

India rules out any change over CTBT

NEW DELHI, Oct 14: India on Thursday ruled out any change in its position of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) following its rejection by the US Senate and a military coup in Pakistan, reports AFP.

External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh, retained in the new Hindu nationalist-led alliance government, said neither issue would change New Delhi's thinking that the treaty was biased in favour of the five recognised nuclear powers -- Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States.

"There is no need to consider any change on account of the developments in Pakistan," Singh said, referring to Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif ouster in a military coup on Tuesday.

And India's stand remained unchanged despite Wednesday's rejection of the treaty by the US Senate.

"India will not stand in the way of entry of force of CTBT," he added. "It is our expectation that other nations will also act accordingly."

The CTBT was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1996, but before it can enter into force it must be ratified by a list of 44 countries judged to have nuclear facilities. India is one of the countries.

Analysts say India, which has come under pressure to sign the CTBT following its nuclear tests last year, is pleased over the US Senate vote as it gives it more time to formulate a domestic consensus.

Anti-Habibie demonstration in Jakarta

JAKARTA, Oct 14: Thousands of Indonesian students began to converge on parliament Thursday demanding that President B.J. Habibie quit the presidential race, hours before he was due to defend his 17-month rule to the assembly, reports AFP.

Some 2,000 students from at least five student groups arrived on foot and in buses from the east but were blocked under a flyover tightly guarded by a multi-layered cordon of hundreds of anti-riot police.

As the students stayed put, the troops erected wooden barriers covered with barbed wire in front of them. Dozens of other anti-riot soldiers stood on the flyover.

The protesters held dozens of anti-Habibie and anti-Suharto banners as well as one of which read "Stop militarism, bring Suharto and his cronies to court."

Hundreds of other students, from the Joint Forum, later arrived on foot, and reports said some 1,000 supporters of opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri were heading towards parliament to join them.

"Reject Habibie and Wiranto" read one poster carried by the Joint Forum group, referring to the president and armed forces chief General Wiranto who he has picked as his candidate for the vice presidency.

Another poster said "Crush remnants of (Suharto's) New Order."

The student protesters called on the MPR to reject Habibie's bid for another term in office, and demanded that the military leave the country's political scene altogether.

The students are also demanding constitutional amendments and the reopening of a corruption probe into former president Suharto.

The government on Monday halted its probe into Suharto, saying there was insufficient evidence to support accusations of corruption.

WTC bombers resentenced to life terms

NEW YORK, Oct 14: Four Islamic militants convicted of bombing the World Trade Center were each resentenced to more than 108 years in prison, a reduction from the original terms of 240 years, reports AP.

A federal appeals court had ruled that the original sentences were calculated incorrectly.

One of the defendants, Mohammed Salameh, 32, who allegedly played key roles in building the bomb used in the attack, was sentenced Wednesday to 116 years, 11 months in prison.

He also got a lecture from US District Judge Kevin Duffy when he criticized the United States and said it might someday splinter like the Soviet Union.

"If you had been convicted of this crime under those foreign governments, there would be no resentencing," Duffy said. "You don't resentence a dead person."

Duffy guaranteed a lifetime behind bars for the four convicted of playing a role in the Feb 26, 1993, bombing, which killed six people and injured more than 1,000 others.

He also ordered the defendants to pay a dirs 250,000 fine and dirs 250 million in restitution should they ever sell book or movie rights to their stories.

Nidal Ayyad, 32, a chemist who ordered materials for the Trade Center bomb, was sentenced to 117 years and a month in prison. Mahmud Abouhalima, 39, got 108 years and four months.

The fourth, Ahmad Ajay, 34, told Duffy he was innocent and in frail health after his left lung was removed during a cancer operation in prison. Duffy said Ajay's guilt was clear and gave him 114 years and 10 months.

Ramzi Yousef, the alleged mastermind of the bombing, who was captured in Pakistan in 1995 and convicted in the United States, is also serving a life sentence, as is a sixth Trade Center defendant, Eyad Ismoil.

Benazir trying to contact army rulers to return home

LONDON, Oct 14: Pakistan's former prime minister Benazir Bhutto was trying to contact military leaders Thursday to secure a safe return home following the ousting of her successor Nawaz Sharif in an army coup, a spokesman said, reports AFP.

