

Stampede in Belarus beer festival kills 54

MINSK, Belarus, May 31: A crowd attending a beer festival and rock concert stampeded in an underground passageway in the Belarusian capital, leaving 54 people dead and more than 100 injured, an official said Monday, reports AP.

The tragedy occurred Sunday night at a festival sponsored by a local beer company marking the two-year anniversary of the Mir radio station. The crush occurred in a pedestrian tunnel near the Nemiga metro station close to the center of the city.

Belarusian Interior Minister Yuri Sivakov said about 2,500 people — many of whom had been drinking — left the festival near the city Sports Palace and dashed into the underpass when heavy rain mixed with hail began to fall.

"The weather worsened sharply... and the crowd, some of whom were under the influence of alcohol, rushed to find cover," Sivakov told state television.

Sivakov said several women, wearing high heels, tripped on the slippery cement floor of the underpass and were trampled by the oncoming crowd. People still outside didn't know what had happened in the passageway and kept pushing forward to get out of the rain, crushing still more.

He said many people suffocated in the push, while several

others died from being stepped on by girls wearing sharp high-heels.

Cezary Golinski, a Polish journalist who lived nearby, said he was on his balcony when he heard screams coming from the underpass. He ran down to the entrance, where police had cordoned off the area and ambulances were taking injured people to the hospital.

According to Sivakov, 42 women — mostly teen-age girls — were killed. Two police officers also died trying to control the rush.

"To have taken measures to prevent this situation would have been practically impossible," he said.

Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko said Monday, "I have no explanations for what has happened. It simply can't be explained." He said none of those in the crowd was drunk.

Paramedics removed the dead and injured, carried out 12 huge sacks of clothing lost in the crush replaced broken glass windows and doors, and washed out the underpass.

"Many young people believe that police did not act properly, and don't want to say anything for fear of repressions," said one woman who identified herself only as Zoya.

New Nepali PM names 16-member Cabinet

KATMANDU, May 31: Nepal's new Prime Minister, Krishna Prasad Bhattarai, named a 16-member Cabinet Monday, state-run radio said, reports AP.

King Birendra, the monarch, formed the new council of ministers on recommendation of the prime minister. Radio Nepal quoted an announcement by the palace.

Bhattarai became prime minister last week after his Nepali Congress Party won a majority in the elections, held earlier this month, winning 110 of the 205 seats in the Lower House of Parliament.

Bhattarai and his ministers will take the oath of office later in the day.

Bhattarai has kept the important ministries of home and foreign affairs for himself while his loyal supporter, Yog Prasad Upadhyaya, has been appointed education minister. Mahesh Acharya will be the finance minister. Govindraj Joshi will look after water resources and Purna Bahadur Khadka will be information and communications minister.

The party picked up many important seats from its rival, the United Marxist-Leninist Communist Party of Nepal, breaking into some of the traditional communist strongholds in the east and west.

Opposition seeks Fernandes's resignation

NEW DELHI, May 31: An Indian opposition leader Monday demanded Defence Minister George Fernandes' resignation, blaming him for the infiltration of Islamic guerrillas into Kashmir, reports AP.

Jayalalitha Jayaram said her long-standing argument that Fernandes "is unfit to head the Defence Ministry stands vindicated."

"The minister has failed to perform his duty by letting the infiltration go on for months without any preventive action," she said in the southern city of Madras.

Jayalalitha said she had warned the government of a possible influx of heavily-armed Muslim guerrillas into the Indian state of Kashmir in October 1998 when she was a member of India's coalition government.

India has accused Pakistan of aiding the infiltration of guerrillas into Kashmir, where the two countries are again at loggerheads.

"It will be a danger to the country to allow Fernandes to continue as defence minister," she said.

Fernandes has come under all-round attack for failure to check the infiltration by the guerrillas who have occupied strategic hills along the Kashmir border, sparking tensions with Pakistan.

He also been flayed for absolving Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of responsibility for the infiltration.

Jayalalitha, an influential politician in southern India, had also denounced Fernandes when he sacked the Indian naval chief in December.

Clinton backs Nigeria's new president

WASHINGTON, May 31: A vacationing President Bill Clinton got out of bed in the predawn hours to watch the inauguration of Nigeria's President Olusegun Obasanjo and said later he was "really pulling" for the newly elected leader, reports Reuters.

