

Militants kill ruling party official in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, June 15: Suspected Kashmiri militants gunned down an official of the governing National Conference party in the northern state of Jammu-Kashmir, police said, reports AP.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the killing of Abdul Aziz Malik in Galoora Handwara, 80 kilometers (50) northeast of state capital, Srinagar. But police blamed guerrillas fighting for Kashmir's independence from India.

Malik's bodyguard was injured in the shootout. The attackers also snatched the guard's assault rifle.

Malik, a lawyer, was vice-president of the Kuphara district of the National Conference, which came to power in the state in the October 1996 elections. Since then, some three dozen party officials and activists have been killed by militants because the party supports Kashmir's integration with India and opposes the separatist movement.

Pakistan evacuates border villages as fighting goes on in Kashmir

ISLAMABAD, June 15: Pakistan evacuated thousands of villagers living close to the border with India Tuesday as fighting in disputed Kashmir kept up, and Islamabad accused New Delhi of slamming the door on negotiations, reports AFP.

Local media reports said the country's armed forces were on high alert over fears the Kashmir crisis could expand into a wider conflict.

Authorities have evacuated between 2,500 and 4,000 villagers living close to the border with India, according to security sources in the border city of Lahore, capital of Punjab province.

Families were moved from about 300 villages along a 72-kilometre stretch of the border between the Pakistani and Indian states of Punjab after the evacuation was announced over mosque loudspeakers on Monday.

Similar evacuations took place in more than 24 border villages in the districts of Ba-

hawalnagar and Rahimyar Khan, which border the Indian state of Rajasthan.

Security officials said it was just a precautionary measure after talks between Pakistan and India on defusing the conflict in Kashmir broke down.

Resident Khushi Mohammad said: "We started moving out after the announcements by the mosques. We have used our farm tractors to move out of the area."

Artillery duels and clashes between the rival armies have been going on for five weeks along the Line of Control (LoC), which divides the Pakistani and Indian-administered zones in the Himalayan region.

Pakistani newspapers said the conflict in Kashmir had taken a more serious turn following the failure of Saturday's talks in New Delhi between the Indian and Pakistani foreign ministers.

"With the diplomatic route all but closed by India, an intensification of the confronta-

tion is almost certain," The News said in an editorial.

The Nation daily said Pakistan, by seeking to lessen tensions in Kashmir, would "encourage the international community, including the G8 (Group of Eight nations) and the US, to support our cause."

US President Bill Clinton Monday urged Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee to resume direct talks with Pakistan to halt the fighting.

Clinton spoke with Vajpayee for 10 minutes by telephone and was expected to call Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif Tuesday, White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said.

Another report from Pallewala Border, India, adds: More than 30,000 people have fled frontier villages in this southern Kashmir border district due to fears of war sparked by intensifying cross-border fighting between India and Pakistan, officials said Tuesday.

In the past five days more than 30,000 residents had left

their homes for safer areas in southern Kashmir frontier areas of Akhnor, R.S. Pora and Samba, they said.

The exodus was continuing Tuesday in Pallewala Border, about 450 kilometres (280 miles) south of the Kashmir summer capital Srinagar.

Fighting broke out in Kashmir on May 9 following wide-scale infiltration into the northern Indian-controlled part of the disputed state by what New Delhi describes as Islamabad-backed Muslim guerrillas and regular Pakistani soldiers who took key mountain posts.

In Pallewala Border, 60-year-old Shankuntala Devi tearfully recalled the last meal she had in her house.

"We had served the children. As we were preparing to sit down to eat, our village, Samoh, was rattled by heavy Pakistani fire. Many houses were damaged.



Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh (L) meets Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji at the Zongnanhai leadership compound in Beijing yesterday. Singh arrived in Beijing on Monday for an official two-day visit and began talks on the ongoing armed conflict in Kashmir. —AFP photo

Indonesia's AG may face military trial

JAKARTA, June 15: Indonesia's Justice Minister Muladi said today that Andi Ghalib, who has stepped aside as attorney-general during a graft probe, will be tried in a military court if proof of corruption is found, reports Reuters.

