

BJP challenges Sonia to public debate on corruption

NEW DELHI, Aug 6: BJP yesterday dared Congress president Sonia Gandhi to a public debate on the issue of corruption in public life and the responsibility for scams during the last five decades, reports PTI.

Now that Sonia Gandhi has proudly and publicly proclaimed the stuff she is made of, the BJP challenges her to a public debate, BJP leader Arun Jaitley told reporters here.

Attacking Gandhi and her party, he said neither the Congress nor its president need be under any illusion that the people do not know the stuff Sonia Gandhi is made of. This is no mystery at all — just like it is an open secret as to what stuff her colleagues are made of, rare is the Congress leader who is not charged with corruption and abuse of office.

On the coming together to Congress with RJD and AIADMK, he said this corrupt 'tri-partite' of Indian politics has single-point minimum programme — how to save their leaders from corruption charges pending against them. It has a single objective — how to beat the prevention of corruption act. And it has a common mascot — corruption in public life.

Death toll in Bihar floods crosses 200

NEW DELHI, Aug 6: The death toll from severe flooding in the eastern Indian state of Bihar has reached 205, it was reported Friday, reports AFP.

Official sources said 17 more flood-related deaths were reported from the several Bihar districts over the last two days, the Press Trust of India reported.

They said hundreds of villages were inundated after a major dyke was breached in the district of Patna, where the state capital is located.

However, they denied that the Bihar capital Patna would be affected by the monsoon floods.

More than 1,500 boats have been commandeered to deliver relief materials to some of the estimated four million people who have been affected by the flooding in Bihar.

The floods began late last month after torrential monsoon rains, and the death toll from Bihar, Assam, West Bengal and Andhra Pradesh states has breached the 300 mark.

Fresh fighting in Lanka: 14 killed

COLOMBO, Aug 6: At least 12 Tamil Tiger guerrillas, a rival rebel and a civilian were killed in fresh violence in northern Sri Lanka, the defence ministry here said today, reports AFP.

Government forces shot dead 12 members of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in four different clashes in the northern peninsula of Jaffna and the Wanni regions on Thursday, the ministry said.

A member of another Tamil militia group which cooperate with government forces had been shot dead on Thursday night, it said.

Meanwhile, a civilian was killed in a rebel bomb attack against security forces in the northern district of Vavuniya today, officials said adding that at least four soldiers were wounded.

The attack came two days after a woman suicide bomber ambushed a police truck in the same district, killing 13 elite commandos and two civilians.

China blasts US move to expand relations with Taiwan

Air Force ordered to strike first

BEIJING, Aug 6: China yesterday blasted alleged US attempts to expand ties with Taiwan undermining Sino-US relations, reports PTI.

Some China-haters are adding fuel to the flames of the tension across the Taiwan straits. Senators Jesse Helms is one of them, the official China Daily said referring to an American legislation, which proposes increase in US aid to Taiwan.

Asking the US to stop abetting Taiwan independence, the newspaper said China is neither Iraq nor Yugoslavia, in an obvious reference to America's unilateral military actions in Iraq and Yugoslavia, strongly condemned by China.

Beijing considers Taiwan a rebel province.

Helms, and those US politicians who think they can pay with fire over the Taiwan issue, should not underestimate the Chinese government's resolution to stop the splitism, the paper warned even as a senior officials of the Chinese parliament criticised a similar bill.

by the US House of representatives.

The paper said Taiwan authorities were emboldened to make splitist statements by anti-China moves by the US Congress.

Such an initiative is enough to drive the separatists in Taiwan to fancy the island can depend on the US when it declares independence, it said.

The strong words came amid renewed tensions between China and Taiwan sparked by Taiwan president Lee Teng-hui's insistence that the two sides should deal with each other as state-to-state.

AFP adds from Hong Kong: China's military leaders have ordered the air force to strike first in any confrontation with Taiwanese fighter jets, a Hong Kong newspaper reported today.

With tension between China and Taiwan showing no sign of abating, another newspaper said the Chinese navy was practising naval blockades that would prevent any foreign intervention in a conflict.

The powerful Central Military Commission ordered regional commands in Nanjing and Guangzhou in southeastern China "to step up low-flying training," the independent Chinese language Ming Pao daily said.

The commission, which is chaired by President Jiang Zemin, had given the air force authority to "strike first in gaining the initiative" in any emergency situation that could lead to a clash with Taiwan, the report said citing unnamed sources.