Clinton, returning from a five-day break in Florida, told reporters aboard Air Force One on Sunday that he had gotten up at 4:30 am EDT (0830 GMT) to watch the swearing-in.

He said he thought Obasanjo had given "a great speech" and that the new president would be able to reform Nigerian politics, improve its economy and root out corruption.

"It's so important that they make it," Clinton said. "I'm really pulling for him. I hope... I hope he can do it."

Obasanjo was sworn in on Saturday, ending 15 years of military rule in Africa's most populous country.

He takes office as Nigeria faces its worst economic crisis since independence from Britain in 1960.

India moves more troops to Kashmir

NEW DELHI, May 31: India has moved more troops to bolster its ground-and-air offensive on its side of Kashmir's ceasefire line to flush out what it calls Pakistan-backed intruders, army officials said today.

Defence officials in Jammu, winter capital of the disputed Jammu and Kashmir province, told Reuters Indian air strikes resumed at 5:30 am (midnight GMT) today in the mountainous Himalayan territory.

They said the raids were preceded by night-time reconnaissance missions, adding there had been fresh shelling by Pakistan across the military control line in the Batalik, Dahanu and Davar sectors of Kashmir.

India's strafe-and-seize attacks to flush out what it says are infiltrators mixed with Pakistani army regulars could take a long time to complete officials say.

But they have reported substantial success on the ground during the six-day-old campaign, including the seizure of key ridges on the snow-capped mountains uninhabited until the incursion.

The Hindustan Times newspaper reported India used French-made Mirage 2000 fighters on Sunday in the "Operation Vijay (Victory)" in the campaign around the ridges of

Kargil, Batalik and Drass enclaves.

"Additional troops are being sent, there is no doubt," an army spokesman told Reuters by telephone in New Delhi.

India reacted coolly on Sunday to an offer by Pakistan to send Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz for talks in New Delhi, saying the only purpose of the meeting could be for Islamabad to take back the intrusion India accuses it of masterminding.

"We are still awaiting confirmation and if the confirmation comes the meeting will take place within this week," Aziz told Reuters Television in Islamabad today.

"Let there be no mistake — this was an armed incursion by Pakistan into Indian territory," Brijesh Mishra, National Security Adviser to Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, told Reuters in an interview on Sunday.

"We are always willing to welcome dialogue, but what is the purpose of dialogue? If the purpose is to agree that Pakistan is entirely responsible for this situation and if Pakistan says 'let us take back our men' then that is good."

India has said it has killed dozens of intruders, among whom it says are Afghan mercenaries.

New Delhi also accuses Pakistan of supplying Stinger

missiles to the militants and cites it as proof of Islamabad's backing.

Islamabad denies Indian charges of aiding Kashmiri guerrillas in the two-thirds of the territory ruled by India. The rest is under Pakistani control.

The two nations have fought two wars over the region since their independence from Britain in 1947.

Vajpayee on Sunday stonewalled efforts by United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan to send a special envoy, saying such a representative should be sent to Islamabad to seek the withdrawal of the Kashmir intruders.

Last week, a Pakistani missile brought down an Indian Mig Fighter jet, killing the pilot, while four Indian airmen died after a stinger missile hit their Mi-17 helicopter gunship.

Pakistan says the jet violated its airspace but India denies this.

India on Sunday reported the death of an army major M Saravanan in a hand-to-hand combat with Kashmir intruders after killing four of them.

The situation as of now is firmly under the control of the security forces," Major-General J J Singh, additional director-general of India's military operations, told reporters on Sunday.

Colombian rebels release 79 hostages

BOGOTA, May 30: Some 100 worshippers were abducted Sunday when a group of heavily armed leftist rebels burst into a church in a wealthy Cali neighbourhood during Sunday mass, police and witnesses said, reports AP.

Two guerrillas of the National Liberation Army and one bodyguard were killed in a shoot-out as rebels forced their captives aboard trucks and sped away from the exclusive "El Jardin" neighbourhood, home to some of the city's most affluent residents.

"It all happened in a few seconds," said one worshipper who escaped the guerrillas, who wore ELN armbands.

Later the ELN rebels released 79 of the hostages, an army spokesman said.

Among those liberated, a small group of men and women were freed after the truck they were crammed into broke down, and the rebel driving the vehicle left them near a school, one of the hostages — who did not want to be named — said.

