

# African forces oust Sierra Leone junta in bold offensive

FREETOWN, Sierra Leone, Feb 14: Amid charred bodies and the smoldering rubble of a punishing military victory, a Nigerian-led African army took control of Sierra Leone's embattled capital Friday, reports AP.

The coalition drove out a 10-month-old junta in a final offensive this week and is poised to restore the ousted president — in what appears to be Africa's first successful experiment with using military might to return an elected government rather than topple it.

By Friday, the African coalition controlled most of the city, although sporadic gunfire could still be heard. Authorities imposed a dusk-to-dawn curfew and worked to restore order, broadcasting radio appeals to listeners to surrender their arms and refrain from retaliatory attacks on junta troops.

Gummen loyal to the country's fast-dissolving military regime were either in flight, hiding or had been served swift street justice by angered civilians.

City residents danced in the streets while the charred bodies

of at least seven junta soldiers killed in revenge attacks lay battered in the gutter.

The junta's removal clears the way for the return of President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah, who was driven from power by renegade military commanders in May.

There was no immediate word on when the coalition planned to return Kabbah to power. Nor was there any immediate indication the coalition intended to retain control indefinitely.

The whereabouts of Lt. Col. Johnny Paul Koroma, the leader of the Blood May coup, were not known. Hundreds of other junta troops had surrendered and thrown down their weapons.

The West African force intervened in Sierra Leone soon after Koroma toppled Kabbah. After bombarding Freetown in a failed attempt to drive the junta from power, the coalition blockaded Freetown's port to prevent food, fuel and other necessities from reaching the city. The Economic Community of West African States autho-

risied the force, which is dominated by Nigerians. Troops from Ghana and Guinea play much smaller roles.

Despite its human rights record at home, Nigeria appears to be trying to improve its image by becoming West Africa's self-appointed guardian of democracy.

Unlike past peacekeeping and peacemaking efforts in Africa — including the inconclusive UN missions in Angola — Sierra Leone's West Africa intervention force may be in the process of setting a precedent for restoring elected rule through outside African military intervention.

A senior coalition commander, Nigerian Maj. Gen. Timothy Shelpidi, said from his headquarters in Monrovia, Liberia, that several of his planes had forced down two junta attack helicopters in Monrovia and captured the 25 people inside.

An unknown number of the passengers were believed to be fleeing junta officials.

"They are being interrogated right now," Shelpidi said, giving no details.

On the sidelines Friday, the UN Security Council urged the African force to allow speedy delivery of humanitarian aid.

Council diplomats had urged Kabbah's restoration but never backed the use of force; foreign ministers of the coalition nations visited the United Nations last week but gave no indication of the offensive that was then days away.

Council President Denis Dangué Rewaka of Gabon refused to say whether that lack of advance notice was an embarrassment to the council.

In Washington, State Department spokesman James P. Rubin said he hoped that Sierra Leone's elected government would soon be returned to power and that calm would be restored.

He promised that the United States would work with the Kabbah government to help the pressing needs of Sierra Leone's civilians.

Fighting has devastated many parts of Freetown, with artillery shells and mortars slamming down on residential districts with seemingly little

regard for a yet-uncounted civilian toll.

The few medical clinics able to keep functioning have been overwhelmed, aid workers said. It was not immediately clear which side had shelled the civilian areas, or if the shells had been fired by both sides.

International aid workers have warned of a humanitarian crisis if food and medical attention does not quickly reach the hundreds of thousands of people who have been trapped between warring forces in Freetown.

Up to 18 per cent of civilians in the country's northern districts face acute malnutrition, CARE and World Food Programme and other aid groups have warned.

Up to a half-million Freetown civilians who had been cut off from food aid shipments during the fighting were in jeopardy, the World Food Programme said Thursday.

The intervention force launched its attack last week. Its troops captured large parts of the city centre Thursday while civilians welcomed their victory with street celebrations.

## Voice recorder of crashed Filipino plane found

MANILA, Feb 14: Searchers have found the cockpit voice recorder of a D-9 jet that crashed nearly two weeks ago in the southern Philippines with 104 people aboard, an official said Saturday, reports AP.

