

Myanmar's entry into ASEAN causes problems for its ties with EU, US

KUALA LUMPUR, July 25: Myanmar's 2-day-old membership in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations has caused problems for the group's relations with the European Union and the United States, the Asian group's chief executive said Friday, reports AP.

The EU has said it is not ready as yet to see Myanmar accede to a economic cooperation agreement between the two regional trade groupings, ASEAN Secretary-General Ajit Singh told reporters.

This is the first shot from the EU side. Let's sit down with the EU and find out what kind of problems they have with Myanmar being in ASEAN. We'll proceed from there," he said.

He said the nine-nation group also faced diplomatic problems with the United States. "It has something to do with the issuing of visas to senior (Burmese) officials travelling to the United States," he said. "But we don't have the same kind of cooperation agreement with the United States" that ASEAN has with

the EU, he added. An EU representative and US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright are meeting with the ASEAN foreign ministers Saturday through Tuesday in annual talks on security and other issues.

The United States had lobbied to keep Myanmar out of ASEAN, citing the country's huge heroin trade and repressive military regime, which has ignored the results of 1990 elections. Washington and some European leaders have called for isolation of the Burmese regime, and the US government has banned new American investment in the country.

The 30-year-old ASEAN, originally devised as a bulwark against communist Indochina, admitted Myanmar and Laos on Wednesday, joining members Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. Cambodia was set to join on the same day, but ASEAN postponed its membership after Hun Sen ousted his co-prime minister, Prince Norodom Ranariddh, on July 5.

'Weak' govt in New Delhi can't solve Kashmir crisis: Benazir

COLOMBO, July 25: Former Pakistan prime minister Benazir Bhutto today accused India of fueling cross-border tensions and said the Kashmir crisis cannot be solved with what she called a "weak" coalition government in New Delhi, reports AFP.

Benazir said the minority government of Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral was incapable of taking "strong decisions" to resolve the dispute which had been the cause of two of the three wars between them.

"Weak coalition governments (in New Delhi) are not in a position to take firm decisions," Benazir told reporters here. "You need to take strong decisions to solve this dispute."

The former Pakistan premier said despite the prime minister of India and Pakistan having had a one to one meeting

in the Indian Ocean atoll nation of Maldives on May 12, bilateral tensions have mounted.

What has happened since this detente? Benazir said. "India has deployed more troops in Kashmir, cross-border violence has increased and India has deployed the Pakistan-specific Prithvi missile at Jalandhar (near the Pakistan border)."

Benazir said her arch rival, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was "unaware of international relations" and decided to ignore violations of Pakistan air space by the Indian Air Force and the troop deployment in Kashmir.

She said it was her late prime minister father, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, and herself who developed missile capabilities for Pakistan to serve as a deterrent against India.

"Pakistan has nuclear knowledge and a missile deliv-

ery system and this will have a deterrent effect on any kind of adventure against Pakistan by India," she said.

She is here to attend the 20th anniversary of the political career of Sri Lanka opposition legislator Anura Bandaranaike, the estranged brother of President Chandrika Kumaratunga.

Earlier report says: The 27-day-old boycott of government functions by journalists working for local, national and international news organisations in Kashmir ended yesterday following shifting of the three police officials accused in last month's incidents of beating media persons, says PTI.

The officials, allegedly involved in two incidents on June 27 in which some journalists on duty were beaten up, were shifted Wednesday evening.



Bernard Rostker, the Department of Defence Special Assistant for Gulf War Illness, displays Thursday at the Pentagon in Washington a map of Khamsiyan, Iraq, where the DOD says troops were possibly exposed to a low-level nerve agent during weapons destruction after the Gulf War. The Pentagon increased its previous figure and now says 98,910 service members were exposed, but that the exposure amounts pose no long term health risk. — AFP/UNB photo

Australian FM condemns LTTE

Fresh fighting in Lanka

COLOMBO, July 25: The Sri Lankan Navy fought a major battle with Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) rebel boats off the island's east coast late on Thursday, naval officials said today, reports Reuters.