However, the report said the central leadership's policy was to "continue observation and maintain pressure" on Taiwan.

China has kept up a propaganda barrage against Taiwan's President Lee Teng-hui after he declared last month that he wanted "special state-to-state" relations with Beijing.

China claims Taiwan is a renegade province awaiting reunification. The two sides split at the end of the Chinese civil war won by the communists in 1949.

India to produce two missile systems this yr

NEW DELHI, Aug 6: India will begin the mass production of two missile systems this year, the architect of the country's guided missile technology said here Friday, reports AFP.

1999 will see very significant milestones, Abdul Kalam told a conference of the heads of Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO).

"Two types of missiles, electronic warfare systems and an unmanned aerial vehicle will reach production after user trials this year," Kalam said at the opening of the two-day DRDO meeting.

The scientist, however, did not specify the types of missiles slated for mass production.

The state-owned DRDO comprises 80 factories and laboratories which are manned by 30,000 personnel.

The quick-reaction Trishul (Trident), with a range of 50 kilometres (31 miles) and Agni-II, which can carry a one-tonne nuclear payload up to 2,500 kilometres (1,550 miles), are in their advanced stage of trials.

India has already begun the production of its 150-kilometre (93-mile) range Prithvi (Earth)

surface-to-surface missile and says it has the capability to mass produce an anti-tank missile called Nag (Cobra).

Kalam also said efforts were "progressing with high intensity" to begin the flight test of a light combat aircraft — DRDO's most ambitious project which has been delayed for years.

Opening the DRDO conference in the national capital, Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said India's military projects had been a success despite attempts by Western countries to block them.

"Some countries have joined together and proclaimed technology denials for various political and commercial reasons," he said.

"(But) Indian scientists have proved that in spite of denials the nation is competent to develop and demonstrate to the world our capabilities to produce high-tech systems, comparable to international standards.

"Such actions will provide strength to our political system to conduct an independent foreign policy, derived from the ability of the nation to under-

pin self-reliance in defence systems," Vajpayee said.

The prime minister also urged the DRDO to focus on military equipment for mountain warfare.

"Technology required for mountain warfare should now be given the highest priority," he said, in reference to criticism that Indian troops were outgunned by Islamic guerrillas during the recent conflict in Kashmir.

Defence Minister George Fernandes said defence research had moved at a steady pace but production schedules must be kept up.

"It will be foolish to think that the enemy will wait till we reach production stages," he said.

Fernandes said this summer's conflict with Pakistan in Kargil in northern Kashmir had demonstrated the need for new technology to help soldiers engaged in mountain warfare.

"Kargil has shown we need to further expand technology needed for mountain warfare," he said.

Violence in Kashmir kills 18

SRINAGAR, India, Aug 6: An upsurge in separatist activity in Kashmir has claimed another 18 lives, including five members of the Indian security forces, officials said Friday, reports AFP.

Most of the victims died in a serious clash between army troops and Moslem militants overnight Thursday in Kupwara district, 100 kilometers north of the Kashmiri summer capital Srinagar.

According to a defence spokesman, as many as 25 armed militants attacked a camp of the Rashtriya Rifles battalion in Kupwara, sparking a gunbattle in which six separatists and five soldiers were killed.

The attack took place at midnight and fighting continued until 7:00 a.m., when the militants withdrew, the spokesman said, adding that two civilians were wounded in the crossfire.

In three other incidents, three family members of a police informer were shot by suspected militants, three sheep herders were killed in a bomb blast and a separatist leader was shot dead by police.

The latest deaths took to 61 the number of people killed in separatist-linked violence in Kashmir this month.

Officials say the upsurge in militant activity followed the end last month of 10 weeks of bitter fighting between Indian troops and Islamic guerrillas along the disputed Kashmiri border with Pakistan.

Absolute gravity data obtained in Arctic Ocean

SNOW DRAGON SHIP, Aug 6: Scientists of the Chinese Arctic Expedition today obtained absolute gravity data in the Arctic Ocean, the first time this long-cherished dream of scientists all around the world has ever been accomplished, reports Xinhua.

The experiment was described by scientists as very successful, thanks to the China-made portable absolute gravimeter, according to Ruyi-Gang Chang, a Taiwanese scientist aboard the expedition ship, the Snow Dragon.

