Pakistan regrets suspension from Commonwealth

ISLAMABAD, Oct 19 : Pakistan today expressed regrets over the decision by Commonwealth foreign ministers to suspend it from the British-led organisation after last week's military coup, reports AFP.

A foreign office official said the Commonwealth move was "regrettable."

The official preferring anonymity said the organisation did not realise the situation on the ground in Pakistan which had been passing through a phase of "sham democracy."

"It is a sad thing that has happened," analyst Talat Masood said.

"I am also saddened about the situation which had been created by the politicians in this country," he told AFP, referring to the alleged autocratic rule of the deposed premier Nawaz Sharif.

Inam ul Haq, Islamabad's permanent representative at the United Nations also said: "We regret the decision."

Pakistanis have "welcomed" the change of government and their "verdict" should have been taken into account, the official APP news agency said quoting the envoy in New York.

Army chief General Pervez Musharraf ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif's unpopular government a week ago and assumed all powers after suspending the constitution and parliament, vowing to eradicate corruption and revitalise the crumbling economy.

But the military intervention, hailed at home, has been condemned abroad.

As the international community insisted on a quick return to democratic rule, Commonwealth foreign ministers at an emergency session in London on Monday suspended Islamabad from the organisation.

"The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group unanimously condemned the unconstitutional overthrow of the democratically elected government of Pakistan as a serious violation of the Commonwealth's fundamental political principles," a statement said.

"The group decided therefore that the Pakistan military regime should forthwith be suspended from the Commonwealth ... pending the restoration of democracy in the country."

Musharraf in a nationwide broadcast on Sunday promised a return to democracy but set no deadline.

The London decision means Pakistan is suspended with immediate effect from all meetings of the 54-nation Commonwealth, including the heads of government summit in Durban, South Africa, from November 12 to 15 in which Sharif was to have represented his country.

The foreign ministers, however, also agreed to send a ministerial delegation to Pakistan at the end of October, in effect giving Musharraf a second chance to pave the way for a return to civilian government.

Commenting on the temporary ouster, Masood said: "It is form of a ritual that they have gone through."

The majority of the Commonwealth countries realise the "difficulty" that Pakistan was facing and the "inevitability" of the army taking over, he said.

Masood said he was not much disturbed because "if the army revives the democratic process I think this will be a short term move."

He welcomed the proposed visit of a Commonwealth delegation saying it would be "helpful" in understanding the "ground situation."

He said representatives of the European Union in Pakistan had shown "greater appreciation of the situation than those sitting far away and clamouring for democracy."

"They should be more concerned about the true aspect of democracy than merely talking of democracy," he added.

Pakistanis "by virtue of accepting the army take over so willingly have given a level of legitimacy" to the new regime, he said.

He believed the armed forces were keen to go back to barracks "but they can't leave the country in anarchy."

Chechens push back Russian soldiers away from Grozny

GROZNY, Russia, Oct 19 : Chechen fighters on Tuesday pushed back Russian soldiers from the outskirts of the separatist republic's capital Grozny during a counter-offensive, Chechen officials told AFP.

The press center of the Chechen military command said federal troops were pushed back several kilometers (miles) from Pervomayskaya, in the western suburbs of Grozny.

Chechen officials said that 60 federal troops were killed and [illegible] Russian armored vehicles destroyed in the overnight fighting. No Chechen casualties were reported.

Grozny officials said that the Russian soldiers continued to shell Pervomayskaya and the northern Grozny district of Staropromyslovskaya from the surrounding hills.

A Russian contingent composed of several hundred soldiers backed up by tanks moved to the western outskirts of Grozny on Monday in the first such push toward the rebel capital since the two sides' bloody 1994-96 war.

