

US to test missile interceptor

WASHINGTON, Oct 2: The US military will test for the first time over the weekend a system to intercept and blast an intercontinental ballistic missile out of the sky, defence officials said here Friday, reports AFP.

The test is scheduled for 0800 BST Sunday over the Pacific Ocean as part of the fledgling anti-missile defence system but delays cannot be ruled out, a senior military official said.

"There could be delays for any reason," the official said. "It could be measured in minutes or seconds or even for that matter in days and weeks."

President Bill Clinton is set to decide by next June whether to go ahead with the controversial missile defence system, designed to shield the United States from missile attack.

The Pentagon has twice tested the system, in 1997 and 1998. But the latest test will mark the first use of a missile interceptor known as an "exo-atmospheric kill vehicle" or EKV, the officials said.

The test will attempt to "demonstrate basically that we can intercept a target of inter-continental range," said a senior military official.

The kill vehicle will orient itself autonomously, track the target, and kill it, the official said.

The EKV, weighing some 60 kilogram (130 pounds), has its own guidance, propulsion and communications systems, as well as computer systems enabling it to select the target.

Taliban urge US to open talks

KABUL, Oct 2: Afghanistan's Taliban regime Saturday urged US to open talks, reports AFP.

Deputy Minister of Mines and Industries Mawlawi Abdul Salam Zaeef told reporters that it was "unfair" to treat the Afghan people with sanctions.

"Compared to others, the people of Afghanistan are poor and hungry. It is unfair if more sanctions are imposed on them."

"It will be useful if talks are held for solution of the problems," he said, adding the militia was trying to improve its diplomatic profile.

The United States this year slapped sanctions against the Taliban, banning US-based companies from making any deals with the militia for harbouring alleged terrorist Osama bin Laden and for failing to curb opium production.

Under the sanctions, Washington froze several million dollars of the Ariana Afghan Airlines in an American bank.

Washington has said it would consider imposing more sanctions if the Taliban did not change their policies.

But Zaeef said: "We hope that the United States and the United Nations are not impatient."

"This is not a big deal, it will be resolved," he said, referring to the drugs issue.

"We are not their enemies and even cannot think of being their enemies... a solution has to be sought," the deputy minister said.

16 more bodies found in Dili

DILI, East Timor, Oct 2: Sixteen more bodies were found here as the United Nations announced Saturday that several members of a human rights inquiry team would arrive shortly, reports AFP.

"I now understand that five people will be coming here next week to head that investigation," UN Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) spokesman David Wimhurst told reporters here.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has announced an inquiry into abuses committed under Indonesian rule in East Timor this year.

Wimhurst could provide more details Saturday on the makeup of the team which will begin looking at the allegations of abuse.

He said another 13 unburied bodies had been discovered in a small village just west of Dili. Ten were buried in a truck, one female was found dead near a house, and two other corpses were found in a shallow grave, UNAMET said.

"Interfet and Civpol (UNAMET civilian police) are conducting a preliminary investigation," Wimhurst said.

Over recent days more than 34 bodies have been found in the Dili area. The total includes three discovered by an AFP reporter on Saturday.

One was found in an abandoned house with a broken roof. The bones of the dead man lay behind a door flanked by a large mural of Christ. The skull and a limb had been severed from the backbone.

Hostage drama ends

Gunmen free all, fly out of Bangkok

BANGKOK, Oct 2: Myanmar gunmen have released a Thai minister who offered himself in exchange for nearly 40 hostages held captive for over 24 hours at the Myanmar embassy here, Thai officials said Saturday, reports AFP.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumbhand Paribatra and another Thai official were returning to Bangkok aboard a helicopter which the five gunmen used to fly to the Myanmar border, Interior Minister Sanan Kachonprasart said.

Sanan said the gunmen fled after landing less than two kilometres (1.25 miles) from the Myanmar border in the western Thai province of Ratchaburi.

"The helicopter landed at Suan Phueung district... the five men got out and the helicopter left the area," said Sanan, adding that their destination was unknown.

Earlier, the gunmen who stormed the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok to protest at the country's military rule released their remaining hostages Saturday as they boarded a helicopter with a Thai government minister and flew out of the capital.

The kill vehicle will orient itself autonomously, track the target, and kill it, the official said.

