Benazir denounces kidnapping of PPP leader

KARACHI, June 15: Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto on Saturday denounced the kidnapping of a politician in her Pakistan People's Party (PPP), reports Reuter.

The PPP's deputy leader in the Sindh provincial assembly, Pir Mazharul Haq, was reported kidnapped on Thursday while he was driving towards the city of Hyderabad north of Karachi.

"It's a political kidnapping... political terrorism," Benazir told reporters in Karachi, the capital of Sindh province.

"We suspect Chief Minister Sindh, Liaquat Jatoi, was responsible for the incident," Benazir said.

The Sindh provincial government has denied the charge, saying police are investigating the disappearance.

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Israeli SC rejects appeal to indict Netanyahu

JERUSALEM, June 15: Israel's Supreme Court Sunday rejected an appeal to overrule prosecutors and charge Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu with fraud in a government influence-peddling scandal, reports AP.

The court rejected the petitions by a 4-1 vote, ruling that prosecutors' decision that there was not enough evidence to indict Netanyahu was reasonable.

"Justice has come to light," Netanyahu, spokesman Shai Bazak told Army Radio. "This is the end of this for us."

At issue is Netanyahu's appointment of a political ally as attorney-general in January. Police suspect the man, Jerusalem lawyer Roni Bar-On, was appointed in exchange for political support from Aryeh Deri, leader of a key partner in Netanyahu's ruling coalition, who allegedly believed Bar-On would act to end his corruption trial.

Writing in the majority ruling, Justice Eliazar Goldberg said the original decision not to indict the prime minister was "in a gray area."

But, he said, "The decision was a reasonable one and we cannot go against such decisions."

The lone dissenting judge, Dalia Dorner, said the state attorney should have been ordered to show cause for his decision not to indict the prime minister.

Opposition legislator Yossi Belling, who brought one of the petitions, hailed Dorner's ruling as a victory.

"It is a turning point," Belling said. "I believe it is the beginning of the end of Netanyahu's term. I don't think he can continue morally against such a backdrop."

Police had recommended in April that four people be indicted in the scandal — Netanyahu, Justice Minister Tsahi Hanegbi, senior aide Avigdor Lieberman and Deri.



Some 10,000 people march through the streets of Amsterdam Saturday to protest against unemployment and exclusion in Europe. At the top of the parade was a group of some 500 people who had been marching for the last two months from different cities in Europe to Amsterdam, where a two-day EU summit begins today. — AFP UNB photo

Khatami's aides planning to form lone political party

TEHRAN, June 15: A group which played a key role in Mohammad Khatami's landslide presidential victory is planning to form Iran's only political party, a newspaper reported Saturday, says AP.

The daily Akhbar said the group will announce the formation of the party within two months.

The newspaper report could not be independently verified.

If the new party is created, it would pose a serious challenge to hard-liners locked in a power struggle with their moderate rivals inside the ruling Islamic government.

The group, called the Servants of Construction, is an alliance of five presidential advisers and Tehran's Mayor, Gholamhossein Karbaschi. They are close to the outgoing president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, who will step down in August after two four-year terms.

An election campaign run by the group was largely responsible for Khatami's victory in last month's election. Khatami, a moderate cleric and Rafsanjani ally routed parliament Speaker Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, who was backed by the hard-line clerical establishment.

The Farsi-language daily said that as a party the group would "play a more serious role in the country's political scene," and recruit members nationwide.

Political parties are banned in Iran but hard-line, moderate and conservative factions within the government function like parties.

The paper said the group is not expected to face problems in obtaining officials' permission.

Prison revolt leaves 10 dead in Pakistan

KARACHI, June 15: A shootout late Saturday between police and prisoners trying to escape custody left nine inmates and a prison guard dead, the authorities said, reports AP.

Policemen were transferring 19 inmates from one jail to another in a southern district of Pakistan's Punjab province late Saturday night when half a dozen gunmen opened fire on their vehicle.

A prison guard was killed and the prisoners escaped, the authorities said.

A manhunt was launched and within hours scores of police had surrounded the escaped convicts in a rugged wooded region. Police opened fire killing nine inmates and arresting the others, they said.

The prisoners were being transferred from Rahim Yar Khan, roughly 500 kilometres (300 miles) north of the southern port city of Karachi, to nearby Bahawalpur when the attack occurred.

Riots erupt in East Java

JAKARTA, June 15: Mobs burned cars, shops and government buildings in riots that erupted during government-organised celebrations for an environmental award on the East Java island of Madura, a newspaper reported Sunday, reports AP.

Troops were sent and fired shots, but no casualties or arrests were reported in Saturday night's violence in Bangkalan, 650 kilometres (406 miles) east of Jakarta, the Suara Pamburuan said.

