

LTTE blunts army drive to capture key highway

COLOMBO, Aug 28: Tamil Tiger guerrillas launched another mortar bomb attack against government forces in northern Sri Lanka, blunting a military drive to capture a key highway, officials here said today, reports AFP.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) fired mortars at army positions near the town of Pullyankulam on Wednesday but there were no military casualties, Defence Ministry spokesman Sarath Munasinghe said.

There was a heavy volume of mortars fired but evasive action prevented any casualties, Munasinghe told reporters here. He said three Tigers were killed in a separate clash elsewhere in the north of the country.

Thousands of soldiers backed by tanks and air cover moved on two flanks near the town of Pullyankulam on Tuesday, the rebels said, adding that they killed 25 soldiers and wounded over 100.

The guerrillas said in a statement from their office in London that security forces were in disarray after the rebels mounted the counter attack to prevent the army advance on Pullyankulam.

US welcomes Israel's decision to lift blockade of Bethlehem

WASHINGTON, Aug 28: The State Department welcomed Wednesday Israel's decision to lift the blockade of Bethlehem but said Secretary of State Madeleine Albright had yet to set a date for her Middle East trip, reports AFP.

"We think it's step in the right direction," spokesman James Rubin said. Israel lifted the month-old blockade that was imposed along with other measures after the July 30 suicide bombing in a Jerusalem market that killed 16 people.

Albright had expressed concern about the blockade in recent conversations with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. "We have understood Israel's need to deal with security threats in the past, but we've also been concerned about the effect of closures like this on the daily lives of the Palestinian people," Rubin said.

The spokesman reiterated that Albright "has made the decision in principle to go to the Middle East very soon" and said she would set a firm timetable when "the circumstances merit."

Albright earlier this month said she was prepared to travel to the region at the end of August but that timetable was pushed back to September after envoy Dennis Ross returned from a visit to the region to discuss steps to improve security. The State Department also said there were no immediate plans for Ross to travel to the region.

It would be Albright's first trip to the region since taking office in January. Her predecessor Warren Christopher made over 20 trips to the Middle East. AP adds: Yasser Arafat on Thursday welcomed Israel's lifting of the monthlong siege of Bethlehem and said Israel must now end its blockade of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In Bethlehem, a Palestinian security official said two suspects have been arrested in connection with a July 30 suicide bombing by Islamic militants in a Jerusalem market. The report could not be confirmed independently.

The closure was imposed after the bombing and bars all Palestinians, including some 100,000 workers, from entering Israel.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has said he would only ease the travel ban once the Palestinians did more to rein in the militants, particularly the Hamas group which has been blamed by Israel for the market bombing.

It was likely, however, that Israel would ease the restrictions to improve the climate before next month's visit of US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to the region.

In one conciliatory step, Israel on Wednesday lifted the monthlong siege of Bethlehem. During the lockdown, Bethlehem's 60,000 residents were barred from leaving town and many pilgrims could not visit the biblical birthplace of Jesus.

Israel had imposed the siege on Bethlehem amid suspicions that Hamas masterminded the bombing were hiding in the city. The two bombers were never identified, though some media reports said they came from abroad.



Israeli Defence Minister Yitzhak Mordechai jumps down from a Markava tank after he was briefed by army officers during an Israeli army exercise on the Golan Heights Wednesday. The disputed high land plateau that Israel conquered from the Syrians in 1967, is one of Israel's main army exercise areas. Syria is demanding a return of the Golan as a precondition for peace negotiations with Israel. — AFP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

2 Pak drug smugglers held in India: Indian authorities Thursday arrested two Pakistanis who were smuggling heroin and opium worth more than 14 million dollars into India, AFP reports from Amritsar. The Pakistanis crossed the Indo-Pakistan border early this morning and were waiting to deliver the contraband to a truck driver, custom officials said. Police also recovered a gun from the two men. The 48 kilos (105 pounds) of heroin and five kilos (11 pounds) of opium were meant to be sold in New Delhi and Bombay.

Plague leaves 2 dead in Mongolia: An outbreak of plague in central Mongolia has killed two people and obliged authorities to quarantine more than 200 others thought to have been exposed to the deadly disease, an official report said Thursday, AP reports from Beijing.