Anwar's brother caught for sex offence

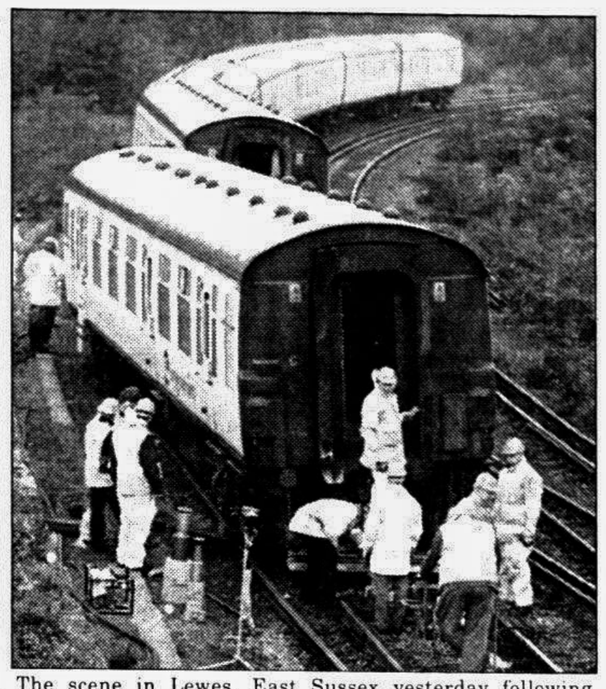
KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 19 : A brother of sacked Malaysian deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim has been caught by Islamic officers on suspicion of being in "close proximity" with a woman, reports said today, says AFP.

Islam bans Muslim couples who are not married to each other from being in close proximity or having sex.

Idrus Ibrahim, 56, was detained early Monday with a female companion in a condominium following a tip-off, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Abdul Hamid Othman was quoted as saying by the Malay-language Utusan Malaysia.

The Star quoted Abdul Hamid as denying that the arrest was a political conspiracy. Islamic officials are investigating before deciding whether to charge the couple.

Idrus is a former headmaster and a local official of the National Justice Party headed by Anwar's wife.



The scene in Lewes, East Sussex yesterday following Monday night's train collision, in which a commuter express ploughed into an empty train. No one was injured in the low-speed collision which comes 13 days after the Paddington rail crash which claimed at least 30 lives.
— AFP photo

US keeps pressure on Taliban over Bin Laden's extradition

NEW YORK, Oct 19 : A US official met here Monday with a representative of Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia to discuss the handover of alleged terrorist Osama bin Laden, The New York Times reported today, says AFP.

Michael Sheehan, the US State Department coordinator for counterterrorism, and Taliban representative Abdul Hakeem Mujahid, met after the UN Security Council Friday theatened to impose sanctions on the Taliban unless they hand over bin Laden within 30 days.

Sheehan told the daily his meeting was to pressure Afghanistan to extradite bin Laden, the alleged mastermind of the bombings of two US embassies in August 1998 in Tanzania and Kenya that killed 224 people.

"We're going to keep putting more bricks on the pile," the US official said.

He said the United States was "always prepared to talk to them about ways in which the (UN) resolution can be implemented," but that, in the end, bin Laden must be surrendered.

Anti-Taliban troops claim significant gains in north

KABUL, Oct 19 : The Afghan opposition said today that troops loyal to anti-Taliban commander Ahmad Shah Masood had made significant gains in a major counter-attack overnight in Kunduz province, reports AFP.

Opposition spokesman Mohammad Habeel said Masood forces had recaptured the districts of Dasht-i-Archi and Imam Saheb and Sher Khan Bandar township in the northern province bordering Tajikistan.

He said the Taliban Islamic militia had now been pushed back to areas from where they started their autumn offensive against Masood a month ago.

Opposition troops had also captured Taliban-held parts of the major towns of Hazarbagh and Khuja Ghar in Takhar province, 400 km north of here, the spokesman said.

"Following our victories in Takhar, our *Mujahideen* continued chasing the Taliban and first captured Dasht-i-Archi and then marched on Imam Saheb," he said.

Indian cyclone death toll now 59, military launches aid work

BHUBANESWAR, India, Oct 19 : The death toll from a ferocious cyclone which ravaged eastern India rose to 59 today, as the army joined a massive relief and rescue operation, officials said, reports AFP.

