

International

Anti-Taliban forces dig in north of Kabul

KABUL, July 21: Opposition soldiers dug in north of the beleaguered capital on Monday, a day after wresting control of a key town from their Taliban enemies and moving within rocket range of Kabul, reports AP.

The anti-Taliban alliance on Sunday swept into Charikar, the capital of Parwan province, about 60 kilometres (36 miles) north of Kabul, largely deserted because of the recent fighting. Charikar, is considered strategically important because it puts the opposition within rocket range of the city.

The opposition also claimed to have captured Baghram air base, some 40 kilometres (24 miles) north of Kabul, but Taliban soldiers said it was still firmly in their hands.

Despite the loss of Charikar there was no evidence that the Taliban was scrambling to get reinforcements to the frontline. Barely 100 Taliban soldiers in pick up trucks were seen heading north out of Kabul, where Taliban troops have been

locked in bitter fighting with opposition soldiers.

The opposition, led by former military chief Ahmed Shah Massoud and Uzbek warrior, Malik Pahlawan, is fighting the Taliban on three different fronts, in northwestern Badkhis province, northern Kunduz province and outside Charikar, north of Kabul.

Shortly after midnight on Monday an opposition jet dropped two bombs on the combined military and civilian airport, causing little damage and no injuries.

It was the third bombing raid over Kabul in the past 24 hours. Two bombs landed in Kabul's northern Khairkhana neighbourhood. Eight people were killed when they were buried beneath the rubble of ruined homes.

A spokesman for Massoud, who gives his name only as Abdullah, said the opposition strategy is to press the Taliban into negotiations.

The opposition wants Kabul turned over to a neutral force

and all the weapons removed from the city, said Abdullah in a satellite telephone interview from his headquarters in the Panjshir Valley.

"We want to see Kabul demilitarised," he said.

The Taliban, meanwhile, wants the release of its high-ranking officials being held prisoner by the opposition in northern Afghanistan.

AFP adds: There has been no change in the frontlines north of Kabul, contrary to anti-Taliban faction claims of an overnight advance, witnesses said today.

Frontline Taliban fighters admitted to visiting Kabul-based journalists that the Parwan provincial capital Charikar was still in the hands of the opposition, but claimed control of neighbouring Baghram air base.

In a radio broadcast Sunday night an official spokesman of ex-defence minister Ahmed Shah Massoud claimed the Taliban had also been pushed out of Qarabagh.



Police inspect the site where the body of Muslim legislator Mohammed Maharoo (L) is lying after suspected Tamil Tiger guerillas opened fire at his vehicle Sunday in the northern eastern district of Trincomalee. Five other people in the vehicle were also killed in the attack.

— AFP/UNB photo

New US envoy pledges to enhance profile of Dhaka

Aziz Haniffa writes from Washington

The US ambassador-designate to Bangladesh, John C. Holzman, has pledged to enhance the profile of Dhaka, often ignored in US policy towards South Asia due to the contentious relationship between India and Pakistan.

Holzman, a career diplomat nominated by President Bill Clinton to be the new envoy to Dhaka, said, "I will work diligently to advance US interests and values in Bangladesh and to continue this pattern of bilateral cooperation."

Appearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs as part of his confirmation hearing, Holzman noted that most of his foreign service career had been spent in the developing world, especially in South Asia.

Holzman, who served in New Delhi as an economic officer, in Islamabad as the deputy chief of mission, and was the director of the office of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh Affairs while in Washington, said, he was looking forward to his tenure in Dhaka to continue "My association with a region that accounts for over one-fifth

of the world's population, has extraordinary potential for growth and development, but is encumbered by enormous political, economic and environmental challenges."

He declared that the US and Bangladesh "Enjoy cordial, productive and expanding relations even though the two countries are on opposite sides of the globe."

He said the present government of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina Wajed continued to face the challenge of working with "The opposition parties to establish a more stable and open political climate in which the country can develop and realise significantly more rapid economic growth."

But he acknowledged that Bangladesh had already achieved important progress in certain areas and noted that in cooperation with the US Agency for International Development (USAID), it has "Significantly reduced population growth while lifting food production."

"Today the country is virtually self-sufficient in rice," he noted.

— India Abroad News Service

BRIEFLY

Jemima's father cremated:

The grieving family of the late billionaire Sir James Goldsmith flew into Britain Sunday to gather at his palatial London home, AFP reports from London.

