

Congress form govt in India's Goa state

NEW DELHI, June 9: Indian opposition leader Sonia Gandhi's Congress Party formed its government in a coastal state Wednesday after a morale-boosting victory ahead of federal elections, reports AP.

Provincial leader Luizinho Faleiro took over as the chief minister, the top elected official, in the tiny western state of Goa after the Congress Party won an absolute majority in the state legislature, United News of India news agency reported. Five Cabinet ministers were also sworn in.

The party won 21 seats in a 40-member legislature in the province, a former Portuguese colony that is now a popular tourist destination.

The Goa election was the first test for the Congress Party since the party split last month. Three senior leaders revolted against the Italian-born Sonia Gandhi's leadership, questioning her eligibility to lead the country because of her foreign birth.

National elections are set for September.

US senate okays \$ 265 b defence bill

WASHINGTON, June 9: The US Senate on Tuesday approved a 265 billion US dollar spending bill of the Defence Department for the year 2000, reports Xinhua.

The Pentagon spending bill for the fiscal year which begins October 1 includes funds to cover a 4.8 per cent across-the-board pay rise for the military. The figure 1.4 billion dollars higher than the budget submitted by President Bill Clinton.

However, the bill contains no money for either a peace-keeping operation or a continued military campaign in Kosovo. That was expected to be submitted by the administration in a later bill.

The Senate passed on a voice vote an amendment by Republican Senator Don Nickles that would block US funds for any future rebuilding of Serbia, outside of Kosovo, so long as Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic remains in power. The measure was supported by Republican and Democratic leaders alike.

"Rebuilding should primarily be done with European money," Republican Senator Ted Stevens said.

Clinton has said that he does not intend to commit US money for rebuilding Serbia outside what may be spent in Kosovo. But Republican senators said they want to see it written into law.

Former US Mafia lawyer becomes Las Vegas mayor

LOS ANGELES, June 9: A high-profile former Mafia lawyer who successfully defended legendary gangsters was elected mayor of Las Vegas, the gambling capital of the world, late Tuesday, reports AP.

Voters swept Oscar Goodman, 59, into office with 63.76 per cent of the votes, against 36.24 per cent of his rival, city councilman Arnie Adamsen, state of Nevada election officials announced.

For his critics Goodman's election is nothing short of a disaster: Las Vegas has for years been trying to reinvent itself to the world as a family vacation destination and leave behind the image of corrupt city of sin controlled by the Mob.

Goodman has made his name over the past 30 years by successfully defending gangsters such as Mafia financial wizard Meyer Lansky and Anthony "Tony the Ant" Spilotro, a suspect in 28 murders.

Actor Joe Pesci's character in the movie "Casino" was based on Spilotro, and Goodman played himself in that movie.

Annan to send independent team to Iraq

UNITED NATIONS, June 9: Secretary-General Kofi Annan told the Security Council on Tuesday that he would send an independent team to Iraq to destroy samples of chemical and biological agents left behind when UN weapons inspectors left in December, diplomats said on condition of anonymity.

Butler recommended last week that a team of experts be dispatched to Iraq to destroy the samples, used to calibrate testing equipment, and remove the less than 1 kilogram (2.2 pounds) of Iraqi mustard gas stored at the UN laboratory in Baghdad.

Butler said the tiny samples were safely stored and posed no threat. But he recommended that they be destroyed and the lab closed because inspectors have been gone for longer than expected and summer weather could lead to fluctuations in the electricity supply to the facilities.

On Friday, his office sent Annan an outline of what the mission would entail, including the timeframe needed, said Ewen Buchanan, spokesman for the UN Special Commission. He declined to elaborate.

Kashmir artillery duel continues despite accord to hold talks

SRINAGAR, India, June 9: India and Pakistan exchanged heavy artillery fire along the disputed Kashmir border today despite an agreement to hold talks on the month-long border conflict, reports AP.

An army spokesman said shelling continued in the Kargil and Drass regions in northern Indian-controlled Kashmir where hundreds of Muslim guerrillas are holed up and India launched air strikes early in the day.