"He is still active in the military so automatically if something happens then the military legal system applies to him although his position as attorney-general is a civilian post," Muladi told reporters.

As attorney-general, Ghalib was leading a much-criticised probe into the wealth of former President Suharto.

On Monday, the government said Ghalib had become non-active as attorney-general and announced the same day that Coordinating Minister for Political and Security Affairs, Feisal Tanjung, would take over the post temporarily.

Government officials have said Ghalib should be reinstated if his name was cleared.



South Korean navy soldiers stand alert on the seaside of Yonpyong Island, South Korea yesterday after South and North Korean naval vessels exchanged fire in the Yellow Sea in the morning. South Korean gunboats sank a North Korean torpedo boat and seriously damaged two other boats. —AFP photo

S Korea sinks North's torpedo boat in Yellow Sea gunbattle

SEOUL, June 15: South Korea's navy today sank a North Korean torpedo boat and seriously damaged two other vessels, as a week-old Yellow Sea standoff exploded into a high-seas gunbattle, officials said, reports AFP.

South Korea put its military on its highest alert to ward off any communist attack following the clash, as a furious North demanded an apology and warned of a possible war.

Pyeongyang warned of "a dangerous situation in which a war may break out any time in Korea because of the reckless military provocation of the South Korean rulers," its Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said.

It accused South Korean "warships" of intruding into its waters and demanded an immediate apology following the first armed clash in six months between the two sides, which remain technically at war.

But defence officials here said the intense 10-minute heavy machine-gun battle erupted after a Pyongyang boat opened fire on Seoul vessels which had rammed intruding North Korean boats.

"We shot back after North Korea opened fire first," said Colonel Hwang Dong-Kyu, spokesman for the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

South Korean gunboats opened up with 40-millimeter heavy machine guns which sank a North Korean torpedo boat and seriously damaged at least two other vessels in the disputed buffer zone.

South Korea and US military chiefs held an emergency meeting and warned Pyongyang against further actions, denouncing its opening shots as "a manifest act of provocation and a violation of the Korean armistice."

Seven South Korean sailors

were wounded and two of their boats slightly damaged in the firefight, a defence ministry official said.

KCNA said one boat was sunk and three badly damaged. There was no word on the fate of the North Korean crew.

The clash, the first in the Yellow Sea in two years, took place as South Korean vessels tried to ram two communist vessels out of its buffer zone, a move which prompted three North Korean torpedo boats to go to their rescue.

After the clash, the North Koreans retreated to their side of the disputed border, ending the confrontation, officials said. But combat readiness was strengthened along South Korea's west coast amid a major alert.

At least 50 South Korean tanks, trucks loaded with soldiers and dozens of jeeps equipped with machine guns

raced from a base in the demilitarized zone to other border areas.

Talks between the US-led United Nations Command (UNC) and North Korean generals aimed at reducing tensions in the eight-day old standoff were suspended when the two sides failed to reach agreement following the clash.

The UNC had called for both sides to "withdraw their naval forces to their respective sides" of the UN-recognised international boundary, warning that a long standoff could raise regional tensions.

Regional powers Japan and China called for calm, with Beijing expressing concern and urging restraint on both sides while Tokyo urged a peaceful, negotiated end to the renewed conflict.

The high-seas drama sent stock markets through the Seoul

BRIEFLY

Car bomb explodes in Baghdad: Several people were injured and buildings damaged when a car bomb exploded in the centre of the Iraqi capital, the official news agency INA said Tuesday, AFP reports from Baghdad.

A police spokesman told INA that the blast occurred late Monday in the district of Karrada. The bomb was concealed in a Toyota, the spokesman said, blaming "mercenaries ... and known circles" for the attack. "Several citizens were hurt" and buildings damaged.

Lawyer arrested on drugs charges: Thai customs have arrested a Malaysian lawyer suspected of trying to board a flight bound for Germany carrying more than two kilos (five pounds) of heroin, officials said Tuesday, AFP reports from Bangkok.

