

Indian troops capture Tiger Hill

DRAS, India, July 4: In a major breakthrough in their fight against Islamic guerrillas in Kashmir, Indian soldiers captured a strategic Himalayan peak Sunday after an intense 10-hour battle, India's defence minister said, reports AP.

With the capture of the cloud-shrouded 16,500-foot (4950-meter) Tiger Hill, India secured its control over a crucial highway that is a lifeline for northern Kashmir.

"We had to fight a long and hard battle for this. It is an important win for the Indian Army," Defence Minister George Fernandes told soldiers in the northern city of Amritsar.

In Pakistan, Saad Salauddin, head of the United Jihad Council — an alliance of 14 Muslim guerrilla groups — denied Indian soldiers had captured Tiger Hill.

"Indians are resorting to heavy artillery fire and airstrikes on our fighters, but they are holding on to their positions," Salauddin said in a telephone interview from Muzaffarabad, the capital of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.

Fernandes said Indian troops captured the peak in a pre-dawn attack after a night of intense artillery bombardment. But fighting continued on a number of lower peaks around Tiger Hill.

Indian field commanders speaking on the condition of anonymity had earlier said that following the shelling, its

soldiers were encountering only minor resistance from guerrillas fighting with automatic weapons.

Talking to reporters in Jammu, Major General PPS Bindra said Indian forces were only 600 meters away from Line of Control, a 1972 ceasefire line that divides India and Pakistan, in the Dras area, where Tiger Hill is located. A major offensive was planned for Sunday night to push back the intruders into Pakistan, he said.

He said there were some Indian casualties in the fighting. Details were awaited.

For the past week, round-the-clock airstrikes have accompanied the fiercest fighting in a seven-week battle between Indian soldiers and Islamic fighters holed up in stone and concrete bunkers on mountaintops in India-controlled Kashmir.

India says most of the fighters are Pakistani soldiers who crossed the 1972 ceasefire line that divides Kashmir between the two neighbours. Pakistan has said its troops are engaged only in retaliatory shelling and have not crossed the line.

The hostilities have raised fears of a wider conflict between the two rivals, which both tested nuclear weapons last year. India and Pakistan both claim all of Kashmir, which has been the focus of two of the three wars between the countries.



An Indian soldier walks through a pile of used 155mm artillery shells in the combat zone of Drass in Indian Kashmir Sunday. Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes announced yesterday that India had re-taken the strategic Tiger Hills from Islamic militants but that fighting was raging for control of neighbouring peaks. — AFP photo

US President Bill Clinton agreed to meet in Washington with Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif on Sunday to discuss resolving the conflict over Kashmir, the White House announced.

Before agreeing to the meeting, Clinton conferred by telephone with Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, who raised no objections, said a

White House official who asked not to be identified by name.

All agreed the situation is dangerous and could escalate if not resolved quickly, the White House press office said in a statement.

The Pakistani foreign ministry on Saturday accused India of closing the door on peace talks.

"In a nuclear environment, this is obviously not a prudent course," Foreign Ministry spokesman Tariq Altaf said.

Earlier, Pakistani Foreign Minister Sartaj Aziz said he was "cautiously hopeful" that tensions between the two countries would "de-escalate" if New Delhi agreed to hold talks. But he said Pakistan needed international help to get India to the negotiating table.

India has refused any dialogue until the Islamic fighters are driven out.

Indian forces had pushed back the fighters to within 4 km of the ceasefire line, military spokesman Col Bikram Singh said in New Delhi Saturday. They had at first seized positions up to four miles into Indian-controlled territory.

But Singh said fighting was slow and had caused heavy casualties, with 240 Indian soldiers killed and 420 wounded. He also claimed at least 467 Pakistani soldiers had been killed. The casualty figures could not be independently verified.

Chechen President signs deal with opposition to settle internal strife

MOSCOW, July 4: Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov signed a deal on Saturday with opposition warlords to end internal strife in the breakaway republic, as Russia announced military action against the rogue elements there, reports AFP.

