

Belgrade using refugees as human shields

NATO zeroes in on Serb energy sites

BELGRADE, May 16: NATO moved into its 54th day of air strikes against Yugoslavia with further attacks on electric power installations and fuel stores, Serbian state media said, reports Reuters.

Energy supplies are deemed crucial to the Yugoslav military which NATO is trying to degrade to make Belgrade withdraw forces from Kosovo and allow the return of ethnic Albanian refugees under international force protection.

NATO also hopes that power blackouts increasingly plaguing daily life in Serbia, on top of damage to infrastructure, will erode Belgrade's defiance of Western terms for a Kosovo settlement, although there is little sign of that so far.

Of the missile strikes reported by Serbian media on Saturday night and early today, the bulk targeted energy supplies.

Two NATO missiles hit a power station belonging to the mining and smelting complex at Bor in eastern Serbia, near the Bulgarian and Romanian borders, at 10:40 pm (2040 GMT) on Saturday, the Yugoslav official news agency Tanjug reported.

It quoted regional civil defence officer Miroslav Ilic as saying six workers were injured and considerable damage done. A fire broke out but was quickly subdued.

Belgrade state radio said two missiles struck the Stratid electricity sub-station at Smederevo, 45 kms east of the Yugoslav capital, at 10:38 pm (20:38 GMT). Firefighters put out an ensuing blaze and there were no injuries, it said.

Three missiles smashed a petrol storage area 14 km north of Belgrade around the same time, Tanjug said.

A city resident reported a second fuel depot blasted. "I had a phone call from Borca saying that Lika Promet gas station on the road to Borca (a western suburb) was hit," he told Reuters.

An inhabitant of Dorcol, on the banks of the Danube, said flames could also be seen in the direction of Borca, to the north-west, on the other side of the river.

Another Belgrade witness said the western Riverside district of Zemun, which has suffered water and electricity cuts, appeared to have come under attack.

"The sky over Zemun is red," the resident said.

Witnesses said a total of eight missile impacts were heard in the direction of the northern suburb of Batujnica, site of a military airport frequently targeted by NATO warplanes.

At least one explosion was heard on Saturday evening in the eastern Belgrade suburb of

Pancevo, home to strategic petro-chemical industry and a military aircraft factory.

NATO planes also bombed the Brankovac area on the western slopes of Mount Fruska Gora in northwest Serbia, audible in the republic's second biggest city Novi Sad, Tanjug said. No casualties were reported.

Meanwhile, Serbian police used ethnic Albanian refugees as human shields in the Kosovo village of Korisa before a lethal attack by NATO bombers, according to an eyewitness account reported by German radio.

Serbian media have said 87 civilians died in the bombing just before midnight on Thursday. NATO has issued its regrets for "accidental civilian casualties" but implied any civilians killed were deliberately put at risk by Serbian security forces.

According to a transcript of an interview with an unnamed refugee broadcast by German radio station Deutsche Welle, some 600 Kosovo Albanians were forced to gather on a small plot of land near the village before the attack.

"We were told something bad would happen to us if we left the place," said the eyewitness, interviewed by the station's Albanian service and identified only as a male with the initials Xh. K.



A local worker with a hand extinguisher fights the last flames in the ruins of a petrol station in Kovilovo (some 20 kms outside of Belgrade) at the road leading from Belgrade to Zrenjanin on Sunday. The petrol station was hit by bombs during the NATO attacks.— AFP photo

Briton missing after scaling Mount Everest

KATHMANDU, May 16: A British climber is reported to be missing three days after he conquered the south summit of Mount Everest, the Nepalese Tourism Ministry said today, reports AFP.

The ministry identified the missing Briton as Michael Matthews, 22, a trader from Sheffield in Yorkshire.

Matthews was last seen on Thursday, the day he climbed the 8,848-metre (29,028-foot) Mount Everest via the south east route. Two other members of his team, Christopher Brown, 53, a farmer from North Yorkshire, and Constantine Niarchos, 37, a businessman from Moritz, Switzerland, accompanied him to the top.

Pak HC in London faces eviction over legal bill

LONDON, May 16: The Pakistani High Commissioner in London is facing eviction from his official residence after lawyers obtained a court order to reclaim money owed by his government, the Sunday Telegraph reported, says AFP.