Military helicopters started air-dropping food parcels to the thousands of mainly poor people marooned in villages across the state of Orissa following Monday's cyclone.

Officials tried to grapple with the aftermath of widespread destruction which a federal minister, Naveen Patnaik, described as "large."

The Press Trust of India (PTI) said 56 of the deaths were reported from Orissa, with the worst-hit tribal-majority area of Ganjam accounting for 49 fatalities.

Unofficial reports said up to 75 people may have died.

Seven people died elsewhere in Orissa, and three people were killed in the neighbouring state of Andhra Pradesh following heavy rains sparked by the cyclone.

PTI said 23 people died in Orissa's Berhampur city, crushed mainly by falling houses and trees. The city was under a sea of water after a swollen river breached its banks.

The town and several other places in Orissa were without power. Many areas were cut off from the state capital Bhubaneswar because of extensive damage to communication facilities.

Orissa was lashed by torrential rains and strong winds up to 200 kilometers (125 miles) an hour Monday, forcing the administration to shift thousands of people from low-lying areas.

A large number took shelter in state-run schools and other buildings.

Many villages remained marooned, displacing thousands of people.

On Tuesday, six trucks loaded with food and first-aid left Bhubaneswar for Ganjam district.

Paramilitary troops began clearing the roads of uprooted trees to remove more than 2,000 trucks and cars stranded on a key national highway linking Calcutta with the southern city of Madras.

"We are removing trees which have fallen on the roads to get the traffic moving," an official said. "Small cars could be plying by this evening."

The cyclone caused havoc across the coastal region, inundating villages and crops and paralysing road and rail transport. It also caused torrential rains in nearby states.

Several areas around Berhampur town in Orissa were also marooned.

A cyclone warning system near the port town of Gopalpur was destroyed by the storm. An ancient fort at Gopalpur was severely damaged and one of its walls had crumbled.

"The devastation is large," said minister Patnaik, calling for huge assistance from New Delhi to meet the situation.

Hillary to use her birthday party in NY to raise money

NEW YORK, Oct 19: US First Lady and undeclared Senate candidate Hillary Clinton is expected to raise 1.5 million dollars with her Broadway gala birthday celebration in one week, organisers said Monday, reports AFP.

Hillary's 52nd birthday celebration, with tickets ranging from 250 dollars to 1,000 dollars, is expected to draw a full house October 25 at the newly renovated Ford Center for the Performing Arts in Times Square.

Cast members from musicals like "Annie Get your Gun" and "Fosse," are to appear with actors and musicians including Lauren Bacall, Billy Joel, Chita Rivera, and Joel Grey.

Broadway actor Alton Fitzgerald White -- who is suing New York police for 750,000 dollars for wrongful arrest in front of his home in Harlem -- will sing "Ragtime," a song calling for racial justice.

Sonia quits Bellary seat, to retain family bastion

NEW DELHI, Oct 19 : Indian opposition leader Sonia Gandhi has given up one of the two parliamentary seats she won this month, retaining a traditional family bastion, officials said today, reports AFP.

Sonia, the Congress Party president, has resigned from the Bellary seat in the country's south and opted to represent Amethi in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh where she won by a whopping margin.

A parliament official said the Italian-born Sonia submitted her resignation to speaker G.M.C. Balayogi Sunday, and it had been accepted.

"The Speaker will make a formal announcement on the floor of the House" on Wednesday, when the new parliament convenes, he said.

According to Indian election laws, a person winning from two constituencies has to give up one seat within a fortnight of the national elections.

Sonia's aides could not be reached for comment but a senior Congress Party official said her decision to retain Amethi was natural as it was a family stronghold since 1980.

Sonia, making her first foray into parliament, won from Amethi by 300,015 votes -- the highest victory margin by any candidate during the staggered Indian elections which concluded on October 3.

Sonia trounced a Hindu nationalist in Amethi. In contrast, her victory margin in Bellary was around 50,000 votes but she defeated a more powerful Hindu nationalist woman politician.

