



Former "Spice Girls" Geri Haliwell signs autographs to Filipino patients during her visit at the Marie Stopes clinic for reproductive health care for women in suburban Calocan city yesterday. Haliwell is in Manila to inspect grassroots women's health programs funded by UNFPA as part of her first official fact-finding tour since her appointment as a United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Goodwill Ambassador. — AFP photo

BRITFLY

Mine kills two children in E Timor: At least two children were killed in a suspected landmine blast in East Timor on Monday, witnesses and a hospital nurse said. AFP reports from Dili.

Residents in Becora, in eastern Dili, the troubled territory's capital, said three children were killed by a landmine while playing in the hills there, but only two bodies had been found. The body of one child, nine-year-old Jose Manuel Soares Borges, was taken to his family home nearby to prepare for his funeral, an AFP photographer said. Another boy, whose identity was not given, was brought in a coma to Motaif church but died shortly afterwards, a nurse at the hospital said. Residents in Becora said the area where the boys were playing was used as a base by pro-Indonesian militias during attacks on the pro-independence movement last month.

SLA frees 4 Lebanese prisoners: Israel's proxy defence force, the South Lebanon Army (SLA), announced today that it had released four inmates from Khiam prison in Israel's self-declared "security zone" in south Lebanon, AFP reports from Jerusalem.

No further details on the identities of those released were immediately available. The releases came amid an atmosphere of uncertainty over the future of the SLA since Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak has committed himself to pulling all Israeli soldiers out of the security zone within one year of taking office.

Fiji parliament takes office: Fiji's new 103-member parliament took office Monday under a cloud of controversy over procedure likely to be referred to the country's High Court, AFP reports from Suva.

The dispute centres on the nomination of eight members to the upper house, the Senate, by opposition leader Inoke Kubuabola. The Senate is a nominated body with 14 of its 32 members picked by the great council of chiefs, nine by the prime minister and eight by the leader of the opposition. One comes from the island of Rotuma. Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and Kubuabola have clashed over interpretation of a new constitution requiring the opposition's eight nominees to reflect the proportionate size of each party in the lower house.

Floods kill three in Nepal: Heavy rain-fall at the onset of this year's monsoon has killed three people and damaged property across Nepal, state radio said Monday, AFP reports from Kathmandu.

Two brothers were drowned in the Khungai canal in Rupan-dehi district, 390 kilometres south-west of Kathmandu, after two days of continuous rain, the radio said. It described how one brother had fallen into the flooded canal and a second had been swept away trying to save him. Twenty-eight houses were also said to have been destroyed by flooding. Elsewhere, a five-year-old boy was swept away by a flooded canal near the Butwal Highway, 260 kilometres west of Kathmandu, according to the report.

Myanmar rebels claim territory in battle

MAE SOT, Thailand, June 14: Myanmar rebels today claimed they had taken control of territory around the former stronghold of drug czar Khun Sa close to the Thai border, reports AFP.

The leader of the Shan State Army's (SSA) southern region said the rebels took territory in fierce fighting with junta troops around the town of Homong just inside Myanmar.

The rebels are now in total control around Homong, Colonel Yawd Suk told AFP at a secret location on the border.

The rebels suffered several casualties, while 12 Myanmar troops were killed during the fighting since mid-May, he said.

No independent confirmation of his claims was immediately available, but Thai intelligence sources have reported heavy fighting between rebels and junta troops in recent weeks.

Yawd Suk said there had been three major attacks since some 1,500 rebel troops surrounded Homong, occupied by 2,000 Myanmar soldiers.

He said the SSA was helped by 300 fighters from the Karenni National Progressive Party.

Myanmar troops are suffering from shortages of food and arms since the rebels cut two major supply routes to Homong, he added.

The SSA is fighting for independence from the Yangon government.

The fierce fighting earlier this month prompted Myanmar authorities to impose a night-time curfew in border districts and to close all frontier checkpoints with Thailand.

