

US, Russia sign Kosovo peacekeeping deal

Yeltsin approves Helsinki accord

HELSINKI, June 19: The United States and Russia signed an agreement ending a standoff over Moscow's peacekeeping role in Kosovo as Serb forces raced to meet the deadline for their pullout from the Yugoslav province, reports Reuters.

US Defence Secretary William Cohen and Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeev signed the agreement in Helsinki on Friday night after three days of intense negotiations.

Cohen said the agreement giving the Russians a role in the NATO-led KFOR peacekeeping force met "two fundamental requirements".

"It preserves the unity of command necessary to make KFOR an effective military force and gives Russia a unique role by providing for operations of Russian forces within KFOR sectors run by the United States, France and Germany," Cohen said.

He said the two sides had also agreed to reopen the airport at the Kosovo capital, Pristina, to all members of the peace force. A small contingent of Russian troops had seized the airport in a move that caught NATO by surprise a week ago.

Sergeev said Russia would provide 3,600 troops for the peacekeeping force, which is due to total around 50,000.

"The Russian contingent will remain under the complete political-military control of the Russian side," he said.

Cohen said KFOR officers would have "tactical control" over the Russians.

A delighted US President Bill Clinton said in the German Rhine city of Cologne he ex-

pected the agreement would be honoured.

The three things we fought for 79 days to achieve — the Serb forces out, the international force with NATO at its core, and the refugees coming home — are being achieved, Clinton said at a photo session with British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

"And I am profoundly grateful for that."

In Moscow, Itar-Tass news agency quoted Prime Minister Sergey Stepashin as saying President Boris Yeltsin — who is due to meet Clinton in Cologne on Sunday at a group of eight meeting backed the Helsinki accord.

"There shouldn't be any difficulties, if the reaction of the G8 heads is anything to go by," Stepashin was quoted as saying.

He also said Russia "will be most actively and directly involved" in Kosovo, including the disarming of "illegal groups" — an apparent reference to separatist forces of the ethnic Albanian Kosovo Liberation Army.

The Helsinki accord is expected to provide a major boost to the Cologne G8 summit which had been overshadowed by the row between Russia and NATO over Kosovo. The meeting brings together the leaders of the seven richest industrial nations — the United States, Britain, Germany, France, Japan, Italy and Canada — and Russia.

In Brussels, NATO said three quarters of the estimated original 40,000 Serb ground troops in Kosovo had left, and they were on track to meet the Sun-

day midnight deadline for a total withdrawal.

NATO troops moved into positions near the northern border with the rest of Serbia as Serb forces raced to meet a Friday midnight deadline for clearing out of the Kosovo heartland. Thousands of Serb civilians fearful of reprisals are also leaving.

As the Serbs departed, ethnic Albanian refugees continued to return. Around 50,000 of almost one million refugees have defied pleas from aid agencies not to head back until their safety was assured.

UN war crimes investigators are also arriving in Kosovo to document the alleged murder of some 10,000 ethnic Albanians and bring those responsible to justice.

Earlier AP says: More than 3,600 Russian troops will help NATO keep the peace in Kosovo, patrolling sectors commanded by French, German and American generals instead of operating independently as Moscow wanted. US and Russian leaders agreed.

This agreement recognises the stakes the United States and Russia share in Europe. US Defence Secretary William Cohen said Friday during a news conference on the third and final day of negotiations that teetered on the brink of failure until the last hours.

Russia's role in postwar Kosovo is particularly sensitive because of its historical ties to the Serbs, who expelled ethnic Albanians from Kosovo by the hundreds of thousands. Moscow opposed NATO's 78-day bombing campaign against Yu-



(R-L) US Secretary of Defence William Cohen (R), Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, Finland's President Martti Ahtisaari, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and Russian Minister of Defence Igor Sergeev face media during a joint press conference at the presidential castle in Helsinki Friday. Russia and the United States signed an agreement on Moscow's participation in the Kosovo peacekeeping force (KFOR) after extended negotiations in the Finnish capital.

goslavia, and it had insisted it be given a peacekeeping role on even footing with NATO.