One helicopter took off from a schoolyard in central Bangkok, carrying five gunmen. Thai Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumbhand Paribatra and one other official, an AFP reporter on the scene said.

Before boarding the helicopter the gunmen released 23 hostages which they had transported with them at gunpoint to the makeshift helipad earlier Saturday.

The 23 were among close to 40 who had been in the embassy when it was stormed. Diplomatic sources here Saturday put the figure of hostages at 39.

Thai Interior Minister Sanan Kachonprasart said Sukhumbhand had offered himself in exchange for the hostages.

Authorities earlier said that 12 gunmen had seized the embassy but police told AFP Saturday only five men were involved.

"I can confirm that there were only five students," said senior police officer Wibol Bangtanel.

The gunmen had demanded safe passage to the Thai-Myanmar border and the helicopter was last seen flying in a westerly direction towards Myanmar.

The hostages had been held for more than 24 hours since the group calling itself the "Vigorous Burmese Student Warriors" took over the Myanmar embassy compound. There have been no reports of any casualties.

Earlier one hostage being taken to the schoolyard in two vans told local radio by mobile telephone: "They are still pointing the guns at us. We need the helicopter now."

Police delivered two vans to the embassy around noon Saturday. Minutes later four shots were fired before the vans sped from the scene.

Six other hostages fled the embassy compound shortly after the vans departed, witnesses said.

The group seized the embassy around noon Friday and threatened to execute one captive every half hour unless their demands for helicopters were met.

Earlier Saturday the gunmen released two hostages - a pregnant Thai woman and a Myanmar man, who appeared unwell. Three other people either escaped or were released Friday.

Police said the gunmen were armed with AK-47 rifles and grenades.

A statement faxed from inside the embassy said the attackers were willing to "die in action."

"Eleven years after (the) nation-wide democracy uprising Burma remains under the oppressive military regime and the people are denied democracy and human rights," the statement said, using the former name for Myanmar.

Earlier one of the hostage-takers, identifying himself as "Johnny," told AFP by telephone: "If our demand is not met we will have to kill (them). These people they are as good as dead."

Outside, army anti-terrorist troops and ambulances joined hundreds of police surrounding the embassy.

Myanmar student dissidents living in Thailand have denied any link with the armed group inside the compound.

They said they knew of the leader "Johnny," whose real name was believed to be Kyaw Oo, a 30-year-old former military cadet and warned his threat to kill the hostages was likely to be serious.



An activist points his AK-47 rifle at photographers as he stands guarding a group of hostages inside the Myanmar embassy in Bangkok yesterday. — AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Student-police clash in Java

At least 20 students and nine policemen, including a local police chief, were injured after running street battles between student and Indonesian police in Purwokerto, Central Java, AFP reports from Jakarta.

Hundreds of student protesters, from the Forum for Students' Action in Purwokerto, clashed with police barring their way into the district office in Purwokerto on Friday, the Kompas daily said. The students were protesting recent violence by the military and police against student protesters. They also demanded an end to the military's political role and that the armed forces be held responsible for violence in several Indonesian regions, Kompas said.

Brazil, China to launch satellite

Brazil and China will launch their first jointly developed satellite on October 15 to study environmental and agricultural phenomena, officials said Friday, AP reports from Brasilia.

Science and Technology Minister Ronaldo Sardenberg said the Chinese Brazilian Earth Research Satellite (CBERS-1) will be launched aboard the Chinese rocket "Long March 4" and will feed data to a relay station in Cuiaba, 540 miles west of Brasilia. Aside from environmental and agricultural applications, the satellite, with its three high resolution cameras, will aid in urban planning and provide feedback on water quality, weather, deforestation and burning, Sardenberg said.

NASA research plane crashes

An experimental NASA research plane crashed Friday but was only moderately damaged when it hit a California highway, the US space agency said, AFP reports from Los Angeles.

The Perseus B-Airerail is remote controlled, with no pilot. There was no fire, no property damage, and no injuries on the ground. The plane crashed Friday morning into the west-bound lanes of Interstate 40 about six kilometers east of Barstow, California, the National Aeronautic and Space Administration said in a statement.



Japan lifts evacuation order after N-accident

TOKYO, Oct 2: Japan on Saturday lifted its last remaining evacuation order for residents near the site of the country's worst nuclear accident, Chief Cabinet Secretary Hiromu Nonaka said, reports AFP.