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, when Khun Sa surrendered.

Scientists closer to creating cloned human embryos

WASHINGTON, June 14: US scientists have stepped up efforts to create the first cloned human embryos, with the aim of developing new treatments to fight disease, the Washington Post reported Monday, reports AFP.

Two teams of privately-funded American researchers have begun experiments that could lead to the harvesting of human embryos, the daily reported.

Geron Corp. of Menlo Park, California is attempting to create the first batches of human embryos, while Advanced Cell Therapeutics of Worcester, Massachusetts, reportedly is attempting to clone embryos that would be part-cow, part-human.

Both companies hope to grow embryonic stem cells for medical research. Research into

the field has stepped up since scientists discovered last year that human embryonic and foetal stem cells can be harvested to treat a variety of chronic ailments.

Scientists believe stem cells ultimately could be used to grow replacements for cells damaged by Parkinson's disease for example, or to build new heart muscles for victims of heart attacks.

But the groundbreaking research raises a host of ethical questions, and has been roundly condemned by bioethicists and religious leaders from several denominations.

There is currently a ban on federal funding for research using human embryos, but the practice is legal in the private sector, the Post reported.

Pakistan accuses India of firing chemical weapons Artillery duels continue in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, June 14: India and Pakistan exchanged heavy fire on their disputed Kashmir border on Monday, a day after India warned it was ready for war if necessary following failed peace talks, reports AFP.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, in Srinagar, claimed "substantial" Indian gains and said the Pakistani shelling will not "deter" New Delhi's efforts to evict Islamic guerrillas occupying strategic Indian heights in divided Kashmir.

"Those who have come to Kargil clandestinely clearly show that they have violated all bilateral agreements and we will not rest in peace till they are driven out," he told Indian air force personnel here.

The prime minister later left for the Indian military base

of Udhampur.

A military source reported "heavy cross-border firing" in the mountains of the northern Gurez region and in others parts of Indian-controlled Kashmir.

The source also said "artillery battles" between Indian troops and the guerrillas were raging in the main conflict zones of Drass, Batalik and Kargil.

The air force launched fresh air strikes Monday, pounding supply stores and bunkers in Drass despite foul weather, sources in New Delhi said.

"The air missions started despite cloudy conditions," an air force spokesman said, and added that Mi-17 helicopter gunships were being used "selectively."

India pulled out its Mi-17s

from Kargil after one of the gunships was downed by a Stinger missile on May 27.

The Russian-made helicopters, each armed with 150 rockets, were re-deployed recently after they were fitted with flares that distract heat-seeking missiles, the sources said.

India says the ground-air attacks are directed on the militants and Pakistani army regulars who crossed a line of control into Indian Kashmir in March and occupied key heights in the disputed territory.

On Sunday, Pakistan accused India of firing chemical weapons into its territory. However, a Pakistani military spokesman and military sources did not give details of the weapons or of any casualties.

ties.

India has rejected the allegation as "malicious propaganda."

Neither India nor Pakistan are known to possess chemical weapons, or to have used them in the past, and both countries are signatories to international treaties banning their use.

On Monday, the Indian media reported an exodus from several border villages in the northern state of Punjab, which adjoins Kashmir, because of war fears.

The Indian Express said there was "panic migration" in some villages in Punjab's Attari district, near the main Indo-Pakistani road border post of Wagh.

Migration had also been reported Sunday in the Jammu region in southern Kashmir.

Serb hardliners quit Peacekeepers pour into Kosovo

PRISTINA, Yugoslavia, June 14: NATO troops poured into Kosovo on Monday on the eve of a deadline for the Serb pullout from the province, while in Belgrade, Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic faced a political crisis triggered by outraged hardliners, reports AFP.

The Serbian Radical Party (SRS) of ultra-nationalist Vojislav Seselj announced its 15 ministers had quit the Serbian government in protest at the withdrawal and the deployment of the NATO-led peacekeeping force, KFOR, in Kosovo.

