

International

Taliban calls for UN mediation

Iranian army starts military exercises near Afghan border

TEHRAN, Sept 2: Some 70,000 Iranian Revolutionary Guards began unprecedented exercises near the Afghan border on Tuesday as the foreign ministry warned the Taliban over the fate of Iranian diplomats held by the Islamic militia in Afghanistan, reports AFP.

The three-day maneuvers, condemned Ashura-3, are the largest exercises ever held in eastern Iran bordering Afghanistan and cover a 600-square-kilometre area from Trubateh-Jam to Khat in eastern Khorasan province.

The maneuvers are aimed at boosting the elite force's "defence and deterrent capabilities in the wake of new security demands and to ensure a rapid movement and intervention of the forces," Iran's official news agency IRNA said, citing military officials.

The exercises also seek to "enhance expertise in the deployment of sophisticated equipment and weaponry in mountainous regions" of eastern Iran.

Air, ground and volunteer units of the Revolutionary Guards are participating in Ashura-3.

The maneuvers, well-publicised in advance, come amid high tension with the Taliban over the hardline militia's seizure of nearly all of Afghanistan, where Iran has traditionally commanded political and cultural influence.

Tehran has voiced fears of possible security threats from the Taliban rule in the neighbouring country, and accused the militia of engaging in drug trafficking to Europe via Iranian territory.

The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan is ready for any kind of mediation by the United Nations or by the Organisation of Islamic Conference, the Taliban's envoy to the United Nations said in a statement.

India terms talks with Pakistan 'constructive'

DURBAN, South Africa, Sept 2: Officials of India and Pakistan, which both held underground nuclear tests in May, had "constructive" talks on Tuesday on the eve of a Non-Aligned summit, a spokesman for the Indian delegation said, reports Reuters.

Indian delegation spokesman KC Singh said Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Vasundhara Raje spoke with Pakistani Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz for about 40 minutes.

India and Pakistan, at odds over Kashmir, have not held formal talks at foreign minister level since the beginning of the year. Tensions rose sharply between them after the nuclear tests.

He declined to say exactly what was discussed at the meeting, saying only that talks had covered "a wide array of subjects."

Aziz told Reuters on Monday that he planned to meet Indian foreign affairs officials to discuss Kashmir, the disputed province which straddles the two countries and which last week suffered some of the worst fighting yet seen to the long-running conflict.

Violence a thing of the past: Sinn Fein

LONDON, Sept 2: The political wing of the IRA, in its clearest public renunciation of the bomb and the bullet, has declared that violence is a "thing of the past" in its battle to end British rule in Northern Ireland, reports Reuters.

The Sinn Fein statement on Tuesday came as the British government unveiled plans for a crackdown on guerrilla splinter groups still resisting a peace drive in British-ruled Northern Ireland which led to a landmark accord in April.

"Sinn Fein believe the violence we have seen must be for all of us now a thing of the past, over done with and gone," Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams said in the statement.

His words were quickly welcomed by the British government and by US president Bill Clinton, who travels to Belfast and Dublin this week.

"This statement is an important contribution to building the trust and confidence necessary to make the Good Friday accord a reality," Clinton said, referring to the April Northern Ireland peace deal.

Adam's statement was the clearest public indication yet that the Irish republican Army's bloody campaign might be over and represented a decisive move to bridge the gulf between Sinn Fein and Northern Ireland's pro-British unionist parties.

Political sources in Belfast said Trimble would respond by inviting Adams and other leaders of parties represented in the new Northern Ireland assembly to a round-table meeting on Monday.



South African President Nelson Mandela, left, and Sudanese President Omar El-Bashir, during a photo session Tuesday after the arrival of El-Bashir to attend the 12th Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit in Durban.

India test fires surface to air missile

BALASORE, Sept 2: 'Akash', the multi-target surface to-air missile developed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO), was test fired from the Interim Test Range (ITR) at Chandipur near here last night, official sources said, reports PTI.

The sources said the missile was launched at 2013 hours. This was the first time that it was fired at night.

The indigenously developed missile has a range of 25-km and the ability to carry a payload of 55-kg.

It used an integrated two-stage ramjet propulsion technology with the capacity to strike several targets simultaneously, the sources said.

Junta believes in force to solve problems: Suu Kyi

YONGON, Sept 2: About 400 university students staged a protest behind locked campus gates Wednesday in the biggest public show of discontent during recent stepped-up agitation against Myanmar's military regime, reports AP.

Traffic police diverted cars from passing in front of the Yangon Institute of Technology an hour after the demonstration erupted, but there was no immediate sign of riot police or troops being called in to break it up.

The students did not appear to try to leave the campus. Senior teachers were seen negotiating with them and shouted slogans were heard. It was the first major confirmed protest since police broke the brief occupation of an intersection by 200 students last week.