"The air strikes have gone through. The intensity of the attacks is the same. Shelling increased for a brief period last night after the India-Pakistan cricket match," the spokesman said.

He reported artillery fire near the sole operating hotel in Kargil town, currently housing several journalists, but said no one was injured.

Military action against what India describes as mainly regular Pakistani army soldiers helped by Islamabad-backed guerrillas began on May 9 after hundreds of men were found to have occupied Kargil mountain posts coming from Pakistan.

About 70 Indian soldiers have died since the fighting erupted and New Delhi claims that 227 Pakistani regulars have been killed.

Pakistan says the Indian shelling has killed 22 civilians

on its side of the border and puts the toll among its troops at just 20.

A Pakistani offer for talks was accepted by India and Pakistani Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz is scheduled to visit New Delhi on Saturday.

Aziz accepted India's proposal and said he was "reasonably" optimistic of success in the talks with his Indian counterpart Jaswant Singh.

"We have accepted the date and I will go to Delhi on Saturday," Aziz told AFP.

But he warned there should be no pre-conditions to the talks and said their purpose "is to defuse tension and prevent an escalation."

He said that his aim was to "defuse tension and prevent an escalation" in Indian Kashmir.

"We will present our explanation of ... this crisis," he said in remarks published Wednesday, referring to artillery duels in Kashmir.

An Indian government spokesman said the one-day talks would focus only on the intense fighting raging since May 9 in the Kargil region of Indian-controlled Kashmir.

"The military operations will continue with the same degree ... as there are no plans to link the operations with the visit," he said.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee has said a dialogue would be fruitful only if it focused on "the intrusion and how Pakistan proposes to undo it".

Pakistan did not immediately embrace India's acceptance Tuesday, and sources said there were concerns Vajpayee's comments indicated there were pre-conditions attached to the talks.

Analysts said the talks this week, the first since the fighting began in Kashmir, would limit tensions though it would not achieve a significant breakthrough.

Former foreign secretary Jyotindra Nath Dixit said he was happy with the mere fact that talks were being held.

"I consider the fact of this visit taking place is a positive development in itself when tensions are so high and the conflict situation is raging," he said. "It could contribute in limiting tensions."

A western diplomat said the prospects of a breakthrough were dim.

"With positions being so radically different, it is difficult to see how they could come up with anything ... They will have to come up with something though."

Car bombs recovered in Kashmir

Meanwhile, Indian security forces seized five car bombs

from Muslim guerrillas in Kashmir meant to target military and political leaders in the region, a government statement said Wednesday.

The bombs were recovered after a fierce gunfight with the militants in southern Kashmir, near the summer capital of Srinagar, on Tuesday, the statement said.

"The militants fled after setting ablaze a haystack, along with huge quantity of explosive. Five powerful car bombs fabricated in the fuel tanks along with arms and ammunition were recovered from the site."

The government claimed that Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence was behind the plot and its "heinous designs" to introduce a new dimension to the decade-old militancy in Kashmir has been "exposed."

The car bombs were being designed to target key military, political and security forces personalities in the valley, the statement said.

It said one of the bombs had the capacity of carrying up to 80 kilograms (176 pounds) of devastating plastic explosive.

"If put to use these bombs could have created devastation and havoc, which may have retarded the phenomenal success achieved in combating the sponsored insurgency in the valley," the statement said.



Indian army soldiers stand behind two of five seized car bombs prior to a press conference at the 8th Mountain Division headquarters near Sharifabad yesterday. — AFP photo

Sri Lanka major drug transit point

COLOMBO, June 9: Sri Lanka has been identified as a major drug transit point involving Tamil terrorists and foreigners, official sources said today, reports Xinhua.

Director of the Anti-Narcotics Bureau Senior Superintendent of Police CL Ratnayake was quoted by the sources as saying that Sri Lankan Tamil terrorist and other social evils go hand in hand with the illegal drug menace and the rebels who were engaged in drug dealings as it is an easy way to make money for them to buy arms, have been caught in Belgium, Italy, Malaysia, France, the United Kingdom and India.

