

BRIEFLY

Pak PM meets Hong Kong chief: Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif yesterday paid a brief courtesy call on Hong Kong Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa after cutting short a visit to China due to the Kashmir crisis, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

Sharif met Tung in "a brief meeting," a Hong Kong government spokesman said without giving further details. The Pakistani premier arrived late Tuesday from a two-day stay in Beijing. His programme in Hong Kong has been curtailed to allow him to return home early amid escalating tensions in Kashmir, a Pakistani consulate spokesman said earlier.

Clinton presents Medicare plan: President Bill Clinton on Tuesday unveiled his plan to modernise and financially shore up Medicare, the federal health care programme that covers some 39 million retirees, AFP reports from Washington.

"Nothing is more important than providing quality health care for our seniors," Clinton said at a White House ceremony.

Two quakes shake Central Asia: Two earthquakes shook three countries in Central Asia early yesterday, but no casualties or damage were reported, Russian news agencies said, AFP reports from Moscow.

The second earthquake, with its epicenter in Afghanistan, was the heavier, measuring five points on the Richter scale, seismologists said. It rocked Dushanbe, the capital of neighbouring Tajikistan.

Two killed in Mexico: Two military officers were killed on Tuesday in an attack on a unit of the presidential guard near the Los Pinos presidential residence here, the city's attorney general said, AFP reports from Mexico City.

Six gunmen attacked the military officers and robbed them of some 500,000 pesos (50,000 dollars) they had just withdrawn from a bank for the unit's daily operations, the attorney general's office of Mexico City said.

Renoir's painting sells at £3m: A painting by the French impressionist artist Renoir, which had been unseen for 20 years, was sold for more than three million pounds (4.7 million dollars, 4.6 million euros) at Christie's auction house in London on Tuesday, AFP reports from London. "La jeune fille au banc" (Young Girl on a Bench), painted by Pierre Auguste Renoir (1841-1919) in 1875, was part of a series of garden studies and was secured by a telephone bidder.

Bus-truck crash kills 6 in China: An overloaded bus skidded out of control on a rain-slicked highway and hit a truck west of Shanghai, killing six passengers, an official newspaper said Wednesday, AP reports from Shanghai.

The accident occurred Monday night near the city of Suzhou, the Wenhui Daily said. The area has been deluged by almost continuous rain for more than a week. The bus meant for 37 passengers was carrying 85 people, the newspaper said.

Ceausescu's goods in auction: Property and gifts once belonging to executed Communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu are to be sold at auction, the Romanian government said on Tuesday, Reuters reports from Bucharest.

A government statement said goods would be put on auction or sold on consignment, but gave no details. Gifts from Romanians or foreigners would be sold after expert assessment.

3 civilians killed in Aceh: Three civilians were found fatally stabbed and arson attacks forced more people to flee their homes in restive Aceh province, witnesses and medical workers said Wednesday, AP reports from Indonesia.

The three bodies were found Tuesday with neck wounds in the Tanah Jamboaya and Baktya districts in northern Aceh. The deaths bring the murder toll to five this week, including two primary school teachers found with fatal stab wounds Monday. Last week, unidentified gunmen killed about a dozen civilians and soldiers.

Nepal's Cabinet expanded: Nepal's Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai expanded his month-old government Wednesday to include 17 more ministers in the Cabinet, the state-run Radio Nepal announced, AP reports from Kathmandu.

Minister for Information Purna Bahadur Khadka was given the additional portfolio of the interior security ministry, becoming the second most powerful minister in the Cabinet. Former Finance Minister Ram Sharan Mahat was named foreign minister.

Li Peng to visit N Korea in Oct: A Chinese delegation headed by Li Peng, head of China's parliament and the country's second highest ranking official, is likely to visit North Korea in October, a Japanese financial daily reported yesterday, Reuters reports from Tokyo.

The Nihon Keizai Shimbun, quoting diplomatic sources in Beijing, said the visit will mark the 50th anniversary of formal ties between China and North Korea.

Blast kills 1 in Philippines: A grenade has been hurled into a prayer rally in the southern Philippines, killing one person and wounding nine, police said yesterday, Reuters reports from Zamboanga.

The culprit escaped and investigators said they suspected Tuesday night's attack was carried out by the Abu Sayyaf, a Muslim fundamentalist group blamed for a spate of bombings in the country's southern islands in recent years.

Australian DPM resigns: Australia's Deputy Prime Minister, Trade Minister and National Party leader Tim Fischer has resigned suddenly from all his official positions, party sources said yesterday, AFP reports from Sydney.