The Goldsmith family arrived in a small convoy of black Limousines at Ormeau Lodge, Sir James's Georgian house in Richmond, southwest London, in the afternoon. Meanwhile the Franco-British financier was cremated at Marbella, funeral officials at the Spanish resort said.

13 die as ferry sinks in Indonesia:

A ferry carrying twice its capacity sank on Sunday in south Sulawesi, leaving at least 13 people dead and scores missing, the official news agency Antara reported Monday, AP reports from Jakarta.

Antara said a four-year-old child was among the dead. Five of the injured were in critical condition.

Mother Teresa arrives in Calcutta:

Mother Teresa arrived from Delhi last night in an Indian Airlines flight, PTI reports from Calcutta.

She was received at the NSC Bose International Airport by the nuns of the Missionaries of Charity. The ailing but cheerful mother was brought down from the aircraft in a wheelchair and taken straight to a waiting car. She was then driven to the Mother's house on a JC Bose road.

Ranariddh meets Singaporean PM:

Seeking support from Southeast Asian leaders ahead of a meeting this week, Cambodia's ousted premier Prince Ranariddh met Monday with Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, AP reports from Singapore.

A Singaporean government official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said the meeting took place at the prime minister's official residence.

40 feared drowned as boat sinks in India

NEW DELHI, July 21: At least 40 people were feared drowned after an overloaded boat sank in northern India on Sunday, reports AFP.

Police said today they could not confirm earlier reports that 70 people were killed in the accident on Sunday.

The Press Trust of India said today that 30 of the 70 passengers, all Nepalese, had managed to swim ashore after the boat sank in the rain-swollen Rapti river in the Shrawasti district of Uttar Pradesh, bordering Nepal.

A police officer from Shrawasti told AFP by telephone that there were no concrete details on the accident so far.

"Our men have gone there but it is still unclear how many have died," he said.

9 killed as bldg collapses in Karachi

KARACHI, July 21: Monsoon rains battered the southern port city of Karachi on Monday collapsing flimsy slum dwellings and killing nine people, including four children, the city authorities said, reports AP.

All the victims were living in the same house in Karachi's poor central district when it collapsed killing everyone inside, they said.

Several other homes were washed away or collapsed in the same area of Karachi, but others managed to escape.

Rains early Monday lashed the poor central district of Karachi causing low lying areas to flood and washing away dozens of poorly constructed sun-baked mud homes, the authorities said.

Algerian forces kill 100 militants

ALGIERS, Algeria, July 21: Algerian government security forces killed about 100 Muslim militants during a raid on a clandestine meeting south of the capital, French television reported Monday, reports AP.

The new Algerian government, elected in June, has been trying to end a 5-year-old Muslim insurgency that has left more than 60,000 people dead in this oil-rich North African country.

LCI television said the raid on the Armed Islamic Group, the most feared militant wing, occurred in the rugged Ataba region. It didn't say when the operation took place.

Ranariddh's troops launch counterattack

Hun Sen pushes Nat'l Assembly to okay his bloody takeover

PHNOM PENH, Cambodia, July 21: Coup leader Hun Sen pushed the National Assembly toward rubber-stamping his bloody takeover Monday, while his troops battled those of deposed co-premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh for a key northern base, reports AP.

The National Assembly's agenda-setting committee approved a session next week that is likely to include endorsement of Hun Sen's choice to replace Ranariddh as co-premier. The vote will keep up a fiction of power-sharing while Hun Sen consolidates his rule as Cambodia's new strongman.

The manoeuvring came amid renewed fighting for the northern town of Samrong, which has traded hands several times in the past five days between forces espousing loyalty to Hun Sen or Ranariddh.

For Ranariddh's royalists, the town, 40 kilometres (25 miles) south of the border with Thailand, is a potential base they cannot afford to lose and still keep alive hopes of armed

resistance against Hun Sen, who now controls the vast majority of the country.

Since smashing the royalists in Phnom Penh in pitched street fighting after the July 5 coup, Hun Sen's larger forces have pushed the royalists toward Thailand to deny them territory before monsoon rains halt fighting, giving them time to regroup.

Kang Heang, third deputy governor of Siem Reap province, where Samrong is located, claimed that "Government forces occupied Samrong yesterday and will keep pushing northward." He provided no further details.

The royalists have counted on recreating an alliance with former Khmer Rouge guerillas. They were allied with the Khmer Rouge in the 1980s against a government led by Hun Sen and installed and militarily supported by Vietnam, Cambodia's historic enemy.

