

48 die in Russian attack in Chechnya

GROZNY, Russia, Oct 6: Russia tightened its grip on Chechnya Wednesday, with Grozny admitting it had pulled out of a key northern province while claiming that 48 people had died in a spate of attacks by federal forces.

The retreat had been ordered for "tactical reasons", a member of the crisis unit set up by Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov told AFP. It was the first time Grozny had announced such an important withdrawal.

Russian troops have taken up positions along the Terek River since pouring thousands of men, tanks and armour along the strategic waterway since driving into Chechnya on October 1 to crush Islamic guerrillas operating in the republic.

Attacks by government troops, who control the northern third of Chechnya, had cost almost 50 lives in the 12 hours to midday in three separate incidents, Chechen officials told AFP.

Twenty-eight Chechen civilians died when Russian tanks opened fire on a fleet of buses ferrying refugees from Grozny back to their northeastern village of Shelkovskaya late Tuesday regional prefect Abdulkadir Israilov said.

The refugees, who had received assurances from Russian troops that they could return to their homes, were fired on as they approached the Russian-controlled village of Chervyomnaya, Israilov said. Of the 40 people, mainly women and children, on board the first bus, 28 were killed, and nine of the 12 survivors were in a serious condition, the Chechen official said.

London rail crash One more body found

LONDON, Oct 6: Emergency services combing the wreckage after a high-speed train crash in London found a further body Wednesday, taking the death toll to 27, but warned the number of victims was likely to mount, reports AFP.

Emergency services resumed work at first light and said one badly damaged carriage remained to be searched. Police had worked through the night to shore up the debris, after two commuter trains collided Tuesday outside London's Paddington station at the height of the morning rush hour.

Rescue workers were confident late Tuesday that no survivors remained in the wreckage of what was Britain's worst train crash in more than 10 years.

Forty-seven people remained in hospital Wednesday. Twenty-five of them were seriously injured and 14 were in intensive care, a hospital spokesman said.

More than 150 people were taken to hospital Tuesday and scores of others were treated at the scene.

Shankar Dayal gets Indira Gandhi Award

NEW DELHI, Oct 6: Former President Shankar Dayal Sharma has been selected for the 1998 Indira Gandhi Award for National Integration (IGANI), reports PTI.

The award, comprising a citation and cash prize of Rs 1.51 lakh, was instituted to uphold the cause of national integration and understanding by Indian National Congress in its centenary year 1985. Rameshwar Thakur, member secretary, advisory committee of IGANI, said yesterday.

It will be given away by Congress President Sonia Gandhi on October 31, the death anniversary of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, he said in a statement.

Clinton signs \$288b defence budget

WASHINGTON, Oct 6: President Bill Clinton on Tuesday signed a 288.8 billion dollar military budget that increases defence spending for the first time since the Cold War ended and gives troops their biggest pay rise in 18 years, reports Reuters.

The fiscal year 2000 national defence authorisation bill signed by Clinton during a special Pentagon visit provides military personnel with a 4.8 per cent salary hike and increases pension benefits beginning next January 1.

The total represents a boost of 8 billion dollar by the Republican-controlled Congress over what Clinton sought for the year. It also provides extra pay for high-tech personnel, especially in the Air Force, and anticipates further basic military pay increases each year through fiscal 2006.

"It provides for a strong national defence and a better quality of life for our military personnel and their families," Clinton said.

"The excellence of our military is the direct product of the excellence of our men and women in uniform. This bill invests in that excellence. It authorises... a comprehensive programme of pay and retirement improvements that add up to the biggest increase in military compensation in a generation."

UN urges world to halt 50 yrs of N-tests

UNITED NATIONS, Oct 6: UN deputy secretary-general Louise Frechette said today that words and intentions were not enough to end 50 years of nuclear testing and at least 2,000 atomic explosions, reports Reuters.

Urging nations to sign and ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), Frechette said further delay increased the risk that nuclear testing could resume. By initiating the treaty in 1996, she said states showed a determination to end more than 50 years of nuclear testing during which at least 2,000 explosions took place.

