

Vajpayee blames China for escalating tension in S Asia

PARIS, Jun 12: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said in an interview published today that China was ultimately responsible for the tension in South Asia following the nuclear tests of India and Pakistan, reports AFP.

"What is certain is that China has armed Pakistan," he told the French conservative daily Le Figaro. "Beijing has supplied a whole arsenal to our neighbour, from nuclear technology to ballistic missiles."

Vajpayee said India had carried out its five nuclear tests last month to ensure its national security in the face of clear strategic threats, and not to change the balance of forces in Asia.

While India had refrained from carrying out tests or building nuclear weapons since its first atomic blast in 1974, "our neighbours did not show the same restraint," Vajpayee said.

"According to the American secret services, ten years ago,

Pakistan possessed several small fission bombs while China has developed a wide-ranging nuclear programme."

However, Vajpayee said, "my government intends to continue dialogue with China in order to reduce tensions on our borders. This is in the interest of both India and China."

Last week, Vajpayee said India did not want a "confrontation" with China but a relationship in which both sides were responsive to each others' "concerns."

Vajpayee told parliament in a written reply that India sought "friendly, cooperative and a mutually beneficial relationship with China."

He said India, which declared itself a nuclear power last month after staging five underground tests, was committed to "resolving outstanding differences with China through dialogue."

India fought a brief but bitter border war with China in 1962,

leading to a 14-year freeze in ties. The frontier dispute still lingers but has been put on the back-burner.

Relations had been on the mend with several high-level visits but ties were recently rocked by India's nuclear tests and Indian defence minister George Fernandes' statement that Beijing was "potential threat number one."

Chinese President Jiang Zemin accused India of "targeting" Beijing with its nuclear tests but said China would not resume its own nuclear programme.

Jiang said in a recent interview with AFP that India had "aspired for a long period of time to be the main power of South Asia", and was fully responsible for current regional tensions.

The Chinese leader also denied Indian allegations that China had helped Pakistan develop its nuclear weapons. He said cooperation was entirely

for peaceful ends and conformed with all international accords on the subject.

Vajpayee said that following its tests, carried out against its will, India had declared a moratorium and was prepared to raise this into a formal undertaking.

But a new international test ban treaty must be negotiated, given that laboratory simulation of nuclear blasts had rendered the present pact unworkable, he said.

Asked if India and Pakistan could fight another war over Kashmir, this time nuclear, Vajpayee said New Delhi wanted good relations with Islamabad.

"We are always ready to resolve our differences and build confidence together. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the Pakistanis," he alleged.

Kashmir had been part of India for 5,000 years, Vajpayee claimed. New Delhi practised religious toleration there.

Canada to host talks on countering US cultural dominance

OTTAWA, June 12: Canada is inviting officials from 40 nations to a meeting on cultural policy later this month. The United States is not on the guest list, but may become a target of criticism from some of the delegates, reports AP.

Canada's Heritage Ministry, which oversees cultural programmes, said Thursday that delegates will discuss cultural diversity and development, the role of culture in global relations, and culture and trade.

So far, 19 culture ministers have confirmed they will attend the June 29-30 meeting.

Heritage Minister Sheila Copps said she did not issue an invitation to the United States because it does not have a culture minister. But the discussions might have proved nettlesome for any US delegate who did attend, since Copps has been a leader of international efforts to counter the increasing dominance of US mass culture.

Canada is one of several countries seeking to prevent cultural issues from being drawn into international free trade forums like the World Trade Organisation.



United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan speaks with children from a Bronx middle school at the UNICEF house in New York Thursday. DC Comics and UNICEF joined in creating new Spanish language comic books featuring Superman and Wonder Woman, which seek to promote landmine awareness among children of mine-affected countries. — AP/UNB photo



A show of dresses worn by Princess Diana, shown Thursday in Washington, opened yesterday for a month-long stay as part of a two-year international tour aimed at raising \$100 million for the kind of charities Diana sponsored. — AP/UNB photo

Show featuring Di's gowns begins in Washington

WASHINGTON, Jun 12: A show featuring 20 gowns worn by Princess Diana begins a month-long stay Friday in Washington, part of a two-year international tour aimed at raising \$100 million for American charities and medical research, reports AP.

