

Taliban trying to block opposition advance

DASHT-E-HAJI, July 26: Anti-aircraft guns and multiple rocket launchers rattled the front line north of the beleaguered capital on Saturday as Taliban soldiers tried to halt advancing opposition troops, reports AP.

The combined military and civilian airport on the north-east edge of Kabul came under attack by opposition rockets. Opposition jets pounded the battlefield and Taliban jets retaliated.

Dozens of nomadic families trudged through the sunbaked fields to escape the fighting, beating herds of sheep onwards, trying to get into the capital.

A 10-year-old girl stopped to pick up an old Russian helmet, misshapen and dirty, quickly put in on her head and raced to catch up with her family.

The recent fighting that has seen the opposition push within 15 kilometres (9 miles) of the capital has forced hundreds of nomads out of their cool mountain homes, across the sunbaked plains, into Kabul.

In their bunkers on the battlefield on what is known as the new road northeast of Kabul, Taliban soldiers held their positions in the blistering noon-day sun.

Built by Communist President Najibullah as a back road to the strategic Baghram air base, 40 kilometres (24 miles) north of Kabul, holding the new road is Taliban last chance to stave an all out attack on Kabul by their northern-based enemies.

Led by former military chief Ahmed Shah Masood and Uzbek warrior Malik Pahalwan, the anti-Taliban coalition has made stunning gains in recent days.

On Friday, the coalition issued a warning to the Taliban to either negotiate the demilitarisation of Kabul or face a full-scale assault.

So far the hardline Taliban has refused, referring instead to the opposition as enemies of Islam.

AFP adds: The president of the anti-Taliban coalition government in Afghanistan has suggested immediate talks if the fundamentalist militia clears out of the capital Kabul.

In an interview that appeared Friday in the Tribune de Geneve newspaper, Abdul Rahim Ghafoorzehi claimed that resistance forces led by General Ahmed Shah Masood now were "five kilometres (three miles) north of Kabul."

Ghafoorzehi, who is also the opposition coalition's foreign minister, said his side wanted to see Kabul become a demilitarised zone.



Kocheril Raman Narayanan waves from a horse-drawn coach in the forecourt of Rashtrapati Bhavan (Presidential Palace) shortly before taking the oath of office as President of India Friday at Parliament House in New Delhi. His victory has been interpreted as a triumph for India's so-called Hindu 'untouchables' — Saturday referred to as Dalits ('Oppressed') — who feature at the bottom of the Hindu social scale.

BRIEFLY

China opens ties with Cook Islands: China has opened diplomatic ties with the Cook Islands, following a pledge by the tiny Pacific territory not to recognise Taiwan, AP reports from Beijing.

Huang Guifang, China's ambassador to New Zealand, and Javeta Shurt, the Cook Islands' senior commissioner to New Zealand, signed a communique in Wellington on Friday that established ties and promised to exchange ambassadors as soon as possible.

Chohen meets NATO secy Gen: US Defence Secretary William Cohen met in Washington Friday with NATO Secretary General Javier Solana for talks on Bosnia and NATO enlargement, AFP reports from Washington.

The talks come amid a surge of harassing attacks on NATO-led peacekeepers in Bosnia following an unprecedented July 10 operation by British troops that ended with the capture of an indicted Bosnian Serb war criminal and the death of another.

US hails Czech compensation move: The United States welcomed Friday the Czech government's announcement that it will pay 600,000 dollars in compensation for its share of gold and jewelry seized by the Nazis from Slovak Jews during World War II, AP reports from Washington.

"We believe the decision announced yesterday will help Holocaust survivors of Slovak descent live out their remaining years in greater dignity," State Department spokesman Jim Foley said.

3 Chad nationals beheaded in KSA: Three Chad nationals were beheaded by sword in Jeddah Friday for trafficking in cocaine and heroin, raising to 70 the number of executions in Saudi Arabia this year, the Interior Ministry said, AFP reports from Jeddah.

The execution of Adam Mussa Adam, Salah Mohamed Akbar and Donkis Miodo was carried out in Jeddah, on the Red Sea, after the three men were convicted in a court for drug trafficking, the official Saudi News Agency SPA said, quoting an Interior Ministry statement.

US terms Israeli PM's stance positive

Netanyahu won't allow Jewish housing project in Jerusalem

JERUSALEM, July 26: Threatened with a new crisis in Middle East peacemaking, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says he will not allow a planned Jewish housing project in east Jerusalem to go forward, reports AP.

