

Israeli blitz undermines peace: Lebanon

BEIRUT, June 25 : Prime Minister Salim Hoss warned Friday that Israel's deadly air strikes on Lebanon threatened the resumption of peace talks and the chances of an Israeli pullout from south Lebanon within a year, reports AFP.

"What happened was really atrocious. We don't see that this will help the resumption of the peace talks. This will undermine the peace process," Hoss said in an interview with CNN.

"We don't believe that the Israelis will fulfill their promise to withdraw from Lebanon within a year given what has been happening in Lebanon over the past few days, and particularly last night," he added.

Israel's incoming Prime Minister Ehud Barak had vowed to end Israel's 21-year occupation of southern Lebanon within a year by resuming peace negotiations with Syria which have been frozen since 1996.

The Hoss government was

holding an extraordinary meeting early Friday to discuss the Israeli raids, which killed 10 people and wounded 54 others and inflicted massive damage on power stations, bridges and communications centres.

Hoss said there had been no contacts with Israel about the escalation of violence. "No, of course not, there are no contacts with Lebanon and Israel at all."

The Israeli raids, the bloodiest in three years, were ordered by outgoing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government after Hezbollah guerrilla attacks on northern Israel that killed two and wounded six others.

Barak's office said the prime minister-elect was only informed of the attacks afterwards, but Hoss said he believed he was aware of the decision.

"Netanyahu couldn't have done it alone. I think there was a collusion between the two," he said.

Barak angered by outgoing govt's attack

Lebanese newspapers branded the Israeli assault a new "war" against Lebanon following the 1996 Grapes of Wrath offensive which killed 175 people, mostly civilians.

"Were these raids Barak's grapes of rosy peace promises or Netanyahu's grapes of farce or maybe just the grapes of the new Israeli coalition in Israel," said the leading An Nahar newspaper.

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak distanced himself Friday from a decision by outgoing Premier Benjamin Netanyahu to launch wide-ranging air strikes against Lebanon overnight in response to a rocket attack on northern Israel by Lebanese guerrillas.

Barak was only informed afterwards about the attacks,

which targeted civilian infrastructure, killed 10 people and will likely complicate Barak's stated aim of reviving moribund peace negotiations with Lebanon and its Syrian patron.

"The acting government is, under the law, solely responsible for the decisions taken and the actions carried out," David Ziso, Barak's spokesman, told AFP.

"The government only informed Barak once the decision to authorize the air strikes was taken," he said.

Israel radio quoted other Barak aides as saying the incoming prime minister was angry about the decision to attack civilian targets, which included two power stations, four bridges and a telecommunications complex in Lebanon.

Netanyahu's government or-

dered the air raids in retaliation for a rocket attack on northern Israel by the Syrian- and Iranian-backed Islamic militia Hezbollah which killed two civilians and seriously wounded another.

Barak is still negotiating with other political parties to form a coalition government and Ziso said the sudden escalation of the Lebanon conflict has added urgency to the talks.

"Barak is accelerating the coalition negotiations so he can take control of things as quickly as possible, notably about Lebanon," he said.

Barak defeated Netanyahu by a landslide in May 17 elections and has vowed to resume negotiations with Syria and Lebanon and withdraw Israeli troops from south Lebanon within a year.



Lebanese Army soldiers inspect the wreckage of Jamhour power station Friday. The power station located 10 km east of Beirut was bombed Thursday by Israeli warplanes. Lebanon braced for further attacks after Israel unleashed its heaviest air assault in three years, killing 10 people in what media in Beirut branded a new "war" by the Jewish state.

— AFP photo

US gen meets Sharif to defuse tension

ISLAMABAD, June 25 : A top US general met Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif Friday to press home US concerns over the escalating crisis in Kashmir, officials said, reports AFP.

The meeting came just after the US State Department urged Pakistan-backed guerrillas in Indian Kashmir to withdraw to help defuse tensions between the world's newest nuclear powers.

General Anthony Zinni, commander-in-chief of the US Central Command, who arrived on Thursday, has already met Pakistan army chief general Pervez Musharraf.

No details of the talks between Sharif and Zinni were given by Pakistani officials.