Abdul Rani Bin Othman, 25, was intercepted in the departure lounge at Bangkok airport with the drugs strapped to his body preparing to board a Lufthansa flight to Frankfurt, they said. Othman, from Kedah in northern Malaysia near the Thai border, was a recent law graduate working as an apprentice.

Rocket attack kills 3 in Afghanistan: At least three people were killed and four injured when three rockets were fired into the Taliban-held Afghan eastern city of Jalalabad, the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) reported Tuesday, AFP reports from Islamabad.

The rockets were launched overnight from an area 20 kilometers (12 miles) east of Jalalabad, the Pakistan-based private information agency said. It was not known who was behind the rocket attack, the first in the provincial capital of Ningarhar province in three years, AIP said.

3 Russians jailed for selling babies: Three people including a gynaecologist have been sentenced from four to five and a half years in prison for selling babies, Izvestia reported on Tuesday, AFP reports from Moscow.

Doctor Ruslan Karagulyan, who sold four newborns, was sentenced to four years by a court in Tula, a town about 180 kilometers (110 miles) south of Moscow. The court sentenced his accomplices, identified as Olga A. and her husband Pavel, to five and a half years and four and a half years respectively for serving as intermediaries, the daily said.



Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak (R) meets with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in Cairo yesterday. Mubarak and Arafat discussed the future of the Arab-Israeli peace process and efforts to convene an Arab summit. —AFP photo

Russia confident of resolving dispute with NATO

MOSCOW, June 15: Moscow said Tuesday its "misunderstandings" with NATO would soon be settled as US and Kremlin officials prepared high-level talks about Russia's role in a Kosovo peace force, reports AFP.

That optimism however threatened to be eclipsed by reports that Russia had dispatched more troops into Kosovo despite earlier promises to do so only after reaching agreement with NATO.

"I am convinced that all misunderstandings which have come up will be solved by the end of the week," Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin said after meeting President Boris Yeltsin in the Kremlin.

Stepashin announced that US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Defence Secretary William Cohen would meet with Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and Defense Minister Igor Sergeev in Helsinki on Wednesday.

Relations between the two sides, already rocky over the NATO action, have been further strained since some 300 Russian paratroopers moved into Kosovo ahead of NATO soldiers early Saturday morning.

That force occupied Pristina's Slatina airport on Saturday and has since denied French and British troops ac-

cess.

Reports said the airport was fired on by a rocket-propelled grenade overnight Monday. No one was said to be hurt.

The peace force dispute stems from Moscow's refusal to place its Kosovo contingent under NATO command. Moscow is further pressing for the right to operate its own sector in the Serbian province.

Washington and its allies insist that NATO, which conducted 11 weeks of air raids against Yugoslavia, should run the entire operation and fear Russia's control of its own zone would lead to Kosovo's de facto partition.

Speaking of Kosovo peacekeepers in Washington on Monday, Albright said: "We welcome Russian participation in KFOR and we are in constant high-level discussions with Russia to work out an appropriate role."

One option according to western media reports is to have Russian peacekeepers answer to Finnish commanders instead of NATO's.

But Russian defence sources cited by Interfax said Moscow "was not studying" such a plan.

Stepashin further reminded NATO of its obligation to disarm "criminal" gunmen of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) which fought Russia's Serbian

allies.

"Without a doubt, the UN resolution to disarm the KLA must be carried out," Stepashin said.

The Russian premier himself will join the Kosovo negotiations when he attends the opening of the Group of Seven industrialized nations' meeting in Cologne on Friday.

Meanwhile, more than 20 charred bodies were found Tuesday by NATO troops in a house in the southern Kosovo town of Velika Krusa, a German officer said, and a witness said the dead were ethnic Albanian men who had been torched alive by Serb forces.

"At the moment, we know for certain that there are at least 20 bodies, completely burned," said Captain Michael Bos.

Troops had secured the site and investigators, either from the NATO-led peacekeeping force KFOR or the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), were on their way, he said.

The discovery in Velika Krusa, just north of Prizren, came only a day after British and German troops reported they had found five mass graves in southern Kosovo, holding at least 85 corpses.