Fischer called a special meeting of his National Party parliamentary colleagues to inform them of his decision, but no information was immediately revealed about the reasons, the sources said.

Floods leave 18 dead in Japan: Flooding and landslides set off by pouring rain in southwestern Japan have left at least 18 people dead, 10 missing and 26 injured, police said Wednesday, AP reports from Tokyo.

National broadcaster NHK TV reported that at least 22 people were killed by early Wednesday. The rains, which began Tuesday, destroyed 37 homes and flooded about 5,000 homes, police said. The Meteorological Agency issued heavy rain warnings for wide areas of western Japan Wednesday morning.

Indian offensives continue

US presses on Pakistan to pull troops out of Kashmir

ISLAMABAD, June 30: Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif returns from Beijing today armed only with modest Chinese support against US demands to pull troops out of Indian Kashmir or risk a fourth war with archrival India, reports Reuters.

The United States turned up the heat on Islamabad today by openly accusing Pakistan of using regular troops in the seizure of strategic heights on the Indian side of disputed Kashmir, a charge Pakistan sternly denies.

A US official in Washington who declined to be named, said, "there are Pakistani regular forces involved, probably in the high hundreds. It's very substantial."

The statement was seen as a significant escalation of US pressure on Pakistan and a sign of Washington's frustration at scant progress towards a solution to the worst military standoff between Indian and Pakistan in nearly 30 years.

It was the first time the United States had publicly voiced charges which are common knowledge in the Pakistani capital but which have so far only been made under the cover of diplomatic anonymity or the safety of distant date-lines.

Pakistan daily maintains that the insurgents are Kashmiri "freedom fighters" over which Islamabad has no control, but the US statement put the onus for their withdrawal squarely on the shoulders of the two-time Pakistan premier, diplomats said.

Western governments had little doubt the occupying force comprises soldiers from the Northern Light Infantry, a regular army unit, although how many and in what ratio to "mujahideen (holy warriors)" was a subject of dispute.

A Sharif envoy appeared to be preparing public opinion for a withdrawal when he told the BBC that Indian and Pakistani officials could meet soon to prepare a schedule to withdraw

infiltrators from Indian Kashmir.

Former Foreign Secretary Naz Naik said the subject was reviewed in secret weekend talks he had in New Delhi with Prime Minister Atal Behari Va-

and artillery units pounded Muslim guerrilla bases in Kashmir today, as ground forces sought to press home their advantage after capturing two key peaks in the region. Air force officials said

larly intense on guerrilla positions in the Tiger Hills area, where Indian troops captured two strategic peaks on Tuesday. The current conflict began on May 9 when India launched operations against what it



A photograph of popular Indian film actress Mamta Kulkarni adorns the butt of the assault rifle of an Indian soldier at a Kashmir frontline near Kargil, June 29. Bunker-to-bunker fighting in Kashmir between Indian soldiers and Islamic raiders from Pakistan is nearing a decisive phase but the bloodiest battle is still to come, an Indian commander said yesterday.

payee and said he hoped a military exit would be followed by resumed peace talks between the two premiers.

He said that Indian and Pakistani military officials should meet to discuss the withdrawal, which could be read as tacit Pakistani acknowledgment of control over the "infiltrators". AFP adds: Indian air force

bombers flew numerous night-time sorties in the mountainous areas of northern Kashmir near the Line of Control (LOC) — the de facto border with Pakistan.

Artillery units also kept up a constant barrage throughout the night ahead of a visit to the battlefield by Indian Home Minister L K Advani.

Indian shelling was particu-

claims are regular Pakistani soldiers and Islamic guerrillas who crossed the LOC to take up positions in Indian-held Kashmir.

The Islamic guerrillas still control much of the Tiger Hills area in Drass sector, but Indian Army officials said Wednesday that their troops had managed to cut their main supply routes.

NATO seeks blunt Serb paramilitaries in Kosovo

Pressure mounts on Milosevic to quit

CACAK, Yugoslavia, June 30: About 10,000 protesters demanded the ouster of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic during a rally in a central Serbian town that organisers said was just the beginning of a wave of protests, reports AP.

The rally Tuesday was organised by several leading opposition parties that have united under the banner of Alliance for Change. The protest was a first test of whether the previously fragmented opposition could exploit public discontent with Milosevic's rule.

"We will continue the protests, day by day," said Vladan Batic, a leader in Alliance for Change. He said opposition leaders would meet Wednesday to set a schedule for new protests.