US diplomatic sources said the discussions were "informal and confidential" taking in various aspects of the crisis including calls for the withdrawal of rebels from the Indian side of the divided Himalayan state.

The high-level US mission, which includes Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Gibson Lanpher, came amid fears the current tensions may escalate into a fourth war between the arch rivals.

The United States has pressed Pakistan to withdraw alleged intruders from the Indian side of the territory while the Group of Eight powers last week urged the two rivals to stop fighting and respect the dividing Line of Control (LoC) in Kashmir.

"We want to see withdrawal of forces supported by Pakistan from the Indian side of the Line of Control," State Department spokesman James Rubin said in Washington.

India says the fighters in the Kashmir heights infiltrated from the Pakistan side of the border and include regular Pakistan soldiers.

Pakistan insists its forces have not crossed the Line of Control (LoC) and that it has no control over what it calls "freedom fighters" in the Indian zone.

After Zinni met the Pakistan

army chief, a foreign office spokesman said Washington should adopt a "balanced" approach as a "narrow" view of the crisis in Kashmir would encourage India to widen the conflict.

He said Pakistan wanted the United States to take into account the decade-old struggle by Kashmiris for self-determination and past Indian "violations" of the LoC.

Border clashes flared after India last month launched ground and air operations against Moslem guerrillas perched on strategic heights in Indian Kashmir.

Sharif on Thursday renewed

his call for new talks with India to end the conflict.

If the tensions in Kashmir escalated into a war it would cause "irreparable" losses to both sides, he said during a visit to frontline troops.

"India should try to extinguish the big fire engulfing the whole of Kashmir instead of focussing on the Kargil issue," Sharif said referring to Indian accusations the Kashmiri militants are backed by Pakistani army regulars.

He reiterated the occupation of Kargil peaks by the freedom fighters was part of the 11-year old separatist struggle.

Sharif said the world com-

munity has acknowledged that South Asia was now a nuclear flashpoint, accusing New Delhi creating a war-like situation on the LoC.

Meanwhile thousands of Kashmiris staged an anti-India rally here Friday.

Led by leaders of several Kashmiri parties, the marchers demanded the withdrawal of Indian forces from Kashmir and hailed the separatist cause in Indian Kashmir.

They handed a memorandum to UN coordinator Robert Englund, condemning what they called India's "brutal suppression" of the Kashmiri movement.



Kashmiri women chant anti-India slogans during a large rally organised by all political parties of Pakistan-administered Kashmir to condemn Indian military activities in Kargil sector Friday. Thousands of people participated in the rally and shouted slogans against Indian troops and demanded quick withdrawal of forces from India-held Kashmir.

— AFP photo

US closes 7 embassies in Africa

PRETORIA, June 25 : The United States has closed seven of its embassies in Africa because of security threats, a spokesman at the US Embassy in Pretoria said Friday, reports AFP.

The missions have been closed for an indefinite period in the capitals of Namibia, Liberia, Senegal, Madagascar, Togo, the Gambia and Ghana since Thursday, the official, who asked not to be named, told AFP.

"In recent weeks the (US) State Service has received a number of threats against US embassies in those countries, so we have decided for the safety of American and other citizens in those areas to close them for the moment," he said.

It "remains to be seen" when the embassies will reopen, he said.

He declined to confirm reports that Washington was fearing attacks on its embassies by followers of suspected international terrorist Osama Bin Laden, saying the State Department never discloses the nature of threats.

Britain offers UN a rapid reaction force

LONDON, June 25 : Britain is putting together a rapid reaction force of several thousand troops which it will make available to the United Nations for peacekeeping missions, Foreign Secretary Robin Cook announced Friday, reports AFP.

Cook had indicated Thursday during a visit to Albania that he would make the troops announcement during a breakfast meeting here with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

Britain will become the first major military power to place a contingent permanently at the UN's disposal.

Red alert in Assam, Tripura

NEW DELHI, June 25: The northeastern Indian states of Assam and Tripura declared security alerts Friday, warning citizens to be on the lookout for bombs and acts of sabotage, which officials said are being planned by Pakistani agents, reports AP.

Both states, where militant tribal groups have been fighting for independence, put their security forces on alert and warned of possible activities by Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence unit, the United News of India reported.

