

US waives some sanctions on India, Pakistan

WASHINGTON, Oct 28: President Bill Clinton on Wednesday waived economic sanctions imposed on India after its May 1998 nuclear tests but kept all but two penalties against Pakistan because a military government had taken power there, reports Reuters.

The tit-for-tat nuclear tests by India and arch rival Pakistan automatically triggered the US sanctions and meant American banks could not lend to the two governments.

Clinton's action continued a waiver of the post-nuclear testing sanctions imposed on India, allowing US commercial bank lending to continue, and loans by the Export-Import Bank.

Mike Hammer, a spokesman for the White House National Security Council, said Clinton decided for now to waive only two economic sanctions on Pakistan — the ban on US

commercial lending and on agricultural credit guarantees. That left Pakistan ineligible for loans from the Export-Import Bank, and unable to participate in an international military education and training programme. It also meant the US-backed Overseas Private Investment Corp and the Trade Development Agency would not be able to operate in Pakistan.

India recently held democratic elections, while on October 12 in Pakistan, the elected government of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif was overthrown in a military coup.

"The different treatment of the two countries reflects the reality that things have changed for the worse in Pakistan. But we hope that Pakistan will return to democracy soon," said Hammer.

"Basically, we have made clear from the start that there can be no business as usual with

Pakistan until an elected government is restored. So the president's decision is a reflection of our determination to see a democratically elected government restored in Pakistan," Hammer said.

US Energy Secretary Bill Richardson, on a trip to India, said Washington was pleased with Indian government statements that it would build a consensus on signing the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty that bans all underground nuclear explosions. "This is India's right and it makes a lot of sense to build a consensus before signing."

He urged India to stop production of fissile material, restrain its missile programme and strengthen export controls, and said it was not in New Delhi's interests to live in a neighbourhood bristling with nuclear arsenals.

US condemns attack on Armenian parliament

WASHINGTON, Oct 28: The United States condemned the terrorist attack on the Armenian Parliament, in which Prime Minister Vazgen Sarkissian and at least seven other top officials were killed, reports AFP.

Sarkissian's death at the hands of gunmen is a "real blow to that country and that region," President Bill Clinton told reporters Wednesday after hearing news of the shooting inside the Armenian parliament in the capital Yerevan.

One of at least four gunmen approached Sarkissian while he was addressing parliament and shot him at short range.

According to reports by the presidency, state television, and Russia's ITAR-TASS agency, at least seven other politicians were killed in the shooting.

Later, Clinton issued a statement through his press

secretary, Joe Lockhart, saying: "I am shocked and saddened by today's armed attacks in the Armenian parliament. I condemn this senseless act against individuals actively engaged in building democracy in their country."

Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien also condemned the shooting, saying "this cowardly attack on legislators as they conducted their nation's business must be condemned by all peaceful, civilised people in the strongest terms."

US Vice President Al Gore said in a statement: "I condemn in the strongest possible terms this wanton, reckless effort to subvert that democracy."

By early Thursday in Yerevan, the Russia's ITAR-TASS news agency, citing government sources, reported that two hostages, Agriculture Minister Gagik Shakhbazian and Energy Minister David Zadoyan, were freed.



TV image taken from Russian television NTV channel showing deputies of the Armenian parliament embraced by their friends after they were released by the gunmen who had been keeping them as hostages in the parliament building for 18 hours in Yerevan yesterday. — AFP photo



Activists from the Youth Congress are pushed back by a water cannon as they tried to storm a police barricade during a demonstration near Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's residence yesterday. The demonstrators were protesting the government's decision to name former premier Rajiv Gandhi in a probe into Bofors arms scandal under his administration. — AFP photo

AI lashes out at UN for delays in E Timor probe

SYDNEY, Oct 28: Human rights group Amnesty International lashed out at the UN today for dragging its feet in sending investigators into East Timor as it released a new report detailing alleged atrocities there, reports AFP.

"Many of the atrocities witnessed in East Timor constitute crimes against humanity and war crimes," Amnesty said in a statement.

"Every day that the UN delays its international investigation, vital evidence may be lost or destroyed."

United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan ordered an inquiry into human rights violations in the former Indonesian-controlled territory on October 15.