The officials said a flotilla of some 25 rebel boats were sailing to LTTE-held Mullaitivu on Sri Lanka's northeastern coast when the navy attacked them and damaged several rebel boats.

The navy intercepted an enemy convoy and a confrontation turned into a major battle that lasted some eight hours on Thursday night, a naval spokesman told Reuters.

"The enemy craft fled after the battle. Two sailors were injured and two naval boats sustained minor damages," the spokesman said.

He said it was not clear how many rebels had been killed.

An LTTE spokesman in London was not immediately available for comment.

Meanwhile, a Defence Min-

istry statement said six rebels were killed in a skirmish near Nedunkeni, which the military captured in operation "Jaya Sikuru," or "Sure of Victory."

Nedunkeni is some 40 km (25 miles) further northeast of the northern government-held town of Vavuniya.

Some 20,000 troops launched the offensive in the Wanni region in May to open a strategic highway linking northern Jaffna to the rest of the island.

AFP adds: Fresh fighting broke out in northern Sri Lanka between government forces and Tamil Tiger guerrillas leaving at least 38 rebels and four soldiers killed, the Defence Ministry here said Thursday.

Gunmen of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam launched a mortar bomb attack on government troops near Nedunkeni on Wednesday, killing four soldiers and wounding 11, ministry spokesman Sarath Munasinghe said.

He told reporters the mili-

tary hit back using helicopter gunships and killed at least 15 rebels and wounded 15.

Munasinghe said another rebel was killed at the nearby Puliyankulam area.

The Defence Ministry in a statement issued a few hours later, raised the rebel casualties to 37 in the main battle.

Meanwhile, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer Thursday condemned Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels but ruled out military assistance to fight the separatist guerrillas.

Downer bluntly criticised Sri Lanka's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and said there was no "terrorist solution" to the Indian Ocean island's ethnic conflict.

"The Australian government unequivocally condemns the terrorist activities of the LTTE," Downer told reporters here after talks with Sri Lankan ministers and leaders of minority parties.

'New Jewish housing project will end ME peace process'

JERUSALEM, July 25: Palestinian leaders warned Friday that a decision by Jerusalem's city government to build a new Jewish housing project in an Arab neighbourhood will end the peace process, reports AP.

Ahmed Tibi, an adviser to Yasser Arafat, said the patience of the Palestinians has already been strained to the breaking point, and the building project at Ras al-Amud is a new provocation.

"This is a conscious declaration of war against the Palestinians in east Jerusalem and the Palestinians in general," he told Israel's Army Radio. "It is total defiance of the spirit of the signed (peace) agreement. What more can be expected of the Palestinians?"

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in a statement Thursday from his office, said he was opposed to the plan to build some 65 apartments for Jews in the middle of the Arab neighborhood of Ras al-Amud and would work to prevent it from being carried out.

However, according to Hagai Elias, spokesman for the city government, Jerusalem cannot prevent the building.

The chief Palestinian negotiator, Saeb Erekat, said he was shocked by the decision. "I can't believe it. If this goes on, it is definitely the destruction of the peace process," he told The Associated Press.

"I urge the government to resort to sanity, wisdom, and courage and immediately revoke this decision."

Arafat, asked about the decision as he entered his office Friday morning, said only: "We will see and we will follow up."

Netanyahu only learned of the decision late Thursday night, spokesman Shai Bazak said.

Netanyahu broke off a late-night meeting with striking union leaders to discuss the decision with Defense Minister Yitzhak Mordechai, Israel Radio said Netanyahu and Mordechai were furious that they had not been informed about the decision in advance.

The Palestinians want to establish the capital of a future state in east Jerusalem and regard any construction of Jewish housing projects there as an attempt to thwart that aim. Israel captured east Jerusalem in the 1967 Mideast war.

Another Jewish housing project started in east Jerusalem in March led to the breakdown of the peace negotiations and to sporadic Palestinian riots in the West Bank.

