

US panel moves to bolster military ties with Taiwan

WASHINGTON, Oct 27: A key US House of Representatives panel on Tuesday diluted but passed a measure aimed at bolstering US-Taiwan military ties, brushing aside criticisms that the bill would inflame tensions between Taipei and Beijing, reports AFP.

By a 32-6 margin, the House International Relations Committee tempered and approved the "Taiwan Security Enhancement Act" over strong objections from several lawmakers on both sides and a top aide to President Bill Clinton who sought the bill's defeat.

The committee's Republican chairman, Representative Benjamin Gilman, said the measure was needed in the face of China's "overweight sabre-rattling and the deleterious effect that this has had on regional stability."

"This could be seen as the Taiwan Security Destabilisation Act," Assistant Secretary of State Stanley Roth countered after the hearing. The bill "could be particularly destabilising given the current environment" of heightened cross-strait tension and poor Sino-US relations.

The altered bill lacks the original initiative's mention of specific arms -- such as missile defence, air-to-air missiles, and diesel submarines -- which the president could transfer to Taiwan under the bill.

But it keeps provisions calling for Taiwan military officers to have an increased number of visits to US military training facilities, and for the establishment of direct communications between the armed forces of both countries.

The measure also calls for stepped-up Pentagon training and exchange programs with "senior officers," omitting the specific ranks listed in the original bill.

Ties between Taipei and Beijing -- which has considered Taiwan a renegade province since Chinese Nationalists fled there in 1949 after a civil war with the Communists -- hit their lowest point this year when Taiwan's president said in July they should have state-to-state relations.

3 Americans kidnapped in Yemen

SANAA, Oct 27: Armed Yemeni tribesmen kidnapped three US citizens, two of them women, and were holding them in a remote valley, a colleague of one of the women told AFP today.

The head of the American Institute for Yemeni Studies (AIYS) in Sanaa, Marta Colburn, aged around 40, was seized together with her parents as they were returning to Sanaa, the colleague said, asking not to be named.

The group was on a tourist trip to the central city of Ta'izz. Colburn's husband and son remained in Sanaa.

A police official told AFP the three Americans were abducted at 6:00 p.m. (2100 BST) Tuesday on the road to the capital Sanaa from the town of Dhammar to the south.

Tribal sources said the kidnappers belong to the Bani Jabr tribe, who have taken a number of foreigners hostage in the past. They were demanding the release of five fellow tribesmen being held by the government.

UN appeals for \$199m aid for E Timor

Indonesian officer freed

DILI, East Timor, Oct 27: Pro-independence guerrillas have freed a captured Indonesian army officer, clearing the way for Jakarta to withdraw its last remaining troops from East Timor, as the UN appealed today for 199 million dollars of emergency aid for the territory, reports AFP.

The United Nations Transitional Authority (UNTAET) issued a statement saying Captain I.G.K. Hartawan had been released to UN staff by the Falintil guerrillas on Tuesday after being held since September 7.

"The TNI captain was tired but in good physical shape," said the statement.

It said UN Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) chief military liaison officer Brigadier General

Rezaul Haider oversaw the handover with Falintil chief Xanana Gusmao at the guerrilla cantonment at Remexido.

"He was then brought to UNAMET headquarters in Dili and dressed in a TNI (Indonesian military) uniform. Captain Hartawan was officially handed over to authorities of the Indonesian task force," said the statement.

Around 1,000 Indonesian troops remain based in the East Timor capital Dili and officers have reportedly told UNAMET they would not leave until Hartawan was safely in their hands.

The UN said Wednesday that 199 million dollars in humanitarian aid would be needed to help the people of East Timor weather the next nine months.

Lise Grande, spokeswoman for the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), said the most urgent humanitarian task was to ensure people had access to food, water and medical supplies.

The infrastructure of East Timor was almost totally destroyed in a violent rampage by pro-Indonesia militias after a UN-sponsored referendum on August 30 produced a massive vote in favour of independence from Indonesia.

Grande said around 73 million dollars was earmarked for coping with the return of refugees, including shelter, 33 million dollars was for food aid and food security, 27 million dollars for health and 10 million dollars for education.

Russia fires tactical missiles at Grozny

VLADIKAVKAZ, Russia, Oct 27: Russia today fired two tactical missiles in the direction of the Chechen capital Grozny, Russian military sources told AFP.

The source said the missiles were fired from the Russian Sputnik military base situated near the North Ossetian city of Vladikavkaz.

The two rockets were fired within 30 seconds of each other, the source said.

An AFP reporter in Grozny earlier reported that the capital had come under intense bombardment at around 12:00 p.m. (1400 BST).