Some 1,200 US marines crossed into Kosovo from Macedonia at dawn Monday and a first contingent of Italian troops arrived in the western town of Pec, swelling the thousands of KFOR troops fanning out across Kosovo.

A stand-off continued, however, between Russian and NATO troops at the airport in the Kosovo capital Pristina.

Russia caught NATO countries off-guard by racing ahead to deploy in Pristina, taking up position at the airport, which had been sketched as KFOR's headquarters.

That move forced the al-

liance to set up an advance headquarters south of the city on Monday.

British NATO forces, meanwhile, were investigating reports of a mass grave, believed to contain the bodies of murdered ethnic Albanians south of Pristina.

The peacekeepers face a tense and confused situation with thousands of ethnic Albanians giving them a hero's welcome as liberators while much of Kosovo's Serb population remained hostile and afraid of reprisals from people forced from their homes by "ethnic cleansing."

Adding to the tension are Yugoslav army and Serbian police units, who are scheduled to withdraw completely from Kosovo on Tuesday, and the presence of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), the ethnic Albanian guerrilla organisation which has been fighting for independence from Serbia.

Five Serbian troops were reportedly killed in clashes with the KLA or NATO forces, while three German journalists were shot dead by unidentified gunmen.

British Lieutenant Colonel

Nick Clissitt said Sunday two Yugoslav soldiers and one Serb policeman were killed in clashes with the KLA, while Serb sources put the toll at two policemen and two Yugoslav soldiers.

British paratroopers also shot dead a Yugoslav reserve policeman, believed to be a Serb, after they were fired upon Sunday. The Serb Information Center in Pristina said the dead man was a civilian.

Three German journalists were also reported killed in southern Kosovo, apparently while investigating reports of a mass grave in the region.

The body of an unidentified man was found Monday eight kilometers (five miles) from Suva Reka, the German foreign ministry said. A press card was found with the body but the name was illegible.

Two journalists were shot dead on Sunday by unidentified gunmen near the town of Stimlje, on the same road as Suva Reka, about 40 kilometres (25 miles) southwest of Pristina.

German troops are in charge of the sensitive southern sector of Kosovo which stretches from

the border to Prizren, a town with a pre-conflict population of more than 100,000.

Troops shot dead a Serb sniper and seriously injured another in a shoot-out in the town centre Sunday. A German soldier was hit in the arm and two ethnic Albanians were also injured when the Serbs fired on a crowd.

NATO leaders, meanwhile, appeared resigned to giving Russia an area of responsibility in Kosovo, in a deal similar to that which operates in neighbouring Bosnia-Herzegovina, alliance diplomats said in Brussels.

They said the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation had agreed to let its generals resolve the immediate problems posed by Russia's unexpected presence in Kosovo, and its politicians define Moscow's eventual role in the province.

NATO diplomats said Russia was likely to be given either a separate area or one straddling the sectors already allotted to Britain, France, Germany, Italy and the United States. A Russian general would also have a post in the headquarters of the KFOR commander.

Jakarta suspends attorney general

JAKARTA, June 14: The Indonesian government said Monday it will temporarily suspend attorney general Andi Ghalib pending a legal decision over allegations he took bribes, ministers said, reports AFP.

"Tomorrow (Tuesday), a presidential decree on the temporary suspension of Andi Ghalib as attorney general will be issued," Justice Minister Muladi said, referring to President B.J. Habibie.

Coordinating Minister for Development and Supervision Hartarto Sastrosumarto added the suspension will remain in effect "until the matter is cleared under the law."

Ghalib has been accused by an independent anti-graft group of taking bribes from businessmen and of possessing bank accounts and time deposits totalling 13 billion rupiah (1.6 million dollars).

Belgian PM resigns after poll defeat

BRUSSELS, June 14: Belgian Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene resigned on Monday after his Christian Democratic Party (CVP) was defeated in legislative elections on Sunday, reports AFP.

