

## International

## Development of 8 far-eastern states

## Vajpayee offers '2-pronged' package in talks with CMs

NEW DELHI, May 8: Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee today promised to improve infrastructure in India's remote far-east where decades of separatist strife have cost thousands of lives and shattered the economy, reports AFP.

Vajpayee offered a "two-pronged" package in unprecedented talks with chief ministers of the region's eight states that share borders with China, Tibet, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan and Myanmar (BURMA), officials said.

The states — Nagaland, Meghalaya, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Assam and Sikkim — have complained that successive governments neglected the region since India's independence from British rule in 1947.

Assam, the largest state in the region, argues that its resources such as petroleum products, timber and tea have been siphoned off by the central government without any benefit to the local population.

Together, the eight states account for about 35 million of India's 950-million-plus population. Large numbers of them are tribals, the original inhabitants of the Sub-continent. Many are Christians.

The prime minister also said he would try and set up direct communication and trade links with the adjoining countries for "developing social infrastructure" of the far-eastern region.

Vajpayee, however, said his Hindu nationalist-led coalition

government could not ignore that the region was "beset with multi-dimensional problems including those having external focus."

These problems are worsening for want of timely and effective redressal, Vajpayee told the eight ministers.

"We cannot entirely lose sight of the political, social, cultural, educational and even security matters that have a direct bearing on the region's economic growth."

"We have to especially pay very serious attention to the international security issues in the region," Vajpayee said of militant and ethnic violence that has claimed thousands of lives in the past 50 years.

Vajpayee, however, said: "My

government does not look upon the region as an area of problem. Rather we see it as an area of unique potential for India's overall development."

He said New Delhi would spend almost 400 million dollars a year to build up the economy and upgrade communication links between the eight remote states with the rest of India.

The government is also examining the feasibility of creating a central pool of unutilised resources for accelerating the implementation of projects in the region," he added.

Vajpayee told his Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani to hold a similar meeting with the eight chief ministers on ways to end extremist violence and cross-border infiltration.



Congress Party president Sonia Gandhi lights candles to inaugurate a function held to celebrate the birth anniversary of N S Hardikar, the founder of the Congress Volunteers Corps in New Delhi Thursday.

## Myanmar junta appoints civilians as dy ministers

YANGON, May 8: Myanmar's ruling military State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has appointed three civilians as deputy ministers, officials said today, reports Reuters.

Political analysts said the move was an attempt by the military to bring more civilian expertise into the government.

Set Maung, an economic expert, was appointed a Deputy Minister in the SPDC office, while long-time diplomat Kluin Maung Win was appointed Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. Tin Swe was given the post of Deputy Minister of Construction, state-owned media reported.

The SPDC, which changed its name from the State Law and Order Restoration Council last November, made a cabinet reshuffle after its name change, including some civilians in the military-dominated government.

