



German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and his wife Doris cast their ballots in Hanover yesterday as some 298 million Europeans in eleven countries are eligible to participate in the vote to choose a new European assembly. — AFP photo

Last day of polls

11 states vote for new EU Parliament

BRUSSELS, June 13: Voters across the European Union go to the polls today to elect a new European Parliament on the last day of a staggered election marked so far by record voter apathy, reports Reuters.

The polls take place in 11 of the 15 EU countries, after citizens in Britain, Denmark, the Netherlands and Ireland showed on Thursday and Friday how unmoved they were by the assembly's recent muscle flexing in a graft scandal.

The 626-member assembly, whose powers have gradually increased over the years, had hoped its success in topping the European Commission from power in March in a fraud scandal would win the hearts and minds of ordinary people. Not so in Britain where the

Home Office (Interior Ministry) said after polls closed on Thursday, the turnout had hit a 23 per cent record low.

Official vote counting in the poll only begins late today after the polls in the other 11 member states close.

Electors will choose from thousands of candidates ranging from traditional Socialist and Christian Democrats to far-right nationalists and anti-EU campaigners.

While the lists are heavy with celebrities like Italian actress Gina Lollobrigida, Miss Belgium 1991 who has promised to pose nude for Playboy magazine if elected, and a raft of athletes they are thinner than usual on heavyweight politicians, save for an ex-Portuguese president.

Indian troops capture key mountain peak

DRAS, India, June 13: Indian troops captured a key mountain peak overlooking India's northern highway Sunday, in a ferocious all-night battle that began as India and Pakistan ended unsuccessful talks to end the fighting that has killed hundreds of combatants, officers on the front said, reports AP.

Indian troops breached the summit of Tololing Peak at 6 am (0030 GMT), after artillery pounded the snowy mountain-top for nearly 10 hours from 25 positions, raining some 12,000 high-explosive shells on Tololing and neighbouring mountain known as Peak 5140.

The capture of the 4,590-meter-high (15,100 feet) Tololing and what officers said was the anticipated fall of 5140 would secure the most vulnerable stretch of highway that has been under constant Pakistani bombardment for one month, accurately directed by observers occupying the peaks.

"Our ground forces have physically occupied Tololing," said a major at an 18-gun artillery position after receiving

radio confirmation.

Some artillery shells fired by the Pakistani military hit a nearby village as India's Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee visited the Kargil area Sunday in a previously planned tour.

Accompanied by the defence minister and the army chief, Vajpayee met military commanders and local administrators, and addressed a group of local residents at the helped from where he flew back to Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu-Kashmir state.

Vajpayee heard complaints from residents about the shortage of medicine and food. He promised that nearly 50,000 people who fled their villages because of shelling would be provided free food, clothes and financial help. Damaged houses will be repaired and people compensated for the losses, he said.

India says infiltrators from Pakistan seized the mountain range on the Indian side of the cease-fire line in early May. It said the objective was to change the unofficial border to change the strategic high ground commanding the road linking Sri-

nagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir, and Leh on the Chinese border.

Pakistan denies Indian charges its army is involved, and says the fighters are indigenous Kashmiri freedom fighters.

An Associated Press team at a forward artillery position near the abandoned town of Dras watched through the night as India unleashed a thunderstorm of shells and rockets on guerrilla positions.

The offensive began at 7:30 pm (1400 GMT) with a heavy barrage from a long string of artillery batteries. During the night, the firing became more directed at specific targets by spotters manning forward observation posts. They radioed information about the movement of the retreating guerrilla forces as Indian infantry units advanced up the mountain.

The Indian gunners also targeted five Pakistan artillery positions across the cease-fire line which had given support to the intruders and had been harassing an Indian brigade headquarters.

Pakistan capable of defending itself: Sartaz Aziz

ISLAMABAD, June 13: Pakistani Foreign Minister Sartaz Aziz called for a peaceful solution to the Kashmir dispute on his return from talks in New Delhi on Saturday but said his country was capable of defending itself, reports Reuters.

"We want to defuse the situation, de-escalate the crisis and pave the way toward a political solution of the larger issue which is essential to the core dispute of Kashmir," Aziz said.

"In sum we want peace, but if war is imposed on us, we have the capability to defend ourselves and our vital national interests," he said.

Aziz met Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh for just 70 minutes to try to ease the most serious crisis in Kashmir in nearly 30 years between the two newly nuclear-capable neighbours.

Tension has increased in Kashmir since late last month when India started air strikes against what it said were Pakistani-backed infiltrators dug into mountains on the Indian side of the Line of Control which divides the Himalayan region.

"We have made it very clear. The aggression has to be undone through military or diplomatic means, whichever comes first," Singh told a news conference.

Aziz said he "undertook to convey India's point of view ... to my prime minister."

