

Pak FM renews offer for talks

ISLAMABAD, July 3: India should respond to Pakistan's proposal for the two arch-rivals to hold talks over the crisis in Kashmir, Pakistani Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz said Saturday, reports AFP.

"Our proposal to India is very clear - sit down and talk," Aziz told reporters here.

Pakistan "is ready for dialogue," he said on his return from a meeting of foreign ministers from the Organisation of the Islamic Conference in Burkina Faso.

Aziz said an invitation to his Indian counterpart Jaswant Singh to come to Pakistan for talks on Kashmir was still "valid," he said.

Aziz issued the invitation on June 12 when he met Singh in New Delhi for talks on ending the latest military confrontation in the disputed Himalayan region, which ended in deadlock.

India has ruled out any further meeting until Pakistan withdraws what it calls Islamabad-backed guerrillas and Pakistani soldiers holding strategic peaks in its zone of Kashmir since April.

Pakistan denies that its forces are fighting alongside Moslem infiltrators in Indian Kashmir, saying the rebels are indigenous freedom fighters.

40 migrants killed in Mexican boat collision

MEXICO CITY, July 3: At least 40 people died when two overcrowded boats carrying Central American immigrants collided off the Pacific coast of southern Mexico, civil protection officials said Friday, reports AFP.

Julio Cesar Antunes, Director of Civil Protection for the town of Tonala in southern Chiapas state said the Mexican Navy had gone to the rescue of the two vessels, which collided around 12:00 noon (1700 GMT) "because of the strong waves."

The bodies of 40 people were recovered, he said, adding that the number of survivors was as yet unknown.

Each fiberglass boat, (total capacity 20 passengers) had more than 40 people on board, Antunes said.

"This is a common practice for immigrant traffickers," he said in reference to the overcrowding, adding that it was unclear what country the passengers were from.

"We only know they were Central Americans," and that they were trying to evade Mexican immigration officials, he said.

Kuwaiti men vote in last all-male election

KUWAIT CITY, July 3: A stream of Kuwaiti men braved fierce summer heat Saturday to elect 50 MPs in the emirate's last all-male election as the government said it hoped for a more cooperative parliament, reports AFP.

Polling stations were packed early in the day as some of the 113,000 men eligible to vote rushed to beat soaring temperatures, which topped 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) by midday.

Even before the polls opened, lines of Kuwaitis dressed in traditional long white dishdashas had formed with fresh voters arriving by foot, by car and even by wheelchair.

Representatives of the candidates stood outside the polling stations in a last effort to change voters' minds before ballot boxes posted at 42 schools around the Gulf state closed at 8:00 p.m. (1700 GMT).

The head of Kuwait's election department, Ali Murad, predicted that turn-out would exceed 80 percent, as in the last ballots in 1992 and 1996. No initial turnout figures were available midday Saturday.

Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah on Saturday called for a more cooperative relationship between the new parliament and the government.

Emir Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah dissolved the last parliament on May 4 following ongoing conflict between the government, dominated by the ruling family, and MPs.

"We wish to see a serious and constructive assembly working in harmony with the government in the service of the country and its citizens," the minister told Al-Rai Al-Aam newspaper.

"I hope we will overcome all the negative aspects and work seriously in the near future to build a modern Kuwait away from political slogans," Sheikh Sabah said.

One of the major tests awaiting the new parliament will be the question of women's emancipation.



British songwriter and singer Elton John performs Friday at Piazza Grande in Lucca, Tuscany.—AFP photo

16 Indian soldiers killed as heavy fighting continues in Kashmir

DRASS, India, July 3: Heavy battles raged between Indian troops and infiltrators in northern Kashmir today, with 16 Indian soldiers reported killed, military officials said, reports AFP.

The casualties were at Pithoragarh ridge in the Drass area, with military sources in Srinagar saying a major and 15 soldiers were killed.

"We suffered heavily," a source said in Srinagar, Kashmir's summer capital. He could provide no further details of the operation.

Other officials here reported "very heavy fighting" in the Drass and Batalik sectors of Kargil, where the Indian troops have been waging a war against Muslim guerrillas and suspected Pakistani troops for weeks.

Army officials said Indian soldiers had captured a strategic peak in Batalik from the Pakistani army, and were fighting to take control of two other

hills in the area. Pakistan denies its forces have crossed into Indian-held Kashmir or that it gives military backing to what it calls freedom fighters holding the peaks.

Indian forces on Friday unleashed an intense air and artillery barrage in northern Kashmir ahead of what is expected to be their largest assault so far against the infiltrators.