King Albert II accepted the resignation.

The king is set to begin consultations with the speakers of parliament and the senate to appoint someone to form a new government, probably from the right-wing Liberal party which emerged as the biggest formation in Sunday's vote.

On Sunday voters deserted the governing parties in droves in the wake of the country's dioxin food contamination scandal, ousting the centre-left coalition that has ruled for the past ten years.

Ecologists and the Liberals, which are on the right of the Belgian political spectrum, were the main beneficiaries of the swing against the government, registering big gains in both Wallonia, the French-speaking south of Belgium, and Flanders, the Dutch-speaking north.

In Germany, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder suffered a crushing defeat, as the opposition conservatives trounced his centre left coalition in its first test since coming to power last autumn.

In Britain, the EU map was turned on its head as the ruling Labour party, headed by Prime Minister Tony Blair, lost half its seats in the European assembly and the opposition Conservatives doubled their share.

And in Greece, Socialist Prime Minister Costas Simitis



A Kosovo Albanian man holds his arms out while being searched by US soldiers of the 82nd Airborne Division at the Blace border crossing with Kosovo on Sunday, where US KFOR soldiers have taken control of the border point. — AFP photo

Taiwan's Air Force may slow deployment of F-16 fighters

TAIPEI, June 14: Taiwan's Air Force may slow the deployment of new F-16 fighters following three deadly crashes, a newspaper reported Monday, reports AFP.

The slowdown could delay inauguration of the final three squadrons of jets, 150 of which were purchased from the United States in 1992 and delivered over the past two years, the China Times said.

The crashes, which have killed five pilots, shook confidence in the air force's upgrading programme and raised speculation that intense training to master new types of airplanes was overburdening the service.

To modernize its air defenses against hostile rival China, Taiwan has mothballed aging American fighters over the past few years and replaced them with cutting-edge US and French technology.

The air force is reexamining its training programme, but has made no decision on delaying the deployment of more F-16s, an air force spokesman said, speaking with customary anonymity.

Three squadrons of F-16s are already based at Chiayi in central Taiwan, and another squadron is located at Hualien on the east coast, the China Times reported.

The paper quoted Defense Minister Tang Fei saying the US Air Force is expected to dispatch an investigation team to Taiwan to seek the cause of the latest crash.

Searchers have so far found no sign of a pilot and plane that vanished off Taiwan's east coast on May 31.

In addition to the crashes, the F-16s have also been hobbled by spare parts delays and a service-wide pilot shortage, the newspaper reported, quoting an

unidentified high-ranking air force official.

Twelve F-16s are now grounded awaiting parts, and the air force is still about 350 pilots short of its optimum strength of 1700, the paper reported.

Problems with the F-16s contrast to the relatively smooth introduction of the 60 Mirage 2000-5 fighters from France, none of which have reported serious problems.

Eager to break into the Asian market, French suppliers have provided highly attentive service, even hand carrying tiny parts all the way from France when Taiwan's supplies ran out at short notice, the newspaper said.

Taiwan has also mustered into service 130 home-developed IDG fighters as part of its air force overhaul.

Peace talks only after Pakistan pulls back, says Vajpayee

NEW DELHI, June 14: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee on Monday said New Delhi was ready for peace talks with Islamabad but only after Pakistan withdrew its troops from Indian territory in Kashmir, reports AFP.

"For the last 22 years there was peace on this border. You have committed this aggression. You withdraw your troops and then we are prepared for talks," Vajpayee was quoted as saying by the Press Trust of India in the Kashmir town of Udhampur.

Vajpayee said his Pakistan counterpart Nawaz Sharif had called him in the Kashmir summer capital Srinagar on Sunday and repeatedly asked

for steps to de-escalate the fighting in divided Kashmir raging since May 9.

"I asked him who started all this?" Vajpayee said.

"If they don't understand the language of peace, we will give them a belting reply," he told air force staff earlier Monday during an address in Srinagar.