Last week, some 300 former Khmer Rouge troops the royalists had considered allies split

from their unit, Division 519, and switched sides to Hun Sen. Prum Su, the division's pro-royalist commander, described them as "traitors."

The renegade guerillas — some wearing Khmer Rouge trademark Mao caps — walked into Samrong unopposed Thursday evening, witnesses said. Townspeople cheered their arrival, claiming the royalists had looted cows, pigs, motorcycles and televisions at gunpoint.

AFP adds: Forces loyal to Cambodia's ousted first premier have launched a counter-attack on their former last base in northern Cambodia but have failed to recapture it, government officials said here today.

The FUNCINPEC troops of toppled first prime minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh, who lost the town of Samrong to forces loyal to rival Co-Premier Hun Sen last week, launched the offensive late Sunday, a Phnom Penh spokesman said.

Political compulsions make him 'weak', admits Gujral

Mahesh Uniyal writes from New Delhi

Tiring of differences within the ruling coalition, Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral admitted he has been "weak" but added his hands were tied by "political expediency."

"Persons facing corruption charges are being allowed to continue in high offices due to political expediency," the prime minister told a seminar in the Indian capital.

He said he was being described as a "weak prime minister," but added: "What can I do? The laws of the country are such that one finds himself in a helpless position."

Gujral was referring to Bihar Chief Minister Laloo Prasad Yadav, whose refusal to quit office after being implicated in Bihar's Rs 9.5 billion embezzlement case has plunged the 14-party United Front (UF) ruling coalition into a worsening crisis.

"It is ironical that political parties forgive corruption if it was done by their own politicians and launch a tirade whenever the accused belongs to a rival party," the prime minister added.

Gujral said that strong opposition from within the UF had made it difficult for his government to use a controversial

constitutional provision to dismiss the Bihar government. Denying that he had failed to act decisively on the Bihar crisis, the 78-year-old prime minister said that he was caught between the UF partners who had different views on this.

The UF was in deeper trouble with serious differences over the admission into the UF of the Bihar chief minister's splinter party which broke off from the prime minister's Janata Dal (JD).

The left parties, which have got used to calling the shots in the UF, and Gujral's JD colleagues want Yadav's party to be kept out, but the prime minister himself and key southern regional parties do not favour keeping the Bihar chief minister out.

The UF crisis took a new twist after a meeting of top UF leaders at the prime minister's residence this week to decide on admitting the Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) into the UF. The informal meeting held ahead of the UF executive panel meet on July 25 had agreed to keep the RJD out of the alliance, UF spokesman and Information and Broadcasting Minister Jaipal Reddy announced after the consultation.

But the very next day, the southern regional Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), which played a key role in the selection of Gujral to head the government, publicly declared that no such decision was taken. The statement of DMK chief and the chief minister of Tamil Nadu state, Muthuvel Karunanidhi, has since been supported by UF convenor and chief minister of southern Andhra Pradesh state, Chandrababu Naidu.

This has thrown the UF leadership into confusion. Alliance spokesman Reddy has now said a final decision on admitting Yadav's party would only be taken at the July 25 meet of the UF Steering Committee.

The Congress continues on the side of Gujral with its chief Sitaran Kesri having declared that his party will continue supporting the government. "Gujral is a transparent, objective and straightforward intellectual, and a patriotic leader. Going by his record as Prime Minister, I am certain that he will give us no reason to revise our stand," Kesri said in an interview published in the India Today weekly magazine.

— India Abroad News Service

95 pc turnout reported in Vietnam polls

HANOI, July 21: The ruling Communist Party on Monday praised the elections for the National Assembly that drew more than 95 per cent of voters to the polls in most parts of the country, reports AP.

The Communist Party newspaper The People described Sunday's polling for the 450-seat legislative body as a "Festival to the Vietnamese people."

Most localities reported a turnout of more than 95 per cent while more than 97 per cent showed up at polling booths in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Some 40 million people were eligible to vote.

With only some 20 per cent of the outgoing members running for re-election and several old guard leaders bowing out, the election will give the assembly a younger, fresher face. There were also more women among candidates than in past elections.

Although 83 per cent of the candidates were from the Communist Party, voters were able to choose among workers, union representatives, educators and others. The non-party members were nominated by state-backed organisations or ran as independents.

Election results will not be announced until next Sunday, because all ballots are counted by hand and reported up from the grass-roots level to central

authorities. Sunday's polling was billed as an indirect selection of Vietnam's new government leadership, which will come from assembly ranks after the body convenes in mid-September.