The voice recorder was the last key instrument to be found in the investigation into the cause of the Cebu Pacific Air plane's crash into a steep mountain ridge, which killed everyone aboard.

Jesus Dureza, chief of the rescue committee dealing with the crash, said the recovery Friday of the instrument, which records conversations between the pilots and between the plane and the airport tower, would allow the search at the crash site to wind up soon.

He said only 14 bodies have been identified so far, including an Australian and an Austrian. The identification of victims will continue, he added.

There were no survivors of the crash, the worst aviation disaster in Philippine history. The plane was traveling from Manila to Cagayan de Oro city.

There were also at least two Americans, one Japanese, one Canadian, and one Swiss on the plane.

The plane's flight data recorder, which was recovered last week, has been sent to Canada for analysis.



A supporter of Sonia Gandhi, widow of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, waves a cut-out of him as he shouts slogans for the Congress Party at a rally in New Delhi, Friday. — AP/UNB photo

## 'Malaysia, S'pore need to be more flexible in dealings

SINGAPORE, Feb 14: Malaysia and Singapore need to be more flexible in their dealings for relations to improve, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said in an interview with the Straits Times, reports Reuters.

"There must be areas for compromise or there is no point talking at all. We are prepared not to be rigid and we expect that both sides must do it," the Singapore-based paper today quoted him as saying.

Mahathir is scheduled to meet Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong on Monday and the two sides are expected to issue a communiqué after the meeting.

He declined to reveal the communiqué's contents, saying only: "I hope it is going to be very positive."

Relations between Singapore and Malaysia went through a sticky patch last year after Singapore's senior minister Lee Kuan Yew described Malaysia's southern Johore state as being "notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jackings."



Marines of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit go for an early morning run aboard the amphibious assault ship USS Guam which is currently in transit to the Persian Gulf to support Operation Southern Watch. A day after Russia strongly objected to American military threats against Iraq, President Clinton said Friday, He respects Moscow's view but "Nyet" is not 'no' for the United States under these circumstances. — AP/UNB photo

## Howard begins refocusing on political issues of '98

THREDBO, Australia, Feb 14: Australian Prime Minister John Howard today began refocusing his government colleagues on the political issues of 1998, widely expected to be an election year, reports Reuters.

About 100 of 130 conservative Liberal-National Coalition government politicians have gathered in Australia's premier ski resort, Thredbo, to consider likely election issues, including the economy, taxation reform, and marginal seats strategy.

Government politicians said it was time to move the agenda on after an historic two-week convention which voted in favour of making Australia a republic. Howard has promised a nationwide referendum on the issue in 1999.

"We'll move the agenda on from the convention," Trade Minister Tim Fischer told reporters on his arrival in Thredbo.

In a closed meeting this morning, Howard outlined the political outlook for 1998, detailing potential areas of weakness and strength.

The meeting comes less than one week after government backbencher Paul Zimmit resigned from the Liberal Party, accusing Howard of a "lack of leadership and integrity."

## Police, troops patrol streets of riot-torn Indonesian towns

PAMANUKAN, Indonesia, Feb 14: Police and troops patrolled riot-torn towns east of the capital Saturday as residents salvaged what they could from hundreds of burned out and ransacked Chinese-owned shops and houses, reports AP.

The heavy security presence brought an uneasy calm to about a dozen towns that were wrecked Friday, the most violent day of protest since the onset of Indonesia's worst economic crisis in three decades.

Police said one man was trampled to death by a rampaging crowd of more than 3,000 in Losari, about 200 kilometres (125 miles) east of Jakarta. Some residents reported hearing gunshots, but police declined to comment.

Hundreds of buildings were attacked and dozens of rioters were detained after security personnel, armed with shields and sticks, restored order.

The Jakarta Post newspaper described Friday's outburst as "eight hours of chaos."

Mobs vented anger against Chinese traders they blame for "soaring prices and massive unemployment that followed a plunge in the value of the currency, the rupiah."

"All these economic prob-

lems are fault of the Chinese," said one man, in Pamanukan about 90 kilometres (56 miles) east of Jakarta.

