

60 rebels, 5 troops killed in Lankan fighting

COLOMBO, Oct 11: Security forces and Tamil Tiger guerrillas fought ferocious battles in northern Sri Lanka, leaving at least 60 rebels and five soldiers killed, the defence ministry here said Friday, reports AFP.

Gunmen of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) mounted the latest waves of counter attacks on Wednesday night on army bunker lines just north of Kanakaryankulam and the fighting raged until Thursday, the ministry said.

"Troops confirm well over 60 terrorists killed and a large number wounded," the ministry statement said, adding that five soldiers were killed during the fighting.

However, the LTTE in a statement from its London office said that they were looking for government forces in the jungles of the northern Vanni region.

Sri Lankan army and deserters from the last few days fighting are being systematically hunted down in the jungles by the LTTE forces," the latest LTTE statement said.

The Tigers did not give details of casualties, but said Sri Lankan air force jets bombed the Kanakaryankulam and

Mankulam area on Monday for seven hours.

"A passenger van travelling on the main road was chased and bombed by these planes at 1.30 pm and the Tamil man on board was torn to pieces," the Tiger statement said.

US envoy concerned at report on Iraq

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 11: US envoy Bill Richardson expressed concern on Friday at the latest report that Iraq had been obstructing the work of UN weapons inspectors and said he would have a "strong and serious response" when the Security Council discussed the matter next week, reports Reuter.

The report, by Richard Butler of Australia, head of the UN Special Commission (UNSCOM) in charge of scrapping Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, said Baghdad was imposing new restrictions on UN inspection teams and concealing vital data about its biological weapons programme.

US, 4 other states approve UN peacekeeping force for Congo

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 11: The United States and four other permanent Security Council members gave the go-ahead for the United Nations to speed preparations for a UN peacekeeping force for the Republic of Congo, diplomatic sources said, reports AP.

The sources, speaking Friday on condition of anonymity, stressed that no final decision to dispatch peacekeepers had been taken. They said Secretary-General Kofi Annan is expected to submit a recommendation to the council for such a force by the middle of next week.

African leaders have been urging such a force for the Republic of Congo, whose capital Brazzaville has been wracked since June by fighting between forces of President Pascal Lissouba and Gen. Denis Sassou-Nguesso.

The United States has insisted that the two leaders accept an effective cease-fire and a "political program" to restore order as conditions for US approval of a UN force. Diplomatic sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, also said Washington insists on UN control of Brazzaville airport, which fell to Sassou-Nguesso's troops Thursday night.

The airport fell only hours after Sassou-Nguesso signed a truce agreement negotiated by the president of Gabon, Omar Bongo. Lissouba had already accepted the truce. Sassou-Nguesso's radio station also claimed the general's troops had taken the presidential palace.

Lissouba was across the Congo River in Kinshasa, capital of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, formerly Zaire.

Annan met Friday afternoon with the ambassadors of the five permanent council members — the United States, Britain, France, China and Russia — to discuss the situation in the Republic of Congo.

No statement was issued after the meeting. But the sources said all five ambassadors agreed that the United Nations should accelerate planning for a peacekeeping force.



Nobel Peace Prize winner Jody Williams, right, smiles as she hugs her sister, Janet Lucier, at her home in Putney, Vt., Friday. The prize was awarded Friday to Williams and the International Campaign to Ban Land Mines for their battle to eliminate explosives that kill and maim 26,000 people a year. — AP/UNB photo

BRIEFLY

Thai king to sign new constitution: King Bhumibol Adulyadej is to sign a new constitution Saturday aimed at stamping out political corruption blamed by many Thais for the worst economic crisis in decades, AP reports from Bangkok.

Signature by the Thai monarch, revered by his 60 million subject, will be quickly followed by publication in the official Royal Gazette, the formal step making it law.

Activists who campaigned for the new charter against government resistance say they will now fight to ensure laws needed to put the document into action over the next eight months do not weaken it.

5 suspects held in Pakistan: Pakistani authorities have arrested five suspects in the killing of five Iranian air force technicians, the English-language daily newspaper, The News reported Saturday, AP says from Islamabad.

