

Indian troops, militants in close combat in Kashmir

KARGIL, India, May 30: Indian ground forces Sunday pressed on with attacks against Islamic rebels in Kashmir, engaging them in close combat, and fought another artillery duel with Pakistan across the border, reports AFP.

India is still studying a proposed visit to New Delhi by the Pakistani foreign minister for peace talks on Kashmir, the subject of two wars since 1947 between the now nuclear-armed rivals.

The air force, which continued limited air raids on the guerrillas following the latest ground attacks, Sunday vowed to avenge the killing of one of its pilots who crashed in Pakistan.

"We are now attacking them at all fronts," Major General J.J. Singh, operations director, said in New Delhi in reference to a zone in Kargil district where hundreds of guerrillas set up bases in an clandestine operation which began May 9. India says Pakistan army units are also there.

"We have pushed them back at all sectors," Singh said.

"We do not have an estimate

of their numbers but we can say that the intruders have suffered huge casualties," he said. India earlier claimed that 175 guerrillas and 125 Pakistani troops had been killed in Kargil.

An Indian infantry major leading 70 troops died in hand-to-hand fighting late Saturday while trying to recapture a strategic post occupied by the guerrillas in the Batalik area.

"The major killed four intruders before being shot dead," Singh said adding that the post held by 20 Islamic fighters was cleared following bloody fighting.

Air force officials Sunday ruled out heavy bombardments of the occupied snow-covered Himalayan region, saying such attacks could cause casualties among the thousands of Indian troops here.

The air force, which began air strikes Wednesday with its MIG-21, MIG-23 and MIG-27 combat jets, on Sunday limited its aerial strikes to sorties by helicopter gunships armed with rockets, cannons and machine guns, sources said.

Air Vice Marshal S.K. Malik rejected suggestions of carpet

bombing of the militant strongholds. "One will shudder by the dimension of casualties by such an action at a time when our own troops are on the ground."

"Our air operations are continuing and you shall see they will show results," Malik said.

"We are now using surprise as an element of our air attacks and I am not at liberty to say when a strike will commence."

Defence Minister George Fernandes, meanwhile, travelled to Kashmir and toured the conflict zones of Drass, Batalik and Kargil on Sunday, officials said.

He was due to return to Srinagar to pay homage to an air force pilot killed after his aircraft crashed in Pakistan territory on Thursday. India blamed mechanical failure.

Indian officials said the pilot, Ajay Ahuja, was shot in the head after he landed by parachute. Ahuja's body was returned by Pakistan on Friday.

India and Pakistan dispute the ownership of Kashmir and each hold parts of the picturesque state. It remains a perennial flashpoint.

Sri Lanka seeks divine intervention to end war

COLOMBO, May 30: Sri Lanka has devised a new battle plan to end its drawn out Tamil separatist war but this time there will be no fighting and the job will be left to divine powers, reports here said Sunday, reports AFP.

The government last week met with businessmen who were asked to help build a temple complex where it is hoped a new statue of Lord Vishnu will help end the ethnic violence that has so far claimed 55,000 lives since 1972.

The Sunday Island and Sunday Leader newspapers said businessmen were told that a Hindu temple near the town of Trichy in neighbouring India faced Sri Lanka, causing trouble in the smaller nation.

"If Sri Lanka was to overcome the malefic effects of this phenomenon, it had to build another Hindu temple for Vishnu in Sri Lanka together with a Buddhist temple," the Leader newspaper said.

Many believe that the Gopuram, or the structure, at the entrance to the centuries-old Hindu temple at Srinangam

near Trichy could bring bad luck to Sri Lanka. The Gopuram had been completed only in the early 1980s.

Both papers said Sri Lanka's junior defence minister Anuruddha Ratwatte, who leads the government's battle against Tamil Tiger separatist guerrillas, attended the meeting where help was sought from businessmen towards a temple.

A businessman at the meeting reportedly confirmed the government's plan to contribute to the temple complex at Muthurajawela, just north of the capital Colombo.

The newspapers said the government had identified the best location to deflect the ill effects of the Indian statue but was hard pressed for the 600 million rupees (8.5 million dollars) needed for construction.

The island quoted Ratwatte as saying there would be no end to the Tamil separatist war while the malevolent effects of the Vishnu statue in India flowed to Sri Lanka.

The only way to counter it was for Sri Lanka to build its own statue, he said.