But Benazir, who has been staying in London since fleeing Pakistan amid corruption charges, has been unable to reach General Pervez Musharraf, her former military operations commander who orchestrated Tuesday's coup.

"I want to give them time to receive me upon my victorious return," she told the Ashraq-e-Awsat paper.

"I will return to Pakistan and if there are free and honest elections, I will win."

She told the paper she would seek to hold "free and honest elections within the next three months."

Benazir still heads the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), the main force in a 19-party umbrella opposition group called the Grand Democratic Alliance.

She faces arrest in Pakistan over corruption allegations relating to her time in power.

Benazir also told Lebanon's al-Mustaqbal paper that the coup was a result of Sharif treating the army "as if they were employees at one of his private companies."

She said she expected the new military leadership to "take important decisions leading the army back to its barracks."

Another report from Islamabad adds: Pakistan's former

president Farooq Leghari today called for a caretaker government that should "cleanse" the country of corruption and hold elections, reports Reuters.

"That (caretaker) may have, as its priority agenda, accountability and the return of the plundered wealth from Pakistan. That may have on its agenda moves towards restoration of democracy in the real sense," Leghari said from Lahore.

Leghari, who now leads his own political party, resigned in 1997 after months of power struggle with Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, who was ousted in a military coup on Tuesday.

Leghari said Sharif's administration had destroyed all national institutions in his 2 years in power and had lastly tried to create "dissension and subversion" in the armed forces which prompted the army chief Pervez Musharraf to take over.

Leghari said although there was no provision for a coup in the constitution it was done for a higher good.

Pak media turn against Sharif

ISLAMABAD, Oct 14: Pakistan's media quickly turned against ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif today, saying his dictatorial actions forced the army to step in and dismiss his government, reports Reuters.

The independent newspapers, which had spoken out against Sharif's government in the run up to Tuesday's bloodless coup, said the overthrow by the army was justified because Sharif had become too powerful and undemocratic.

"The army has had to step in to dislodge the increasingly authoritarian, wayward and personalised government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif," The News said in an editorial.

"The undemocratic ways of Pakistan's elected civilian government created conditions which left the army -- the most powerful and professional institution in the country -- with no other option but to intervene," it said.

The News is part of the Jang Group of newspapers which had a high-profile fight with the government earlier this year over tax-evasion charges and accusations of press censorship.

In an editorial called "A new beginning?" The News said the performance of Sharif's government since coming to power with a strong mandate in February 1997 was "abysmal".

"So personalised and autocratic was Mr Sharif's rule that all institutions of the state were made to work according to his whims."

The constitution was manipulated and disregarded and democracy itself undermined by his obsessive compulsion to concentrate power," it said.

Not all the allies in the NDA have joined the government. Some partners have said they would prop up the government from the outside and offer it "issue-based" support.

The NDA, which is dominated by Vajpayee's BJP, won around 300 seats in the 545-member parliament, routing the main opposition Congress party.

The government's birth pangs, however, led to rumbles with an influential ally, Ramakrishna Hegde, hitting out at Vajpayee for dropping him from the cabinet. Hegde was earlier the commerce minister.

Hedge, a former chief minister of the southern state of Karnataka, has decided to strengthen their nuclear-weapons-free zone, coinciding with rejection by the US Senate of a landmark treaty to ban nuclear testing, reports AP.

In a meeting Tuesday, representatives of the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations agreed to strengthen the treaty that committed them to a zone free of nuclear weapons four years ago.

The gathering came on the eve of the US Senate's refusal to ratify the test-ban treaty, dealing President Bill Clinton a foreign policy defeat despite appeals from other nuclear powers to endorse the pact.

A statement on the regional meeting issued Thursday by the Thai Foreign Ministry, which chaired the meeting, made no reference to the US vote.

But the statement noted that the US and the four traditional nobler powers -- Russia, China, France and Britain -- are being consulted about joining the pact to keep nuclear weapons out of the region.

Thailand will to launch moves toward a dialogue between the treaty signatories and the Vienna-based International Atomic Energy Agency, which monitors the development of nuclear energy and arsenals.

The presumed presence of nuclear weapons aboard US warships has frequently been a target of protest in the region.

Gusmao to return to E Timor next week

CANBERRA, Australia, Oct 14: East Timorese leader Xanana Gusmao said Thursday he planned to return to his homeland next week for the first time in seven years as the UN said its top man in the territory would go to Australia for consultations with the former guerilla commander, reports AFP.