A time bomb made of chemical explosives blasted the New

Jalpaiguri Railway Station in another northeastern state, West Bengal, on June 22, killing 20 people and injuring up to 80.

Two of the dead and at least 16 of the injured were soldiers on their way to fight an incursion into Kashmir, and officials have said they suspect possible Pakistani secret service involvement in the bombing.

Citing that explosion, the Assam state government put its security forces on "maximum alert" to guard airfields, oil refineries, supply lines, railway and bus stations and storage depots, the news agency re-

ported. The state government also asked citizens to use caution when visiting crowded places and to alert police if they spot an abandoned vehicle, unattended package or suspicious person.

The agency quoted a statement issued from the Assam state capital, Guwahati, as saying, "In the context of ongoing hostilities in Kashmir and the success achieved by the Indian armed forces in driving out Pakistan regulars and intruders from across the Line of Control, the possibility of Inter Services Intelligence aiding and abetting violence is high."

Mbeki promises greater role in African affairs

CAPE TOWN, June 25 : New President Thabo Mbeki on Friday spelled out a more assertive role for South Africa in continental affairs, telling parliament that Pretoria will "contribute whatever we can to towards the resolution of conflicts on our continent", reports AFP.

"We cannot accept that war, violent conflict and rapine are a permanent condition of existence for us as Africans," Mbeki said in his maiden state-of-the-nation address to a joint sitting of both houses of parliament here.

"As part of the world community of nations, we will make our due contribution to the construction of a new world order that will be responsive to the needs of especially the poor of the world."

In a wide-ranging speech, Mbeki also promised speedier delivery of services to the poor and tougher measures to combat crime.

As one of the first acts of his presidency after being sworn in on June 16 -- when Nelson Mandela stepped down -- Mbeki

convened a meeting in Pretoria of key players involved in the conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

He is due to attend a heads of state summit on proposals for a ceasefire in the DRC in Lusaka, Zambia, on Saturday.

Reports here have said Mbeki is ready to commit South African troops as part of a peacekeeping force in the DRC, should a ceasefire be agreed.

In his speech Friday, he said Africa would work towards "the resumption of her rightful place among the continents of our globe."

"Where necessary, we will call on the services of such outstanding statepersons as former presidents Mwalimu Julius Nyerere (Tanzania), Sir Ketumile Masire (Botswana) and Nelson Mandela to assist in the promotion of this agenda," he stated.

Before addressing parliament, the 57-year-old president took the national salute outside parliament during an air force fly-past and a 21-gun salute.

Reconciliation talks between rival E Timorese factions begin

JAKARTA, June 25: Reconciliation talks between pro and anti-independence East Timor camps opened here three hours late today after the delayed arrival of jailed resistance leader Xanana Gusmao, reports AFP.

Gusmao, accompanied by two lawyers, arrived at 12:30 pm (0530 GMT), after participants in the meeting agreed to wait for him to be released from his house jail in Central Jakarta before opening the talks.

Lawyer Johnson Panjaitan said the resistance leader had been unable to get away earlier as official approval from the Justice Minister failed to arrive on time.

The talks, closed to the media, were to be opened by the two Roman Catholic bishops of the former Portuguese colony.

The Daré II dialogue and reconciliation conference, will involve 60 participants from East Timor and abroad.

BRIEFLY

Brahmaputra water level rises:

Water level of River Brahmaputra has risen alarmingly in Assam due to incessant rains and crossed the danger mark in the eastern parts of the state, PTI reports from Guwahati.

Official sources said Thursday the river level was flowing above the danger mark in the upper Assam districts of Dibrugarh, Jorhat and Dhemaji following continuous rains in the upper reaches and along the char areas throughout Assam. The government was taking all possible measures for limiting the impact of the annually recurring menace of floods in the state, the sources said.

Two Egyptian newsmen jailed: Two prominent Egyptian journalists were sentenced to six months in prison Thursday for assaulting a policeman, AP reports from Cairo.

Mohammed Abd el-Koudous and Yehia Qalash had earlier complained to the Interior Ministry that policemen assaulted them when they visited a fellow journalist last year in Cairo's Torah prison. The ministry is in charge of the police force and prisons. The judge convicted El-Koudous and Qalash, who were not present in court, of assaulting the police officer in charge of the prison ward where their colleague Gamal Fahmi was being held.

