

Saudi Arabia urges regional states to sign nuclear treaty

DUBAI, Aug 10: Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Abdullah urged regional states on Monday to join a treaty to limit nuclear capabilities, reinforcing an earlier denial of a report that the kingdom was seeking to acquire nuclear arms, reports Reuters.

"We expect from states which have not yet joined the nuclear weapons non proliferation treaty to take this initiative and to open their nuclear facilities for inspection," Prince Abdullah was quoted by the official Saudi Press Agency as telling the weekly cabinet meeting.

"The kingdom wants to see the Middle East as a region free of all types of weapons of mass destruction," said the crown prince who was chairing the meeting in the absence of King Fahd who is in Spain.

Prince Abdullah's comments reinforced a statement last week in which Saudi Arabia's Defence Minister Prince Sultan denied that his country was seeking to import nuclear weapons from Pakistan. Earlier this month, Western officials expressed concern that Saudi Arabia might be seeking to acquire weapons from Pakistan after Prince Sultan toured the Kahuta uranium enrichment plant and missile factory with Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in early May.

The United States imposed financial sanctions on India and Pakistan last year after they staged tit-for-tat underground nuclear tests.

Defence analysis

China's new missile can't be intercepted

BEIJING, Aug 10: China may have tested a new high-altitude nuclear-capable strategic missile last week for which there is no effective defence even with the United States, defence analysts said here today, reports PTI.

If the Chinese have tested the high-altitude ballistic missile, with a range of 8000-km, even the United States with its high-tech national missile defence (NMD) cannot intercept it, one defence analyst said.

We assume that China launched the Dong Feng (east wind)-31 ground-to-ground ballistic missile on August second from central China, he told PTI. According to defence analysts, the missile, launched from a test range in Wuzhai in central China's Shaanxi province, travelled some 3,000-km and landed in the Tarim Basin in Taklimakan desert in northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur region.

Since the missile travelled within its own airspace during the entire flight, China did not notify its neighbours.

China successfully conducted a launching test of a new type of long-range ground-to-ground missile within its territory, the official Xinhua news agency said on August 2, without giving any further details.

While the official media has kept silent on the new missile, Wen Wei Po, a pro-Beijing newspaper in Hong Kong has come out with details of the latest missile as well as on China's strategic missile force.

To date, there is no weapon in the world that can intercept such a missile, it said adding that the NMD and theatre missile defence (TMD) systems developed by the US were merely low-altitude missile defence systems.

Sectarian clash leaves 16 dead in Ambon

AMBON, Indonesia, Aug 10: At least 16 people were killed and scores injured when Muslim and Christian mobs fought bloody street battles, hospital and religious officials said Tuesday as sporadic sectarian violence continued for a second day, reports AP.

Some victims were shot to death by riot police, witnesses said. Others were stabbed or beaten. Medical officials, who declined to be identified, said 11 bodies were brought to the city's public Haulussy hospital. They said about 120 people were injured.

One victim, Walem Muskitu, was found dead with seven bullets in his body, said one of the hospital workers. Ten houses were set afire when fighting started late Monday among towns in the capital of strife-torn Maluku province, 2,300 kilometres (1,450 miles) east of Jakarta.

Malik Selang, an official at Ambon's main Al Fatah mosque said five Muslims were killed. Four died of gunshot wounds Tuesday at the mosque's hospital. Another died after he was struck by a police car at the height of the riot.

"I believe there are also victims on the Christian side and also among the security personnel," Selang said. He said gunshots and blasts were still echoing across from some parts of town on Tuesday.

At least five members of security forces were admitted to the local military hospital, witnesses said.

The official Antara news agency said many residents of Ambon's Mardika and Batu Merah neighborhoods — where bloody conflicts first erupted in January — sought shelter in churches, mosques, and military facilities.

Israeli police seal opening in outer wall of Al Aqsa Mosque

JERUSALEM, Aug 10: Israeli police sealed an opening in the outer wall of the Al Aqsa Mosque compound before dawn Tuesday in a showdown with Muslim clerics over control of the site sacred to both Muslims and Jews, reports AP.

