

Australian PM calls for urgent talks with Jakarta

CANBERRA, Australia, Oct 11: Australia was seeking urgent high level discussions with Indonesia after its troops were fired on by members of the Indonesian army, Prime Minister John Howard said today, reports AFP.

Troops attached to the Australian-led multinational security force (Interfet) in East Timor were on patrol Sunday near the border between East and West Timor when they were fired on by pro-Indonesian militias accompanied by members of the Indonesian military and returned fire in self defence.

An Indonesian commander later admitted his troops had attacked Australian troops, believing they had crossed the border into West Timor.

Howard told parliament Monday the Australian government regarded the incident in the most serious terms and said he was seeking to have discussions with Jakarta as soon as possible.

"Interfet personnel believe the incident took place in East Timor," Howard said. "It shows that some elements in TNI (the Indonesian military) may be disregarding the terms of the UN Security Council resolution 1264 and continuing to support militia groups."

Australia would also make its concerns known to United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the Australian prime minister said.

Typhoon Dan death toll rises to 34

BEIJING, Oct 11: Typhoon Dan which struck the south-eastern Chinese province of Fujian over the weekend has left a total of 34 people dead and hundreds injured, local officials said Monday, reports AFP.

The 14th typhoon to hit the region this year caused the deaths of 16 people in the city of Quanzhou, 10 in Zhangzhou and eight in Xiamen, officials at local civil affairs bureau told AFP.

More than 1,400 people were injured in the storm, with dozens seriously hurt, they said.

Most of the deaths were in collapsed buildings as winds reached up to 144 kilometres (90 miles) an hour.

The typhoon was the strongest to hit Xiamen since 1959.

Economic losses were still being assessed but local officials said they could be the highest caused by a typhoon in recent years.

In Quanzhou, local officials estimated losses to be more than 1.2 billion yuan (144 million dollars) as of Monday, while the China Daily said losses in Zhangzhou stood at two billion yuan (240 million dollars).

Heavy rains and wind brought road, railway and air traffic in the region to a standstill on Saturday as more than 23,000 homes were flooded, 1,500 houses collapsed and 35,000 acres of farmland flooded.

Six students killed in US road accident

COLLEGE STATION, Texas, Oct 11: Six college students on their way to a fraternity party were killed yesterday when the driver of a pickup truck apparently fell asleep at the wheel and ran them over, police said, reports Reuters.

The students were walking along a highway near the campus of Texas A&M University when the accident occurred. Blood tests showed the driver, 18-year-old Texas A&M student Brandon Kallmeyer, had not been drinking before the accident, said Maj Mike Patterson of the College Station police department.

"He volunteered and went to the hospital and got a blood test. We don't think there's alcohol involved in it. I think he just fell asleep at the wheel," Patterson told reporters.

Schroeder loses sixth state polls this year

BERLIN, Oct 11: German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder suffered his sixth straight state election loss this year in Berlin Sunday as his Social Democrats (SPD) plunged to their lowest post-war score in the capital, according to provisional results, reports AFP.

But SPD leaders said their centre-left party had stabilised from its nation-wide electoral free-fall as the result was not much worse than the previous Berlin parliament ballot in 1995 and better than had been predicted.

The conservative Christian Democrats (CDU), which rule in Berlin in a coalition with the Social Democrats, won the vote but not an absolute majority as some polls had forecast. Former East German communists did well in the poll, continuing to show strength in eastern Germany, but were third, behind the SPD.

SPD Secretary General-designate Franz Mueentefering said the score was "not satisfactory" but still represented a "stabilisation at a low level" showing the chancellor's party had recovered nationally "from the lowest depths."

The Social Democrats have already this year lost state elections in Hesse in February and in September in Saarland, Brandenburg, Thuringia and Saxony, as voters reject Schroeder's austerity policies and condemn bickering in the SPD.

Free East Timorese from 'concentration camps'

Gusmao appeals to Indonesia

MELBOURNE, Australia, Oct 11: East Timor's resistance leader Xanana Gusmao appealed to Indonesia Monday to free the tens of thousands of displaced East Timorese from the "concentration camps" of West Timor, reports AFP.