The gowns glitter under spotlights in glass cases spread around a darkened room. Large wall captions and bigger-than-life photos illustrate her life and work.

Contributors paid \$500 a person to attend a gala Thursday night in the great glass-covered atrium of the new Ronald Reagan Building. Admission to the regular exhibit will cost \$12.50 a person.

Maureen Rorech, who runs a chain of dress shops based in Tampa, Florida, bought 13 of the dresses for \$870,000 last year at a New York auction. She later bought a 14th and borrowed six others for the show.

Proceeds will go to cancer and AIDS research, Boys and Girls Clubs of America and the American Red Cross.

Ms. Rorech has organised a not-for-profit sponsor, The People's Princess Charitable Foundation Inc., to take the gowns around the world, ending in London in 2000. At the end of the tour, she plans to give 13 of the dresses to Diana's sons, Princes William and Harry.

Arafat to reshuffle govt

GAZA CITY, Jun 12: Yasser Arafat will reshuffle his Palestinian autonomous government later this month, under a decision taken Thursday by the PLO Executive Committee, reports AFP.

The move follows allegations of corruption levelled against the Palestinian administration by the Palestine National Council or Parliament.

The Executive Committee said the reshuffle would take place within 10 days from the next session of the Palestinian legislature.

The committee asked Palestinian parliamentary deputies not to go ahead with a threatened vote of no-confidence in the government.

Palestinian sources said the PLO Executive Committee, which is generally considered to be the highest Palestinian authority, was empowered to order a reshuffle.

The Executive Committee has authorised President Yasser Arafat to open negotiations to form a new cabinet.

These consultations and negotiations will be held with all groups in parliament, the Fatah (Arafat's own movement), the Islamists and the independents, as well as with Palestinian organisations not represented in parliament, said Tayeb Abdelrahim, Arafat's chief of staff.

"What we want is the bring in competent people who will improve efficiency in the various ministries and introduce more democracy into Palestinian society," he said.

Another report adds: The UN Security Council on Thursday expressed concern about the reports that new Jewish housing is being built in disputed East Jerusalem.

The Security Council expressed concern about events reported and renews its support for the efforts to bring the two parties to resume the peace process, council president Antonio Monteiro told reporters after a closed-door session.

Hashimoto survives no-confidence vote

TOKYO, Jun 12: Embattled Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto yesterday easily survived a no-confidence motion launched against him by opposition parties over his handling of the country's ailing economy, reports Reuters.

The 500-seat lower house of parliament defeated the motion by a vote of 273 to 207, with 20 votes not cast.

The motion, on a day when Japan's economy was formally declared in recession, accused Hashimoto of poor management of the economy and failing to address political corruption following recent financial scandals involving bureaucrats.

The socialists and sakigake party, an Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) splinter group, which both pulled out of an alliance with Hashimoto earlier this month, joined forces with the LDP to defeat the motion.

India studying Annan's offer to send special envoy

NEW DELHI, June 12: India's leaders Thursday were scrutinising reported proposals by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to send a special envoy to kick-start talks between arch-rivals New Delhi and Islamabad, reports AP.

But experts here said such a move, if it came about, would be self-defeating.

Foreign Ministry spokesman KC Singh said India was "reserving comment" on the reported offer made late Wednesday, adding: "we need to study it in its totality."

Sources in Islamabad said Annan has contacted Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif by phone and offered to send an envoy to discuss "contentious issues" between the arch-rivals.

Officials quoted Kofi Annan as saying that the UN "wants to help the two countries to settle their disputes through peaceful negotiations." India, however, totally rejects all outside mediation in its ties with Pakistan.

Meanwhile PTI adds from Moscow: Russia yesterday said it was opposed to internationalising the Kashmir problem and favoured a direct dialogue between India and Pakistan on all outstanding issues.

Russian position was outlined by foreign ministry spokesman Vladimir Rakhmanin even as Prime

Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee's special envoy Brajesh Mishra concluded his discussions with Russian leaders on the situation in the sub-continent following nuclear tests by India and Pakistan.

Mishra, principal secretary to the prime minister, told Moscow-based Indian journalists that Kashmir issue came up during discussions with Russian leaders in the over all context of Indo-Pak relations.