Muslim leaders said the wall opening is part of renovations carried out by the Islamic Trust and that Israeli authorities had no right to interfere.

They accused the new government of moderate Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak of trying to provoke a confrontation and warned that police action would spark violent Muslim protests. Ikrema Sabri, the mufti of Jerusalem, or its highest-ranking Islamic clergyman, said the Muslims were acting within their rights to carry out the renovations.

There is no doubt that they (the Israelis) are interested in

creating an atmosphere of tension and trouble in Jerusalem," Sabri told The Associated Press.

Barak told his ministers at a cabinet meeting Tuesday that he stood by Israel's action.

The prime minister said this type of response was appropriate in a situation where people were breaking the law and attempting to create facts on the ground," a statement from Barak's office said.

The compound, known to Jews as the Temple Mount, or the site of the Jewish Temple destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD, is perhaps the most sensitive spot in the Israeli-Arab conflict.

In 1996, Israeli and Palestinian troops engaged in three days of gun battles after Israel opened an archaeological tunnel alongside the Al Aqsa compound, Islam's third holiest

shrine. Eighty people died in the violence.

Israel captured the compound in Jerusalem's walled Old City in the 1967 Mideast war, but has given the Islamic Trust a great deal of autonomy in administering the Al Aqsa and Dome of the Rock mosques located there.

In recent years, the Islamic Trust, or Waqf, has carried out a number of renovations, turning underground vaults into prayer areas. Israel has protested, but has not stopped the work, apparently fearing a repeat of the 1996 riots.

During the current renovations, workers enlarged a window on the southern side of the compound's outer wall into a door-sized opening about 2 metres (6.6-feet) high. The opening is not far from the Western Wall, the last remnant of the Jewish Temple and Judaism's most sacred site.

Israel's police minister, Shlomo Ben-Ami, said that enlarging the opening was a violation of the unwritten agreement that neither side introduce changes at the holy site.

"We insist on maintaining the status quo on the site," Shlomo Ben-Ami told the Associated Press Television News. "It is important that we redress this situation and that we establish an atmosphere of dialogue and understanding and respect of the status quo. I think this is very important for the peace process."

Ben-Ami said that Israeli authorities were in contact with Palestinian officials overnight and informed them of the decisions to seal the opening.

Police sealed the opening early Tuesday under orders from Ben-Ami, according to police spokesman Shmuel Ben-Ruby.



Presidential hopeful Megawati Sukarnoputri who heads The Indonesian Democracy Party-Struggle is presented with a local traditional shawl shortly before addressing her supporters at a sports stadium in Dili yesterday.

— AFP photo

US to sell Nixon's secret tapes on Watergate

WASHINGTON, Aug 10: The US National Archives announced Monday that the copies of former President Richard Nixon's secret White House audio tapes on Watergate will be for sale to the public in January, reports Xinhua.

"In the past there has been a lot of interest in using the tapes on the air," said Susan Cooper, a spokeswoman for the National Archives.

"Researchers have been interested in having their own copies, and professors have wanted them for their classes. We are just responding to a demand," she said.

Cooper said the archives would not profit from the sale of Nixon tapes as prices for the cassettes will be set to cover the cost of copying and packaging them.

The archives have a total of 3,700 hours of Nixon tapes, but the public can only buy copies of 264 hours of so-called "abuse of government power" tapes. The tapes for sale will contain conversations about the break — in and bugging of the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate in 1972, the subsequent cover-up and wrongdoing by Nixon or his staff, the scandal that led to Nixon's resignation 25 years ago.

US, ROK to conduct war games next week

SEOUL, Aug 10: US and South Korean troops will conduct the world's largest computer-generated war game next week, military authorities said Tuesday, reports AFP.

The annual war game, code-named "Ulchi Focus Lens," from August 16 to 27 comes amid growing tensions over North Korea's missile threat.