The plague, spread by infected marmots, has also spread to other parts of the country, China's state-run Xinhua News Agency reported. More than 170 people suspected of having been infected by plague were under quarantine in hospitals, while another 74 who had been in contact with the two people who died of plague also had been isolated, said the report, citing Mongolia's official Montsame news agency.

Filipino kidnappers free Japanese: A Japanese executive in charge of a Japanese government-funded dam repair project was freed unharmed four days after being kidnapped by armed men, Philippine and Japanese officials said Thursday, AP reports from Manila.

Officials said Masayoshi Terada and his driver were seized by about five armed men in Santa Rita in Bulacan province Friday night as he was being driven home from the dam repair project site, also in the province. They were freed in Manila at midnight Tuesday after a ransom was paid, they said. "He's fine."

NBC's ex-executive Tartikoff dead: Brandon Tartikoff, the former NBC Entertainment president who transformed prime time television in the 1980s with the landmark shows "Hill Street Blues," "L.A. Law" and "The Cosby Show," died Wednesday, KCAL-TV reported. He was 48, AP reports from Los Angeles.

Tartikoff had been undergoing chemotherapy treatment earlier this year for his third recurrence of Hodgkin's disease. He was diagnosed with the disease, a cancer of the lymph nodes, when he was 23. He became the youngest entertainment president in network history when he took over NBC's programming at age 30 in 1980 and ran the network's schedule until 1991. He quickly turned the lowest-rated network into America's most popular through groundbreaking comedies and dramas, including "Cheers," "Family Ties," "Miami Vice" and "The Golden Girls."

Iraqi minister in Syria: Iraqi Trade Minister Mohammed Mehdi Saleh arrived in Damascus on Wednesday, the first Iraqi minister to visit Syria in 17 years, AP reports from Damascus.

Iraq severed diplomatic ties with Syria in 1980 after Damascus sided with Iran in the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War. Iraq and Syria are ruled by rival wings of the pan-Arab Baath Party.

North Korea backs out of missile proliferation talks with US

WASHINGTON, Aug 28: North Korea pulled out of missile proliferation talks with the United States yesterday after Washington granted asylum to two North Korean diplomats privy to Pyongyang's secrets, reports AFP.

"In light of the position taken by the United States in the reported defection... we find it does not make any sense to resume the missile talks as planned," a North Korean spokesman Li Gun, said from the UN mission in New York.

He added that the escalating US dispute with North Korea, which has demanded the extradition of the two defectors, also jeopardized preliminary Korean peace talks set for September 15.

"The behavior of the US toward the defection incident has seriously damaged the atmosphere to discuss bilateral issues. It will seriously cause damage toward the process of the four-party talks as well," he said, reading from a prepared statement.

The White House called the abrupt cancellation of the missile negotiations disappointing but not unexpected and said the talks should not be connected to the defections.

"We see no linkage between the defection and the missile talks and we believe it is in North Korea's interest to remain engaged in the talks," said spokesman Barry Toiv from president Bill Clinton's vacation spot in Massachusetts.

North Korea did not give any conditions for resuming the proliferation talks in which US officials were to urge Pyongyang to halt its development of medium and long-range missiles.

But North Korea is demanding the immediate return of the defectors, insisting they are "criminals" who leaked state secrets and embezzled public funds.

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'Ganga Action Plan fails to achieve objective'

NEW DELHI, Aug 28: The Ganga Action Plan has failed to achieve its objective despite spending Rs 500 crore, Union Environment and Forests Minister, Prof Salfuddin Soz, said here today, reports PTI.

It was with great expectations that Rajiv Gandhi launched the plan, but Ganga, the nation's pipeline, remains polluted, we have not succeeded in cleaning the river despite spending a whopping Rs 500 crore, Prof Soz said at a seminar on Rajiv Gandhi's contribution in the perseverance and promotion of world ecology organised by the All India Congress Seva Dal.

Prof Soz said the plan to prevent pollution of the river will not succeed even if the centre meets all the expenses unless there people living along the banks of the river in UP, Bihar and West Bengal do not realise the importance and necessity of keeping the river clean.