It was widely speculated that the 52-tear-old widow of former premier Rajiv Gandhi would give up Amethi if she wanted her politically ambitious daughter Priyanka or son Rahul to win a by-election from there.

The Congress official told AFP that her decision showed she did not want her children to enter politics, at least for now.

"She would have left Amethi if Priyanka was to be fielded there," the official said. "This shows she does not want to expose the daughter to active politics."

"So Amethi became the natural choice. It would not be difficult for Congress to win Bellary in a by-election since we have our own government in that state."

Sonia Gandhi married into the Nehru-Gandhi family in 1968 and became an Indian citizen in 1983. She took to politics only last year amid great expectations from the party.

However, she led the Congress to its worst-ever election defeat this year. The Congress won only 112 seats -- compared to 140 it won last year when she was only a campaigner and did not hold any party post.

Protest against Jiang

Dissidents released after rally in London

LONDON, Oct 19 : Two Chinese protesters arrested outside a London hotel where Chinese President Jiang Zemin was staying have been released without charge, police said today, reports AFP.

The human rights group Amnesty International said one of the two was Shui Li. The other was named by the Independent newspaper as Li Nan Wu.

Both are veterans of the 1989 Tiananmen Square democracy protests who went into exile.

They were among a noisy but peaceful demonstration of around 20 people outside the Hyde Park Hotel, where Jiang was spending the first night of his landmark state visit to Britain.

While the authorities here have laid on a warm welcome for Jiang, the first Chinese head of state to visit Britain, pro-Tibet and human rights protesters have promised to dog his every step.

Jiang's official itinerary runs from Tuesday to Friday.

He is to be given a ceremonial welcome by the queen later Tuesday and will spend the rest of his visit as her guest at Buckingham Palace.

Participants of the Miss Tourism International Pageant 1999 pose in their national costumes yesterday at a hotel in Kuala Lumpur. From left are Miss Costa Rica Nidia Guzman Jimenez, Miss Brazil Gislaine Meiga, Miss Mexico Cristina Bernal, Miss Lithuania Laura Liesyte and Miss Latvia Inga Aispure. Twenty one participants from all over the world will take part in this year's finals of Miss Tourism International in Malaysia where the winner will be crowned on October 31.
— AFP photo

Asia-Pacific defence forum meet begins in Tokyo

TOKYO, Oct 19 : Defence officials from the Asia-Pacific region and Europe began two days of talks today to discuss Pakistan, North Korea and East Timor, officials and reports said, says AFP.

"I would like all attendants to hold frank talks and deepen their mutual understanding," Defence Agency chief Tsutomu Kawara said in his opening statement, according to an agency official.

The forum drew officials from the United States, China, Russia, Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Australia, Brunei, Cambodia, Canada, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines.

Pakistan's call for better ties a sham :Indian media

NEW DELHI, Oct 19 : Indian newspapers today echoed the government line to denounce Pakistani military ruler Pervez Musharraf's decision to withdraw troops from the border with India, reports AFP.

Editorials said Musharraf's announcement -- and the subsequent reported pullback of Pakistani troops -- was only aimed at strengthening his own position after last week's military coup.

The Indian Express said "the withdrawal from the international border is the stuff of public relations" as Musharaff had not extended the offer to the Line of Control (LoC) which divides the Himalayan state of Kashmir.

"In effect, Musharraf has not given any indication that he is interested in a meaningful dialogue" by promising to stop aiding Moslem separatists in Kashmir, the daily said.

On Monday, after Musharraf promised to withdraw Pakistani troops from the long international border with India, the Indian government said Pakistan would have to stop backing Moslem insurgency in Kashmir if it really wanted to improve relations.

"It is imperative that Pakistan should cease its sponsorship of cross-border terrorism in India as a matter of state policy, and as yet we see no signs that this is happening," the foreign ministry said.

India's army chief, General V.P. Malik, was equally candid.

"We should not read too much into this Pakistani announcement," he said. A military official in Indian Kashmir said Monday that there was no evidence of a Pakistani military withdrawal.