The Ras al-Amud permit would allow 65 homes to be built on 3 a half 2 acres bought by Miami millionaire Irving Moscovitz.

Jerusalem Mayor Ehud Olmert said the project had been approved by all the planning commissions. There was no legal basis for rejecting Moscovitz's application, and Palestinian threats were no reason to shelve it, he said.

"It is high time that questions concerning Jerusalem were not decided on the basis of how Arafat will react," he told Israel Radio.

BRIEFLY

NASA to launch next mission Aug 7: NASA has set August 7 as the launch date for its next space shuttle flight, a science mission by Discovery. AP reports from Cape Canaveral.

During the 11-day flight, the US-Canadian crew will release and retrieve an atmospheric-research satellite, test a short robot arm that's similar to what will be used by the Japanese on the future international space station, and observe the Hale-Bopp comet with an ultraviolet telescope. The mission was originally scheduled for July, but was bumped to make room for Columbia's reflight, completed last week. As a result, the comet will be twice as far away and therefore harder for the crew to see.

Taiwan wants to buy US choppers: Taiwan wants to buy 479 million dollars worth of Super Cobra attack helicopters and supporting equipment and expertise, the US Defence Department said on Thursday. Reuters reports from Washington.

The proposed sale, requested by the Taipei economic and cultural representative office in the United States, would involve the purchase of 21 helicopters primarily to conduct military exercises for purpose of self defence and military preparedness, the Pentagon said in a statement. The prime contractor will be Bell Helicopter of Fort Worth Texas.

Mine blast claims 2 in Bosnia: Two Bosnian Federation soldiers were killed in a mine blast during a mine-clearing operation near the northern town of Maglaj on Wednesday, the NATO-led Stabilisation Force said Thursday. AFP reports from Tuzla.



Henry Kissinger, secretary of state in the Nixon administration, discusses the opening of a dialogue between the United States and China in 1971 and 1972 during the 25th anniversary of 'Ping Pong Diplomacy' celebrated at the United Nations in New York Thursday. In the background are a tapestry of the Great Wall of China and the flags (L-R) of the United States, the United Nations, and China. — AFP/UNB photo

State of emergency ends Mejdani sworn in as new Albanian president

TIRANA, July 25: Albania's new Parliament elected a successor to the nation's ousted president Thursday and declared an end to a state of emergency imposed four months ago when the Balkan nation slid toward anarchy, says AP.

The Socialist-dominated body voted 110-3 in favour of Rexhep Mejdani, a 53-year-old physicist and Socialist Party general secretary. The Democratic Party of former President Sali Berisha, which holds 27 of the 155 Parliament seats, boycotted the vote.

Upon being sworn in, Mejdani accepted the resignation of caretaker premier Bashkim Fino and named Socialist Party leader Fatos Nano as the new premier. The new president said he would work toward reconciliation.

"I feel deep responsibility for the office I now hold," Mejdani said. "This country needs peace and love instead of dividing people."

Albania descended into anarchy and chaos this year when widespread protests over failed high-risk investment funds turned into a tumultuous drive to oust Berisha's government, which was blamed for allowing the pyramid schemes to operate and accused of profiting from them.

The government clamped down with curfews, media cen-

sorship and roadblocks. Refugees spilled out of the country and a force of multinational peacekeepers moved in to protect aid shipments for those who remained.

Berisha finally agreed to call early elections, held in June and July, which saw his Democrats suffer huge losses. He quit in disgrace Wednesday, belatedly fulfilling a promise to resign if his party lost the elections.

The Democrats called Mejdani's election "deplorable."

The party also criticised the lawmakers' decision to lift the state of emergency as "an unreasonable, hasty decision."

"Since order and peace do not exist in the country, this opens a new period of criminality," the party said in a statement.

At midday Thursday, police said at least 12 people, including a police officer, had been killed in the previous 24 hours in various conflicts.