"None of this, however, will come to pass until the international community brings the treaty into force and adopts it universally," she told the opening of a review conference of the treaty in Vienna, according to her prepared remarks.

"Words of support and statements of intention are simply not enough," Frechette said.

The three-day meeting, chaired by Japan, was called to speed up approvals for the treaty, a requirement if the accord failed to go into force three years after it was open to signature. The treaty needs 18 more nations to ratify it.

The Vienna session will also review the extensive monitoring in place and planned to detect atomic tests.

The United States is in the embarrassing position of having been the first to sign the treaty but being unable to get the US Senate to ratify it, despite a blitz campaign by President Bill Clinton. This means Washington has observer status rather than being a full-fledged participant in Vienna.

The treaty bans all explosions in the environment, whether in the atmosphere, space or underground, regardless of size. A 1963 treaty barred explosions in the atmosphere

and another one in 1974 set some limits on underground tests.

A total of 154 nations have signed the treaty and 51 of them have deposited instruments of ratifications, chief UN spokesman Fred Eckhard said on Tuesday.

But the treaty does not go into effect until 44 nations with nuclear weapons, power stations or other atomic capabilities have both signed and ratified the convention.

Of this group of 44, all but India, Pakistan and North Korea have signed the treaty and 25 have ratified it, the last ones being Switzerland, Romania and Mexico.

India has hinted it would consider signing the treaty after the formation of a new government following recent elections. Pakistan has refused to sign until the United States eases sanctions imposed after its nuclear test last year.

All five declared nuclear

powers — the United States, Russia, Britain, France and China — signed the treaty.

The 26 nuclear-capable countries that ratified the treaty are: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Britain, Bulgaria, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and Mexico.

For the treaty to take effect, however, ratification is still needed from 18 nations: Algeria, Bangladesh, Chile, China, Colombia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, Vietnam, the United States, India, Pakistan and North Korea.

Russia are each estimated to deploy more than 7,000 nuclear warheads.

Floods kill 64 in Mexico

Disaster areas declared in 4 states

MEXICO CITY, Oct 6: Mexico declared disaster areas in four states on Tuesday as heavy rains caused some of the worst floods in 40 years, killing at least 64 people and driving tens of thousands from their homes, officials and media said, reports Reuters.

In Tulancingo, a city filled with textile factories in the central state of Hidalgo, the Tulancingo river raged over its banks in the centre of town, dragging trucks and cars and filling some 6,500 homes and buildings with water.

"Practically half of the city is affected to some degree," Hidalgo state Gov. Manuel Angel Nunez told reporters. He said the water was more than a meter (three feet) deep in parts of Tulancingo, about 70 miles (120 km) northeast of Mexico City.

Also in Hidalgo, the walls of a marble quarry caved in from rains, burying seven workers under tons of mud and rock. Six bodies were recovered from the collapsed mine, said Margarito Hernandez, an official in the town hall of San Salvador.

The Interior Ministry declared emergencies in parts of the states of Puebla, Michoa-

can, Jalisco and Tabasco as rivers burst their banks. The declaration allows local officials access to federal funds to cope with the natural disasters.

In the Gulf of Mexico state of Tabasco, authorities said rivers were flooding higher than they had in 40 years and two drownings Tuesday brought the death toll to four. More than 58,000 people were forced out of their homes.

In Tabasco's capital Villahermosa, the Carrizal river was flooding huge suburban neighbourhoods.

"I'm about two kilometres from the river, in a high area, and the water is up to my knees. It's coming up through the drains. My bed, camera, and microwave are ruined," said resident Manuel Lopez, speaking from a cellular phone as he stood on his roof. "I'm going to stay on the roof tonight with some neighbours to make sure nothing gets stolen."

For a second day in a row Tabasco officials warned people living near the Carrizal, Samaria, Grijalva and Usumacinta rivers to evacuate as they were forced to open floodgates

to release water pent up behind hydroelectric dams.

On Tuesday night Televisa television station reported a total death toll of 39 in the state of Puebla in the past week and 14 in Veracruz, including two men buried in mudslides. Southern Chiapas state on the Guatemalan border also reported two deaths.