"Our demand is resignation of Slobodan Milosevic," protest organizer Goran Svilanovic

told the crowd who responded with deafening chants of "resignation, resignation."

Discontent has grown throughout Serbia, the largest republic of Yugoslavia, since Milosevic gave in to NATO demands after 78 days of bombing and pulled Serb troops and police out of the southern Serbian province of Kosovo. Serbs are increasingly disillusioned by the man whose policies brought on the bombing and made Serbia a pariah state.

Serbian Orthodox Church leaders already have called for the resignation of Milosevic and opposition leaders were expected to work with church leaders to increase the pressure on the president to step down.

US State Department spokesman James Rubin said the demonstration is part of a trend against the Milosevic's rule, with the Serbian Orthodox

Church taking the lead.

The church has in a "rather dramatic way" not only demanded the resignation of Milosevic, but also made it clear "the Milosevic leadership had a policy of atrocities in Kosovo," Rubin said.

"The whole responsibility for this misery lies on Slobodan Milosevic," said former Gen Vuk Obradovic, another leader of the Alliance for Change.

About half of the 860,000 Kosovar Albanians forced to flee to neighbouring countries have now returned home. Thousands more are returning every day. At least 70,000 Serbs, fearful of reprisals, have fled Kosovo.

NATO-led peacekeepers are trying to restore order in Kosovo, but thousands of the refugees who returned to find their houses burned and neighbours murdered seem bent on

revenge.

In Washington, US Defence Secretary William Cohen said NATO is moving quickly to get its 50,000-strong peacekeeping force into Kosovo to flush out Serb paramilitaries, acting in defiance of the peace agreement.

Peacekeepers hope their control over the province will be strengthened by what they described as compliance by the Kosovo Liberation Army with a June 21 agreement to demobilize the rebel movement.

A campaign of looting and burning of Serb homes continues in parts of the province. Serbs, who tried to force the Albanians out, now express fear Kosovo will become cleansed of Serbs.

Police tried to prevent the opposition rally in Cacak's main square, blocking some roads to stop protesters and some media crews.

Dog beating costs him a lot

VICTORIA, British Columbia, June 30: A man who beat a dog with a golf club in what was described as a case of road rage was sentenced Tuesday to 15 months in jail, reports AP.

Witnesses described seeing Gary Priddle, 45, strike an 11-month-old Australian shepherd with a 9-iron golf club at a traffic light in Victoria on April 19. The dog's skull was fractured in four places and he lost his left eye.

The dog, named Toba was tied by a leash in the bed of a pickup truck when he was attacked.

His owner, Tim Hill, said the attack occurred shortly after he stopped on a Victoria street to allow five ducks to cross the road. He said he heard a vehicle honking at him as he waited.

Hill said he proceeded to the next intersection and as he waited for the traffic light to change, he heard Toba yelp and saw Priddle walk back to his truck with a golf club in his hand.

Fire kills 23 school children in S Korea

SEOUL, June 30: Twenty-three kindergarten and primary school children were killed in a pre-dawn fire that swept through a three-story summer recreation centre south of Seoul Wednesday, police said, reports AP.

Two children and a teacher were also injured, none seriously, in the fire that broke out at the Sealand Youth Training Centre in Hwasung, about 20 km from Seoul, at 1:40 am (1640 GMT), they said.

Most of those killed were six-year-olds who were suffocated by toxic gas, police said. They included 19 children from one kindergarten in Seoul who were sleeping in a third-floor room, where the fire was believed to have started, they said.

There were bursts of sparks in a third-floor room and then all of a sudden, I saw flames spreading rapidly," Chun Kyong-ja, a female worker at the centre, said on television.

Ocalan verdict puts Turkey on collision course with Europe

ANKARA, June 30: In sentencing Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan to death, a Turkish court has put the country on a collision course with its European allies, reports AP.

European leaders issued a chorus of appeals on Tuesday warning Turkey that carrying out the death sentence could strain relations and jeopardise its already shaky prospects for joining the European Union.

The 15-nation EU opposes the death penalty. Executing Ocalan has other risks as well. His followers have said they would avenge his death if he is hanged. Putting him to death could also lead to further bloodshed in the largely Kurdish southeast.

Still, there is enormous domestic pressure in Turkey to hang the man whom Turkish media routinely describes as the "baby-killer" and blames for the 37,000 deaths in 15 years of fighting.

Many Turks believe that Ocalan's death would be the final blow to his Kurdistan Workers Party, or PKK, and would bring peace to the devastated southeast.