Russia's Interfax agency reported that Maskhadov had agreed to set up a national security council with the opposition chiefs to end the internal strife in the region.

Earlier Saturday, Russian Interior Minister Vladimir Rusalov announced military strikes on rebel bases in Chechnya. He told the Russian Federation Council, the upper chamber of parliament: "The Chechen authorities cannot control the situation. The power is in the hands of the warlords."

There has been no word from the Chechen capital Grozny as to whether the Moscow-ordered attacks were carried out.

Among those at the Chechen congress that agreed the new security council was Shamil Basayev, the strongest of the warlords, who has been Maskhadov's chief antagonist

in the republic's turbulent internal politics.

The congress participants condemned the spate of abductions for ransom that have become regular events in the republic. But the Interfax agency, citing Chechen sources, said another two Russians were abducted on Saturday.

According to official statistics, 1,046 people were abducted in the Russian Caucasus between January 1, 1997 and June 1, 1999.

Russian troops fought Chechen separatists in a bloody guerrilla war between 1994 and 1996 after a 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.

Ocalan orders Kurdish rebels to hold fire

ANKARA, July 4: Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan has ordered his guerrillas not to carry out any violent attacks that could provoke Turkey into carrying out the death sentence on him, a Turkish newspaper said today, reports Reuters.

A court sentenced Ocalan to death last week, finding him guilty of treason in orchestrating the rebel Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) armed campaign for Kurdish self-rule in southeast Turkey. More than 29,000 people have died in nearly 15 years of fighting.

After the verdict the PKK threatened to spread guerrilla violence throughout Turkey, with the emphasis on strategic economic targets.

The mainstream Sabah newspaper said Ocalan had ordered his rebels not to attack.

"Show a peaceful approach, otherwise it will be bad for me," Sabah quoted the rebel leader as saying. The message was passed to the PKK by people who

visited Ocalan on his prison island shortly before the verdict, it said.

The rebels have killed four civilians and a policeman in attacks Turkish security officials say were retaliation against the death sentence.

Meanwhile, hundreds of Pakistan's ethnic Kurds held a march on Saturday to protest against the death sentence imposed by a Turkish court on Kurdish rebel leader Abdullah Ocalan.

The protesters from Pakistan's southwestern province of Baluchistan marched on the streets of the provincial capital Quetta carrying placards and banners with slogans condemning the sentence passed on Tuesday and demanding its withdrawal.

"Ocalan is innocent, he is fighting for the freedom of Kurdish people," a speaker told the protesters as they squatted outside the Quetta Press Club after the march.

Fresh Russia-NATO row over Kosovo peace mission

MOSCOW, July 4: Russia was forced to delay the deployment of 120 paratroopers to Kosovo on Sunday after fresh disagreements surfaced with NATO over Moscow's participation in the peace mission to the Serbian province, reports AFP.

Russian television NTV showed images of two military planes grounded at the airport in Ivanovo, southeast of Moscow, hours after their scheduled takeoff with 120 paratroopers on board.

NATO-member Hungary, along with Bulgaria and Romania, refused to give Russia permission to use their air space after NATO said details on the role of the Russian peacekeepers needed to be worked out.

Russian defence ministry officials quoted by the Interfax news agency responded angrily to the development, with one official denying that there was

any need to further discuss technical details.

"The terms of Russia's participation in the peacekeeping operation in Kosovo were agreed upon in Helsinki and subsequently in Brussels during a Russian military delegation's visit last week," an unnamed source at the defence ministry was quoted as saying.

"Such assertions may be qualified as a provocation on the part of the United States," he said.

Interfax quoted military sources as saying that the paratroopers would not leave Ivanovo until Monday, at the earliest.

Under the terms of an agreement reached last month between the United States and Russia, some 3,600 Russian troops will serve in the NATO-led peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, KFOR.

The agreement was reached after some 300 Russian peacekeepers from Bosnia entered Kosovo ahead of NATO troops and seized control of Pristina's Slatina airport on June 12.

With air corridors blocked, Russia pressed ahead with a plan to ferry military supplies and troops by boat to the Balkans.