A five-member panel has been appointed by UN Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson to lead the investigation. But it has yet to travel to East Timor and is only expected to arrive in Geneva for training early next month.

Amnesty said a prompt investigation was crucial into the alleged human rights violations there during a three-week rampage by pro-Jakarta mili-

tias following an August 30 vote for independence by the East Timorese.

There was also evidence atrocities were continuing, Amnesty said, particularly in militia-controlled refugee camps in West Timor, where more than 250,000 East Timorese fled last month.

"Until the UN proves that it is serious about investigating the crimes committed in East Timor, such individuals will continue to assume that they can commit violations with impunity," the group said.

"International investigations must commence without any further delay and with the full support of the Indonesian government and the international community."

Amnesty said investigating the alleged atrocities and holding those responsible accountable was essential for East Timor's future.

"A shattered society can only be rebuilt on the foundation of justice not impunity," the group said.

"Strengthening the rule of law and respect for human rights is an essential step for future peace and reconciliation in East Timor."

Militias still control many camps in W Timor: UN

Wiranto should be tried: Belo

DILI, East Timor, Oct 28: A UN official today said that armed militia still controlled refugee camps in parts of West Timor and were preventing East Timorese there from returning home, reports AFP.

"There are still some camps completely under the control of the militia, this is our problem," said Jacques Franquin, UN High Commissioner for refugees (UNHCR) spokesman.

Franquin said that East Timorese had been discouraged from leaving the camp because of intimidation by the militia and a lack of security from Indonesian police and the Indonesian armed forces (TNI).

"The authorities of Indonesia in West Timor haven't taken a decision to deal with the militia. They are still intimidating refugees," he said.

While there are about 250,000 East Timorese refugees staying in the camps in West Timor, humanitarian access has been restricted to about 50,000, he said.

He added that even in areas where visits are allowed, it is impossible to monitor the situation.

"We have good access to the Kupang area, but we don't know what is happening overnight. Militia don't wear uniforms."

About 25,000 refugees have so far returned to East Timor, primarily by boat and flights organised by the UNHCR and the UN's International office of Migration.

However the flow of people returning on foot has been severely limited by militia intimidation.

While Franquin said there was now less evidence of cooperation between the militia and the TNI, this had the potential to backfire by leading to isolated terrorist acts.

Meanwhile, Nobel peace laureate Bishop Carlos Belo today demanded former Indonesian defence minister General Wiranto be hauled before an international tribunal to account for atrocities in East Timor.

"General Wiranto, General Syafril, General Damiri -- all these people must be put in an international tribunal," Belo told AFP in an interview from his home in Dili.

"If there is any kind of international tribunal the United Nations should create a commission for these people."

Wiranto was army chief and defence minister when elements of the Indonesian military and pro-Indonesia militias went on a bloody rampage across East Timor in September following a massive vote in favour of independence.

Earlier this week he stepped down from the military and was appointed coordinating minister for politics and security affairs in the new government of President Abdurrahman Wahid.

General Syafril Samsuddin was a former chief of operations at the military's headquarters in Jakarta.

Troops kill 368 militants in Kashmir offensive

SRINAGAR, India, Oct 28: The Indian army said today it had killed 368 Muslim separatists in Kashmir during a three-month counter insurgency offensive, reports AFP.

The offensive was launched August 1 to counter a fresh wave of separatist activity in the wake of the army's 10-week conflict with Pakistan-backed guerrillas on the disputed Kashmir border.

The significant achievements of the army in these sustained counter-insurgency operations from August to October has resulted in the regaining of the initiative and moral ascendancy by the army," the defence ministry said in a statement.

Of the 368 militants killed during the period, "a majority" were foreign mercenaries, the statement said without elaboration.

New Delhi claims that most of the militants now taking part in the 10-year Kashmiri

separatist struggle against Indian rule are Islamic militants from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The ministry said 64 militants had been captured since August 1, while the army had also foiled 30 attempts at guerrilla infiltration from across the border with Pakistan.

"The indicators are that the militants have been forced to vacate their hideouts and bases... following the increased tempo of operations being launched by the army," the statement said.

Heavy casualties and loss of stores has resulted in the lowering of morale of the militants. Inter group clashes have shown an increase.

