

# China sounds warning over Taiwan

## ASEAN Regional Forum opens

SINGAPORE, July 26: China sounded an implicit warning Monday that attempts to promote freedom for Taiwan could spark "war and conflict," as Asia's premier security forum came to grips with raging regional disputes, reports AFP.

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), bringing together 22 foreign ministers from Southeast Asia and leading powers, also heard US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright pledge Washington's commitment to improving ties with Beijing.

"If there occur any action for Taiwan independence and any attempt by foreign forces to separate Taiwan from the motherland, the Chinese government will not sit back and do nothing," Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan said.

"It has been proved by the age-old Chinese civilisation that prosperity and development are associated with unity,

while war and conflict come with separation," Tang said in a speech to the ARF.

"To stick to the One China policy principle is the basis for stabilizing and developing the cross-strait relations, is where the fate of the Chinese nation lies and bears on the tranquility of the Asia-Pacific region," he said.

The latest Chinese warning followed fears of a military confrontation triggered by Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui's statements this month that the island should be treated as a state in its ties with Beijing.

China, which regards Taiwan as a renegade province, has denounced such statements as a "separatist menace" and said it reserved the right to use force against the nationalist island.

Tensions across the Taiwan Strait, big-power relations, the dispute over the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea, the sit-

uation on the Korean peninsula and the India-Pakistan row over Kashmir are on the ARF agenda here.

The ARF brings together the 10 members of ASEAN plus the United States, Canada, China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the European Union, Russia, India, South Korea, Mongolia and Papua New Guinea.

The Association of South-east Asian Nations groups Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

The grouping has already reaffirmed its adherence to a "One China" policy and so has the United States.

Albright assured the ARF that solid ties with China were a top priority for Washington.

In prepared remarks, Albright called the Sino-US relationship "a key to the Asia-Pacific's future," seeking to al-

lay regional concerns over recent frictions in Sino-US ties.

"My government is strongly committed to its policy of purposeful and principled engagement with China," Albright said.

Albright said Stalinist North Korea should rejoin membership in the ARF, after having listed stability on the Korean peninsula among top US priorities at the talks here.

She also called on India and Pakistan, which last year carried out nuclear tests, to "avoid steps that would lead to arms race" and urged them to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

On Sunday she had a meeting with Tang, which she said had eased some of the tension after the NATO bombing of Beijing's embassy in Belgrade in May, and also held talks with Indian Foreign Minister

Jaswant Singh.

Tang and Albright also appeared to find some agreement on the issue of Taiwan, with the latter urging Taiwan's president to clarify his statehood remarks.

At the ARF talks, key powers are expected to react to ASEAN initiatives to draw up a conduct code for claimants to the Spratlys, claimed in whole or part by Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, China and Taiwan.

During informal talks Sunday, the foreign ministers of the 22 nations also discussed the Asian financial crisis and its impact on the regional security landscape.

ASEAN has been concerned that an upsurge of tensions could stall the region's recovery from the crisis, which plunged several once-booming Asian economies into recession.



(From L to R) Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh, Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas and Japanese Foreign Minister Masahiko Koumura at the start of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Singapore yesterday.

— AFP photo

## BRIEFLY

### Georges Habash in Beirut

Opposition leader Georges Habash arrived here on Monday on his first trip to Lebanon since a forced departure during the 1982 Israeli invasion of the country. AFP reports from Beirut.

Habash, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), came by land from neighbouring Syria where his group has its headquarters, a PFLP official told AFP. Habash was expected to attend a ceremony later Monday during which Egyptian journalist Mohamed Hassanain Haykal was due to receive the "Gamal Abdel Nasser" prize from the Beirut-based Institute on Arab Unity Studies.

### Iran floods leave 12 dead

Floods in northern Iran along the Caspian Sea on Monday left 12 people dead and an undetermined number of others missing after the heaviest rains in a century, state radio reported, AFP reports from Tehran.

Torrential showers hit the town of Neka close to the northern provincial capital of Sari, home to one of Iran's largest power stations, the radio said. Entire neighbourhoods in central Neka were destroyed and hundreds of houses submerged, the radio said, adding that authorities had issued an urgent appeal for relief supplies for the flood victims.

### Barak, Arafat to meet today

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat are to meet Tuesday evening at the Erez Crossing between Israel and the Gaza Strip, officials said, AFP reports from Jerusalem.