He also made a personal plea to the Indonesian parliament's newly appointed chairman, Amien Rais, to halt the persecution of thousands of Timorese residents in Indonesia and shut down the Kopassus special forces whom he branded "the real criminals" of East Timor.

"We appeal to the Indonesian government to act in a way which is consistent with the process of democratic reform in Indonesia itself," Gusmao told almost 5,000 supporters at a rally here.

"We invite the Indonesian government to prove the sincerity of its political good will

which can only help to lift the shame brought upon the country by a handful of generals."

Gusmao received a thunderous welcome as he entered the Melbourne Tennis Centre after a day meeting political leaders, union and church representatives and addressing a packed news conference.

Gusmao told reporters earlier the East Timorese had always been ready to accept the risk of armed struggle against Indonesia and were now prepared to accept the high cost of their independence and freedom.

But he admitted: "The barbarism of the Indonesian generals was not expected by myself and my people in such a dimension."

He warned that the same Indonesian military responsible for the deaths of so many East Timorese people were also still killing Achenese people,

the people of Irian Jaya and the shame brought upon the country by a handful of generals."

"The Indonesian military have to be taught to accept international values, the values of democracy, the values of justice... because what happened in East Timor was very, very unjustified," Gusmao said.

Gusmao also blamed the Indonesian military for provoking a weekend incident in which Indonesia has said Australian troops killed an Indonesian police officer at the border of East and West Timor.

In his speech to supporters, which was eloquent despite its delivery in halting English, Gusmao thanked Australians for standing "side-by-side" with the East Timorese at a time when East Timor was considered a closed case.

"You were there with us, crying with us, sharing our anguish, feeling our despair."

Russia dismisses Chechen peace proposal

GROZNY, Russia, Oct 11: Russia's top security officials said Monday they were not aware of a peace proposal by Chechnya's leader and would press ahead with a military campaign against the rebellious republic in southern Russia, reports AFP.

Chechnya's President Aslan Maskhadov outlined a peace plan Sunday, saying he would crack down on renegade warlords if Russia pulls its troops from Chechen territory.

But Defence Minister Igor Sergeev and Interior Minister Vladimir Rusalio said they hadn't heard of the plan and didn't appear to show much interest in the details.

"I am not aware of Maskhadov's statement," Rusalio told the Interfax news agency. "The anti-terrorist campaign in Chechnya will continue."

Russian and Chechen forces clashed over the weekend along the Terek River, which cuts across the northern third of Chechnya and has effectively become the front line separating the two sides.

The Chechens said they inflicted heavy casualties and retook positions in the villages of Chervlennaya and Chervlennaya-Uzlovaya, which the Russians seized last week.

The Russians moved into Chechnya two weeks ago seeking to establish a security zone that will prevent Chechen militants from invading other regions in southern Russia.

So far, the Russians have moved cautiously and have not attempted to storm the Chechen capital Grozny, though they are only 25 kilometres (15 miles) away at the nearest point.

The Russians have not said what they plan to do next, but have not ruled out an assault on Grozny, a city that remains badly damaged from the 1994-96 war.

"If Chechens... ask us to liberate Grozny from the bandits, we will do so," Sergeev, the defence ministry, said in a television interview Sunday.

In his peace proposal,

Maskhadov called for Russia to immediately end "all combat actions" and said the two sides should observe the basic principles outlined in a 1997 peace accord signed following the previous Chechen war, which gave Chechnya effective independence.

Maskhadov's plan was the most detailed peace proposal to date, but did not appear to be generating any interest from the Russians, who have said they have no immediate plans to negotiate.

"Our goal is to eliminate all bandit formations and absolutely exclude any conditions for their revival" in Chechnya, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin said in an interview with Russia's RTR television that aired Sunday.

Maskhadov acknowledged that Chechen fighters, operating outside the authority of his government, took part in the incursions into neighbouring Dagestan in August and September, sparking the current conflict.