Officials could not be reached Sunday for confirmation.

During celebrations of the city's award for cleanliness, the stage was pulled down, causing panic among the organisers and spectators, the paper said.

It said East Java military commander Maj Gen Imam Utomo ordered the state-owned electricity company to turn off power for the city, hoping the blackout would prevent the rioting from spreading.

Bangkalan district head Djakfar Safii told the paper that the causes of the rioting were being investigated.

"It has nothing to do with the elections," Djakfar said.

The paper quoted unspecified sources as saying the rioting was touched off by rumors that the festival was held to celebrate the landslide victory of the ruling party Golkar in the May 29 general elections.

Earlier this month, rioters burned shops, houses and government buildings in nearby Sampang, 50 kilometres (31 miles) southeast of Bangkalan, in a protest claiming vote rigging in favour of the ruling party.

Djakfar said the situation had returned to normal on Sunday.

Last Friday, election protests erupted in rioting in Jember, in East Java, 800 kilometres (500 miles) south-east of Jakarta.

Ten of the rioters were injured and 24 were arrested for questioning, said Lt Col Sofwat Hadi.

The protesters were urging the opposition Muslim-based United Development Party not to accept the election results.

Off the Record

Bid to break record in climbing

KATMANDU: High winds howling in from the Tibetan plateau delayed British mountaineer Alan Hinkes and threatened to scuttle his attempt to break the record for climbing the Himalayas, reports AP.

Hinkes returned to the Nepalese capital Saturday after taking a month to scale Lhotse, the 8,511-meter (28,086-foot) peak that is the world's fourth tallest.

Hinkes, 42, wants to be the first to climb six mountains higher than 8,000 meters (26,400 feet) in one year. There are only 14 such mountains in the world, and he has climbed all other eight in the past nine years.

But the month-long delay at Lhotse was a serious setback to his timetable. He had reached base camp at 5,350 meters (17,655 ft) in April, in plenty of time to complete the climb by early May. But he could not reach the summit until May 23.

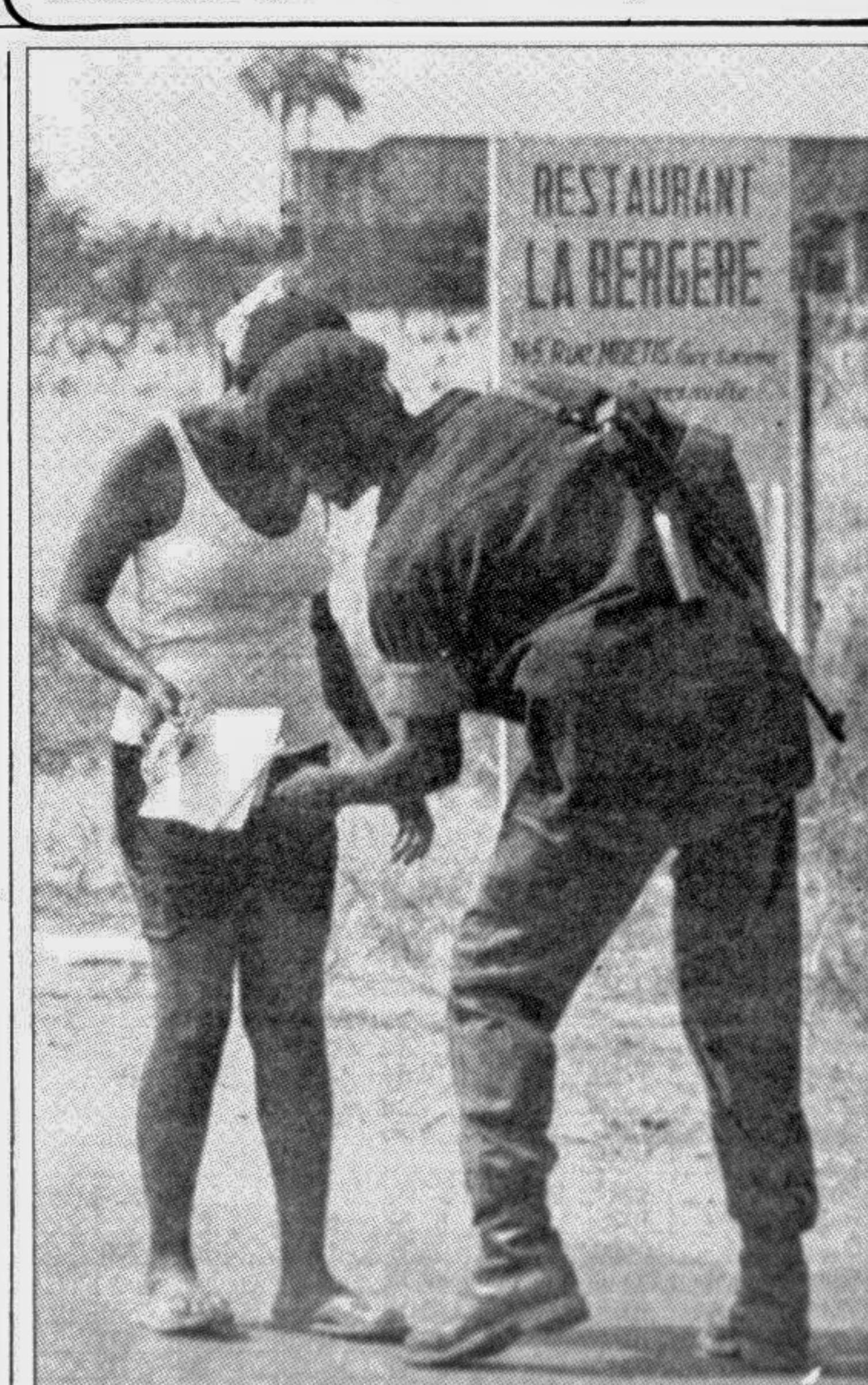
"I had to wait in the base camp for so many days for the weather to improve. It was a long and frustrating wait," he told The Associated Press after flying in by helicopter from the mountain.