He told a meeting at the police headquarters Tuesday that Sri Lanka is situated between two areas which play a major part in world heroin production — the Golden Triangle and the Golden Crescent.

Big time drug dealers use Sri Lanka as a transit station when they transit heroin by air and sea en route to the West and East Asian countries.

He disclosed that they had been able to detect 42 leading local and foreign drug dealers. Nine locals and five foreigners who were caught for conveying drugs had jumped jail, but 62 others were serving life sentences.

It is estimated that there are about 40,000 heroin addicts in Sri Lanka and the main sources of heroin to the country are India and Pakistan.

Y'slav, NATO generals yet to reach accord on Kosovo peace plan

KUMANOVO, Macedonia, June 9: Yugoslav and NATO generals haggled through the night over details of Belgrade's withdrawal from Kosovo, but by sunrise Wednesday there was no sign of an agreement on the plan — a key step toward ending Western air attacks and allowing refugees to return home, reports AP.

The talks at this French military garrison near the Kosovo border began late Tuesday after eight major powers signed off on the text of a Kosovo peace plan sent to the UN Security Council for final approval — once Belgrade signs the troop withdrawal plan.

The United States, Russia and six leading democracies authorized a text Tuesday calling for a peacekeeping force for Kosovo with "substantial" NATO participation and agreed on a NATO bombing pause once Serb forces begin a verifiable withdrawal.

Agreement among the so-called Group of Eight nations was expected to intensify pressure on Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic to end the crisis and pave the way for Security Council approval of the peace plan, the removal of Yugoslav forces and the arrival of 50,000 international peacekeepers.

Although NATO officials had predicted a speedy approval of the withdrawal plan, it was clear by sunrise that the deliberations were slower than forecast. It was unclear, however, whether the talks were deadlocked or simply proceeding slowly.

A Yugoslav delegation led by Gen Svetozar Marjanovic arrived here about 9:30 pm (1930 GMT) and was given the plan to study.

After more than three hours, Marjanovic and two senior delegates drove back to Kosovo, about 10 kilometers (6 miles) away — to confer with higher authorities, NATO officials said.

The three returned about an hour later. There was no immediate word on whether they brought back a positive answer to NATO's demands.

Talks among the generals fell apart early Monday partly

because Yugoslavia reportedly had been seeking more than one week to remove border guards in the province than the "hundreds, not thousands" stipulated in the peace accord.

US President Bill Clinton made clear that palpable evidence of troop pullbacks were a must, saying only a verifiable withdrawal of Serb forces will allow us to suspend the bombing and go forward with the plan.

In Washington, Pentagon spokesman Kenneth Bacon said US intelligence has detected signs that Serb forces are making preparations to withdraw from Kosovo, although no troops are moving or assembling for a pullout.

However, NATO spokesman Maj Gen Walter Jertz said that the Serbs were in fact reinforcing positions in western Kosovo, sending additional tanks toward the Albanian border where the Yugoslav army is fighting ethnic Albanian rebels.

Bacon confirmed the fighting along the border, telling reporters that the Kosovo Liberation

Army rebels were pinned down by Serb-led forces near the Morini crossing point, where hundreds of thousands of Kosovo Albanian refugees have fled into Albania.

US B-52 bombers pummeled the area near Junik, where the KLA is trying to open a supply corridor into central Kosovo, for a third straight day.

The commander of the Yugoslav army in Kosovo, Maj Gen V. Limir Lazarevic, visited the border area and accused NATO and the Albanian army of helping the KLA.

Despite the peace moves, NATO intensified its air campaign, flying 658 sorties over a 24-hour period ending at midday Tuesday.

NATO spokesman Jamie Shea said that was a 50 per cent increase over the level since Milosevic accepted a peace proposal last Thursday.

Tanjut reported Wednesday that more than 2,000 civilians have been killed and more than 5,000 wounded in 11 weeks of NATO air raids on Yugoslavia.