"The militants are increasingly finding it difficult to muster support from the local population."

The May-July Kashmir conflict ended with Pakistan -- under heavy US pressure -- calling

back Islamic infiltrators who had occupied strategic heights on the Indian side of the Line of Control (LoC) dividing Indian- and Pakistan-controlled Kashmir.

The outcome was seen as a military and diplomatic victory for India.

The defence ministry statement said the "comprehensive defeat" had pushed the Pakistani army and intelligence services to "desperate attempts" to raise the level of militant violence in Indian Kashmir.

The latest offensive by the Indian army extended from the militant heartland of the Kashmir valley to mountainous and heavily forested hideouts close to the LoC.

Extra battalions were drafted in to carry out the operations, which claimed the lives of 145 militants in the month of September alone.

Gore, Bradley square off in first TV debate

HANOVER, New Hampshire, Oct 28: Vice President Al Gore and former senator Bill Bradley squared off here late Wednesday on key national issues in the first televised debate in the race for the Democratic Party's nomination for US president, reports AFP.

Both men answered pre-screened political and personal questions from local residents and college students in the audience at Dartmouth College here.

The questions centered on key national issues, including political finance reform, health care coverage, violence and education.

Neither man appeared to take the lead in the debate, but both received loud applause from the audience on different issues.

Answering a question on why he left the US Senate, Bradley distinguished himself as a "Washington outsider" by recalling his past two years in the private sector.

"I engaged outside of Washington in a dialogue with

the American people about where they saw their lives and where they would like to take this country," he said.

Bradley said he decided to run for president because he "could improve the quality of lives for millions of Americans."

Gore, meanwhile, sought early to distance himself from President Bill Clinton.

Responding to a question about the public's cynicism with politics and politicians, the vice president emphasised with the American public who felt "disappointment and anger toward President Clinton," saying "I also felt that myself."

Then, he asked the public to "turn the page" on that part of US history.

Gore, who until recently has appeared stiff in public exchanges, this time was poised and bantered with the audience.

Dressed in a blue suit and red tie, Bradley, on the other hand, was relaxed but seemed unable to connect with mix of mothers, retirees, students and others present at the debate.



Commonwealth ministerial delegation headed by Llyod Axworthy (L) opens talks with Pakistani high officials at the foreign office in Islamabad yesterday. The delegation opened talks with Pakistan's military rulers warning Islamabad risked expulsion from the organisation if it did not set a timetable for a return to democracy. — AFP photo

Grenade attack On Kashmir state secretariat: One killed

SRINAGAR, India, Oct 28: Suspected Muslim militants launched a grenade attack today on the main offices of the Kashmir state government, leaving one dead and 15 injured, reports AFP.

The militants fired at least half-a-dozen grenades into the heavily guarded compound of the state secretariat at around 1:15 p.m. (1:45 pm BST), witnesses and police officials said.

A civil servant in the education department was killed in the attack.

BRIEFLY

Hostages freed in Philippines: Armed kidnappers freed 18 people today after an overnight hostage drama in the southern province of Lanao del Norte, authorities said, AFP reports from Zamboanga.

Police and military reports said the hostages, Mindanao State University personnel and students who were seized Wednesday from a minibus, were released into government custody and were on their way to the city of Iligan.

US House bans assisted suicide: The US House of Representatives approved a bill banning most forms of medically assisted suicide, but allowing doctors to prescribe pain-killers that can increase the risk of death, AFP reports from Washington.

Passed Wednesday by a 271-156 vote, the bill would amend a 1970 federal law governing the use of "controlled substances." The new bill, which requires Senate approval before becoming law, would allow doctors to prescribe certain "controlled" drugs to manage pain, even if the drugs have side-effects,

Vietnamese troops fired on Philippine jet over Spratlys

MANILA, Oct 28: Vietnamese troops fired on a Philippine air force reconnaissance plane in the disputed Spratly Islands earlier this month, Filipino Foreign Secretary Domingo Siazon said today, reports AFP.

He said the plane was not hit in the incident on October 13 over Pigeon Reef, called Tennent Reef by the Philippines, but Manila had lodged a strong protest with Hanoi.

