

International

6 mercenaries killed in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Aug 1: Indian troops shot dead six foreign mercenaries when they sneaked into the Himalayan state of Kashmir from Pakistan, a military spokesman said today, reports AFP.

The mercenaries were killed following a six-hour gunbattle late Saturday in a mountain range close to Kashmir's border with Pakistan, 110 kilometres (68 miles) north of Srinagar.

Several other guerrillas managed to escape, the spokesman said.

The nationality of the dead men was not immediately known, but Indian authorities say a large number of mercenaries from Afghanistan and Pakistan are active in Kashmir.

Elsewhere in the state, an Indian soldier was killed and seven others were injured in a land mine explosion on Saturday which was blamed on the Muslim separatists.

Taliban capture opposition's key air base

ISLAMABAD, Afghanistan, Aug 1: The ruling Taliban militia captured the opposition's key air base Sunday and made other advances in its 5-day-old major offensive, officials said, reports AP.

Opposition spokesman Dr Abdullah, who goes by only one name, said the Taliban launched a very large two-pronged attack on the New Road and the Old Road at 3 am local time, capturing Bagram airport.

Both sides suffered heavy casualties and fighting was continuing beyond the airport toward Parwan province, he said.

A Taliban official claimed the militia also captured the village of Stalis on another front.

Bagram is the only air base under the control of the opposition forces led by commander Ahmed Shah Masood of the Jamiat-i-Islami group. Its loss would be a major setback for the northern-based opposition alliance, which controls 10 percent of the country.

However, the Taliban claim Tajikistan has been allowing the opposition the use of one airport and that Iran was using it to ship supplies.

In addition, the opposition lost Bagram airport for several days during the Taliban's major offensive last year before managing to reclaim it.

The capital Kabul was buzzed several times early Sunday by Taliban fighter jets that appeared to be heading toward the front lines. Extensive artillery was audible in the distance.

Israel lifts ban on Palestinian minister

JERUSALEM, Aug 1: Israel has lifted a three-month-old order banning a Palestinian minister from staying in Jerusalem, the prime minister's office announced today, reports AFP.

Ziad Abu Ziad, who is a minister without portfolio and a representative for Jerusalem in the Palestinian parliament, has been given back his special permit for Palestinian VIPs.

The Israeli authorities issue the permits to enable prominent Palestinians to enter Jerusalem relatively easily by getting through Israeli road blocks cutting the city off from the West Bank.

The measure has been taken to strengthen trust between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, the office said.

Abu Ziad, who lives in a West Bank village outside the Jerusalem municipal boundaries, had his permit taken away by the previous right wing government of Benjamin Netanyahu, which accused him of conducting "political activities" in Orient House, the Palestinian headquarters in East Jerusalem.

Crackdown on Iranian students continues

NICOSIA, Aug 1: Iranian police are continuing their crackdown on student protesters three weeks after a campus demonstration sparked the worst unrest there since the aftermath of the 1979 revolution, a leading human rights group said Sunday, reports AFP.

The New York-based Human Rights Watch named 77 people it said had been jailed or had "disappeared" and added that up to 600 people detained during the demonstrations may still be in custody.

The group said at least five students, who disappeared after a meeting on July 23, have not been seen since and are thought to be in detention.

It said one of them, Mehdi Fakhrizadeh, is a member of the elected Council of Student Protesters, a coordinating body of students across the country.

HRW added that student leaders in Iran believe that between 200 and 600 people, most of them students, who were arrested in last month's clashes, are still being held by the authorities.

Police arrested 1,400 people following the July 9 protest over the closure of a leading pro-reform newspaper, which sparked six days of bloody clashes pitting demonstrators against security forces and Islamic hardliners.

The unrest in Tehran left one person dead and three wounded, according to official figures.

Arafat seeks reconciliation with PLO rivals ahead of key talks with Israel

CAIRO, Aug 1: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat began mending fences here Sunday with opponents of his peace accords with Israel in a bid to strengthen his negotiating hand ahead of key talks on a permanent settlement, reports AFP.

Arafat warmly greeted Abu Ali Mustafa, the number two of the biggest PLO opposition faction, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, as they made their biggest push for reconciliation since the PFLP rejected the peace process launched in Madrid in 1991.

Mustafa told journalists his faction remains opposed to the Oslo accords which paved the way for limited Palestinian autonomy in the West Bank and Gaza Strip but now accepts them as a "political reality."