While few dramatic changes are expected, observers say the passing of the old guard may instill more vigor into the political system and allow for some independent voices to emerge within the party structure.

"This is a very democratic election," said party General Secretary Do Muoi as he cast the first ballot in his Hanoi neighborhood. "Everybody has the right to make their own choice."

Muoi, 83, opted not to run for re-election, saying he wanted to give way to a younger generation. Premier Vo Van Kiet and President Le Duc Anh also announced that they were stepping down.

Deputy Premier Phan Van Khai, 64, is among the strongest contenders for premier, while Anh is likely to be succeeded by Foreign Minister Nguyen Manh Cam.

Since the top party job is a five-year, appointed position independent of the assembly, Muoi may not necessarily leave office at the same time as his colleagues.

Kim Jong-Il calls for peaceful reunification of two Koreas

TOKYO, July 21: North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il has called for the peaceful reunification of the two Koreas, the country's official media reported today, says Reuters.

The state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said Kim made the call in a letter he sent on July 13 to a Washington-based Korean-American woman journalist who identified as Mun Myong-ja.

KCNA said Kim wrote to Mun after she visited North Korea to cover ceremonies on July 8 marking the end of the three-year mourning period for Kim's father, Kim Il-Sung, the founder of North Korea.

"The reunification of the country is an urgent task facing the Korean people and the president (Kim Il-Sung) devotedly worked for this national cause all his life," KCNA quoted Kim as saying in the letter.

"We will do all we can to reunify the country, independently and peacefully, and on the principle of great national unity as the president wished," Kim added.

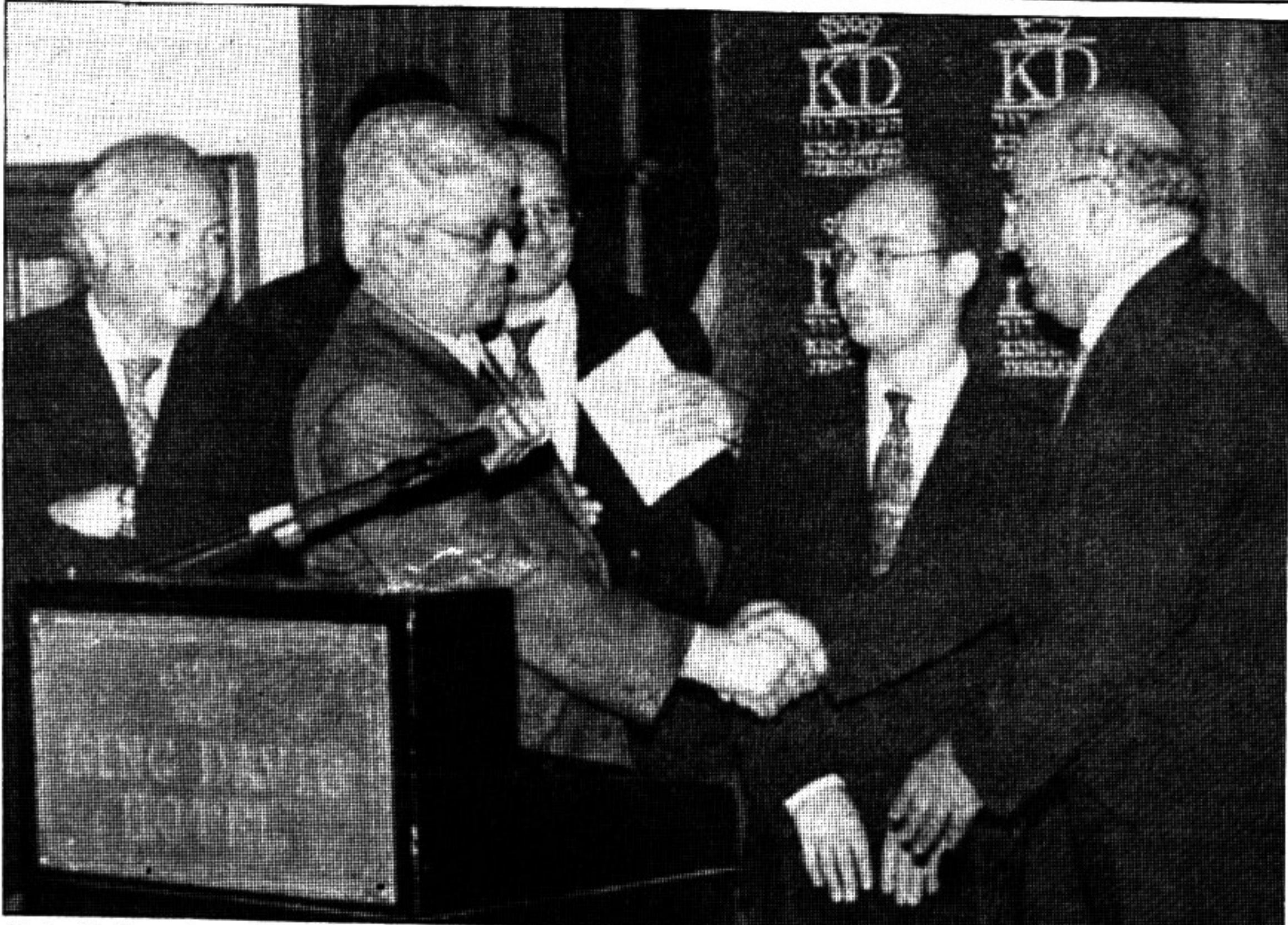
The United States, North Korea, its arch-rival South Korea and China meet in New York on August 5 to decide details on negotiations aimed at closing the books on the 1950-53 Korean war by replacing a fraying armistice with a formal peace treaty.