German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer (C) gestures during a joint press conference flanked by US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright (L) and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov (R), in Cologne on Tuesday. G8 ministers agreed that the Kosovo peacekeeping force will have a unified command structure and a NATO component, Fischer said. — AFP photo

Israel to allow 4000 Palestinian refugees back to Gaza

JERUSALEM, June 9: Israel has agreed to allow thousands of Palestinians stranded in Egypt for more than 20 years to be reunited with their families in the Gaza Strip within 18 months, Israeli officials said Wednesday, reports AP.

About 4,000 Palestinians have been living in the "Canada" camp on the Egyptian side of the border with Gaza since the early 1970s when they were moved because of a road-building scheme.

The refugees were then stranded in Egypt after the 1979 Camp David peace accords under which Israel returned the Sinai peninsula to Egypt.

But at a meeting on Monday

with Mohammed Dahlan, the head of Palestinian internal security in the Gaza Strip, Yaakov Orr, the Israeli army's chief coordinator in the Palestinian territories, agreed to speed up the refugees' return by the end of 2001, according to spokesman Shlomo Dror.

Between 30 and 50 families should be able to move back each month following Monday's agreement, Dror said.

Dahlan attributed the agreement to renewed Israeli interest in the peace process following Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's defeat at the hands of Labour party leader Ehud Barak in May elections, according to press reports.

An earlier agreement envisaged the return of the refugees by the end of 2005 with financial assistance provided by the Canadian government, but so far only 145 families have been able to move, a Canadian embassy spokesman said.

As part of the Oslo peace process, which gave Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority autonomy over 60 per cent of Gaza, the Canadian government stepped in 1994 to provide 12,000 dollars in humanitarian assistance for each family to build a house and move back, the spokesman said.

Jordan celebrates King Abdullah's enthronement

AMMAN, June 9: Bedouin tribal leaders began gathering under traditional camel hair tents set up along Amman's thoroughfares this morning ready to welcome King Abdullah on his enthronement procession through the Jordanian capital, reports AP.

Giant pictures of the 37-year-old king and his wife Queen Rania look down on streets where Jordanians will throng to watch the king's motorcade pass at around 6:00 p.m. (1600 GMT) on its way to the Raghadan Palace.

Flags and coloured lights have also been hung up and street markings repainted along the route.

Once they arrive at the palace the king will present Queen Rania with Jordan's top decoration, the Hussein bin Ali medal, before greeting hundreds of foreign and Jordanian dignitaries, but no coronation ceremony is planned.

The crown prince of Bahrain, Sheikh Salman bin Hamad Al-Khalifa, and Saudi Prince Abdel Aziz bin Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz, advisor to the Saudi crown prince, arrived in Amman Tuesday evening to join the celebrations while the prime minister of Qatar, Sheikh Abdullah bin Khalifa Al-Thani, and a number of other Gulf princes are expected to arrive Wednesday.

The reception will be the first at the palace after the three month period of mourning for King Hussein who died from cancer on February 7.

Wednesday has been declared a public holiday, and fireworks and other festivities have been organised to celebrate the occasion.

EU "concerned" over vote count Opposition consolidates early lead in Indonesia

JAKARTA, June 9: Indonesian opposition parties consolidated their solid lead over the Golkar party of former president Suharto today as European observers expressed deep concern over the sluggish count, reports AP.

By early afternoon, two days after the polls, only some three per cent of the more than 100 million votes had been officially counted by the independent election commission.

With 3,772,585 votes tallied, two main "reform" parties — Megawati Sukarnoputri's secular Indonesian Democracy Party-Struggle (PDI-P) and the National Awakening Party (PKB) of moderate Muslim leader Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid — were far ahead of the ruling Golkar.

The PDI-P had won 38 per cent with 1,432,159 votes and the PKB had 22.8 per cent with 861,364 votes, while Golkar trailed in third place with 557,996 votes, or 15.3 per cent, in Indonesia's first free and fair elections since 1955.

The PDI-P also topped absentee balloting in the Netherlands, Australia and the Philippines, the Antara news agency and officials said.