The rest were found by soldiers in the foothills of the Andes and are being brought to Cali, some 500 km southwest of Bogota, said Colonel Miguel Naranjo.

All of the freed hostages appeared to be healthy, while still in shock.

Numbered among the hostages was the priest of the church, according to Cali Mayor Ricardo Cobo, as well as women, children and elderly people. It was not immediately known if they were among those freed.



Margarita Iragorri hugs her children Daniel and Marcela after being freed Sunday by guerrillas from the National Liberation Army (ELN) in Cali, Colombia. Some 50 ELN guerrillas stormed a church and took 100 hostages, police and witnesses said, and as they tried to put them on trucks a shootout occurred, killing three, two guerrillas and one guard. The Colombian Army reported later that 79 of the hostages had been released outside the city.

— AFP photo

Discovery astronauts enter ISS

HOUSTON, Texas, May 31: Discovery shuttle astronauts entered the International Space Station (ISS) to deliver some two tonnes of equipment for the first crew to live aboard the orbital complex next spring. NASA's control center here said.

Russian cosmonaut Valery Tokarev and his American colleague Tamara Jernigan opened the last hatch separating the two spacecraft at 0114 GMT Monday.

Discovery docked with ISS late Friday some 400 km above the Earth in the first link-up between a shuttle and the fledgling space station.

Unity, the astronauts were to pass through three doors before stepping into the Russian part of the station, the Zarya module.

"Welcome aboard... make yourself at home," ISS mission controllers told the astronauts as they ventured into the station.

No one had set foot inside the two modules of the International Space Station since they

were assembled by the Endeavour shuttle crew in December 1998.

Due to logistical constraints, the first components of the fledgling state station were placed in orbit stripped of much of the equipment and comfort features needed to make ISS livable.

Over the next four days, the Discovery astronauts are to install some 750 items into the space station, including computers, clothes, water and spare parts, to prepare ISS for its first occupants.

US commander William Shepherd and his Russian colleagues Yuri Gidzenko and Sergei Krikalev are due to move in next spring.

The Discovery crew is also tasked with repairing some of the technical glitches that have surfaced over the first six months of the station's existence.

Tokarev and Canadian astronaut Julie Payette are to change the defective battery chargers of the Zarya module and to install noise reduction devices aboard.

Mob attacks ruling party campaign in Aceh

JAKARTA, May 31: A mob stoned officials of Indonesia's ruling Golkar party and torched one of their cars as they were campaigning for the June 7 elections in the troubled province of Aceh, a report said Monday, reports AP.

Some members of the audience at a Golkar rally threw stones at officials on the stage including deputy chairman Abdul Gafur during a tour in the Jeura area of West Aceh Saturday, the Kompas daily said.

Gafur and other campaigners managed to escape in a backup car after the van parked behind the stage was burned by the angry mob, Kompas said.

Separate press reports quoted an independent poll watchdog as saying that soldiers tortured six of its student volunteers in West Aceh after an ambush in the region Saturday that left nine soldiers and policemen dead.

SLA to withdraw from part of S Lebanon

MARJAYOUN, Lebanon, May 31: Antoine Lahad, commander of the South Lebanon Army (SLA), announced here Monday that his Israeli-backed militia would withdraw from the Jezzine region of southern Lebanon during the first two weeks of June, reports AP.

In a statement released ahead of press conference here, Lahad said that the "SLA command has decided to withdraw from the endangered Jezzine region during the first 15 days of June."

He called on the Lebanese authorities to ensure the security of residents of the mainly-Christian enclave.

Lahad, a retired Lebanese army general who has been sentenced to death by Beirut for "collaboration" with Israel, said in the statement that the "slow death" of Jezzine "could no longer be tolerated."

"It is for this reason that the SLA has decided to unilaterally withdraw from the Jezzine region," which has seen its population fall over the years to some 5,000 from 30,000 previously, he said.

"Our decision to fall back (into the Israeli-occupied south Lebanon 'security zone') places the Lebanese state before the hour of truth," he said, calling for the "security and dignity of residents" to be respected.

Israeli newspapers reported Monday that the SLA had already withdrawn from most of its outposts in Jezzine, a mountainous salient that juts

north from the Israeli-occupied zone, and was destroying the final fortifications in the region before the final pullback.