Last month, three gunmen riding a motorcycle opened fire on a vehicle carrying the Iranian technicians to a training course in the Punjab city of Rawalpindi, killing the technicians and their Pakistani driver.

Argentinian jailed in Spain: A Spanish judge ordered a former Argentine naval officer jailed Friday after he admitted in court that he hurried people to their deaths from airplanes during Argentina's "dirty war." AP reports from Madrid.

Former Lt Commander Adolfo Scilingo's admissions were made during four days of testimony this week before a judge investigating the disappearances of 600 Spaniards during Argentina's 1976-1983 dictatorship.

Judge Baltasar Garzon ordered Scilingo jailed without bail Friday on charges of genocide and terrorism, the state news agency EFE said. He was to be taken to Carabanchel Prison outside Madrid.

Kim visits air force HQs: North Korean leader Kim Jong-il has visited the headquarters of the country's air force unit as part of a series of public appearances since his rise to the top of the Workers' Party, the North Korean media said yesterday, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) monitored Tokyo, said Kim had visited the headquarters of the Korean People's Army (KPA) air force combined unit No 564 on Friday, on the 52nd anniversary of the Workers' Party of Korea (WPK).

He warmly waved to the cheering soldiers and congratulated the officers and men of the KPA on the anniversary of the WPK, Pyongyang's mouthpiece said.

Quake hits off coast of Japan: A moderate earthquake hit off the Pacific coast of central Japan Friday, but there were no immediate reports of damage or injuries, AP reports from Tokyo.

The quake with a preliminary magnitude of 5, which struck about 3 pm (0600 GMT), was centered about 30 kilometres (19 miles) under the sea off the coast, near the city of Hamamatsu, 200 kilometres (125 miles) west of Tokyo, the Meteorological Agency said.

There was no danger of tsunami, which are undersea waves triggered by volcanic activity or earthquakes, it said.

Iranian group challenges US list: The main Iranian opposition movement, the Mujahideen Khalq, said on Friday it would challenge its listing by the United States as a "terrorist" organisation in the US courts, Reuter reports from Washington.

The State Department include the group only as a sop to the new Iranian government, it added in a statement from its Washington office — less than 400 yards (metres) from the White House.

The group again denied the "terrorism" charge raised by the State Department in a controversial 1994 report to Congress.

Russian border guards kill 5: Russian border guards have shot dead five drug couriers and detained another four who tried to cross into Tajikistan from neighbouring Afghanistan, a Russian officer in the ex-Soviet state said yesterday, Reuter reports from Dushanbe.

"An armed clash with the couriers took place late on Friday, near the Pyandzh border point in southern Tajikistan," the officer told Reuters.

"The guards tried to detain the group but it opened fire. Five couriers were killed, and the other four were seized as they tried to return to Afghanistan," he said.

Bomb blast in Algiers mosque claims 7 lives

ALGIERS, Oct 11: A bomb exploded in an Algiers mosque at Friday prayer, killing seven people and injuring up to 20 others, residents of the neighbourhood where the mosque is located said, reports AP.

It was the first reported bomb attack inside a mosque since violence erupted in this North African nation 5 1/2 years ago.

There were no firm details on the attack, which was not confirmed by authorities, and no claim of responsibility.

The mosque is located in the Puit des Zouaves neighbourhood in the hills above the Mediterranean port capital.

Residents said seven people were killed and 20 injured.

Castro reelected as 1st secretary of Cuba's ruling Communist Party

HAVANA, Oct 11: Cuba's ruling Communist Party on Friday re-elected president Fidel Castro as the party's first secretary and appointed a 24-member politburo that included six new faces, reports Reuter.

The party's new 150-member central committee confirmed Castro in his post as its fifth party congress drew to a close, Cuban official media said.

Castro, 71 and in power since his 1959 revolution, is also Cuba's commander-in-chief of the armed forces and president of the council of state and council of ministers, his reelection as party boss had been expected.

National Assembly to open debate on election law in Cambodia

PHNOM PENH, Oct 11: The National Assembly will open debate Monday on a law for elections scheduled for next year that are expected to solidify the power of Hun Sen, who toppled his co-premier in July, reports AP.