"We still reject the Oslo accords, but we believe these agreements have become a part of

critical reality and have become facts on the ground," he said.

"Rejection of these accords does not prevent us from seeking a common vision to meet the dangers facing the Palestinian people."

"What's done is done. We hope to work with (the opposition) within the framework of the ongoing peace process and we welcome their participation in the negotiations on the final status," he said.

"This dialogue is part of national efforts to discuss questions about the destiny of the Palestinian people and we want to discuss together the means to protect the national interests of this people," he said.

Key Arafat aide Nabil Shaath said Palestinians had to close ranks ahead of the final status talks and meetings with other opposition factions would take place soon.

"We are passing through a decisive period. It's the transition to the final status talks. We think the time and the place are right to unify our ranks," he said.

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ation Organisation's political department in Tunis, and Mohammed Jihad and Mohammed Ghneim.

The meeting was held in the Egyptian capital to allow the four committee members living outside the Palestinian territories to attend.

Kaddumi said Fatah hoped to reach agreement with other factions on how to approach the final status talks which "is a difficult stage requiring an Arab effort and Palestinian unity."

The PFLP continued a violent campaign against Israel even after Arafat signed the Oslo accords in 1993 and established the Palestinian Authority in West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The Palestinian leadership now hopes to meet with the other main PLO opposition group, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine led by Nayef Hawatmeh.



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat meets with Abu Ali Mustafa (L), the number two in the main Palestinian opposition group, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), yesterday in Cairo. — AFP photo



British KFOR soldiers checking the remains of the explosive device placed in the main Orthodox cathedral Hram Sveti Spasa in central Pristina after the blast on Saturday night, while an ethnic Albanian boy looks on. — AFP photo

S Korea resumes cruise tour to North Korea

SEOUL, Aug 1: South Korea, seeking to mend ragged ties with North Korea, on Sunday allowed the resumption of suspended cruise boat tours to the famine-stricken nation despite its growing missile threat, reports AFP.

South Korean tourists will be allowed to visit North Korea's scenic Mount Kumgang resort site this week, the unification ministry said.

The green light came after tour operators, the giant Hyundai Group, secured a new guarantee from North Korea on the personal safety of South Korean tourists.

The ministry said the resumption reflected South Korea's efforts to improve ties with North Korea which has boycotted inter-Korean talks on family reunions over a naval battle between the two Koreas, still technically at war.

"It will also contribute to easing growing tensions over North Korea's preparations to test-fire a new ballistic mis-

sile," it said.

The ministry, however, indicated the tours could falter again if North Korea went ahead with its missile launch.

Pyongyang last August fired a medium-range rocket over Japan, prompting warnings in Washington and Seoul that a further launch would lead to the severance of an aid lifeline for North Korea.

The tour project, launched by Hyundai last November, was suspended on June 20 when North Korea detained a South Korean housewife for allegedly trying to entice a North Korean female warden into defecting while on a cruise visit.

The government decided to resume the tour as we judged that the safety of tourists would be guaranteed in a more secure manner," Hwang Ha-Soo, a ministry official, said.

Hyundai was also allowed to remit eight million dollars to North Korea for entrance fees and other expenses, he said.

The tours had taken some 86,000 South Koreans to North Korea, earning the impoverished country more than 150 million dollars in desperately-needed foreign exchange.

Under an agreement signed last week in Beijing, North Korea will deport any South Korean tourists who make provocative remarks during the tour.

The agreement spelled out the level of fines in case of violations by tourists and called for Hyundai and North Korea to form a steering committee to handle serious crimes.

The agreement contained more concrete terms on the protection of tourists, South Korean officials said.

The tours were suspended when Min Young-Mi, a 36-year-old mother-of-two, was detained for bragging about the prosperous lives of two successful North Korean defectors living in the capitalist South.

The meeting is scheduled to be held at the Negara Palace late Tuesday, Muladi added.

"I hope everyone will come," Muladi said.

Gus Dur will be invited even though he is not a party leader,

Habibie invites Megawati, other leaders for talks

JAKARTA, Aug 1: Indonesian President B.J. Habibie will hold talks with leaders of the main political parties, including presidential hopeful Megawati Sukarnoputri, on the country's future, reports said Sunday, reports AFP.