Following the move, 83 people who had sheltered in a public hall since Thursday can return home, the top government spokesman told reporters.

They had been evacuated as their homes are within 350 metres of the uranium processing plant where the accident occurred.

The government had designated the area an exclusion zone.

The levels of radiation in the area were confirmed to be normal and pose "no safety problem," Nonaka said.

"We have carefully examined the levels of radiation and soil. The findings confirmed safety and people in the 350 metres area can return to their normal life," Nonaka said.

Radiation leaked at a uranium-processing plant in Tokaimura, Ibaraki prefecture, some 120 kilometres northeast of Tokyo, leaving 49 exposed and forcing more than 320,000 people to shelter in their homes.

Nonaka said the Tokaimura accident was "utterly beyond imagination," suspecting that it happened by mere fundamental human errors.

"This accident shows a complete lack of moral... as well as sense of responsibility, and it is justified to say it has happened because of utterly simple errors made by individuals," he said.

Nonaka declared all food products made in the prefecture as safe.

The ministries of health and agriculture conducted a "thorough examination" on the products and "there is no danger at all," he said.

Pak violence toll rises to 20

ISLAMABAD, Oct 2: Two more people, including a senior police official, were killed in Pakistan Saturday, raising the toll to 20 killed in two days of Muslim sectarian unrest that has heightened security fears, reports AFP.

On Friday nine Shiite Muslims were slain in an attack on a mosque in Karachi, followed by an apparent retaliatory killing of four Sunni Muslims in the city, capital of southern Sindh province.

Five Shiites, including a doctor and a former lawmaker, were gunned down the same day at different places in central Punjab province.

In the latest incidents, leader of a Shiite party, Pir Hasnain Shah, was shot dead by two motorcyclists Saturday in the Punjab town of Jatoi.

Police said two motorcyclists sprayed the Tehrik-i-Tafria Pakistan (TJP) local leader with bullets.

A top police official, Farooq Haider, was killed in an ambush by two gunmen in Peshawar, the main city in North West Frontier Province (NWFP).

Haider, provincial deputy inspector general of traffic police and a Shiite Muslim, died on the spot near his home as a lone assailant armed with a pistol pumped bullets into him from close range and fled, police said.

Police said they suspected sectarian anger was behind the attack.

Authorities said security had been tightened in sensitive areas across the country and a crackdown on religious militants was under way in Punjab, the power base of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.

Police sources in the Punjab capital of Lahore said more than 200 militants, mostly from Sunni extremist group Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan (SSP), had been detained in the province since late Friday.

The top SSP leader, Mohammad Azam Tariq, has been put under indefinite detention in his home in Jhang, the base city of the organisation in Punjab, a police official told AFP in Lahore.

Tariq was released last month after spending nearly two years in jail for alleged crimes involving sectarian bloodshed, none of which led to a judicial conclusion.

Special teams are continuing raids to round up sectarian extremists," the police official said.

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No evidence of shorelines on Mars

BOSTON, Oct 2: Recent photographs of Mars show no evidence of ancient shorelines that would have once bordered oceans on the dusty planet, contrary to the impression given by images taken by the Viking probes of the 1970s, according to a study in the Journal of Geophysical Research Letters, reports AFP.

Images taken by the Mars Global Surveyor in 1998 have a resolution five to 10 times higher than those of the Viking missions, and the newer pictures show no trace of coastlines that would have edged oceans had they existed, the scientists wrote.

Certain surface features on Mars, when viewed from the Viking images, looked as though they might have been formed by water, but upon closer inspection none of those features appear to have been shaped by the movements of seas.

"The ocean hypothesis is very important because the existence of large bodies of liquid water in the Martian past would have had a tremendous impact on ancient Martian climate and implications for the search for evidence of past life on the planet," wrote Kenneth Edgett, a staff scientist at Malin Space Science Systems, in San Diego, California.

"The newer images do not show any coastal landforms in areas where previous researchers -- working with lower resolution Viking images -- proposed there were shorelines," Edgett said.

Anwar fit to leave hospital

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 2: Malaysia's jailed former deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim -- who says he has been poisoned with arsenic -- is fit enough to leave hospital, a press report said Saturday, reports AFP.