Nano, 45, next must choose his Cabinet, which will be subject to parliamentary approval. The Socialists, Albania's former Communists, hold 101 seats in Parliament. In a sign that they will take other parties seriously, the body elected a Socialist Democrat, Skender Gjinushi, as speaker. His deputy, Namik Dokle, belongs to the Socialists.

Algerian forces kill GIA leader, many followers

PARIS, July 25: Algerian forces killed the leader of the rebel Armed Islamic Group (GIA) in a military operation in which many of his followers also died, according to sources close to the security services, reports Reuters.

No official confirmation was immediately available of the death of Antar Zouabri, 27, one of the most ruthless figures to emerge in five and half years of civil conflict which has cost about 60,000 lives.

Algerian newspapers said up to 140 of the GIA Muslim rebels were killed in the military operation which eventually managed to trap Zouabri in a tunnel.

The Algerian newspaper Liberte quoting some GIA members who managed to give themselves up, said that before his death Zouabri had killed 12 of his men because they wanted to surrender.

Irish President Mary Robinson to resign

DUBLIN, July 25: Irish President Mary Robinson said Thursday she will resign her post two months early, on September 12, to take up a job as UN Commissioner for Human Rights, reports AP.

No date was announced for the election of a successor. In a statement, Robinson, said UN Secretary General Kofi Annan had spoken to her Thursday "of the importance he placed on my taking up appointment as UN High Commissioner for Human Rights before the commencement of the 52nd meeting of the General Assembly."

She had therefore decided to bring her resignation forward to 1 pm (1200 GMT) on Sept. 12, she said.

Clinton, Herzog decry ethnic tensions

WASHINGTON, July 25: In an Oval Office meeting followed by a luncheon, President Clinton and German President Roman Herzog commiserated on their countries' ethnic tensions and agreed that the peace process in Bosnia must be hastened, reports AP.

Supporting economic reform in Ukraine and strengthening the NATO-Ukraine relationship were also discussed. White House press secretary Mike McCurry said Thursday.

"The presidents agreed on the need to accelerate implementation of the Dayton peace agreement in Bosnia, with particular focus on the return of refugees," McCurry added. "They also compared efforts in Germany and the United States to enhance opportunities for minorities and to promote ethnic tolerance."

Taliban FM escapes from captors in N Afghanistan

ISLAMABAD, July 25: The foreign minister of the ruling Taliban militia escaped from captors Thursday in northern Afghanistan, the Taliban's Radio Shariat reported, reports AP.

Mullah Mohammed Ghous has been held captive, along with hundreds of other Taliban soldiers, since May when the Taliban briefly overran and then lost the northern desert city of Mazar-e-Sharif.

Radio Shariat reported that Ghous travelled safely to northern Kunduz province, the only Taliban-controlled province in the opposition-held north, after fleeing Mazar-e-Sharif.

The Taliban controls two-thirds of the country, but the opposition controls most of the northern part of Afghanistan.

The radio report, which did not say who helped Ghous escape, could not be independently confirmed.

The anti-Taliban coalition, led by ousted defense chief Ahmed Shah Masood and Uzbek warrior Malik Pahlawan, is locked in fierce battles on a number of fronts with the radically Islamic Taliban.

The report of Ghous' escape came the same day as reports that opposition troops were less than 15 kilometres (9 miles) north of the war-shattered capital.

Opposition jets pounded Kabul and its mountainous outskirts Thursday in bombing raids that left at least four dead.

New constitution becomes law in Fiji

SUVA, Fiji, July 25: The president signed Fiji's amended constitution into law Friday, restoring the political rights of the huge Indian community and paving the way for Fiji's acceptance back into the Commonwealth, reports AP.

The new constitution is amended so that indigenous Fijians are no longer guaranteed the majority of seats in Parliament and the prime ministership, relegating the Indians to permanent opposition status.