Pathfinder project scientist Matthew Golembek said scientists hope additional analysis of more rocks in the boulder-rich Rock Garden will help bolster their findings.

A rock named Shark is much like the unusual Mars rock Barnacle Bill, which is remarkably similar to rocks found on Earth, scientists said today.

The preliminary analysis of Shark indicates it was repeatedly heated in the martian crust.

The Sojourner rover is currently stuck on a rock named Half Dome but soon will be dispatched for more chemical analysis, scientists said.

In other findings presented today during a news conference at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Mark Lemmon of the University of Arizona said:

If you took all of the water vapor in the martian atmosphere and condensed it,

Cambodia's attitude towards UNCHR concerns UNSC

UNITED NATIONS, Aug 28: The UN Security Council expressed concern on Wednesday about the Cambodian government's attitude toward the United Nations Centre for Human Rights (UNCHR) in Phnom Penh, reports AFP.

"In our opinion the government of Cambodia has a duty to provide the facilities and the wherewithal for the UN to be able to carry out its job in Cambodia," said Security Council President John Weston of Britain.

Weston expressed concern over the "UN Human Rights Centre whose status and activities are being questioned" as well as for the "personal security of those who are serving there."

The diplomat was not more explicit. China had been reticent to use stronger language, diplomats said.

The 15-member council also called on all parties in Cambodia to support "fair free elections" there next year.

And all members support efforts by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations to resolve the current crisis, Weston said.

Earlier, the nominal head of the Khmer Rouge Kieu Samphan called on UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to "condemn the anti-constitutional coup d'etat" that ousted Cambodian Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh last month.

deal with whichever government is in Phnom Penh," Abdullah said.

Abdullah said ASEAN would continue to deal with Ung Huot on matters related to Cambodia since he was still foreign minister of the country.

BJP planning to sue West Bengal govt for defamation

BOMBAY, Aug 28: India's largest opposition party is threatening to go to court after being compared to Adolf Hitler's Nazis in a state school textbook, newspapers said here today, reports AFP.

The Indian Express newspaper said the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, Indian People's Party) in the eastern state of West Bengal was planning to sue the state government for "defamation."

Indo-Pak troops stop firing on Kashmir border

SRINAGAR, India, Aug 28: Guns were silent on the Kashmir border today as Indian and Pakistani troops withheld fire for the first time in a week, a senior Indian Army officer said.

"Nothing is happening now on the line of control. It's all quiet," Brigadier General Ashok Kapoor told Reuters in Srinagar, the summer capital of India's northern Jammu and Kashmir state.

At least nine people were killed over the past week in cross-border fire along the 720-km (445-mile) line of control dividing the Himalayan region.

India and Pakistan have accused one another of provoking the exchanges of artillery ahead of the third round of bilateral peace talks set for mid-September in New Delhi.

India on Wednesday reaffirmed its commitment to the peace talks and said the shooting was unlikely to cloud the negotiations.

Martian rocks are similar to those found on Earth

PASADENA, California, Aug 28: The second rock type to be identified by NASA's Sojourner rover poses a mineralogical mystery that scientists hope to unlock with more remote-controlled wandering on the martian surface, reports AP.

Tom Economou, a University of Chicago scientist working with the rover's Alpha Proton X-ray spectrometer, said the analysis showed there are clearly at least two distinct kinds of rocks on the red planet. The second group, which includes rocks called Yogi and a recently examined rock called Wedge, is lower in silicon and higher in sulfur than Barnacle Bill, the first rock that Sojourner analysed.

The findings are so new, scientists on the Mars Pathfinder team haven't been able to come up with an explanation on how the second type of rock was formed. They also can't explain the presence of sulfur.

Economou and Mars

UK, Malaysia disagree on HR, Myanmar

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 28: Britain and Malaysia held talks Thursday and emerged with wide differences on human rights and Myanmar, reports AP.

The talks were held between visiting British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook and Malaysian Foreign Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and other officials.

Speaking jointly to reporters after their talks at the Foreign Ministry here Cook reiterated the strong commitment by the new Labour government to support human rights around the world, including in Myanmar.