A defence lawyer told AFP that his sodomy trial would probably resume Wednesday.

The trial was adjourned September 10 after lawyers for Anwar, who is already serving a six-year term for abusing his official position, said tests showed he was suffering from arsenic poisoning and someone might be trying to murder him.

The court ordered a medical examination and tests.

US Senate debate on CTBT set for Oct 8

WASHINGTON, Oct 2: After two years of neglect, US Senate Republicans on Friday dusted off the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and cleared the way for a debate to open next week on the accord, which still has strong opponents in the party, reports AFP.

The Senate debate will begin on October 8, with a vote possible as soon as October 12, Senate Democratic Minority Leader Thomas Daschle announced Friday.

The treaty has languished in the Senate for two years, but late Thursday Senate Republicans, in a surprise about-face, announced that they would soon be ready to vote on the CTBT.

A spokesman for Republican Majority Leader Trent Lott, John Czwartacki, explained the change of heart as a concession to the Democrats.

"This is what they've been clamoring for, we're just giving them what they asked for," he said.

But Czwartacki made it clear that Lott had not had a change of heart about the CTBT itself.

"This is an awful treaty, he'd oppose it," Czwartacki said of Lott. "It's not good for national security, it's not good for the country."

A senior aide at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, which is led by conservative Republican and staunch CTBT

Presidential election in Indonesia Oct 20

JAKARTA, Oct 2: Faction leaders of Indonesia's national assembly have agreed to elect the country's new president on October 20, instead of waiting until November, ruling Golkar Party Chairman Akbar Tanjung said Saturday, reports AFP.

"An agreement has been reached that the MPR (People's Consultative Assembly) speed up its convention... so that by October 21 at the latest, a new government with a new president is already elected," Tanjung told journalists on the sidelines of the convention.

Tanjung said the new president was expected to be elected on October 20 and the vice president the following day.

"This was following lobbying late yesterday (Friday) until this morning... there was an agreement that there is an urgent need to get a legitimate president," said Sabam Sirait of the Indonesian Democracy Party-Struggle (PDI-P) of opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri.

The political leaders agreed to hold the MPR sessions within three weeks, Tanjung said.

The current session, to end on October 3, will set down the rules and procedures for the convention and elect the chairman and vice chairmen of the legislature.

Between October 5 and 14, a working committee of the MPR will prepare the broad policy guidelines for the next five years and the necessary MPR decrees.

Incumbent President B.J. Habibie will present his accountability speech to the MPR on October 15, Tanjung added.

Under Indonesian law, the president has to account for the policies of his government to the MPR before ending his term. A rejection of the account would scuttle Habibie's attempt to get elected for a new term.

Habibie and the PDIP's Megawati, daughter of the country's first president Sukarno, are the frontrunners in the presidential race.

The decision to hold the election early was expected to be endorsed by a plenary session later Saturday.

The PDI-P had earlier insisted the president be elected on October 12, without first formulating the general policy guidelines.

But a team of seven other main opposition parties had demanded the election be held on October 28, after the policy guidelines are formulated.

JKLF leader vows to receive Pak marchers

SRINAGAR, India, Oct 2: A Muslim leader in Indian Kashmir said Saturday he planned to welcome Pakistan-based Kashmir separatists who have threatened to march over the border dividing the disputed Himalayan region, reports AFP.

Bhawani Bashir Yasser of the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), the state's premier separatist group, said he expected "thousands of Kashmiris" to cross the border from Pakistan on Monday.

The Indian government has warned Pakistan that it will have to take sole responsibility for the consequences if it fails to prevent the march going ahead.

According to reports, the Pakistani authorities have already arrested at least 40 people in a crackdown on JKLF supporters.

"Thousands of JKLF mem-

bers have started assembling at Rawalkote in Pakistan-held Kashmir and are determined to cross over to this side in spite of the crackdown," Yasser told reporters here.

"We are all set to receive them."

The JKLF ignited the Muslim separatist campaign in Indian Kashmir in 1989, but its influence has greatly waned in recent years.

The JKLF advocates Kashmir's independence from both India and Pakistan. Almost all other Muslim separatist groups favour the merger of Kashmir with Pakistan.