Foreign Undersecretary Benjamin Domingo called Vietnamese Ambassador Nguyen Thac Dinh to the foreign office on Wednesday to

formally protest the shooting and the alleged expansion of Vietnam's presence on Pigeon Reef claimed by Manila, Siazon said.

"These acts, particularly the firing of shots at a Philippine aircraft, are a clear assaultment of the letter and spirit of various regional, multilateral and bilateral agreements and declarations entered into by both the Philippines and Vietnamese governments," Siazon said.

Defence Secretary Orlando Mercado declined to comment, saying he did not want to add to the tensions between Manila and Hanoi.

Russia intensifies strikes on Chechnya, bombs Grozny

GROZNY, Russia, Oct 28: Russian warplanes intensified air strikes against Chechnya as federal troops battled today to within 10 km of the rebel republic's capital, Grozny, reports AFP.

Russian officials said bombers and helicopter gunships flew nearly 100 sorties over Chechnya during a 24-hour span that marked the launch of a "second stage" of an army operation to crush rebels it says are based in the Caucasus territory.

For the first time, Mi-24 helicopters became heavily involved in the fighting, suggesting that Moscow now felt confident it had weakened the rebels enough to deliver air strikes from low altitudes.

At the same time federal forces clashed with Chechen rebels in Tolstoi-Yurt, only 10 km north of Grozny's outskirts.

The Russian defence ministry in Moscow said that Grozny would be completely surrounded by early November and that 80 per cent of escape routes from the capital had been already cut off.

The hills surrounding Grozny were used by Russian forces to pound the city with heavy artillery fire on Wednesday, while Russian bombers and helicopters hit the capital's northern suburban area of Staropromyslovskiy.

A Chechen military spokesman said that Russian planes also rocketed the western Chechen villages of Samashki and Bamut.

There were no immediate reports of casualties from the attacks.

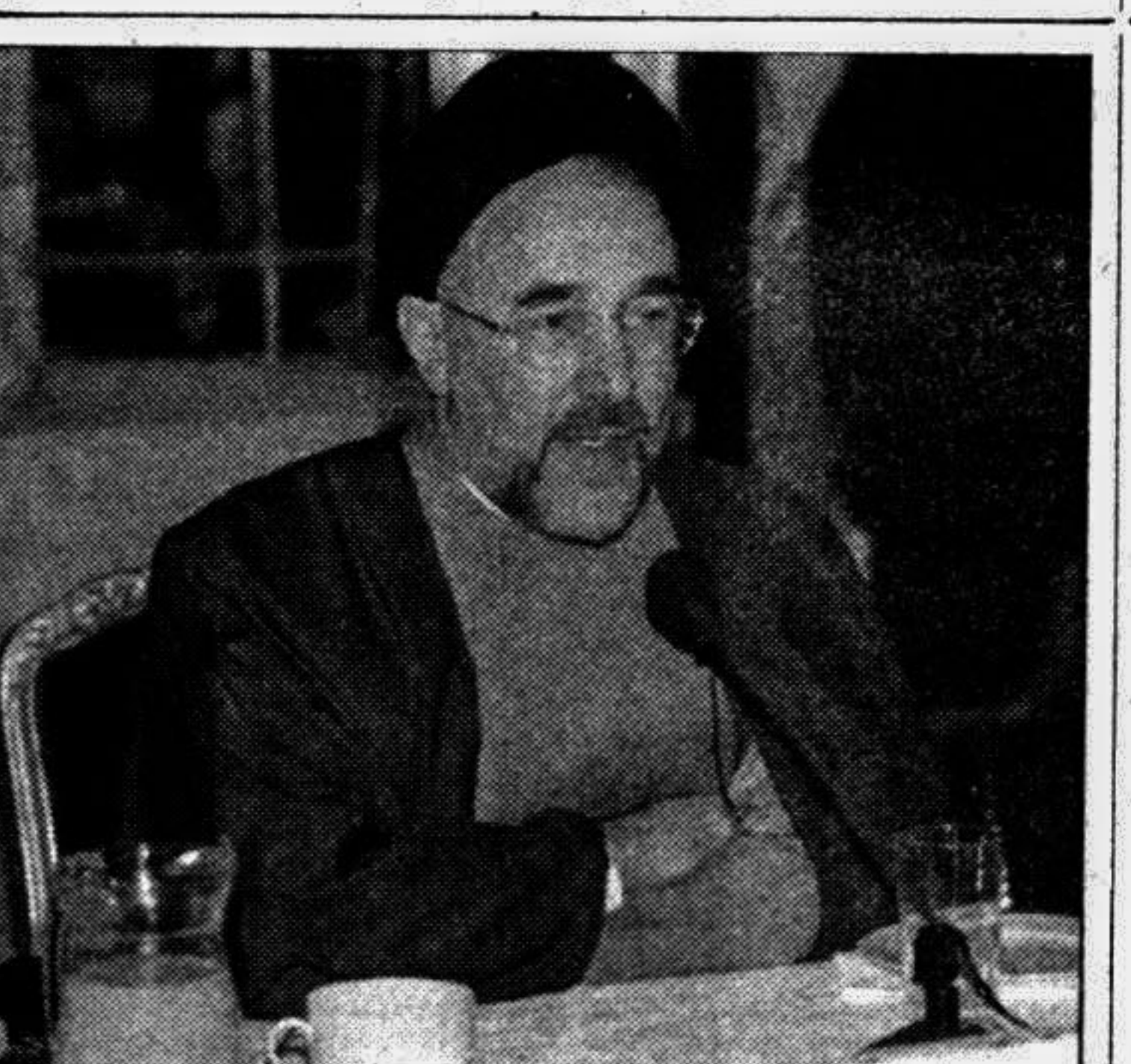
into the heart of Grozny.