10 more countries on Australia's visa hit list

SYDNEY, June 15: Ten additional countries were identified by Australia today as potential sources of illegal immigrants in a further tightening of entry rules by the federal government, reports AFP.

Those added to the list are Albania, Bosnia, Bulgaria, Ecuador, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Laos, Lithuania, the Russian Federation and Nepal.

The list includes a breakdown of the high-risk groups by age and sex and was drawn up by Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock's department after studying the records of visa overstayers, The Australian said.

People from the countries highlighted will automatically face greater difficulty getting a visa than those from "safe" countries such as Japan and the United States.

Junta agents abduct Myanmar students in China: Report

BANGKOK, June 15: Myanmar intelligence agents have abducted two leaders of the country's student opposition as they toured support groups in southern China, exiled students said Tuesday, reports AFP.

Military intelligence officers arrested Moe Kyaw, secretary of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front's (ABSDF) northern committee, and Than Zaw, an official in the same group, an ABSDF statement said.

"The Burmese regime has no respect for ... borders, so we are very worried about activists all along the border," Thailand-based ABSDF spokesman Sonny Mahinder said.

"This abduction is a clear violation of Chinese sovereignty," he said, adding the abductions happened on June 10.

There was no independent confirmation of the ABSDF's claim and junta officials could not immediately be contacted.

The ABSDF statement said the abductions of its leaders near Ruili, in China, was an indication that authorities in Yangon were increasingly suppressing opposition in and outside the country.

It said the student leaders were being held in Myanmar's Northern Shan State.

UN approves extension of Iraq's oil-for-food programme

UNITED NATIONS, June 15: The United Nations approved a plan submitted by Iraq to renew its oil-for-food programme for six months, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan said Monday.

"The government of Iraq was informed today that I had approved the plan," Annan said, reports AFP.

The US chief said he had informed the head of the UN Security Council last week of his decision to approve the request.

Iraq, which has been under a strict UN embargo since 1990, accepted at the end of May to renew for a sixth-month period the oil-for-food scheme under which it can export 5.2 billion dollars of oil every six months.

But largely because of the devaluing state of the oil industry, exports reached only 3.9 billion dollars under the last phase of the programme (December 1998-May 1999).

Under the programme Iraq is authorized to sell crude to finance imports of food, medicine and other humanitarian supplies as well as 300 million dollars of oil machinery spare parts every six months.

Baghdad, aiming to boost its output, has asked for the spare parts allocation to be doubled.

The United Nations announced last week it has sent oil industry experts to Iraq to help draw up a shopping list of spare parts and equipment to

boost oil exports.

The office for the Iraq Programme (OIP) director Benon Sevan is to leave for Baghdad Monday to meet with top Iraqi government officials.

"One focus of Mr. Sevan's visit will be the prospects for increasing Iraq's ability to export oil," the OIP said in a statement.

Oil exports from Iraq since the UN oil-for-food programme began in December 1996 have topped a total of 1.5 billion barrels, the official Iraqi News Agency said.

Iraq's oil output is currently running at 2.65 million barrels per day, two million of which is exported.

Off the Record

'Cause it didn't fit the definition

WASHINGTON: One of President Bill Clinton's lawyers hit the roof when he heard the President might argue that he was truthful when he denied having a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky because oral sex did not fit the definition, a new book says, reports AP.

"You can't do this," the book quotes lawyer Robert Bennett as telling a Clinton adviser. "It's insanity."

But Clinton made that argument anyway, in testimony to independent prosecutor Kenneth Starr's grand jury. And Clinton's assertion that oral sex was not a sexual act helped him escape removal from office in the impeachment trial.

A phone conversation between Bennett and Clinton adviser Mickey Kantor is recounted in "Shadow: Five Presidents and the Legacy of Watergate," by Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward. The Associated Press obtained a copy in advance of Tuesday's release of the book.

Another passage shows Starr standing firm in his determination to send a report to the House full of explicit detail on Clinton's relationship with the former intern, despite attempts by some on his staff to have him focus on the President's alleged legal wrongdoing and go easy on the sex.

