

Lockerbie blast Scottish Court postpones trial

CAMP ZEIST, Netherlands. June 7: A Scottish High Court judge agreed today to postpone for six months the trial of two Libyans accused of the 1988 Lockerbie bombing, a Scottish Official said, reports AFP.

The trial is scheduled to start on or before February 4th, 2000, spokesman for presiding judge Lord Sutherland, Howard Heart, said after a closed hearing.

The hearing considered a request for a six-month extension to the normal 110-day time limit between an indictment and the start of a trial, Heart explained.

Al-Amine Khalifa Fhimah, 43, and Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi, 47, both suspected Libyan intelligence agents, are accused of placing a bomb on the Pan Am Flight 103. It exploded above the Scottish town of Lockerbie in December 1988, killing all 259 passengers and crew aboard the plane and 11 people on the ground.

The pair have repeatedly protested their innocence. Following Scottish legal procedure, the Lord Advocate (chief prosecutor), Lord Hardie, submitted the application for a six-month extension at the request of the defence, Heart explained.

It was the first time that a Scottish High Court has sat at this former military camp near Utrecht in the central Netherlands, which was ceded to Britain for the duration of the trial, being conducted under Scottish law.

The two suspects were committed for trial by the lower-ranking Sheriff's Court, following a speedy extradition by the Netherlands to the Scottish authorities when they arrived from Libya escorted by United Nations officials on April 5.

On their arrest by Scottish police, they were charged with murder, conspiracy to murder and contravention of the Aviation Security Act, and the names of the 270 victims were read out.

Israeli warplanes raid southern Lebanon

TYRE, Lebanon. June 7: Israeli warplanes raided southern Lebanon for the second straight day Sunday, targeting suspected guerrilla infiltration trails, Lebanese security officials said, reports AP.

The Israeli jets fired at least six missiles in two sorties over a valley between the villages of Zuhayr and Jebel al-Botom. 15 kilometers southeast of the port city of Tyre.

Smoke billowed from the area, often used by Lebanese guerrillas to stage hit-and-run attacks against Israeli troops and allied Lebanese militiamen in Israeli-occupied southern Lebanon.

There were no immediate reports of casualties from the evening raid, the officials said on customary condition of anonymity.

In Jerusalem, Israeli army spokesman Brig. Gen. Oded Ben-Ami, confirmed air strikes in the area.

2m evacuated from flood areas in China

BEIJING, June 7: China is moving 2 million people out of lowland areas to protect them from flooding along the Yangtze River, the official Xinhua News Agency reported, reports AP.

The project will take three to five years and is expected to increase the river's flood discharge capacity by 10 billion cubic metres, Xinhua said late Sunday.

That is equal to half the water-retaining capacity of the Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest hydroelectric project being built on the Yangtze's middle reaches, the reports said.

The flood season usually begins in June. This year, the upper Yangtze's largest tributary, the Hanjiang River, is likely to see 30 per cent more rain than in a normal year, Xinhua said.

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Trial of Chinese official begins Thursday

BEIJING, June 7: The trial of former senior Chinese official Fang Jue, who called for democratic reforms, is to resume in Beijing Thursday, his family said today.

Fang Jue's trial will be resumed at the Beijing No.2 Intermediate People's Court on Thursday, but we don't know the time of the hearing yet, Fang's sister, Liu Jing, told AFP.

The Hong Kong-based Information Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Movement in China said in a statement that Fang was likely to be sentenced at the hearing.

He is charged with fraud and illegal business practice and accused of taking 145,000 yuan (17,512 dollars) profits from manipulating diesel import quotas, the Hong Kong Information Centre said.

Fang's trial began on April 26 but was adjourned with no verdict.

Fang, 44, a former senior official from the southeast province of Fujian, was arrested last July after calling for democratic reforms in an essay earlier in the year.

India steps up offensive in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, June 7: India intensified artillery attacks on Islamic guerrillas in Kashmir today and heavily reinforced its disputed border with Pakistan in efforts to end nearly a month's fighting.

Air strikes, which on Sunday were the heaviest since they began on May 26, resumed today. Official Indian sources told AFP that artillery assaults and mortar fire continued against Muslim strongholds in northern Kashmir overnight.

There was also heavy shelling by Pakistani forces across the Line of Control marking the border, they said.

