

International

Indian troops capture key peak

Vajpayee denies secret deal

DRAS, India, June 29: The Indian Army recaptured a towering peak close to the frontier with Pakistan in a fierce battle after dawn Tuesday that claimed dozens of casualties, officers said, reports AP.

The fighting came after India sent a clear to an envoy from Islamabad on the weekend it was determined to evict all the Pakistan-based fighters who seized a range of mountains in Indian-controlled Kashmir.

Infantrymen clambered up Point 4700, known by its height in metres (15,500 feet), and stormed the 13 guerrilla positions on the mountain, five-km from the Line of Control, the 1972 ceasefire line.

The guerrillas retreated, but then launched a counterattack.

India rushed up more reinforcements to hold on to the hard-won positions, said officers said on condition of anonymity.

Reporters near the town of Dras could see the soldiers in white snow boots and helmets making their way up the precipitous slopes toward the battle line early Tuesday.

Thousands of artillery shells pummeled the mountain

through the night, sending up huge plumes of smoke, to prepare for the assault.

Initial and unconfirmed reports said five Indian soldiers were killed and 20 wounded. Officers estimated as many as two dozen fighters were killed on the other side.

The battle for 4700 was part of the groundwork for the expected attack on the most important peak remaining to be reclaimed in the Dras sector, the 16,500-foot (5,000-metre) Tiger Hill.

Tiger Hill overlooks India's National Highway 1, the life-line for supplies for the Ladakh region of northern Kashmir.

India says fighters who crossed the Line of Control are led by Pakistani Army troops. Islamabad has denied it, but the Pakistani Army chief acknowledged last weekend his troops were fighting.

Meanwhile, India acknowledged diplomatic efforts were under way to end the fighting.

The Foreign Ministry confirmed Monday that telephone

calls and messages between Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart, Nawaz Sharif, have kept communications open between the two nuclear-armed neighbours.

Sharif's envoy, former Pakistani Foreign Secretary Niaz Naik, met Vajpayee on Sunday.

But Vajpayee's security adviser, Brajesh Mishra, who also met Naik, told The Associated Press: "I don't see any forward movement."

Vajpayee convened a meeting of all major political parties Monday to brief them about the fighting and to seek a political consensus on New Delhi's approach. He said he would consider summoning Parliament into a special session for a public hearing.

In political footnote to the fighting, the Asian Age reported that salesmen from the Swedish maker of the Bofors gun, which was at the centre of a huge bribery scandal a decade ago, were in India to negotiate

the sale of spare parts and ammunition.

Business with the Celsius Corp., which took over Bofors, has been unofficially banned while investigations continued into an alleged \$50 million in kickbacks in the 1986 purchase of the gun. The scandal led to the defeat of Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in the 1989 election.

The 155 mm cannon has been the workhorse of the seven-week artillery war in northern Kashmir.

The official spokesman also confirmed that former Pakistan foreign secretary Niaz Naik had visited New Delhi as special envoy of Nawaz Sharif over the weekend during which he met Vajpayee and his principal secretary Brajesh Mishra, but he refused to elaborate.

But reports reaching here said Pakistan Foreign Office maintained that Naik's tour was "a private visit and it has nothing to do with Pakistan's foreign policy."

