

No sign of Milosevic's cracking

NATO bombs Serb police HQs

BELGRADE, May 25: Despite NATO claims Slobodan Milosevic was "cracking," there were no signs the Yugoslav president was willing to accept an allied-backed peace plan for Kosovo or that the crackdown against ethnic Albanians was easing, reports AP.

As the allied air war entered its third month, NATO bombed Serb police headquarters in downtown Belgrade early Tuesday, Serb media reported. The modern glass building had already been destroyed in an earlier allied attack on April 3. No explosion was heard in the new strike, which Serb media said was because several missiles that hit the headquarters did not explode.

Exposing just how far apart the sides are in agreeing on a peace plan, Yugoslavia's UN envoy declared Monday that NATO has no moral right to enter the country after its bombing campaign and insisted that Belgrade must be a full partner in negotiations.

"It would be really unthinkable for one sovereign country to allow its own destroyers to play the role of peacemakers or peacekeepers," Vladislav Jovanovic said.

If NATO troops enter Yugoslavia, he warned that

"nobody could guarantee the safety of those people because of the outrage of the population."

As a key precondition to end the bombing, the United States insists that NATO troops from the "core" of an international security presence in Kosovo that would ensure the return of more than 800,000 ethnic Albanian refugees who have fled Milosevic's forces and the continued NATO strikes.

Sergio de Mello, head of the UN fact-finding mission, said visits to more than seven Kosovo towns over three days showed conditions in the province to be "a lot worse than we feared."

Although mission members were unable to visit all the places they wanted, what they heard and saw was enough for a "picture of what went on. Everything indicates that there is an attempt to displace, ethnically cleanse Kosovo," he said, calling the scale of the crisis "gigantic."

Thousands more refugees have flooded into neighbouring Macedonia in the past few days. Many said they had tried to hand on in Kosovo but finally gave up under the combined weight of NATO bombing and Serb police repression.

Serbian media claimed 100 people were killed in strikes Friday and Sunday on a prison in Istok in northwestern Kosovo. There was no independent confirmation of the Radio Belgrade report; 19 had earlier been reported killed.

Early Tuesday, NATO jets fired at Mount Cer, some 100 km west of Belgrade, where a key communication transmitter is located. Serb media said. It also reported strikes at the Batajnica military airport, northwest of Belgrade, and in the capital's suburb of Rakovica, the site of a large underground military complex.

And police in Cacak, some 100 kilometers (60 miles) south of Belgrade, detained three leaders of an anti-war movement, according to the Montenegrin news agency in Yugoslavia's junior republic, Montenegro.

Reuter adds: NATO targeted its old opponent, the Serbian Interior Ministry in Belgrade, in a fresh round of air strikes today. Yugoslavia's official news agency Tanjug said the ministry was hit at 3:05 am (0105 GMT) although no explosion was heard.

Belgrade's Civil Defence Centre said the Central City Ministry building, already badly damaged in previous attacks, was hit just before 3 am.

The Yugoslav and Serbian interior ministries were the first buildings to be attacked when NATO aircraft bombed the Yugoslav capital for the first time on April 3.

"is cracking. No question about it."

While Milosevic's power remains unchallenged, there were new reports of war protests.

In the Serbian towns of Krusevac and Aleksandrovac, crowds of up to 2,000 people rallied Monday against the call-up of local men for military service.

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A Macedonian soldier shows a way out of the Black refugee camp near the border with Kosovo to a group of Kosovar refugees. The UNHCR pressed Macedonia to keep taking in Kosovo Albanian refugees, after it said the authorities tried overnight to send new arrivals directly to Albania. — AFP photo

LTTE plotting to kill Sonia

NEW DELHI, May 25: India's main opposition leader Sonia Gandhi is under threat from Sri Lankan Tamil rebels who killed her husband Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, news reports said today, according to AFP.

Intelligence sources told two newspapers that Sonia was being targeted by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), who feared she would launch an offensive against them if she came to power.

The Hindu newspaper quoted senior intelligence officials as saying the LTTE had resolved in an April meeting in Durban, South Africa, to kill Indian-born Sonia in a car bomb attack.

The meeting also reportedly came up with a suggestion to target the 52-year-old widow in northern India "so that the needle of suspicion did not indicate the involvement of any south Indian groups or the LTTE," the Hindu said.

Former premier Rajiv Gandhi was killed on May 21, 1991 in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, where several LTTE members are active, during an election rally. His killer was an LTTE woman suicide bomber.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has acknowledged the threat to Sonia Gandhi's life

over the weekend and said security around her had been tightened.

Sonia's Congress Party claimed an unidentified "fascist" group was trying to kill her.

Sources said the chief of an elite commando group charged with the security of senior Indian leaders as well as the president and the prime minister, had asked Sonia to be "extra careful" when she appeared in public and to be circumspect when accepting public engagements or chalkling out fours.

The Indian Express said the Federal Intelligence Bureau last week intercepted two wireless messages between an LTTE activist in Madras, the capital of India's Tamil Nadu state, and another in Sri Lanka's Jaffna town, which revealed a plan to kill Sonia.