Gusmao, widely tipped to be the first president of an independent East Timor, has been out of the former Portuguese colony since he was captured in 1992 by Indonesian authorities.

But emerging from a meeting with Australian Prime Minister John Howard on Thursday, he said he was eager to set foot in East Timor despite concerns in some camps his life could be in danger if he returned.

"I'm planning to go next week," he told reporters.

The announcement came after he and Nobel Peace Prize winner Jose Ramos Horta met in Canberra with Howard, Foreign Minister Alexander Downer and opposition Leader Kim Beazley.

Gusmao and Ramos Horta also received a rousing welcome in Australia's parliament where they attended question time.

The pair are expected to return to Darwin on Friday before Gusmao flies home next week. Ramos Horta is expected to return to East Timor later this year.

In the East Timorese capital of Dili, United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) spokesman David Wimhurst said Ian Martin, the special representative of UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in the territory, was leaving for Darwin later Thursday to meet with Gusmao.

Wimhurst said Martin would spend the weekend in talks with Gusmao and return to Dili on Monday.



Pakistan army soldiers patrol inside the premises of Parliament house in Islamabad yesterday, the third day of the dismissal of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. The Army sealed off Parliament offices and asked the staff to leave the building.

— AFP photo

Vajpayee criticised for jumbo government

NEW DELHI, Oct 14: Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee came under media criticism Thursday for inducting a jumbo-sized 70-member ministry dominated by Hindu nationalists, reports AFP.

He retained most veterans of his 1998-99 coalition, including Home Minister Lal Krishna Advani, Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha, Defence Minister George Fernandes and External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh.

"This is clearly not in keeping with the commitment to downsize government," The Economic Times said, adding the ministry's size betrayed the prime minister's compulsions of coalition.

But Vajpayee dropped Sikander Bakht, the most high-profile Muslim supporter of the Hindu nationalists, leaving the cabinet without a single Muslim or Sikh -- India's two influential minority groups.

The new coalition included members of 10 political parties, including Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP, which cornered nearly 60 percent of all ministerial berths.

For the first time, Kashmir's Muslim-dominated pro-India National Conference party, which rules the Himalayan state, joined a government in New Delhi.

Vajpayee should have instead tried "reducing the size of the government, getting government out of business, and (boosting) privatisation."

Vajpayee, 72, whose Hindu

Russian bombing leaves 2000 dead: Grozny

GROZNY, Russia, Oct 14: The Russian bombardment in Chechnya has killed 2,108 civilians in just over one month, the Chechen general staff announced Thursday in Grozny, reports AFP.

Another 8,000 civilians suffered injuries since Russia opened an air and artillery campaign against the rebel republic on September 5. Chechen officials told AFP.

Russian defence officials refused to comment on the Chechen report.

Moscow insists it only is targeting suspected rebel bases in the separatist republic, which Moscow holds responsible for a deadly wave of Russian apartment block explosions and incursions in neighbouring Dagestan.

In Moscow, President Boris Yeltsin on Thursday consulted Mamedov, leader of Chechnya's neighbor Dagestan, over the crisis.

Yeltsin has made no public comments over the conflict since Russian troops rolled into Chechnya for the first time since a 1994-1996 civil war that killed some 80,000 people and left the republic with de facto independence.

Forty villages have been completely demolished while another 130 suffered serious damage from the bombings, the general staff said.

Two Russian Sukhoi-25 jets bombed Grozny, hitting oil installations, an AFP correspondent said.

It reported that 37 Chechen

soldiers have been killed and 45 wounded since September 23.

Meanwhile, Chechnya reported killing some 920 Russian soldiers over the past three weeks, downing six Russian warplanes and destroying 65 armoured vehicles.

It said another 52 Russian soldiers and officers have been taken prisoner.

Russian defence officials refused to comment on the Chechen report.

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A thick pall of smoke could be seen above a district of the city where several small oil refineries are located.

Another missile hit the outskirts of Grozny airport, already targeted by the Russian air force on September 23.

Overnight Russian air and artillery bombardments targeted the eastern regions of Chechnya around the villages of Nozha-Yurt and Gudermes, Gorokhovskiy in the west, Dolinsky (a few kilometers west of Grozny) and Bamut in the southwest.

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