Russian border guards kill 3: Russian border guards killed three suspected drug smugglers during a shootout Friday along Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan, officials said, AP reports from Dushanbe.

The border guard command said seven men crossing the Pyandzh River into Tajikistan were spotted by a patrol and a shootout ensued. Three of the suspects were killed. The four others managed to escape.

Child rapist executed in Manila: The Philippines yesterday executed convicted child rapist Eduardo Agbayani, the second prisoner to be put to death after a 23-year moratorium, prison officials said, AFP reports from Manila.

Agbayani, 51, who was convicted of raping his 14-year-old daughter in 1994, was pronounced dead at 3:11 pm (0711 GMT) after receiving a lethal injection at the national penitentiary. He was the second person to be executed in this country after the reintroduction of capital punishment. Leo Echegaray, another child rapist, was put to death on February 5.

Dyke named new BBC DG: The head of an independent Television company will become the new director general of the British Broadcasting Corp., the organisation's Board of Governors said Thursday, AP reports from London.

The governors said Greg Dyke, a millionaire TV producer who once donated money to Prime Minister Tony Blair's Labour Party, had "the skills, flair and experience" to lead the taxpayer-funded BBC into the 21st century. The director general is responsible for the overall output of the BBC, which has two national terrestrial TV channels, four satellite TV channels, five national radio stations and several dozen local radio stations.

6 Somalis killed in Mogadishu: Six people were killed and 11 others wounded in heavy fighting that erupted in the Somali capital overnight, clan elders told AFP yesterday in Mogadishu.

The fighting was between the Warsangeli and Eli-Omer sub-clans of the Abgal clan, dominant in north Mogadishu. Four of the killed were reported to be militiamen, while the other two were an elderly woman and a businessman hit by stray bullets.

South Korea warns North against missile test

SEOUL, June 25: South Korean President Kim Dae-jung warned Friday that another missile test by North Korea would seriously hurt the communist country's relations with its potential donors, including the United States, Japan and South Korea, reports AP.

"Blocking another North Korean missile launch test is a top policy priority of the three countries," Kim told reporters. "If the North test-fires a new missile, it will seriously hurt its relations with them."

Kim was commenting on reports that North Korea may be trying to follow up last year's missile test launch with another test as early as this summer.

Last August, North Korea surprised the world by firing a rocket that flew over Japan and landed in the Pacific. The North claimed that it launched a satellite, but Western officials believe it was a test of a three-stage ballistic weapon.

The development and sale overseas of missiles by the North, along with its suspected nuclear weapons programme, were major issues at high-level US-North Korea talks that ended in Beijing Thursday.

Charles Kartman, the chief US negotiator at the Beijing talks, was to fly to Seoul on Friday afternoon to brief South Korean officials on the talks.

The South Korean president also asked North Korea to free a detained South Korean tourist as soon as possible. The South Korean housewife was detained during a sightseeing tour of North Korea on Sunday.

North Korea accused her of encouraging a North Korean tour guide to defect to South Korea. Officials of the tour's organiser, the Seoul-based Hyundai industrial group, who met the unnamed housewife said she denied the charges.

Another AP report from Beijing says, South Korea expects rival North Korea to resume ne-

gotiations Saturday without the noisy demands for redress over the sinking of a North Korean gunboat that had previously halted the talks.

North Korean officials mentioned no preconditions when they telephoned their South Korean counterparts Thursday to offer to reopen the talks suspended two days earlier. South Korean Embassy spokesman Wi Keyul-chul said Friday.

The highest level contact between the two governments in 14 months, the talks on neutral ground in Beijing are supposed to focus on reuniting families separated by the division of the Korean peninsula into the communist North and the capitalist South 54 years ago.

North Korean negotiators ended the first session in 90 minutes Tuesday after chief delegate Pak Yong-su demanded South Korea apologise for last week's naval skirmish in a disputed part of the Yellow Sea.

Russian senators back troops for Kosovo

MOSCOW, June 25 : Russian senators unanimously approved Friday the deployment of 3,600 paratroopers to Kosovo to take part in the NATO-led peace force KFOR, Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeyev said, reports AFP.

