

Kashmiri militants want withdrawal of army before any peace talks

SRINAGAR, Apr 7: Two front-ranking militant outfits operating in Jammu and Kashmir yesterday demanded withdrawal of army from the state and release of all detainees to facilitate peace talks with the Indian government, reports PTI.

"Before initiation of a dialogue, government should create a conducive atmosphere for talks which could be done by withdrawing army and other forces to the barracks and releasing all detainees, a Hizbul Mujahideen spokesman said.

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Spokesperson of Lashker-e-Toiba Abu Usama said "no talks are possible till Indian forces are present in Kashmir."

Union Home Minister L K Advani had said yesterday that government is ready to hold talks with militants in Kashmir on the issue of autonomy but within the framework of the Constitution.

Without involving Pakistan, India and representatives of Kashmiris, every effort aimed at resolving the issue is not only a futile exercise but would not be acceptable to the people of Kashmir, the Hizbul Mujahideen spokesman said.

Arafat firm to declare Palestinian statehood

NABLUS, West Bank, Apr 7: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat on Thursday reiterated his intention to declare independence in five months as a new round of peace talks kicks off in Washington, reports AFP.

This year is the year of the Palestinian state. We were to have declared it last year, but I decided to wait until after the Israeli elections, but now we have agreed in Sharm el-Sheikh on September 13," Arafat told a conference of some 1,000 youth members of his political group Fatah in the northern West Bank town of Nablus.

Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak committed themselves in the September 4 Sharm el-Sheikh accord to conclude a final and conclusive peace agreement by September 13.



A policeman removes burning tyres set ablaze by supporters of deposed prime minister Nawaz Sharif after the court verdict in Lahore on Thursday. An anti-terrorist court in Karachi sentenced Sharif to life imprisonment for hijacking and terrorism, and acquitted six other co-accused, including his brother Shabaz Sharif. — AFP photo

Conviction of Sharif draws support, condemnation

54 pc describes verdict as 'fair': Poll

KARACHI, Apr 7: Pakistani political parties reacted with mixed feelings today to the life jail term handed to deposed prime minister Nawaz Sharif by an anti-terrorism court for hijacking and terrorism, reports AFP.

Some said the verdict was harsh and unjustified while others saw it as the fruits of a "reckless" exercise in political power that characterised Sharif's period as prime minister.

The business community appeared to have a sigh of relief as the index at the key bourse in Karachi rose by 0.59 per cent on Thursday soon after the news that Sharif had escaped the death penalty.

Human rights activists too voiced relief. The privately-run local Gallup Poll said 54 per cent of 500 Pakistanis questioned in a sample survey on Thursday described the verdict against Sharif as "fair."

Forty-six per cent said the decision was given under government pressure, the group said.

Asked what Sharif's supporters should do, 52 per cent said the verdict should simply be accepted, 38 per cent supported a court battle and only 10 per cent supported street

protests, the organisation said. Judge Rehmat Hussain Jaffri sentenced Sharif to life imprisonment, fined him 500,000 rupees (10,000 dollars), and ordered his property confiscated on charges of hijacking and terrorism.

The charges stemmed from Sharif's attempt on October 12 to prevent a plane carrying then-army chief General Pervez Musharraf and 198 passengers from landing at Karachi.

The flight from Sri Lanka landed once the army took control of Karachi airport. Musharraf seized power in a bloodless coup and deposed Sharif, who had sacked him hours earlier.

Sharif, who was elected prime minister in a landslide victory two years ago, could have faced the death penalty but was found not guilty of attempted murder and kidnapping.

The president of the Awami National Party (ANP) said in a statement that no political worker could be happy over the decision against Sharif.

"We condemn it and hope the accused will get relief from the appellate court," Asfandyar Wali Khan said.

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) of Benazir Bhutto termed the verdict a setback for the military regime. Sharif's confidence in the judge finally bore fruit, it said.

"Since the co-defendants have been acquitted on the basis of the same evidence, this strengthens the appeal of Nawaz Sharif in the Sindh High Court," a PPP spokesman said.

However, the Jamaat-islami said the verdict "was neither political nor vindictive." Cricket hero-turned-politician Imran Khan's Movement for Justice said the trial and conviction of Sharif was a "sad and unfortunate chapter symbolic of an era of reckless politics."

Former president Farooq Ahmad Leghari said the Pakistani people were much more interested in the recovery of plundered national wealth than the conviction of Sharif.

"Everyone should learn a lesson from Sharif's fate," he said, voicing the hope that in future no ruler would consider himself above the law.

Pakistan newspapers said Sharif was to blame for his problems and urged the regime to prevent further upheavals and concentrate on reviving the economy.

Sharif's political career begins and ends with the military

ISLAMABAD, Apr 7: His career started and ended with the military, reports AP.