He said he suggested India "stop all air action" in northern Kashmir and that both sides halt artillery exchanges.

India has said it will not stop the air strikes until the guerrillas are driven from its territory.

Aziz said he left his proposals with the Indians and told them that "we can talk on your proposal once you de-escalate the situation."

... I suggested that despite our differences over the origin and nature of the present tension, we share an interest in defusing the situation and de-escalating tensions by bringing about an appropriate atmosphere in which we can effectively address each other's concerns," he said.

Aziz said he did not believe the standoff would turn into a full-scale war, adding that the minimum outcome of his visit could be that "there will be no

escalation (clashes) to other sectors."

There was no such commitment from India, but "this is my own assessment," he said.

In Lahore, prime minister Nawaz Sharif said he would hear Aziz's report today.

"We are not prepared to move an inch back (on Pakistan's stance) and we are ready to give a befitting reply to India as we did in the past," he said.

While Aziz met Indian leaders, the battle for control of strategic heights on the Indian side of Kashmir raged on.

Pakistan, which holds on-third of Kashmir, insists the guerrillas are locals fighting India's rule over two-thirds of the region, at the centre of two of the three wars fought by the two countries since their independence from Britain in 1947.

The main problem between India and Pakistan is the unresolved issue of Kashmir. They (Kashmiris) have not been given the right of self-determination," Aziz told reporters in New Delhi, adding that no Pakistani soldier had crossed Kashmir's Line of Control on to the Indian side.



Local people greet the members of the the 4th Armour Brigade as they drive into Kosovo on Saturday. The Brigade are amongst the first wave of British troops to enter Kosovo. — AFP photo

NATO moves to Kosovo as US-Russia peacekeeping dispute eases

PRISTINA, Yugoslavia, June 13: Thousands of NATO troops poured into Kosovo for another day Sunday as the United States showed signs it was ready to compromise with Russia over a dispute on its peacekeeping role in the province, reports AFP.

British NATO troops were well established in the Kosovo capital Pristina by late Saturday, having spearheaded the move into the province from neighbouring Macedonia.

But Russian troops -- who stole a march on NATO to arrive in Kosovo from Bosnia hours ahead of alliance contingents -- were left in control of Pristina's airport.

Many Serb policemen could still be seen in the city centre Sunday, and British and Serbian officers reportedly held talks on the activities of the rebel Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

Some 6,000 British troops, including Nepalese Gurkhas, had advanced through Kosovo during the day in the wake of retreating Yugoslav forces, after crossing the border at dawn.

Unlike French NATO troops,

who were badly delayed by having to clear landmines, the soldiers of the British army's 4th and 5th brigades, accompanied by helicopters and tanks made good progress.

After airborne troops secured the high ground, it took seven hours for the advance guard to negotiate a narrow pass from the border post of Djeneral Jankovic, including two bridges and two tunnels which were feared mined.

Sappers blew up a mine in one of the tunnels, leaving the way open to Pristina and the advance speeded up, leaving units behind at intervals to guard key points.

From around the half-way point, at Urosevac, ethnic Albanian residents began massing along the road, greeting the troops as liberators from dominance by the Serbs.

"It is the first time we have dared leave our homes since the beginning of the war," said villager Naim Batqeci, referring to the 11-week NATO air campaign which began on March 24.

British Lieutenant-General Michael Jackson, commander

of the Kosovo peacekeeping force KFOR, arrived in Pristina around 7:30 p.m. (1730 GMT) Saturday by helicopter to confront Russian troops who arrived in the Kosovo capital overnight -- in vehicles bearing the KFOR insignia -- and occupied the airport.

The surprise move caught NATO commanders off-guard. The Russians had apparently ignored an agreement not to enter Kosovo before NATO contingents.

Asked if he was embarrassed by the Russian move, Jackson said: "Not at all. On the contrary, I welcome the Russians as part of KFOR."

Preparations were underway to bring in the 50,000 peacekeeping troops to be deployed in Kosovo, Jackson said.

He also warned the KLA he expected full compliance with a UN Security Council resolution on Kosovo, which calls for demilitarisation of the guerrilla organisation.

Talks between Russian and British commanders resulted in a compromise over control of Pristina's airport after a tense, three-hour standoff.

British paratroopers would take up positions south of the airport, but British Brigadier-General Adrian Freer admitted the Russians controlled the strategic landing strip, which is crucial to NATO's deployment in Kosovo.

In Moscow, US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott -- who has been in Russia since Thursday -- ended talks Sunday with Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov over Russia's role in KFOR.

An upbeat, Talbott said: "It has been a good visit. All in all I'm very satisfied and hopeful coming out of these talks."

Ivanov and I agreed on some quite important points that should be incorporated into a solution on those issues and problems that are still outstanding.