"Mr. Arafat and Mr. Barak are to meet at Erez on Tuesday at 8:00 p.m. (1700 GMT), Arafat's spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina told AFP. "They will examine ways to implement the Wye River agreement to revive the peace process." The Wye River land-for-security deal, which calls for further Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank, was negotiated by Barak's predecessor, Benjamin Netanyahu, but never fully implemented.

### Blast kills 6 in Colombia power plant

Six people including a German engineer were killed and 21 others were hurt when a transformer exploded during routine maintenance at a power plant in northern Colombia on Sunday, authorities said, Reuters reports from Colombia.

The 66,000 kilowatt generator blew up at the TermoCartagena electricity plant in the southwestern suburbs of the Caribbean coast resort of Cartagena, plant manager Jose Rodon said. Hernandez Maturana, head of the city firefighters' department, named the dead German as Gutter Agge, an employee of German engineering firm Siemens. His age and home town were not given.

### Moderate quake jolts Japan

An earthquake measuring 4.9 on the Richter Scale jolted northern Japan yesterday but there were no reports of casualties or damage, officials said, AFP reports from Tokyo.

The quake struck at 11:46 am (0246 GMT) off the eastern shore of Honshu, the northern tip of Japan's central Honshu island some 500 km (310 miles) north of Tokyo, the meteorological agency said. The epicentre was estimated at 100 kilometers (62 miles) below the seabed, the agency said.

### Russian cargo plane crashes

A Russian IL-76 cargo plane with seven crew members on board crashed shortly after takeoff from the Siberian city of Irkutsk on Monday morning, the Emergency Situations Ministry said, AP reports from Moscow.

There was no immediate word on casualties, but rescue teams were at the crash site searching for survivors, according to the Federal Aviation Service. The plane, with 30 tons of cargo on board, went down just after departing from Irkutsk, and was headed to Perm in the Ural Mountains, officials said.

## 31 rebels killed in Aceh province

LHOKSEUMAWA, Indonesia, July 26: In a dramatic upsurge in violence in Indonesia's troubled Aceh province, security personnel killed 31 suspected guerrillas during an attack on a rebel base, an army spokesman said Monday, reports AP.

However, villagers accused troops and police of capturing and then executing them.

Col Syarifudin Tippe, said a rebel leader was among the those killed in a surprise dawn raid Saturday on a rebel headquarters in Beutong village, about 200 kilometers (125 miles) southeast of the city of Banda Aceh.

He declined to identify the rebel leader.

Dozens have died in a spate of clashes in recent weeks in Indonesia's westernmost region, where a guerrilla group known as the Free Aceh Movement is waging an increasingly bloody struggle for independence. Last week, rebels killed eight government soldiers in an ambush and wounded at least 20 others.

Syarifudin said there was no casualties in the latest clash among the troops belonging to a special counter-insurgency unit deployed to the area. Its members included both army soldiers and paramilitary policemen.

All of the victims had been buried by local villagers, he said.

However, witnesses claimed most of the victims did not die in the firefight.

"They were captured and taken out of the village where they were executed," said a villager who spoke on condition of anonymity.

On Saturday, police killed one civilian in Pidie regency while another five were found dead in Central Aceh, media reports said.

### Six killed in security zone in Lanka

COLOMBO, July 26: Three soldiers and three civilians were killed when a suspected Tamil Tiger gunman opened fire in a high security zone at a northern Sri Lankan town, officials said, reports AFP.

The gunmen believed to be a member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) sprayed bullets into a crowd of people near a police barricade at the town of Vavuniya, 254 kilometers north of here, officials said.

Three security personnel and three civilians died on the spot while another six escaped with serious injuries, a local official said by telephone.

He said the shooting was carried out by a man riding a three-wheeled taxi and he escaped after the killing spree.

The incident was within a tightly guarded area just outside the military air base in the town.

The attack came amid an alert for rebel attacks in the month of July when the guerrillas usually commemorate two important anniversaries in their calendar.



US President Bill Clinton (C), his wife Hillary Clinton and their daughter Chelsea attend the funeral of King Hassan II of Morocco in Rabat on Sunday. King Hassan died on July 23 at the age of 70.