"The consciousness of the nation is relieved," Deputy Prime Minister Devlet Bahceli said Tuesday following Ocalan's conviction for treason and separatism. Bahceli's right-wing party has appealed to soldiers and others disillusioned by the violence.

The verdict sparked celebrations among relatives of the war victims at the port of Mudanya, near the prison island where the trial was held. Some held ropes in the shape of nooses. Many wore the red crescent and star Turkish flag

across their chests. "I want to see him hanged with my eyes now," said Huseyin Tamac, whose 21-year-old son was killed in a 1994 clash with the rebels.

It could be months before Tamac sees his wish come true. The death sentence is automatically appealed. If the court reaffirms the sentence, as is widely expected, it must still be approved by parliament and President Suleyman Demirel.

Some analysts have said that Turkey may try to delay a final decision until after November, when the country is to play host to the summit of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Diplomats have said that European states have hinted that they may boycott the summit if Ocalan is hanged.

The council issued a formal

Myanmar junta blasts AI as dupe of terrorists

BANGKOK, June 30: Myanmar lashed out at human rights group Amnesty International on Wednesday, saying its report on alleged abuses in the military state was part of a "smear campaign" by ethnic terrorists, reports AFP.

A junta spokesman said Amnesty's report released earlier Wednesday was based on interviews with "so-called refugees" who were in fact supporters of "ethnic terrorist groups".

"These same terrorists are also exploiting Amnesty and using it as a platform to attack the government in their smear campaign," the spokesman said in a statement received here.

The Amnesty report focused on three remote border states -- home to Karen, Shan and Karenni minorities -- and was based on interviews with refugees in Thailand.

It accused Myanmar's military of systematic human rights abuses in its effort to suppress armed ethnic dissent in areas controlled or contested by rebel armies.

Abuses detailed in the 50-page report included the torture of civilians, use of slave labour, forced relocation of villages, and rape. It said there were also reports of rights violations by the rebel armies.

All of the allegations against the junta have been widely documented by Amnesty and various other human rights watchdogs as well as international bodies such as the United Nations over a number of years.

Addressing only the issues of forced labour and relocation, the junta spokesman denied the allegations.

He countered Amnesty's claim that children were forced to work on the construction of a temple, saying their labour was voluntary.

"The workforce comes to participate of their own free will and according to Buddhist belief ... This can in fact be regarded as freedom of religion," he said.

He said ethnic villagers were not being uprooted and forced to move as claimed by the refugees in Amnesty's report. He said they were being temporarily taken "out of harm's way."

The junta has signed a number of tenuous peace deals with

ethnic armies this decade but several remain staunchly opposed to the Yangon regime and have continued their struggle for independent states or autonomous regions.

Many have sided with Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, whose National League for Democracy (NLD) party won a sweeping victory in elections in 1990 but has never been allowed to form a government.

Amnesty appealed to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to address the issue at its ministerial meeting in Singapore next month and develop a human rights strategy specifically targeting Myanmar.

"These (human rights) issues have become particularly acute since Myanmar's admission (to ASEAN) in July 1997," the report said.

ASEAN countries then claimed that such a move would encourage the junta to improve its human rights record.

Amnesty's report echoes claims by Aung San Suu Kyi that ASEAN membership gave the junta new confidence to crack down on all forms of dissent, including the NLD.

Militants kill 13 workers in Kashmir

JAMMU, June 30: Armed Islamic guerrillas surrounded sleeping construction workers in Jammu-Kashmir and shot dead 13 of them, police said Wednesday, reports AP.

The attack on a brick factory was carried out late Tuesday in the mountainous Bulbul Nowgam village near the town of Anantnag, 625 km north of India's capital New Delhi.

Few other details were immediately available.

Construction workers from outside Jammu-Kashmir are often hired to work in roadlaying and house construction projects in the state, wracked by a decade-old Islamic insurgency. They comprise of both Hindus and Muslims.

Police said the victims in Tuesday's killings and belonged to Bihar the eastern Indian state considered India's poorest and most lawless.

'Barak to reverse decision to quit Lebanon truce panel'

JERUSALEM, June 30: Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak is likely to reverse a decision by Israel's outgoing government to boycott a south Lebanon truce monitoring group once he takes office, a senior aide said on Wednesday, reports AFP.

Former prime minister Shimon Peres, who is expected to hold a senior position in Barak's cabinet, said the decision to suspend Israel's participation in the five-nation truce committee was "extreme and nonsensical" just days before the Israeli government changes hands.