The professor from Taiwan-based Ming Hsin Institute of Technology said determining the absolute gravity in the Arctic region has great significance for scientific studies in the fields of aviation and space flight and mineral exploration.

Professor E Dongchen of the Wuhan Technology University of Surveying and Mapping indicated that this was the first time the absolute gravity of the Arctic Ocean has ever been determined, and that this is a great contribution to the world. Scientists indicate that they will also conduct experiments to determine the absolute gravity at other sites in the Arctic region, as well as at the South Pole.

Russia plans \$2b fighter sale to China

MOSCOW, Aug 6: Russian state arms dealer Rosvooruzhenie has a deal to sell China Sukhoi fighter aircraft worth about 2 billion dollars, the governor of the region where the planes are made was quoted as saying today, report Reuters.

Russia's Kommersant business daily quoted Khabarovsk Governor Viktor Ishaev as saying a deal for 60 SU-30 planes had been sealed after nearly four years of negotiations. Kommersant quoted unnamed sources as saying the deal was preliminary.

Both Rosvooruzhenie and the Moscow-based Sukhoi design bureau declined to confirm or deny that a deal had been signed.

The SU-30 is a fighter equipped with advanced "thrust vectoring" engine nozzles which give the craft great manoeuvrability. One SU-30 crashed in June at the Paris airshow when the tail of the aircraft hit the ground during a loop.

China paid Russia 2 billion dollars for 22 SU-27 jets in 1996.

3 killed in US shooting spree

PELHAM, Ala., Aug 6: A gunman shot and killed three people on Thursday at two businesses in the small Alabama city of Pelham, adding another incident to the grim litany of multiple shootings across the United States, reports Reuters.

Alan Eugene Miller of Billingsley, Alabama, 34, was charged with three counts of capital murder Thursday afternoon.

Thursday morning, police said he entered Ferguson Enterprises and Post Airgas, two companies a few miles apart in Pelham, a suburban community about 12 miles south of Birmingham, and opened fire on employees.

"There are a total of three victims of this shooting spree all of whom were pronounced dead on the scene," Pelham Police Chief Allan Wade told a news conference.

The killings in Pelham took place just a week after a stock market day trader went on a shooting rampage at two Atlanta brokerages, killing nine people before committing suicide. Police later discovered the man, Mark Bafton, had bludgeoned his wife and two children to death in the days before the killing spree.

Japan remembers Hiroshima

54th anniversary of atomic-bombing

HIROSHIMA, Japan, Aug 6: Japan Friday remembered the 54th anniversary of the atomic-bombing of Hiroshima, calling for nuclear disarmament while warning of global threats such as a feared North Korean missile test, reports AFP.

Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi and Hiroshima mayor Tadatoshi Akiba said the road to eradicating nuclear weapons in a conflict-ridden world would be hard to follow.

But the solemn commemoration of the day the US B-29 bomber Enola Gay dropped the "Fat Man" bomb on Hiroshima, killing 140,000 people by the end of 1945, was overcast by the new threat in Northeast Asia.

"If another missile was launched, it would have a grave impact on peace and stability in Northeast Asia," Obuchi told a news conference after the memorial.

"And it would not bring any profit to North Korea," he said.

North Korea, which has a suspect nuclear program, launched a ballistic missile last August that stunned Japan, US, Japanese and South Korean officials say another is test on the horizon, although not imminent.

About 50,000 Hiroshima survivors, bereaved families and government officials gathered at the Peace Memorial Park near the Atomic Bomb Dome, a skeletoned building renowned as a symbol of the calamity.

As the bronze bell tolled for the victims, survivors pressed their hands together in silent prayer to mark the moment at 8:15 a.m. (2315 GMT) on August 6, 1945, when the uranium-135 bomb exploded 567 meters (1,871 feet) above the city.

Other prayers were held around the country and the parliament fell silent for one minute.