— AFP photo

## Missile test would have 'serious implications'

### Cohen warns N Korea

TOKYO, July 26: US Defence Secretary William Cohen arrived in Tokyo on Monday warning North Korea any ballistic missile test will have "serious implications" for its relations with Washington, reports AFP.

But he was greeted with a strident statement from Pyongyang of its "sovereign right" to develop missiles.

Cohen landed at Tokyo's Haneda Airport for a three-day visit at the start of a round-the-world week-long trip that also takes him to South Korea, Ukraine and Georgia.

At the top of his agenda are fears that North Korea is preparing to test-fire a ballistic

missile and a bitter confrontation between China and Taiwan over the island's status.

The United States had indicated to the North Koreans "that they should refrain from further such tests, that it would have serious implications for the relationship," Cohen told reporters aboard his plane.

"I believe Japan has also communicated that message," he added.

"We can't predict what they will do at this point. We hope that they will refrain from this because of what we see as undermining the progress that has been made in the past several months and years."

Japan was stunned when

North Korea launched a missile -- believed to be a Taepodong I -- over its territory last August and has since been moving to make its military more responsive in case of attack.

But coinciding with Cohen's arrival, Pyongyang's Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) carried a report saying US arguments that its missiles posed a threat were "absurd."

"We do not want to regard the United States as the sworn enemy," said the KCNA dispatch, monitored here, and Pyongyang was ready to develop relations if the United States recognised its sovereignty and "freedom of option."

## Indian leaders ignored Kashmir intrusion warnings: Report

NEW DELHI, July 26: The Indian government and top officers ignored repeated warnings from an army commander that Pakistan was planning a full-scale incursion into Kashmir, a news magazine reported Monday, reports AFP.

The commander who gave the warnings was transferred soon after fighting broke out on the Kashmir border in May, the weekly Outlook said.

It said Brigadier Surinder Singh, commander of the Kargil sector that became the key battle zone in the two-month conflict, wrote at least six letters to his superiors between August 1998 and March this year about Pakistani intentions.

"Unfortunately, the information was not taken cognisance of and no action was taken on his warnings," the magazine said, in a cover story

likely to fuel claims of a major intelligence failure.

Outlook said one reason why the army failed to act on Singh's warnings was they did not want to upset Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee who had launched a high-stakes diplomatic mission to mend fences with Pakistan.

Vajpayee travelled in a bus to Pakistan in February in a journey touted as a major breakthrough in frosty ties.

India launched a major military offensive on May 9 to evict hundreds of heavily-armed Islamic guerrillas and alleged Pakistani troops who took over key hills in Indian Kashmir after quietly crossing the border.

The mountains overlooked a vital military supply route.

New Delhi Saturday announced an inquiry into how the large-scale intrusion into

Indian Kashmir took place. News reports have suggested the initial infiltrations began weeks, or even months before.

Vajpayee has refused to say if there was a failure of the military and intelligence establishment.

Defence Minister George Fernandes has repeatedly ruled out an intelligence failure and reiterated his views even after the announcement of the government probe.

Outlook said Brigadier Singh wrote a letter in August last year detailing "increased threat perceptions" from across the Line of Control (LoC) that divides Indian and Pakistan-held Kashmir.

Outlook said the brigadier wrote another warning in October after failing to receive fresh instructions or more troops to step up patrolling on the LoC.

## Serb military intelligence creeps back into Kosovo

GATE ONE, Yugoslavia, July 26: French troops deployed in northern Kosovo have stepped up their vigilance on the border with the rest of Serbia amid reports that Serb military intelligence officers are creeping back into the province, reports AFP.

"We have seen a number of military men coming back. Officially they have been demobilised and they are certainly not armed," said Colonel Didier Legrand, commander of a French parachute unit.

The agreement between Belgrade and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation which ended NATO bombing of Yugoslavia bars federal Yugoslav and Serbian paramilitary forces from Kosovo.

"But as long as they are un-

armed and claim to be ordinary citizens, we can't keep them out on the pretext that they are well-built and have short hair," Legrand said.

But he admitted that in the district of Leposavic, just inside Kosovo, which is almost exclusively populated by Serbs, "everyone carries a weapon," it is like Texas.