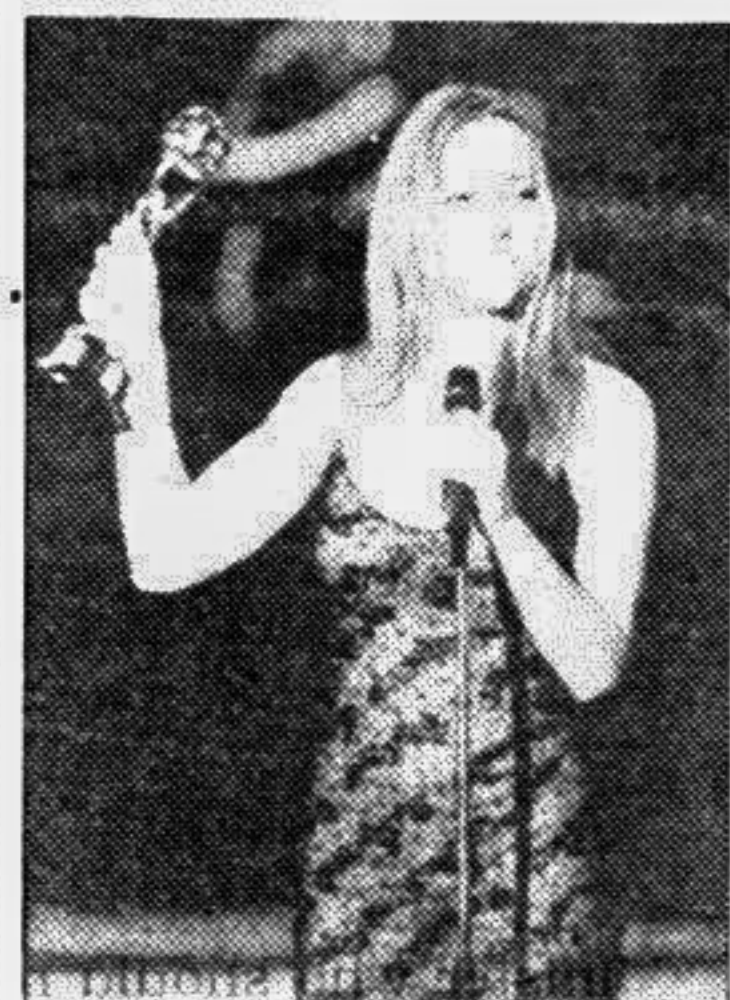
"By including these three others into the government it seems as if the military is leaning more and more toward technocrats," he added.

## 17 killed in bus mishap in Kashmir

JAMMU, India May 8: At least 17 passengers were killed and 23 injured when a bus skidded off a road and plunged into a gorge in India's mountainous Jammu and Kashmir province, police said today, reports Reuters.

Ten of the injured were said to be in a serious condition after the accident which happened on Thursday night near Kishtwar, some 248 km east of Jammu, the state's winter capital, they said.

Police said the passengers were mainly labourers and supervisors headed for the Dulhasti hydroelectric project site near Kishtwar.



US singer Mariah Carey with the award for the World's Best-Selling Artist of the 90s, during the 10th World Music Awards in Monaco, French riviera, Wednesday. Carey won two awards. —AP/UNB photo

## No breakthrough yet in Sudanese talks

NAIROBI, May 8: The Sudan government and rebels of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) agreed on Wednesday to an internationally supervised vote on self-determination for the south of the country, according to brokers of peace talks in the Kenya capital, reports Reuters.

But at the end of two days of discussions the two sides disagreed on the boundaries of the south and the issue of religion and the state, according to a communiqué read by the host, Kenyan Foreign Minister Bonaya Godana.

The meeting ended with the SPLA saying it had made new military gains while the talks were in progress.

## Ashura observed in Iran

TEHRAN, May 8: Millions of Iranian Shi'ite Muslims marched in long processions yesterday rhythmically thumping their chests to mark Ashura, the peak of a Shi'ite mourning festival, reports Reuters.

Hundreds of black-clad young men lashed their backs with clusters of chains to mourn the death in battle 13 centuries ago of the Prophet Mohammad's (SM) grandson Imam Hussein (RA), revered as a martyr fallen in the fight against injustice and oppression.

## India incapable of absorbing impact of Ghauri: Pak FM

ISLAMABAD, May 8: Foreign Minister Gohar Ayub said yesterday Pakistan had gained an edge over India in missile technology after Islamabad developed a new medium-range surface to surface missile, reports Reuters.

"In the missile race, we have overtaken them," Ayub said in an interview with Reuters television.

By developing the new 1,500-km range Ghauri missile Pakistan had shattered the "myth" of India's strategic depth and could reach any Indian city, Ayub said.

India's Prithvi missile had a much smaller range of around 200 km, he added.

"Their Prithvi is 200 km. It's

a crude weapon. Our Ghauri has a range of 1500 km and goes straight into the stratosphere 350 km up and then comes straight down and hits a target at 1500 km in 12 minutes," Ayub said.