The law will establish a procedure for political parties to register and run in the elections, assembly members said Saturday. Its passage by the end of October is seen as crucial by government officials if elections are to be held in May.

Hun Sen's cash-strapped government hopes that quick passage of election laws will encourage the United Nations and other donors to provide sorely needed aid and technical assistance in the polls to the tune of dollars 21 million.

"If the bill is passed, I think it will influence the international community's decision about assisting in the polls," said Kann Man, a legislator.

'Pak legal community lives in fear of terrorist attacks'

LAHORE, Oct 11: Pakistan's legal community lives in constant fear of attacks by extremist Muslim groups, a leading human rights lawyer said Saturday, one day after a retired judge was gunned down in his Lahore office in a suspected revenge killing, reports AP.

"I receive threats constantly, and so do many others," said Asma Jehangir, a lawyer and founding member of Pakistan's Human Rights Commission.

Attacks and threats against lawyers and judges generally have been an attempt by extremist Muslim groups to intimidate lawyers not to defend people accused of blasphemy and judges to impose the death penalty.

Often blasphemy charges are brought against members of minority religions and difficult to prove.

Retired Judge Arif Iqbal Hussain Bhatti had received a series of threats in the weeks leading up to his death Friday in his office in central Lahore.

A lone gunman walked into Bhatti's office pulled out a pistol and fired several shots at close range killing the retired judge.

No one has taken responsibility for the shooting.

Police suspect the killing may have been in retaliation for a 1995 trial in which Bhatti acquitted two Christian brothers accused of blasphemy. They were accused of writing graffiti

against Islam's Prophet Mohammed.

One of the accused was 10 years old at the time of the alleged offense and was illiterate. Bhatti's ruling sparked protests by the extremist Sunni Muslim group Guardians of the Friends of the Prophet and the two brothers were whisked out of the country and granted asylum in Germany.

Jehangir, the lawyer for the Christian brothers in the case, said she and Bhatti have lived with regular threats from Sunni Muslim extremist groups since the 1995 trial.

Religiously motivated violence has plagued Islamic Pakistan, home to 140 million people. About 200 people have died in sectarian attacks so far this year.

Most of the clashes involve extremist Sunni and Shiite Muslim groups.

At least seven lawyers and judges have been targeted in drive-by shootings and assassinations, she said.

Jehangir declined to say who she thought was responsible for Bhatti's death, but said the faxed threats she and the judge received often included the names, addresses and phone numbers of the senders.

"The messages often dared me to send the police after them," she said.

Jehangir said she turned in the messages to the police, but there was never any investigation. She blames the refusal of the police to follow up on these threats on links between the heavily armed and well-funded extremist Muslim groups and senior members of Pakistan's judiciary and police forces.

Sexual harassment charges Hillary urges Clinton to settle case with Jones

WASHINGTON, Oct 11: First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton urged the president to settle the sexual harassment case brought by Paula Jones although she believes her husband did nothing wrong in a news magazine reported on Friday, reports Reuter.

But President Bill Clinton himself has decided to seek full exoneration of Jones charges in court, US News and World Report said.

Jones, a former Arkansas state employee alleges that then governor Clinton made crude sexual advances toward her during the 1991 encounter. The president denies the allegations and says he cannot remember meeting Jones.

The magazine citing sources it did not name or directly quote, said Mrs. Clinton decided to endure whatever embarrassment might result in order to end the lawsuit and all its distractions.

Jones recently rejected a reported settlement offer of 700,000 dollar and a statement from Clinton attesting to her character, she has said in the past she would only accept an admission of guilt by Clinton and an apology.

Her former lawyers Gil Davis and Joseph Cammarata, had urged her to accept the settlement offer and resigned from the case when she refused Davis and Cammarata have also filed

an 800,000 dollar libel on any settlement or judgement they might eventually get.

Jones is now represented by the Dallas IAW firm of Rader Campbell Fisher and Pyuke.

DPRK praises Japan for offer of food aid

TOKYO, Oct 11: North Korea curtailed its typically virulent rhetoric today and praised Japan for its offer of food assistance to the famine-hit state, reports Reuter.