A Srinagar military source said Islamic guerrillas were still occupying a stretch of Indian territory in the mountainous northern Kargil zone about 200 kilometers long and six to seven kilometres wide.

"Heavy reinforcements of (Indian) troops is going on... trucks are moving into the battle areas all the time," the source said.

A defence source in New Delhi added Sunday's night attacks by Indian troops had been the heaviest since the conflict started on May 9.

Another source in Srinagar said Islamic militants were trying to attack key bridges and power stations, with several shells landing around the Iqbal bridge in Kargil.

"They have also tried to blow up a 3.75 megawatt power station nearby but have been unsuccessful," the source said.

Indian air strikes began at around 7 a.m. today, an air force spokesman said.

Air force sources reported 15 sorties by MiG-21 and MiG-27 fighters in the morning and said all planes returned safely.

Officials in Kashmir said a media ban on battle zones was still in force after its imposition on Sunday.

The restriction added to growing speculation that thousands of Indian ground forces backed by artillery and jets were poised to attempt a decisive assault.

Meanwhile, some 3,000 inhabitants from southern border areas were being relocated to allow the Indian army to dig trenches and install heavy weaponry to retaliate against Pakistani artillery attacks.

"The Indian army has told us to vacate border villages within 24 hours," Rashid Khan Katana, the chief of a local association told AFP. "We have started our move to an unknown destination."

An Indian newspaper today said Muslim guerrillas were using US Stinger missiles originally given to Afghan rebels and Pakistani agents to topple the former Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan.

Defence Minister George Fernandes, who faced political flak last week for offering safe passage to the entrenched guerrillas, vowed Sunday to remove them in any way possible.

"Our sole target is to drive out the infiltrators dead or alive from Indian soil," he said.

The border clashes between India and Pakistan, who have fought two wars over Kashmir, began after hundreds of Islamabad-backed militants and what India claims are Pakistani regular soldiers infiltrated key Indian posts in April.

India has reported 59 military deaths in the fighting. The official Pakistani military toll is 15.

The intensified military action coincided with a reported warning by Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif against allowing the escalating tensions in Kashmir to spin out of control.

Sharif was quoted as saying that the onus lay upon leaders on both sides "not to allow the situation to slip out of their hands."

Islamabad later denied Sharif made such a statement, although newspapers in India played up the warning.



Yugoslav Army Generals Blagoje Kovacevic (5th L) and Svetozar Marjanovic (6th L) and the Yugoslav delegation are escorted by a British NATO officer (4th R), arriving for renewed talks at the NATO base in Kumanovo, Macedonia on Sunday. — AFP photo

NATO to intensify airstrike as talks on Serb pullout collapse

KUMANOVO, Macedonia, June 7: NATO will intensify its airstrike campaign against Yugoslavia after talks aimed at putting the Kosovo peace plan into action collapsed today, an alliance general said, reports AP.

NATO has "no alternative but to continue and intensify the air campaign until such time as the Yugoslavs are prepared to implement the agreement fully and without ambiguity," said Lt. Gen. Michael Jackson, the commander of NATO troops in Macedonia.

Jackson blamed the failure to reach agreement after two days of talks on Yugoslavia's insistence on a proposal that in NATO's view would not "guarantee the safe return of all the refugees" or the full withdrawal of Yugoslav forces.

Meanwhile, air raid sirens sounded in Belgrade, the capital, and Pancevo and Novi Sad

221 Pak soldiers killed so far: Indian army

NEW DELHI, June 7: At least 221 Pakistani soldiers have been killed since the start of Indian military action against Muslim guerrillas in Kashmir a month ago, an army spokesman said on Monday.

"It is a reliable and authentic figure that we have killed 221 Pakistani army personnel alone" since the operations began on May 9, Colonel Vikram Singh said.

"Our information is based on a week of assessment and it is reliable. We have our agencies working such as radio intercepts that have confirmed our assessment," Singh said.

"The details of army personnel injured and the casualties inflicted on the militants are being ascertained and will be released in due course," he said.

India claims Pakistani soldiers are fighting alongside the guerrillas in the mountainous region of Kargil, Batalik and Drass. Pakistan denies the charge.

Singh said "reliable intelligence inputs" had revealed that the "armed intruders comprise mainly Pakistani army regulars supported by a sprinkling of hired Mujahideens to give it a facade of Jihad (holy Islamic war)."