"We exchanged important and promising ideas about how to move this process forward," he said.

Talbott said senior Russian officials had pledged not to deploy any more troops in Kosovo without prior agreement with the West.

Now Hillary to face Starr report

NEW YORK, June 13: Independent counsel Kenneth Starr may release a "blistering" report on the behaviour of Hillary Rodham Clinton in the failed Whitewater real estate venture, but will not seek an indictment against her, today's New York Times reported, says Reuters.

Starr, who is winding down his investigation of the Whitewater development, has wrestled with the idea of releasing the report and "was leaning toward issuing a report that would discuss the Clintons' behaviour in some detail," the newspaper said, citing unnamed members of his staff.

The Times said Starr had decided not to seek criminal indictments of president Clinton or Hillary.

But the document could be highly critical of the first lady and its release will coincide with Hillary's expected campaign for the US Senate in New York and therefore could be dismissed as a partisan political manoeuvre by her supporters, the paper said.

The report would be a recitation of events and unresolved issues without any explicitly stated judgements, Starr associates told the Times.

Another debate in Starr's office is whether it is fair for him, to release a report on a person who has not been and will not be indicted, the Times said.

"The question as it has been framed in the debate has been

whether you put up or shut up," one adviser told the paper, "if you can't indict her, shouldn't you just shut up?"

Last year, Starr told the Congress that he did not have sufficient evidence to indict President Clinton for any misdeed related to his failed investment, as Arkansas governor, in the Whitewater development.

However, Starr did issue a report of more than 700 pages that detailed Clinton's effort to keep secret his sexual relationship with former White House intern Monica Lewinsky.

Russian political leaders order military exercises

MOSCOW, June 13: Russia's political leadership has ordered the armed General Staff to prepare for large strategic exercises, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported Saturday, reports AP.

An unnamed Defence Ministry official told ITAR-Tass that the exercises would include one of the Russian fleets and three military districts, as well as the armed forces of neighbouring Belarus.

The official did not say when the exercises were ordered, or whether they were connected with the situation in Yugoslavia, ITAR-Tass said.

Off the Record

Happiest mother

KUALA LUMPUR: Grief turned to joy for a mother preparing for her son's funeral when she found that he was alive and well at a local hospital, Malaysia's daily New Straits Times reported today, says Reuters.

Grieving mother, Kwok Lai Ying, 61, felt her "whole world collapsing" as she ordered a coffin and arranged funeral rites for a badly decomposed body that had been identified as her mentally handicapped son. Friends and relatives even donated 3,000 ringgit (790 dollar) for the ceremony.

But hours before the funeral was to begin, her son Tam Joo Choy, 20, who has a history of running away from home, was discovered at the Kuala Lumpur hospital. He had been missing since May 22.

"While we were preparing to claim the body the next day, a friend phoned to say he had seen my son's photograph in another Chinese newspaper on June 1.... We rushed to the hospital and found him there," she told reporters.

"What happened is a sign that my son will live a long life," Kwok said.

Lucky baby

NEW DELHI: A Kuwaiti airliner made an emergency landing in the southern Indian city of Madras on Saturday after a woman went into labour and delivered a boy just before touchdown, officials said, reports AP.

Some women passengers on board the Kuwait Airways Airbus helped Rochimah Bt Sansui Abdul, 31, as the plane was flying over Madras, the state capital of Tamil Nadu, airport officials said.

The pilot of the Kuwait-Singapore-Jakarta flight got permission to make an emergency landing.

After the plane landed, an airport doctor helped cut the umbilical cord and complete the delivery, the officials said on condition of anonymity. Both mother and the 6 1/2-pound (3-kilogram) baby were later hospitalised.

The plane was grounded as the flying crew had finished their duty hours by the time the delivery was over, a short while later. The other passengers were accommodated in city hotels and the airline prepared to fly them to Singapore later in the night.

Airlines usually give free air tickets for life to babies born on board an aircraft. Under international laws, the baby has the right to become an Indian national.



Texas Governor George W. Bush arrives to screaming supporters at the local airport on Saturday in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Bush is beginning his race for the US Presidency by campaigning through Iowa and New Hampshire this weekend with his wife Laura. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Dalai Lama in Israel: Clad in his red and yellow robes, the Dalai Lama met with a crowd of Israelis on Saturday and later said that embracing nonviolence could help end the Middle East conflict. AP reports from Jerusalem.

The exiled Tibetan Buddhist leader is on a private, three-day visit to the Jewish state, where he is taking part in an interfaith conference along with Jews, Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Shintos. The trip was organised by an American friendship group and the Inter-Religious Coordination Council in Israel.

Factory fire kills 16 in China: A fire at an electronics factory in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen killed 16 workers and seriously injured eight, the official Xinhua news agency reported today, Reuters says from Beijing.