"India and Pakistan should be forced to roll back from Kashmir," Yasser said, accusing both countries of "keeping Kashmiris hostage."

India controls the southern two-thirds of Kashmir and Pakistan the remaining one-third.

Fighting in Philippines: Death toll rises to 67

COTABATO, Philippines, Oct 2: Philippine troops have killed 67 Muslim separatist guerrillas in five days of fighting in the towns of Datu Piang and Sharif Aguak, a military spokesman said Saturday, reports AFP.

At least 67 soldiers have been seriously wounded in the fighting which is still raging on the southern island of Mindanao, Captain Onting Alon said, adding that two helicopter gunships are attacking the positions of the Muslim separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

Two rocket launchers, three assault rifles and a machine gun had been captured from the MILF as well, Alon said.

MILF military chief Mohamad Murad however said they had suffered only one fatality and had destroyed two armoured vehicles and a truck. They had also killed numerous soldiers although he could not give a figure.

The fighting was centered around a hill considered strategically valuable overlooking the MILF's Camp Omar.

About 4,000 civilians have fled their homes after the fighting broke out on Tuesday.

Local military commander, Brigadier General Rodolfo Garcia said the clashes were triggered by the MILF's harassment of military patrols in an attempt to expand their territory beyond Camp Omar in preparation for forthcoming peace talks due to start on October 25.

The MILF is expected to demand the government recognize territory they occupy by committing to keep troops and police out of those areas. In the past this has been a point of conflict that has bogged down negotiations.

Murad said they would maintain a defensive position but warned that they may pull out of the peace talks if the government does not halt its attacks.

Russia continues air raid in Chechnya

MOSCOW, Oct 2: Russia pressed ahead Friday with a bombing campaign against the breakaway republic of Chechnya as more refugees fled to neighboring provinces in Russia's North Caucasus region, reports Xinhua.

While political leaders said Thursday that government troops had taken strategic heights several miles inside Chechnya, the military has declined to give any details on troop movements.

More than 88,000 refugees have fled Chechnya to neighboring Ingushetia in the west, straining the resources of the impoverished territory. Four trucks from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, with tents, mattresses, food and other supplies, arrived in Ingushetia on Friday, Russia media reported.

Chris Carpenter, the head of UNHCR in Moscow, was quoted as saying that there could be 100,000 refugees in Ingushetia within days if the current pace continues.

The Interfax news agency reported that federal fighter jets kept up the air strikes on Chechnya, carrying out more than 20 strikes on suspected rebel targets overnight Friday.

The bombing raids have targeted suspected rebel strongholds, oil refineries and bridges, according to the Russian air force. The air force has

carried out more than 350 air raids on Chechnya in the past two weeks.

AFP adds: The United States is growing increasingly concerned by Russia's military intervention in Chechnya, even though Washington sympathises with Moscow's position as it moves to wipe out suspected terrorists, officials in Washington said Friday.

"We feel a lot of sympathy for what they're going through in Moscow," a senior State Department official said, ahead of what was billed as a major policy speech on Russia and Chechnya to be delivered in Boston by Deputy Secretary of State Stroble Talbott.

However, the official said Washington was concerned that Russia was "placing obstacles" in the way of a peaceful resolution to the situation by continuing its military offensive and announcing it no longer recognized the rule of President Aslan Maskhadov over the breakaway Caucasus republic.

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foe Jesse Helms, told reporters that both sides estimated that the 67 votes needed for ratification were not likely to materialize.

The Senate must ratify all international treaties by a two-thirds majority.

But President Bill Clinton said late Friday he had already begun pushing the Senate to ratify the treaty.

"I am fighting now to get the CTBT ratified in the Senate," Clinton told journalists after a Democrat fund-raising dinner in Las Vegas.

"It is profoundly important because we are trying to stop countries that do not have nuclear power now, and terrorist groups who do not have nuclear power now, from getting it," Clinton insisted.

According to Daschle, the Senate debate on the treaty may continue for 14 hours, and Lott may ask the Senate Armed Services Committee to hold preliminary hearings on the subject.

He said the treaty had the support of all 45 Senate Democrats, which means at least 22 Republican votes are needed to ensure ratification.

At the State Department, spokesman James Rubin said the Senate had not allotted enough time for the debate.

"I do not think that three or four days is enough," Rubin said.