

Lankan fighting death toll crosses 400 mark

COLOMBO, Oct 7: The death toll from two days of fighting in northern Sri Lanka has risen to more than 400 as soldiers battled Tamil Tiger rebels for control of a vital highway, military officials said today, reports Reuters.

Some 200 guerrillas and 30 soldiers were killed in fierce fighting on Monday when rebels attacked troops advancing towards Mankulam, about 260 km (165 miles) northeast of the capital, on the main highway to the northern Jaffna Peninsula, the officials said.

Four army officers were among those killed.

Troops, supported by planes, battle tanks and artillery, retaliated, forcing the rebels to retreat, officials said.

They said the 200 death toll was based on intercepts of radio transmissions and nearly 100 bodies seen on the battlefield by ground troops.

This raised the death toll to 414 since troops resumed their campaign on Sunday to capture

the highway linking the government-held front line town of Vavuniya to the Jaffna Peninsula.

The Defence Ministry said on Monday that 34 soldiers and 150 rebels were killed in fighting on Sunday as thousands of troops advanced towards Mankulam.

Mankulam is the last big town on the highway that links Vavuniya with Kilinochchi.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have said they beat back a two-pronged military advance on Monday, causing heavy losses to the troops.

A statement from the rebel's London office late on Monday said that they had recovered 100 bodies of soldiers and that 22 guerrillas had been killed in the fighting.

The rebels did not give details of the fighting.

Independent confirmation of the reports was not available as journalists are not allowed into the war zone.

Israel, PA resume peace talks

JERUSALEM, Oct 7: Israelis and Palestinians relaunched peace talks Monday after a seven-month standoff, but the US-brokered initiative was overshadowed by the triumphant return to Gaza of the founder of Hamas, reports AFP.

US peace envoy Dennis Ross met in a Jerusalem hotel with Israeli Foreign Minister David Levy and Palestinian number two Mahmud Abbas to launch eight committees on implementing the 1995 interim self-rule accords.

Ross, who arrived in Israel Monday, earlier held separate rounds of talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in Jerusalem, and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in the West Bank city of Ramallah.

Meanwhile, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, the spiritual leader of

the radical Islamic group Hamas, was greeted by 15,000 euphoric Palestinians at a Gaza city rally following his release from an Israeli jail — adding a twist to laborious US efforts to kickstart peace talks.

It was Netanyahu, who has refused to implement huge swaths of the interim accords on the grounds Arafat has failed to clamp down on Islamic militants, who authorised the release of Yassin from an Israeli jail.

The premier was forced into releasing the religious leader by the Jordanians, who were infuriated by a bungled Israeli attempt to assassinate Hamas official Khaled Meshal in Amman.

As part of a heavy price to gain the release of two Mossad agents arrested by Jordanian

police after the September 25 attack, Netanyahu also freed 20 Palestinian prisoners Monday and pledged to release between 40 and 50 more within two weeks.

After the Mossad agents returned to Israel on Monday, Netanyahu announced a commission of inquiry with limited powers would be set to probe the botched Amman attack.

Netanyahu did not speak specifically of the Meshal attack, but he said he took "general responsibility" for the actions of Mossad and staunchly defended Israel's right to pursue terrorists.

"We view it as our right to defend ourselves. We did the right thing for the right reasons. We are fighting the just battle against terrorist murderers and their dispatchers," he insisted.

Foreign media out to create tension between me & Anwar: Mahathir

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 7: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said today he would not resign, despite rumours that he was on the verge of stepping down, reports AP.

"How can I run when the country is in such a state," Mahathir said, referring to the recent currency turmoil and stock market slump affecting the Southeast Asian country.

Speaking to reporters following his return from Latin America, Mahathir said he believed that there were concerted efforts by the foreign media as well as "by foreign fund managers" to get rid of me.

He denied that his recent comments calling for a ban on currency trading were behind the Malaysian currency's rapid depreciation, more than 30 per cent since mid-July.

Later today, the ringgit was trading at 3.3700 against the US dollar, up slightly from 3.3500 ringgit late Friday, but down from 3.3825 early Monday.

EU to ask UN to investigate HR abuses in Myanmar

LUXEMBOURG, Oct 7: The European Union is to ask the United Nations to investigate human rights abuses in Myanmar, diplomats said today, reports AFP.

The request for a detailed report from the United Nations Human Rights Commission follows the failure of EU governments on Monday to agree to tighten sanctions against the Southeast Asian country's military rulers.