The reporter initially said the assault appeared to come from heavy artillery fire which lasted between five and 10 minutes.

The AFP reporter later said that two massive explosions could be heard in the Chechen capital, although it was not

immediately clear which targets had come under fire.

He said a 30-minute Russian air bombardment assault also continued over the capital until around 1:15 p.m. (1515 BST).

The Zolotskoi, Kalinino, Olimpiyskiy, Otkryabskiy and Staropromyslovskiy regions of Grozny, as well as the city's centre, all came under attack.

One of the Russian air bombs dropped only 100 meters in front of the AFP reporter but failed to detonate.

No immediate casualty figures were available although people at the scene said the damage appeared immense.

Traffic was completely cut off throughout the city, while civilians scrambled for safety in basements and homes.

Reuters adds: Dozens of Russian armoured units rolled closer to the Chechen capital today, but commanders

of the federal forces were silent over whether they planned to storm Grozny.

Russian troops were reported to have moved closer on the west, northwest and eastern sides of the capital and generals showed few signs of wanting to end their air and artillery strikes against what they say are rebel targets in Chechnya.

"Over the last three days, (the western forces) have got to within 24 km (15 miles) of the main aim of our moves, the main strike," Major General Vladimir Shamanov, commander of the western forces in the North Caucasus, said in televised comments, but he did not clarify whether his comments meant taking Grozny.

Russia's Ren TV reported that up to 200 Russian tanks were attacking an area 15 km (nine miles) from the Chechen capital.

Factory fire kills 20 in China

BEIJING, Oct 27: A quickly spreading fire in a leather goods factory suffocated 20 workers and injured nine others in the southern Chinese city of Guangzhou, the official Beijing Youth Daily reported Wednesday, says AP.

Firefighters extinguished the fire within 15 minutes of being called to the factory around 7:40 am Tuesday and found the dead and injured on the top floor of the three-story building, the newspaper said.

The report called the fire the worst in nearly 20 years in Guangzhou, the economically vibrant capital of Guangdong province near Hong Kong.

The newspapers cited unidentified authorities as saying that the privately owned factory had no license and the facility was a fire hazard.

Police have detained the factory manager as part of the investigation into the cause of the fire, the newspaper said.

Despite the economic growth and a lax if not outright corrupt officialdom have created a legacy of ill-regulated, shoddy and badly equipped factories prone to accidents.

Chechen president rules out talks with Moscow

GROZNY, Russia, Oct 27: Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov today ruled out holding any future negotiations with Russian leaders and called on the North Caucasus to rally behind his war-torn republic, reports AFP.

"It is useless to hold talks with (Prime Minister Vladimir) Putin because he is only looking for revenge," Maskhadov told a press conference in the separatist republic's capital.

"Putin is looking to score a victory because he wants to preserve the image of a tough leader before his own people. He is working only on his image."

Maskhadov's comments came as Russian forces massed troops around the outskirts of Grozny and prepared to seal off the capital from all outside contact.

The Chechen president reported heavy fighting on the northern and western outskirts of Grozny but denied Moscow media reports that Russia had managed to slip the first Russian reinforcements into the capital's suburbs.

"They are not inside Grozny," Maskhadov said.

He further called on leaders of neighbouring southern Russian republics to rally to Chechnya's defence.

"The only way to end this war is that if the leaders of the North Caucasus say hands off Chechnya," Maskhadov said.

Two Falungong followers die in police custody

BEIJING, Oct 27: Two followers of the banned Falungong spiritual group have died attempting to escape police custody during the recent crackdown on its activities, the organisation said today, reports AFP.

One of the deaths was confirmed independently.

Cheng Ying, 18, died after jumping from a train while under police arrest, an official at Shuren Senior Middle School in Jiamusi city, where the girl lived, said.

"She wanted to escape so she jumped out of the bathroom window of the train" the official told AFP.

The girl had gone to Beijing in early August to protest the July 22 ban on Falungong. She was being escorted back to her hometown by police, the official said.

Another Falungong follower, Zhao Dong, 38, from Jixi city, Heilongjiang also died after jumping from a train in a similar incident, Falungong's New York spokeswoman Gail Rachin told AFP.

Earlier this month, police in the town of Zhangjing in the northeastern Chinese province of Shandong confirmed that Zhao Jinhua, 42, had died at the local police station after she was taken in for "education."

Falungong followers say she was beaten to death.

China has continued to round up followers of the banned group, while government officials, state-owned enterprises and universities have been told to lay off or expel Falungong followers in their midst if they refuse to accept "education" and renounce their beliefs in the group.