"This is a continuation of the good precedents of mutual humanitarian assistance," the official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said of the aid proposal.

KCNA regularly publishes attacks on Japan for the country's military alliance with the United States and for Japan's annexation of the Korean Peninsula earlier this century.

In expressing appreciation for the aid plan, KCNA said: "This will positively contribute to developing friendly ties between the two peoples."

On Thursday, Japan announced it would provide 27 million dollars worth of humanitarian food aid for North Korea after cutting aid to the Stalinist state for 15 months.

Murderous swing of hurricane Pauline 400 die, 20,000 turn homeless

ACAPULCO, Mexico, Oct 11: Some 400 people died and 20,000 were left homeless after hurricane Pauline's murderous swing through the tropical resort of Acapulco and the coast of Southern Mexico, the Red Cross said on Friday, reports Reuter.

The organisation's estimate was substantially higher than government estimates. State officials had previously put the death toll across three states at around 128, though they said hundreds more were missing.

Thousands of people were stranded without food, drinking water or homes in this once-glistening tourist paradise.

At the extent of the hurricane disaster became clear, residents criticised the official rescue effort, saying authorities were doing too little too late.

"The figures we have are about 400 dead and 20,000 homeless," Jose Barroso, head of the Mexican Red Cross, told a news conference in Mexico City.

But the final death toll would not be known until floodwaters drained off the disaster areas. "We don't know what's underwater," he said.

President Ernesto Zedillo pledged his loyalty to India. He has offered to negotiate more autonomy for his state, saying only a peaceful path can lead to a lasting solution.

Pakistan and India have embarked on talks that could contribute to peace. The rivals have fought two wars over Kashmir, two-thirds of which is held by India and the rest by Pakistan. Sporadic artillery duels continue, such as one in early October that killed 39 civilians and soldiers on both sides of the border.

Perhaps Abdullah's greatest hope is that his constituents want calm after years of devastation. Even hard liners like Geelani acknowledge that Kashmiris now see less interest in fighting than in starting businesses and welcoming tourists and that the army has the upper hand.

Geelani predicts the hull will last only until Kashmiris have regained their strength.

But the conversation between the Hindu accountant and the Muslim shopkeeper might give him pause. Bhan and Mohammed, who disagree on much, both said Kashmir had seen too much suffering.

Political problems persist, but Kashmiris tired of violence

SRINAGAR, India, Oct 11: The Hindu accountant is convinced peace is coming to Kashmir. The Muslim shopkeeper is just as adamant nothing has improved in the region torn by religious violence since the 1980s, reports AP.

Yet the argue amiably, sipping glasses of tea thick with milk and sugar. And that is a sign of hope here in Kashmir. Although the main sources of friction have not been settled, change is in the air.

It has been a year since the Indian government declared Kashmir was ready to have its own local government again and held elections for a state assembly led by a chief minister.

Federal authorities had imposed direct rule in late 1989, stripping the powers of Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah after clashes between Indian soldiers and Muslim separatists reached serious levels.

Abdullah won office again in last year's vote. Since taking his oath last October, a few roads cratered by artillery shells have been repaired, a few schools blasted by bombs rebuilt. Residents of Srinagar, the state capital, stroll in the city's

famous Mughal gardens again and venture out to shops and parties after dark, the night's calm rarely broken by rocket fire these days.

With 80 per cent of its 7 million people Muslim, Kashmir is the only predominately Muslim state in largely Hindu India, and Muslim militants still want independence or union with Pakistan, India's Islamic neighbour to the northwest. But fighting has ebbed.

The government refuses to say how many soldiers it has throughout Kashmir to put down the insurgency, but estimates range as high as 800,000.

The Defence Ministry announced October 7 that an unspecified number of soldiers are being moved from Srinagar and two other cities to the Kashmiri countryside.

The weekend before the announcement, Srinagar looked occupied. Soldiers patrolled in groups of five or six on the lookout for rebels that India says are armed and trained by Pakistan. Sandbags were piled high on the balconies of barracks that were once the homes of Kashmiri Hindus who fled in the 1990s.

