

Ruling alliance pledges to hike India's defence spending

Vajpayee refuses to commit on signing CTBT

NEW DELHI, Aug 16: Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist-led alliance pledged Monday to hike defence spending if returned to power in next month's general elections, reports AFP.

Unveiling its election manifesto, The National Democratic Alliance (NDA) said it would "correct the imbalance and budgetary neglect of defence needs" by previous governments.

While the manifesto provided no specific figures, it said the NDA, which is riding high in the opinion polls, would ensure the "adequacy of budgetary allocations" for the military.

"In today's unipolar world it is of paramount importance that India constantly maintains and strengthens the state of preparedness, morale and combat effectiveness of the armed forces," the manifesto said.

Military spending has become a priority campaign issue following the recent 10-week conflict along India's disputed

border with Pakistan in Kashmir.

Senior army officers complained that a lack of modern weaponry and surveillance technology had drawn out the conflict, which erupted May 9 as India launched an offensive to flush out Islamic guerrillas who had crossed the border and taken up strategic positions on the Indian side.

The NDA said it would also take advice from the National Security Council on the establishment of "a credible nuclear deterrent," in the light of India and Pakistan's nuclear tests in May last year.

"These are the minimum requirements in this recently inaugurated era of global inequality and increased vulnerability," the manifesto said.

India's military budget for the fiscal year ending March 2000 stands at 10.8 billion dollars, an 11 percent increase on the previous year.

The figure represents around 2.3 percent of gross domestic

product, and the army wants that figure raised to around three per cent.

Meanwhile, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee refused Monday to give a pre-election commitment to sign up to a global nuclear test ban.

Unveiling the election manifesto of his National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which opinion polls predict will win a clear majority in the September-October polls, Vajpayee spoke of the need for a "broad national consensus" on signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

"We are trying to evolve this consensus. After elections, a final decision will be taken in this regard," Vajpayee told reporters.

Vajpayee had originally indicated he would sign the CTBT before September, but that was before the coalition government, led by his Hindu nationalist BJP party, collapsed in April, necessitating mid-term

elections.

"Even after getting a mandate there will be a need for consensus, and we would also like the opposition to be a part of it and to be consulted," Vajpayee said.

India came under intense international pressure, especially from the United States, to sign the CTBT following its nuclear tests in May last year.

The tests sparked a tit-for-tat response from Pakistan and drew a slew of international sanctions.

India has criticised the CTBT and other global non-proliferation treaties for being biased in favour of the five recognised nuclear powers -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States.

BJP pledges to bar foreigners from high office

Meanwhile, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist-led alliance made an electoral pledge Monday to enact a law barring foreign-born nationals from the highest offices of state.

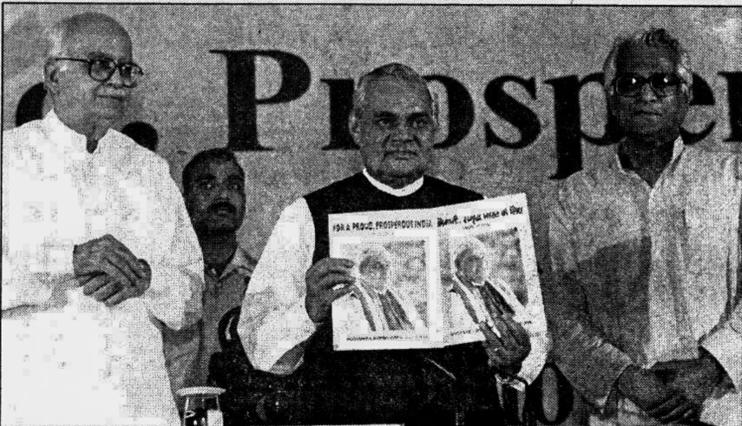
Such legislation would prevent Italian-born opposition leader Sonia Gandhi from becoming prime minister.

"We will enact legislation to provide an eligibility criteria that the high offices... are held only by naturally born Indian citizens," the National Democratic Alliance said in its election manifesto.

"On this proposal we will like to evolve a consensus with other parties and try to implement it at the earliest," Vajpayee told reporters at the manifesto launch.

Hardliners in Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party have labelled Gandhi, who was born into an Italian Roman Catholic family, as an "agent of Rome," out to undermine Hinduism and Indian culture.

Gandhi, 52, is the widow of former premier Rajiv Gandhi. She married into the Nehru-Gandhi family in 1968 and became an Indian citizen in 1983, a year before her husband became prime minister.