The cover of an Amnesty International letter Sunday shows two child soldiers of Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger guerrilla movement (LTTE) sent as part of a campaign in Colombo against the LTTE's recruitment of children. The London-based human rights organisation condemned the use of child soldiers by the Tamil Tiger rebels and urged people to express their concern to the guerrillas who are fighting for an independent homeland in the island. — AFP photo



Pall-bearers carry a coffin containing the dead body of Indian Air Force SQ-Leader Ajay Ahuja at Srinagar Airport Sunday after being handed over by Pakistan. Ahuja bailed out of his Mig-21 when hit by a missile over Kashmir on May 27, with Indian officials claiming that he was "murdered in cold blood" by Pakistan troops after he landed by parachute and was shot in the head and chest. — AFPphoto

Discovery astronauts begin spacewalk

HOUSTON, Texas, May 30: Two American astronauts began an historic six-hour spacewalk a day after the US shuttle Discovery docked successfully with the International Space Station (ISS), NASA's control center said Sunday, reports AFP.

Discovery astronauts Tamara Jernigan and Dan Barry stepped out of the spacecraft at 9:56 p.m. Saturday (0256 GMT Sunday) and began unpacking some 200 kilograms (440 pounds) of equipment.

They are tasked with installing the tools on the station's exterior to prepare for future assembly missions.

The pair's long list of chores also includes attaching two cranes to the station's hull as they lay the groundwork for the future orbital laboratory.

The cranes will be used by crews to move cargo and facilitate the construction of the 500-tonne space outpost, which is expected to be completed by 2004.

If time allows, Jernigan and Barry will also wrap the US Unity module with a cover and check the antenna which allows it to communicate with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration mission control center here.

Once those tasks are completed, astronauts Julie Payette, a Canadian, and Valery Tokarev, a Russian, will start delivering some two tonnes of food, water, computers, spare parts and tools to ISS.

The NASA mission aims to prepare the space station for the arrival of its first occupants -- two Russians and an American -- in spring 2000.

Discovery's 10-day flight is the second of 36 shuttle missions needed to complete the 50-billion-dollar, 10-year space station project over the next five years.

Construction of the ISS began in December and the docking with the shuttle represents a first major step forward for the station.

Discovery's seven-member crew succeeded without a hitch late Friday in intercepting the ISS in the first link-up between a shuttle and the orbiting outpost.

The spacecraft slowly maneuvered for more than an hour around the station's two modules as it prepared for the groundbreaking rendezvous.

At an altitude of 400 kilometers (250 miles) and a speed of 27,000 kilometers per hour (16,740 miles per hour), the delicate maneuver left little room for error.

"Houston, we have capture," shuttle commander Kent Rominger said upon contact.

The shuttle linked two tunnels to the space station, allowing astronauts to move freely between the two vehicles while they are joined over the next six days. Discovery heads back to Earth on June 5.

ISS is NASA's first since the inaugural station-assembly mission was launched from Kennedy Space Center almost six months ago.

ISS is the first truly international space venture, with partners including Japan, Russia, the United States and all 11 members of the European Space Agency, along with technical and material contributions from Brazil and Italy.



A view from the US Space Shuttle Discovery shows US astronaut Tamara Jernigan (L) along with US astronaut Daniel Barry (R) Sunday as they work on the International Space Station's Zarya Module. The Discovery and her seven persons international crew are delivering hardware and supplies to the station during their ten-day mission. — AFP photo

Air strikes to continue: Fernandes

KARGIL, India, May 30: Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes said Sunday air strikes would continue against pro-Pakistan guerrillas in Kashmir, despite the loss of two Indian MIG planes and a helicopter gunship, reports AFP.

"There is no rethinking on air strikes. Operations will continue," Fernandes told reporters in Kargil during a tour of military operations near the Line of Control which divides Indian- and Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.

The region has witnessed heavy shelling, air strikes and ground fighting in recent weeks as the Indian Army attempts to flush out hundreds of guerrillas who crossed the border under cover of Pakistan artillery fire.

Long-range artillery shells from across the borders landed in this town on the Himalayan foothills as Fernandes spoke to the reporters.

India conducted four straight

days of air strikes against guerrilla positions in the hills last week.

The air force had been stung by the loss of its planes and helicopter, as well as surprised that the guerrillas were armed with surface-to-air missiles.

The defence minister paid tribute to Indian troops fighting in the inhospitable, high-altitude conditions.

"I was happy to see our men are fighting very bravely and accomplishing operations that were beyond our expectations," he said.

Four Indian troops killed in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, May 30: Four Indian security personnel were killed Sunday when their vehicle ran over a landmine in the Himalayan state of Kashmir, officials said, reports AFP.

Six others were injured in the explosion on a highway at Banihal 120 km south of Srinagar, Kashmir's summer capital.

defy imagination on snow-capped mountains that the foreign elements are holding," he said.

"They have been flushing them out and the situation will keep changing by the day as we push out those who surreptitiously moved into our territory."

Fernandes put the number of infiltrators at between 500 and 600, while stressing that all numbers were "speculative."

During a brief meeting with some local Karol ... Fernandes was asked ... ernment would earmark funds to help rebuild schools damaged by the shelling.

There is open resentment in Kargil and other affected townships and villages that the authorities have not done enough to help those who have seen their homes, schools and hospitals damaged or destroyed.