The paper said the firm, Ian Guster, had not been paid 120,000 pounds (195,000 dollars) for investigating the business dealings of former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto.

It added that the firm was applying for a sale of the 4.2 million-pound (6.8-million-dollar) seven-bedroom residence to cancel the debt.

Off the Record

Clinton misses the near miss

LOS ANGELES: The pilot of Air Force One was forced to make an evasive maneuver on Saturday night to avoid coming too close to another airplane during a flight carrying President Bill Clinton from Palo Alto, California, to Los Angeles, White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said, reports Reuters.

Lockhart said Air Force One was descending to an altitude of 10,000 feet (3,000 metres) when a commuter plane headed in the opposite direction descended to an altitude of 9,000 feet (2,700 metres). An automated collision-avoidance system aboard Air Force One signalled the pilot to climb, Lockhart said, and the plane rose back to 10,400 feet and banked away from the commuter plane.

Lockhart said the two planes never came closer than the 1,000-foot (minimum vertical separation required under federal air safety regulations).

"This was not a near miss by any calculation... They at all times maintained the required separation," Lockhart said.

Bad influence on future king

LONDON: The son of Prince Charles' mistress and a close friend of the heir to British throne's own son Prince William has admitted to The Sunday Times that he had taken cocaine, the paper said, reports AFP.

Tom Parker Bowles 24, son of Camilla and godson of Prince Charles, was cautioned for possession of cannabis and the "rave" drug ecstasy four years ago, the paper said.

It added that when it confronted Parker Bowles with allegations of his continued drug-taking this week, the public relations executive "accepted" he had taken illegal drugs and was "very sorry that he had distressed his parents."

He was also said to be "humbled" by the fresh revelations. The Sunday Times said it had been told of Parker Bowles' cocaine-taking at a party by a friend who was "increasingly concerned by his habit."

"I am concerned that he is William's mentor", the friend said. "Anyway you look at it Tom Parker Bowles is a bad influence on the future king of England."

BRIEFLY

Khatami begins KSA visit

Iran's president began a landmark visit to Saudi Arabia on Saturday, marking the steady improvement in ties that were soured by Tehran's 1979 Islamic Revolution. AP reports from Jeddah.

The two countries have been rivals for influence in the Persian Gulf for the past 20 years, but relations have been warming since moderate President Mohammed Khatami came to office in 1997. Khatami's visit is the first by an Iranian leader since the revolution. Soon after his arrival late Saturday, he held talks with Saudi King Fahd and Crown Prince Abdullah at al-Salam palace in the Red Sea port Jeddah.



Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu addresses supporters during a rally in Netivot Saturday. Latest opinion polls showed that opposition Labour leader Ehud Barak could defeat Netanyahu in the first round of national elections today. — AFP photo

Train derails in Pakistan: 5 killed

MULTAN, Pakistan, May 16: A passenger train derailed in eastern Punjab province Sunday, killing at least five people and injuring 140 others, doctors and railway officials said, reports AP.

Eight of the 10 cars, each of which can carry about 88 people, derailed on a turning near Rahimiyar Khan, some 215 km south of Multan.

The cause of the accident is not known, but railway officials said they were not ruling out the possibility of sabotage.

"We don't rule out a possibility of terrorism," said Aziz, a Pakistan Railways official.

Punjab province has been the scene of much sectarian violence often involving bombs on public transportation. There was no immediate evidence that implicated terrorists, but Aziz said an inquiry will decide.

The Railway authorities have launched an inquiry. The Quetta Express, was en route to Quetta, the capital of southwestern Baluchistan province from Rawalpindi.

UK sets 'absolute' deadline for forming N Ireland govt

LONDON, May 16: British Prime Minister Tony Blair on Saturday set a new and "absolute" deadline of a month and a half for a breakthrough in the Northern Ireland peace process, reports AFP.

As pressure mounted for a deal before the traditionally volatile summer marching season is in full swing, Blair's spokesman said the province's parties must agree to form a power-sharing government by June 30.

"The prime minister has told the parties that the deadline is absolute," said a spokesman for Blair's office at 10 Downing Street in London.