Four ships departed Saturday from the Sevastopol naval base in the Black Sea and were to pick up hundreds of troops at the Russian port of Tuapse before heading to the Greek coast.

They were to then take an overland route to Kosovo in line with a joint Russian-Greek agreement.

Ten contingents of several hundred troops each were to arrive in Tuapse at the beginning of next week for boarding, while a fifth transport vessel was to leave Sevastopol later on.



County Londonderry Orangemen march up to, then turn away from the security barrier at Drumcree in Portadown Saturday as the County Lodge turned up to support Portadown brethren. The march protested the banning of the Protestant Orange Order return march. Sunday down the mainly Catholic Garvaghy Road. — AFP photo

Queen faces pay freeze

LONDON, July 4: Britain's Queen Elizabeth, reputed to be one of the wealthiest women in the world, faces a pay freeze, according to press reports Sunday, reports AFP.

The Independent on Sunday said the British government, believing the royal family has been overpaid during the past 10 years, wants to veto any increase next year.

It said the government estimated the overpayment at 20 million pounds (32 million dollars) of taxpayers' money.

Chancellor of the Exchequer Gordon Brown is said to be proposing a review of the way the Civil List — public money used by a declining list of royals for official duties — is calculated.

It is currently assessed every 10 years, but the paper said he wanted that changed to once every three years so it takes better account of inflation and other trends.

The current assessment, which expires next year, was based on inflation of seven per cent. It is now under three per cent.

Last week the family announced it had cut spending on travel, maintenance of its residences and even on gas and electricity bills, saving five million pounds over the past year.

Spending for the financial year ending March 1999 was 28.6 million pounds, down from 33.7 million pounds the year before.

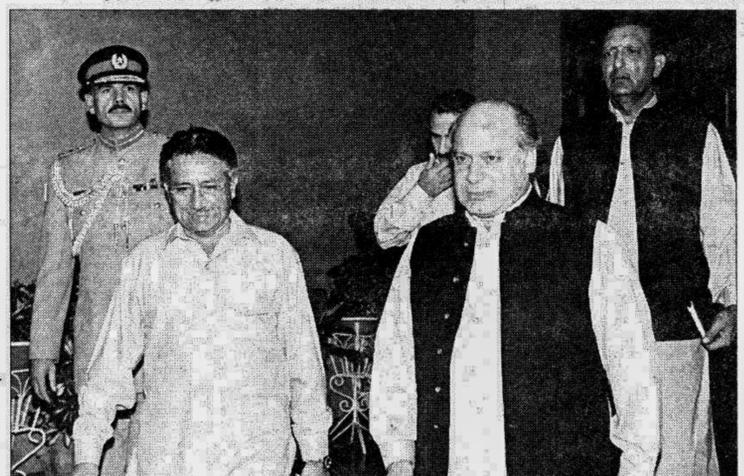
"In short, another satisfactory year," the royal treasurer concluded.

The Royal Household has achieved substantial savings and better value for money, without compromising the high standard of service provided.

Last year the palace revealed that Prince Philip, the queen's husband, and her sister Princess Margaret had used elderly travel passes to get discounted tickets on trains.

Since the beginning of the decade, the royal family has been making a big effort to economize, in response to criticism by the press and taxpayers who fund most of their spending.

The number of those on the Civil List has been reduced.



Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif (2nd R) and Army Chief General Pervaz Musharraf (2nd L) come out after an hour long meeting before the departure of Sharif for Washington, at Chaklala air base in Rawalpindi, some 25 km from Islamabad, early Sunday. Sharif left for Washington for talks with US President Bill Clinton on the deteriorating situation in Kashmir. Others are unidentified. — AFP photo

Opposition sweeps Kuwaiti elections

KUWAIT CITY, July 4: The opposition has swept Kuwait's parliamentary elections, official results showed Sunday, boding well for the vote for women but ill for cooperation between MPs and the emir's government, reports AFP.

The result was "a crushing defeat for the government," said the English-language Arab Times, while the leading daily Al-Qabas said the electorate made the cabinet pay the "price of dissolution".