Prince William wants to join army:

Britain's Sunday Telegraph also quoted the late Princess Diana's brother as saying William — second in line to the throne of England — was capable of making up his own mind about drug abuse, referring to recent tabloid exposes of celebrities.

King Fahd back in hospital:

The custodian of the two holy sites, King Fahd bin Abdel Aziz, was admitted to the specialist King Faysal hospital in Riyadh in the early afternoon Saturday for a few medical tests, said the palace statement, carried by the official SPA news agency.

IRNA chief freed on bail:

An Iranian court on Saturday ordered the areas of Fereydoon Verdinejad, director of IRNA and publisher of several leading newspapers. He was later freed after posting 180 million rials (\$60,000) bail, the papers said. Details of the charges have not been made public but journalists told Reuters that the case stemmed from complaints over a cartoon in the Persian-language Iran newspaper which ridiculed the conservative-controlled state television.

Cholera claims 80 in Cambodia:

The death toll from a stubborn cholera outbreak in remote northeastern Cambodia has risen to more than 80, a senior official said yesterday but he added that the outbreak was being brought under control, Reuters reports from Phnom Penh.

"Now there is intervention and help from both local authorities and the ministry of health to stop the disease," provincial governor Kham Khleoun told Reuters by telephone. "It's decreasing now."

Schuster elected Slovakian President

BRATISLAVA, May 30: Rudolf Schuster, candidate of the ruling coalition, was elected president of Slovakia with 57.3 percent of the votes cast in Saturday's election, according to unofficial results given Sunday by private Markiza television, reports AFP.

Schuster, 65, a former communist apparatchik turned left-leaning pro-European politician, defeated former authoritarian premier Vladimir Meciar, underscoring Slovakia's turn towards European integration.

Slovakia has been without a president since March 2, 1998, when former head of state Michal Kovac, an arch rival of Meciar, ended his five-year term in office with no successor.

Ocalan trial set to start today

MUDANYA, Turkey, May 30: Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan will appear in a Turkish court on Monday to face treason charges amid uncertainty over a possible adjournment of the trial to allow for legal changes to the court's status, reports AFP.

The landmark case against Ocalan, leader of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), will be heard by a State Security Court, which has been the target of criticism both at home and abroad on account of its military judge sitting alongside two civilian ones.

Mahathir says he has no authority to free Anwar

KUALA LUMPUR, May 30: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad has said he does not have the power to free his former deputy Anwar Ibrahim who is serving a six-year jail sentence for corruption, reports AFP.

"Many of his (Anwar's) friends have asked me to release him but I don't have the authority to free him," Mahathir was quoted as saying in Japan by the official Bernama news agency late Saturday.

Anwar was sentenced to jail in April following his sacking and arrest in September last year after a fallout with Mahathir.

Once her apparent to the 73-year-old Mahathir, Anwar will go to court again on June 7 for his second trial, on a charge of sodomy.

Iraq urges Pakistan, India not to fall into "US trap"

BAGHDAD, May 30: Iraq's government, in a meeting chaired by President Saddam Hussein, urged nuclear powers India and Pakistan not to fall into a US trap with their Kashmir conflict, newspapers said Sunday, reports AFP.

"The United States is provoking fires around the world to punish any independent tendency, notably since the nuclear tests carried out by India and Pakistan in 1998, the cabinet said in its meeting late Saturday.

The government called for New Delhi and Islamabad to prevent "their two peoples falling into traps set by those who want to do them harm, by the United States to be precise."

Pakistan and India, whose Petroleum Minister V.K. Ramamurthy arrived in Baghdad on Friday, have been embroiled in three weeks of border clashes in disputed Kashmir.

'NATO to face hell if ground operation mounts'

BELGRADE, May 30: The Yugoslav commander in Kosovo said Saturday the army was ready to fulfill all "peace initiatives" of President Slobodan Milosevic, but warned that NATO soldiers would face "hell" if they mounted a ground offensive in the province, reports AFP.

"We are ready to fulfill all peace and other initiatives of our supreme commander (Milosevic) and state and military leadership," General Nebojsa Pavkovic, commander of the third army, said in an interview quoted by Serbian state television. In Belgrade Friday, Milosevic's office issued a statement saying Yugoslavia accepted the general principles for a peace settlement proposed by the G-8 countries and agreed that the UN Security Council should adopt a resolution in line with the United Nations Charter.

The announcement came after eight hours of talks between Milosevic and Russian envoy Viktor Chernomyrdin.

The Group of Eight (G-8) comprises the Group of Seven (G7) most industrialised countries — Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States — plus Russia.

The G-8 conditions were that Milosevic must end repression in Kosovo, pull all army, police and paramilitary forces out of the province, accept deployment of an international mili-

tary force, allow refugees to return home and begin negotiations on enhanced autonomy for Kosovo.