The US military called the computer exercise a routine, regularly scheduled one involving the theoretical deployment of 56,000 South Korean soldiers, 14,000 US soldiers here and 5,400 American soldiers in Japan, Guam and the United States.

But the manoeuvres, with their thrust on computer-simulated war games and on battle control systems, carry a greater weight than previous years as the United States and its allies brace for a possible missile test-launch by North Korea.

"This is the world's largest computer-generated simulation war game," a US military spokesman told AFP, adding that it would be controlled by the Pentagon.

There will be limited field drills but it will largely focus on command post drills.

But North Korea has rebuffed the demand, saying the launch was to put a satellite into orbit.

Syria developing longer-range missile: Israel

TEL AVIV, Aug 10: Syria will be able to strike any point inside Israel with a new class of surface-to-surface missiles currently under development, the Israeli daily Haaretz reported Tuesday, reports AFP.

Israeli military officials quoted by the paper said the new version of the SCUD-C missiles will have a range of more than 500 kilometres, sufficient to reach anywhere in Israel even when fired from deep within Syria.

Currently only SCUDs deployed close to the Golan ceasefire line dividing Syria from Israel could hit southern Israel.

The officials, who asked not to be named, pointed out that the weapons would also be less vulnerable to Israeli attack if they were further from the border.

Syria, with technical assistance from Iran, is also attempting to increase the explosive charge of the missiles, and to build silos to give them better protection, the paper said.

The Israeli army regards the Syrian missiles as the main strategic threat to Israel.

Syria has about 60 missile launchers and a large number of SCUDs able to reach almost any point in Israel in less than two minutes, according to Tel Aviv University's Institute of Strategic Studies.

The SCUDs are Syria's main deterrent to the nuclear weapons which many experts believe Israel possesses.

Israel has embarked on a programme to build the Arrow anti-missile missile, in collaboration with the United States, but this weapon is not yet operational.

1,500 yr old tomb found in N China

TAIYUAN, Aug 10: Chinese archaeologists have found the tomb of an ancient general dating back to the Northern Dynasties (386-581) in this capital of north China's Shanxi Province, reports Xinhua.

The tomb was discovered at a road construction site, said one expert, and is the third-largest ancient tomb unearthed in the city.

Archaeologists also excavated a large amount of historic relics from the 20-square-meter tomb chamber, including brick carved with ancient characters, a knight-like terra-cotta figure, a stone sheep sculpture, flask, official-like figure, and pottery living utensils.

According to historical documents, the tomb was occupied by He Dachang, a famous general of the Northern Qi Kingdom (550-577), the expert said, adding that the general died at the age of 47.

This discovery will provide valuable material for the study of northern China's history, culture, which groups, and folk customs of the period.



Russian President Boris Yeltsin (R) shakes hands with acting Prime Minister Vladimir Putin during their meeting in Kremlin yesterday. Vladimir Putin said on Tuesday that he would keep Defence Minister Igor Sergeev and Interior Minister Vladimir Rushailo in his cabinet.

Separatist rebels step up attacks in Assam

GUWAHATI, India, Aug 10: Separatist rebels blew up a section of highway Tuesday in the Indian state of Assam — the latest attack in a campaign to cut transport lifelines between the northeast and the rest of the country, reports AFP.

Suspected members of the United Liberation Front of Assam exploded a massive landmine that ripped up a large portion of national highway 31 in Nalbari district, 80 kilometres west of the state capital Guwahati, police said.

The blast was apparently aimed at a paramilitary police convoy which escaped unscathed.

However traffic on the highway, the main road between India's remote northeast and the rest of the country, was suspended for repairs.

The attack came one day after tribal Bodo guerrillas blew up a goods train in Kokrajhar district, 320 kilometres west of Guwahati with a bomb that also ruptured the main rail line to the northeast.

Following Tuesday's blast on the highway, the entire region was effectively cut off, until highway and train traffic resumed late in the afternoon.

Militants on Sunday also blew up a concrete bridge in

Kokrajhar. Separatist activity in Assam, and other northeast states where rebels have been fighting for decades for autonomy, traditionally increases in the run up to Independence Day on August 15.