Opposition candidates won a two-thirds parliamentary majority in Saturday's elections, giving liberals and Islamists the power to block legislation.

The result was likely to send shock waves through the government, which can however add the 16 votes of its ministers to force legislation through the National Assembly.

The Islamists won 20 seats and the liberals 16, while the other 14 seats in the 50-member assembly went mostly to pro-government candidates, the official news agency KUNA announced.

In the last parliament, which the emir dissolved on May 4 because of a breakdown in cooperation with the government, the opposition controlled only 21 seats.

The big winner of the polls, expected to be the last all-male vote in the oil-rich Gulf Arab state, was the liberal camp whose tally in the last house was four times lower.

Their new strength increases the chances of women gaining the vote as decreed in mid-May by the emir, Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah, in the absence of MPs.

The decree grants women the right to vote and run for office from 2003, the next scheduled parliamentary elections. The new parliament will be called upon to endorse the decree.

Apart from liberals, the vote for women also has the support of Shiite Muslim fundamentalists, although Sunni Islamists are opposed, especially to women running as candidates. But Al-Rai Al-Aam newspa-

per warned that "the return of hawks to the assembly" could lead to a new showdown between parliament and the executive, which has also passed draft laws on foreign investment since the dissolution.

Leading liberals such as anti-corruption campaigner Abdullah al-Naibari, who was the target of an assassination bid in 1997, and veteran speaker of parliament Ahmad al-Saadun were among the winners.

Saadun is one of the most outspoken critics of the government and seen by many as de facto leader of the opposition.

Among the 288 candidates in the race for a four-year tenure were some 60 prospective opposition MPs. But all ran officially as independents as political parties are banned in Kuwait.

Almost 113,000 men were eligible to vote, just 14 per cent of the 793,000-strong population. Along with women, members of the armed forces and Kuwaitis naturalised after 1966 were also excluded.

BRIEFLY

Afghan FM postpones Pakistan visit: Afghan Taliban government foreign minister Mulla Muhammad Akhund has postponed a visit to Pakistan because of the Kashmir crisis, officials said Sunday. AFP reports from Islamabad.

Akhund was scheduled to arrive here later in the day for talks with Pakistani counterpart Sartaj Aziz who left here overnight for Washington with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The Afghan foreign minister will now visit Pakistan later this month, the officials said.

US band singer dies on stage: The lead singer of the US rock group Morphine died of a heart attack during a Saturday night performance in Palestrina, outside Rome, police said Sunday. AFP reports from Rome.

Mark Sandman, 47, collapsed on stage at the end of his second song in front of nearly 2,000 spectators. A doctor rushed to the scene and performed a cardiac massage, but the crooner died as an ambulance drove him to hospital. Morphine, a trio from Boston known for adding saxophone sounds to rock music, came to Palestrina for a festival, "In the name of Rock."

Algeria pardones Islamic militants: Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has pardoned thousands of imprisoned Islamic militants who have not been implicated in "blood crimes" or rape, officials said Sunday. AFP reports from Algiers.

The pardon, which Bouteflika announced June 26 while travelling in Switzerland, is designed to mark Algeria's independence day Monday.

Russian guards kill 3 smugglers: Russian guards patrolling the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan seized a half kilogram of opium following a shoot-out Saturday night that left three dead, according to border service sources. Three Afghan nationals were attempting to illegally enter Tajikistan with the contraband when the Russian guards opened fire, killing all three, AFP reports from Dushanbe.

The smugglers were the latest of close to 30 Afghans who have died in border disputes involving illegal narcotics since the beginning of the year. In the same period, some 300 kilograms (660 pounds) of heroin have been confiscated from traffickers in the region.

Barak names David Levy as FM

JERUSALEM, July 4: David Levy, who served twice as Israel's foreign minister under rightist governments, said Sunday that he had been given back the job by Prime Minister-elect Ehud Barak of the Labour Party, reports AFP.

The prime minister-elect had no doubt that this was the right post for me, I had no doubt either," Levy said after meeting with Barak in Tel Aviv.