"We have made real progress in the last few days and there are proposals being discussed which we believe will get the process back on track."

They do not challenge the fundamental positions of the parties. They do force people to face up to the decisions which have to be made to implement the Good Friday agreement in full.

The historic agreement to share power in a new semi-autonomous administration, signed by all parties in April 1998, has been blocked over the

issue of IRA disarmament.

The Protestant Ulster Unionists refuse to let the IRA's political wing Sinn Fein occupy two ministerial posts assigned to them until the IRA begins to hand in weapons.

Sinn Fein says this was not part of the peace deal, and insists it does not have the influence to deliver IRA disarmament.

Yet according to a source close to the talks, a proposed deal put forward by London and Dublin after a day of telephone talks Saturday and 10 hours of all-party talks in London Friday makes no mention of weapons handovers.

The working paper will not include a commitment from the IRA to deliver or to commence decommissioning by that date (June 30), said the source.

Instead, the head of Northern Ireland's disarmament commission, Canadian General John de Chastelain, will be asked to report by June 30 on which organisations could be classified as non-violent.

Ministers from those parties would then be allowed to assume their powers, while the others would remain shadow ministers.

Sonia won't be intimidated by criticism of her foreign origin

NEW DELHI, May 16: Congress President Sonia Gandhi yesterday declared that she would not be intimidated by the campaign launched by the BJP and the Sangh Parivar on her foreign origin even as the party working committee decided to confront this malicious propaganda on non-issues, reports PTI.

I would like to make it quite clear that I am not intimidated by these attacks just like my mother-in-law and Rajivji were not, Sonia told a meeting of the party working committee.

Stating that they were aware of the kind of campaign by the BJP and its organisations, she said the attack is of course on the Congress party and me personally.

In a resolution, the working committee took note of the slanderous personal disinformation campaign against the Congress president and decided to confront this malicious campaign effectively and said the lies, propagated by the BJP and the Sangh Parivar.

It is quite clear that the Sangh Parivar has started once again its old trick of misleading people through vicious disinformation campaign on non-issues. The while exercise is aimed to divert the attention of the people from the disastrous performance of the central government in the last 13 months, it said.

The CWC directed all PCSS and subordinate Congress committees to enlighten the public about this and carry on their effective campaign to unmask the real face of BJP.

PTI from Lucknow adds: Uttar Pradesh Congress Working Committee today adopted a resolution requesting AICC president Sonia Gandhi and her daughter Priyanka Gandhi to contest the coming Lok Sabha elections from any seat of their choice from Uttar Pradesh.

The resolution was adopted at the first meeting of the newly constituted state working committee held under the presidency of UPCC president Salman Khursheed here.

The meeting also discussed in detail party's strategy for the coming elections.

Addressing the meeting, Khursheed said the elections would prove to be historic as the Congress would reassert itself to prove its strength in national politics and defeat the forces indulging in politics of caste and religion.

He expressed confidence that the party would post impressive victory under the dynamic leadership of Sonia Gandhi.

Samajwadi Party (SP) would not allow either a BJP-led coalition or Congress which projects Sonia Gandhi as the next Prime Minister, to come to power at any cost, SP National General Secretary Amar Singh said today.

"We can not allow those who carried out or abetted demolition of the Babri Masjid at Aydhya in 1992 to take over the reins of the counter, Singh told reporters at the "Raj House" here lambasting both the BJP and the Congress.

Clinton asks Hollywood to limit violence on screens

FALO ALTO, California, May 16: President Bill Clinton, expected to raise at least \$1.7 million for Democrats at a star-studded Hollywood gala, on Saturday urged the entertainment industry to limit the violence that children see in movies and on television, reports Reuters.

"There is still too much violence on our nation's screens, large and small," Clinton said in his weekly radio address to the nation, saying all Americans need to search for ways to prevent a repeat of last month's tragic massacre by two teenagers at a Colorado high school.

He issued three challenges to the industry — including a call to movie makers to review their rating system to see if "too much gratuitous violence" is included in films approved for viewing by children.

Clinton said there was a need to reduce the level of violence to which our children are exposed, noting that experts es-

timate that by the age of 18 "the typical American will see 40,000 dramatized murders."