Pakistan on Sunday said the Indian army had handed over the bodies of three soldiers who it said were killed when Indian troops attacked one of its posts in Kashmir on May 31. The Indian army said they were killed while fighting in Indian-controlled Kashmir.

"One more dead body of an armed intruder has been recovered in the Batalik sector which will be handed over to the Pakistan army in accordance with established military customs," Singh said.

India has admitted to a steady rise in the number of casualties in its ranks and said 59 Indian soldiers were killed. Fourteen soldiers are missing.

Supreme Court defers execution of Rajiv killers

NEW DELHI, June 7: India's Supreme Court today deferred the execution of four people sentenced to death for the assassination of former Indian prime minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991, reports AFP.

The four, three men and a woman, had appealed to the court for a review of the sentence.

The three-judge Supreme Court bench then delayed the execution, which had been scheduled for Wednesday, to July 19 to study their plea.

On May 11, 19 people were freed after being acquitted of murdering Gandhi, but the death sentence passed last year was confirmed for the four remaining.

Rajiv Gandhi, premier from 1984-89, was killed by a female suicide bomber belonging to Sri Lanka's powerful Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) group at an election rally in Tamil Nadu on May 21, 1991. But LTTE has denied being involved in the incident.

to the north early today, warning of possible NATO airstrikes. NATO jets also pounded western Kosovo late Sunday, firing 30 missiles at targets there over a 35-minute period, the state-run Tanjug news agency reported. Several missiles fell on Mount Pastrik, along the border with Albania and one struck the district of Grnija in the provincial capital, Pristina.

The talks were aimed at translating a political deal agreed to earlier in the week by the Yugoslav government and the West into a workable "reality on the ground," Jackson said.

The two sides met for 10 hours in Kumanovo on Sunday — the second day of talks — then agreed to take a break, with NATO officers reporting snags in the proceedings. When the Yugoslavs did not return as agreed, a British spokesman,

Capt. Simon Worthy, said there would be a further break "of a few hours."

In an indication of serious problems, Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, the chief architect of the peace plan, postponed a visit to Beijing to discuss it with Chinese leaders. There was no explanation for the decision, just 30 minutes before his planned departure.

NATO insists the talks are only to spell out terms of a withdrawal and are not negotiations. The Yugoslav side reportedly was seeking more time to extract its troops, along with guarantees that convoys would not be ambushed by ethnic Albanian rebels.

The Russian news agency ITAR-Tass said one point in dispute was the entry of peacekeepers into Kosovo. In a dispute from Belgrade, the Yugoslav capital, it said NATO had been insisting Serbs begin

withdrawing within 24 hours along with the simultaneous entry of NATO forces from Macedonia. It said Russia was arguing that a peacekeeping operation could not begin until the UN Security Council approved it.

Russian Lt. Gen. Yevgeny Barminev arrived at the meeting Sunday afternoon.

The foreign ministers of the seven biggest industrial countries and Russia are to begin negotiating a draft UN resolution Monday.

The resolution also is to set out a command structure for a postwar security force in Kosovo.

Russia helped craft the Kosovo peace proposal, although it remained sharply at odds with NATO over the bombing campaign. Moscow has agreed to contribute troops to a security force for Kosovo, but insists they will not answer to NATO.

BRIEFLY

Thai police kill 7 tribals: Thai police yesterday shot dead seven hill tribesmen believed to be smuggling drugs across the border from neighbouring Myanmar, officers said, AFP says from Bangkok.

Police said the men were shot during a fierce gunbattle after which an estimated one million amphetamine tablets were found in sacks near their bodies.

Israeli soldier jailed: An Israeli soldier has been sentenced to 30 days in a military jail for killing a Palestinian teenager last week at a West Bank road block, military officials said yesterday, AFP reports from Jerusalem.

The soldier, whose identity was not given, opened fire on a Palestinian car which he claimed had tried to run him down at the army checkpoint in the southern West Bank.

US, Philippines war games next Feb: Joint military training exercises involving the Philippines and the United States are expected to begin next February after the ratification of a defence accord last month, the presidential palace said yesterday, AFP reports from Manila.

It quoted Foreign Secretary Domingo Siazon as saying that while a date has yet to be set, weather conditions in February are "normally good" for exercises.

Cossack leader shot dead: The new Cossack "commander-in-chief" of the Don region, Gennady Nedvignin, died in a hail of bullets at the weekend only two days after taking up his post, Interfax reported, AFP says from Moscow.