The reports' lengthy narrative "shows how pathetic Clinton is, that he needs therapy, not removal," the book quotes Starr lawyer Brett Kavanaugh as saying. "Our job is not to get Clinton out of office. It's just to give information."

But Starr is said to have dug in, telling staff members: "I love the narrative!"

Older than oldest living person

KUALA LUMPUR: A Malaysian man who says he is 141-year old has staked his claim to the title of world's oldest living person, currently held by an American woman, a news report said Tuesday, reports AP.

Omar Abbas, who says he was born on September 26, 1857, has received the support of Malaysia's health minister and the Malaysia Book of Records, the Sun newspaper reported.

The book states that Omar does not have a birth certificate, but the registration department where he lives has verified his birth date.

That would make him more than two decades older than Sarah Knauus of Pennsylvania, currently deemed the world's oldest living person at age 118.

Malaysian citizens were not issued birth certificates until June 1926. Residents born before then were given ration cards which recorded their particulars.



This recent photo shows a baby born on June 6, 1999 from a zebra father and a donkey mother, the first natural crossbreeding between the two species in Japan, at Nasu Safari Park in Nasu, Tochigi Prefecture. The hybrid animal, called a "jinkey" scientifically, has black-and-white striped legs and mane. Although its head is brown, it has the lean shape of a zebra, according to zoo officials. —AFP photo

Basic overhaul needed to protect US N-labs from security leaks: Report

WASHINGTON, June 15: Describing a "culture of arrogance" at the Energy Department and nuclear labs, an influential intelligence advisory panel told President Bill Clinton that his proposed security improvements fall short of what is needed to protect against nuclear thefts, reports AP.

The panel, asked by the president three months ago to closely examine security problems at the Energy Department, strongly recommended that nuclear programmes be placed under a new agency either within the department or altogether independent.

In a scathing 57-page report, the panel, headed by former Republican Sen. Warren Rudman,

concluded that the Energy Department is "incapable of reforming itself." It said only a dramatic overhaul of the government's nuclear programmes would ensure the needed security and counterintelligence improvements.

"Organisational disarray, managerial neglect, and a culture of arrogance — both at DOE headquarters and the labs themselves — conspired to create an espionage scandal waiting to happen," the report declared.

Rudman briefed Clinton on the findings early Monday.

In a statement, the president said the department "represents the best of America's scientific talent and expertise."

And he said the administration has "taken unprecedented steps to reduce the vulnerability of our secrets at the labs."

"We remain committed to taking the necessary steps to safeguard our nation's secrets," Clinton added, without commenting directly on whether to reorganise the department.

A senior official knowledgeable about the report, said Rudman told the president he had "good news and bad news" about the security mess that erupted into the open in early March with the firing of a scientist at the Los Alamos nuclear weapons lab in New Mexico.

Rudman told Clinton that the president's directive in

February 1998 to beef up security at the research labs was a "positive step" and more than what had been done by previous presidents.

"The bad news is that people to this day are trying to keep (the directive) from being implemented," Rudman told the president, according to the senior official, who spoke on condition of not being identified further.

In March, Clinton asked the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board to examine past security and counterintelligence lapses at the Energy Department and its nuclear weapons labs and recommend further steps needed to protect the nation's nuclear secrets.

The panel heard from more than 100 witnesses — all of whom were assured their views would be held confidential — and reviewed thousands of pages of documents.

It concluded that over 20 years or more, an entrenched bureaucracy both at the department and in the research labs demonstrated "an arrogant disregard for authority" and took security and espionage concerns lightly.

There was "a staggering pattern of denial" when it came to security and the growing threat of espionage from China and other countries, the report said.

The report praised Energy Secretary Bill Richardson's recent actions to beef up security

and counterintelligence but questioned whether those improvements would last once Richardson leaves office.

The report said panel members were "extremely skeptical" that any reforms will "gain more than a toothhold" in the department and the labs. A more basic overhaul was needed.

The panel suggests two alternatives: Create a semi-autonomous agency within the Energy Department with "a clear mission" to maintain the nuclear weapons programme. Or, create an independent agency, similar to NASA, that would have control over nuclear weapons programmes, including the research labs.