

India launches massive air strikes in Kashmir

NEW DELHI, June 1: India today launched massive air strikes against Muslim guerrillas in Kashmir and accused Pakistan of intensifying artillery fire along their disputed border, as the two rivals argued over dates for peace talks, reports AFP.

Military sources in New Delhi also reported an overnight assault by Pakistan-backed Muslim guerrillas to breach Indian defences in one of the four main conflict zones of northern Kashmir.

Air force sources said waves of MiG-21, MiG-23 and MiG-27 aircraft conducted at least six sorties in the battle zone of Kargil in northern Kashmir against entrenched guerrillas.

The raids which began at 7:00 am (0130 GMT) were spearheaded exclusively by fighter jets, a source said, adding that "Helicopter gunships played no role in the attacks."

Mirage 2000 jets also provided the Kashmir skies, jamming Pakistani missile

radars across the border of the Himalayan heights.

The air force deployed its Mirage 2000s after two of its MiG jets and a helicopter gunship were shot down during combat last week.

An Indian army spokesman said Pakistani troops have stepped up shelling along the line of control where clashes have been going on since May 9 following the infiltration of Islamic guerrillas into Indian territory.

He said the Pakistani offensive had spread from the remote northern mountain areas of Kargil and Drass to southern Kashmir.

"They are now not only concentrating there but are attacking our positions in Poonch and Rajouri in the south of (Indian-administered) Kashmir," he said.

He said the shellings, which came after Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee agreed to talks with Pakistan Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz to

defuse the Kashmir situation, would not be successful.

The Pakistanis are under the impression that we have moved away from border areas in Kashmir to Kargil and Drass," the spokesman said. "That is not correct."

"We have the men and we have the arms."

Pakistan is moving artillery and heavy weaponry in almost the whole of the Line of Control (LoC) but we are prepared," he said of the deployment of reserve troops in the frontiers of the disputed state.

"We are making our presence clear on the ground, at the LoC, in the air and on our maritime boundaries," a senior defence ministry official said.

The fighting in the Kargil region of northern Kashmir is centred at a dozen posts in the mountainous sectors of Drass, Batalik and Mushko Valley.

Military sources said contingents of Muslim guerrillas made a daring raid overnight to cross a fast-flowing stream in

Batalik to escape heavy shelling and to breach Indian defences.

Reuters reports from Islamabad: At least 50,000 people have fled their homes on the Pakistan side of Kashmir amid stepped-up Indian attacks across the ceasefire line, a Pakistani cabinet minister said yesterday.

Kashmir Affairs Minister Majed Malik said Indian mortar and machine-gun fire had increased all along the dividing Line of Control.

"All along the line, I think there would be 50,000 to 60,000 people who have been affected so far. They have moved backwards and they are in different areas and different groups," Malik said.

Indian troops, backed by jets, launched a seventh day of attacks today against what it says are Pakistan-backed infiltrators in northern Kashmir, with an aim to removing threats to a strategic supply highway.

Supporters of the United Democratic Movement (UDM) holds an UDM poster on May 29 near Umtata stadium where UDM leader Bantu Holomisa held his last rally before South Africa's second all-race elections today.

— AFP photo

Sharif rejects India's accusation

ISLAMABAD, June 1: Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday rejected India's accusation that Islamabad was pushing in rebels into Kashmir, saying people fighting Indian army in the valley are neither militants nor infiltrators, but are freedom fighters, reports PTI.

The people in the valley are neither militants nor infiltrators. They are just freedom fighters struggling for the liberation of their motherland, Sharif said and urged India to find a peaceful solution to issue as per the Lahore declaration he signed with Indian counterpart Atal Bihari Vajpayee in February.

Speaking at a public function in Lahore, Sharif asked India to work out a settlement of the Kashmir issue in accordance with the wishes of the people of Kashmir as they (the people) have an inalienable right to self-determination as set out by the 50-year-old UN security council resolution, the official APP news agency reported.

He also said that Kashmir issue had to be solved ultimately as it is a prerequisite for durable peace in the region.

Sharif had met Vajpayee in Lahore in February and both had agreed to intensify their efforts to resolve all bilateral disputes including Kashmir.

Sharif's comments off the militaries now waging a war against the Indian troops in the Kargil and Drass sectors of Line of Control (LOC) come even as India agreed to hold talks with Pakistan to defuse tension.

Nigeria's new leader cancels contracts under military regime

ABUJA (Nigeria), June 1: Two days after his inauguration speech against corruption, Nigeria's new civilian President Olusegun Obasanjo today suspended all contracts penned since the beginning of the year by the former military regime, reports AP.

Obasanjo's spokesman Doyin Okupe said in a statement that all senior government and diplomatic postings made since January 1 had also been suspended pending a government review.