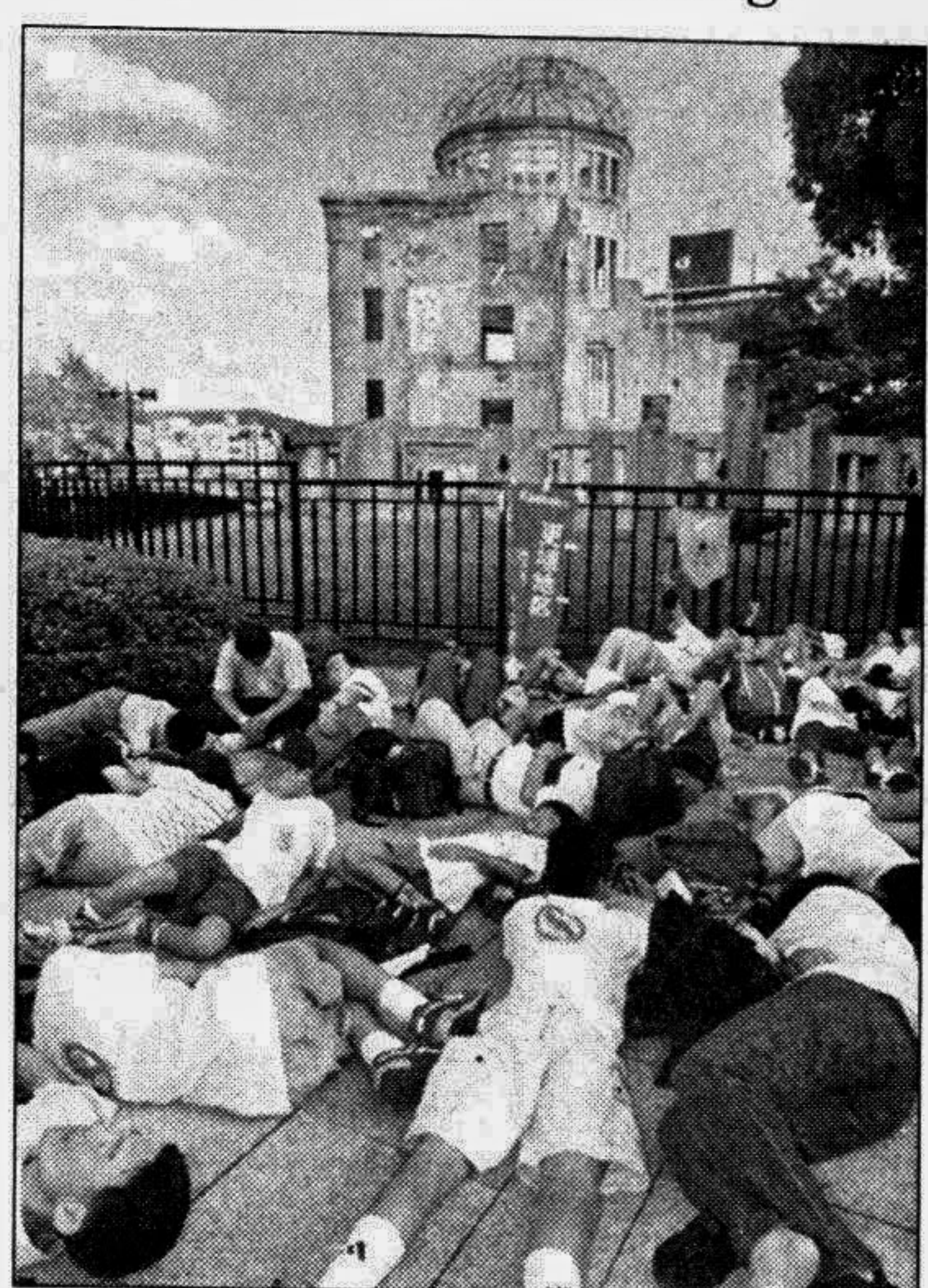
A century of war, the 20th century spawned the devil's own weapons — nuclear weapons — and humankind has yet to free itself of their threat," said the mayor.

The survivors had prevented further "lunacy" — the use of nuclear weapons, Akiba added.

"Whenever conflict and war break out, there are those who advocate nuclear weapons use," he said. "This was true even in Kosovo."

Obuchi placed yellow chrysanthemums at the white memorial cenotaph for Japanese victims, and another bouquet at a separate monument for 20,000 Korean victims, many of whom were forced labourers.

"As we can see in the Kosovo conflict in Yugoslavia, there are



People stage a 'die-in' protest against nuclear weapons in front of the atomic bomb dome near the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park yesterday. Citizens commemorated the 54th anniversary of the atomic bombing, which has been attributed to the deaths of over two hundred thousand people. —AFP photo

a series of regional conflicts stemming from ethnic and religious problems in the international community after the end of the Cold War," the premier said.