"My gravest concern is the events since polling day," the head of the EU Election Observation Unit, John Morgan, told a press conference here.

He said the period between the transfer of votes from the

written to the computerised form was the "most vulnerable to fraudulent misuse, distortion and false counting."

He added that "more seriously we've now reports that there are discrepancies" in some areas between the written figures and those being put on computer.

Morgan, who otherwise lauded the polls as "sufficiently free and transparent," said that if the reports were true they would "cast the gravest doubts on the whole (counting) operation."

The elections are the first to be held since the fall of strongman Suharto in May 1998, with many Indonesians hoping they will herald a turning point after his 32-year authoritarian rule.

The sluggish official vote count has been criticised by many of the parties including Golkar, whose presidential candidate is Suharto's protégé and successor, incumbent President B.J. Habibie.

Golkar, which like other parties is making its own count, claimed Tuesday night it had counted more than seven million votes in total with 25 per cent in its favour.

Muhammad Hikam, a researcher from the Indonesian Institute of Sciences, told AFP he agreed that "if the delay continues it will open the way to wild speculations."



An Indonesian street artist hangs up a portrait of opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri yesterday two days after the country's general election. Indonesian opposition parties consolidated their solid lead over the ruling Golkar Party. — AFP photo

Myanmar rebels kill 7 soldiers in fighting

MAE HONG SON, Thailand, June 9: Shan State Army (SSA) rebels have killed at least seven Myanmar soldiers in fierce fighting around the former stronghold of drugs kingpin Khun Sa. Thai intelligence sources said Wednesday, reports AP.

The clashes erupted after the Shan State Army, which is fighting for independence against the Yangon government, launched an offensive last week to regain lost territory and cut army supply routes, the sources said.

Seventeen police were also injured in the clashes near Khun Sa's former stronghold of Homong, just inside the Myanmar border.

There were no details of rebel casualties.

A battalion of 1,500 SSA troops was involved in the attack and seized a significant portion of land from the army, the sources said.

"The SSA will carry on attacking the enemy until they retreat," Shan State Army Major Kam Laeng told AFP.

The engagements prompted Myanmar authorities to impose a night-time curfew in border districts and to close all frontier checkpoints with Thailand, the sources said.

A group of around 300 refugees fled the fighting and was stranded near the border, they added.

The SSA has around 5,000 men under arms and joined renegade factions of Khun Sa's Mong Tai Army which fought a 20-year struggle against Yangon before 1996.

Khun Sa, who is wanted by the United States on drugs charges, now lives under military protection in Yangon and officials claim he has renounced the drugs trade.

Myanmar's junta has in recent years been trying to make peace with many of the country's ethnic rebel groups.

DPRK navy ships intrude ROK territorial waters

SEOUL, June 9: A South Korean naval ship collided with North Korean patrol boat Wednesday during a tense armed standoff in the Yellow Sea, the Defense Ministry said, reports AP.

The accident off South Korea's west coast caused only slight damage to each ship and did not result in an exchange of fire, the ministry said.

The collision occurred while eight South Korean navy ships were trying to force six North Korean patrol boats out of South Korean waters for the second time in two days, it said.

"It's a slight contact and no serious damage or clashes resulted," said Capt. Lim Wol-kyu, spokesman for South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Both sides restrained themselves."

The latest standoff began when six North Korean navy ships re-entered South Korean waters shortly after day break Wednesday, about six hours after withdrawing from the area.

One North Korean patrol

boat was spotted crossing the sea border and, within an hour, five more joined it deep in South Korean waters, Lim's office said.

A day earlier, six North Korean navy ships penetrated South Korean waters in the same general area, creating an 11-hour armed standoff with eight South Korean navy boats.

After ignoring repeated South Korean warnings, the North Korean boats withdrew shortly before midnight. But they re-entered the area Wednesday morning, the office said.

The North Korean navy ships appeared to be guarding a number of northern fishing vessels operating in the area, it said.

The infiltration came two days after North Korea accused South Korea on Sunday of sending three warships into its territorial waters in the Yellow Sea, and warned of retaliation.