The remarks were broadcast hours before Clinton was to attend an exclusive all-star evening gathering in Beverly Hills hosted by SKG Dream-Works studio heads David Geffen, Steven Spielberg and Jeffrey Katzenberg.

The event was expected to generate at least \$1.7 million for Democratic campaigns next year from a list of about 100 donors, including performers Meg Ryan, Dennis Quaid, Goldie Hawn, Kurt Russell and Whoopi Goldberg.

In Washington, Senate Republican leader Trent Lott criticised Clinton and Vice President Al Gore for "begging for cash from one of the polluters responsible for our nation's moral decline."

What's the message to our children? Lott of Mississippi asked in a statement issued by his office.

Yeltsin braces for another battle with Duma

MOSCOW, May 16: Russian President Boris Yeltsin braced today for his next battle with parliament after comfortably surviving a Communist-led attempt to impeach him, reports Reuters.

His opponents in the State Duma, or lower house, failed on Saturday to muster enough votes to start impeachment proceedings on any of five charges of misrule after three days of acrimonious debate.

The closest the Communists came to tripping Yeltsin up was over his role in the 1994-96 war in breakaway Chechnya. But they secured only 283 votes even on that count, 17 short of the 300 votes — or two-thirds majority — needed.

This is a victory for democracy, liberal deputy Sergei Ivanenko said after the vote, which followed months of painstaking preparations by the Communist-led opposition.

But one Communist backbencher burst into tears. "Those

who voted against impeachment voted against Russia," she shouted.

The Communists, who have tried to topple Yeltsin for most of this decade, have a chance to hit back when the Kremlin presents Yeltsin's loyal ally, Sergei Stepashin, to the Duma on Wednesday and asks it to confirm him as prime minister.

The stage is set for another showdown because the Communists have been humiliated by Saturday's defeat and angered by Yeltsin's dismissal last week of Yevgeny Primakov, the prime minister they had backed.

Yeltsin met his Kremlin chief of staff, Alexander Voloshin, at a residence outside Moscow as soon as the result of the Duma voting was known and turned his attention to the battle ahead.

They discussed the outcome of the vote and almost immediately went over to discussing other matters — the serious po-

litical crisis and concrete matters to do with forming the government," said Yeltsin's press secretary, Dmitry Yakushkin.

He said Yeltsin felt fine after a medical check on Saturday morning, describing it as routine, although the 68-year-old leader has a history of frequent illnesses.

Yeltsin must dissolve the Duma and call an early parliamentary election within three months if it rejects his candidate three times. But he would then have the right to rule temporarily by decree and appoint whoever he wants as premier.

Deputies have no strong allergy to him (Stepashin), said Gennady Seleznyov, the Duma's Communist Speaker.

But it is not clear how the communists will respond to their defeat and how they view Stepashin, a 47-year-old former interior minister who also had a role in the Chechen war as head of one of the main branches of the security forces.

Second round of voting in Nepal today Rigging in first phase alleged

KATHMANDU, May 16: Nepalese voters go to the polls in the second round of general elections Monday amid accusations of ballot-rigging during the first stage of polling two weeks ago, reports AFP.

The election has been split into two stages — covering different parts of the Himalayan Kingdom — to help security forces deal with the threat of violence from Maoist rebels.

Opinion polls and political observers predict that the centrist Nepali Congress led by Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala will emerge as the largest single party in parliament, followed by the two main communist factions.

But there is a large question mark over whether the Nepali Congress can secure the minimum 103 seats required for a simple majority in the 205-member lower house.

The last election in 1994 produced a hung parliament that inflicted six different governments on an increasingly disenchanted electorate.

Monday's voting will cover 39 of Nepal's 75 districts, with three former premiers as well as the incumbent Koirala — all appearing on the ballot sheet.

A meeting of opposition groups last week alleged that

the Nepali Congress had used its influence over the security forces to manipulate the first round of voting on May 3 — a charge Koirala's party hotly denied.

"These allegations are completely baseless," said Congress spokesman Narhari Acharya. They are charging us with vote-rigging because they know they were badly beaten in the first round, just as they will be on Monday."

The counting of votes from both stages will begin immediately after polling stations close.