Mexico's national Meteorological Service said that at 9:00 pm local time (0200 GMT Wednesday) a tropical depression was hovering in the Gulf of Mexico, 75 miles (120 km) northeast of Veracruz port.

"Additional rainfall amounts of 10 to 15 inches (25 to 38 cm), with locally higher amounts in mountainous areas, are possible over portions of eastern Mexico. These rainfalls could cause flash floods and mudslides," the Miami-based US National Hurricane Centre said in a report.

The rains did not let up in Central America either, where areas barely recovered from the devastation wrought last year by Hurricane Mitch have been pummeled by torrential rains since mid-September.

Golkar party chief elected House speaker

JAKARTA, Oct 6: Indonesia's newly-elected lower house announced early Wednesday it had elected the chairman of the ruling Golkar party, Akbar Tanjung, as the House speaker for the next five years, reports AFP.

The election, by a secret vote, followed the failure by a plenary session of the People's Representative Council (DPR) to approve a consensus of the leaders of the 10 parliamentary factions who selected Tanjung to chair the parliament.

Tanjung won 411 of the 491 votes in the ballot, the provisional chairman of the DPR, Abdul Majid said shortly after the vote count at 2:40 a.m. (0140 BST).

The four other candidates for the post were named as deputy chairmen of the DPR, sworn in on Friday as the first post-Suharto parliament.

"I thank the other parties for the trust they have given me, for supporting me to become the chairman of the DPR," Tanjung said after he was elected.

He attributed his election to the cooperation of the parties following earlier trade-offs, but added no concessions were made in return for their votes.

Journalist unions slam govt-proposed Press Council in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, Oct 6: Journalists Unions in Pakistan are opposing the formation of a government-proposed Press Council and call it the final blow to the freedom of expression in the country, reports IPS.

Under fire for muzzling voices of dissent in the country, the Nawaz Sharif government is now coysing up to newspaper owners to push through a Press Council that would lay down a code of conduct for working journalists and ensure its implementation.

The government says the proposed council will discourage yellow journalism, besides providing people with a means of redressal in case of libelous reporting.

Journalists however, fear that the government-sponsored council would impose tighter controls and suppress their independence. They demand the withdrawal of other anti-press laws in Pakistan.

A mix of colonial and post-colonial legislation — the Pakistan Penal Code of 1860, the official secrets act of 1920 and Maintenance of Public Order Ordinance of 1960, to name a few — gives the Pakistan government the power to curb the rights of expression and press freedom.

The proposed Press Council is not required, says Dr Mehdi Hassan, who taught journalism at the University of Punjab, in Lahore, in Pakistan there is no dearth of laws that control press freedom in one way or the other, he said.

Journalist unions will resist

any attempt by the government to control the press, be it through a press council, said Tahir Rathore, newly elected president of the Rawalpindi-Islamabad Union of Journalists.

Proposed by Prime Minister Sharif at a cabinet meeting in the first week of August, the information ministry did not take long to convince the council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors (CPNE), most of whom are the owners-cum-editors of their media businesses.

Information Minister Mushahid Hussain and the CPNE reached agreement on the formation of the council at a meeting held on Aug 30 in Islamabad.

Israel to free 151 more Palestinians

JERUSALEM, Oct 6: Israel will free 151 Palestinian and Arab prisoners from its jails on Thursday, one day ahead of the deadline under last month's interim peace deal, the prison authority said on Wednesday.

They will be released early Thursday from three prisons, a prison authority spokeswoman told AFP. Of the 151 detainees, 28 are from neighbouring Arab states.

A first batch of 199 prisoners was released on September 9, four days after the signing of the Sharm el-Sheikh interim peace accord.

Report on religious freedom China, 6 other nations may face US sanctions

WASHINGTON, Oct 6: The State Department has designated China and six other countries for possible sanctions for having engaged in or tolerated "particularly severe" violations of religious freedom, officials said, reports AP.

Joining China on the list were Afghanistan, Myanmar, Iran, Iraq, Serbia and Sudan, the officials said Tuesday. Of the seven, the United States has normal diplomatic relations only with China.