Ayub said if Pakistan marked Indian cities, the way Indians had every Pakistani city in their range, massive destruction could take place.

"Terrible devastation which should never be talked about, discussed or thought about and it should never come to this."

Pakistan can absorb the attacks of Prithvi but India will never be able to absorb the attacks of Ghauri, he added.

## UN envoy meets with Tamil rebels in northern jungles

VAVUNIYA, Sri Lanka, May 8: A top UN official met with representatives of main Tamil separatist group in the northern jungles, Thursday to protect children in the 15-year-old ethnic conflict, reports AP.

On a weeklong mission to Sri Lanka, Olara Otunnu, a representative of UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, spent Wednesday night in an 18th century church under rebel control near Vavuniya, a town 210 km south of Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital.

Vavuniya town is held by the government.

Government officials said Otunnu met with representatives of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and discussed

ways to safeguard children.

The government accuses the rebels of using children as combatants, mainly suicide bombers, in its campaign for an independent homeland for minority Tamils.

Ottunnu is scheduled to meet more Sri Lankan and military officials in the northern war theatre before returning to Colombo on Friday.

The guerrillas had announced a two-day ceasefire, beginning Wednesday, to facilitate Ottunnu's visit. But the government accused the rebels of violating it by killing three policemen and shelling government positions in the area on Wednesday.

## Mudslides kill 74, scores missing in southern Italy

SARNO, Italy, May 8: With hands, shovels and fading hope, rescuers on Thursday dug through brick-hard rivers of mud for more victims of landslides that have killed at least 74 people in southern Italy, reports AP.

Dogs trained to sniff out avalanche victims were brought in to help the 3,000 firefighters, police and soldiers searching through towns in a 60-km wide stretch between Naples and Salerno.

Two days after disaster struck, the rescuers were still using helicopters and ladders to pluck the stranded from roofs.

"The worst thing is seeing the relatives crying in despair," said Maria Grazia Salvator, caked up to her knees in mud. The 20-year-old volunteer from

Salerno, 10-km away, said she pulled the bodies of two children, but no survivors, from the mud Thursday.

RAI state television reported Thursday evening, without citing a source, said that as many as 218 people were missing. Civil Protection Ministry Undersecretary Franco Barberi said at least 125 were missing.

The possibility of finding more people still alive is weak, even though hope is the last to die," said Andrea Todisco, a Civil Defence official.

Some 150 millimeters, or nearly 6 inches, of rain fell Monday and Tuesday, triggering torrents of mud and water through streets.

The sun shone brightly Thursday, but the heat baked the mud like bricks.

"It's more difficult today because you need to be stronger to dig. Yesterday it was like quicksand. Today you can almost walk on it," Salvator said.

A man in Episcopo, one of six towns at the base of Mount Sarno, a 1,100-meter mountain, wept as he said his family of four, including an eight-year-old child was missing.

In Sarno, the hardest hit town, one leg of a chair and a light blue umbrella stuck up from the mud. On Thursday, rescuers removed 30 people trapped in homes or cars and found 10 bodies. At least 44 died here.

Alberto Montuori, 41, recalled how a mud slide barreled toward him as he was driving home Tuesday evening.

## Fighting in Afghanistan continues

ISLAMABAD, May 8: Fighting is continuing Thursday in northern Afghanistan between the Taliban militia and opposition forces led by Tajik warlord Ahmed Shah Masood, reports Xinhua.

According to a report by the Afghan Islamic Press based in Peshawar, Pakistan's north west frontier province, the fighting between the two Afghan warring factions is still continuing in Bhangli district of Takhar province in northern Afghanistan.

The fighting broke out Wednesday although the Taliban militia agreed to allow the UN humanitarian food relief to be provided to the central Afghan province of Bamaiyan controlled by the rival faction.