The suspended deals included crude oil export contracts and all state approval for petroleum exploration. No other details of the move were available.

Nigeria, the world's sixth largest oil exporter, has been hobbled by years of military corruption that have made a select few fabulously wealthy while reducing Africa's most populous country to one of the world's poorest states.

Critics have accused the country's latest military leader, Gen. Abdulsalam Abubakar, of making improper economic deals in the final months prior to his weekend handover of power to Obasanjo.

Local newspapers and radio stations have also estimated that about 2.6 billion dollars has been withdrawn from Nigeria's foreign reserves during its yearlong democratic transition.

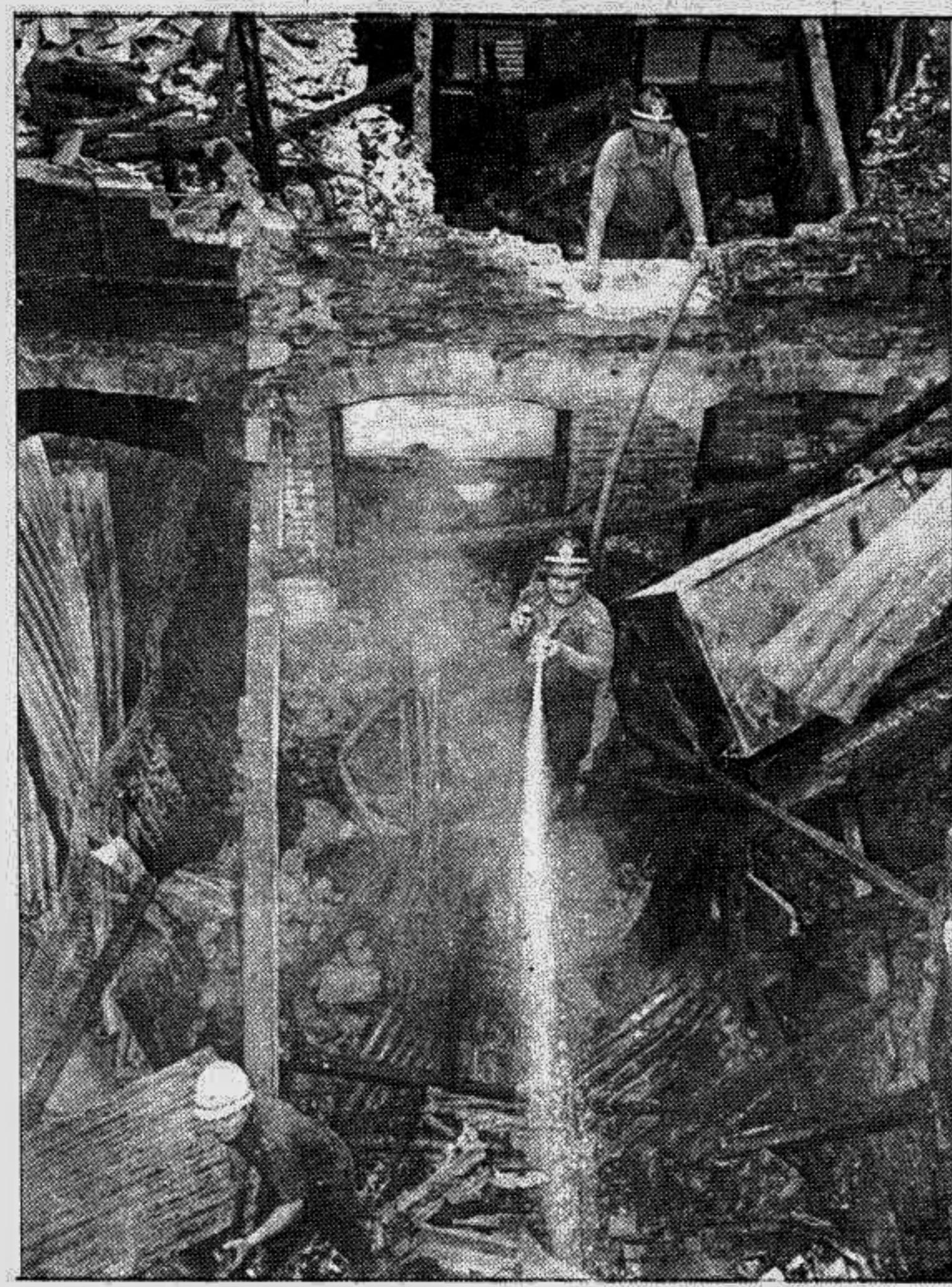
Colombian rebels still holding 60 churchgoers

CALI, Colombia, June 1: Troops searching for Marxist rebels holding about 60 of more than 140 people abducted from a church in Colombia seemed to come up empty-handed on Monday, a day after a crime the Vatican called an unprecedented act of "barbarity," reports Reuters.