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (C) poses with the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) election manifesto as Home Affairs Minister LK Advani (L) and Defence Minister George Fernandes look on in New Delhi Monday. The Hindu Nationalist-led alliance unveiled a series of electoral pledges to fire up the economy while maintaining a strong flavour of self-reliance. — AFP photo

Suharto improving

JAKARTA, Aug 16: Former president Suharto's intestinal bleeding has stopped and his general condition is improving, his doctor said Monday, reports AP.

"The bleeding gradually decreased since he was admitted and it finally stopped on Sunday," said Dr Ibrahim Ginting, chief of Suharto's medical team.

Ginting said Suharto's current illness was not related to a minor stroke he suffered less than a month ago.

The former strongman, who ruled Indonesia for 32 years before he quit last year amid protests and riots, was rushed to Jakarta hospital Saturday after he was diagnosed with internal bleeding.

Ginting said Suharto, 78, would not need surgery.

"There is no need for an operation. His illness is common among people who are over 70," he said.

But Ginting gave no indication how long Suharto was expected to remain in hospital. "I do not want to take chances," he said.

29 killed in southern Algeria

ALGIERS, Aug 16: Islamic extremists killed 29 people overnight at Beni Ounif in the Bechar region some 750 kilometers (450 miles) southwest of Algiers, Algerian security officials said yesterday, reports AFP.

Three people were injured in the attack attributed to "a group of terrorists," the officials said. They gave no details of the circumstances or the identities of the victims.

Security forces and rescue workers were rushed to the scene, and a large-scale manhunt was mounted, the officials added.

Anwar's aide urges court to dismiss contempt notice

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 16: A wheelchair bound associate of ousted Malaysian deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim disputed a contempt charge when he appeared in court Monday, reports AFP.

"The show cause notice is defective. I urge your lordship to carefully consider to set aside the show cause notice," Karpal Singh, counsel for Chandra Muzaffar, told High Court Judge Arifin Jaka.

Chandra, a critic of Premier Mahathir Mohamad, was ordered on August 2 to appear in court after being cited for contempt over alleged remarks on Anwar's sodomy trial made on the Internet.

Karpal told: "The notice to show cause is not based on admissible evidence and the notice is an unadulterated abuse of power."

"The attorney-general did not tender the document under oath. To get the court to issue a notice, there must be strict compliance because what is at stake is the freedom of expression and the freedom of the individual," said Karpal, who is also an opposition lawmaker.

Attorney-General Mohit Abduljalil disputed an alleged statement made by Chandra, the vice-president of a new political party headed by Anwar's wife.

Japan, US agree on anti-missile programme

TOKYO, Aug 16: Japan and the United States agreed Monday to research an anti-ballistic missile system, amid fears North Korea is preparing to test fire a new missile, officials said, reports AFP.

Pentagon and Japanese Defence Agency officials signed a memorandum of understanding on research for a sea-based system which uses satellites to pinpoint incoming missiles and then shoots them down.

"A basic outline" of the research had already been established, a foreign ministry statement said.

The joint research on ballistic missile defence will involve consulting required design and prototype experiments for navy theatre-wide defence" against missiles, it said.

Before the signing, papers were exchanged between officials for Foreign Minister Masahiko Komura and US Ambassador to Japan Thomas Foley. Japan's cabinet approved the plan on Friday.

The research is expected to cost 50-60 billion yen (435-522 million dollars) over five to six years, with Japan paying 20-30 billion yen, officials said.

Navy attacks Tiger boats

COLOMBO, Aug 16: Navy gun boats sank two rebel boats in northeastern Sri Lanka Monday while a fisherman was killed in the crossfire and 13 guerrillas died in fighting elsewhere, officials here said, reports AFP.

Patrol craft detected the boats of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) off the coast of Paludmodi and began attacking them in a sea battle that lasted several hours, officials said.

They said a civilian fisherman was killed and another wounded and admitted to a government hospital at the small town of Padaviya.

The two rebel craft exploded just as they were hit by the navy barrage, indicating they were carrying ammunition, a navy spokesman here said.

Rebel casualties were not immediately known but the navy confirmed two boats were sunk and three others damaged.



Members of parliament from the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of the former Pakistani prime minister Benazir Bhutto hold her portrait (C) along with her father's Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto (pictured-R) in front of the provincial Sindh Assembly during a hunger strike in Karachi yesterday. The party is campaigning for ouster of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, accusing him of "dictatorial" rule. — AFP photo

PPP MPs observe hunger strike

KARACHI, Aug 16: Some 25 garlanded MPs from the party of former Pakistani premier Benazir Bhutto started a day-long fast in public here Monday in protest against the "dictatorial" rule of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, reports AFP.