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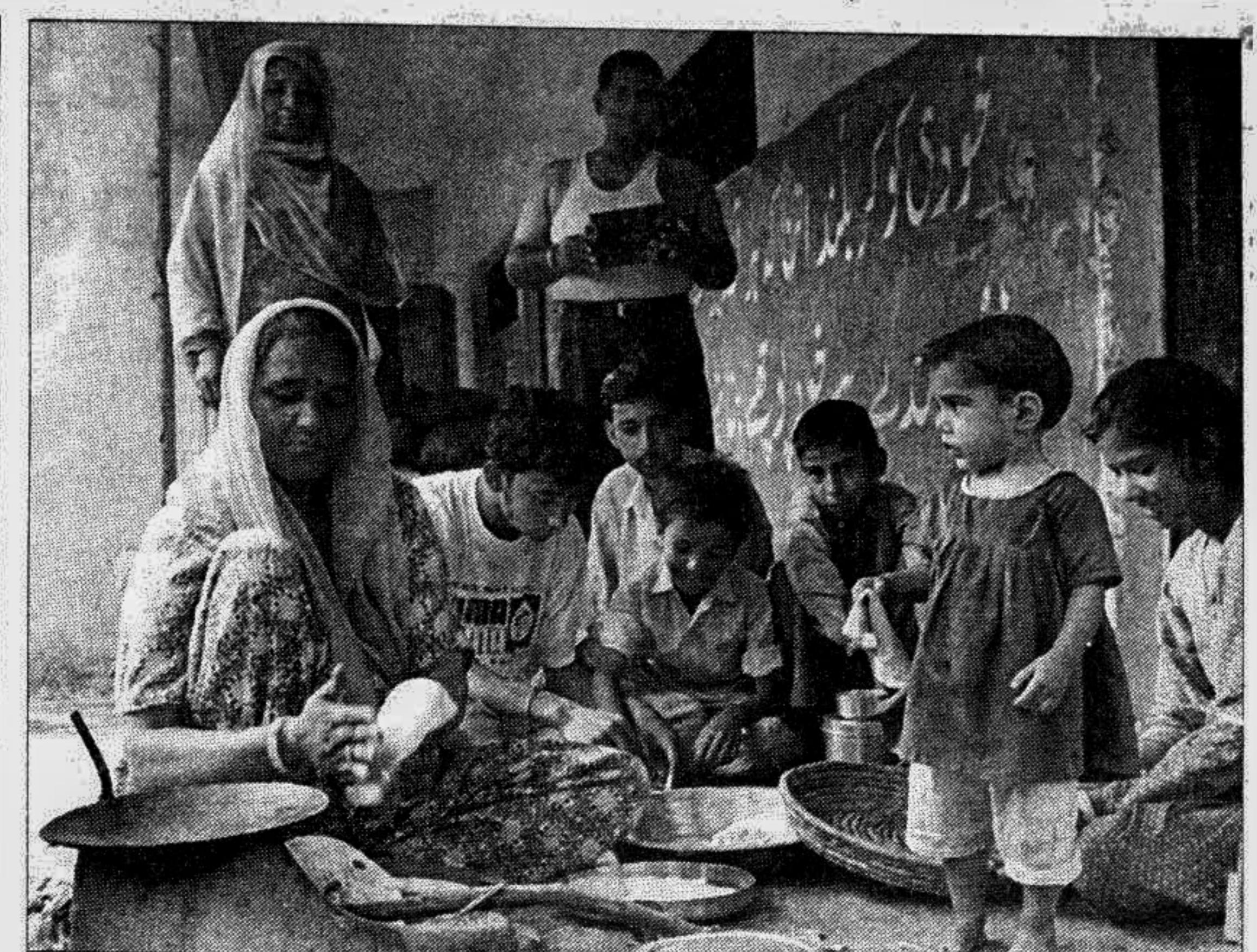
He maintained that there would be no further dialogue so long as the "incursion" continued, adding that "no proposals or mediation by third parties will be accepted" by India.

However, a spokesman of the External Affairs Ministry confirmed yesterday that Vajpayee and his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif had exchanged messages on the Kargil situation earlier.

"These messages were in continuation of their telephonic discussions of the past few weeks in this context," the spokesman said at the daily briefing on the on-going conflict between the two neighbours in Kashmir.

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Residents, migrated from their ancestral village following heavy shelling from the Pakistan side of Kashmir, cook food in a school room in Akhal, which acts as a make-shift shelter Sunday. More than 70,000 people have fled from 25 villages close to the border since the fighting erupted.

— AFP photo

'KLA abides by disarmament plan'

PRISTINA, Serbia, June 29: Kosovo rebels have met a deadline for establishing sites where they can turn in their weapons and appear to be abiding by a disarmament plan, a spokesman for the KFOR peace-keeping force in Kosovo said today.

"We have every reason to believe that the UCK (Kosovo Liberation Army) is in compliance with the undertaking" for disarming the province, Major Kenneth Pickles, a KFOR spokesman, told Reuters.

Pickles said that the rebels, who signed an accord on June 21 for a phased disarmament of the southern Serbian province, had met a deadline of midnight on Monday for establishing deposit sites for turning in their arms to place under KFOR guard.

The rebels have also agreed to bear weapons only in designated assembly areas from the same deadline, with only commanders and their guards permitted to be armed outside the assembly points.

Pickles said he had no immediate details on how many weapons had been turned in nor did he have an exact number of storage sites and assembly areas that had been established.

He said there were approximately 10 storage sites and five assembly areas in the British-protected sector alone.

Under terms of the deal signed by KFOR commander Lieutenant-General Sir Mike Jackson and KLA commander Hashim Thaqi, the KLA is bound to establish "secure weapons storage sites" and to progress towards demilitarisation over 90 days.