EU foreign ministers agreed to extend the bloc's existing sanctions for six months. But efforts by Britain, Denmark and Ireland to have the largely symbolic measures beefed-up, including officially discouraging European tourism to Myanmar, floundered in the face of opposition from France and Italy.

A definitive report from the UN condemning the human

rights situation in Myanmar would be a significant boost for those seeking to step up the pressure against Yangon, diplomats said.

The United States in April announced a ban on new investment in Myanmar, but Europe has been wary of following suit, largely for fear of clashing with other Southeast Asian states and weakening the EU's relatively fragile position in terms of trade and investment links to the world's most dynamic economies.

However there is no guarantee that a UN mission would be allowed into Myanmar. Investigators from the European Commission who wanted to probe allegations of the widespread use of forced labour by the Burmese authorities last November were refused entry to the country.

Costs of illegal immigration SC rejects California, Arizona's appeals

WASHINGTON, Oct 7: The Supreme Court Monday rejected appeals by California and Arizona seeking billions of dollars in reimbursement from the Federal Government for the costs of illegal immigration, reports Reuters.

The justices let stand a US Appeals Court ruling that dismissed lawsuits by the two states against the federal government on the grounds that the dispute involved political questions outside the jurisdiction of the legal system.

California sued the federal government in 1994 for its costs of education, emergency medical care and imprisonment of illegal immigrants.

The lawsuit said the US constitution provides that the United States shall protect every state against invasion, and claimed California was under "invasion" by about 125,000 illegal immigrants every year.

Arizona brought a similar lawsuit, charging that federal officials had failed to fulfill their constitutional duty to protect the state from the massive influx of illegal immigrants across its border with Mexico.

The Supreme Court in 1996 rejected an appeal by Florida af-

ter the dismissal of its lawsuit against the Federal Government over illegal immigration. US Appeals Courts also have ruled against New York, New Jersey and Texas.

California said in its appeal that it has at least 43 per cent of all illegal immigrants living in the United States, and estimated 2.1 million people accounting for about five per cent of its total population.

Arizona in its appeal said the judiciary "should not turn its head."

New Nepalese PM forms cabinet

KATHMANDU, Oct 7: Nepal's new Prime Minister-designate today appointed a five-member cabinet dominated by former monarchists, the royal palace said, reports Reuters.

Prime Minister Surya Bahadur Thapa, head of the Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP), retained Finance Minister Rabin Nath Sharma and Foreign Minister Kamal Thapa, who had served in the communist-dominated government which fell on Saturday.



Hamas leader Sheikh Ahmed Yassin sits with family after arriving home following a tumultuous reception by thousands of supporters Monday. Yassin arrived in Gaza on Monday from Jordan after being sent there following his release from Israeli prison last week. — AP/UNB photo

Hamas must be uprooted from Palestinian controlled areas: US

WASHINGTON, Oct 7: Despite Israel's release of Hamas' spiritual leader, the Clinton administration denounced the militant Islamic group Monday as a terrorist organisation and said it must be uprooted from Palestinian-controlled areas, reports AP.

While insisting it was not second-guessing Israel for freeing Sheikh Ahmed Yassin and exchanging him for two Mossad agents, the State Department took a hard stand against terrorism and those who carry out "evil acts."

"We want them shut down," spokesman James P. Rubin said. "And those people who support them ought to be arrested and ought to stay in jail."

In what seemed to be a veiled criticism of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the spokesman added: "We believe that Israel must take into account the repercussions and consequences of any actions it takes in its fight against terror."

Several times, in the course of the department's daily briefing Monday, Rubin was at pains to say the administration's statements were not to be taken as a reflection on Israel's swap of the sheik for the agents cap-

tured in a bungled assassination attempt in Jordan.

Israel also freed at least 19 Palestinian and Jordanian prisoners, who returned to their homes. Israel radio said an additional 40 to 50 detainees were to be freed in the next two weeks.

By agreeing to the release of Yassin and other terrorist suspects, Netanyahu appears to have weakened whatever leverage he had in demanding that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat arrest large numbers of Hamas activists. But the State Department tried to keep the pressure on Arafat.

"Our position on Hamas is clear," Rubin said. "They have repeatedly shown that they do not support the peace process and use terrorism to destroy it. We are opposed to Hamas for that reason and believe it is essential that its terrorist infrastructure be dismantled."