Suspected members of Iranian opposition groups are arrested by French police in Paris yesterday, a few hours before the arrival of Iranian President Mohammad Khatami in the French capital. Thirty-nine people were detained in raids on Iranian opposition groups. — AFP photo

Khatami arrives in Paris amid tight security

PARIS, Oct 27: President Mohammad Khatami arrived here for a ground-breaking visit today as France ordered a major crackdown to avoid big disturbances during his three-day stay, reports AFP.

The moderate president is the first Iranian head of state to visit France since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

As Khatami flew in from Orly international airport by helicopter to Paris, where he will be put up at the official Marigny residence for visiting heads of state and government, dissident Iranians massed for a protest against the visit.

Some 2,000 protesters waving flags turned up at around noon at the Trocadero square complaining of Tehran's poor human rights record.

Fog held up Khatami's arrival and threatened to cause the cancellation of talks between Khatami and French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, who had

been due to meet the moderate Iranian leader for brief talks before flying off himself for a visit to the Caribbean.

Security was tight around Marigny residence, which is just across the road from President Jacques Chirac's Elysee palace.

Three of the city's underground Metro rail stations nearby -- Concorde, Champs Elysees and Invalides -- were closed to the public and streets cordoned off to traffic.

Police earlier cracked down against Iranian dissidents and border police have been turning away Iranians by the hundreds to prevent potential troublemakers from entering France during the visit.

The surprise raids involving dozens of officers came as France also reinstated border controls this week, turning away hundreds of Iranian travellers due to the visit.

Four people remained in detention on Wednesday morning

after police released 35 others many of them women and children, who were picked up in three separate and often violent raids in Paris and the suburbs.

In Auvers-sur-Oise, northwest of Paris, where the dissident People's Mujahideen headquarters in a large compound, Iranian exiles hurried blocks of concrete and stones at squads of police moving in under cover of dark.

Mujahideen leader Massoud Rajavi, who also heads its political wing, the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), said in a statement that the raids were "a blatant and outrageous contravention of the principles of human rights, freedom of expression ... and the sacred right of asylum."

In Jacques Chirac, Rajavi urged an end to "acts of harassment" and said the "unprecedented action" was "devoid of any justification or reason."

Jakarta to reopen Suharto probe

JAKARTA, Oct 27: The new Indonesian government will reopen a graft probe into former president Suharto, the attorney general said Wednesday, as President Abdurrahman Wahid said the former strongman should repay the state if he was found to be sitting on an illegal fortune.

"The case needs to be processed by the attorney general's office," Attorney General Marzuki Darusman told AFP.

He said the authorities could either reopen the existing investigation or continue the probe targeting different areas of the case. The old probe concentrated on the huge charities that Suharto ran.

"It is either reopening the case or continuing to probe other issues within the case," Darusman said.

But he said that whatever the decision, the probe would remain one on suspected corruption.

"So far the attorney general's office has been handling a corruption case and it would (now) also be a corruption case," said Darusman, who was Tuesday named the new attorney general. He is expected to be sworn in along with the other members of the new cabinet on Friday.

He could not give a precise date for the reopening of the case but said that it would be "as soon as possible."

The acting attorney general in the government of Wahid's predecessor B.J. Habibie earlier this month halted an official probe into Suharto related to the vast charity foundations he controlled, citing insufficient evidence.

Earlier Wednesday Wahid said at a breakfast with Indonesian editors that he felt Suharto should be made to repay the state if the probe showed he had illegally amassed a fortune.

"According to me, the most we can do is to investigate Suharto and then, based on the results of the investigation, decide on how much wealth he should return," Wahid said.

He said the money returned



Suharto

would be used to fund efforts to help the country emerge from its current economic and food crisis.

Wahid said he thought his solution would bring faster concrete results than if Suharto was taken to court.

"That would be better than getting all excited in court, while scores of years go by without the case being settled," he said.

He cited the dragging court process on former Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos that took over a decade and said that in current conditions, Indonesia could not afford to wait that long.

The former government's move to halt the official probe into Suharto sparked a public furor amid accusations Suharto protegee Habibie was deliberately dragging his feet.

The national assembly which met in November last year tasked the Habibie government with eradicating corruption, collusion and nepotism and specifically mentioned a need for a probe into Suharto.

The trial of Suharto over accusations of illegally massing wealth during his 32 years in power has been a main reformist demand.

Suharto is currently suing the US magazine Time for allegations it made in a cover story in May that he and his family were sitting on a fortune of 15 billion dollars.