Cohen said the deal, which must be approved by NATO's political authorities and by the Russian government, met NATO's requirement that all countries contributing peacekeeping troops to Kosovo operate under the command of NATO generals.

AFP adds: Russian President Boris Yeltsin has "approved" the accord signed in Helsinki

on Russia's role in Kosovo's peacekeeping force. Prime Minister Sergei Stepashin said Saturday in Cologne in a statement broadcast by Russian public television RTR.

Earlier, the ITAR-TASS news agency quoted Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov as saying Russia has a "worthy" role to play in the Kosovo Force (KFOR).

"We have obtained a participation worthy of our country in the peacekeeping operations,

which will be carried out on the basis of the UN Security Council resolution," signed June 10, Ivanov said.

Moscow and Washington signed an agreement late Friday that limits the deployment of Russian troops in Kosovo to 3,600, spread among three sectors, as part of the NATO-led peacekeeping operation.

The three sectors will be the US-controlled eastern zone, the northern French zone and the German southern zone.

Delhi won't accept third party mediation: Vajpayee

SRINAGAR, India, June 19: India on Saturday hailed international support to its action against Islamic raiders in Kashmir, as the military reported fighting was raging in pockets of the disputed Himalayan land, reports AFP.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said India acknowledged the world community's understanding for its military offensive, but added it will not accept any mediation to end the conflict with Pakistan-backed guerrillas.

"We respect the international goodwill shown towards us," Vajpayee said before leaving on a two-day official visit to Bangladesh.

But "there is no need for any mediation... It is a bilateral issue and we will resolve it," Vajpayee told reporters.

India has traditionally opposed any third-party mediation with Pakistan over Kashmir. Islamabad wants a UN role. Bangladesh has offered to mediate.

Vajpayee sent this week a letter to US President Bill Clinton explaining India's stance, ahead of a G8 summit now going on in Germany.

Clinton had asked Islamabad to withdraw its troops from Indian-controlled Kashmir and New Delhi expects the G8 to put similar pressure on Pakistan.

India, accusing Pakistan of "aggression", says Islamic militants and Pakistani regular soldiers have intruded into its zone of Kashmir.

Military sources on Saturday said Indian soldiers were locked in a raging combat in efforts to dislodge the guerrillas from strategic positions in the battle of Kargil.

The air force spokesman said fighter jets conducted several sorties over the battle-zone on Saturday but added details of air strikes if any would be available later.

"We are operating in close coordination with the army and the air missions in the zone

are as per their requirement," the spokesman said.

The air force, which has orders not to cross the Line of Control (LoC) dividing the two zones of Kashmir, has limited air strikes to prevent casualties on the ground where Indian troops are deployed in thousands.

Military source also confirmed reports that Indian gunners Friday shelled an unspecified number of military facilities in the region of Skardu, in Pakistan-administered Kashmir.

An army spokesman, however, clarified the shelling did not target a Pakistani military headquarters in Skardu, but said the attacks were directed against administrative facilities in the region across the LoC.

The fighting was mainly concentrated in the Bataik mountainous region in Kashmir where ground forces backed by the artillery have launched attacks to capture Tiger Hill.

Benazir accuses Sharif of isolating Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, June 19: Pakistan opposition leader Benazir Bhutto today accused Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of isolating Islamabad diplomatically after fighting broke out along the Line of Control and said he "did not know how to reduce tension and preserve peace," reports PTI.

In a statement issued today, Benazir who is living abroad said, "at this critical juncture in our country's history, the demand of the Pakistan Awami Ittehad to form an interim government of national consensus had assumed even greater urgency."

The former prime minister said Pakistan People's Party (PPP) had full confidence in the ability of the armed forces to

defend the territorial integrity and solidarity of Pakistan.