Military sources said the barrage was the first stage in a planned weekend ground assault on the strategic Tiger Hills, close to the Line of Control (LoC) dividing Indian and Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.

The attack on Tiger Hills is expected to mark a turning point in India's seven-week military operation to evict the guerrillas who crossed the LoC and set up hill-top bunkers in Indian territory.

Tiger Hills' strategic importance lies in its dominance of

the main Srinagar-Leh highway, the lifeline for Indian troops in the Himalayan state of Kashmir.

Saturday's reports of heavy fighting came a day after a top Indian official warned the Indian army might be forced to cross the LoC and enter Pakistan if the fighting escalated.

Brajesh Mishra, national security advisor to Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, told CNN that he was aware that breaching the LoC could lead to a "larger escalation."

"I cannot rule out a possibility that a time will come when we may have to say to them (the army) or agree with them that they have to cross the LoC," Mishra said.

"Again, I emphasise, we don't want to do it because we are aware that it could lead to a larger escalation."

India has maintained until now that its troops would not cross the LoC, which divides the

scenic Himalayan state between Pakistan and India, to avoid a possible war.

New Delhi, however, says that Islamabad has violated the line by sending Muslim guerrillas and Pakistani troops to capture strategic hills in Indian Kashmir.

India launched in May a major military offensive in Kashmir to evict the Islamic forces. The fighting has sparked serious tension between India and Pakistan, who have fought three wars in the past five decades.

Several Indian army officials have demanded their troops be permitted to cross the LoC to cut off supplies to the intruders in Indian Kashmir.

But Pakistan has warned that this could lead to war.

On Friday, Pakistan urged India to recognise the consequences of a war in South Asia and begin talks on resolving the crisis.



The mother (R) of Captain Vijayant Thapar of the Rajputana Rifles, offers a prayer in front of the coffin containing his remains during a wreath-laying ceremony at Delhi Cantonment Friday. The remains of 22 Indian soldiers, who lost their lives in fighting against Islamic militants in Kashmir's Kargil sector, were honoured at the ceremony.

— AFP photo

UK soldiers kill 2 amid Kosovo celebrations

PRISTINA, Serbia, July 3: British soldiers killed two civilians and wounded two others who were involved in a rowdy demonstration marking Kosovo's Republic Day early on Saturday, British forces said, reports Reuters.

The civilians were in a vehicle which drove past a building providing temporary housing for 50 Serbs in the provincial capital Pristina, spokesman Major Dave Pashen said.

He said the Serbs living in the building, used by the Serbian-run temporary executive council of Pristina, had been terrified by the boisterous ethnic Albanian demonstration, which included widespread firing of guns.

Pashen said that a car with eight people inside and on the roof had driven past British soldiers standing guard and begun firing automatic weapons.

"Three soldiers returned fire, believing their lives to be in danger," Pashen said. He said one person died at the scene, another died later in hospital and two remained in hospital for treatment of wounds.

Pashen said the incident happened just after midnight local time.

Tens of thousands of Kosovo Albanians flooded the streets of Pristina on Friday night to celebrate, publicly for the first time, the day they call "Kosovo Day" which was previously banned by the Serbs.

People in the crowd carried red, double-eagle Albanian flags, chanted slogans of support for NATO and Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), waved NATO-country flags and sang a patriotic song whose refrain was "I will give my life for Kosovo".

There was also shooting of weapons into the air, some of it with heavy-calibre arms, about two hours after the demonstration began. The celebrations carried on into the early hours of this morning.

"We are free now," said Flutura Muharelli, 19, as she joined the celebration which took over the main boulevard of Kosovo's capital Pristina.

"We will drink and we will be happy," she said as the crowd moved from the Grand Hotel in the centre of town towards the university. There students toppled a marble statue of Vuk Karadzic, a 19th-century writer who is credited with helping to regularise the Serb alphabet.

They also burned a Yugoslav flag, toppled another Serb statue and tore down the sign from a Serb-controlled bank that had once been run by Kosovo Albanians.

Blair, Ahern unveil N Irish peace plan

BELFAST, July 3: Britain and Ireland have urged Northern Irish parties to back a blueprint for guerrilla disarmament and shared political structures this month and save the province's shaky Good Friday peace agreement, reports Reuters.

Prime Ministers Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern, at the end of five days of fractious talks aimed at getting parties to end feuding, unveiled a plan that could see a long-delayed provincial Cabinet created on July 15 and IRA arms handed over days later.