He left Lhotse base camp May 27 by helicopter for Makalu, but was stopped again by ferocious winds and blizzards battering the upper level and icing the slopes.

Hinkes said he had to turn back at 7,300 metres (24,090 feet) so that he could leave by May 31, the last day of the spring climbing season.

"I could have climbed Makalu if I had gone there earlier," he said.

It was the second time Hinkes abandoned a Makalu expedition. Nine years ago his climb was cut short by an avalanche.



A Cobra militiaman, faction of former Congo president Denis Sassou-Nguesso, searches a Congolese girl Saturday in northern Bazzaville, stronghold of the faction. Nearly 5,000 foreigners have been evacuated from Bazzaville over the past week to escape fighting between Congolese government and opposition militia forces. — AFP/UNB photo

Factional clashes leave Khmer Rouge on the verge of collapse

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, June 15: The Khmer Rouge appeared to be on the verge of collapse, as rival factions of Cambodia's former rulers prepared Sunday for armed confrontation in the jungles of Northern Cambodia, reports AP.

Pol Pot, who presided over a reign of terror in the late 1970s which left 2 million Cambodians dead, is reported to be seriously ill and has been cornered by loyalists of Khmer Rouge general Ta Mok.

Some of Cambodia's prime ministers said Saturday the army should sit back while the group that created one of the 20th Century's bloodiest regimes destroyed itself.

"We sit on the mountaintop

conference that Pol Pot and some 200 troops were surrounded near the border with Thailand by about 1,000 former comrades led by Ta Mok, a general legendary for brutality. The border was sealed.

Nhek Bunchhay claimed Ta Mok's faction had agreed to defect to the government, completing a process that began last year when some 10,000 war-weary guerrillas broke with Pol Pot and laid down arms.

Nhek Bunchhay, a member of Ranariddh's FUNCINPEC party, said he wanted to send Ta Mok ammunition to cement the defection and fight if necessary. He expressed hope Pol Pot could be taken alive.

Second Prime Minister Hun Sen, who leads the rival Cambodian People's Party in the

tense ruling coalition, said no help should be given either group. Instead, they should be allowed to destroy each other.

The disagreement reflected attempts by both parties to woo support from previous Khmer Rouge defectors, whose military prowess could influence the outcome of next year's elections.

The royalists, the weaker of the coalition parties, have been more willing to cut deals with the historic Khmer Rouge leaders and have taken the lead in negotiating with them at their last stronghold in Anlong Veng, northern Cambodia.

Nhek Bunchhay, disclosing the process in detail for the first time Saturday, said that a tentative deal had been reached to

allow Pol Pot. Son Sen and Ta Mok — the group's most blood-stained leaders — to leave Cambodia for exile in an unnamed country.

On June 1, Nhek Bunchhay said he led a delegation to Anlong Veng and met Khieu Samphan, the group's figurehead president. They were on the verge of an agreement, but in the end, Pol Pot along stood against it and accused Khieu Samphan of betrayal.

In the early hours of June 10, Pol Pot called a meeting of the top leadership, Nhek Bunchhay said. Son Sen was apprehensive and did not wish to take part. He was shot to death in his home shortly afterward, along with his wife, on charges of treason.

Eight of their family mem-