The institute, a hotbed of anti-government sentiment, had been closed since the last

wave of student protests two years ago. It was recently reopened so students could finally study and take their long-postponed final exams.

Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi said in a rare interview Tuesday that the government may use force to resolve its latest confrontation with the pro-democracy opposition, possibly banning her party.

"This government always believes in violence and the use of force to solve problems," Suu Kyi told foreign journalists. "They never think of resolving problems through negotiations, through reasonable give and take."

A week ago, Suu Kyi was described as dehydrated and severely weakened after a 13-day roadside standoff against authorities on a bridge outside the capital. Her doctors wanted to keep her under observation.

BRIEFLY

Chirac praises Yeltsin: French President Jacques Chirac on Tuesday praised Russian leader Boris Yeltsin, saying he has always chosen the right steps in times of crisis, AP reports from Paris.

In a 15-minute telephone call, the president told Boris Yeltsin that at every decisive moment he has made the right choice — those of democracy and economic reforms. Chirac's spokeswoman, Catherine Colonna, told reporters.

Fires threaten Brazilian reservation: Devastating fires that have been raging for two weeks in central Brazil are quickly approaching the country's largest Indian reservation, killing wildlife and livestock and endangering the lives of thousands of Indians, AP says from Sao Paulo.

Federal Indian Bureau spokesman Roberto Lustosa said by phone Tuesday that the fires were less than four km from the Xingu National Park that covers an area of 2.6 million hectares in the state of Mato Grosso.

2 die as Russian chopper crashes: A helicopter carrying workers to a gold mine crashed in Russia's Far East, killing two people and injuring three others, the ITAR-Tass news agency said yesterday, AP says from Moscow.

The Mi-2 helicopter belonging to the Krasnoyarsk regional airline crashed shortly after taking off near the village of Nikolayevka in the Kamchatka region, the news agency said.

China detains Taiwanese reporter: A Taiwanese reporter was detained in northwestern China after police found news clippings about regional independence movements and Taiwanese politics in his luggage, his employers said yesterday, AP reports from Taipei.

Police allowed Lee Fu-chung to return to his hotel at about 2:00 am yesterday (18:00 GMT Tuesday) after being questioned in Urumqi, the capital of the Xinjiang region, said the Central Daily News, a newspaper owned by Taiwan's ruling Nationalist Party.

2 killed in Philippines road mishap: Six out of nine people transporting a dead relative for burial were killed when their van collided with a bus yesterday on a rural road north of Manila, police said, AP says from Manila.

A passenger in the bus was also killed and several others in both vehicles were injured in the accident in Baliwag in Bulacan province, police said.

Minibus accident claims 38 in China: An overloaded minibus plunged into a 10-metre deep gully in southeast China, killing 38 of the 41 people on board, an official newspaper said, AP reports from Beijing.

The remaining three people aboard the bus were seriously hurt in the accident last Thursday in Jianning county, Fujian province, the Xinmin Evening News said in its Monday edition.

Republicans go easy on Clinton till air clears on inquiry

WASHINGTON, Sept 2: US Senate Republicans swatted aside a suggestion that they move to censure President Bill Clinton over his relationship with Monica Lewinsky, according to Republican sources who said the idea was deemed premature pending a report from Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, reports AP.

Democrats, too, discussed Clinton's woes at a private closed-door caucus, reflected the extent to which Clinton's admission of a sexual relationship with Lewinsky — along with Starr's probe — hovers over the final weeks of Congress' session and the elections in November.

Asked afterward whether Democrats are united behind Clinton, Daschle replied: "The

Lieberman has been weighing whether deliver a speech, possibly on the Senate floor, that might include a call for censure of the president. However, Lieberman's spokesman, Eric Federing, said Tuesday night that the senator "has no plans to call for any legislative action."

The twin discussions, held at the parties' regular weekly closed-door caucuses, reflected the extent to which Clinton's admission of a sexual relationship with Lewinsky — along with Starr's probe — hovers over the final weeks of Congress' session and the elections in November.

Asked afterward whether Democrats are united behind Clinton, Daschle replied: "The

Democratic caucus is solidly behind the agenda that we are talking about and that the president supports as strongly as we do." He named health, campaign finance and other bills that are pending, as well as a proposed increase in the minimum wage.

Within the Republican session, one Republican said that Utah Sen. Bob Bennett had floated the possibility of formally censuring the president, but the idea drew no support. These sources said Sen. Mitch McConnell and others argued such a plan was premature because Starr is expected to submit a report to Congress later this year containing any evidence he has uncovered of impeachable offenses.



A Bangkok Tuk-Tuk driver and his passenger are pushed through a flooded street Wednesday. Heavy rains throughout the night flooded many streets causing the normally heavy urban traffic to snarl even more.