According to statute, the secretary of state is authorised to choose from a variety of sanctions to show US displeasure over the absence of religious freedom in the designated countries.

The secretary has the option of waiving sanctions if she deems it to be in the national interest. The sanctions can range

from a wrist slap to economic penalties. The disclosures came four weeks after the State Department issued its first annual report on the state of religious freedom worldwide.

The report said Chinese government intolerance of unregistered religious activity has led in some areas to persecution of people, on the basis of religious practice, "through harassment, prolonged detention and incarceration in prison or 'reform-through-labour' camps."

The report offers these evaluations on the other six: Afghanistan — Shiites suffer persecution and killing at the hands of the Taliban-led government in Kabul, Afghan police impose "severe physical punishment and imprisonment" for deviations from codes of worship and dress, the report said.



Nobel Peace laureate Bishop Carlos Felipe Ximenes Belo (L) hugs a supporter upon his return to East Timor yesterday, one month after he fled violence unleashed by pro-Jakarta militia. Belo wanted to stay in East Timor but fled when his home was destroyed by fire. — AFP photo

Devastated E Timor 'worse than hell' Bishop Belo returns home

DILI, East Timor, Oct 6: Bishop Carlos Belo on Wednesday described the aftermath of the devastation wrought on East Timor in the last month as "worse than hell", reports AFP.

Speaking on his return to the territory's capital Dili a month after being forced to flee for fear of his life, East Timor's spiritual leader said he was deeply shocked by the scale of the damage inflicted by rampaging militias and the Indonesian military.

"This is worse than hell. We can't see hell yet but this is really hell," he said after a meeting United Nations officials.

The bishop also said it was too early to talk about reconciliation with Indonesia. "Now we do not talk about reconciliation," he said. "Let us clean up the city first."

He called on the people of East Timor to show "the spirit to rebuild, to reconstruct the country and to look to the future not the past".

After his talks, Belo returned to his charred residence on Dili's waterfront. Some 100 local people were there to greet

him.

The bishop was evacuated from the compound on September 6 as militias prepared to attack hundreds of refugees sheltering in the grounds.

Earlier report says: Bishop Carlos Belo, East Timor's spiritual leader, arrived in Baucau to a hero's welcome Wednesday, a month after fleeing the violence that exploded after his compatriots voted massively for independence.

In emotional comments to a rapt audience outside the cathedral in the town of his birth, Belo appealed for all the other refugees from the terror to return and start building an independent East Timor.

"My message to other East Timorese living outside is to urgently and quickly come back," Belo said. "Their place is here, this is their homeland."

Belo's return is expected to be followed soon by the homecoming of Xanana Gusmao, the leader of the independence movement who spent almost seven years in an Indonesian jail.

JKLF leader Amanullah Khan freed

MUZAFFARABAD, Pakistan administered Kashmir, Oct 6: The leader of an attempted march across the border into Indian Kashmir was released Wednesday a day after being arrested, authorities here said, reports AFP.

Amanullah Khan, chairman of Jamaat-ul-Jehad Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF), was escorted out of Pakistan-administered Kashmir by police and set free, they said.

Hundreds of JKLF marchers, led by Khan, tried to cross the disputed border into the Indian side in Kashmir on Monday but were felled by security forces. Several people were injured in clashes with the police.

Administration officials said 10 of about 300 JKLF members arrested since Monday were also freed and others would be released gradually.

The JKLF, which advocates a united Kashmir independent of Pakistan and India, attempted the march to attract international attention to the decade-old turmoil in Indian-held Kashmir.

The party said the march was also aimed to show that the people of Kashmir rejected the division of their homeland.

Shiite shopkeeper killed in Karachi

KARACHI, Oct 6: Gunmen have shot dead a Shiite Muslim shopkeeper in Karachi, the latest victim in a wave of sectarian violence that has claimed 31 lives over the past week, police said today, reports AFP.

The 25-year-old Syed Haider Abbas was attacked by unidentified assailants late Tuesday when he was closing his shop in the city's central Bufferzone neighbourhood, they said.

The attackers fled the scene as panicked residents and relatives gathered at the site, residents said.