"However, the diplomatic and political cover that the armed forces need cannot be given by the unrepresentative regime of Nawaz Sharif."

The Nawaz regime came into power through a rigged election, which cannot motivate or mobilise the masses," she alleged.

Benazir said the "failure" of the Nawaz foreign policy is evident from the fact the United States, which had tilted in favour of Pakistan in 1971, is now tilting towards India in holding Pakistan responsible for the current situation, "this is a deplorable circumstance, which is demoralising the nation," she remarked.

Nepal to maintain close ties with India, China: PM

KATHMANDU, June 19: Newly-elected Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai today pledged to retain Nepal's Non-Aligned foreign policy and maintain closer ties with China and India, reports AFP.

Announcing the Nepali Congress government's policies over state radio three weeks after his appointment, Bhattarai said his top priorities were developing agriculture, alleviating rural poverty, reducing unemployment level and maintaining law and order.

Bhattarai said "any kind of use of arms by any quarters will not be tolerated." In a reference to a three and a-half-year-old "People's War" launched by Maoist insurgents which has so far claimed more than 800 lives.

16 die as train rams tractor in Bihar

NEW DELHI, June 19: Sixteen wedding guests were killed when the tractor they were riding on was rammed by a train in the eastern Indian state of Bihar, the Press Trust of India said today.

Five others were seriously injured in the collision in the Samastipur city as they made their way to a wedding late Friday, the news agency said.

UNSC extends mandates of Bosnia missions

UNITED NATIONS, June 19: With the Kosovo peace still fragile, the Security Council authorised NATO to keep peacekeepers in Bosnia for another year and also decided Friday to keep the separate UN civilian mission there for the same period, reports AP.

In a resolution, the council extended the mandates of both missions until June 21, 2000.

Security Council approval for the NATO-led Stabilisation Force in Bosnia, or SFOR, provides a legal basis for the operation under international law.

The council took the action earlier this month in authorising KFOR, the international peacekeeping force that has been dispatched to Kosovo to ensure the return of refugees and disarm the rebel Kosovo Liberation Army.

Edward and Sophie tie the knot

LONDON, June 19: Sophie Rhys-Jones, elegant in a fitted ivory gown, married Britain's Queen Elizabeth II's youngest son Prince Edward today, reports AFP.

Without a hint of nerves, the couple spoke clearly and with confidence as they repeated their wedding vows at St. George's Chapel, Windsor, in a deliberately low-key late afternoon ceremony.

At around 5:15 p.m. (1615 GMT) the couple was married, Edward slipping a simple gold band, handed by his best man and eldest brother Prince Charles, on to Rhys-Jones' finger.

The bride remained smiling throughout, showing few nerves even as she stepped from the black Rolls-Royce, veiled in full-length silk chiffon.

A specially-commissioned "Fanfare for Sophie" played by the Royal Marines marked her entrance to the chapel, before she made her way down the aisle on the arm of her father.

Her dress was distinct in its simplicity: a pannelled dress-coat with long bias-cut sleeves, V-neck and train in silk crepe and organza, embroidered with thousands of cut-glass and pearl beads.

By mid-morning, a few hundred people had gathered in the brilliant sunshine around

Windsor Castle, including a few dozen diehard royalists who had camped out overnight to be in prime position for the big event.

Waving British flags, they chatted happily as they waited patiently for the hours to pass.

Edward's two older brothers Charles and Andrew and his sister Anne enjoyed lavish ceremonies before crowned heads and huge audiences at St Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey.

But the prince, seventh in line to the throne, and his bride, a public relations executive, have eschewed pomp and ceremony, inviting friends and family rather than politicians and foreign royalty.

It won't be that anonymous, of course. The demands of public interest mean two and half an hours of wedding coverage will be beamed live around the world to a potential audience of hundreds of millions.

Sixteen cameras alone will cover the event inside the chapel.

And up to 8,000 invited members of the public are being admitted to the castle precincts to see the bride and groom, with several thousand more expected to line the route of a carriage procession through the streets after the ceremony.