Although the threatened Maoist violence never really materialised in the first round — apart from a few isolated incidents — security will be tight Monday, with some 35,000 police and army troops deployed in the polling areas.

"We made a close assessment of the first stage and will correct some mistakes and avoid any weaknesses this time around," Inspector General of Police Achyut Krishna Kharel told AFP.

More than 2,200 candidates from 38 different parties are contesting the elections.

Nepal, a country of about 23 million people, has 13.5 million registered voters and

turnout in the first stage was just under 60 per cent.

The economy grew just 1.9 per cent last year — the worst figure in 10 years — and annual per capita income is the lowest in South Asia at 210 dollars.

King Birendra has ruled as a constitutional monarch since 1990 when a pro-democracy rebellion stripped him off his supreme executive powers.

The advent of multi-party democracy carried with it the hopes and aspirations of millions of Nepalese for greater freedoms and an improved standard of living.

But the majority Nepali Congress government that came to power in 1991 elections failed to live up to those expectations, as did the series of coalitions and minority governments that followed the 1994 polls.

The candidates in this election have had to face a deeply cynical electorate angry at official corruption, economic mismanagement, rising crime and inflation.

The Nepali Congress had 87 seats in the outgoing parliament but hopes to improve on that total by exploiting a split in its main electoral rival, the Nepal Communist Party-United Marxist and Leninist.

Indonesia bracing for polls campaign Troops on alert in Ambon

AMBON, Indonesia, May 16: Indonesian troops were on full alert on the tense island of Ambon today, a day after eight people were killed when soldiers opened fire to halt Muslim-Christian clashes, military officials and residents said, reports Reuters.

"Troops are stationed in many parts of Ambon, but the city has returned to normal. People are guarding churches and mosques," one resident said.

Hospital sources said troops shot 18 people, killing eight, while trying to restore order after fighting erupted during celebrations honouring a local hero.

"We are still on full alert," a military official said. "More than 200 people have died this year on Ambon, heart of the famed Spice Islands, in communal bloodshed mainly rooted in religious tension."

Saturday's violence broke out during the relaying of a torch symbolising the spirit of Patimura, a Christian hero who led a rebellion against Dutch rule in the early 19th century.

A Muslim group carrying the torch to the main celebration refused to hand it over as

scheduled to a Christian group.

AFP adds: Indonesia is bracing for the start of campaigning by the 48 political parties contesting the first elections since the fall of former strongman Suharto, as doubts linger about the fairness of the polls and the shadow of electoral violence looms.

In the six elections held every five years during the 32-year reign of former president Suharto, only three government-recognised political parties were allowed to compete.

This time 48 parties will take part in the elections which President BJ Habibie pledged to hold after being picked by his mentor Suharto to take over from him when he resigned in May last year.

Among the main contenders in this election is Suharto's former political vehicle, the ruling Golkar Party, which Friday officially endorsed Habibie as its sole candidate for the next presidency.

But several other parties, headed or backed by popular leading reformists, have emerged as strong contenders ahead of the campaign which starts on Wednesday and lasts until June 4.

They are the People's Man-

date Party (PAN) headed by Amien Rais, the Indonesian Democracy Party-Struggle (PDI-Struggle) of Megawati Sukarnoputri and the National Awakening Party backed by Abdurrahman Gus Dur Wahid, who chairs the country's largest Islamic group, the Nahdlatul Ulama.

Manhunt for rebels in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, May 16: Hundreds of Indian troops today launched a major offensive against Muslim guerrillas in the Kashmir frontier region of Kargil, officials said, reports AFP.

Military sources in Srinagar said infantry reinforcements moved into the mountains of Kargil where 10 soldiers and 15 militants have been killed in skirmishes over the past week.

Kargil is 160 km southwest of Srinagar. More than 24,000 people have died since 1989 in a Muslim separatist revolt against Indian rule in Kashmir.



Indian troop reinforcements gather information as they pause in the road on the way to the militant stronghold of Kargil Sunday where 10 soldiers and 15 rebels have been killed in skirmishes over the past week. Thousands of Indian troops launched the largest offensive in a decade against Muslim guerrillas in the Kargil region and fought a duel with Pakistani gunners. — AFP photo