**Indonesian riots**

90 per cent Muslim.

Chinese run most stores in towns and cities and complain that they're being made scapegoats for the economic mess.

Rioters pelted stones at buildings and vehicles. Others grabbed goods from shop shelves, piled them in the streets and set them on fire. Many Chinese hid in friends' homes or took shelter in police stations.

One Chinese storekeeper wept openly as he surveyed the damage to his shop on Saturday. Along the street crowds of people took what they could carry from other wrecked stores.

Other traders packed up, saying they would leave the area until the situation calmed.

At the height of the chaos fearful residents painted the word "Muslim" on their doors to keep rioters from attacking their homes. Three Chinese churches were raided and their furniture burned.

"I don't know who did this here. They were strangers to me," said one resident in Sukamandi, 75 kilometres (45 miles) east of Jakarta.

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## EU urges Iran to remove threat to Rushdie's life

LONDON, Feb 14: The European Union made a new appeal to Iran today not to carry out a death order against British author Salman Rushdie, reports Reuters.

The plea was made by Britain, current president of the EU, on the ninth anniversary of a fatwa, or religious ruling, by Iran's former spiritual leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, that condemned Rushdie to death for alleged blasphemy in his novel "The Satanic Verses."

The fatwa said any Muslim in a position to kill Rushdie had a duty to do so.

The British statement, issued by the Foreign Office, urged the Iranian authorities to work with the EU to find a satisfactory solution.

The European Union welcomes the new Iranian government's stated commitment to respect the rule of law and their emphasis on the need for a dialogue of civilisations.

The European Union hopes that this will take up towards the assurances that we need to remove the threat to Salman Rushdie's life," the statement said.

British officials said Foreign Secretary Robin Cook would meet Rushdie soon to underline the government's commitment to his case.

## US welcomes release of Cuban prisoners

WASHINGTON, Feb 14: Maintaining an unyielding line, the Clinton administration welcomed Cuba's decision to release dozens of prisoners but withheld any matching US gesture to Fidel Castro, reports AP.

Pope John Paul was credited for the release of the prisoners, who were on a list of several hundreds presented to Cuban authorities by the Vatican during his visit.

"If these releases lead to an increase in the sphere of freedom inside Cuba, they are an important development," James P. Rubin, the State Department spokesman, said Friday. "But until we have further information on the scope and conditions of these releases, we cannot fully assess their significance."

Rubin said the United States was particularly concerned that many political prisoners were not being released and that those who were released may be forced to exile.

In Havana, Cuba ruled out any immediate pardons for 70 of the hundreds of prisoners the Pope asked to be freed, saying they posed threats to national security or public safety.

## ULFA threatens bloodshed against voting in India

GAUHATI, India, Feb 14: A separatist group in northeastern India on Saturday warned of bloodshed if people vote in the general elections to parliament that begins in two days, reports AP.

In a statement faxed to media offices in the state of Assam, the chief of the United Liberation Front of Assam, Arabininda Rajkhowa, said "acceptance of the Indian democratic system... would only open the doors for more bloodshed."

He asked the state's 15 million voters not to head to polling stations Monday.

State Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta admitted the separatist warning would scare voters in rural areas. He urged people to resist the rebel call, which he said was influenced by foreign powers creating a reign of terror in the state. He did not elaborate.

Police officer S P Ram, overseeing the security arrangements for the balloting, said 40 per cent of the state's 17,500 polling stations have been declared sensitive.

"We are faced with an acute

shortage of forces. That's our biggest problem now," he said in an interview.

Thousands of armed policemen and paramilitary police fanned out across the state, the country's main tea-growing region.

Friday night, a planeload of paramilitary soldiers were flown to the state. Another 2,000 army commandos are expected to arrive in the state Saturday.

The independent Election Commission Friday rejected a plea from the state government to spread the poll over two days in Assam, but the organisation refused to do that.

In the last few weeks, ULFA, which is fighting for an independent homeland for nearly a decade, has killed three top political leaders in Assam. The rebels accuse the federal government of economic exploitation of the state of 24 million people.

On Friday, a student group enforced a strike to revise the voters' list, to eliminate people the students accused of being il-

legal migrants from Bangladesh.