Wedding fever hits Windsor Saturday as a Windsor Teddy bear shop window shows "Prince teddy" on his wedding day. Prince Edward and Sophie Rhys-Jones got married Saturday in a low-key ceremony at the St George's Chapel in Windsor.

— AFP photo

Clinton delays moving embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem

WASHINGTON, June 19: President Bill Clinton, anxious not to wreck the chances of progress in Middle East peace talks, on Friday delayed moving the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem for at least six months, reports Reuters.

A law passed by Congress in 1995 decreed that the embassy should move by the end of 1999 but also gave the president the power to postpone the transfer in the national interest.

A statement issued in Cologne, where Clinton is attending a Group of Eight summit, said he invoked his waiver power "to protect our critical national security interests, most crucially in preserving the prospects for a comprehensive, just and lasting peace."

An embassy moved would infuriate the Palestinians and other Arabs and would damage Washington's ability to mediate.

Most countries reject Israel's claim to Arab East Jerusalem, captured in 1967 war and claimed by Palestinians as the capital of a future independent state.

The White House noted that both Israel and the Palestinians have agreed to discuss the future of Jerusalem in "Final status" talks expected to resume once Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak forms a coalition government.

Talks between Israel and the Palestinians had made little progress under outgoing Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu.

The White House said: "At a time when there is real potential for movement in the peace process, and as we look forward to the start of those crucial negotiations, the United States should not be taking steps of its own that prejudice those negotiations and make them more difficult."

"The differences that remain between Israelis and the Palestinians can only be resolved through direct negotiations and the United States should do everything it possibly can to facilitate their success," it added.

Asad Abdul-Rahman, executive committee member of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), welcomed the decision. "We think this is very encouraging," he said.

DPRK to attend talks with ROK in Beijing

SEOUL, June 19: Pyongyang today confirmed it would attend government-to-government talks in Beijing next week despite a naval clash between the two Koreas in which a North Korean boat was sunk, Seoul officials said, reports AFP.

"North Korea today informed us through the truce village of Panmunjom that North Korean delegates will come to the vice-ministerial-level talks," a Unification Ministry spokesman said.

Anwar's trial Lawyers urge judge to imprison Mahathir

KUALA LUMPUR, June 19: Anwar Ibrahim's lawyers in his sodomy trial urged the judge on Saturday to imprison Malaysia's prime minister for contempt of court after he delivered a searing diatribe against his onetime portage at a ruling party convention, reports AP.

Anwar's lawyer, Karpal Singh, said the remarks by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad would jeopardise the chance of a fair trial for the former deputy prime minister, is on trial on a charge of sodomizing his then-family driver in 1993.



MOC2-135a Malin Space Science Systems/NASA

This picture from MGS's Mars Orbiter Camera (MOC) released Thursday by NASA shows a heart shape on Mars. The shape is actually a pit formed by a collapse within a straight-walled trough known in geological terms as Graben.

— AFP photo

BRIEFLY

8 more rebels freed in Colombia: Marxist rebels who hijacked a commercial airliner on April 12, abducting its 41 passengers and crew, freed another eight of their hostages on Friday in a war-torn corner of northern Colombia, Reuters reports from Bogota.

But the kidnap ordeal continued for 16 other seized when National Liberation Army (ELN) rebels commandeered a Fokker 50 aircraft operated by domestic carrier Avianca moments after takeoff from the northeast city of Bucaramanga.

Gaddafi begins Sudan visit: Libyan leader Moamer Gaddafi began a two-day state visit Friday, his first to Sudan since 1992, amid efforts by Tripoli to make peace between the regime and opposition forces, AFP reports from Khartoum.

Gaddafi, who was initially expected Thursday, said in an arrival statement that he will hold talks with Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir on bilateral, Arab and other issues of common interest.

Editor of weekly held in Iran: The editor-in-chief of a moderate Iranian weekly has been arrested on the orders of a Tehran revolutionary court, newspapers reported yesterday, AFP reports from Tehran.