Security forces say the current wave of separatist activity is being fuelled by Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence agency. Pakistan denies the charge.

"It is a systematic attempt by the extremists to target highway bridges and railway tracks to get maximum mileage and publicity in the week before Independence Day," said Assam Chief Minister Prafulla Kumar Mahanta.

The dozen rebel organisations in the northeast have called for a boycott of all official functions and celebrations on Sunday, and in Assam, some 30,000 troops police and paramilitaries have been deployed to try and curb separatist attacks.

Security patrols have been intensified and we are sure we will be able to foil attempts by the insurgents to create disturbances," said Assam police chief P.V. Sumant.

Militants in Assam possess a wide range of weapons, and

the Bodo guerrillas are known for their expertise in handling explosives.

The improvised explosive devices that the rebels use either kill or leave horrific injuries, and 90 per cent of the victims are innocent people, said Lieutenant General D.B. Shekhatkar, commanding officer of the army's Fourth Corps, headquartered in the northern Assam town of Tezpur.

Initially, the militants were known for their hit-and-run tactics, laying ambushes on security patrols from hilltops or nearby jungles.

But their attacks have become increasingly sophisticated and the targets more ambitious.

"The insurgents use plastic explosives like RDX and commercially available explosives used for road construction. They have been firing the chemicals electronically or by radio control, with remote controls or at times electronically," said army explosives expert Colonel M.S. Atwal.

During the past five years, there have been at least 300 incidents of bomb blasts in Assam killing an estimated 1,000 people. More than 10,000 people have lost their lives to insurgency in Assam.

Korea peace talks end

GENEVA, Aug 10: The latest round of talks aimed at bringing a permanent peace to the Korean peninsula ended yesterday with no progress and no date for a new round, reports Reuters.

After 12 hours in a Swiss conference centre, negotiators of North and South Korea and their 1950-53 Korean War allies China and the United States emerged yesterday evening with only a brief, vague statement.

Chinese ambassador Qian Qunqian, who chaired the session, read out the joint statement that described the five-day-long sixth round of talks as "businesslike and cordial."

"Each party recognised in the current situation on the Korean peninsula the importance and urgency of tension reduction there," said the statement.

"All parties sharing the value of the four-party talks agreed to arrange the next round as quickly as possible," it said.

US negotiator Charles Kartman said talks may resume in December. But North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye-gwan said his country would not turn to the table only "when there is the right atmosphere for us to attend."

BRIEFLY

4 shot dead in Los Angeles: Gunfire erupted in a residential neighbourhood where four people were found dead in a home, authorities said. A woman was believed to have been kidnapped from the scene. AP reports from Rosemead, California.

There were no arrests or suspects in custody Monday night, said Los Angeles County Sheriff's Deputy Carrie Stuart. A sixth victim was injured, but no details were released. The shooting happened at about 8:30 pm Monday in a home in Rosemead.

Bishop Carlos meets Megawati: East Timor's Nobel Peace Prize winner Bishop Carlos Belo met Indonesia's presidential frontrunner Megawati Sukarnoputri Tuesday and urged her to respect the outcome of a UN-supervised independence ballot for the troubled territory, AP reports from Dili.

Speaking after meeting her at his Dili residence, the Roman Catholic bishop said the democratic wishes of East Timor's people must be honoured. "I hope Megawati ... can respect the aspirations of the people of East Timor after the referendum on Aug 30," Belo told reporters.

Philippine flood death toll 152: The death toll in the flooding and landslides caused by heavy monsoon rains in the Philippines last week rose to 152, the disaster office said Tuesday, AFP reports from Manila.

Four more bodies were recovered today from the ruins of the Cherry Hills housing estate smashed by a landslide a week ago, raising the number of dead in that tragedy to 52 with 22 still missing and feared killed, the National Disaster Coordinating Centre said.

Israel rounds up Hezbollah agents: The Israeli army announced on Tuesday that it has carried out a string of arrests in occupied south Lebanon of suspected agents of the Lebanese guerrilla group Hezbollah, AFP reports from Jerusalem.