"New moves to obtain weapons of mass destruction are also seen... we still see a rough road ahead to the abolition of nuclear weapons."

Within 10 seconds of the detonation in Hiroshima, the shock wave wiped out everything within four kilometres (2.5 miles), and the number of deaths attributed to the bomb now totals about 200,000.

A plutonium-239 device, almost twice as powerful, was dropped on Nagasaki three days later and Japan surrendered six days after that, ending World War II.

"August 6 has come again and aroused the horrible memory which I have tried to forget

but cannot," said 74-year-old Akito Suemune, whose body was burnt and cut with shattered glass in the Hiroshima blast.

"I renewed the feeling that as the only atomic bomb sufferers we should lead an anti-nuclear appeal because conflicts such as the one in Kosovo are still happening," Suemune said after the Hiroshima memorial before the new millennium.

"One atomic bomb tragedy is enough for human beings. The appeal should go on in the next century, the following century and forever."

A total of 91,940 sufferers still live in Hiroshima, accounting for 30 percent of the total number of atomic bomb survivors in Japan. But their average age is now about 69 years and officials are trying to record their experiences before they die.

PKK armed wing ceasefire

Pullout from Turkey begins Sept 1

ISTANBUL, Aug 6: The armed wing of the rebel Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), responding to a call from its leader on death row, on Friday announced it would stop fighting and begin withdrawing its guerrillas from Turkey from next month, reports AFP.

The headquarters of the Kurdistan People's Liberation Army (ARGL) made the announcement in a statement published by the pro-Kurdish news agency Dem and received in Istanbul.

"We declare that we, the ARGL forces, regard Chairman Apo's (Abdullah Ocalan) call to our armed forces to stop the war beginning September 1 as an order," it said.

"We announce that we will begin to put the plan advanced by our supreme commander, Comrade Abdullah Ocalan, into practice beginning September

1." Ocalan — sentenced to death by a Turkish court on June 29 — on Tuesday called on the PKK forces to end their armed struggle and withdraw from Turkey.

"I call upon the PKK to end the armed struggle and withdraw their forces (to territory) outside the borders (of Turkey) for the sake of peace from September 1, 1999," the PKK leader said in a declaration issued from his cell.

The PKK leadership council, which includes both the ARGL and the PKK's political wing ERNK, on Thursday said it fully supported Ocalan's call.

But the ARGL warned the Turkish army against interpreting its withdrawal as a sign of weakness and against attacking its forces on their way out, saying it reserved the right to self-defence.

"Outside of making use of our

legitimate right to self-defence against attacks made under the assumption that our realising the (withdrawal) plan is a weakness, there will be no armed action on the part of our forces," ARGL headquarters said.

The statement did not say where the ARGL forces would withdraw to on leaving Turkey.

Northern Iraq, where the PKK already has several bases, is widely thought to be its most likely choice.

But Turkish newspapers on Friday pointed out that northern Iraq was also a possibility, as the PKK was able to hold a clandestine party congress there in spring.

The PKK took up arms on August 14, 1984 to fight for Kurdish self-rule in southeastern Anatolia. More than 31,000 people have since been killed in the conflict.

BRIEFLY

Holbrooke new US envoy to UN: After more than a year of delays, the Senate on Thursday confirmed the appointment of Richard Holbrooke, a high-profile diplomatic trouble-shooter, as US ambassador to the United Nations. Reuters reports from Washington.

24 killed in Pak road accident: At least 24 people were killed and 15 injured when a truck collided with a stationary trailer on a highway in southern Pakistan's Sindh province, police said Friday, AFP reports from Karachi.

Police said the fast-moving truck ploughed into the trailer, which had stopped on the road after experiencing some problems near Mirpur Mathelo town, some 500 kilometers (300 miles) west of here, late Thursday. Most of the victims were date farm workers and their family members who were going to attend a wedding ceremony.

Israel to allow PFLP leader to return: Israel is to allow the deputy head of the Palestinian opposition movement, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), to return to the Palestinian territories, Israeli military radio announced Friday, AFP reports from Jerusalem.

The decision to allow the return of Abu Ali Mustafa, the deputy secretary general of George Habash's PFLP, was made at the request of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who wishes to continue his dialogue with the movement, the radio said.