Thursday's announcement by Jerusalem city officials to build the settlement in the Arab part of Ras al-Amud neighbourhood infuriated the Palestinians — and Netanyahu.

Peace talks with the Palestinians have been at a standstill since Israel began construction in March on another Jewish housing project in east Jerusalem. While Netanyahu has refused to consider halting that construction, he said he will oppose the Ras al-Amud project.

The permission may have been given, but the building is not going to take place," Netanyahu adviser David Bar-Ilan told The Associated Press. The project "may be considered provocative by the Arab population of Jerusalem."

Bar-Ilan said Netanyahu was taken by surprise when he learned of the city's decision to approve the project, financed by Miami millionaire Irving Moskowitz. The prime minister broke off a late-night meeting with striking union leaders to discuss the decision with Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai.

Netanyahu and Mordechai were furious that they had not been informed about the decision in advance, Israel radio said.

The radio said Yitzhak Molcho, Israel's chief negotiator, had telephoned Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to assure him of Netanyahu's opposition.

US mediator Dennis Ross also telephoned Arafat Friday in an attempt to calm the situation, the radio said.

But Palestinian officials were not reassured.

Faisal Hussein, Palestinian minister in charge of Jerusalem affairs, called the decision a "serious provocation and a clear invitation for more clashes and for ending the peace process."

Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat appealed Friday to the United States, European Union and United Nations to intervene to stop the construction at Ras al-Amud.

He noted Netanyahu's criticism of the plan, but said "What we need is deeds, not words."

In Washington, the State Department also expressed opposition to the project.

"We believe that this is not the kind of announcement that will help to put the peace process back on track. It would be a move that would further undercut confidence between the parties," spokesman Jim Foley said.

Arafat, asked about the project Friday, said only: "We will see and we will follow up." He was scheduled to go to Cairo on Saturday to discuss the matter with Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

The status of Jerusalem is the most sensitive issue in Israel-Palestinian peacemaking. The Palestinians want to establish the capital of an independent state in the eastern part of the city and regard Jewish construction there as an attempt to thwart that aim. Israel

Strike in Kashmir to protest Gujral's visit

SRINAGAR, India, July 26: The rebellious Kashmir valley was closed Saturday by a strike to protest a planned visit by Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral, reports AP.

Gujral was due to lay the foundation of a railway line to Kashmir, the first rail link to the dispute northern province where Muslim militants are fighting to break away from the Indian federation.

Shops and schools were closed and streets were mostly quiet in response to a strike call by the Hurriyat Conference, an umbrella body of pro-separatist political groups.

"By visiting the valley Gujral will add salt to the wounds of the people," said a Hurriyat statement published in Saturday's newspapers.

Gujral's visit was "trying to give fake consolation" for human rights abuses by security forces stationed in the area, it said.

Gunmen kill 10 in 2 days in Karachi

KARACHI, July 26: Unidentified gunmen killed ten people here in two days, as the Supreme Court launched today an inquiry into the prolonged crime and violence in Pakistan's largest city, reports AP.

Police said three people, including a political worker, were gunned down today in different parts of the city.

In overnight incidents unknown assailants driving in a car shot dead three people in eastern Malir district. Two people were shot dead by snipers and police also found bullet-riddled bodies of two more persons, including a cleric.

Supreme Court Chief Justice Sajjad Ali Shah summoned senior police and government officials to his chamber here today, court sources said.

Shah has initiated a move on his own to hear views of officials and citizens in Karachi on the cause of the prolonged unrest in the city.

Karachi residents have been invited to register names for recording their views and suggesting solutions to the law and order problem.

"We discussed the modalities," during today's meeting with the chief justice, Attorney General Chaudhary Farooq Hasan told reporters.

Yadav's resignation portrayed as move to clean up politics

NEW DELHI, July 26: Prime Minister Inder Kumar Gujral Saturday portrayed the resignation of a scandal-tainted powerful politician as move to clean up corruption in politics, reports AP.

"I had made a commitment that no charge-sheeted man would hold office. I have ensured that," he told reporters at his New Delhi home.

Laloo Prasad Yadav resigned as the top elected official in northeastern Bihar state Friday after a court ordered his arrest on corruption charges. Hours later, the governing coalition decided to keep his party out of the cabinet.