The last SLA troops were due to leave the enclave Monday evening, the newspapers said.

The 3,000-man SLA took control of Jezzine in 1985 when Israeli forces that had invaded Lebanon in 1982 withdrew to the 15-kilometer (eight-mile) wide zone they still occupy.

The Israeli army says the SLA's decision to quit the zone was "autonomous" and should not be seen as a signal that Israel is preparing to withdraw from south Lebanon altogether.

But Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak has already pledged to pull Israeli troops out of Lebanon within a year.

Close Barak aides have said the SLA pullback from Jezzine would provide a key test of the Lebanese government's willingness to prevent evacuated areas from being used as staging areas for attacks on Israeli interests by the Islamic guerrilla movement Hezbollah.

Over the weekend, Lebanese leaders reassured residents of the mainly-Christian Jezzine enclave that they would not be the target of retribution for their links to the SLA.

The officials also said Lebanon's army would take control of Jezzine, implying that Hezbollah would not be permitted to use the area to launch attacks on the Israeli-occupied area to the south.

Court rejects adjournment of Ocalan's trial

IMRALI, Turkey, May 31: A Turkish State Security Court trying Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan on Monday rejected a request by defence attorneys to adjourn the trial, the Anatolia news agency reported, reports AP.

The defence team had earlier said it would ask for an adjournment to gain time to prepare his case as well as to allow parliament time to pass a legal reform to change the status of State Security Courts.

Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit had announced last week that it was his government's priority to submit a draft bill to replace the military judges in these courts with a civilian one.

Ocalan went on trial Monday on the prison island of Imrali.

The leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is charged with separatism, treason and the murder of thousands of Turkish civilians in terror attacks. He faces the death penalty if found guilty.

Meanwhile, Kurdish rebel

leader Abdullah Ocalan declared Monday he was willing to work for peace with the Turkish state, in remarks he made at the start of his trial for treason on the Turkish prison island of Imrali.

"I want to work for peace and brotherhood, to achieve this goal in the Turkish Republic," Ocalan said in his opening remarks, made from his bullet-proof glass cage in the courtroom.

"That is why I want to live," the leader of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) added.

"I will try to stop the bloodshed," Ocalan said. "I promise that I will work for this. I want to be of service to the state."

The PKK leader said he shared the pain of the families of Turkish soldiers slain by the PKK, present in the courtroom as co-plaintiffs, and apologized to them.

He also accused Greece, Russia and Italy of "violating international law" and added that he had not been submitted to any pressure after his capture in mid-February.

Milosevic inching closer to peace

BELGRADE, May 31: Even as Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic appeared to be edging toward accepting a peace deal, NATO continued its heavy bombing campaign, with two attacks reportedly killing at least 12 civilians, reports AP.

Allied missiles slammed into a bridge crowded with market-goers in central Serbia killing at least 11 people and sending several cars plunging into the Morava River Sunday, the state-run Tanjug news agency reported.

Divers searched for victims, Tanjug said, adding that the attack wounded 40 people, including five in critical condition.

The destroyed, metal structure fell into the river. A shoe lay nearby. Glass windows of neighboring riverside cottages were smashed.

NATO said four aircraft attacked the bridge about 1 pm, saying the span was a legitimate and designated target.

NATO said it was unable to confirm reports of casualties.

The killing civilians in the

airstrikes, now in their third month, and insists all such casualties are unintentional.

In a separate strike farther south in Kosovo, NATO missiles hit near a convoy of Western journalists Sunday, killing a driver and wounding three people including two reporters, the Serb-run Media Centre in Pristina said.

The injured included a Times of London reporter identified as Eve-Ann Prentice. Also wounded was an unidentified reporter from the Italian Corriere della Sera newspaper and a French philosopher, Daniel Schiffer, who has been advocating the Serbian cause since the Bosnian war.

Sunday's deaths brought the weekend civilian death toll from NATO air strikes to 20, according to state Serbian media.

In Belgrade, a huge cloud of smoke could be seen rising south of the city after a strong explosion Sunday. The city centre said NATO had targeted the Obrenovac area, 20 km southwest of the capital, where there is a major power

plant.

Early Monday, NATO jets destroyed a power grid facility in Nis. Local sources told private Studio B television at least two loud explosions were heard before the third-largest Yugoslav city was plunged into darkness.