Bomb defused near Lankan tourist resort

COLOMBO, Sept 2: Sri Lankan police defused a bomb found in an abandoned bag near a telecommunication center in Hikkaduwa, a popular sea resort in the south, the area's police chief said Wednesday, reports AP.

PRP Senanayake could not say who may have planted the bomb, which was discovered late Tuesday, but said it appeared to be locally made.

Hikkaduwa, about 100 kilometres south of Colombo, is visited by a large number of Western budget travellers. The area is known for its coral reefs.

Police have blamed the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Prince Harry joins Eton

LONDON, Sept 2: Prince Harry headed for the playing fields of Eton on Wednesday, following his brother to the elite boarding school favoured by royals for centuries, reports AP.

The school is just across the River Thames from Windsor Castle, a weekend base for the prince's grandmother, Queen Elizabeth II.

Red-haired Harry, easy-going and said not to be too academically inclined, was with his mother, Princess Diana, and his father, Prince Charles, to see William sign Eton College's historic entrance book three years ago.

The 13-year-old prince travelled with his father Tuesday night from Balmoral, the queen's estate in Scotland where the royal family marked the first anniversary of Diana's death Monday, and stayed overnight at Highgrove, Charles' country residence.

Off the Record

1500 poems old at 14 years of age!

NEW DELHI: Is she an Arundhati Roy in the making? The Booker may be some time away, but for now an Indian teenager who lives in Abu Dhabi has wowed the literati with her fourth book, reports IANS.

Merin Elizabeth Kuruvilla, 14 years and 1,500 poems old, released 'Efflorescence' at the India International Centre here last week. The young poetess had come out with her first anthology, 'Impressions', when she was all of ten years old. Kuruvilla hails from the southern Indian state of Kerala.

A ninth grade student, she has not only impressed with her creative outpourings, but has several international awards to her credit. She won at the International Haiku competition in 1992; the Abu Dhabi Cultural Foundation in 1993; and the Shankar's International Children's Competition in India in 1994 and 95, the Times of India reported.

"These poems relate to a child and her world. But they are my world too," noted Indian poet Jayant Mahapatra was quoted as saying. "Merin seems to see through life, young as she is. Not many of us older people can visualise the futility of things, and so of our lives."

The mystery of the missing Ling

BANGKOK: The mystery of the missing Ling has been solved, reports AP.

The eight-year-old Burmese cat disappeared from an airplane during a transit stop in Bangkok nearly three months ago, leaving his retired British naval officer owner inconsolable.

Now, Ling is about to be returned to Geoff Graham — thanks to a kindhearted Thai woman, high technology and a serious cash offer.

Roger Lohanan, manager of the Thai Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, said Tuesday that Graham had offered a reward of 50,000 bath (dhs 1,200) after the large, golden cat went missing June 6 during a journey from Surabaya, Indonesia, to London. His second cat, Dao, made it safely to Britain.

That newspapers gave wide publicity to the offer. Cat in hand, some 25 hopefuls had applied for the reward, but none proved to be the wayward feline... until Monday.

Vacharee Panjali, the 43-year-old housewife said she had become really attached to the animal and if it hadn't been for the reward money, wouldn't have given her up, Lohanan said.

Ling is under a veterinarian's care pending Graham's decision on whether to come to Thailand to retrieve him or simply to fly him back to Britain.

UN rejects UAE plea for weekly flight to Iraq

UNITED NATIONS, Sept 2: The Security Council's Iraqi Sanctions Committee turned down a request by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on Tuesday to provide a weekly medical flight to Iraq, but said such flights would continue to be approved on a case by case basis, reports Reuters.

The UAE had sought permission for Emirates Airlines to organise a weekly flight, at its own expense, to take medical and other humanitarian relief supplies to Baghdad, and to return with sick and elderly Iraqi patients for medical treatment in Dubai.

Committee members said there was no consensus among the 15 members for authorising a regular weekly flight, but that the United States and Britain noted there was an existing procedure for approving such flights on a case by case basis.

On another matter, the Sanctions Committee approved a request by a Finnish energy company, Neste Oy, for a field test in northern Iraq of a new oil production additive which improves the flow of oil in corroded pipelines.

India-Bangladesh ties may hit a rough patch

Mahesh Uniyal writes from New Delhi

NEW DELHI, Sept 2: India-Bangladesh ties, which had experienced a dramatic upturn over the past two years, could hit a rough patch over the issue of deportation of Bengali-speaking people who Indian authorities say are illegal Bangladeshi immigrants.

Analysts here caution that the "excellent" bilateral relations could sour if New Delhi did not heed Dhaka's warning not to forcibly send across the border people Bangladesh denies are its nationals.

India has to be especially careful to have good ties with Bangladesh and help nurture "secular democracy" in that country at a time when Pakistan has taken the route of Islamisation, they said.