But it took no immediate decision on whether to expel three Cabinet ministers belonging to Yadav's party, saying it would leave that decision up to Gujral. The three are Raghuvansh Prasad, Kanti Singh and Jainarain Nishad.

Yadav's downfall had been slow because of the influence he held over members of both the national and Bihar state legislatures. The low-caste popular leader is believed to have played a key role in negotiations among party bosses that resulted in Gujral being named Prime Minister in May.

Gujral on Saturday appeared to take responsibility for Yadav's resignation, although for weeks, Yadav defied the prime minister's appeals to quit.

Yadav ensured his continued control by proxy over the Bihar government, however, when his wife was sworn in as his successor. Until now, Rabri Devi's main task had been raising their nine children, and she is not a member of the state legislature. Yadav's party its allies control 168 out of 325 Bihar state legislative seats.

Although the national coalition was left with fewer members in Parliament, Gujral's position was bolstered by the appearance at his news conference of the president of the Congress Party, Sitaram Kesri, to announce that they had agreed on a candidate for the post of India's vice president.

The Congress Party supports Gujral's 14-party coalition and its continued backing is critical to the government's survival.

Yadav was charged last month in connection with the alleged theft of state funds, but refused to step down as Bihar chief minister until it became clear he would be arrested.

"I quit because I wanted to avoid unnecessary criticism," Yadav told reporters Friday. "There were all these cases and the campaign against me by politicians."

Yadav is charged along with 55 other officials and politicians in the theft of tens of millions of dollars earmarked to buy livestock feed for state-run dairy farms. The accused, including Yadav, have denied wrongdoing.

It was not immediately clear when he would be taken into custody.

He has appealed to the Supreme Court to be granted "anticipatory bail," or protection against arrest.

Yadav led a split in Gujral's Janata Dal Party after it became clear the charges against him would make it impossible for him to continue as president of the party. While one faction demanded Yadav's resignation and another cautioned that his departure would weaken the party, the turmoil raised questions about the stability of Gujral's government.

In recent speeches, Gujral has said corruption was the biggest problem in India and was slowing down economic growth.

US admn pushing for 'political settlement' in Cambodia

KUALA LUMPUR, July 26: The United States is pushing for a "political settlement" in Cambodia that would require coup leader Hun Sen to partly disarm his militia and allow his ousted rival to return for elections next year, reports AP.

Hun Sen, who had spurned outside mediation, has agreed to meet again with Southeast Asian leaders to negotiate a settlement, and exiled co-premier Prince Norodom Ranariddh is willing to accept replacement by his own royal party until voting next May, an American official said Saturday.

Southeast Asian foreign ministers asked Friday for confirmation of Hun Sen's willingness to cooperate with them, after a series of conflicting statements from the Cambodian capital.

The US official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said that envoy Stephen Solarz had discussed the American proposal with Hun Sen, Ranariddh and other parties, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, during a week of shuttle diplomacy.

Solarz presented the plan Saturday to US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who was meeting here with her foreign minister counterparts.

"This is the best chance for a solution. At the end of the day, if there is a solution, it has to come in the form of a political settlement," said the US official. "The challenge that ASEAN will face will be to turn the broad agreements on principles into concrete action."

The official said many obstacles remain to restoring the coalition government that co-premier Hun Sen shattered in a July 5-6 coup. Ranariddh and his party loyalists fled the country, although some are still fighting.

The international community was just as skeptical of a peaceful outcome before the signing in 1991 of the Paris Peace accord, which ended the Cambodia civil war and led to 1993 UN-sponsored elections, the official noted. The co-premiers had shared power since then, but warily.

ASEAN, a group of nine Southeast Asian nations, suspended Cambodia's membership indefinitely this year because of the crisis. The group is leading mediation and its envoys also have been meeting with both sides.



US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright arrives at the Sunway Lagoon Resort Hotel Saturday. Albright is in Kuala Lumpur to attend the ASEAN Regional Forum and the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference.

Rivals begin talks for peace in Congo Republic

LIBERVILLE, July 26: The first face-to-face talks between representatives of Brazzaville's rival leaders began here late Friday, mediated by Gabonese President Omar Bongo and joint UN-OAU envoy Mohammed Sahnoun, reports AP.