But the province's powerful Ulster Unionist Party gave the formula frosty reception, with one headline member calling it "deeply flawed."

UUP leader David Trimble was also downbeat about the plan, saying he had not yet had firm guarantees that the Irish Republican Army would hand over the weapons that it used in a 30 year war aimed at ending rule from Britain.

"We have still not secured any commitment that would be

recognised by unionists. We consider that the guarantees are weak," declared Trimble.

But Gerry Adams, Sinn Fein's leader struck a conciliatory tone when he spoke to reporters minutes after Britain's Blair and Ireland's Ahern published the plan on the steps of the talks venue in Belfast.

"We want a new future for all our people, all sections of our people. We want the Good Friday agreement to work."

The UUP, which supports continued rule by Britain, and Sinn Fein, the political wing of the IRA, have been locked in a bitter wrangle since the landmark peace deal was signed on April 10 last year over the key issues of disarmament and the formation of a coalition Cabinet.

Unionists have refused to sit in a ministerial executive along with Sinn Fein until the IRA hands in arms. Sinn Fein said the unionists' stance breached the agreement and that it had an automatic right to seats.

The government's blueprint

came after they had received a report from General John De Chastelain, the head of the province's Disarmament Commission, who said he thought the IRA would endorse a guarantee given by Sinn Fein on Thursday that there could be IRA disarmament by May 2000.

The governments see the plan as the way to keep up momentum in the accord, lifting it out of a torpor that settled on it in the wake of bitter acrimony between the parties and tension between the province's two communities.

But the comments of Adams and Trimble underlined a continuing gap between them, and raised searching questions over whether the UUP in particular would support the move.

The governments plan to launch the provincial Cabinet in two weeks but it could not operate if unionists were not prepared to sit in it alongside Sinn Fein.

Rejection of the plan by unionists would cast the accord into limbo and put the ball back into the governments' court.

BRIEFLY

Russia, Vietnam sign accord: Russian Defence Minister Marshal Igor Sergeev and his Vietnamese counterpart, Col-Gen. Pham Van Tra, signed an agreement on military and military-technical cooperation on Friday, the ITAR-Tass news agency reported, AP says from Moscow.

Sergeev said that more than 13,000 Vietnamese military specialists had been trained in Russian military academies, and that the agreement called for further cooperation in military education.

"Our stand is to render comprehensive assistance to our Vietnamese friends in the promotion of military-technical cooperation," Sergeev was quoted as saying.

Assad to visit Russia: Syrian President Hafez al-Assad will visit Moscow on Monday on his first trip to Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Syria's official news agency SANA said on Friday, Reuters reports from Damascus.

Assad will fly to Moscow on an official invitation from President Boris Yeltsin for a visit originally planned for April. It said. Relations between the two countries have been strained because Syria never resolved a \$12 billion debt for weapons supplied by the Soviet Union.

Murderer of 8 girls to die in China: A man who murdered eight girls in Beijing was sentenced to death Friday by the Beijing No. 1 Intermediate People's Court, Xinhua reports from Beijing.

Zhao Lianrong, 37, a resident of west Beijing's Shijingshan District, was found guilty of killing eight girls, aged between 18 and 24, on the early morning of May 30. This is the worst homicide case in the Chinese capital in the past 50 years, and aroused great public concern.

158 Indonesians held in Malaysia: Malaysian authorities have detained 158 Indonesians, including nine women and a child, after a series of gang fights left two people wounded, newspaper reports said Saturday, AP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

Quake shakes Japan: An earthquake measuring 6.0 on the Richter scale shook eastern Japanese islands yesterday but there were no immediate reports of casualties or damage, the Meteorological Agency said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The epicentre of the quake, which struck at 2:31 pm (0531 GMT), was near Chichijima Island, 1,000 km south of Tokyo. No tidal waves were forecast, the agency said.

Moscow orders strikes against Chechnya positions

MOSCOW, July 3: Moscow has ordered military strikes on rebel bases in Chechnya in the Russian Caucasus mountains, Interior Minister Vladimir Rushailo said on Saturday, reports AFP.

"I have given the order for preventative strikes on the bases of Chechen fighters and the order is already in operation," Rushailo told the Russian Federation Council, the upper chamber of parliament.

The military strikes were aimed at groups led by Chechen warlord outside the control of the republic's President Aslan Maskhadov and which threaten to topple him.

Rushailo said: "The Chechen authorities cannot control the situation. The power is in the hands of the warlords."

He said: "We are going to give an adequate response to the criminals," adding that the republic had become a "zone for drug trafficking."