Vajpayee went to Kashmir on Sunday in a morale-boosting exercise. He had to cut short his visit due to Pakistani shelling in Kargil but told troops that while India wanted peace, it was also ready for battle.

The prime minister dismissed the Pakistani shelling during his visit to Kargil as immaterial.

Megawati's party confident of getting most votes

JAKARTA, June 14: The opposition Indonesian Democracy Party-Struggle (PDIP) of Megawati Sukarnoputri expressed confidence Monday that it will clinch most votes from Indonesia's landmark election, reports AFP.

The "PDIP will come out as the largest party," party deputy chairman Kwik Kian Gie told a seminar here.

The party leads in the vote count but has urged members not to celebrate prematurely.

By midday Monday, the PDIP had around 37.9 per cent of the 37 million votes counted, about a third of the total.

Kwik said the PDIP had prepared a general guideline for policies to be proposed to the next president for the upcoming five-year term.

He said the guidelines had been compiled involving "many competent sources from outside PDIP."

The proposals were to be discussed during the seminar later Monday.

The PDIP was one of the 48 political parties that contested Indonesia's first parliamentary elections since the resignation of former president Suharto last year.

Suharto's old ruling Golkar

party is trailing in third place in the official count with some 16.5 per cent of the vote. It's chairman, Akbar Tanjung, on Saturday conceded that it had lost top spot to the PDIP, and was seeking coalition partners.

Meanwhile, some 100 supporters of a small political party contesting last week's Indonesian elections Monday held a protest to demand a repeat of the polls, saying the results were rigged.

"We urge students, reformist parties to reject the election results and demand a new election," they said in a statement.

The protestors from the People's Democratic Party (PRD) also urged "disqualification" of the ruling Golkar Party and the People's Sovereignty Party (PSR), linked to Cooperative Minister Adi Sasono, for allegedly using funds earmarked for the poor to attract voters.

"Disqualify Golkar and PSR because they have misused the social safety net funds," the statement said.

The Urban Poor Consortium, a non-governmental organisation, last month claimed it had proof that the two parties had used funds from the social safety net programme in their campaigns.

DPRK patrol ships cross again into ROK waters

SEOUL, June 14: A tense cat-and-mouse stand off between the rival Koreans in the Yellow Sea entered its eighth day today as North Korean patrol ships crossed again into South Korean waters, a defence ministry spokesman said, reports Reuters.

All seven ships had retreated to northern waters on Sunday but two crossed the border again at around 6:00 am (2100 GMT) on Monday. The two have remained in our water since then," the spokesman said.

Another defence ministry official said the two North Korean vessels were about 3.5 km (two miles) inside the Northern Limit Line (NLL), which forms part of a buffer zone.

He said South Korea had deployed seven navy boats against the North Korean ships.

North Korea agreed on Sunday to meet United Nations Command officers to discuss the confrontation.

An official at the UN Command said the meeting was expected to take place on Tuesday at 10:00 am (0100 GMT) in the border village of Panmunjom. The exact time would be fixed on Monday, he said.

The US-backed UN Command oversees the uneasy truce between the Koreans which ended three years of brutal war on the peninsula but left the two sides technically at war.

The standoff, which has been largely peaceful, escalated on Friday when South Korean ships repeatedly rammed North Korean vessels to drive them back across the sea boundary.

Meanwhile, South Korea's opposition urged the military today to take tough action against repeated intrusions by North Korean vessels into disputed waters in the Yellow Sea.

The Grand National Party (GNP) also accused President Kim Dae-Jung of responding lukewarmly to the week-long standoff in the Yellow Sea in a bid to protect his "sunshine policy."

The policy is aimed at drawing the reclusive North into dialogue through gradual engagement. North Korea has rejected it as a ploy to destroy its socialist system.

Our security is in a very grave situation," GNP leader Hoi-Chang said during a briefing by defence ministry officials.