Heshmatollah Tabarazi, chief editor of Hoveyat-e Khish and a former radical activist now close to Iran's reformist President Mohammad Khatami, appeared before the conservative court on Thursday, the papers said. He was ordered detained in Evin prison in northern Tehran.

Israeli jets strike S Lebanon: Israeli warplanes attacked South Lebanon on Friday, targeting suspected guerrilla hideouts, AP reports from Rashaya. Two Israeli jets fired two missiles at 7:30 pm local time (1530 GMT) in a raid near the Zillaya valley, 12 miles (20 kilometers) northeast of the Israeli border. Lebanese security officials said on customary conditions of anonymity, in Jerusalem, jets attacked guerrilla targets in the area of Zillaya, 9 miles (15 kilometers) southwest of the town of Rashaya, an Israeli army spokesman said.

KLA promises to keep guns off Kosovo streets: KFOR

PRISTINA, Yugoslavia, June 19: The ethnic Albanian guerrilla movement, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), has promised that its fighters will no longer carry weapons in Kosovo's towns and cities, a spokesman with the KFOR international peacekeeping force said here Saturday, reports AFP.

"The KLA, of its own initiative, said it will not carry arms in the streets of populated areas," the spokesman said.

"They said they were making the gesture as a contribution to a more secure and more stable environment in Kosovo," he said, adding that the measure came into force overnight.

Another NATO official said the KLA had also agreed that its fighters would no longer wear

uniforms in the southwestern part of Kosovo under the control of German KFOR troops. He did not immediately know if the order was valid across all the provinces.

The development came as KLA leaders and KFOR commander British Lieutenant-General Mike Jackson negotiated the final details of a demilitarisation agreement for the guerrillas.

A NATO officer said a draft version of the agreement had already been sent to the North Atlantic Council of NATO ambassadors in Brussels for a "silent procedure" ending at 10:00 a.m. (0800 GMT) — meaning that if no ambassador raises objections by that time, it is understood that the council has given its approval.

Suu Kyi asks Myanmar women to fight for democracy

BANGKOK, June 19: Embattled opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi encouraged Myanmar women to fight for democracy in a statement released Saturday on Women of Burma Day, which was also her 45th birthday, reports AP.

"There is a great need for our women of Burma to use their capabilities to bring democracy and human rights to our country," Suu Kyi said in a statement received in Bangkok.

Myanmar, which has been ruled by the military since 1962, is also known as Burma. Suu Kyi, the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize winner, spent six years under house arrest from 1989-95 for her role in trying to restore democracy to the country.

Women of Burma Day, which is not recognised as a national holiday, was created by Suu Kyi's supporters as a way to celebrate the struggles and achievements of Burmese women.

"It is no longer possible even for housewives to keep out of politics, because politics has invaded the traditional domain of housewives," Suu Kyi said.

"The root cause of upward spiraling commodity prices, greatly increased charges for electricity and rising costs of education and health care is a political one," she said.

Suu Kyi and many

economists have blamed the military government for economic mismanagement that has plunged the resource-rich country into poverty. Power cuts are a daily occurrence.

The military spends nearly half the government's budget on defence, while its appropriations for health care and education have steadily dwindled during the past decade.

Suu Kyi delivered the statement to members of her political party, the National League for Democracy, at its headquarters in the capital of Yangon on Friday.

She spent Saturday giving food to Buddhist monks, as she customarily does on the 19th of each month to honour her late father.

In Bangkok, more than 20 women from Myanmar protested against military rule in front of the Myanmar Embassy. Dressed in traditional Myanmar sarongs, they chanted anti-military slogans.

In her statement, Suu Kyi also addressed Myanmar and ethnic minority women who have fled the country. More than 100,000 mostly ethnic refugees from Myanmar have been living in camps in Thailand for several years, having fled to avoid campaigns by the Myanmar army.