Five heavy explosions rocked the Belgrade district of Zvezdara early Monday. Studio BTV said army barracks and a neighbouring school were hit.

Also hit overnight were a bridge in Vladicin Han, southern Serbia, and unspecified targets in Aleksinac, about 200 km southeast of Belgrade.

Police in Belgrade arrested six Kosovo Albanians, mostly Belgrade University students, on charges of preparing "terrorist activities," Tanjug reported Monday. It said the six were linked to the rebel Kosovo Liberation Army.

Until now, thousands of ethnic Albanians have lived in Belgrade without any reports of arrests or harassment.

NATO comments on Sunday centered on attempts to force Milosevic to agree to a Kosovo

peace plan acceptable to the alliance.

NATO wants Yugoslavia to withdraw its troops from Kosovo and let 840,000 ethnic Albanian refugees who have fled or been expelled from the province to return under the protection of an international peacekeeping force.

NATO Spokesman Jamie Shea said Sunday that Milosevic was slowly moving away "from the position... of almost total defiance of the international community," but was still far from accepting "Withdrawal reservation, without negotiation," NATO conditions for ending the air campaign.

Russian and Yugoslav media reporting on Milosevic's meeting Friday with Russian envoy Viktor Chernomyrdin said Milosevic had accepted in principle to the Kosovo peace plan agreed on by the G-8 nation — the world's seven major industrialised democracies, plus Russia.

But the reports indicated Milosevic continues to oppose NATO having a leading role in a peacekeeping force — some-

thing the alliance insists on.

In Belgrade, Serbian Information Minister Aleksandar Vucic said an international presence had never been opposed, but "What cannot be accepted — never — is the occupation of our territory."

Chernomyrdin met in Moscow on Sunday with Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin and other top government officials to map out a strategy on resolving the Kosovo crisis.

Chernomyrdin said after the talks that Yugoslavia's "Sovereignty and territorial integrity" remained inviolable, meaning Russia still opposes a well-armed foreign force in Kosovo with a strong NATO component.

Kosovo is a southern province of Serbia, the dominant republic in Yugoslavia. Although Serbs consider it the cradle of their national identity, 90 per cent of its prewar population of 2 million was ethnic Albanian. Belgrade insists that its military action in Kosovo is necessary to quell a terrorist-led secessionist drive.

BRIEFLY



Two Muslim girls walk on the world's longest pedestrian suspension bridge measuring 428 metres long Monday at Sunway Lagoon Theme Park in Kuala Lumpur. The theme park is a favourite hang out place among youths who are currently having their school holidays. — AFP photo

New Cabinet appointed in Bahrain:

Bahrain's Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa yesterday appointed a new Cabinet, his first since he took over after the death of his father in March. Reuters reports from Manama.

An Emiri decree, carried by the official Gulf News Agency (GNA), named 17 ministers with most key portfolios retained by ministers from the outgoing Cabinet.

Suharto's daughter questioned:

The eldest daughter of ex-President Suharto was questioned Monday by the state prosecutor in connection with allegations that the former first family has amassed a fortune abroad, AP reports from Jakarta.

Siti Hardiyanti Rukmana, who was social minister in Suharto's final Cabinet and is better known as Tutut, arrived at the attorney general's office accompanied by lawyer Amir Syamsuddin and several bodyguards. She also was questioned earlier this year in her capacity as official of a charity foundation headed by Suharto.

UN soldier killed in Lebanon:

An Irish soldier in the UN peacekeeping force in south Lebanon was killed yesterday when his outpost was hit by shell fire, a UN spokesman said, Reuters reports from Jerusalem.

"An Irish soldier was killed and another Irish soldier was seriously wounded when shells hit their position at Brasheet," UN Spokesman Timur Goksel said. He said it was unclear who launched the attack.

Yeltsin may meet Stepashin:

President Boris Yeltsin arrived in his Kremlin office yesterday and Russian news agencies said he planned to meet Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin amid a government crisis. Reuters reports from Moscow.



Ethnic Albanian men from Kosovo cross the border checkpoint of Morina Sunday. Some 150 Kosovo men arrived at this Albanian border town exhausted and emaciated, some with bloodied faces, after being released from a Yugoslav jail. — AFP photo