It said the LTTE "feared a crackdown on its bases if she became prime minister" after India's national elections in September-October.

Earlier this month, India's Supreme Court acquitted 19 Indians and Sri Lankans who had been previously sentenced to death by a lower court for involvement in the Rajiv Gandhi assassination case but upheld the death penalty on four convicts.

China stole all major US N-secrets'

WASHINGTON, May 25: China stole key data on every important US nuclear warhead made since the 1970s and even shared the secrets with US enemies, according to a US congressional report to be released Tuesday, reports AFP.

After months of leaks to the news media, a special congressional panel under Republican Representative Christopher Cox was to release a 700-page report on Capitol Hill Tuesday morning detailing the allegations.

According to advance copies of the report:

- Stolen US technology allowed China to develop small nuclear warheads that can be used on highly mobile intercontinental ballistic missile systems.

- China stole guidance technology currently used in US missiles and advanced jet fighter airplanes.

- Chinese nuclear spying continues to this day as part of a massive effort to steal or buy US military technology.

- US counterintelligence agents began to look into spying at the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico in 1995, when the CIA obtained secret Chinese documents that contained classified US nuclear weapons information. The CIA concluded that the document was provided by a Chinese double agent.

The report states that China gave weapons systems and

said.

China has not yet deployed any weapons resulting directly from the secrets stolen from the United States, which still has "overwhelming superiority," Dicks said.

The Cox committee also found that China successfully obtained secret nuclear-missile, aircraft and space-weapon technology over the past two decades, with much of the theft occurring at four US laboratories run by the Department of Energy.

The technology was transferred during commercial satellite launches, according to the report. Also, high-powered computers sold to China have been used for military purposes, it says.

Meanwhile, a US congressional report alleging China stole US nuclear weapons technology was an attempt to poison relations between Washington and Beijing, Chinese officials said Tuesday.

This kind of report is surely aimed at poisoning the relations between the two countries, foreign ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao told a news conference.

He said China hoped the US government would "have a clear cut attitude on this."

A special congressional panel under Republican Representative Christopher Cox was to release a 700-page report later Tuesday.

Sonia consolidates her command

"The election campaign is going to kick off today with Sonia at the top. We are all joyful, happy that she is leading us," he said.

A Congress leader from West Bengal state said the electorate would now rally around Sonia Gandhi, adding that a wave of sympathy for outgoing Hindu nationalist premier Atal Behari Vajpayee, whom Gandhi helped topple last month, would wane.

"Sonia has given us a new hope. The little depression which had settled has died out. There is a new surge of sympathy for Sonia and the temporary sympathy for Vajpayee has been wiped out," he said.

Congress workers echoed the sentiment, shouting slogans such as "Millions of hands are raised in favour of Sonia," and "Sonia, we want you as our prime minister."

Similar messages were emblazoned in banners around the stadium and along a one-kilometre stretch leading to the helm.

The 52-year-old Sonia resigned as Congress president on May 17 after three party rebels said her foreign origins should disqualify her from holding the office of Indian prime minister.

She changed her mind on Monday night, giving in to relentless pressure and appeals written in blood by Congress activists.



Sonia Gandhi greets members of her main opposition Congress Party at a "mammoth meeting in New Delhi Tuesday in her first public appearance since her resignation from the party's leadership on May 17. The Italian-born Sonia withdrew her resignation on Monday after the expulsion from the party of three rebel leaders who questioned her credentials on account of her foreign origin. — AFP photo

Sir Hillary remains unbeaten

KATHMANDU, May 25: There was no proof that two British climbers who died on Mount Everest in 1924 had made it to the summit, an expedition that set out to prove the pair had beaten Sir Edmund Hillary to the top by nearly 30 years said Tuesday, reports AFP.

George Mallory and Andrew Irvine disappeared on the world's highest mountain in 1924 and are believed to have been killed after being blown down by a fierce blizzard.

The mystery of the first ascent of Mount Everest by Mallory and Irvine remains unsolved so long as evidence like the Kodak camera showing the ascent of Everest is not found, team member Conrad Anker told a press conference.

The research team led by Eric Simonson, which spent 60 days on the northern slope of Mount Everest, found Mallory's body but no photographic proof of the pair at a 8,848-metre (28,208-foot) summit.

Andy Politz, who searched the body that was preserved in the cold, dry conditions said: "There is no evidence that Mallory had climbed Mount Everest, during their attempt on the summit on June 8, 1924."

He said the weather conditions on Everest's northern slope were excellent, with little snow -- enabling them to find Mallory's body at a height of 8,230 metres (27,000 feet).

An angry Hillary last month said the team's decision to take and sell pictures of Mallory's body, which appeared around the world, was an "unpleasant and unkindly thing to do."

He said the weather conditions as a local one because it wants to dispel the notion that the area could become a flashpoint for another war between the two countries, both of which are declared nuclear nations, The Hindu newspaper reported.