About 100 workers were initially trapped when the fire at the Taiwan-funded Zhimao Electronics Plant broke out on Saturday evening, the agency said. Local firefighters were able to quickly rescue most of them and put out the fire within an hour, it said.

Colombian rebels kidnap 22: Colombian authorities were investigating a reported kidnapping of 22 people Saturday by rebels from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in the north of the country, AFP reports from Bogota.

Unofficial reports broadcast by Bogota radio stations said the rebels forced several vehicles to stop at a false roadblock and then kidnapped 22 people near Ciénega, in Magdalena department, 960 kilometres north of Bogota.

Seven shot dead in Brazil: Seven people were shot to death around dawn Saturday in a suburban Sao Paulo bar, bringing the number of people murdered this year to 96, police said, AFP reports from Sao Paulo.

The four women and two men were shot by three people during a drug deal, pushing the number of drug-related homicides to 34 for the year, police said. Not all the victims were drug dealers, said police, who believe the women were killed for witnessing the crime.

Carlos Salinas return from exile: Ex-president Carlos Salinas arrived back in Mexico Saturday, four years after he left in disgrace at the height of the peso crisis and following the arrest of his brother for the murder of a top politician, AFP reports from Mexico City.

News of his presence in Mexico caused an uproar, with politicians warning it could destabilise the country. Salinas, 51, who left the country in March 1995 amid widespread anger over the devaluation of the peso, said he was only on a brief visit and would leave again today.

Indonesia's ruling party concedes defeat in polls

JAKARTA, June 13: Indonesia's ruling Golkar party conceded to landslide wins in the past six general elections held under former president Suharto, has conceded defeat in the first post-Suharto polls, a report said today, reports AFP.

"We have conducted our own count and we have reached the conclusion that Golkar has lost," Golkar vice chairman Marzuki Darusman was quoted by the Bisnis Indonesia daily as saying.

Darusman spoke with less than a quarter of the total expected vote officially counted. But Golkar is trailing in third place, with Megawati Sukarnoputri's Indonesian Democracy Party (PDI-P) well ahead.

An unofficial tally by the joint operations media centre, which has counted about 40 per cent of the vote from last Monday, has Golkar overtaking the National Awakening Party (PKB) for second place after the PDI-P.

"We have already been able to estimate from the figures that Golkar has lost ... A loser is certain to be disappointed but we will accept (defeat)," he said.

Darusman declined to comment on the reasons for the party's defeat, saying that Golkar was investigating its electoral performance and would publicise the results of its probe on June 21.

The latest official count of 29.7 million votes today gave PDI-P the lead with 38.1 per cent, the PKB 19.1 per cent, Golkar 16.3 per cent, the Muslim United Development Party 9.4 per cent and the National Mandate party of reform leader Amien Rais 6.8 per cent.

Kumaratunga clips wings of top army general

COLOMBO, June 13: Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga has in a sudden move clipped the wings of a top army general just two weeks after conferring unprecedented powers on him, an official document showed Sunday, reports AFP.

In late May President Kumaratunga appointed retired army general Rohan Daluwatte to a new post called "Chief of Defence Staff" and placed all combat troops and police units under his command.

But in an extraordinary gazette notification dated June 9, President Kumaratunga took away all the powers conferred on Daluwatte and scrapped a National Security Council set up by her 13 days earlier.

Several officials said they were surprised by the president's move on May 27 to give seemingly unlimited powers to a single general and even more surprised those powers were withdrawn so suddenly and without any public statement.

"It seems like a virtual coup in the first place to have got the president to agree to such a move," an official who declined to be named said.

"There seems to have been a realisation that it could have been a potential dangerous appointment," he said.

The state-run Silumina Sinhalese-language weekly said Sunday there could be several changes in key positions with the defence ministry and the armed forces following the latest developments.

Many speculated the president's U-turn may have been triggered by representations by other military officers who

Troops kill 60 Tamil rebels

COLOMBO, June 13: Backed by artillery fire and airstrikes, the Sri Lankan military launched a major offensive against Tamil Tiger rebels in northern Sri Lanka, killing at least 60 rebels and wounding 100 others, the defence ministry said Sunday, reports AP.

The Voice of Tigers, the clandestine rebel radio monitored in the northern city of Vavuniya, admitted the guerrillas were under a severe military attack. The radio Sunday advised civilians living in rebel-controlled areas to move to safer places.

In Colombo, Ranjith Witana, the military spokesman, said the artillery guns bombarded a major rebel base west of Paranthan on Saturday. The fighter bombers also joined in the campaign and bombed another two guerrilla bases in the area.

Witana said the air and artillery attacks caused severe damage to the rebel bases, killing at least 60 guerrillas and wounding 100 others.