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Angry East Timorese shouts at Indonesian soldiers loading cargoes on an Indonesian Navy landing ship (background at right) at the Dili port yesterday. Timorese blamed the Indonesian military behind the militia violence which reduced East Timor into ashes after East Timor voted for independence on August 30.

'New BJP govt to collapse within 6 months'

NEW DELHI, Oct 11: India's Hindu nationalist-led alliance will collapse within six months of assuming office, an opposition leader said today, reports AFP.

"I give the government six months to fall into disarray due to their internal contradictions," Mulayam Singh Yadav of the Socialist Party told reporters here.

"Let us see how the coalition shares power among its partners."

Yadav, who was defence minister in a centre-left coalition government in 1996-98, defied most opinion polls to lead his party to win 24 seats in recent elections to the 545-member parliament.

Yadav is a bitter critic of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalists.

His remarks came before Vajpayee was appointed prime minister for a second term Monday by Indian President K.R. Narayanan and invited to form a government.

The government, to be sworn in Wednesday, will include representatives from more than a dozen parties.

Megawati rated best leader

JAKARTA, Oct 11: Indonesian presidential favourite Megawati Sukarnoputri eclipses her rivals in her ability to handle major issues confronting the country, including corruption and economic crisis, a poll published today shows, reports Reuters.

Ahead of the October 20 presidential election, the poll in the respected Kompas daily found about two in three of those surveyed felt Megawati could tackle corruption and the economic crisis and maintain security and national unity.

Less than one third said the incumbent president B.J. Habibie, was capable of dealing with the economic crisis and fewer than one in five said he could deal with the other issues.

The poll asked 1,158 people in four major cities to rate the capabilities of six leading candidates for the presidency and vice-presidency.

It is the latest to show the public does not want Habibie re-elected after his tumultuous 16-month rule following the downfall of his mentor and predecessor, the autocratic Suharto.

Habibie's Golkar party begins a two-day meeting today which is expected to reaffirm the party's support for his re-election.

Congress to join hands with former rebels to form state govt

BOMBAY, Oct 11: India's opposition Congress party said today it was hopeful of joining hands with a rival splinter group to oust Hindu nationalists from the politically prominent state of Maharashtra, reports AFP.

Congress leaders were holding talks with the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) -- formed in June by three Congress rebels who challenged the suitability of Italian-born party president Sonia Gandhi as a candidate for prime minister.

"We are trying our best to form a government together. The talks are at an advanced stage and the signs are very hopeful," said state Congress party treasurer Vijay Kalantri.

Maharashtra is India's most industrialised state. The state capital is Bombay, the country's financial hub.

Before and during state and national elections in Maharashtra, Congress and the NCP had categorically ruled out

any possibility of an alliance, as their respective leaders vilified each other during campaigning.

Political expediency, however, has produced a dramatic turnaround.

The Congress emerged as the largest party in the 288-member state legislature with 75 seats, while the NCP grabbed 56.

Combined, the two parties could wrest control of the legislature from the incumbent coalition of the Hindu nationalist BJP party and the right-wing Shiv Sena -- which only managed 127 seats.

State Congress party chief Prataprao Bhosale sent a formal letter late last week to the NCP seeking cooperation in forming a new government "to keep out communal elements."

Hectic meetings have been in progress ever since, even as both parties have been demanding apologies for election campaign slurs.

Jakarta drops probe into Suharto corruption

JAKARTA, Oct 11: The Indonesian government on Monday announced it was dropping an investigation into former president Suharto over suspected misuse of funds and abuse of power, citing lack of evidence, reports AFP.

The attorney general's office has decided to halt the investigation because of weak evidence regarding indications of abuse of funds, acting Attorney General Ismujoko said after meeting President B.J. Habibie.

He said the investigation only concerned alleged misuse of funds gathered from state companies by a Suharto-controlled foundation, the Darmas Foundation.