"My brother had nothing to do with politics. His only crime was that he was a member of the Shiite community," the victim's wailing brother, Fyyaz Haider, told reporters at a hospital.

The incident followed a spate of sectarian attacks last week.

Twenty-one people have been killed in Karachi, capital of southern Sindh province, since Friday's storming of a Shiite mosque in the city by masked men that left 10 people dead.

Others were gunned down by assailants in central Punjab and North West Frontier Province.

Police in a country-wide crackdown have detained around a 1,000 suspects and activists from radical religious groups including a Sunni Muslim party, Sipah-i-Sahaba Pakistan.

US blasts Taliban over treatment of women

LONG BEACH, Californian, Oct 6: US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright on Tuesday sharply criticised Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia over its treatment of women, reports AFP.

In a speech to the California Governor's Conference for Women here, she condemned the Taliban for being "determined to drag Afghan women back from the dawn of the 21st century to somewhere closer to the 13th."

The only female rights they appear to recognise are the rights to remain silent and uneducated, unheard and unemployed," she said.

A growing movement spearheaded in part by Hollywood celebrities has for some time been trying to highlight the fundamentalist Taliban's treatment of women and girls.

Albright assured her audience that the United States would not ignore their plight, recounting her words to Afghan women refugees when she visited Pakistan two years ago.

"The United States cannot and will not abandon you," she said. "We have made it clear that if the leaders of the Taliban or any other Afghan faction want international acceptance they must treat women not as chattel but as people and they must respect human rights."

N-accident in Japan Police raid uranium plant operator

TOKYO, Oct 6: Japanese police today raided offices of JCO Co. the operator of a uranium processing plant where the nation's worst-ever nuclear accident occurred last week, reports Reuters.

The raids came just hours before Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi, accompanied by newly-appointed Science and Technology Agency chief Hirofumi Nakasone, were to fly by helicopter to the scene of the accident at Tokaimura, 140-km (90 miles) northeast of the capital.

A police spokesman said about 200 investigators raided JCO's headquarters in Tokyo and its office in Tokaimura. They are looking at the cause of last Thursday's accident in which more than 50 people were exposed to radiation, the spokesman said.

Authorities are trying to establish if the firm, a subsidiary

of Sumitomo Metal Mining Co. should be charged with negligence and violating nuclear regulations.

JCO officials have admitted it illegally revised a government-approved manual to allow workers to use buckets instead of a pump to transfer a uranium solution to a mixing tank.

Workers mistakenly loaded 16-kg (35-lb) of condensed uranium into the tank, nearly eight times the proper amount, causing it to reach "criticality" the point at which a nuclear reaction becomes self-sustaining.

People in the immediate vicinity living were evacuated and thousands of others were told the stay indoors until the situation was brought under control on Friday morning.

The government has been criticised for failing to ensure the company followed proper safety procedures.

BRIEFLY

Prodi, Arafat to meet in Nov:

European Commission President Romano Prodi and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat will meet in Brussels next month, European commissioner for external relations Chris Patten announced Wednesday, AFP reports from Strasbourg.

The meeting will be dedicated to the "reinforcement of Palestinian institutions." Patten said in a speech before the European Parliament. Patten also announced that the European Union soon will set aside 20 million euros (21.4 million US dollars) in aid for cross-border projects between Israel and its Arab neighbours.

Dutch PM to visit Pakistan, India:

Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok will visit Pakistan and India next month for talks with leaders in the rival South Asian countries, officials said Tuesday, AFP reports from the Hague.

In Islamabad on November 20, Kok will have a working visit with his Pakistani counterpart Nawaz Sharif before travelling to India on November 22-24 for an official visit. Kok will be accompanied by Foreign Minister Jozias van Aartsen.

Israeli air raid in Lebanon:

Israeli warplanes carried out a new air raid against targets in Lebanon at dawn on Wednesday, after six strikes the day before, an army spokesman said, AFP reports from Tel Aviv.

"Our aircraft attacked targets in the eastern sector of southern Lebanon, north of the security zone," the strip of land occupied by Israel just beyond its border with Lebanon, he said.