Voting is staggered by region over six non-consecutive days to allow paramilitary forces time to deploy at different trouble spots, including Assam. Two hundred twenty-two of the seats will be contested Monday.

The balloting in the world's largest democracy involves some 600 million voters, 850,000 polling stations and 4.5 million polling staff.

Elections were called three years ahead of schedule after the Congress Party withdrew support from the minority United Front coalition of Prime Minister I K Gujral in December.

Newspapers have reported high disinterest in the latest election, especially after more than a dozen large political parties split. Setting aside ideology, political groups have formed alliances with an eye on coming to power.

Several opinion polls have indicated that no single group will win enough seats to form a government.

## UN sending team to survey 8 suspected Iraqi sites

UNITED NATIONS, Feb 14: The United Nations is sending a team to survey eight sites Iraq says are off-limits to UN arms inspectors and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan is considering a trip to Baghdad, officials said on Friday, reports Reuters.

The extent of the so-called Iraqi presidential compounds, and what they encompass, are a matter of controversy in the crisis threatening to explode with a US military strike on Iraq.

The team, due to arrive in Iraq on Sunday, includes two Austrian surveyors and will be led by Staffan de Mistura of Sweden, director of the UN Information Center in Rome and former UN Humanitarian coordinator for Iraq.

Meanwhile, Annan, who has expressed his readiness to fly to Baghdad himself, held a second meeting on Friday with the five permanent members of the Security Council — the United States, Russia, Britain, China and France — and scheduled a third meeting for Monday.

Iraq, as well as Russia and some other council members, are pressing him to visit Baghdad to try to resolve the current

crisis over inspections peacefully and head off military action by the United States and Britain, which have massed ships and planes in the Gulf.

The aim of his meetings with the permanent members of the Security Council is to agree on a package of proposals he could take to Iraq, according to some sources, the US position was not yet clear.

The secretary-general said a mission to Baghdad "needs to be prepared very carefully, both here in New York and on the ground in Baghdad."

"I have told people... that what I am after a workable solution, not a trip. I hope that in the next few days, things would clarify and positions will be brought closer and that a trip to Baghdad would be meaningful. And at that point I would be ready to go to Baghdad."

Asked whether the permanent council members were close to agreement on a set of proposals, Annan told reporters: "The fact that we have fixed a second time and we have fixed a third meeting indicates that there is a willingness for us to work together and find a common ground that will permit me to move on the Bagh-

dad."

While the United States and Britain are preparing military action against Iraq if it fails to allow UN weapons inspectors full access to all presidential sites, Russia and China are strongly opposed to any use of force. France takes a similar position.

Annan said: "We reaffirmed the basic principles at stake, including the need to implement the resolutions of the Security Council fully and without conditions."

Referring to the presidential sites, he said Friday's meeting focused on "the need to define them and the possible exploration of modalities to inspect them."

"Large areas of common ground emerged but discussions will continue and we will meet again... at 4 pm (2100 GMT) on Monday."

Annan said he expected the survey team to complete its work in three or four days.

Iraq has said its presidential sites could be inspected, but only once, during a 60-day period and that the inspection teams would answer to the Security Council, not UNSCOM.

### BRIFLY

**Algerian rebel's death confirmed:** The Algerian government confirmed Friday that an Islamic militant accused of plotting a spate of deadly bombings in Paris in 1995 is dead, AP says from Algiers.

Alli Touchent, on the run since the bombings that killed nine people and injured 200 others, was first reported dead by independent Algerian newspapers last year. But authorities refused to confirm the reports. On Friday, Algeria's security forces said Touchent had been killed in May, 1997, along with another Islamic militant in a shooting near a hotel in downtown Algiers. They said the bodies had not been immediately identified.

**Sudanese mourn leaders' death:** Thousands of Sudanese clad in their traditional mourning colour of white crowded a downtown square Friday to mourn the vice president and eight other political leaders killed in a plane crash a day earlier, reports AP.