This is a meeting ahead of the general convention of the MPR (the national assembly), therefore various programs for the convention will be discussed.

State secretary Muladi was quoted as telling the Republic daily.

Speaking Saturday after a meeting between Habibie and popular Moslem leader Abdurrahman "Gus Dur" Wahid, Muladi said the president will invite the leaders of the political parties which gained parliamentary seats in the June 7 elections.

The meeting is scheduled to be held at the Negara Palace late Tuesday, Muladi added.

"I hope everyone will come," Muladi said.

Gus Dur will be invited even though he is not a party leader,

Muladi said the meeting will cover "the various problems facing the nation" and the case of former president Suharto may also be on the agenda.

The Suara Pembaruan daily on Sunday quoted Muladi as having said the government would choose "a political solution" to deal with Suharto's case.

The case of Mr. Suharto will be solved by means of a political solution. How can (the case) be solved legally if he remains ill," Muladi said. But he did not elaborate.

Suharto, 78, who had just spent 10 days in hospital following a mild stroke, has been under an official investigation following accusations he enriched himself during his 32 years in power.

The government of Habibie, Suharto's protege and vice president, when the former strongman appointed him his successor in May last year, has been accused of foot dragging in the investigation.

Muladi said last week the issue of the charges against Suharto would have to be discussed by the president with other public figures, including the leaders of the poll-winning parties.

Only 10 of the 48 parties that took part in the June 7 elections will be represented at the 500-seat People's Representative Council (DPR), the final vote count by the Indonesian Election Committee released July 15 showed.

The Indonesian Democracy Party-Struggle (PDIP) of Megawati led the poll tally with 33.7 per cent of the vote, followed by the ruling Golkar with 22 per cent.

Muladi said Habibie was also planning to meet on August 13 with the leaders of all 48 political parties.

The series of meetings were called by the president ahead of the convention of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) which will convene in November and pick a new president.

Off the Record

Dead man sitting

SYDNEY: A widow whose husband died six months ago walked into her lounge room to find him sitting in his favorite chair in front of the television, it was reported today, says AFP.

The Australian Police Journal said the woman's disturbed son exhumed the body in a bizarre attempt to comfort his grieving mother.

A retired forensic officer wrote that the son, armed with a pick and shovel, dug up the grave and removed the corpse in the dead of night.

He then strapped the body into the passenger seat of his car and drove home where he put his father in an armchair before falling asleep.

His horrified mother found the body the next morning and ordered him to return the corpse to the cemetery.

But by then it was daylight and the son, afraid he would be seen, instead placed the body on his mother's bed, according to the report.

When she returned and found it, she became hysterical and finally called the police, who described the case as tragic.

"There was no question of laying charges against the man," one officer said. "He really did not understand the enormity of what he had done or the trauma he caused his mother."

World's oldest twins turn 107

TOKYO: Toting sparkling pink shovels, the world's oldest living twins celebrated their 107th birthday with a tree-planting ceremony in northern Japan today, reports Reuters.

Kin Narita and Gin Kanle, considered national treasures, took a wagon ride after helping to plant a tree in a Sapporo park.

"I want to thank all of you for coming out here today," a beaming Gin said.

Kin and Gin, whose names mean silver and gold in Japanese, were born into a farming family near Nagoya in central Japan on August 1, 1892. They now live in separate homes in Nagoya.

Kin, the first born, was released from hospital last week after suffering from a stomach ulcer, local media reported.

The pair shot to fame at the age of 99 after local politicians visited them on "Respect for the Aged Day." The government designated them national treasures in 1991.

Since then, they have appeared in commercials, game shows, news programmes and even graced the pages of "People" magazine.

They recorded a "granny rap" record that vaulted up the Japanese pop charts for their 100th birthday.

It also took them 100 years to file their first income tax returns because of the unexpected income from their pop music ventures, endorsement contracts and guest television appearances.

Kin has 11 children, seven grandchildren and five great-grandchildren while Gin has five children, four grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren.

"We never thought we would live this long," King said on her 100th birthday. "We could survive because we were twins. We need each other more than anyone else in the world."



Falungong supporters protest outside the Chinese Consulate-General offices in Sydney yesterday over the Chinese government's banning of the sect in Beijing on July 22 and the issuing of an arrest warrant for sect leader Li Hongzhi, who resides in New York. — AFP photo