Senior GNP officials argued the navy's "lukewarm" response showed "serious defects" of Kim's overzealous appeasement policy.

But Vice Defence Minister Park Yong-Ok said the navy was trying hard "to prevent an escalation of tensions" between the two Koreans, still technically at war following their 1950-53 conflict.

Off the Record

She is very different from Di

LONDON: Sophie Rhys-Jones, who marries Britain's Prince Edward Saturday, said in a BBC interview she was very different from the late Princess Diana, although she acknowledged a physical resemblance between them, reports AFP.

Her husband-to-be, meanwhile, said the couple would never play on his resemblance, which he said had been hyped up by the media because it brought in revenue.

Rhys-Jones, 34, has asked not to be given the title of princess so as to avoid any further comparisons with Diana, divorced wife of Edward's elder brother Charles, who died in a car crash in Paris in 1997.

The marriage of Rhys-Jones and Edward, 35, is to be held in the chapel of Windsor Castle and not in the more prestigious Westminster Abbey. But it will still be broadcast live on BBC television and watched by 8,000 guests.

Centre-right ousts Socialists as Euro-Parliament's biggest group

BRUSSELS, June 14: The centre-right European People's Party emerged Monday as the biggest group in the new European Parliament after elections which saw the Socialist group hit hard by losses in Britain, Germany and Greece, reports AFP.

In Germany, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder suffered a crushing defeat, as the opposition conservatives trounced his centre left coalition in its first test since coming to power last autumn.

In Britain, the EU map was turned on its head as the ruling Labour party, headed by Prime Minister Tony Blair, lost half its seats in the European assembly and the opposition Conservatives doubled their share.

And in Greece, Socialist Prime Minister Costas Simitis

conceded defeat to the opposition New Democracy party.

Socialists maintained their position in France, Portugal and Sweden, however.

Projections based on exit polls suggested the European People's Party (EPP), made up largely of Christian Democrat parties, could claim as many as 215 of the assembly's 626 seats, up from 201 in the previous parliament.

"Early results throughout Europe indicate that a historic shift in power is taking place," the EPP said in a statement. "For the first time, the EPP is set to gain up to 30 more seats than the Socialists."

The Socialists, previously the dominant political force in the assembly with 214 deputies, were set to fall as low as 180.

The centrist Liberal Democrats were on course to strengthen their position as the

parliament's third force with gains set to lift their number of deputies from 42 to around 50.

Meanwhile, the Greens were poised to gain 10 deputies, to 37.

Despite the change in the respective position of the two biggest groups, the results will likely make little difference to the way business is done in Brussels and Strasbourg. Both major formations will continue to have to seek allies to rally majorities.

Across the EU the vote, which followed a campaign overshadowed by the conflict in Kosovo, was marked by a high level of apathy with less than half the electorate turning out in most countries.

The biggest Socialist losses came in Britain, where the introduction of proportional representation, a turnout of less than 25-per cent and a revival in

the fortunes of the opposition Conservative Party were expected to cost the ruling Labour party around 30 seats.

BBC projections indicated Labour would hold onto only 29 of its 62 seats, while the Conservatives would double theirs from 18 to 38.

It was a similar story in Germany, where Schroeder, a Social Democrat, conceded defeat to the opposition Christian Democrat Union (CDU).

"We have lost and the Christian Democrats have won, that is clear," he said, adding: "We have understood the lesson the voters wanted to give us."

Germany's ARD television said the CDU took 47.8 per cent of the vote, against 31.4 per cent for the SPD and 6.8 for the Greens, the two government parties.

In Greece, exit polls indi-

cated New Democracy would oust PASOK as the country's leading party in Strasbourg, garnering between 35 and 37 per cent of the vote, while PASOK would win between 32.5 and 35.3 per cent.

In France, first estimates showed Prime Minister Lionel Jospin's Socialist party credited with around 22.5 per cent of the vote, well ahead of a meagre 13.3 per