Hassan Turabi, the government's Islamic ideologue, led the four-hour funeral, chanting until his voice grew hoarse. Maj Gen Zubair Mohammed Saleh, the vice president, and the eight others were killed when their military plane carrying 57 passengers skidded off the runway and into the Sobat River in Southern Sudan.

**Lanka probes into threat to newsman:** President Chandrika Kumaratunga has ordered a probe into threats against a journalist who has reported on allegations of corruption in the military, a state-run newspaper reported Saturday, AP says from Colombo.

"The government is deeply perturbed over this incident," The Daily News quoted Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera as saying. Iqbal Athas, who won the US-based Committee to Protect Journalists' International Press Freedom Award in 1994, told police that five men entered his home Thursday night and pointed a gun at him in the presence of his wife and 7-year-old daughter.

## Navy gunboats kill 10 Tigers in north-eastern Lanka

COLOMBO, Feb 14: Navy gunboats killed at least 10 Tamil Tiger guerrillas in north-eastern Sri Lanka today in an attack on rebel vessels, defence officials said, reports AFP.

The navy detected the boats of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) off the coast of Pulmudalai at dawn Saturday, officials said, adding that one boat was sunk and two others were damaged by naval fire.

In a second confrontation hours later another rebel boat was sunk, the officials said.

The Tigers returned fire but there were no navy casualties, the sources said.

The navy action came a day after Junior Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte said the military had successfully repulsed a Tamil rebel offensive against a strategic military base in the north of the country.

Ratwatte rejected LTTE claims they had captured the town of Kilinochchi after a ferocious attack two weeks ago.

"They came to our first line of defence but we have driven them back," Ratwatte told reporters here Friday. "Our troops have gone back to their original lines. We have not lost even an inch."

## Sexual harassment case US secret service members may be questioned

WASHINGTON, Feb 14: With no date in sight for Monica Lewinsky to testify, prosecutors pressed forward Friday with negotiations aimed at bringing Secret Service members in for questioning before the grand jury investigating allegations of a presidential affair and cover-up, reports AP.

The notion of tight-lipped Secret Service agents being compelled to testify about President Clinton's private actions drew resistance from government officials concerned that it could jeopardize the traditional level of trust between presidents and their protectors.

Treasury and Justice Department officials sought to limit the scope of questioning to what Secret Service members might know about those outside the first family, according to government officials speaking on condition of anonymity.

Under such an arrangement, agents theoretically could be questioned about what they observed or heard from Ms Lewinsky or others who came in contact with the first family.

But it was unclear whether prosecutor Kenneth Starr would press for more specific testi-

## Off the Record

**Valentine weddings in love district**

BANGKOK, Feb 14: Money may not buy love, but romance wasn't immune from Asia's economic crisis on Valentine's Day, reports AP.

In what has become an annual ritual, a record number of 1,500 couples registered their marriages in Bangkok's "district of love" to mark Valentine's Day, but many drastically scaled back celebrations because of current hard times.

"We won't have any celebration this evening," said Police Lance Cpl. Chakrarin Rattana, 30. "We can't afford a honeymoon, and I'm only taking a half-day off."

Chakrarin was legally registering his 10-year union with Jiraporn Rohwatt, 23, at a hotel serving as a vast marriage bureau for one day, enabling couples to have the neighbourhood — Bang Rak, or love district — stamped on the marriage documents.

Two floors of the Narai Hotel were packed with couples who patiently waited their turns in rows of chairs. Many had been wed in religious ceremonies years ago, but had waited for a Valentine's Day to make it official.

Nine couples, including one who were blind and were treated as the couple of the day, had both traditional wedding and registration at the hotel.

A poll taken of 1,898 Bangkok residents last week by Thai Farmer's Bank showed that 21.2 per cent gave much importance to Valentine's Day, 55.5 per cent saw it as moderately important, and 23.3 per cent ignored it.

Bang Rak registered 500 marriages on Valentine's Day in 1996 and 1,000 last year. Part of the 1998 increase may be attributed to the economic crisis rocking Thailand and other former Asian miracle economies.

By contrast, registering a marriage in Bang Rak office is free. Additionally, each couple gets a coupon for cosmetics, a Buddha amulet, a marriage handbook and a pack of condoms.