Zee-news correspondent attacked: A local correspondent of Zee-news, Srikanth Pratyush, escaped unhurt when two unidentified assailants fired at him inside a telephone booth at Kudwaipuri in Patna Thursday night, PTI reports from Patna.

Police said the assailants opened fire when Srikanth was talking to his office in New Delhi. The bullets missed the target and hit the booth operator, seriously injuring him.

27 soldiers jailed for drug trafficking: A military court in Kathmandu has jailed 27 soldiers for drug trafficking, army sources revealed Friday, AFP reports from Kathmandu.

The convicted men all received sentences of two years and nine months after a general military court found them guilty of dealing in marijuana, a source at army headquarters said. All the convicts were serving with the Tara Dal Gurm Battalion posted in Parsa 200 kilometres south of Kathmandu, bordering the Indian State of Bihar.

Barak sends envoy to Arafat

JERUSALEM, Aug 6: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak has sent a personal envoy to meet Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat in a bid to renew direct contacts and try to end the wrangling over the Wye River peace accord, a newspaper reported here today, reports AFP.

The envoy, a former military governor of the Gaza Strip, Reserve Brigadier Yitzhak Segev, has met Arafat in the past few days, the Haaretz newspaper said.

Barak's spokeswoman, Parsi Tsadok, declined to confirm or deny the report.

"All we can say is that there are contacts between the prime minister and the Palestinian Authority," she told AFP.

Official contacts have been suspended since the Palestinians rejected Barak's proposals

to further delay a troop withdrawal from the West Bank as called for in October's Wye River accord.

Last week Arafat agreed to take two weeks to consider Barak's proposal to delay implementation of the accord and roll it into definitive "final status" talks later.

However, a joint Israeli-Palestinian committee set up to examine the proposal made no headway and Palestinians reported that their negotiations had run into serious crisis.

The Wye accord, which requires Israel to hand over another 13 per cent of the West Bank to the Palestinians, was frozen in December by Barak's predecessor after completing only a single pullback from two per cent of the territory.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority has called on the United States to take action to ensure that Israel carries out the long-overdue Wye River accord, chief negotiator Saeb Erakat said Friday.

"The Palestinian National Authority has officially demanded that the United States guarantee the honest and faithful implementation of signed accords, particularly Wye," Erakat told AFP.

He said the Palestinians had been in contact with US officials in recent days, including Middle East envoy Dennis Ross.

"We told them they must intervene to guarantee implementation of the accords because the United States is responsible for the peace process," he said.

Israel's new Prime Minister Ehud Barak has angered Palestinians with his reluctance to carry out the US-brokered accord and his proposal to further delay a troop withdrawal from the West Bank.

1000-yr-old turtles

KUNMING, Aug 6: Two large turtles, which are believed to be over 1,000 years old, have attracted more than two million domestic and overseas visitors since they were discovered in June at a temple in the city of Dali in southwest China's Yunnan Province, reports Xinhua.

The two turtles, which were first mistaken for two large stones by monks of the Wuwei Temple, weigh 90 kg each. Experts confirm that the turtles are the largest of their kind ever found in China. The tortoise-shell of the two turtles is about 80 cm long.

One turtle is 88 cm long, 78 cm wide and 80 cm tall, the other, 86 cm long, 76 cm wide and 36 cm tall, and they are both now being kept in the temple.

Two hostages freed in Sierra Leone

Captors still holding 30

FREETOWN, Aug 6: Two of the hostages held by former members of a junta that briefly ruled Sierra Leone were freed and returned to the capital Freetown, one of them said early Friday, reports AFP.

Journalist Christo Johnson said he had been released along with a member of the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNOMSIL) dealing with human rights questions.

Johnson, a Sierra Leonean employed by Britain's Reuters news agency, said their captors, who are still holding some 30 people, were demanding the release of their leader, Major Johnny Paul Koroma.

The hostages, including Koroma, were overthrown President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah in May 1997, was being held by Sam Bockarie, field commander of the Revolutionary United Front.

They called on Kabbah, who was restored to power by the West African force ECOMOG in February 1998, RUF leader Foday Sankoh, who signed a peace deal with Kabbah four weeks ago, and Liberian President Charles Taylor, to intercede for Koroma's release, Johnson said.

Sources at UNOMSIL said Thursday that 37 people had originally been captured Wednesday in the Occra Hills, 40 kilometres east of Freetown, and five released immediately.