"I hope that we will be able to work together in harmony as we have been since we joined forces," he said, referring to his decision to join Barak's One Israel alliance for the May 17 general elections.

Habibie may offer vice-presidency to Megawati

JAKARTA, July 4: President BJ Habibie may offer a power-sharing deal to opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri, whose party is leading in the vote count from last month's elections, an Indonesian newspaper reported Sunday, says AP.

The Jakarta Post cited Jimmy Assidique, a close associate of Habibie's, as saying the president was prepared to include his main rival in "a kind of coalition government."

Habibie would likely offer Megawati the post of vice-president, the daily said.

'Bin Laden sets up new base in Afghanistan'

LONDON, July 4: Exiled Saudi dissident Osama Bin Laden and his followers, blamed by the United States for 1998 embassy bombings in Africa, have set up operations at a new base in Afghanistan, the Observer newspaper said today, reports Reuters.

It said Bin Laden's new hide-out was in hills, a few miles south of the city of Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan near the Pakistan border.

He moved to the site two

months ago and was spotted there as recently as last Tuesday, it added.

The disclosure that Bin Laden has built himself a new base in Afghanistan will embarrass the hardline Taliban regime (in Afghanistan) which claimed in February that it had no idea of his whereabouts," the newspaper said in a front page article.

The United States has accused Bin Laden of plotting the bomb attacks on US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania last August that killed more than 250 people.

In retaliation for the bombings, the United States launched Cruise missile attacks on a previous base in Afghanistan where Bin Laden was located.

The Observer said that for security reasons Bin Laden was constantly on the move but that it was becoming more difficult for the 44-year-old to travel because of health problems including a back condition.

The newspaper said that since the African bombings, Bin Laden has survived three assassination attempts including an attempt on his life six weeks ago.

It said the Taliban were aware of Bin Laden's location in the village of Farmahadda and had even deployed guards to protect his new base which was once a farm during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.



Canadian singer Celine Dion performs at Munich's Olympic Stadium Saturday on her "Let's Talk About Love" world tour. — AFP photo

Russia expels US military attaché

MOSCOW, July 4: A US military attaché who was declared persona non grata by Russia has left the country, an American official said Sunday, reports AP.

Li Col Peter Hoffman, an assistant Army attaché at the American Embassy, left Russia on Thursday after his diplomatic accreditation was withdrawn, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

No reason was given for his expulsion, but Hoffman's departure comes at a time when relations between Russia and the West have become strained over NATO's military campaign in Kosovo, and Russia's role in keeping the peace there.

Lanka to buy warships from Russia, Croatia

COLOMBO, July 4: Sri Lanka has sent a delegation to Russia to explore the possibility of buying several warships while Croatia has offered to sell the country naval craft, a report said here Sunday, reports AFP.

Two navy officers were in a team already in Russia to examine used warships that could bolster the island's forces fighting Tamil Tiger guerrillas, the Sunday Island newspaper said.

It said Sri Lanka was looking at the possibility of buying three "fighting ships" from Russia, while offers had been received from Croatia to sell naval craft.

Off the Record

Novel punishment
DUBLIN: A teenager who urinated on Dublin's premier street returned to the scene of his offence Saturday on a judge's orders -- bearing a placard apologising for his action, reports AFP.

City police said Kevin McCrossan, 19, had turned up to serve his sentence of four hours bearing the placard at the same spot and that they were monitoring his presence.

The unusual punishment was handed out Thursday after McCrossan had pleaded guilty to urinating in public.

Judge William Early was told the defendant had been with a friend queuing at a bank cashpoint machine on O'Connell Street earlier in the week when police saw him relieving himself on the pavement.

Police said a young woman was standing behind him in the queue.

It is not the first time Judge Early has handed down a novel punishment.



Malaysian girls dressed in costumes decorated with flowers sing and dance at Malaysia's Floral Fest '99 parade in Kuala Lumpur Sunday. Hundreds of students and nine floats from various corporate and government agencies took part in this annual event. — AFP photo