4 killed in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, July 25: Four persons, including two militants, were killed and a security jawan was wounded in the Kashmir Valley, where security forces foiled militants' attempt to set off two powerful improvised explosive devices (IED) and arrested 12 militants on Thursday evening, reports PTI.

Residents of Safapora in Baramulla district Thursday staged a demonstration and blocked traffic on the main road in protest against the alleged excesses committed by the security forces camping in the village reports here said.

The reports said the protesters, mostly women and children, later dispersed following assurance by police authorities that they would look into the matter.

US hails Phnom Penh's willingness to accept ASEAN mediation Commander loyal to Ranariddh vows to fight against Hun Sen

OSMACH, Cambodia, July 25: A military commander loyal to deposed Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh vowed Friday to fight the new regime in Cambodia, claiming to have 40,000 soldiers and the support of some Khmer Rouge factions, reports AP.

Gen. Nhek Bunchhay, who fled Phnom Penh following the bloody July 5-6 coup, spoke to reporters at this northern town where some 20,000 refugees are pressed against the Thai frontier.

While diplomatic efforts proceeded around the region to end the conflict, Ranariddh's top lieutenant said, "If we don't fight we will die."

The exiled Ranariddh had earlier said there were 20,000 troops of his FUNCINPEC party still in the field but that they lacked ammunition. But Nhek Bunchhay said his soldiers could fight "many months" on existing supplies.

Special US envoy Stephen Solarz was to meet Friday with Hun Sen, the second prime minister who deposed Ranariddh.

He will carry an eight-point peace plan and a message that the United States firmly opposes the violent power grab.

This will also be stressed by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright who was flying to Southeast Asia to meet with regional leaders on Cambodia and other issues.

"We don't know what the outcome of all this will be," State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns told reporters on Thursday travelling with Albright. "But we will continue to oppose any attempt by Hun Sen to unilaterally seize power."

Foreign ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, meeting in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, have rejected Cambodia's bid to enter the economic bloc.

After initially refusing to accept ASEAN's mediation, Hun Sen appears to have had a change of heart which was conveyed to the ministers by his representative, Foreign Minister Ung Huot.

We are encouraged by what

now appears to be a willingness on the part of Hun Sen to accept the ASEAN offer to use its good offices to facilitate a political resolution of the Cambodian crisis," Solarz told reporters in Bangkok on Thursday.

Solarz is lobbying for an eight-point plan, whose highlights include abiding by the terms of the 1991 Paris peace accords aimed at ending Cambodia's civil war; holding free and fair elections next year; and allowing all those now in political exile to return to participate fully in politics.

In northern Cambodia, an estimated 20,000 people who fled fighting at Samrong, 40 kilometres (25 miles) south of the Thai border, gathered at this border salient. Fearful that the fighting may reach them, many have sought to cross from Osmach into Thailand, but the border is closed to them.

Chhom Samthly, who said he helped 18 orphans escape the fighting, said the forests were full of people trying to escape.

AFP adds: The United States welcomed Thursday Cambodian

ruler Hun Sen's willingness to accept mediation by Southeast Asian Nations in his country's political crisis.

But State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns also said Washington favoured a broader international initiative, which would include the United States to restore democracy in the coup-split country.

We want to contribute to an international effort, Burns said. We oppose any attempt to seize power unilaterally.

He spoke to reporters aboard the US Air Force jet taking Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to Kuala Lumpur.

Hun Sen Thursday conceded in Phnom Penh that the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has a role to play in restoring stability to Cambodia but warned the bloc against interference in its affairs.

Foreign Ministers of the nine ASEAN countries including newcomers Myanmar and Laos, began talks Thursday in the Indonesian capital on security issues.



Joint winners of the Face of '97 contest held in London late Wednesday, Lucy Shropshall (L), age 15 from Birmingham and Lauren Tempany (C), age 14 from Linlithgow, near Edinburgh, are congratulated by runner up Caroline Collins (R) age 14, from Worcester. The competition winners are automatically signed up by Elite model agency and go on to the international competition in Nice later this year. — AFP/UNB photo