The report quoted Taliban sources as saying that the Taliban forces repulsed the attack launched by the Masood forces.

## Labour suffers setback in UK local polls

LONDON, May 8: One year after Labour's crushing election victory, the government has suffered a net loss of support in local elections in England, amid an unprecedented low turnout, early results showed today, reports AFP.

With 120 results declared out of 166 districts across England, BBC projections showed that Labour's share of the votes would translate into a national support of 38 per cent. This is six per cent less than Labour's 44 per cent score at the May 1997 general election.

But the opposition Conservatives, ousted after 18 years in office, by Labour's landslide victory in the legislative polls, failed to grab much larger share of the national vote than they gained last May.

The BBC projections showed the Tories with a national support of 32 per cent — only marginally above their 1997 general election score of 31 per cent — but better than their disastrous performance in the 1994 local elections.

## Netanyahu may not attend Washington talks

## Israel again rejects US proposal for ME peace

JERUSALEM, May 8: Israel today again rejected a US-backed compromise for breaking a 14-month-old peace deadlock with the Palestinians, reports Reuters.

"The very proposals being spoken of — a scope of 13 per cent of redeployment as they are being presented — are not acceptable to the government of Israel for the very reason that it doesn't fall into line with the security needs of the state of Israel," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's senior adviser Danny Navet told Israel radio.

US Middle East envoy Dennis Ross was due back in Israel

today to try to coax Netanyahu into accepting a deal that the Israeli leader could seal with Palestinian President Yasser Arafat at the White House on Monday.

An earlier report says: Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Thursday he might not attend a summit with Palestinian President Yasser Arafat in Washington on Monday, citing outstanding peace-making disputes.

"I don't know if we'll get to Washington by Monday because there are a lot of issues that are left open," Netanyahu said on CNN television.

## Russia will begin to lower Mir's orbit in June

MOSCOW, May 8: Russian space officials will gradually begin lowering the orbit of the Mir space station next month, part of a year-and-a-half-long process for bringing it down, a senior flight controller said Friday, reports AP.

Space officials had said previously that they would begin altering the orbit this month as they began preparing to discard the 12-year-old space station around the end of 1999.

But deputy Mission Control chief Viktor Blagov said Friday that the maneuver will take place only after the US space shuttle Discovery takes home NASA astronaut Andrew Thomas, who is currently on the Mir along with two Russian cosmonauts.

Discovery's launch is scheduled on June 2 and it's expected to dock with Mir on June 5, Blagov said.

Thomas, who's been on the Mir since January, is the seventh and final US astronaut to live on the Russian space station.

Blagov said it would not make sense to change Mir's orbit until after Discovery disengages from the Russian station.

"We have coordinated every-

thing (for the docking), it would entail huge costs to change the orbit," the ITAR-Tass news agency quoted Blagov as saying.

A Russian cargo ship, which is scheduled to dock with Mir on May 17 and remain linked with the station, will fire its engines some time in late June to begin lowering the station's orbit, Blagov said.

The Mir currently orbits 400 kilometers (250 miles) above the Earth, and will be gradually lowered to 150 kilometers (90 miles) by December 1999, when it will be discarded and allowed to burn in the earth's atmosphere.

The remains of the 120-ton station that do not burn up in the atmosphere are expected to crash into the ocean, Russian space officials said.

They warned, however, that the timetable for abandoning Mir could change if the new international space station continues to be delayed. The first modules are scheduled to go into orbit later this year, followed sometime next year by the first crew.

Russian and the United States are among 15 countries involved in the new project.

## BRIEFLY

## Judge shot dead in Germany:

A German judge was shot dead in his court office in the city of Essen on Thursday by a man he fined 17 years ago for minor fraud offences, police said, Reuters says from Essen Germany.

The 69-year-old attacker then shot himself on the spot. "The man fired several shots at the judge, at first missing as the judge sought to flee by the door, he was hit in the head by one shot and by another as he lay on the floor," state prosecutor Bernd Chlinthausen told a news conference.