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright repeatedly has insisted that Arafat uproot Hamas' operations to assure Israel the Palestinian Authority is making a strong effort to deter terrorism against Israel.

The statement Monday indicated the administration was

keeping to the tough line, but whether it would be effective in light of Israel's actions was problematic.

Yassin, the founder of Hamas, which opposes the Israeli-Palestinian peace accords, is Arafat's biggest political rival, and his return to Gaza may strengthen Hamas further.

The swap followed a bungled attempt by Mossad, the Israeli spy agency, to kill another Hamas leader, Khalid Meshal, in Amman, the capital of Jordan, on September 25 by injecting him with poison outside his office. The two Mossad agents were captured.

Rubin noted that US law prohibits American assassinations of foreign figures. "We have a law against that," the US official said. "Therefore, we're opposed to it. And therefore, we're opposed to assassinations by other governments as well."

But Rubin said Hamas is an enemy of the Palestinian and Israeli people and of peace. "We want the sponsors of terrorism, those who support terrorism, to be taken down, their infrastructure to be dismantled and these people arrested and stay in jail. And that is the position of the United States," he said.

Hashimoto urges ASEAN to step up cooperation

TOKYO, Oct 7: Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto called on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) today to step up cooperation with Japan to combat terrorism, reports AFP.

"I expect Japan and ASEAN to further strengthen cooperation in the fight against terrorism," Hashimoto said in a message read at the beginning of a two-day closed conference here on anti-terrorism measures.

The meeting is attended by anti-terrorism experts from Japan and the ASEAN, which groups Brunei, Myanmar, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

The meeting was organised based on a proposal Hashimoto made during his visit to ASEAN member countries in January amid a hostage crisis at the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima, Peru.

The four-month crisis ended on April 22 when Peruvian forces stormed the building, freeing 71 hostages and killing the 14 members of the leftist guerrilla group Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA).

Security forces readapting to confront massacres in Algeria

ALGIERS, Algeria, Oct 7: Algeria's foreign minister said Monday that security forces battling an Islamic insurgency were in the process of readapting to confront massacres that have killed hundreds of people in recent weeks, reports AP.

More than 50 people were killed in three new attacks reported Monday, the latest in a series of grisly massacres that has drawn the attention of the international community to the nearly six-year-old conflict.

But Foreign Minister Ahmed Attaf, speaking at a news conference, reiterated that Algeria rejects as interference any outside help in finding a solution to the crisis.

Still, Attaf's remarks appeared to signal a new tactic by Algerian authorities in dealing with the subject. Discussing the violence in a public forum has, until now, been taboo.

Attaf spoke a day before President Liamine Zoualou was to leave on a three-day visit to Saudi Arabia, his second Middle East trip in less than a month. He visited Jordan and Syria in September.

Attaf called the massacres "barbaric without precedent in the history of humanity."

Security forces are "in a phase of adaptation to confront

this new form of barbarity," the minister said. He did not elaborate.

Hospital sources and witnesses said Monday that 54 people — 48 adults and six children — were killed in attacks Saturday in three villages.

According to the reports, the victims' throats were slit and their bodies burned.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the attacks, but they were characteristic of the Armed Islamic Group, Algeria's most violent insurgent faction, which has ignored a cease-fire called by the rival, the Islamic Salvation army.

A group of 50 armed men with a list of their intended targets killed 10 members of a civilian self-defence group in the village of Ouled Sidi Yahia, 150 kms (90 miles) south of Algiers, witnesses said. The so-called self-defence groups were set up by the government to combat the insurgency.

In Draa Tmar, about 100 kms (60 miles) south of the capital, attackers killed 13 members of the same family, including six children, said witnesses and hospital sources who spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of reprisal.

Atlantis returns after rough stay aboard Mir

CAPE CANAVERAL, Florida, Oct 7: Space shuttle Atlantis returned to Earth on Monday, bringing home American astronaut Michael Smith after a tumultuous 4 1/2 months aboard Mir, reports AP.

Atlantis swooped through a hazy sky and landed at Kennedy Space Centre just before 2200 GMT, one day late.

Thick clouds had prevented Atlantis from landing Sunday and kept Foale in orbit for a 145th day. NASA fretted over the clouds and wind throughout the afternoon Monday before finally giving the seven-member crew the go-ahead to land.