Russia's interior ministry has 17,000 troops in the region,

a force which could be bolstered to 70,000 with reinforcements from the army and border guards.

No information was immediately available in the Chechen capital Grozny concerning any Russian action there.

Russian troops fought Chechen separatists in a bloody guerrilla war between 1994 and 1996 after an unilateral declaration of independence by Grozny.

The conflict ended without the main issue of the small republic's status being settled.

Skirmishes are frequent between the Russian troops and Chechen rebels.

Last month, seven Russians were killed and 15 injured in a night of border fighting.

In another attack at the end of June, four men were killed and a dozen others injured when an armed Chechen group attacked an interior ministry outpost in the middle of the night.

France may delay jets' delivery to Pakistan

PARIS, July 3: France said on Friday it might delay the delivery of Mirage combat jets to Pakistan as a result of fighting in India's disputed northern Kashmir, reports Reuters.

"In the framework of routine verifications carried out due to the increase of fighting in Kashmir, there may be delays in the execution of on-going contracts," Foreign Ministry spokesman Francois Rivasseau told reporters.

He indicated that the contract which would be affected was that for 40 updated Mirage III combat jets of which eight have already been delivered and a further eight were to be sent within the next few days.

Rivasseau insisted France was not imposing an arms em-

bargo against Pakistan or against neighbouring India with which it is at odds in the crisis.

India has maintained ground and air offensives for about two months against what it calls Pakistani-backed infiltrators and some Pakistani regular troops. Pakistan denies involvement and describes the insurgents as freedom fighters.

France has called for an end to intrusions by armed groups across the existing boundary lines between the two sides.

Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine later telephoned his Pakistani counterpart Sartaj Aziz, asking him to "make the necessary gestures" for resumed dialogue between India and Pakistan, Vedrine's office said.

Korean talks collapse

BEIJING, July 3: A last-ditch effort to salvage talks between North and South Korea on reuniting separated families collapsed here Saturday with Seoul deploring Pyongyang's attitude, reports AFP.

"There was no agreement between them and they confirmed again their old position," a South Korean embassy spokesman told AFP.

As the South Korean delegation was preparing to leave, North Korea proposed a one-to-one meeting between the South's Vice Unification Minister Yang Young-Shik and the North's Pak Yong-Su, a senior official from the Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland.

But the meeting ended in

stalemate with North Korea reiterating its demands for South Korea to apologise and pay compensation for a recent naval clash in the Yellow Sea.

The South Korean delegates had intended to leave Beijing Friday, but rescheduled their flight to Saturday afternoon in the hope that North Korea might have "changed its attitude."

But the embassy spokesman said that nothing had changed.

"We greatly deplore the North's attitude of making excuses about the Yellow Sea accident, which was provoked by themselves, to cut short the dialogue," he quoted a statement by the South Korean delegation as saying.



British Prime Minister Tony Blair on the steps of Castle Buildings, Stormont Friday announces that the government will trigger mechanisms to set up a power-sharing executive for the new Northern Ireland Assembly July 15 and transfer legislative powers from London to Belfast three days later.

Myanmar plane crash kills 8

YANGON, July 3: Eight people were killed when a Myanmar Airways plane plunged into the Bay of Bengal in bad weather near the western city of Sittwe, officials said Saturday, reports AFP.

The state-owned Fokker-27 propeller aircraft crashed Friday afternoon as it prepared to land in bad weather at Sittwe's airport after flying the 280 miles from the capital, Yangon.

Off the Record

First cockroach farmer

BANGKOK: To survive the economic crisis, a Thai businessman has pioneered cockroach farming by raising thousands of the insects as bait for fishermen, a newspaper said Saturday, reports AP.

Somkiat Phanmanee, 33, told the Matichon Daily that he earns up to 20,000 baht (\$540 dollars) a month selling dried cockroaches from his two farms near Bangkok to fishing enthusiasts and stores. One cockroach sells for 4 baht (9 US cents).

"It is a little bit cheaper than artificial bait. Fish love it and it is rich with protein," he said, claiming to be the world's first cockroach farmer.

Somkiat returned home two years ago when the economic crisis began with a degree in business administration from India. He, like other Thais, had problems finding a job.

As a sports fisherman who had used cockroaches as bait, Somkiat said he knew he could make a business out of his hobby.

Before getting started, Somkiat surfed the Internet for information about insects and began experiment. He caught cockroaches for breeding at rice mills.

Expansion followed and now Somkiat's two farms turn out 3,000 cockroaches a week.