At the checkpoint dubbed Gate One, set up on the road from the Kosovo capital Pristina to Belgrade, between 1,500 and 2,000 vehicles a day are checked by French para-

troops. But seizures of weapons are rare and limited. "When they know where we are it's no longer effective," commented one soldier.

However patrols which cover the mountainous area on foot have begun putting up temporary checkpoints on secondary roads and tracks. Other units can also intervene in case of suspicious movements picked up on radar.

Near Belo Brdo, 20 kilometers (12 miles) east of Gate One, two men concealed under a tarpaulin were keeping a 24-hour watch on a crossroads, reporting back to their section on vehicles entering from Serbia.

"We noticed an increase in traffic on this secondary road, which is important enough to serve as a supply line," said Lieutenant Thierry Paolucci, the section commander.

## Benazir demands probe into use of IMF loans

ISLAMABAD, July 26: Pakistani opposition leader Benazir Bhutto on Monday demanded a parliamentary probe into the government's alleged misuse of International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans, reports AFP.

The IMF has provided the government with hundreds of millions of dollars, yet the people of Pakistan "are more impoverished now than they have ever been," Benazir said in a statement from London.

An all-party National Assembly committee should be set up to investigate the issue, the former prime minister said in the statement released by her Pakistan People's Party here.

Benazir's demand coincided with talks under way in Washington between Pakistani Finance Minister Ishaq Dar and IMF officials over the release of the Fund's latest 280-million-dollar loan to Pakistan.

## Clinton-Arafat meeting in Rabat

RABAT, July 26: US President Bill Clinton on Sunday pressed Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to keep "an open mind" when he meets later this week with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak, reports AFP.

Clinton held a 40-minute meeting with Arafat, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation and the Palestine Authority on the West Bank and Gaza Strip, following the funeral here of King Hassan II of Morocco, a senior US official said.

"The president went out of his way to encourage chairman Arafat to go into the meeting with Barak later this week with a very open mind," the official told journalists, speaking on background.

## Falungong members freed from stadium

BEIJING, July 26: Members of the outlawed Falungong sect have been released from a Beijing sports arena, sources said Monday, almost a week after Chinese authorities launched a nationwide crackdown on what they dubbed "superstition and witchery," reports AFP.

At the Fengtai Sports Centre in southwest Beijing, the remaining Falungong practitioners being held by police were released late Monday afternoon, a stadium worker told AFP.

He refused to say how many had been held in the building or how long they had been there, but indicated only police remained on the premises.

An official at central Beijing's Chaoyang Stadium told AFP the police had evacuated the area by Monday morning, while the Shijingshan Stadium on the west side of the city had been cleared Sunday evening.

China on Thursday banned

the sect in a nationally televised broadcast, calling it an "illegal organisation" and forbidding the practise of its exercise routines in the toughest security measures since the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown.

The crackdown had started on Tuesday July 20 -- after President Jiang Zemin reportedly held an emergency politburo meeting -- with reports of up to 2,000 practitioners being held in Shijingshan stadium.

Tens of thousands of followers were rounded up by police over the week, but the number of practitioners who would be formally arrested would be much smaller, police sources said.

"Maybe there were about 50,000 detained, but not arrested. In China you can detain someone for 15 days without arresting them," a Beijing policeman told AFP.

## Chavez wins majority in Venezuelan polls

CARACAS, July 26: President Hugo Chavez won a strong mandate for his "peaceful revolution" Sunday as his supporters took virtually all seats in an assembly that will rewrite the constitution of this oil-rich but poverty-ridden country, reports AFP.

"Venezuela is reborn," a jubilant Chavez told a crowd of several thousand, saying the new National Constitutional Assembly would work toward a more democratic Venezuela free of corruption.

Hugging his blushing wife Mariabel, the former para-trooper announced that the first lady was among the 123 Patriotic Pole candidates who won a mandate on the 131-seat assembly. Three seats have already been allocated to representatives of Venezuela's in-

digenous people. The president, who conceded abstention in Sunday's vote was around 50 per cent, said the assembly would get to work in coming days and should have completed its task within six months, when the new constitution would be put to a referendum.

Chavez put his job on the line, saying the assembly was free to choose whether he should stay in office and reiterating

his claim it could also decide the fate of Congress. Addressing the cheering crowd that gathered below the presidential balcony, he said that he would propose that the assembly create two extra branches of government, in addition to the executive, legislative and judicial.