Both the RUF, which was allied with the junta during Koroma's period in power, and Kabbah's government, said all would be freed soon.

The hostages were seized Wednesday and were being held in the region of Occra Hills, the

UN sources said.

They had gone to the region for the release of 300 children RUF fighters had abducted during an invasion of Freetown last January.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan called for the immediate and unconditional release of the hostages and appealed to the parties to do everything to obtain the earliest possible release of all detainees and ensure security of international personnel.

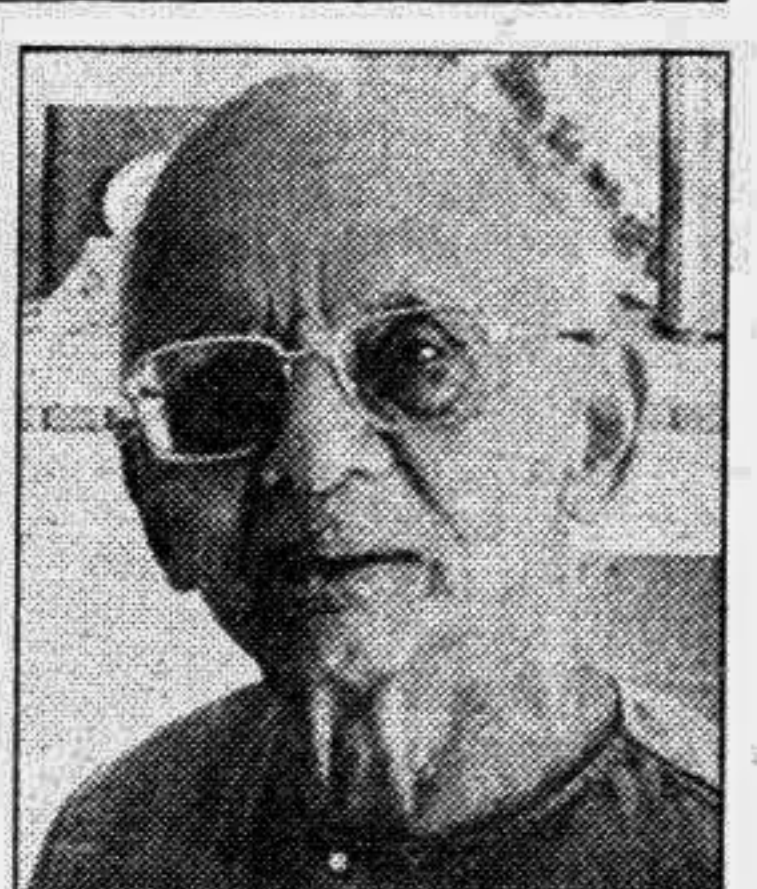
Five British soldiers are among the UN mission members held, according to the British Foreign Office in London.

UN threatens Taliban with sanctions

UNITED NATIONS, Aug 6: Security Council members condemned Afghanistan's Islamist Taliban movement yesterday for launching a new military offensive, demanded an immediate halt and held out the threat of sanctions, reports Reuters.

A statement read to reporters after a council briefing by the UN secretariat also expressed concern at "reports of massive foreign military assistance in support" of the offensive.

While Taliban's opponents accuse it of being backed by Pakistan, Taliban accuses Iran, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan of aiding the opposition alliance.



Nirad Chaudhuri cremated

OXFORD, Aug 6: Mortal remains of Nirad C Chaudhuri, well known Indian author and intellectual giant, were consigned to flames at the electric crematorium here yesterday afternoon, reports PTI.

After an hour-long solemn ceremony, where the 101-year-old author was eulogised, Prithvi Narayan, his youngest son, performed the last rites.

Acting high commissioner H S Puri read out a touching message from president K R Narayanan who said in the passing away of Nirad Chaudhuri, the world has lost an intellect of the rarest calibre.

Others who paid tributes to Nirad Chaudhuri, who passed away at his Oxford home last Sunday, included some of his close British friends and Indian admirers.

As per his wish, Chaudhuri was cremated in his Bengali dhoti and kurta with the gold button chain intact. His other two sons, Dhruva Chaudhuri and Kirti Chaudhuri, were not present at the funeral.

Colonel Hugh Toye, who had known Nirad Chaudhuri for nearly five decades, in his tribute described the writer as a living encyclopaedia.