Nedvignin was hit by nine bullets near his home on Saturday night and died in an ambulance taking him to hospital, said Valery Kamshilov, an official of the Russian and foreign Cossack movement, quoted Sunday by Interfax.

Typhoon Maggie sweeps Hong Kong: Typhoon Maggie ripped past Hong Kong yesterday, closing schools, banks and courts, severely disrupting traffic and dumping heavy rains on the New Territories near the border with mainland China, police said, Reuters reports from Hong Kong.

Typhoon warning number eight, for winds of 63 to 114 kph was hoisted. Officials had hoisted the higher number nine signal during the night when the typhoon was closest to Hong Kong.

New security package for US embassies

WASHINGTON, June 7: The United States is sending Congress a legislative package this week that would add 300 million dollars to next year's spending on construction to improve security at overseas US diplomatic missions, reports AP.

The White House also is asking for 150 million dollars a year for security construction from 2001 through 2004, bringing to 900 million dollar the new spending over the next five years, a White House official said Sunday.

And this 900 million dollars comes on top of the White House's original request for 3 billion dollar in constructions over the five years starting in 2000.

Retired Adm. William Crowe, who headed State Department panels that studied embassy security, and some members of Congress denounced the 3 billion dollar figure as woefully inadequate.

"Admiral Crowe's work played a valuable role in highlighting security needs," the White House official said.



(From L-R) Judy Dench, Martin Short, Bernadette Peters and Brian Dennehy pose together with their Tony Awards at the end of the ceremony on Sunday in New York. They won, respectively, best actress in a play, best actor in a musical, best actress in a musical and best actor in a play awards. — AFP photo

Anwar trial begins

KUALA LUMPUR, June 7: Ousted Malaysian deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim went back on trial today for sodomy, less than two months after being jailed for six years for abuse of power, reports AFP.

The hearing started with a new dispute after the prosecution changed the date of the alleged offence of sodomy committed by the former heir-apparent of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

Attorney-General Mohhtar Abdullah told the court Anwar had "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" with driver Aziz Abu Bakar between January and March of 1993 — the second change of date in six weeks.

Azizan was a key prosecution



Anwar Ibrahim waves to supporters outside the court yesterday. — AFP photo

witness in Anwar's five-month-long trial for abusing his position to get police to quash allegations of sexual misconduct.

During the trial, Azizan said he was repeatedly forced to have sex with Anwar but at one stage admitted under cross examination that the allegations were false.

Anwar, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, appeared to have lost weight since his April 14 conviction but looked cheerful and waved to photographers as he arrived at the court carrying a brown briefcase.

As proceedings got underway, defence lawyer Raja Aziz Adrusse complained that the revised date of the alleged act was "too wide" and unfair to the defence.

Prosecutors originally alleged the offence took place in 1994 but switched the date to 1992 during a hearing in late April.

"The change in the date of the charge is not appropriate and not fair for the accused," he said. "It shows that the attorney general did not make sure of all the criteria before making the charge."

Anwar's adopted Indonesian brother Sukma Darmawan Sasmitad Madijannon, is being jointly tried on two sodomy-related charges. Karpal Singh, counsel for Sukma also opposed the charge.

"This is an abuse of the court by the attorney general. The main issue is abuse of power. The court should cancel these proceedings," he said. "What is being done is not prosecution but persecution."

Algerian rebel group declares end to guerilla fight

ALGIERS, June 7: The Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), one of several rebel groups in Algeria, on Sunday declared an end to their guerrilla struggle against the government, reports Reuters.

President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who has said that restoring peace to Algeria is his first priority, swiftly awarded the rebels with a promise of an amnesty for the AIS and supporters.

"The AIS has decided to abandon definitively its armed activities against the authorities," AIS chief Madani Mezrag said in a statement read on state-run television.

"We will keep weapons only to use them under the authority of the state," the statement said. The rebels also informed Bouteflika in a letter of its decision.

The group, believed to number about 2,000 seasoned fighters, is the armed wing of the outlawed Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) which was once Algeria's main radical opposition group.

The AIS has been observing an unilateral ceasefire since October 1997 — a move seen as taken to distance it from the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which is widely blamed for horrific massacres of thousands of Algerian civilians.

Bouteflika said word would begin on an amnesty for the AIS.