New Delhi hopes its army will be able to cut off supply lines to the 500 infiltrators -- it won't say if they are soldiers or guerrillas -- who have seized positions high up in the mountains of Kargil along the disputed border, the reports said.

New Delhi is describing the fighting as a local one because it wants to dispel the notion that the area could become a flashpoint for another war between the two countries, both of which are declared nuclear nations, The Hindu newspaper reported.

New Delhi is also keen to maintain that recent efforts by India and Pakistan to thaw relations -- embodied in a declaration signed by their prime ministers in Lahore earlier this

India playing down border clashes

SRINAGAR, India, May 25: Seeking to dispel notions of Kashmir becoming a nuclear flashpoint, the Indian government is playing down the exchange of heavy artillery fires with Pakistani soldiers in the Himalayan mountains where suspected Pakistani guerrillas have held up, newspapers said Tuesday, reports AP.

New Delhi hopes its army will be able to cut off supply lines to the 500 infiltrators -- it won't say if they are soldiers or guerrillas -- who have seized positions high up in the mountains of Kargil along the disputed border, the reports said.

Brijesh Mishra, a former career diplomat and currently the prime minister's Principal Secretary, told a television interviewer Sunday that Pakistan's elected government may not have been aware of the plans of its secret service agencies to send people across the border.

The Indian government accuses Pakistan of firing to help the infiltrators -- it won't say if they are soldiers or guerrillas -- to sneak into Kashmir, the territory over which both nations have fought for 51 years.

The infiltration is being viewed in India as a failure of its intelligence agencies, the Times of India newspaper quoted unnamed officials as saying.

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An estimated 15,000 Indian soldiers have moved into the Kargil region, the main centre of the fighting.

New axis between India, Russia & China emerging

MOSCOW, May 25: A tripartite axis between India, Russia and China appears to be emerging on the Kosovar issue with New Delhi and Moscow underlining that the similarity of approach of the three countries in the wake of NATO bombings on Yugoslavia could form basis of a joint action in international fora, reports PTI.

This became clear after yesterday's meetings External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh had with Russian leaders, including Victor Chernomyrdin, special envoy of President Boris Yeltsin on Kosovo and Secretary of the Russian Federation Security Council Vladimir Putin.

During the meetings, Singh noted that India, China and Russia have independently come to a point of view on developments in Kosovo which showed overlap in their approach. This, he suggested, should form the basis of an action the three countries would take at international fora.

Chernomyrdin, after his talks with Singh, told reporters that Russia was prepared for implementing a coordinated policy of the three countries on the issue. We are already prepared for such an activity, he said.

A spokesman of the External Affairs Ministry said that the three countries are keeping in touch with each other.

Approach on a pressing matter like Kosovo is a healthy development, he said.

In an apparent reference to the strategic partnership pact India and Russia are to sign later this year, the External Affairs Minister told the Russian leaders that the two countries have a strategic partnership, which might not be formally in place so far.

Another highlight of Singh's visit was his address to the Moscow State University for International Relations.

The kind of unilateralism being seen in the Balkans under the so-called regional initiative of NATO was fundamentally flawed and was doing irreparable harm to the region and a grave wrong in global affairs, he said.

In the address, Singh said mindless barbarity in the name of preservation of human rights is totally illogical ... this example should not be emulated anywhere in the world.

JERUSALEM, May 25: Israel's new government will make the resumption of peace talks with Syria and the Palestinians a top priority but will not forge ahead at any price, a lawmaker close to Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak said Tuesday, reports AP.

Labour party legislator Shlomo Ben-Ami spoke Tuesday after Barak asked potential coalition partners to accept a 10-point plan that ruled out a withdrawal from all of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and failed to mention peace talks with Syria and Lebanon.

The plan forms the basis of coalition talks that entered their second day Tuesday. Barak has 45 days to form a government.

The government Barak is establishing will be a government of peace, but it will be a government of a careful, skeptical and determined peace, Ben-Ami told Israel radio.

Ben-Ami said Barak has learned lessons from the past

seven years when Israel was ruled first by a narrow left-wing and then a right-wing coalition that deepened divisions among the people.

Ben-Ami said Israel's prime minister-elect is trying to establish the "broadest coalition possible" in order to have strong backing for difficult decisions he faces in the future.

The 10-point plan appeared aimed at appealing to hard-line parties, while providing enough flexibility to resume peace talks.

For example, Barak says he wants most of the Jewish settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip to live in large settlement blocks under Israeli sovereignty -- implying that small, isolated settlements would be dismantled.

Outgoing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party, which promoted settlement building, is likely to have trouble accepting the idea of uprooting some West Bank and Gaza communities.

Taiwan to hold drills to test revamped forces

TAIPEI, May 25: Taiwan's military is to hold month-long exercises to test reorganized units with the first exercise starting close to the Chinese mainland Thursday, the defense ministry said today, reports AFP.

The ministry downplayed the significance of the drills, calling them as routine.

Spokesman Kung Fan-ding said only part of the exercises would be live-fire while the others would feature kriegspiele -- in which figures representing forces are moved about on a large map.