Security sources said a combined force of about 3,000 soldiers and members of elite police counterinsurgency units combed the rugged Andes mountains just southwest of Cali, where National Liberation Army (ELN) rebels fled with their hostages.

But the search produced no fresh leads as to the exact whereabouts of the guerrillas and their captives, the sources said.

The ELN, Colombia's second-largest guerrilla army, is the same group that abducted all 41 passengers and crew aboard a commercial airliner hijacked over northeast Colombia last month.



Firefighters douse the remains of a building in the thickly populated Lal Quan business district of old Delhi on Monday.

— AFP photo

Fire kills 34 in Delhi

NEW DELHI, June 1: The death toll in a major fire in New Delhi rose to 34 Tuesday and several of the nearly 100 people injured may succumb to burn injuries, hospital sources said, reports AFP.

A doctor at a state-run city hospital told AFP that 19 more people, including children, had died overnight Monday of burn injuries.

He said several others were in critical condition.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Tuesday visited the injured at the hospital.

On Monday afternoon, a devastating fire swept through a row of shops in a densely populated business quarter after a large quantity of chemicals stored in a two-storey building exploded.

Backed by strong winds, the fire spread rapidly and destroyed more than a dozen shops. About 30 fire tenders took almost 90 minutes to bring the blaze under control.

Witnesses said the fire quickly spread to nearby shops and houses.

"I saw fireballs whizzing past my window. When I looked

Tamil rebels kill 11 civilians in Lanka

COLOMBO, June 1: Tamil Tiger rebels attacked a van carrying civilians in northeastern Sri Lanka, killing 11 people and wounding seven others, military officials said today, reports Reuters.

They said the rebels set off a bomb buried in a road, then opened fire on the van with automatic weapons in the attack late on Monday near Padavaya town, 240 km northeast of the capital Colombo.

Among the dead were six men and five women, the officials said, adding that soldiers took the wounded to a nearby hospital.

Separately, three rebels were also killed by government troops in two attacks in northern Jaffna district on Monday, the defence ministry said today.

Families of Tiananmen victims sue government

BEIJING, June 1: More than 100 families who lost relatives in the crackdown on Tiananmen Square 10 years ago are suing the Chinese government, the mother of a teenage boy who was killed said Tuesday, reports AFP.

"One hundred and five relatives of the victims have filed a legal suit against the state leaders of 1989," Ding Zili, whose 17-year-old son was killed by troops on June 4, 1989, told AFP.

Ding, who is under constant police surveillance and has been barred from leaving her home for more than one month, refused to give further details on the appeal. She referred questions to the US-based Human Rights in China.

Meanwhile, dissidents across China began quiet commemorations to mark the 10th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre despite heightened police surveillance.

The battle by victims' relatives, a movement spearheaded by Ding, has until now focused on petitions demanding a re-examination of the official verdict on the massacre and for compensation for families.

The central government announced just days after the 1989 repression that the six weeks of pro-democracy protests had been a "counter-revolutionary rebellion".

Amongst those signing the suit was Wei Jie, whose husband Yang Minghu was killed during the night of June 3-4.

"You are very strong, she must now work to bring up her son who was only five years old when his father died," Ding said, but declined to provide the names of other plaintiffs.

"They would be subjected to even more pressure than I am," she said.

More troops deployed in Aceh

LHOKSEUMAWE, Indonesia, June 1: An extra 1,310 troops and police have been dispatched to Aceh province, where violence has increased in recent weeks by separatist rebels opposed to next Monday's national election, officials said Tuesday, reports AP.

All security personnel were put on full alert in Indonesia's northwesternmost province after a group of unidentified gunmen attacked the main police station Monday night in the northern Aceh town of Lhokseumawe, about 1,600 kilometers (1,000 miles) northwest of Jakarta.

Gunsights were heard over a period of about an hour Monday evening, and soldiers blocked streets in the area around the station, witnesses said.

"They fired from on top of shops across from the station," a resident said in a telephone interview Monday in condition of anonymity. He added that police had asked people to evacuate the area.

Most of the extra troops and police have been deployed in the western and northern parts of the province, where clashes have been intensifying.

Local residents said Tuesday that many people were fleeing Lhokseumawe to avoid possible further fighting between security forces and armed assailants.

12 boat people arrive in Australia

A boatload of about 12 suspected illegal immigrants has come ashore at Cape Leveque in Western Australia's far north, a report said on Tuesday. AFP reports from Perth.

Customs and coast watch officials were heading to the area where the vessel was seen arriving early in the day, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation report said. A tourist who reported it to local authorities, spotted the boat.