## Clinton cancels N Ireland visit:

President Bill Clinton has scrapped plans for visit to Northern Ireland out of concern that his presence might disrupt the campaign for a May 22 referendum on a peace accord, the White House said Thursday, AP reports from Washington.

The president planned to meet to meet during the day with victims of violence in Northern Ireland and announce initiatives to spur economic development in the area. He also was calling on Congress to approve the administration's request for 75 million dollars over two years for an international fund for Ireland. Clinton had considered visiting Belfast and Dublin in mid-May at the end of the annual summit of industrialized nations.

## Australian jets to leave Gulf:

Part of Australia's contribution to the international coalition of forces in the Persian gulf will be withdrawn, Defence Minister Ian McLachlan said Friday, AP reports from Canberra.

Two Australian Air Force refueling aircraft, both 707s, and support personnel will be recalled, McLachlan said. He did not name a withdrawal date he said they will return soon. That will leave an Australian contingent of about 30 commandos and 110 members of the elite Special Air Services Regiment in the Gulf region.

## 20 die as bldg collapses in China:

At least 20 people were killed in a building collapse in the southern Chinese city of Zhuhai, it was reported in Hong Kong yesterday, AFP says from Hong Kong.

Another 15 were also said to be missing after a row of five residential buildings ranging from two to five storeys, tumbled on Wednesday, a Chinese language Apple daily citing reports in Guangzhou said.

## Military plane crashes in ROK:

A South Korean military aerobatics plane crashed Friday after an in-flight scrape with another plane, the air force said. The pilot was missing, AP reports from Seoul.

The A-37 Dragon Fly jet went down near Chuncheon, 80 km west of Seoul after scraping its wing with another plane. The other plane landed safely in a nearby military airport with a minor damage on one of its wings. The air force's six-plane Black Eagles aerobatics team was training for the second international Seoul Air Show slated for October when the accident occurred.

## Constitutional council formed in Cambodia

PHNOM PENH, May 8: The Cambodian National Assembly voted Friday to place three of its members loyal to government leader Hun Sen's powerful political party on the constitutional council, a body assigned to resolve election-related disputes, reports AP.

The move, critics said, further skews the July polls in favor of Hun Sen, who ousted Prince Norodom Ranariddh as his co-premier in a bloody coup d'état 10 months ago.

Hun Sen has sought new elections to win back aid and legitimacy lost after his violent takeover.

The nine members of the constitutional council — assigned to determine the constitutionality of all laws — could be called on to examine controversial electoral and political parties laws which have been said to favor Hun Sen.

Three of the members are to be selected by the National Assembly, three by Cambodian King Norodom Sihamoni, and three by the Supreme Council of Magistracy.

Members of parliament loyal to Ranariddh expressed outrage after the vote.



Flanked by his wife Nane, left, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan is led by Rwandan Parliamentary President Joseph Sebazeo, right, into the Rwandan General Assembly, where he gave a brief speech to the governing body, after arriving late Thursday evening into Kigali, the Rwandan capital. Annan said Thursday the world and the UN failed Rwanda by not preventing the 1994 genocide of more than 500,000 people. —AP/UNB photo

## Pro-democracy candidates likely to win most votes in HK polls

HONG KONG, May 8: Two weeks before Hong Kong's first election under Chinese rule, the territory's pro-democracy candidates are expected to win the lion's share of the popular vote, reports AP.

But no one expects Hong Kong's pro-China and business elite to lose control of the legislature, given the complex election rules, and that may be one reason the vote isn't riveting the public.

Despite rising unemployment and falling stock and property prices resulting from Asia's economic crisis, the campaign for the May 24 election has been mainly about mainland China, which reassured control over Hong Kong last July 1.

Although they won't control the legislature, Beijing's critics are strong enough to control the debate.