The Russian side did not offer any mediation, he said, adding they only expressed their desire for encouraging India and Pakistan to resolve differences through direct talks.

Off the Record

China not to embarrass Clinton during visit

BEIJING: President Bill Clinton may be getting plenty of grief for his planned trip to China back home, but his Chinese hosts are going out of their way to prevent any embarrassing disruptions, reports AP.

Bicycles and vehicles are being cleared from their usual parking places along city sidewalks; the city's shrubs and lawns are being tidied and flowers planted. And bookstores selling a sensationalist volume on Clinton's myriad sex scandals have been asked to pull the books from their shelves.

The State Publications and Press Administration, reportedly has banned the book in the cities Clinton will visit during his June 25-July 2 trip, refused comment.

Although Clinton is unlikely to wander into a local bookstore during his visit, and even less likely to understand the book's Chinese title, the Chinese place a high value on propriety and hospitality.

"The Temperament of President Clinton" examines Clinton's public and private persons, his political career and the women he's been linked to, complete with their photos.

BRIEFLY

2 senior Malaysian officials charged: Two senior aides of a former chief minister facing corruption charges were arraigned Friday for allegedly misusing their office to favour a company in a huge real estate deal, AP says from Kuala Lumpur.

One of the officials is alleged to have accepted a bribe of 1.2 million ringgit (\$300,000) to facilitate the 20 million ringgit deal.

China expects to be 'polio free' by 2000: In a step highlighting improvements in public health, China expects to be certified "polio free" by 2000, the state-run China Daily reported yesterday, AP says from Beijing.

Mass vaccination programmes have helped to rid China of the crippling viral infection, which spreads to the spinal cord and brain, causing paralysis and sometimes death. The last case of indigenous polio reported in China was in 1994. If no further indigenous cases are found, China will be certified free of the disease in 2000, it said.

Russia, Finland sign 5-yr deal: The Finnish nuclear safety authority has signed a five-year agreement with its Russian equivalent, Gosatomadzor, to improve safety monitoring of Russian nuclear waste, it was announced here, AFP says from Helsinki.

Under the accords which were signed in Moscow Thursday, Finnish officials will be responsible for instructing Russian customs agents on how to measure radio activity and for organising meetings on the subject.

Teachers, police clash in Greece: Striking teachers clashed with police outside schools around Greece on Thursday, leaving at least 13 people injured, media said, AP reports from Athens.

The strikers were protesting new examinations introduced for qualified teachers who wish to be appointed to state-run schools. They say their university degrees should be the only qualification necessary. Under the previous system, teachers had to wait for years before they received a state job.

Minor charged with murder: An 11-year-old boy has been arrested and charged with murder in the shooting death of a 13-year-old neighbour, an incident that police originally said was accidental, AFP reports from California.

Larry Kiepert died Saturday, after being shot in the head as he played basketball in his back yard. The suspect, whose name was not released, alleged fired the shot from the second-story master bedroom of his home, using his father's scope-equipped hunting rifle.

UNSC slates W African coup attempt: The UN Security Council on Thursday condemned the attempt coup in the West African state of Guinea Bissau and called for the restoration of constitutional order, AFP says from United Nations.

Council President Antonio Monteiro told reporters after a closed door meeting that the 15-member council "strongly condemns the attempted military coup" led by former Armed Forces Chief General Ansumane Mane.

Russia to sell submarines to India: Russia will sell the Indian navy another "kilo" submarine this June, interfax said Thursday, citing the head of the St-Petersburg-based Rubin Naval Equipment Design Bureau, AFP says from Moscow.

Igor Spassky said the sub will be supplied under a contract with India, under which several subs have already been delivered to Delhi. Russia and India will continue cooperation in this area, Spassky said.

Tree plagues destroying Chinese forests: Infestations of various pests have destroyed millions of hectares of Chinese forests, causing at least 5 billion yuan (\$602 million) in losses of timber resources every year, the state-run China Daily reported yesterday, AP says from Beijing.

The State Forest Administration reported that forests in China's northern, northwestern, eastern and southwestern regions face a "massive bug plague," it said.