A dozen other leaders from the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) also joined the hunger strike, which follows a series of anti-government rallies by the main opposition party in the country.

This is against Sharif's atrocious behaviour towards the masses. Our protest will continue till the ouster of Sharif's undemocratic and dictatorial government," a PPP central leader Nisar Khuhro said.

Khuhro slammed Sharif's handling of a recent conflict with India in Kashmir as well as the government's economic policies and imposition of di-

rect federal rule in southern Sindh province, of which Karachi is the capital.

Benazir, convicted along with her jailed husband Asif Ali Zardari by a Pakistani court on April 15 in a corruption case, is currently in London.

Both were sentenced to five-years imprisonment for receiving kickbacks from a Swiss firm on a pre-shipment trade cargo inspection contract in 1994. Benazir has said the case was politically motivated and her appeal is pending at the Pakistani Supreme Court.

Besides the PPP, the influential Sindh-based ethnic Muttahida Qaumi Movement (MQM) party has also been waging a campaign against the government over alleged persecution.

The PPP is politically the largest party in troubled Sindh, followed by the MQM.

Militants blow up truck in Kashmir: 8 killed

SRINAGAR, India, Aug 16: Seven army porters were killed when suspected Moslem separatists blew up a truck in Indian Kashmir on Monday, police said, reports AFP.

Two others were injured in the mine blast in Kupwara district, 90 km north of Srinagar, a police spokesman said.

"Five people died on the spot while two died later in the hospital," he said, adding that security forces had cordoned off the area.

In a separate attack, militants threw a grenade into a restaurant in Srinagar killing the cook and injuring five other workers.

Moslem separatists launched an armed insurgency in Indian Kashmir in 1989, since when more than 24,000 have been killed in militant-linked violence.

Israel, PA fail to bridge gulf on WB withdrawal timetable

BEIT HANOUN, Gaza Strip, Aug 16: Israeli and Palestinian negotiators met for seven hours on the Palestinian side of the border Sunday but failed to reach an agreement on a timetable for further Israeli withdrawals from the West Bank, reports AFP.

The negotiating teams headed by Palestinian chief negotiator Saeb Erakat and Israeli prime ministerial envoy Gilad Sher had started their meeting at 5:00 p.m. (1400 GMT) in the Gaza Strip.

"We continue to have differences on a calendar for the Israeli redeployment," Erakat told journalists after a second meeting in 24 hours with Sher.

The first meeting took place for three hours in west Jerusalem late Saturday.

Erakat said a joint commission would be set up to look into the issue of Palestinians held in Israeli prisons.

"We agreed that each party present lists of prisoners and we will meet again on Tuesday after a meeting by the commission to discuss the issue," he said.

The Palestinian minister in charge of prisoners Hisham Abdel Razeq said Israel last year freed a first contingent of 250 prisoners, but only 86 of them were political prisoners.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak briefed his government before the resumption of the talks, noting that he had instructed the army to prepare for the implementation of the second phase of the Wye River accord on September 1.

Barak also reiterated his hopes to merge part of the withdrawal agreement with the so-called final status talks on a permanent settlement.

Erakat said he asked that Israel "precisely and totally implement the Wye Plantation agreement" that was signed in October last year.

He earlier told Voice of Palestine radio that the Palestinians do not want to waste any more time.

"Good intentions only are not sufficient, expressing readiness to implement agreements without the actual implementation is not sufficient, a long time has passed and we feel that there is a real waste of time," Erakat said.

On Saturday Barak's office released a statement in which

the prime minister reiterated his commitment to implement the long-overdue Wye agreement.

"The prime minister instructed the army to prepare... for the implementation of Wye on September 1, this means that the transfer of the land will begin on October 1," the statement said.

Officials close to Barak told AFP that in September Barak is expecting the Palestinians to fulfil their obligations under Wye before carrying out the withdrawal on October 1.

Under the agreement the Palestinians are to gather illegal weapons, arrest wanted "terrorists," prevent incitement to violence against Israel and cut down the Palestinian police force by 6,000 men.

BRIEFLY

Train mishap claims 3 in US: An Amtrak passenger train travelling from New Orleans to New York City smashed into a car, killing three people inside the vehicle, AP reports from Vance.

Authorities are investigating Sunday's accident, which happened at a crossing that had no flashing lights or gates in this small community between Tuscaloosa and Birmingham.

UNESCO chief to step down in Nov: UNESCO director-general Federico Mayor said Sunday that he will step down when his term expires in November after 12 years of globe-trotting and long workdays that have left him exhausted, AP reports from Madrid.