The Bengali-speaking Muslims are being sent to Bangladesh by the government of the western state of Maharashtra which is ruled jointly by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its chauvinist Hindu ally, the Shiv Sena.

The move has been opposed by the Communist-ruled state of West Bengal through whose

territory the alleged aliens were being pushed back. Former External Affairs Minister K. Natwar Singh, of the main opposition Congress party, said the BJP-led government must "get hold of itself" and address Dhaka's complaint.

Singh said that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's government did not have the time to address itself to the issue as it was preoccupied with political "firefighting" to ensure its survival.

"The problem of Bangladesh immigrants is a human issue and no amount of deportation or border fencing can solve it as many studies have shown," said The Hindu newspaper.

Sources in the External Affairs Ministry told India Abroad News Service that New Delhi wants the issue resolved by "discussion, keeping in view our friendly relations." The matter is expected to figure in the talks between top internal security officials of the two nations when the Indian Home Secretary goes to Dhaka this month.

But Bangla diplomats here say that so far India has not

raised the subject in official communication with them. "Unless they (the Indians) raise the issue, we cannot do anything," a Bangladeshi diplomat told IANS. Indian officials insist there are some 10 to 12 million Bangladeshis living illegally in India but Bangladesh says there is no proof they are its nationals.

Bangladesh has reportedly put its border security forces on alert to foil attempts by India's Border Security Force (BSF) to push in from the northern and western borders Bengali-speaking people Bangladesh claims are Indian nationals.

Ministry sources confirmed reports that Dhaka had summoned the Indian High Commissioner to lodge a formal protest. Dhaka has also complained about recent incidents of border firing, allegedly by the BSF on Bangladesh border guards, and asked for compensation from India.

Leading international affairs commentator Bhabani Sengupta did not agree with the Bangladeshi claim, but insisted that India's handling of the issue is not "human." "People are not cattle that

you can push them across the border," he said, adding, "This government (Indian), which says it believes in good relations with neighbours, should immediately stop this."

"Having played a very responsible role in the creation of Bangladesh, India should be sensitive about the feelings of Bangladesh," Sengupta told IANS. Sanjoy Hazarika of the Centre for Policy Research, who has been studying immigration issues for several years, said the BJP-Shiv Sena government's "ham-handed" approach has "harmful effects to make the issue better understood" by all parties concerned.

According to Hazarika, despite Dhaka's official denial, a section of the Bangladesh intelligentsia, including the media and some think tanks, has acknowledged the presence of illegal Bangladeshi migrants in India.

The immigrants come for well known reasons — search of livelihood — and this should be taken into account, he said, but added it is necessary to ensure that any change in demographic balance as a result of such influx does not alter the

political balance in regions where they settle.

India cannot afford to strain bilateral ties which have been on the upswing in the past two years, analysts said. The forcible push-backs can give a handle to "fundamentalist" forces in Bangladesh where democracy is "flourishing on lines which we should welcome," Sengupta said.

"In view of what is happening in Pakistan, it is all the more important for us to keep secular democracy well and alive in Bangladesh," Sengupta cautioned.

Tensions over the issue could also be a setback to long-delayed plans to speed up development in India's northeastern states, analysts warned. New Delhi and Dhaka are still negotiating on granting Indian transit through Bangladesh territory to the Indian states of Meghalaya and Tripura.

then so-called Gujral Doctrine named after former Indian Prime Minister I.K. Gujral.

Sengupta said that while the Vajpayee government has said it is for continuity in India's neighbourhood policy, it is under pressure from hardline elements in the BJP which at one time advocated forcible deportations of alleged illegal Bangladeshi migrants.

The issue has also been complicated by India's domestic politics, with political parties using it for electoral advantage. Political rivals have accused each other of exploiting the so-called migrants to boost their vote banks.

The ruling BJP has however toned down its rhetoric over the issue since coming to power with Home (Interior) Minister L K Advani saying that since the people concerned were economic refugees the problem had to be handled in a more humanitarian way. He also suggested giving work permits without voting rights to these immigrants.

Milosevic offers self-rule for Albanians in Kosovo

BELGRADE, Sept 2: Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic on Tuesday offered ethnic Albanian leaders in Kosovo an interim agreement providing for a degree of self-government in the troubled province, Tanjug news agency reported, says AFP.

The agreement would cover a period of three to five years and give Kosovo "a certain degree of self-administration," Tanjug said.

The offer came after six months of fighting in the province between Yugoslav security forces and ethnic Albanian separatists in which more than 700 people, mostly Albanians, have died.

Milosevic, who was meeting US envoy Christopher Hill, said it was time for Belgrade to "resume dialogue as soon as possible" with representatives of the Kosovo parties.

An official statement said that any agreement should ensure equality of all citizens and national communities living in Kosovo.