India shares a long border with Pakistan, with which it has fought three wars. Much of it is known as the international border -- in contrast to the disputed LoC which cuts across divided Kashmir.

In May-July, India fought a bloody border conflict with Pakistan-backed Islamic guerrillas who had crossed the LOC and occupied major hills along the border inside Indian Kashmir.

The guerrillas were pulled out from Indian territory by Pakistani prime minister Nawaz Sharif under US pressure, straining his own ties with the Pakistani military which last week ousted him.

The Statesman newspaper lauded the Indian government response.

"India's minimum position is that cross-border terrorist attacks must stop ... This is entirely justified."

The Asian Age said the new Hindu-nationalist coalition of Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee in India would "await more concrete proof" of Musharraf's intentions.

"Musharraf might be saying all this to convince the world about his bona fides ... He is eager to consolidate his coup against deposed Prime Minister Sharif."

In an address to the nation Sunday, five days after seizing power in a coup, Musharraf announced a unilateral "military de-escalation" along the border with India.

"I hope this step will serve as a meaningful confidence-building measure," Musharraf said.

BRIEFLY

Fresh fighting kills 4 in Lanka: Sri Lankan troops and Tamil Tiger guerrillas traded fire in the north of the island, leaving four dead, the defence ministry here said yesterday, AFP reports from Colombo.

Government soldiers shot dead three members of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) while security forces lost one trooper killed in Monday's clash at Karuppadamurippu, the ministry said.Officials said heavy fighting in the region had died down since the weekend when both sides lost 242 men in three days of fighting.

Indonesian troops kill 2 in Aceh: Indonesian soldiers in the troubled province of Aceh have shot dead two men with suspected links to separatist rebels, a report said yesterday, AFP reports from Jakarta.

Two men riding a motorcycle were shot when they attempted to escape a raid by security personnel to capture separatist rebels and weapons at a housing complex for government officials in Tanah Luas sub-district, the Antara news agency said.

Earthquake rocks E Taiwan: An earthquake measuring 5.0 on the Richter scale has jolted eastern Taiwan but no casualties or damage were reported, the Central Weather Bureau said yuesterday, AFP reports from Taipei.

The tremor struck at 11:31 p.m. (9:31 BST) Monday with its epicenter 26.9 km west of Hualien in eastern Taiwan. It originated 14.6 km underground. A couple of hours later an aftershock of 5.0 in magnitude rocked central Taiwan.

US TV satellite placed in orbit: A US television and communications satellite was placed in orbit early yesterday by Europe's Ariane rocket, the launch company, Arianespace, said at its headquarters, AFP reports from Evry,France.

The 3.8-tonne satellite, Oral 2, owned by the US firm Loral Orion, will provide digital TV broadcasts and data transmission. The launcher was an Ariane-44LP, an Ariane-4 rocket equipped with four boosters.

It was Ariane's 122nd launch and its sixth this year. Four other launches are scheduled by the end of this year, including that of the new heavy rocket, Ariane-5, which is to take aloft an orbiting European observatory.

US-Russian 'biochip' may help combat drug-resistant TB

WASHINGTON, Oct 19 : A sophisticated "biochip" developed jointly by laboratories in the United States and Russia will allow progress in identifying drug-resistant strains of tuberculosis, researchers said yesterday, reports AFP.

The University of Chicago's Argonne National Laboratory said the new technology will be tested in a research study using tuberculosis DNA. In the future, the technology may be suitable for clinical applications using fluid samples from active tuberculosis patients, it said.

The new type of biochip was developed in a joint project by the Argonne laboratory and Russia's Engelhardt Institute of Molecular Biology.

"We chose tuberculosis for the tests because new drug-resistant strains have sprung up and can easily spread to the whole world. If we can quickly identify specific strains, it will help doctors prescribe the best treatments quickly and possibly help prevent a worldwide epidemic," said Argonne associate director Harvey Drucker.

