

International

Russia plans to privatise military properties

MOSCOW, Aug 2: The Russian government plans to privatise nearly 9,000 military properties from the beginning of next year, including 5,000 small stores and 2,000 canteens, a senior privatisation official said Friday, reports AFP. Alexander Braverman, First Deputy Chairman of the State Property Committee told a news conference that the sell offers would include some 5,000 of the army discount stores collectively known as Voyentory.

Under Russia's sweeping military reform plans some of the loss-making army enterprises will be closed and others privatised.

Many of the agricultural enterprises created in the Soviet period to provide cheap food for the army are chronically inefficient.

The Lion's share of the revenue from the privatisations — 87 per cent — will be ploughed back into the army, to cover social benefits for service and re-training for some 500,000 personnel due to be shed from the armed forces in the next two years, Braverman said.

The Federal Security Service (FSB), the main successor to the Soviet KGB secret police will act

to "prevent any criminal gangs meddling in the privatisation of military property," Alexander Yurchenko, Deputy Head of the FSB, told the news conference.

Military prosecutors have set up a special department staffed by about 10 experts to oversee the privatisations.

Yeltsin names new dy PM for ethnic ties

MOSCOW, Aug 2: Russian President Boris Yeltsin named Friday a prominent figure from the troubled North Caucasus region as a new deputy prime minister for ethnic relations, Interfax news agency said, reports AFP.

Ramazan Abdulatipov, a former Deputy Speaker of the upper house of parliament before he was elected a deputy to the lower house in 1996, will be the seventh deputy premier in the government.

He comes from the multi-ethnic North Caucasus republic of Dagestan, which borders the Caspian Sea and the rebel republic of Chechnya, and is a member of the tiny Avar ethnic minority.

US ends ban on sale of high-tech warplanes to Latin America

WASHINGTON, Aug 2: President Bill Clinton on Friday ended a 20-year-old ban on the sale of high-tech US warplanes and advanced weapons to Latin America, reports Reuter.

The decision to allow sales of high-performance planes to the region comes as Chile begins shopping around to replace its fighter planes and has shown interest in buying F-16s made by Lockheed.

This decision puts US arms transfer policy toward Latin America on a par with our policy towards other regions of the world and will be implemented in a way that serves our objective of promoting stability, restraint and cooperation in the region," White House spokesman Mike McCurry said in a statement.

The Carter administration adopted the arms sales policy at a time when most of Latin America was under military regimes.

But now, McCurry said, "Latin America has changed dramatically from a region dominated by coups and military governments to one of

democracy and civilian control."

"Our partnership with countries in the region has reached a new level of maturity, cooperation and dialogue," he said.

He stressed the need for engaging Latin American governments as "equal partners" as they modernise and restructure their defence establishments and said this would promote security and stability in the region.

The change was urged by the Pentagon. Latin American governments and arms dealers eager for a lucrative market.

In practice, the change will have the most immediate effect on Chile, which has been seeking to buy advanced fighter aircraft, US officials said.

Last April, Clinton indicated a change of policy was in the works when he authorised US manufacturers to bid to sell jets to the Chilean air force as part of a plan to modernise the country's ageing air fleet.

US officials said two US firms — Lockheed and McDonnell Douglas — are competing for that sale but firms from

Sweden and France were also asked to bid. Chile is not expected to make a decision until year's end.

Other countries have also expressed interest in buying US-made weapons but those deals are further into the future, US officials said.

One senior official said the United States will "clearly not" be offering advanced weapons to Peru and Ecuador, who went to war in 1995 over a long-standing border dispute.

The two countries "are seeking new weaponry and we are discouraging acquisition ... this decision will not change that policy," the official told Reuters.

US officials had argued before that Latin American countries would be better off spending their resources on other things than military hardware as they struggled to implement economic reforms and strengthen democracy.

But some countries have gone elsewhere to buy weapons, such as Peru, who bought Russian-made Mig-29 warplanes from Belarus earlier this year.

US officials denied the policy change would set off a buying spree.

McCurry said the US government would seek to prevent an arms race, would support transparency and confidence building and ensure that defence modernisation occurred responsibly.

An interagency government chaired by the undersecretary of state for arms control and international security affairs will consider the advanced arms sales requests.

The change brought a quick response from representative Nita Lowey, a New York Democrat, who said McDonnell Douglas and Lockheed Martin must not be allowed "to dictate our foreign policy."

The ban promotes peace and democracy in Latin America and it must be maintained. Lifting this ban will set off an arms race in Latin America that will divert scarce resources there from pressing social needs," she said in a statement.

She has introduced legislation to put a ban on arms sales to Latin America into law.

Is Benazir losing interest in domestic politics?

Tariq Butt writes from Islamabad

band Asif Zardari.

Zardari, who has been arrested for several criminal charges, including the murder of his brother Murtaza Bhutto, remains in jail. He was arrested on November 5, the day the Benazir Bhutto government was dismissed by President Farooq Leghari for violating the Constitution.

Zardari, who was made Investment Minister by his wife, enjoyed unprecedented power during her incumbency and is the only member of the previous government who has been in prison since it was ousted.