The meeting comes just as observers feared the delegations, fronting for Congolese President Pascal Lissouba and his predecessor Denis Sassou Nguesso, had reached a deal — and after week-long negotiations.

To add to the hopes of a settlement, some four hours earlier in Brazzaville, military chief on both sides signed an accord promising to respect an often violated ceasefire.

Megawati plans to commemorate day of raid on party office despite ban

JAKARTA, July 26: Supporters of ousted Indonesian minority party leader Megawati Sukarnoputri said today they still planned to commemorate the first anniversary of a raid on party offices, despite the event being banned, reports Reuters.

Party rivals backed by police and troops raided the Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) headquarters in Jakarta on July 27 last year to evict Megawati supporters who had occupied the building after her government-backed ouster a month earlier.

Reports about Fujimori's birth place denied

TOKYO, July 26: An uncle of Peruvian President Alberto Fujimori today angrily denied media reports in Lima that the head of state was born in Japan.

The Peruvian constitution requires presidents to be born in Peru.

"I was surprised at the reports," Kiyoshi Minami, one of Fujimori's uncles, told Reuters in a telephone interview.

"Why do they have to fabricate stories and slander him?" said the 83-year-old uncle, who lives in the western Japanese city of Matsuyama.

The Peruvian weekly magazine Carretas questioned the authenticity of documents stating Fujimori — the 58-year-old son of Japanese immigrants — was born in Peru and whether he was born in Japan.

The Carretas report, based on a four-year investigation, showed documents which allegedly altered information on Fujimori's birthdate and suggested he may have entered Peru from Japan after he was born.

US urges LTTE to stop terrorism

Tigers attack new govt positions after losses

COLOMBO, July 26: Air force helicopter gun ships strafed Tamil Tiger rebel positions in northern Sri Lanka after the guerrillas lobbed mortar shells at government troops, military officials said Saturday, reports AP.

The clash followed a battle in an adjoining area that left at least 30 rebels dead a few hours before.

Guerrilla casualties were not immediately known in the latest battle in Sri Lanka's 4-year-old civil war that has left over 48,000 people dead.

Military spokesman Colonel R Vitana said no soldier was hurt in Friday's latest clash near Nedunkerni town in the Vavuniya district.

The area is 240 kilometres (150 miles) north of the capital.

The military on Saturday said at least 30 rebels were killed in first battle.

Officials had earlier put the rebel death toll at 20 in the 7-hour battle off the town of Mullaitivu, in which two guerrilla boats were sunk and 30 rebels were also wounded.

Two government sailors were injured in the fighting about 260 kilometres (162 miles) northeast of the capital, Colombo.

In another incident, military snipers shot and killed three rebels in the jungles around the nearby town of Puliyankulam also on Friday, where soldiers are trying to open a land route to link the government-controlled Jaffna Peninsula, said Col. Vitana.

More than 450 soldiers and 1,000 rebels have been killed in the offensive since it was launched on May 13. The military has captured one-quarter of the 88-kilometer (55-mile) highway.

Two successive rebel counterattacks in June, however, slowed the soldiers' advance.

Nearly half a million people live in the Jaffna Peninsula, a former rebel stronghold, which is now supplied by sea and air.

The rebels, claiming that minority Tamils are discriminated against by the majority Sinhalese, are fighting for a homeland in the north and east of Sri Lanka.

Another report from Washington: The US State Department called Friday on Sri Lankan rebels to cease all acts of terrorism following attacks on two foreign flag vessels in Sri Lankan waters and the assassination of two parliamentarians from Eastern Province.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were responsible for the attacks on foreign flag vessels and are suspected by the government of responsibility for the assassinations.

"We join with Amnesty International in calling for the LTTE to stop immediately the killing of non-combatants and cease other human rights abuses," State Department spokesman Jim Foley said.

The rebels have been fighting since 1983 for a homeland for the minority Tamils, who account for 18 per cent of Sri Lanka's 18 million people. They allege discrimination by the majority Sinhalese, who control the government and the army. More than 48,000 people have been killed in the fighting.



Janaina, the two-year-old daughter of a family of farmers belonging to the Landless Movement (MST) holds her doll and a MST banner Friday during a rally in downtown Rio de Janeiro. The farmers staged the protest rally to mark the National Day of the Rural Worker and to press the government to speed up land reforms. Brazil counts an estimated 4.8 million landless peasants in a country in which 182 million hectares owned by large landowners sit untilled.