Cyclone death toll crosses 700 in India

BOMBAY, Jun 12: For poor villagers in western India Friday, the disaster of a cyclone that killed at least 727 people was followed by desperate shortages that forced them on to mud-choked roads in search of food and drinking water, reports AP.

The death toll stood at 706 Friday in the hardest-hit state of Gujarat, as workers continued to find bodies flung on power cables and trees or buried in sludge left behind by a tidal wave three days after the cyclone hit land.

The cyclone weakened Wednesday as it moved north, leaving nine more dead in Rajasthan state and 12 more in neighbouring Pakistan.

At least eight entire villages and three salt factory worker camps were wiped out near Kandla port, 530 kilometers (330 miles) northwest of Bombay.

The workers earn their living selling salt left behind after sea water they collect in pans, or shallow pools, evaporates.

Soldiers and government officials distributed food and water and helicopters airdropped packages, but supplies weren't coming quickly enough.

"The poor are leaving what is left of their homes and walking to the next village in search of something to eat," said survivor Tejabhai Desai by telephone from Madhabar, a village near Kandla.

Japanese cult member gets 17 years in jail

TOKYO, Jun 12: A former member of a Japanese doomsday cult was sentenced to 17 years in prison Friday for his role in the murder of seven people in a central Japanese city, a court official said, reports AP.

Takashi Tomita, 40, was sentenced for his involvement in the June 27, 1994, nerve gas attack by the Aum Shinri Kyo cult against a dormitory for court officials in the city of Matsumoto. Seven died in the attack and 144 others were injured.

Tomita was also sentenced for his involvement in the mass production of the deadly sarin nerve gas at the cult's compound at the foot of Mount Fuji.

Aum members have admitted using the gas in an attack on Tokyo subways in March 1995 that killed 12, sickened thousands and shocked a nation that had taken its low crime rate for granted.

US lawmakers for airstrike on Serbs UNHCR chief appeals for end to violence in Kosovo

GENEVA, Jun 12: The United Nations refugee chief issued an appeal Thursday to all sides immediately to put "an end to the cycle of violence" in the explosive Yugoslav province of Kosovo, reports AP.

Further displacement of refugees "could destabilise the entire region," UN High Commissioner for Refugees Sadako Ogata said in a statement.

UNHCR estimates that some 12,000 refugees have already fled across mountains from Kosovo into northern Albania to escape the latest outbreak of fighting. Altogether, "around 65,000 people have been forced to flee their homes in Kosovo" since March, Ogata said.

"Nobody wants another Bosnia," Ogata added. UNHCR is still working to "solve the situation" of some 1.8 million people displaced from the Bosnian and Croatian conflicts.

She appealed for international support of Albania's efforts to deal with the influx of refugees. Also Thursday, the International Red Cross launched an appeal for 3.2 million Swiss francs (\$1.2 million) in aid for the refugees in northern Albania.

AFP adds from Washington:

US lawmakers for airstrike on Serbs

A group of US lawmakers called Thursday for air strikes against Serbs in the separatist province Kosovo, as NATO defense ministers meeting in Brussels prepared for military intervention in the region.

Suharto hires lawyers under pressure to reveal wealth

JAKARTA, June 12: Former Indonesian President Suharto, under pressure by reformists to reveal his and his family's wealth and hand it over to the state, has hired a number of lawyers, a report said today, reports AP.

The Jakarta Post quoted attorney general Soejono Atomogotog as saying Thursday that he had met the lawyers, and that they had handed him a letter showing that they had been given Power of Attorney for Suharto.

But Soejono declined to say how many lawyers the former chief of state had hired, nor did he confirm rumours that they were foreign nationals.

Habibie releases some political prisoners E Timorese urge Indonesian govt to allow referendum on independence

JAKARTA, Jun 12: More than 1,500 East Timorese rallied in front of the foreign ministry here today, calling on Indonesia's new government to allow a referendum on independence for the former Portuguese colony, witnesses said, reports AP.

The East Timorese, most of them students from universities throughout Indonesia, delivered speeches through loudhailers and wore black headbands emblazoned with the single word "referendum" written in white.

Ten of the student leaders were admitted to the ministry for a dialogue with a director general on the referendum issue, while the others chanted slogans outside in drizzling rain.