Milosevic and Chernomyrdin announced in a statement late Friday that Belgrade would accept the G-8 principles for an end to the Kosovo conflict. It was the first time Belgrade has set no pre-conditions to accepting the deal.

However, Pavkovic warned that if NATO decided in favour of a ground invasion of Kosovo, its soldiers "will face hell with every step they take."

NATO's "technical advantage will melt in the first days of invasion," Pavkovic said in an interview given to the weekly Vojvka and quoted by television. "We will soon find each other face to face on the ground which we have prepared well for the defence," Pavkovic added.

He said that the 3rd army, in charge of Kosovo, "has fulfilled all tasks given by the Supreme Command. While using different tactical moves and deeds, we managed to preserve people and equipment."

"We also managed to keep a favourable operative disposition of units for conducting ground fighting," Pavkovic said.

Meanwhile, a secret meeting between the five senior NATO defence ministers discussed plans for a 150,000-strong in-

vasion force for Kosovo, including 50,000 British troops, two London newspapers reported today.

US Defence Secretary William Cohen flew to Bonn for the unpublicised meeting, also attended by British Defence Secretary George Robertson and ministers from France, Germany and Italy, said The Sunday Telegraph and the Observer.

Britain's Ministry of Defence confirmed the meeting had taken place Thursday, on the margins of a gathering of European defence ministers, but denied that any discussion had taken place about a 150,000-strong invasion force.

A ministry spokesman said that the only discussions involving ground forces were in relation to the proposed international peacekeeping force of 25,000 to up to 48,000 agreed last week by NATO.

"There was certainly no discussion of figures in relation to options other than that already agreed by NATO," the spokesman said.

However, The Sunday Telegraph quoted senior ministry of defence officials as saying that Britain was now working on contingency plans for sending up to 50,000 British personnel to the Balkans.

According to the newspaper, a spokesman for Robertson told it that the defence ministers had spoken about "other options" than an international peacekeeping force.

They decided to intensify the air war but also looked at options for a ground invasion, said The Sunday Telegraph.

The ministers were told that General Wesley Clark, NATO's commander in Europe, estimated that a total force of 150,000 would be required to eject the Serbs from Kosovo if Belgrade refused to accept NATO's terms by late summer, it added.

Earlier AP says: NATO warplanes kept up their attacks on Yugoslavia early Sunday as key European leaders urged a review to see whether Slobodan Milosevic was budging toward a peace deal.

State-run and independent Serbian media reported more civilian casualties, including six deaths Saturday and continuing attacks early Sunday.

French Prime Minister Jacques Chirac and German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder said the seven leading industrialised countries and Russia, known as the Group of Eight, should meet again to assess whether Russian envoy Viktor Chernomyrdin had made any progress toward a settlement in his latest meetings with Milosevic.

France and Germany consider it necessary to examine whether the content of this

China hits out at US resolution on Tiananmen

BEIJING, May 30: China on Sunday slammed a critical resolution by the US Congress before the 10th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre of pro-democracy protesters, saying it incited "a new anti-China wave" and attempted to undermine national stability, reports AFP.

Beijing's "immediate, correct, and resolute measures" to quell the "disturbance" in 1989 maintained social stability and ensured the reform, opening-up and modernisation of the country, said an article by an unnamed official of the National People's Congress Foreign Affairs Committee.

The full text was carried by the official Xinhua news agency.

"The US House of Representatives and Senate adopted anti-China resolutions on May 25 and 27 respectively with the excuse of the so-called '10th anniversary of June 4 incident'," said the official.

The article said the resolution wantonly distorted facts, attacked China's human rights conditions, incited a new anti-China wave and attempted to undermine China's stability, and obstructed the development of Sino-US relations.

"It is well known that some people with ulterior motives in and out of China made that political disturbance in Beijing at the turn of spring to summer in 1989, in an attempt to over-

throw China's legitimate government and subvert the socialist People's Republic of China."

"The experience of the past 10 years fully proves that if there were no such correct decisions made by the Chinese government at that time, there would be no political stability and today's remarkable economic and social progress and generally-recognized achievements in China," the commentary added.

Anti-Chinese forces in the US and some other Western countries "played an inglorious role in that disturbance" by using their media to "hoodwink the international community," it said. The protesters were given aid and shelter and were helped to flee the country.

"Now, the US Congress brazenly and peremptorily interfered in China's internal affairs in its anti-China resolution, flagrantly demanding that the Chinese government set up a certain 'investigation committee' and 're-evaluate' the incident," it said.

The attempt to reverse the official conclusion -- that the protests were a "counter-revolutionary rebellion" -- is "extremely domineering" and doomed to failure, the official said.

"The humanitarian disaster in Yugoslavia caused by US-led NATO bombing highlighted the hypocrisy of the US human-