The assaults over the past 24 hours were the heaviest since a brutal 1994-1996 civil war that ravaged the republic but left Chechnya with de facto independence after Russia was forced to beat a humiliating retreat.

The Russian defence ministry has refused to either confirm or deny an AFP report that two cruise missiles were fired toward Grozny from a military base near the North Ossetian city of Mozdok on Wednesday afternoon.

It was the second long-range missile attack on Grozny since late last week when Chechens said nearly 140 people were killed in strikes

Defence Minister Igor Sergeev flew to Russia's main North Caucasus military base in Mozdok to monitor the offensive's progress.



Iranian President Mohammad Khatami meets with representatives of the MEDEF, French business leaders, at the Hotel Marigny in Paris yesterday. — AFP photo

Corruption is 'low-risk, high profit' business in India

NEW DELHI, Oct 28: Corruption in India is a "low-risk, high profit" business, the country's chief anti-graft official said here today, reports AFP.

Central Vigilance Commissioner N. Vittal said there was virtually no effective punishment in India, with the conviction rate in corruption cases running at a lowly six percent, the Press Trust of India reported.

Vittal said he had asked the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), India's federal investigating agency, to provide copies of complaints made against any official within four days to the concerned organisations.

"Instead of looking at vigilance as a factor that comes in the way of competitiveness it is better to look at it as a factor that will help greater competitiveness," he said. "I find that there is a very

strong undercurrent of feeling against corruption, though there may be a greater level of acceptance and apathy about corruption."

He added that he would like to change "the acceptance and apathy for corruption into anger and action against corruption."

Corruption is endemic in India where bribes are often paid for mundane things such as telephone and cooking gas connections, railway tickets and driving licences.

Vittal said a corruption-free society would also usher in a better work ethic.

"Once people are convinced that they are working in a clean organisation... their loyalty will grow and they will tend to think of enriching the organisation and incidentally themselves rather than only enriching themselves at the cost of the organisation."

Judge says Lawyers can seek arrest warrant for Mahathir

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 28: The judge in the sodomy trial of Malaysia's sacked deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim today denied he was afraid of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and said defence lawyers could seek an arrest warrant to bring him to court, reports AFP.

Anwar's defence counsel Karpal Singh had asked Judge Arifin Jaka to cite Mahathir for contempt of court following comments the premier made about plans to subpoena him as a trial witness.

Mahathir told reporters Tuesday he would appear in the high court if required but would only answer questions on the sodomy case and not on alleged conspiracies, since this was unrelated to the trial.

Anwar is giving evidence in his defence designed to show the charges against him stem from a top-level political conspiracy.