'I do' vs 'I won't'

NEW YORK: The number of Americans getting married has dropped to a 40-year-low as divorce and changing attitudes have replaced "I do" with "I won't", researchers said on Friday, reports Reuters.

A study by Rutgers University's National Marriage Project found that Americans have not given up on marriage as an ideal, but statistics show a precipitous drop since 1960 in the number of couples who actually walk down the aisle.

"The institution of marriage is in serious trouble," said David Popenoe, who co-wrote the study, "The State of Our Unions: The Social Health of Marriage in America," with Barbara Dafoe Whitehead.

"The current generation has grown up in the midst of the divorce revolution, so they are extremely wary and cautious about entering into marriage," Whitehead told Reuters, commenting on the report.

The report said Americans are less likely to marry than ever before, those who do marry appear to be less happy than previous generations, and despite a small drop in the divorce rate, nearly 50 per cent of all marriages will end in divorce.

According to the report, the number of marriages per 1,000 unmarried women aged 15 or older dropped to about 49.7 in 1996 versus 87.5 in 1960. At the same time, the number of unmarried couples living with each other rose to 4.2 million in 1996 versus 439,000 in 1960.

Annan fails to recommend waiver of Libyan sanctions

UNITED NATIONS, July 3: UN chief Kofi Annan in a report to the UN Security Council on Friday reviewed Libyan compliance with requirements linked to the lifting of UN sanctions, but failed to make any recommendation, reports AFP.

Annan noted in his report that certain requests for cooperation could only be undertaken by Tripoli "during and following the conclusion of the trial of two Libyans, who are accused of the 1988 Lockerbie bombing, by a Scottish court sitting in the Netherlands."

Libya handed over the pair in April, prompting the Security Council to suspend the seven-year-old sanctions, but the court has agreed to delay the trial opening until February next year at Libyan request.

"For that reason, I am not in a position to provide any factual information on compliance by the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya with the relevant requirements," Annan said.

Annan's report dealt with Libyan cooperation with prosecutors in connection with the trial of the two suspects accused of planting a bomb on a Pan Am jetliner which exploded in midair, the payment of compensation to the victims' families, and renouncing terrorism.

The UN Security Council is due to review next Wednesday the sanctions imposed in 1992 to press for the surrender of the two suspects wanted for the bombing of a Pan Am airliner over Lockerbie, Scotland, that killed a total 270 people.

US Ambassador Peter Burtleigh and his British counterpart Sir Jeremy Greenstock in comments to reporters here Friday ruled out any total lifting of the sanctions until Libya had fully cooperated.

But they noted that the air embargo and other punitive measures would remain suspended, and Greenstock said that progress with the Libyans was being made.

Population confce sets new goals on abortion, sex edn

UNITED NATIONS, July 3:

Despite reservations from a few conservative countries and the Vatican, delegates from 180 countries approved new proposals to curb the world's population — including calls for giving women access to abortion and adolescents access to sex education, reports AP.

Women's groups praised the agreement Friday, calling it a giant advance beyond what was agreed to at the landmark 1994 UN population conference in Cairo because it compels governments to take action to increase and improve access to reproductive health care.

The Cairo conference adopted an ambitious 20-year programme to slow the world's population — which is slated to reach 6 billion this year — and held as a main premise that population and development are linked, and that educated women with access to reproductive health care have fewer

children.

The three-day conference at UN headquarters was intended to review the progress of the Cairo programme and decide on new proposals to implement it. But negotiations got bogged down over contentious issues such as making abortions "accessible" where they are legal and dedicating money to give girls education about family planning and sexual health.

Late Thursday, however, consensus was achieved on those new elements and the General Assembly was poised late Friday to adopt the final conference document.

"I think a recognition is gaining — regardless of the small opposition — that women have been neglected and have not been addressed adequately, and that reproductive health issues are a vast part of that," said Dr Nafis Sadik, executive director for the UN Population Fund. In addition to the abortion

and reproductive health education issues, the final document takes the Cairo programme several steps further by setting up new five-year goals on reducing maternal mortality and access to universal health care and reducing the so-called "gender gap" in education.

Argentina and Nicaragua made formal reservations to the final document, particularly over the abortion aspect, and the Holy See also voiced opposition.

But their efforts to stymie agreement on the most contentious issues fell apart after the so-called Group of 77 developing countries failed to muster a cohesive position opposing the document.

"I think part of the exhilaration is that there was a handful that tried to thwart it and they failed," said Adrienne Germain, president of the International Women's Health Coalition.