It has not been proved the Darmas foundation has misused funds obtained from the obligatory contribution of five percent of the profit of state companies, Ismujoko said.

He said that based on information from the then finance ministers, the funds were used "for social purposes" and were not lent to commercial interests.

The foundation, along with six others that were also controlled by Suharto, has since been turned over to the state.

"The investigation can be reopened if new evidence is found," Ismujoko said.

President B.J. Habibie, who was handed the final report of the probe by Ismujoko earlier in the day, made no comment, Ismujoko said.

Government officials, including Justice Minister and State Secretary Muladi, have said that the attorney general would only deal with the legal aspect of the probe.

The political aspect will be dealt with by Coordinating Minister for Development Supervision Hartarto Sastrosumito, Muladi has said.

The political side of the probe is concerned with whether Suharto issued any laws, decrees or regulations that may have favoured people such as his children or close business cronies.

Habibie was quoted by the Tempo weekly in an interview published Monday as saying that cases of corruption, collusion and nepotism could not be settled in just a few months.

"We should see the case of (former Philippine) president Marcos that was only finished after 13 years."

White House pushes to avert Senate defeat of CTBT

WASHINGTON, Oct 11: Top Clinton Administration officials on Sunday urged the US Senate to delay an impending vote that would almost certainly defeat a landmark nuclear test-ban treaty, reports AFP.

A vote in the Senate on the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which was signed three years ago by President Bill Clinton but has been stalled in Congress for two years since then, is scheduled for Tuesday.

If the vote proceeds as scheduled, the treaty is almost certain to meet defeat in the Republican-controlled Senate. But the Democrats, and some Republicans, have been working to postpone the vote in the belief the treaty could be ratified if supporters had more time to make their case.

"All of the chiefs of the Army, the Navy and the Marines believe this is the right thing to do," said National Security adviser Samuel Berger on CNN's Late Edition.

Secretary of State Madeleine Albright agreed, telling ABC's This Week the treaty was critical as "a tool to prevent the other countries from testing."

The United States would lose nothing, but "gain the possibility of ending this kind of testing," she said.

William Cohen concurred, speaking on NBC's Meet the Press: "If the treaty is rejected... we will have a more difficult time (persuading) India, Pakistan and other countries not to test," he warned.

And Energy Secretary Bill Richardson made a television appearance on Fox News to urge

senators from both sides of the aisle... to work out a process to postpone this vote."

Richardson, whose department oversees the nation's nuclear arsenal and laboratories, acknowledged that a prohibition on testing had raised security concerns among Republicans, who worry it would prevent the United States from ensuring its nuclear weapons' reliability.

But he noted that both he and the president were confident such concerns were addressed and resolved within the treaty.

"We can ensure the integrity of our stockpile without testing," Berger pointed out. "If in the future, there comes a time where that's not possible, the president has indicated that he would be willing to withdraw from the treaty."

Republican Senator Jon Kyl, on the same program with Richardson, was not convinced. "I think the Senate must vote on this treaty and defeat it," he said, but acknowledged that the drive to delay a vote might succeed.

"There are some procedural shenanigans that could be engaged in by the other side if they want to delay this, and it's possible that they could obtain a fair majority to do that," said Kyl.

General Henry Shelton, chairman of the US military's joint chiefs of staff, said Sunday on NBC that the treaty should be ratified to help in the fight against nuclear proliferation, and that the joint chiefs unanimously believed it would not compromise US security.

"This sends a very clear signal that we are concerned about (nuclear) proliferation," Shelton said.

The joint chiefs are convinced that we have sufficient information that our national security interests are in fact taken care of in this treaty with the safeguards," he said.

Republican senator and presidential candidate John McCain however disagreed.

The United States has not conducted any nuclear testing since a moratorium was imposed in 1992.

The CTBT was adopted by the UN General Assembly in September, 1996, but cannot enter into force unless it is ratified by all 44 countries judged to have nuclear facilities. So far, only 26 countries have ratified the treaty.