Strike disrupts life in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, Oct 27: Schools, shops and businesses shut down in Kashmir on Wednesday in response to a general strike called by pro-separatist leaders to protest the landing of Indian troops in the valley 52 years ago, reports AP.

Most buses, cars and taxis stayed off the roads and attendance was thin in government offices.

The All Party Hurriyat Conference, an umbrella organisation of 32 pro-separatist political, legal and voluntary groups that supports the 10-year-old anti-India insurrection in Kashmir, observed October 27, as a "black day."

The conference also protested the detention of more than 20 of its leaders held without charges by state authorities for more than two weeks.

Police detained the Hurriyat leaders for organising anti-India demonstrations and a boycott of parliamentary elections.

Indian plane skids off Yangan airport

YANGON, Oct 27: An Indian Airlines jet veered off the runway at Yangan airport in heavy rain after clipping landing lights, witnesses said today, reports AFP.

No one was injured in the accident on Tuesday evening but the Boeing 737 aircraft, on a flight from Calcutta to Singapore via Myanmar, was severely damaged.

"The plane went off to the right after it hit landing lights," a witness at the airport said.

"The front nose-wheel was broken and the left rear wheel was crushed," said the witness.

There were no immediate details of the total number of passengers and crew on the plane, but sources quoted by the Press Trust of India reported that some had already left Yangon for Singapore on a SilkAir flight.

Airline officials said all international flights into Yangon had been suspended as the runway was still blocked by the severely damaged plane.

Military role reduced in new Indonesian cabinet

JAKARTA, Oct 27: Indonesia's new Cabinet was widely hailed Wednesday, with some of the ministers getting to work even before they are sworn in, reports AP.

Analysts warned, however, that the poverty-stricken populace, impatient for immediate improvements, is unlikely to tolerate much of a honeymoon period.

President Abdurrahman Wahid, whose election by parliament last week entrenched Indonesia's transition to democracy, on Tuesday announced a Cabinet filled with political neophytes, Islamic party politicians and fewer military officials than ever before.

The 35 new ministers are likely to be sworn in on Friday. But Economics Minister Kwik Kian Gie already was pressing for an economic turnaround, while Attorney General

Marzuki Darusman said he would re-examine the controversial decision to drop a corruption probe of former President Suharto.

Kwik inherits the daunting task of revamping Indonesia's sluggish economy. He has pledged to move quickly to repair the country's damaged relations with the International Monetary Fund in the wake of the high-profile Bank Bali corruption scandal.

Kwik said the IMF, which had suspended its multibillion-dollar bailout programme "has pledged to assist Indonesia to recover its economy," adding that it would help the country raise more funds for its social safety net.

"We have to cooperate and work hard to save the young generation from malnutrition," Kwik said. "We have to avoid having a lost generation."

Kwik said his economic team already has started to get

used to their new portfolios.

"We all need time to study our mission," Kwik said. "We're still not installed in our new offices; we're studying the situation and need a lot of input" from as many people as possible.

Wahid continued to host courtesy calls by foreign ambassadors, including Australia's John McCarthy, who afterward expressed hope for an improvement in relations, strained over Australia's leading role in the international peacekeeping mission in East Timor.

Major newspapers expressed satisfaction with the new ministerial lineup, even though there are four holdovers from past Cabinets under Suharto, who resigned in May 1998 amid pro-democracy protests and riots, and his handpicked successor, B.J. Habibie.

"Our ravaged country today

is like a wretched soul tossed around in a rough sea," the Jakarta Post said in an editorial. "Our cabinet could prove to be our life preserver ..."

However, it warned that Indonesians are impatient for improvements.

"Although we are still coasting on the euphoria of the change to a new government, the mood could easily swing to widespread dissatisfaction if the government fails to deliver in meeting public expectations," the newspaper said.

The first anti-government protest since the Cabinet announcement took place Wednesday at Jakarta's main traffic circle as about 30 students chanted, "Reject the military."

"The reform struggle is not yet over," university student Nurul Inayah said. "We intend to watch President Wahid to en-

sure he does the right things, such as restarting the Suharto investigation."

She said the students were forming an opposition group to "keep things honest."

It remained unclear how the powerful military would accept its reduced role and the appointment of the first civilian defense minister in four decades.

Juwono Sudarsono faces the huge task of reforming a military widely accused of human rights abuses and meddling in politics. He also has the challenge of keeping restive parts of the country from trying to break away.

He takes over from Gen. Wiranto, the powerful military leader who also was replaced as commander of Indonesia's armed forces. Wiranto was awarded the senior post of political and security affairs minister.



Indonesian students shout slogans at Welcome Square in Jakarta yesterday protesting against five military members in the new cabinet. — AFP Photo