CL Bhan, an accountant, was one of the few Hindus to stay on. Bhan feels the fighting, which caused Hindus and Muslims alike to flee, and took 16,000 lives since 1989, is dying out. Some of his relatives are talking of returning.

More importantly, he said, state legislators are gaining a reputation for listening and responding to citizen complaints about unemployment, power failures, poor roads — the normal concerns of a normal government.

"The previous regime was only trying to contain the military. There were no people's representatives in the government — only bureaucrats," Bhan said. "This new government, our own government."

His words drew a scornful laugh from Noor Mohammed, a Muslim village shopkeeper in town to pick up a supply of bath soap from the grocery supplier for whom Bhan keeps the books.

Mohammed said Abdullah, who is Muslim, "Doesn't care about the miseries the people are suffering" and is too insulated by bodyguards to even know much about Kashmiris' day-to-day difficulties.

Abdullah has escaped several assassination attempts since taking office from 9 to 10, traffic is barred from a main Srinagar road while buses of bureaucrats are escorted to government headquarters by armored police jeeps. Traffic is halted again when they return to their guarded compounds at the end of the day.

In an interview, Abdullah said nothing can keep him from going to the people to listen to their concerns. He did not mention that his forays from Srinagar are sometimes met with empty streets. Villagers close their shops and stay at home to show their dislike of his government, which has been accused of moving too slowly and being riddled with cronyism.

Abdullah offered a modest assessment of his achievements. He is proud of cracking down on cheating on high school exams.

Repairs also were begun on five major roads, completed on two. Loans were offered to get small taxi business started and help innkeepers renovate rooms in hopes of a return of the tourists who once flocked to Kashmir's mountains.

"When I took office ... there was nothing," Abdullah said.

His top aide, chief secretary Ashok Jaitly, said basic government was neglected during federal rule and the results were costly.

In 1989, Jaitly said, Abdullah's previous government had been on the verge of accepting a 4 billion rupee (dhs 111 million) grant from the British development agency to clean up Srinagar's Dal Lake, fast being transformed into an open sewer. Work was never begun, and nearly eight years later, the estimated cost has doubled.

Syed Ali Shah Geelani, whose pro-independence Islamic Movement boycotted last year's elections, has little patience for talk of bridges and sewage systems.

"A local government's function is to build roads and that kind of thing — not to solve the political problem," he said.

"The masses are for freedom. We are not satisfied with Indian rule. We are not satisfied with Farooq Abdullah."

Abdullah, whose late father is revered for campaigning for Kashmiri independence, has

White House to turn over videotapes of Clinton's coffee meetings

WASHINGTON, Oct 11: The White House said on Friday it planned to turn over the remaining videotapes of President Bill Clinton's White House political events by next Tuesday, reports Reuter.

"We are hoping to produce all remaining tapes and logs of Democratic National Committee events by next Tuesday," said White House Special Counsel Lanny Davis.

The White House's belated turning over of 44 videotapes of Clinton's White House coffee meetings with deep-pocket political contributors generated outrage from Attorney General Janet Reno and the Senate Governmental Affairs Committee, both of which are investigating campaign finance abuse allegations related to last year's elections.

Clinton, talking to reporters on Wednesday, said it was a mistake the tapes were not turned over sooner and insisted they showed at any rate that no one in the White House had done anything wrong.

Manila-Canberra vow to combat child abuse

MANILA, Oct 11: The Philippines and Australia vowed to cooperate to combat sexual abuse against young children, officials said today, reports Reuter.

Philippine Foreign Secretary Domingo Slazon and Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer signed a memorandum of understanding to combat paedophilia and other serious crimes during a regional security dialogue held in Manila.

"It's the first such MOU for Australia and it does represent an important landmark against child sexual abuses," Downer said in a new conference.

The United Nations estimates that there are 60,000 child prostitutes in the Philippines, where there are significant levels of incest and sexual abuse in some communities.

Two of the three foreigners convicted of child abuse in the country are British. However, local officials say most foreign paedophiles come from Australia and Japan, some of them on special sex tours.

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