Pak opposition ends anti-govt campaign after coup

ISLAMABAD, Oct 19 : Pakistan's multiparty opposition alliance has ended an anti-government campaign after the country's armed forces ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in a bloodless coup last week, reports AFP.

The Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA), formed by the country's 19 political and religious parties with a one-point agenda to oust Sharif for his alleged undemocratic rule and foreign policy fiasco has ended its struggle, a key group leader Tahir-ul Qadri told reporters in Lahore on Monday.

With the October 12 military intervention the "GDA's agenda stands fulfilled and the struggle of allied parties has ended," he said.

He appealed to politicians and national leaders to strengthen the government in saving the country from impending economic collapse.

Police under Sharif's ousted government launched repeated crackdowns throwing thousands of opposition leaders and workers in jails.

The authorities banning gatherings, thwarted at least two GDA attempts to stage rallies in the politically volatile port city of Karachi and the move was slammed by human rights organisations.

Qadri, who heads Pakistan Awami Tehrik, lauded the armed forces for uprooting the "gang of political mafia" which had held the nation "hostage" after crippling the economy.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin touches his nose while listening to a speech during a conference of justice and interior ministers of the G8 countries in Moscow yesterday. The discussions among the representatives of the G8 nations at their two-day forum will be dominated by the growing problem of international crime and terrorism.
— AFP photo

MPR to elect president today

Indonesians flood streets to push their candidate

JAKARTA, Oct 19 : Thousands of Indonesians flooded the streets of the capital today to push their candidates in the country's presidential election as white collar workers told incumbent B.J. Habibie to drop out of the race, reports AFP.

Some 5,000 detractors of opposition presidential hopeful Megawati Sukarnoputri marched from a main mosque in South Jakarta towards parliament in a show of opposition.

The protestors, mostly Muslim youths belonging to the Movement of Students, Youths and People (Gempar), yelled "Reject Mega."

At the front of the march, where shouts of "*Allahu Akbar* (God is Great)" rang out, was a large banner saying: "She is Not My President."

But at a major roundabout in central Jakarta, hundreds of Megawati loyalists, mostly from other cities in Java, held their own rally, flouting a Monday police ban on the use of the square for mass rallies.

Megawati loyalists are urging the 700-member People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) which will elect the president Wednesday to follow the "voice of the people" -- the results of the June parliamentary elections which Megawati's party won.

Some 300 of the protesters paraded around the roundabout as some 80 members of the Brimob elite police units barred an access street to prevent another group of some 60 protestors -- Muslims in favour of Habibie's candidacy -- from approaching to avert a clash.

Earlier on Tuesday, some 1,000 white collar workers rallied for the second day at the Jakarta Stock Exchange warning of a strike if the national assembly fails to reject Habibie's bid for a second term.

The protesters, from the Indonesian Professional Community (MPI), in a statement read at the rally, demanded "all MPR members reject Habibie's (accountability) speech as well as the nomination of Habibie and Wiranto."

The rally was held about two hours before the assembly was to vote on whether to accept a speech by Habibie accounting for his 17-month rule.

"We are determined to continue our demonstrations until our voice is heard by the MPR," MPI leader Nico Kristanto said.

Australian PM offers backing to Megawati

Australian Prime Minister John Howard gave his support Monday to Megawati Sukarnoputri in her bid to become Indonesia's next president arguing that with most of the votes she deserved to win.

Despite his personal rapport with President B.J. Habibie, Howard said the fact that Megawati's Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle (PDIP) commanded the most parliamentary seats looked like being decisive for her.

"It's for Indonesia to decide who its president should be but she got the highest vote and her party commands the most seats," Howard told commercial radio here.

Habibie's chances slipping fast after Wiranto opts out

Meanwhile, President B.J. Habibie's chances of winning a new term were slipping fast today ahead of an expected no-confidence vote after defence chief General Wiranto declined to be his running mate, press reports said.

Wiranto stunned the country late Monday when he appeared in uniform on national television and, with senior aides standing stiffly behind him, announced he would not enter the current election fray pitting Habibie against two other aspirants.