Serb opposition leaders boycott EU meeting

BELGRADE, Oct 11: Several leading Serb opposition officials decided not to go to a meeting with European Union foreign ministers in Luxembourg today, the independent B292 radio station reported, says Reuters.

It said leaders of the Alliance for Change as well as the Serbian Renewal Movement (SPD) had decided to stay away because EU diplomats had presented them with a final declaration of the Luxembourg meeting before the session had even started.

One of the opposition officials, Zoran Zivkovic of the Democratic party, told B292: "Thirty hours before the meeting a document is circulated which is supposed to be the result of a meeting with us. This is a principle which is unacceptable."

B292 said however that some opposition officials would attend the meeting, including Vuk Obradovic of the Social Democracy party, which is a member of the Alliance. It said he would not go as a representative of the Alliance.

The independent Beta news agency said on Sunday that opposition leaders objected to a part of the proposed EU text under which they would bind themselves to hand over indicted war criminals to the UN war crimes court if they came to power.

EU foreign ministers were expected at the meeting to back the Serbian opposition by approving fuel aid for towns controlled by foes of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic.



Russian President Boris Yeltsin waves as he leaves the hospital for his Gorky-9 presidential country residence outside Moscow yesterday. Russian President was admitted to hospital on October 9 as he was suffering from a bout of influenza and a high temperature.

—AFP photo

Yeltsin released from hospital

MOSCOW, Oct 11: President Boris Yeltsin was released from the hospital Monday after his temperature returned to normal, and he went back to his country residence, the Kremlin said, reports AP.

Yeltsin was taken to the Central Clinical Hospital on Saturday suffering from a high temperature and a flu. Shortly after he was admitted, his temperature began to normalize, the presidential press service said.

Doctors said Yeltsin's condition had improved and he could finish recovering at home, presidential spokesman Dmitry Yakushkin told the Interfax news agency.

Yeltsin did not give any special powers to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin while he was in the hospital, Interfax said, indicating that the latest illness was not serious. Yakushkin had described it as "minor."

"The president has a normal temperature. Doctors are of the opinion that he should finish treatment in household conditions," Yakushkin said Monday.

Russian television briefly showed a smiling Yeltsin chatting with Yakushkin upon leaving the hospital Monday. The president, moving slowly but looking healthy, waved to cameras and then got into his limousine unaided.

With Yeltsin's history of health problems, the latest trip to the hospital once again led to questions about the president's fitness to lead. The illness comes at a time when Russian forces have launched a major military campaign against breakaway Chechnya in southern Russia.

Yeltsin, 68, has been hospitalised for an ulcer, pneumonia, bronchitis and heart trouble during his second term. Still, he insists he is capable of running Russia and says he won't step down before his term runs out next summer.

Even when healthy, Yeltsin rarely spends more than a few days a week in the Kremlin, and usually returns to his home outside Moscow by early afternoon.

BRIEFLY

Jailed Canadian journalist freed:

A Canadian reporter was freed from prison Monday after serving four weeks for contempt of court, the first such punishment handed out to a journalist in any commonwealth country in 50 years, AP reports from Kuala Lumpur.

"I am okay," said Murray Hiebert, 50, as he was driven out of the Seremban Prison, on the outskirts of the Malaysian capital, Kuala Lumpur. Hiebert, the local bureau chief for the Far Eastern Economic Review, was sentenced to six weeks in prison on September 11 after he lost an appeal against his 1997 conviction. A court found him guilty of contempt for an article about a lawsuit filed by a judge's wife against the Kuala Lumpur International School for dropping her son from the debating team.

8 escape from Philippine jail:

Eight prisoners charged with murder, rape and other crimes escaped before dawn Monday by sawing through the iron grill in the window of their cell in a central Philippine province, officials said, AP reports from Manila.

Police were searching for the escapees in the town of Barotak Viejo in Iloilo, officials said. Regional jail superintendent Danilo Barbas said two guards noticed the jailbreak shortly after midnight and prevented other prisoners from escaping. The jail has about 50 prisoners, all undergoing trial on various criminal charges.