The protesters waved placards saying that more than 250,000 Timorese had died since Indonesian troops invaded the territory in 1975, and calling for a halt to Indonesian military operations there.

Indonesia invaded the former Portuguese colony in 1975 and annexed the territory as its 27th province a year later after heavy fighting. But the United

Nations and most governments have not recognised the annexation.

AP adds from Dili: Shouting pro-independence slogans and clutching their belongings in plastic bags, a dozen pardoned political prisoners walked out of a jail Friday in the Indonesian-controlled territory of East Timor.

President BJ Habibie, who is pursuing an agenda of democratic reform, signed a decree for the release of the political prisoners earlier this week. Many are students who were arrested last year for demonstrating against Indonesian authority.

"This freedom (is) good for our struggle. It's a victory for us," said Tomas Augusto Correia, a 33-year-old municipal worker who was among the detainees.

On Thursday, the prisoners refused to leave Becora prison on the outskirts of Dili, the capital of East Timor, saying they also wanted freedom for Xanana Gusmao, the jailed separatist rebel chief.

But they agreed to leave after regaling wardens with a litany of complaints, ranging from the

poor quality of prison food to military repression. Most were serving one- or two-year sentences, and some were due to leave jail in coming days.

In a brief ceremony in a cramped prison office, the warden shook hands with one of the prisoners and handed him his release form to a smattering of applause.

In silence, the inmates then unveiled a banner with slogans denouncing the presence of the Indonesian military in East Timor and demanding the release of Gusmao. Arrested in 1992, Gusmao is serving a 20-year sentence in Ciplinang jail in Jakarta, 2,240 kilometers (1,400 miles) west of East Timor.

The government has yet to give a clear signal on how it plans to handle the charismatic Gusmao. He is beloved by thousands of East Timorese who see him as a symbol of resistance, but the Indonesian military has said he is a criminal, not a political prisoner.

The Indonesian military has been accused of widespread abuses in East Timor, bringing international condemnation.

Eritrea seeks UNSC action to stop Ethiopian onslaught

UNITED NATIONS, June 12: Eritrea called Thursday for the Security Council to do everything in its power to stop the border clashes with Ethiopia, reports AP.

In a letter to the council president, the Eritrean UN ambassador, Haile Menkerios, accused Ethiopia of threatening to strike boats in its ports and planes in its airspace.

"This irresponsible act is not only intended to cut off commercial air and sea traffic to Eritrea, but is also a direct threat to the freedom and safety of international commercial traffic," he wrote.

The two Horn of Africa nations, which less than a decade ago were part of the same country, are battling over several stretches of border land. The fighting that erupted May 6 prompted an array of mediation attempts.

"We call upon the council to condemn and do everything in its power to stop it in time," the ambassador wrote.

Another report says: About 100 frightened Ethiopians hovered outside their embassy Thursday, pleading for travel

documents to escape Eritrea and the surge of anti-Ethiopian sentiment that has accompanied the world's newest war.

Eritrean aircraft bombed the northern Eritrean town of Adigrat on Thursday, killing at least one person and wounding three, while ground troops clashed on two fronts.

With the clashes spreading, tensions were high among the 100,000 Ethiopians living in Eritrea, plus hundreds of migrant workers.

"I want to go home," one desperate young Ethiopian cried through a locked, grillwork fence in front of the Ethiopian embassy. "I'm afraid."

Most are from Ethiopia's northern province of Tigray, whose people many Eritreans blame for the conflict. Many Tigrayans fear for their safety and say bias against them is growing among Eritreans, who call them "Agame," the name of a region of Tigray that has come to mean beggar or traitor.

Amanuel Madera Hagas, a construction worker, said he was fired and kicked out of his home when the conflict broke out last month, and is now hungry and sleeping on the streets.



A group of Bosnian Muslims, pray during a ceremony for their relatives who died in the Bosnian war, at Srebrenica cemetery, some 80 kilometres east of Sarajevo, Thursday. For the first time since the war ended, expelled Muslims from Srebrenica were allowed to visit their family graves in the eastern Bosnian town now under Bosnian Serb control. — AP/UNB photo