They say it is important to

keep an eye on democracy and the rule of law. This election is not about choosing a government — Hong Kong has never done that. It's about choosing a watchdog to monitor the government.

"What is going to separate the democrats and the pro-Communists politicians is the willingness and courage to speak the unspeakable truth on anything that the central government has a strong view on, and is not good for Hong Kong," said Martin Lee, leader of the largest party, the Democrats.

The Democrats are portraying the campaign as a contrast between themselves and smaller allies against the Democratic Alliance for the Betterment of Hong Kong, or DAB, the strongest grassroots pro-Beijing force.

Jonathan Fenby, editor of the South China Morning Post,

wrote that no one has revealed realistic economic proposals. "With parties recycling familiar themes, it is hardly surprising if voters do not feel enthused," he said.

Part of the problem is that the 60-seat legislature has little power. Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa is not up for election. Tung appoints other executives, and a civil service with roots deep in British colonial rule provides the backbone of the administration.

When they go to the polls, said Hong Kong University analyst Sonny Lo, voters "will try to vote for a loyal political opposition."

Hong Kong never was a democracy, including under the British.

This year, about 2.7 million registered voters can directly elect 20 legislators. Half the legislature will be chosen from so-

called functional constituencies. Besides voting in the geographic districts, the leaders of banking, tourism, the hotel industry, teachers, medical workers, union members and other professions will elect a representative from their professions. An electoral college already chosen by mostly the same people will elect the final 10 lawmakers. In other words, some citizens will be able to vote three times.

With few exceptions, functional constituencies elect elites who favour China, and a stable business climate. The system ensures the legislature "will definitely be dominated by the business elite," Lo said.

Many of those chosen are likely to have been in an appointed, interim legislature that served for the year after the handover.

Pro-Beijing politicians say

they want to cooperate with the government in the interests of stability, but pledge to examine its policies. The Democrats and their allies say the interim legislature was a rubber-stamp, passing legislation restricting labour rights and demonstrations, and exempted mainland institutions from some Hong Kong laws.

Most polls indicate Lee's Democrats will win up to 13 of the 20 directly elected seats. With independent democratic allies, they should get 17-18 seats.

The head of the Election Commission, Woo Kwok-hing, says publicity-seeking politicians have made the system seem too complicated. But polls indicate that most voters don't understand it. Political commentator Lau Siu-kai said turnout will fall below the 35.8 per cent figure in 1995.

Western delegations say the system is flawed, but that the territory will do a fair job administering it. Democrats say a hybrid proportional representation system used in geographic districts will hurt them, as will the absence of party names or logos on the ballot.

Government officials urge patience: The election system is a fact of life, written into Hong Kong's post-handover constitution, and the number of directly elected seats will increase to 30 — half the total — over the next 10 years. It is unclear if full democracy will follow.

Minky Worden, a Democratic Party operative, said the party wants a strong turnout to give Lee a claim to meet Tung as an equal.

"The mandate, and the effect, is so much larger than the number of seats," she said.

## Off the Record

## Birds, one too many!

PASADENA, California: A bird in the hand may be worth two in the bush, but more than 1,000 in your home is a bit hard to swallow, reports Reuters.

When a Pasadena couple returned to their home this week after a few days away they discovered a scene straight out of Alfred Hitchcock's 1963 suspense movie, "The Birds" — their two storey house was filled with more than 1,000 swifts, a small migratory bird not unlike the swallow. What drove them there is not known.

Passadena fire department battalion chief Joe Nestor said on Thursday that the department received a call from neighbours of the couple on Monday night reporting that a huge flock of swifts was disappearing down the chimney of the house.

"They called us because they could not think of any one else to call," Nestor said.

When that fire engine arrived at the house the couple, who Nestor declined to name because of department policy, were not home, but they arrived a short time later.

"When our fire fighters entered the house there was upward of 1,000 birds there and they'd done quite a bit of damage to the interior," Nestor said.