In the letter, Kim promised that North Korea would live up to pledges it had made to the United States during negotiations to improve relations with Washington.

"In our relations with the United States, we will faithfully implement the agreed points in conformity with the idea and principle of our foreign policy," Kim wrote. "This is our invariable stand."

The letter did not spell out what issues were involved.

But as part of a deal between Washington and Pyongyang, North Korea has suspended a nuclear programme that the United States suspected was linked to developing atomic weapons.



Palestinian International Cooperation Minister Nabil Shaath (R) shakes hands with Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy at the end of a press conference with European envoy for the Middle East Miguel Angel Moratinos (L) Sunday in Jerusalem after their meeting. The three met to discuss how to resume Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations broken off four months ago.

— AFP/UNB photo

African leaders rally behind Kabila

KINSHASA, July 21: African heads of state and country delegations rallied Sunday behind the new regime of President Laurent Kabila and lashed out at those they accused of trying to undermine the new government, reports AP.

Leaders from Uganda, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Central African Republic, Eritrea, Zambia and presidential envoys from Ethiopia and Gabon attended the one-day summit in this Central African capital.

Also present was Rwandan President Pasteur Bizimungu. Rwanda has admitted that it provided decisive military support to Kabila's successful uprising in the former Zaire against longtime dictator Mobutu Sese Seko.

Kabila's 2-month-old administration is under international pressure to cooperate with a UN investigation into reports of mass killings by Kabila's men of Hutu refugees from Rwanda. The refugees included remnants of the former, Hutu-dominated Rwandan Army and an extremist militia that killed some 500,000 Tutsis in Rwanda

in 1994 before being driven into neighbouring Congo by the victorious Tutsi rebels who now rule Rwanda.

The United Nations this month issued a report accusing Kabila's troops of killing so many Rwandan Hutu refugees in eastern Congo during their campaign to topple Mobutu that the deaths could be considered genocide.

Congo has blocked the start of a full-scale investigation into the alleged massacres by its fighters. Government officials objected to a member of the investigating team, whom they accused of being biased.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan has agreed to send a new team to Congo to conduct the investigation and Kabila has vowed to cooperate. He denies involvement in any massacres.

Although the refugee controversy was not on the agenda for the one-day meeting, it evidently was the most crucial point discussed by the African leaders.

"The heads of state and government noted with dismay

the persistent, unsubstantiated disinformation campaign against the Democratic Republic of Congo and other countries in the region," began a statement by the summit leaders at the end of the day. "We view this as an attempt to undermine the leadership of the Democratic Republic of Congo. We therefore condemn this campaign of vilification and unjust pressures that are being made against the Democratic Republic of Congo."

The statement, read by the spokesman of Zimbabwe President Paul Mugabe, reiterated a demand made by Kabila to allow an independent and neutral commission study the alleged massacres and offered their participation in such a board of inquiry.

The leaders also appealed for material and financial assistance to help develop the infrastructure, educational system and economy of the impoverished country.

Those countries that were invited, but did not attend were South Africa, Burundi, Angola, Tanzania and Botswana.