"Large amounts of weapons and explosives" were also recovered during searches carried out in houses in the villages of Bint Jbeil and Elita ash-Shaab in the western sector of the occupied zone, an army spokesman said.

China moves PLA elite in preparation for action against Taiwan

HONG KONG, Aug 10: China has posted several elite officers from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to its southeastern region in preparation for possible military action against Taiwan, a report said Tuesday, reports AFP.

Major-General Zhu Wenquan, commander of the PLA "First Group Army," was promoted to head the Nanjing military region, which oversees the Taiwan area, the South China Morning Post said quoting an army source.

Zhu, who was also made a lieutenant-general, is known in military circles as an expert in amphibious warfare and as chief of staff, he will play a pivotal role in manoeuvres and other means of putting pressure on Taiwan," the report said.

He was the only PLA officer named in the report as being sent to the Nanjing military region.

Major-General Ding Shouyu, a specialist in "urban warfare" and commander of another crack unit, the 20th Group Army, was being considered by military authorities for a posting to Nanjing, the source said.

The source also said that the transfer of elite officers and units to the Nanjing military region indicated that some

form of mobilisation had begun in earnest.

The independent-Chinese language newspaper Hong Kong Economic Times reported that senior Chinese leaders have reached a consensus at their annual summit at the resort of Beidaihe to exert pressure on Taiwan and would launch military action if the island took concrete moves to seek independence.

China has kept up a propaganda barrage in recent weeks trying to persuade Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui to back down from his quest for "state-to-state" relations with the mainland.

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

The United States has warned the tensions could spin out of control and the Taiwan press has reported a Chinese air force provocation almost sparked a confrontation with Taiwanese fighter jets last week.

There have been multiple reports of Chinese military exercises as part of the war of nerves which has badly hit Taiwan's stock market.

Washington denies Qatar's report of plan to raid Laden

WASHINGTON, Aug 10: The United States today quickly denied a report from Qatar that US military planes had landed in Pakistan with commandos in apparent preparation for a strike against Afghan-based guerrilla leader Osama bin Laden.

"This is an inaccurate report and should not be taken seriously," David Leavy, a spokesman for the National Security Council at the White House, told Reuters after the report aired by a satellite television station in the Gulf emirate.

Al-Jazeera television, monitored by the BBC in Jordan, said the two planes landed at the same time — one at Islamabad airport and the other at a nearby airport. It said dozens of US military commandos emerged, taking up combat positions near the planes and barring anyone from approaching the area.

Al-Jazeera reported that the operation was in apparent preparation for a military strike against bin Laden, the exiled Saudi dissident whom the United States holds responsible for the bombing of the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania a year ago that killed at least 226 people, including 12 Americans.

The Pentagon, which does not discuss elite commando

movements, declined comment on the report. But Leavy quickly denied it and another senior US official, who asked not to be identified, also said it was not true.

President Bill Clinton said on the eve of the anniversary of the bombings last Friday that the United States would not rest

until justice was done. The United States retaliated for the embassy bombings last Aug 20 with missile strikes at what US officials said were bin Laden's camps for training guerrillas in Afghanistan.

The Qatari broadcast, monitored by the BBC, said "informed Pakistani sources" reported that two US aircraft had landed at Islamabad and Quetta airports in Pakistan for possible use against Afghan targets.

The sources said Pakistani officers and the personnel of the two air bases were banned from coming close to the two aircraft, which, it is believed, would probably take part in striking Afghan targets," the report said.

The sources confirmed the arrival of scores of US commandos to Islamabad. It is believed that they will take part in such an operation," the report added.

There was no confirmation of the report in Islamabad, where the vernacular Urdu and English-language media has been abuzz with speculation of an imminent commando raid or missile attack in the runup to the Aug 20 anniversary of the US's retaliatory strikes.

Eckhard said the rebels were still holding a UN military observer believed to be a lieutenant-colonel from Kyrgyzstan and 15 soldiers from the West African peacekeeping force,