Cook said, "We are committed to promoting freedom and human rights," and added as for Myanmar "We are very concerned about the violation of democracy and freedom there."

While Cook backed the European Union's stand for strong action to bring human rights and democracy to Myanmar, Abdullah reiterated the Malaysian and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' stand for "Constructive engagement, which we think is the best way."

Cook accused the military junta ruling Myanmar of "not doing anything" to stop the drug trade in Myanmar and added, "This is a criminal act."

ASEAN admitted Myanmar as a member two months ago although the European Union and the United States had hoped ASEAN would keep Myanmar out until its human rights and democracy improved there.

While the United States and some European Union members do not want a review of the Human Rights Convention, Malaysia has been campaigning for a review at various forums.



Winner of the Elite Model look Hong Kong 1997 Liu Liao Liao (C) and runners up Lu Yan (L) and Cindy Jia Bui (R) hold their certificates Wednesday at an awards giving ceremony. The Elite Model Agency goal was to find an "Oriental Beauty" who would take her place alongside the likes of Cindy Crawford and Claudia Schiffer. The international finals will be held later in the year. — AFP/UNB photo

Family discord leads to delinquency

LONDON, Aug 28: Delinquency is associated with family discord, poor parental supervision and harsh or erratic discipline, said a report yesterday, calling for support for the family in order to cut crime, reports Xinhua.

The report, by the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of offenders, said that evidence suggests a link between broken homes and delinquency, but children brought up by loving lone parents may be less likely to offend than those raised by feuding couples.

The report surveyed more than 5,300 UK children born in 1946 and found that they were much more likely to commit serious offences if their parents separated before they were four, and rates of offending were twice those among children whose parents stayed together.

However, this only applied to children whose parents separated because of conflict as offending rose only slightly among those who lost a parent through death or long-term hospitalisation, said the report.

A strategy to target the needs of young families will do far more to cut crime than tough sentencing, tagging, curfews or more prisons, said Paul Cavadino, Principal Officer of the Association.

Hashimoto declares candidacy for LDP president

TOKYO, Aug 28: Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto today formally declared his candidacy for a second two-year term as President of Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), a senior party official said, reports Reuters.

"Hashimoto expressed his determination to run in the party presidential race," Yoshiro Mori, chairman of the party's general affairs council, told reporters.

but we take it very seriously," said Dr Marc. Wyeth-Ayerst's medical director.

The FDA described its latest findings in Thursday's issue of the New England Journal of Medicine.

Fenfluramine is chemically similar to Redux, another popular appetite suppressant that came on the market last year. The FDA said it had also learned of four cases of heart valve damage in Redux users. There also were two in patients taking fenfluramine alone and two in patients taking Redux plus phentermine.

At Interneuron Pharmaceuticals, which makes Redux, spokesman Bill Bont said: "This is a very limited number of cases that may or may not have anything to do with the drug and may be related to the underlying condition of obesity."

Dr Michael Hamilton, an obesity expert at Duke University, said he discovered a heart murmur in one of his own fenfluramine patients after the Mayo Clinic cases were reported.

"I don't know if it was always there, whether I hadn't listened carefully enough that first day, whether the air conditioner noise made it difficult to hear," he said.

Doctors appear to have cut back their use of all three drugs. Figures from IMS America, a drug market research company, show that in the month after the Mayo Clinic findings were made public, new prescriptions for fenfluramine fell 40 per cent, Redux 23 per cent and phentermine 18 per cent.

The valve damage appears to be separate from another well-known hazard of diet drugs — an often fatal condition called pulmonary hypertension, a

Volcanic emissions kill 1, sicken 100 in Philippines

BACOLOD, Philippines, Aug 28: Suspected emissions from a volcano thought to be dormant killed one villager and sickened about 100 people in four mountain villages in the central Philippines, officials said Thursday, reports AP.

Officials said the emissions enveloped the mountain villages on Negros Island three weeks ago with a thick mist that caused serious coughing and lung irritation.

At least one child died, said Omar Blanco, an official of Cadiz City where the villages belong. Cadiz is about 475 kilometers (295 miles) southeast of Manila.