The first weapons were sur-



The Kosovo city of Pec lies in ruins Monday. Serb Orthodox Patriarch Pavle recently announced he would move to Pec, seat of the patriarchy, to encourage fleeing Serbs to return to Kosovo. But the church leader has yet to fulfil his promise, leaving the last 200 Serbs of Pec sheltering in the monastery complex, terrified and gripped by paranoia, — AFP photo

rendered on Monday morning. Removing some of the huge number of weapons in circulation in Kosovo is expected to help ease fears of the remaining Serb population, many of whom live in fear of revenge attacks from the ethnic majority Albanians subjected to brutal treatment by Serbs during the 16-month armed rebellion in the province.

AFP adds: UN chief Kofi Annan will make a new appeal

to top officials from a dozen countries on Wednesday to speed up deployment of UN police officers in Kosovo and reconstruction efforts.

Foreign ministers from the majority of leading industrialized countries are to attend the four-hour talks Wednesday focusing on civilian aspects of the international peace plan for the Serbian province, diplomats said.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook are among the leading figures attending the session to be chaired by Annan.

Annan will appeal to par-

17 Muslims killed in Kashmir village

JAMMU, June 29: Unidentified attackers swooped into a remote mountainous village in Jammu-Kashmir state and killed 17 Muslims in what police described Tuesday as rivalry between factions within a guerrilla group, reports AP.

A police spokesman said members of the Hizb-ul-Mujahideen, a pro-Pakistan group fighting against Indian forces in the northern state, were suspected of killing relatives of a rival faction late Monday in Mora Bachhi village, close to the ceasefire line with Pakistan.

The spokesman, who gave information on condition of anonymity, said it was not known immediately how the victims were killed.

The village, 230-km northwest of Jammu, winter capital of Jammu-Kashmir state, is located close to the guerrilla hub of Surankote, a small border town, police said.

Militants kill 7 policemen in Assam

GUWAHATI, India, June 29: Seven policemen were killed and nine wounded in India's strife-torn northeast when militants bombed the bridge police were crossing and opened fire on the survivors, a senior official said today.

Militants ambushed two vehicles carrying policemen on patrol at Dholabari, near Rangiya, killing seven policemen on the spot and injuring nine others, Dirajuddin Ahmed, an officer of the Special Operations unit of the Assam police said. Reuters

Police said they suspect a separatist guerrilla group over late Monday's attack in India's tea and oil rich northeastern state of Assam.

Rangiya is 52 km west of the state capital Dispur.

Police said the attackers set off a powerful remote-controlled bomb under the bridge as the vehicles crossed then opened fire on the survivors.

Israel suspends participation in Lebanon truce panel meet

BEIRUT, June 29: Israel has suspended its participation in meetings of the south Lebanon truce monitoring committee until Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak forms his government, the French delegation to the panel said today, reports AFP.

The French delegation said in a statement that Israel had informed it that it "would not be in a position to attend the meeting of the monitoring group scheduled for today."

The Israeli delegation said "the timing of the next meeting of the monitoring group will be made by the newly-elected government once it assumes office," the statement said.

France is the current chairman of the five-nation panel which monitors the April 1996 truce in southern Lebanon.

In Israel, a senior Defence Ministry official confirmed that Israel would not be attending today's meeting but declined to give any reason for the decision. "We won't be going to this meeting," the official said.

Thai Cabinet faces reshuffle

BANGKOK, June 29: Thailand's deputy prime minister and one of his junior ministers officially resigned today in a move designed to force a Cabinet reshuffle within the coalition government, reports AFP.

Deputy Prime Minister and Science and Technology Minister Suwit Khunhitti said he and his science deputy Ravee Hiranyachote would notify Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai of their decision later today.

Both are members of the Social Action Party (SAP), which has been torn by a factional spat over the allocation of ministerial portfolios.

Suwit said a party executive meeting on July 2 would determine the party's future and whether to remain in government.

Mounting violence led op-

White House plays down reports of Clinton-Gore friction

WASHINGTON, June 29: The White House worked to squelch the notion that President Bill Clinton is fuming over Vice President Al Gore's remarks about his conduct, reports AP.

"Don't believe everything you read in the newspaper," White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said Monday, referring to reports that said Clinton was angry after Gore criticised Clinton's behaviour in a June 16 speech announcing his candidacy for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Lockhart said Clinton thought Gore delivered a "great speech," and was impressed with the vision the vice president articulated. He denied the speech strained the Clinton-Gore friendship, saying Clinton has not displayed any hard feelings.

"I can tell you I talked to him half a dozen times, while we were in Europe, about the Gore announcement, the speech, the coverage, and he never expressed any anger to me," Lockhart said.