The 126-0 vote in the Federation Council, the upper chamber of parliament, cleared the way for the swift deployment of soldiers to reinforce the 200 Russian paratroopers who currently control Kosovo's regional airport at Pristina.

A further 32 senators gave written approval for the operation.

The chamber, comprised of governors and regional leaders, gave the green light to the deployment despite concerns over funding the operation and fears that Russian troops could get sucked into clashes between fellow Orthodox Christian Serbs and returning ethnic-Albanian refugees.

The vote followed a formal request by President Boris Yeltsin for senators to authorise the move, which will cement Russia's role in the Kosovo operation for which Moscow spent weeks battling. Under the constitution, the upper house must approve all deployments of Russian troops abroad.

General Leonid Ivashov, a leading anti-NATO hawk in the defence ministry, told journalists that the first reinforcements could leave within hours. "The troops are ready to leave in three hours, but everything depends now on President Yeltsin, who must sign a decree authorising their departure," he said.

"We are taking part in peacekeeping in multi-ethnic regions, which is good for Russia, which is also a multi-ethnic country," Ivashov added, a reference to concerns raised by some senators ahead of the debate.

Delhi urged to ratify charter on torture

NEW DELHI, June 25 : India should immediately ratify the United Nations convention against torture which still persists despite a constitutional ban, the head of a human rights watchdog said Friday, reports AFP.

National Human Rights Commission chairman Justice M.N. Venkatachaliah, quoted by the Press Trust of India, said that although the government had pledged to ratify the convention in June 1997, it had yet to do so.

"I therefore urge that this step be taken at the earliest," he said, adding that despite a ban on torture in the constitution, it still "persisted" in India.

"Between the making of law, whether domestic or international, and its effective implementation, falls a shadow. And that shadow persists in respect of torture, the minds of those who practice it and the lives of those who are its hapless victims," he said.

US offers reward for Milosevic, others

PRISTINA, June 25: Brushing aside NATO appeals, ethnic Albanians torched Serb houses in western Kosovo and looted Serb-owned shops as Washington offered a 5 million dollars reward for help in convicting Slobodan Milosevic and others wanted for war crimes in the Balkans, reports AP.

In Belgrade, the Yugoslav parliament votes Friday on measures to give the Milosevic government power to crack down on dissent and keep its wartime controls over banking and the economy, despite the assembly's decision to lift the state of war imposed after NATO began bombing March 24.

Milosevic's autocratic rule has been shaken by the Kosovo conflict, in which Serb-led Yugoslavia sustained heavy bombing damage and was forced to agree to withdraw troops from Kosovo and allow in a NATO-led force.

In Pristina, British soldiers

swarmed around the commercial centre of the Kosovo capital late Thursday in an attempt to curb looting. During the 78-day NATO air bombardment, ethnic Albanians fleeing to nearby countries spoke of Serbs looting Albanian-owned businesses.

Now that Yugoslav forces have left the province under an international peace plan, ethnic Albanians are turning the tables on the Serbs.

Fires believed set by ethnic Albanians leveled Serb homes and much of the Gypsy quarter Thursday in the western Kosovo city of Pec. Serbs complained of an intensifying campaign of retaliation that was driving some from their homes.

The fires started before day-

break, and columns of smoke rose into the sky over the city throughout the day. A dozens homes burned by early evening, one in sight of a Serbian Orthodox monastery where increasing numbers of the city's Serbs are taking shelter.

"This is Kosovo. You have no place here now," Gokovic claimed the KLA fighters told him.

In an effort to bring justice to the thousands of victims of the Serb crackdown, the US State Department announced the 5 million dollars reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of people sought by the UN tribunal trying war crimes cases from the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo.

In addition to Milosevic and four colleagues indicted last month for alleged crimes in Kosovo, the tribunal also has indicted former Bosnian Serb leaders Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic. They were charged in the massacre of 6,000 Bosnian Muslims in 1995.

FBI forensic experts have begun work in the southern city of Djakovica host to some of the most horrific ethnic killings and brutality during the Kosovo conflict.



Yugoslav Army reservists sit atop a tank and a truck as several thousands of them block the roads near Kraljevo, some 150 km south of Belgrade Thursday, demanding payments for their military duties.

— AFP photo