Shortly after Atlantis rolled to a safe stop, NASA Administrator Daniel Goldin called from Italy to welcome Foale back to the planet and congratulate him on "a wonderful job." The astronaut replied he was doing fine; several minutes later he was out of the shuttle and into an airport-style people-mover undergoing the first of many medical tests.

Rhonda Foale gathered near the runway with her two children, ages 3 and 5, and about 400 other well-wishers. She waited cheerfully as she has since May when her husband rocketed away to Russia's aging space station.

"I've had to be patient for so long that it didn't fluster me at

all when they said it was going to be a day late," she said earlier Monday. She guaranteed she'd be "really excited" once Atlantis and her husband of 10 years were back on terra firma.

Foale, a 40-year-old British-born astrophysicist, moved from the battered Mir into Atlantis on Sept 28, one day after the shuttle arrived with his replacement, a new computer, patches for holes punched in the hull by a colliding cargo ship, and other urgently needed supplies.

Foale changed places aboard Mir with American astronaut physician David Wolf, whose four-month stay was approved by NASA at practically the last minute following a fierce public debate over the space station's safety.

Some key members of Congress and NASA's own inspector general were alarmed by the raging fire in February, the debilitating collision in June and the frequent computer breakdowns and power losses.

Shuttle commander James Wetherbee thanked Goldin for allowing the mission to proceed. He replied Goldin: "I was prepared if it wasn't safe to pull the plug. But we had the data, it was the right thing to do and, God, it was wonderful watching this mission."



Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeev, right, smiles as he shakes hands with his Indian counterpart Mulayam Yadam, Moscow, Monday. Mulayam began a five-day military shopping trip to Moscow on Monday, with a list that includes submarines and air defence missiles. — AP/UNB photo

Human Rights report Saudi Arabia abusing alien workers

DUBAI, Oct 7: Saudi Arabia executed a Syrian man on false charges of witchcraft only to meet the demands of his employer, a nephew of the king, according to a Human Rights report released Tuesday, reports AP.

The New York-based Human Rights Watch-Middle East cited the execution of Abdul-Karim al-Naqshabandi as one of numerous cases of foreign workers in Saudi Arabia who are arrested, tortured and punished based on false charges.

There was no immediate reaction from Saudi authorities, who seldom respond to reporters' queries. Human Rights Watch said it wrote several letters to Saudi Arabia's foreign, interior and justice ministers to seek a response, but all went unanswered.

The report also criticised the kingdom's lack of a written or published penal code, which it said permits authorities "excessively wide discretion."

Al-Naqshabandi, 40, was executed in December for allegedly practicing witchcraft. He had worked for more than 14 years for Saudi Prince Salman bin Saud bin Abdul Aziz, a nephew of King Fahd.

The 29-page report, devoted entirely to al-Naqshabandi's case, said he was detained for more than three years before he was beheaded in the Saudi capital, Riyadh.

It said al-Naqshabandi, an administrative director at Prince Salman's storage company, wrote letters to the trial judge alleging the prince brought false charges against him when he refused to falsely testify against another employer. But his letters were ignored, the report said.

He also described physical abuse by the prince and police officers while he was detained to extract a false confession, said the report.

He said he was "tied like an animal" on the edge of a swimming pool and so what could I do but give in and sign the confession in order to save myself."

Al-Naqshabandi said he was taken to a police station, where an officer put a shoe in his mouth and held him in solitary confinement.

The report said al-Naqshabandi was "prosecuted and then executed to satisfy the wishes of his wealthy, well-connected employer." Until three days before his execution, al-Naqshabandi did not even know he had been convicted let alone sentenced to death.

Saudi Arabia's Islamic courts impose the death penalty on murderers, rapists and drug traffickers. Beheadings are carried out in public with a razor-sharp sword. At least 100 people have been executed in the first nine months of 1997 alone and more than 540 since 1990.

It is not known how many of them were executed for practicing witchcraft.

Human rights groups have in the past criticised the executions on grounds that the accused often are not represented by lawyers during their trials and have difficulty appealing verdicts.

Chirac calls for Euro, Latin American confce

PARIS, Oct 7: President Jacques Chirac on Monday told Mexico's president that Europe and Latin America could hold a summit in 1999 aimed at boosting ties, reports AP.

Chirac made the comment as he and President Ernesto Zedillo signed several accords bolstering commercial ties and reinforcing the fight against illegal drugs and money-laundering.

The move toward such a summit gained momentum during recent European Union meetings, said Chirac spokeswoman Catherine Colonna.