Mayor, a 65-year-old Spaniard, told the Sunday edition of the magazine El Faro that he wants to go back to his old job teaching biochemistry at the Autonomous University in Madrid.

Taliban rounding up thousands of refugees

KABUL, Aug 16: Afghanistan's Taliban have arrested thousands of refugees who fled here after recent fighting, independent sources said Monday, but the hardline militia insisted they were only weeding out a handful of criminals, reports AFP.

The sources said the Taliban began a security crackdown on Sunday morning with the arrests of 2,000 people at Khair Khana on the northern outskirts of Kabul, where the United Nations says more than 10,000 refugees had entered the city in just two days.

Several sources said the arrests had forced people into hiding amid fears they would be denounced as anti-Islamic and jailed.

"It's a mess. Foreign groups can't carry out their work if people are too scared to queue up for bread or food because they might be thrown in jail," one western source told AFP.

But Kabul police chief Mulla Abdurrahman said the capital was quiet and calm, saying only around 60 people had been arrested around Khair Khana.

10 hurt in riot-torn Ambon city

JAKARTA, Aug 16: Ten people were wounded when Indonesian security forces opened fire near the airport in the riot-torn city of Ambon Monday to quell clashes between Moslems and Christians, residents said, reports AFP.

Ten people suffered gunshot wounds and several houses and a church were burned, Daan Huwae, a member of the Maranatha Protestant church, told AFP by phone from Ambon.

Huwae said the clashes in the Tawiri area near the Pattimura airport erupted when Moslem residents from the neighboring hamlet of Laha launched an attack on the predominantly Christian area.

Air force and army units shot at the warring crowds, injuring mostly Christians, Huwae said.

Reports earlier Monday said Mandala Airlines, one of only two carriers flying into Ambon, had halted its flights in and out of Pattimura airport because of the rising violence in Laha.

An official in the Maluku military command meanwhile described the situation in downtown Ambon as "relatively calm."

At least 107 people have been killed in violence between Christians and Moslems in Ambon since July 27.

US-ROK conduct war games amid DPRK's missile threat

SEOUL, Aug 16: South Korea and the United States mobilized more than 100,000 troops for massive war games which included air-raid and chemical attack drills, despite furious protests by North Korea, reports AFP.

The maneuvers came amid growing tensions over North Korea's suspected plans to launch a long-range missile. It also started as Japan and the United States announced joint research for an anti-ballistic missile system.

The exercises triggered angry protests by the Stalinist North, which has been under pressure to scrap plans to test-fire a ballistic missile capable of hitting US territory.

Pyeongyang lambasted the exercises as "intentional and premeditated war moves to aggravate the situation on the Korean peninsula and start a war against the North any moment."

The exercises, codenamed "Ulchi Focus Lens," are the world's largest computer-simulated war games, despite the massive human force also involved.

They kicked off when South Korea's President Kim Dae-jung, wearing khaki military-

style fatigues, chaired a national security meeting before dawn, with all presidential staff put on a war footing.

"We need a thorough military stance to defend Seoul in the event of a war," Kim said ahead of the joint drills which will last until August 27, involving 56,000 South Korean soldiers and 19,400 US troops.

Separately, South Korea launched huge week-long exercises involving some 200,000 soldiers, police and government officials, a defense ministry official said.

"We will conduct a wide range of drills against simulated North Korean chemical and commando attacks," he said, adding there also would be air-raid drills on the ground and anti-submarine maneuvers at sea.

In Seoul, soldiers wearing gas masks and chemsuits treated a crowded subway station with special fluids to counter a mock chemical attack as other machine-gun toting soldiers rushed through the area.

The South Korean exercises underlined fears over North Korea's missile proliferation which has sparked worldwide alarm.

But North Korea's official newspaper, Rodong Sinmun, on Monday denounced Seoul for "unpardonable anti-national, anti-reunification moves to stifle calls for reunification."

"The warmongers are asserting that the joint military exercises are for 'defence' purpose but they are mobilizing huge aggression armed forces enough to undertake a war, timed to coincide with their anti-(North Korea) campaign over it non-existent 'missile threat'."

"This is nothing but a sophism intended to cover up the real anti-North offensive nature of the play with fire," Rodong Sinmun said.

The North has lambasted the war games as a plot to start a war, using the pretext of Pyongyang's reported plan to launch a new missile.

The North is said to be preparing the launch of a new Taepodong II long-range missile. It launched its medium-range Taepodong I a year ago.