"They enjoy a very strong relationship."

An administration official speaking Monday on condition of anonymity, said White House Chief of Staff John Podesta told Clinton aides in a senior staff meeting that the president supports Gore 100 per cent — and instructed them to ensure they're not suggesting anything to the contrary.

A second administration official speaking Monday on condition of anonymity, said Podesta told staff to "keep your mouth shut" if they've got a problem with Gore's campaign or an opinion about his relationship.

China 'deeply concerned' over Kashmir tension

BEIJING, June 29: China Tuesday said it was "deeply concerned" over tensions in the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir, as Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif cut short a trip to Beijing because of the crisis.

India claims Pakistan army forces have joined Islamic militants who crossed into the Indian zone of divided Kashmir, a charge denied by Pakistan.

Indian forces have been

fighting to drive out the intruders and are engaged in clashes with Pakistan troops along the defacto border splitting the region.

The two countries have fought two of their three wars since becoming independent in 1947 over the Kashmir dispute.

Pakistan foreign ministry spokesman Tariq Alataf said Monday that because of the Kashmir situation Sharif would leave Tuesday immediately after his talks in Beijing.

He would overnight in Hong Kong before returning to Pakistan on Wednesday.

In his talks with Zhu, Sharif said a just and final settlement of the Kashmir dispute was necessary and stressed the ongoing conflict was part of a continuing saga of Indian aggression in the region, Alataf said.

The prime minister briefed the Chinese on the genesis and the development of the issue, as well as Pakistan's efforts to de-escalate the situation and the cessation of hostilities, he added.

"In the latter context, China is fully supportive of Pakistan's efforts and position," Cheng Ruisheng, a South Asia specialist at the China Institute of International Studies, said China would seek to remain neutral in the dispute, but would support Pakistani efforts to resume peace talks with India in an effort to resolve the issue.



Chinese President Jiang Zemin (R) points to a raucous group of journalists before speaking with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif at an official meeting Tuesday in Beijing. China yesterday said it was "deeply concerned" over tensions in the disputed Himalayan region of Kashmir, as Sharif cut short a trip to Beijing because of the crisis.

— AFP photo

Mahathir to find a 'suitable time' to retire

PUTRAJAYA, Malaysia, June 29: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said today he would find a "suitable time" to retire, but only after forthcoming general elections, reports AFP.

The 73-year-old premier, who has led Malaysia for 18 years, said his supporters kept urging him to stay in office.

"As such I can't really say when I want to retire," he was quoted as saying by the official Bernama news agency.

"I cannot announce when I will retire because it will have an effect on the sentiment of the government," he said at the new government headquarters south of the capital Kuala Lumpur.

Mahathir, whose former deputy Anwar Ibrahim was his anointed successor before their spectacular fall-out last September, said he still had too much work to do to consider handing out.

"I can't leave it to an inexperienced deputy to manage not just the party and government but also the election."

Mounting violence led op-

UN post attacked, 12 hurt

E Timorese factions reach accord on disarmament

JAKARTA, June 29: East Timor's rival factions have reached agreement on the thorny issue of how to give up their weapons ahead of a planned independence referendum, negotiators said Tuesday.

The problem of disarmament has been resolved," Leonardo Isaac, a pro-independence leader, told The Associated Press as talks entered fourth day. "We are still discussing other issues."

His statement was confirmed by an anti-independence backer, Herminio da Silva da Costa who said the talks had moved on to other issues. Observers reported more progress before the two sides broke for lunch.

Although it remains unclear how well any disarmament can be implemented in East Timor, which has been plagued by decades of deadly hatred, agreement would appear to bode well for the planned vote.

Mounting violence led op-

posed factions to open five days of reconciliation talks sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church. But the negotiations, scheduled to end Wednesday, have snagged over fundamental differences.

The UN chief of security has rushed to the scene, David Wimhurst, the spokesman for the UN mission in East Timor (UNAMET), told AFP by phone from the territory's capital Dili.

"Yes we have the same report. I can confirm there has been an attack, and it did take place this morning. We have sent the chief security officer there," Wimhurst said.

He added that he could only give fuller details on the attack once the security officer returned from Maliana, a town on the western border of the territory some 80 km from Dili.

It was the first reported violence against UNAMET since it started deploying officials and unarmed civilian police in East Timor ahead of a planned vote scheduled for August on independence.

Suwit said a party executive meeting on July 2 would determine the party's future and whether to remain in government.

RIO DE JANEIRO, June 29: Europe and Latin America have embarked on a new era