In her absence, the job of defending her and retaliating against the government has been left to a team of her media advisors in Islamabad. They churn out her statements every day.

Some PPP leaders had hinted that Ms Bhutto would lead a Kisan Bachao Tehrik (Save Farmers Movement) against the imposition of agriculture land tax in Punjab. But this does not seem possible now after her departure for Britain. By the time she returns after a month, the farmers' movement, which was confined to only one district of Punjab province, is likely to have died down.

The basic reason behind Ms Bhutto's apparent disinterest in home politics and staying out of the country is that she knows that she has no chance to come to the political centrestage in the next few years, a member of the Sharif cabinet claimed.

In the suffocatingly humid weather that Pakistan has during the months of July, August and September every year, most top out-of-government politicians invariably go away to Europe but Ms Bhutto's long leave of absence is causing political tongues to wag.

India Abroad News Service

BRIEFLY

10,000 evacuated from Gujarat:

About 10,000 people have been evacuated from 125 villages following monsoon floods in the western Indian state of Gujarat, the Press Trust of India (PTI) reported yesterday. AFP reports from New Delhi.

The evacuation was carried out in the districts of Kaira and Baroda, where around 230 people have died since June during torrential rains.

PTI said helicopters and army and paramilitary personnel backed up police during the evacuation.

US bid to ease Koreas' tensions: The United States plans to propose new ways to ease tensions between the two Koreas as part of a negotiating process that begins on Tuesday in New York, US officials said on Friday. Reuter reports from Washington.

The United States, China, South Korea and North Korea are to sit down for the first time together that day at Columbia University to work out the mundane details of when and where substantive peace talks will take place.

ASEAN envoys meet Hun Sen: Three top level envoys from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) began a meeting with Cambodia's Second Prime Minister Hun Sen and Foreign Minister Uong Huot in Phnom Penh yesterday, AFP reports from Phnom Penh.

Foreign ministers Ali Alatas of Indonesia, Domingo Siazon of the Philippines and Thailand's Prachuab Chaiyassayon began the closed-door meeting with the two top officials and it was expected to last two hours.

They were expected to discuss what role the regional grouping would play in resolving Cambodia's political turmoil, following Hun Sen's ousting of first prime minister Norodom Ranariddh earlier this month.

11 killed in Philippines: Eight Communist guerrillas and three private security guards were killed in two separate attacks involving Communist guerrillas in the southern Philippines, the military said yesterday. AFP reports from Zamboanga.

About 100 rebels attacked a paper mill Thursday in the village of Salvacion, killing three security guards. They also took six weapons from the slain guards, a report by the military's southern command said.

The guerrillas ambushed a group of soldiers sent to reinforce the security guards, sparking a gun battle in which eight of the rebels were killed, the report said.

17 Japanese held in Malaysia: Malaysian authorities arrested 17 Japanese expatriates, including three women at an electronics factory in the northern state of Penang, officials said yesterday. AFP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

A state Immigration Department official said 17 of them, who were detained Friday, were working illegally as they were on a state visit passes.

Penang, dubbed the "Silicon Valley" of Malaysia, houses one of the largest concentrations of hi-tech electronic factories from Japan, the United States and Europe.

US Congress accused of backing anti-Arab group

RAMALLAH, West Bank, Aug 2: Palestinian Information Minister Yasser Abd Rabbo accused the US Congress Friday of supporting the radical Jewish anti-Arab group Kach, reports AFP.

The position of the US administration in the peace process "has been balanced. But the Congress has been flagrantly biased toward Israel's position," information minister told journalists.

"It's as if it's in a continual demonstration for the Kach movement," he said.

The racist group Kach was banned in Israel after one of its members gunned down 29 Palestinians praying in a Hebrew mosque.

The US House of Representatives provoked Palestinian anger by voting in June for a resolution opposed by President



People watch Friday in Lautrec, a bull's head entirely made of pink garlic, a local speciality, during the garlic celebrations organised every year in this town of the Tarn region, western France.

— AFP/UNB photo

Ahead of fighting between two rival premiers

Over 5000 Cambodian refugees flee to Thailand

ARANYAPRATHET, Thailand, Aug 2: More than 5,000 Cambodian refugees and 374 royalist soldiers have fled to Thailand ahead of fighting between forces of Cambodia's rival premiers, the Thai military said today, reports AFP.

The soldiers were disarmed and allowed across the border late Friday after troops loyal to Cambodian Second Prime Minister Hun Sen surprised them with a night attack using heavy weaponry, Thai army sources said.

Troops loyal to ousted First Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh appeared to be on the run in the area, but an officer from the Cambodian 12th Army Division of General Lay Virak said the fighting would go on.

Thai red cross officials said however that they were assisting 7,000 civilian refugees from areas near the northwest Cambodian border town of Poipet, opposite the checkpoint, with food and medicine.

Clashes began Thursday night when Hun Sen forces attacked three border settlements held by troops loyal to the prince, including the 12th army, Thai army officials said.

By Friday afternoon Hun Sen troops had secured one of the three settlements north of Poipet.

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