"The president has instructed the prime minister to adopt a draft law to be voted on in parliament in due course. This draft law is broadly merciful to all affected people to resolve all security problems towards restoring stability," he said in a statement read on state-run television.

"The AIS informed me in a letter dated June 6 that it ceased fire definitively and offered to participate in the struggle against terrorism," Bouteflika's statement added.

The statement did not say when the draft law, providing amnesty for rebels who renounced violence, would be submitted to the parliament where the government has a large majority.

Bouteflika's predecessor President Liamine Zeroual rejected calls to endorse the AIS truce and his government then viewed it as a "surrender."

The AIS in its statement criticised the previous government's stance, saying if it had backed the ceasefire the country's security situation would have improved and many lives might have been spared.



An Indonesian hospital patient places his vote in a ballot box brought to his bedside in a Jakarta hospital yesterday during the country's general election. — AFP photo

Cambodia puts Khmer leader on trial

PHNOM PENH, June 7: Cambodia today put its first former Khmer Rouge leader in the dock as Nuon Paet went on trial for the 1994 kidnap and murder of three western hostages seized in a guerrilla train ambush, reports AFP.

The 53-year-old was led into a packed courtroom handcuffed and flanked by tight security. He is the sole rebel accused of the kidnap and killing of Frenchman Jean-Michel Braquet, 27, Briton Mark Slater, 26, and Australian David Wilson, 29.

Nuon Paet has accused two former rebels who are now senior government officials, Sam Bith and Chhouk Rin, of ordering the killings. They arrived in court under summons as witnesses and possible indictees.

Interrogated by chief prosecutor Yet Chhara, Nuon Paet confirmed his past role as senior Khmer Rouge officer but vigorously denied any involvement in plucking the three backpackers from their coastal-bound train in July 1994 or their subsequent murder.

"My group never kidnapped people and the hostages were under the responsibility of Vith Vorn," he added, explaining that Sam Bith was his superior and had overall command.

He said he was "deeply sorry" for the deaths of the hostages, claiming the Khmer Rouge's "upper level" gave the execution order.

If found guilty Nuon Paet faces between three years and life imprisonment.

While Nuon Paet faces no charges related to his role in Pol Pot's "Killing Fields" regime, the handling of his high-profile case is widely seen as a crucial test for Cambodia's legal system.

"Also due to stand trial are captured military chief Ta Mok and Pol Pot's chief executioner Duch, who are facing charges related to their role in the killing of up to two million Cambodians from 1975-1979."

Early unofficial counts Strong opposition showing in Indonesian polls

JAKARTA, June 7: Voting in Indonesia's first elections since the fall of strongman Suharto ended here Monday with early random counts by unofficial observers indicating a strong showing for the opposition here and in eastern Ambon city, reports AFP.

In Ambon city, where polling closed two hours earlier than Jakarta because of the different time zones, a source close to the governor's office said the Indonesian Democracy Party-Struggle (PDIP) had overwhelming support.

The source stressed the report was totally unofficial and preliminary, but added the PDIP of popular opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri was out-polling the ruling Golkar party by 10 to one.

There are 34 parties contesting here, and it is overwhelmingly "Mega," the source said, adding many of the 315 polling stations in the city showed 200 to 300 votes for the PDIP and about 20 to 30 for Golkar.

Witnesses including journalists watching the first count at

polling booths in the plush central Jakarta suburb of Menteng said the votes there were also tilting towards the PDIP.

At the polling station where former Indonesian president Suharto voted earlier in the day, the count in the parliamentary vote was PDIP 90 votes, the National Mandate Party (PAN) of Amien Rais 60, the small Republican Party — reputedly a Golkar front — 39 and Golkar 32.

In another Menteng station, PDIP led with 156 votes, PAN followed with 66 and Golkar trailed with 48 votes.

But by 5:00 p.m. (1000 GMT) there had been no announcement of the results in any part of Indonesia.

Under the Indonesian election system the first unofficial results in the polls are not expected to be announced by the Indonesian Election Commission until later in the night.

The final official results from all corners of the far-flung archipelago are not scheduled until July 8.



A Thai worker puts finishing touches on models of characters from the new Star Wars film: Episode I: The Phantom Menace in a Bangkok theatre on Tuesday. The movie will make its official debut in Thailand in ten days time. — AFP photo