Suharto's eldest son questioned

Ex-President Suharto's eldest son followed two other siblings to the attorney general's office Tuesday to be questioned extensively about reports that the former first family amassed a fortune abroad, AP reports from Jakarta.

"They would be subjected to even more pressure than I am," she said.

New cabinet in Lithuania

Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus on Tuesday approved the new 14-member cabinet of Prime Minister Rolandas Pakas, submitting the list and government programme to parliament for approval. Reuters reports from Vilnius.

Significant appointments include Jonas Liojanas as finance minister, while the head of the state-backed bad loans unit, Eugenijus Melkis, will be economy minister. As expected, seven posts, including defence and foreign affairs, were unchanged, ensuring European Union and NATO membership remain the former Soviet republic's top foreign policy goals.

Kosovo peace hopes rise

BRUSSELS, June 1: NATO's pound of Yugoslavia continued unabated Tuesday amid rising hopes that a deal to end the war could be in sight after 10 weeks of bombing, reports AFP.

After another night of intense air strikes, during which Serb media reported at least 10 civilians had been killed, Yugoslavia said it had officially told Germany it was ready to accept the principles for a peace deal outlined by the group of seven leading economies and Russia.

NATO expressed cautious optimism that the move was a sign Belgrade was moving towards accepting its conditions for calling a halt to the bombing.

The combined military and diplomatic squeeze on the Milosevic regime is tightening, chief spokesman Jamie Shea said.

"Anything that implies Belgrade is moving closer to the position of the international community is clearly a step in the right direction, even if we have to evaluate what it means in practice."

German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer said the next few days would be "decisive" for determining if the conflict can be resolved quickly.

The Yugoslav move came as European, Russian and US envoys prepared to meet in Bonn to thrash out the terms on which Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari and Russia's Balkan troubleshooter Viktor Chernomyrdin will travel to Belgrade on Wednesday.

NATO's Shea insisted that Ahtisaari would be going to Bel-

grade to assess how close Milosevic is to accepting the allies' key demands, but not to negotiate with the Yugoslav leader.

NATO leaders have so far reacted cautiously to the signs of movement in Belgrade, insisting that Milosevic must be unequivocal about pulling all Serb forces out of Kosovo and accepting the deployment of an international security force "with NATO at its core."

Planning for the Kosovo Force (KFOR) accelerated Tuesday with the staging at NATO's military headquarters in Belgium of a first force generation conference.

Meanwhile, Russian envoy Viktor Chernomyrdin left for talks with US and EU representatives in Bonn on Tuesday, declaring he was bearing "new proposals" from the Kremlin aimed at ending the Kosovo conflict, reports AFP.

"We are flying to Bonn with new proposals that were drawn up by the Russian side and approved by (President) Boris Yeltsin," Russian news agencies quoted Chernomyrdin as saying.

"There is a great will by the United States, Europe, Russia and all the sides to find a political solution," he said.

"This week must lead us to a specific decision that will transform a military conflict into a political one," Chernomyrdin added.

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Chernomyrdin, who left Moscow at 11:00 a.m. (0700 GMT), will meet in Bonn with the European Union's Kosovo envoy, Martti Ahtisaari.

The three will prepare for an Ahtisaari-Chernomyrdin trip

to Belgrade on Wednesday.

The ITAR-TASS news agency on Saturday reported that Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic had agreed to a Russian plan to deploy a UN-supervised international force in Kosovo.

The report quoted sources as saying that the Russian plan called for forces from NATO nations which had taken part in the bombing campaign to be deployed in Albania and Macedonia to prevent Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) rebels from entering Yugoslavia.

Forces from NATO nations which had not been a party to the air raids would be deployed at the border with Kosovo under the plan, ITAR-TASS said.

Meanwhile, Yugoslav Foreign Minister Zivadin Jovanovic has sent a letter to his German counterpart, Joschka Fischer, to confirm Belgrade has accepted the G8 principles for a peace deal on Kosovo, Serbian state radio reported Tuesday.

NATO gave a qualified welcome, but Germany stressed that no document had been received from Belgrade so far.

Jovanovic said in the letter that Yugoslavia accepted the Group of Eight's principles, noting that they comprise "the presence of the United Nations" in Kosovo, and the adoption of a resolution by the UN Security Council, the radio said.

But he said, "It is indispensable to stop the NATO aggression" against Yugoslavia.

Jovanovic affirmed Belgrade's "firm attachment" to a "lasting political solution" for Kosovo.

Clinton admin blamed for Netanyahu's defeat

JERUSALEM, June 1: The administration of US President Bill Clinton worked against outgoing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during his relection bid, a senior adviser to Netanyahu claimed today, reports AP.

David Bar-Ilan, who served as Netanyahu's