Washington and Pyongyang held missile talks last week. The United States warned the North that any launch could shatter regional stability.

Habibie congratulates Megawati

JAKARTA, Aug 16: Indonesian President B.J. Habibie on Monday congratulated the opposition party of Megawati Sukarnoputri for its victory in the June 7 elections, reports AFP.

"I express my congratulations to the Indonesian Democracy Party - Struggle (PDI-P) as the reaper of the most votes," Habibie said in his state-of-the-nation address to parliament on the eve of the country's 54th Independence Day.

The PDI-P won the June 7 elections, the first since Habibie took over the presidency from Suharto last year, with 33 percent of the vote.

Habibie's ruling Golkar Party came a distant second with 22 percent, followed by the Moslem United Development Party (PPP), and the National Awakening Party (PKB).

Habibie and Megawati, the feisty daughter of the country's

founding president Sukarno, are the two leading contenders for the Indonesian presidency which is to be decided in November by the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) formed by the elections.

Although PDI-P won the polls, the MPR's choice of president and vice president is not bound by the poll results.

Megawati's candidacy has come under attack from Moslem scholars and politicians who oppose having a woman president.

Indonesia is the world's largest Moslem-populated nation with close to 90 percent of its 210 million people professing Islam.

But in his speech, though he did not specifically mention objections to Megawati, Habibie said the issue of gender should no longer shake the country.

"It is now time for us to put women equal to men," Habibie

said.

Indonesia's ruling party may dump Habibie

JAKARTA, Aug 16: Indonesia's ruling Golkar party could reverse a decision to nominate President B.J. Habibie for a new term if potential allies reject him, the party leader has said, reports AFP.

"There is still a possibility for Golkar to review its presidential candidate if political parties eager to form a coalition reject Habibie's bid," Golkar leader B.J. Habibie was quoted by the Indonesian news server as saying.

In comments made at a seminar attended by leaders from two opposition parties late Saturday, Tanjung, however, made no mention of who the party might name as an alternative.



Visiting Cambodian Parliamentary Speaker Prince Norodom Ranariddh (C) is flanked by members of the Indonesia's People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) as he listens to Indonesian President BJ Habibie's state-of-the-nation address at parliament in Jakarta yesterday. — AFP photo

New PM vows to defend Russia's integrity

400 rebels killed in Dagestan

MOSCOW, Aug 16: Acting premier Vladimir Putin said Monday that he will fight to preserve Russia's territorial integrity despite a wave of violence gripping the southern Dagestan republic and neighboring Chechnya, reports AFP.

"Russia's integrity cannot be an object of debate, haggling or blackmail," Putin said in remarks carried on state-run RTR television.

A senior interior ministry official earlier Monday said some 400 Islamic insurgents have been killed in 10 days of fighting in the southern Russian republic of Dagestan.

The interior ministry spokesman refused to provide any information on the number of Russian soldiers killed in battle.

Russia launched a major offensive last week to crush an Islamic incursion into Dagestan that began August 7 when rebels crossed over from Chechnya and seized control of several villages.

It marked the worst spell of violence since the 1994-96 Chechen war that killed some 80,000 people and left the north Caucasus chronically unstable.

Meanwhile, President Boris Yeltsin ruled out imposing a state of emergency in Dagestan on Monday despite reports that hundreds have been killed in 10 days of fierce fighting between Islamic insurgents and Russian troops.

"Once again I say firmly and resolutely, as the president of the country, there will be no state of emergency," Yeltsin said firmly in televised remarks. "The situation is calm, normal."

But Yeltsin added that he supported "tough measures" to overcome the Islamic rebels who crossed from the rebel Chechen republic on August 7 and seized several mountain towns in Dagestan, which they proclaimed independent of Russia.

These measures would be implemented "both in Dagestan and other northern Caucasus

republics," Yeltsin said.

Chechnya on Sunday declared its own state of emergency and imposed a night-time curfew as Russian forces claimed to have killed some 80 Islamic rebels in just one night of fighting.

The death toll reports could not be independently confirmed, but a senior interior ministry official said some 400 Islamic insurgents have been killed in fighting so far.

Acting Russian premier Vladimir Putin, facing confirmation before lawmakers angry with the latest violence on Russia's turbulent southern flank, vowed to defend the country's territory in full.

"Russia's integrity cannot be an object of debate, haggling or blackmail," Putin said.

Russian defense sources, cited by Interfax, said an additional 600 paratroopers had landed in Dagestan on Monday as Moscow said it was making impressive strides in dislodging the rebels from their strongholds.