A team of doctors and local officials traveled to the villages Wednesday and brought 21 sick children and their parents down to clinics in Cadiz, which has no hospitals.

Children, held by their mothers, were coughing heavily everywhere. Some were spitting

blood," said Rolando Salcedo, a local official who went to Celestino Villacin, the worst hit village.

Salcedo said local officials have sent trucks to bring down the sick, but many villagers refused to leave their homes.

He said the mist has remained for three weeks, causing lung and eye irritation and obscuring visibility.

Officials said they would ask volcanologists to study the emissions and determine their source.

Salcedo said they were verifying reports from residents that the emissions, which smell like sulfur, were coming from ground fissures in nearby Mount Slay, a volcano believed to be extinct.

There are four volcanoes in Negros. Volcanologists say only one is active, the 2,434-meter (8,035-foot) Mount Kanlaon which erupted last year, killing three mountain climbers.

Afghan fighting 50 feared killed or wounded

ISLAMABAD, Aug 28: Clashes between Taliban militia and its rivals in eastern Afghanistan have left 50 people on both sides killed or wounded in two days, the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) reported today, reports AFP.

Details of the casualties were not available, the Pakistan-based Private Information Service said, adding the Taliban had admitted three of their soldiers were killed and eight injured.

The anti-Taliban opposition yesterday claimed its fighters had taken Khwaja and Dara-i-Noor districts in Nangarhar province and Sarkani and Narang district in neighbouring Kunar, near the Pakistan border.

The Times noted that despite declining support, Prime Minister Tony Blair was in a far stronger position than any previous premier as he returned Thursday to Downing Street after a summer holiday.

Labour govt's popularity declines

LONDON, Aug 28: The Labour government's popularity is still strong some four months after it came to power, but recent squabbles have taken the shine off its honeymoon period, an opinion poll suggested today, reports AFP.

The Mori Survey for the Times newspaper put Labour at 54 percentage points, down three compared with the end of July, while the opposition Conservatives were at 28 per cent, up five points.

The Times noted that despite declining support, Prime Minister Tony Blair was in a far stronger position than any previous premier as he returned Thursday to Downing Street after a summer holiday.

The possibility that the diet drugs might damage heart valves came to light July 8, when doctors from the Mayo Clinic said they had identified 24 cases.

The FDA then asked physicians to report any other patients and that search turned up the 58 additional cases, all but

More cases of heart damage linked to diet drugs

BOSTON, Aug 28: Fifty-eight more cases of heart valve damage among users of fen-phen have been reported to the US Food and Drug Administration since new concerns arose last month about the popular prescription pill combination taken by million to lose weight, reports AP.

As a result, the agency said Wednesday it will require new drug labels warning patients of the potential danger. And a drug company announced a new study on the medication's effects.

The possibility that the diet drugs might damage heart valves came to light July 8, when doctors from the Mayo Clinic said they had identified 24 cases.

The FDA then asked physicians to report any other patients and that search turned up the 58 additional cases, all but

two of them in women. How many of those cases were actually caused by the medicines, however, is unclear. Some doctors wondered whether newly vigilant physicians might be hearing heart murmurs — the telltale sound of bad valves — that have been there all along.

Fen-phen is a combination of the prescription drugs fenfluramine and phentermine that suppresses appetite. Both drugs are approved by the FDA for short-term use in dieting, although not specifically in combination.

We are not absolutely saying you shouldn't use them, but physicians and patients need to consider the risk very carefully before going on them," said Dr James Bilstad, a drug evaluation chief at the FDA.

Given the large number of people using these drugs, the risk of heart damage is clearly low. But just how great the risk is — even whether it truly exists — cannot be determined without a careful study comparing diet pill users with overweight people who are not taking the medicines.

Drug company officials have raised the possibility that obesity itself — not drugs to treat the condition — may actually be causing the heart problems.

To help settle these questions, Wyeth-Ayerst Laboratories, which makes the Pondimin brand of fenfluramine, said Wednesday it will sponsor a study of 1,200 fen-phen users and others being treated for obesity at several institutions.

Recognising that both drugs have been available for many years and millions of patients have taken them, we were quite surprised to have this finding,