"I believe that Ehud Barak will return to the committee meetings," Peres said on Israeli radio.

Peres, whose government signed the truce accord in 1996, noted that Barak had been his foreign minister at the time and approved the creation of the

ceasefire committee. Barak, a former army chief of staff, is still negotiating the formation of a coalition government and is expected to take office next week.

The outgoing government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu boycotted a meeting by the truce panel called for Tuesday by the Israeli and Lebanese guerrilla movement Hezbollah exchanged cross-border attacks last week in violation of a 1996 ceasefire agreement.

In the attacks, two Israeli civilians were killed by Hezbollah rockets and in retaliation Israel launched air raids against Lebanese civilian.

The 1996 truce accord, which ended a 17-day Israeli air and artillery offensive waged in Lebanon by Peres' government, prohibits attacks from or against civilian areas by either Hezbollah or Israel.

Attack on UN office in E Timore UNSC expresses concern

UNITED NATIONS, June 30: The UN Security Council on Tuesday expressed "grave concern" at an attack by pro-Indonesian militias on a UN regional office in East Timor and demanded a full investigation, reports AFP.

The 15-member council, reacting swiftly to an attack by about 100 militiamen on the UN post at Maliana, in East Timor, also endorsed a statement issued earlier by the UN spokesman which had warned that the Indonesian government would be held accountable for such incidents.

UN chief Kofi Annan, in his statement issued by his spokesman Fred Eckhard, strongly deplored the attack and called on Indonesian police to investigate and punish those responsible.

One woman electoral officer and several East Timorese were injured in the attack. The council issued a formal

statement in open session which expressed "grave concern at the attack on the UNAMET office in Maliana, East Timor, and demands that all parties respect the safety and security of UNAMET personnel."

UNAMET is the UN mission which is organising a referendum in August on the future of the former Portuguese colony annexed by Indonesia in 1976. The East Timorese are to be asked whether they wish East Timor to remain part of Indonesia with wide-ranging autonomy or to become independent.

The United States issued a condemnation of the attack and accused Jakarta of not doing enough to rein in the militias.

"Pro-Jakarta militias, which have operated with the acquiescence and support of elements of the Indonesian military, are responsible for much of the recent violence and killings in East Timor."

'Global warming, sea level rise may be higher than predicted'

WASHINGTON, June 30: The rate of global warming and sea level rise may be slightly higher than predicted during the next century based on new information gathered by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, says a climate scientist who analysed the preliminary data, reports AP.

The findings are likely to add to the controversy over the impact of heat-trapping pollution in the atmosphere over to what extent it will affect climate and sea levels worldwide in the decades to come.

Tom ML Wigley, a US National Centre for Atmospheric Research Scientist, said Tuesday that his new estimates of warming are based on new emission scenarios developed by the IPCC, the group of scientists, organised by the United Nations, that has been studying climate change.

In 1995, the group estimated human releases of heat-trapping "greenhouse gases" would increase the mean global surface temperatures 1.4 to 6.3 degrees Fahrenheit (0.8-3.5 Cel-

sus) by the end of the next century.

But Wigley, in a report released by the Pew Centre on Global Climate Change, said the IPCC's latest estimates on the impact of sulfur dioxide releases suggest the mean warming of the globe's surface will be slightly higher, 2.3 to 7.3 degrees Fahrenheit (1.3-4.0 Celsius).

The new estimates are primarily based on a finding of significantly lower levels of sulfur dioxide emissions than previously assumed, Wigley said. Sulfate particles cool the atmosphere, mitigating the impact of the greenhouse gases, mainly carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels. Sulfur emissions are dropping because of the push to reduce acid rain and other surface air pollution.

The new research suggests the likelihood of slightly larger changes in temperature and sea level rise than projected in the most recent IPCC assessment," said Eileen Claussen, executive director of the Pew Center on Climate Change.



Exiled pro-independence advocate Jose Ramos Horta (2nd L) and independence leader Xanana Gusmao (C) chat during a meeting at the Sheraton Hotel between pro and anti-independence faction leaders of the troubled territory of East Timor, in Jakarta yesterday. The faction leaders held Reconciliation Talks ahead of a ballot on self-determination of East Timor in August. Others are unidentified. — AFP photo



Rescue workers search a missing resident after a landslide hit houses where three bodies were found, in Hiroshima yesterday. Heavy seasonal rain lashed western Japan leaving at least 18 people dead and 19 others missing in landslides and floods. — AFP photo