Nawaz Sharif, who was thrown out of power by the army and sentenced to life in prison on Thursday was brought into politics more than two decades ago by another military ruler.

His political career began in his home province of Punjab under the tutelage of then military dictator Gen. Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq, who toppled the civilian government of the day and handed prime minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, accusing him of plotting to kill a political foe.

The Sharif family wealth also soared with Zia's military rule. The family-run business that was worth 250 million rupees (4 million dollars) in 1977 when Zia took power soared to 6 billion rupees (112 million dollars) by 1990 when Sharif began his first term as prime minister of Pakistan. That represents a 210 per cent annual increase in value.

His family now owns more than 12 steel foundries, sugar mills and textile mills in the country's rich Punjab province. The Sharif family also owns four apartments in Britain and

a sprawling estate of several hundred acres, outside the eastern city of Lahore.

On Thursday the anti-terrorist court ordered all Sharif's properties confiscated, however it's not clear how much is in his name.

Sharif's first introduction to politics was as finance minister in the Punjab provincial Cabinet. He became chief minister in the late 1980s.

In 1990 he was elected prime minister but his term ended abruptly three years later in 1993 when the president used his constitutional authority to dismiss the government.

He returned to power again in 1997 with a two-thirds majority and the goodwill of most Pakistanis who put their faith in his promises to clean up corruption and rebuild a tattered economy.

People stood in line outside banks to contribute small sums, sometimes, as little as 10 rupees (two cents) toward Sharif's prime minister's fund which was advertised as the fund that would wipe out the country's foreign debt and reduce Pakistan's dependence on international aid, Sharif said this fund would put an end to the begging

how. But the debt continued to soar and the proceeds of the prime minister's fund which at one point was said to be several hundred million rupees disappeared.

Sharif turned his attention toward consolidating his power, removing the president's constitutional authority to dismiss civilian governments and relegated the president to a figurehead.

Within two years Sharif had engaged in confrontations with every institution in the country. He had forced the chief justice of the Supreme Court to resign after an open display of hostility toward the court; prompted the president to quit and forced the previous army chief Gen. Jehangir Karamat to leave his post.

He was replaced by Gen. Pervez Musharraf, a former commander in the military.

Relations between Sharif and Musharraf began to deteriorate following last summer's bitter border war with India in the Kargil region of Kashmir, the Himalayan territory claimed by both countries.

India said the Pakistan army sent its soldiers into In-



Nawaz Sharif

dian Kashmir disguised as guerrillas and took Indian territory. Pakistan denied the charge, saying the infiltrators were Kashmiri militants.

However, Sharif ordered the militants to withdraw following a July 4, 1999 meeting in Washington with US President Bill Clinton.

Musharraf is believed to have opposed that decision.

On Oct. 12, Sharif dismissed Musharraf and replaced him with a junior general a move that caused the military to revolt and seize power.

Water leaks at Japanese N-reactor

TOKYO, Apr 7: Japan's second-biggest utility, Kansai Electric Power Co Inc, said today it had started to shut down a 500,000 kilowatt nuclear reactor manually after discovering a small leak of primary cooling water, reports Reuters.

There was no leak of radiation into the environment from the incident at the No 2 Mihama power plant in Fukui Prefecture, some 350 km northwest of Tokyo on the Sea of Japan coast, a Kansai Electric spokesman said.

He said the volume and the cause of the coolant leak were not yet known.

The leak was discovered at around 10 am (0700 BST) today, and the company started steps to manually shut down the plant at around noon, he said.

Global statistics show that in 1996 Japan reported a far smaller number of incidents of unplanned shutdowns than many countries using nuclear power, including France and the United States.

While Japan reported an average of 2.2 such incidents per reactor, France reported 2.7 and the United States 2.4.

Nuclear power accounts for about one-third of Japan's electricity demand. In France it provides some 80 per cent and in the United States about 50 per cent.

However, a series of accidents at nuclear-related facilities in recent years has heightened public distrust of the industry.

The nation's worst nuclear accident from which one worker later died, was at a uranium processing plant last September.

Elian's father in US

WASHINGTON, Apr 7: The father of Cuban castaway Elian Gonzalez landed on US soil Thursday to claim his son and face a battle with his Miami family who denounced his return to the communist nation as "dangerous," reports AFP.

"For exactly 137 days I have been cruelly separated from my child. Never before has he had more need for his father," Juan Miguel Gonzalez told reporters after he flew into Washington from Havana just after dawn.

In Miami, talks broke down between US immigration officials and the relatives who have been caring for the six-year-old boy since his dramatic November rescue from the sea after his mother drowned fleeing to US shores.

The Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS) refused the relatives' request that Gonzalez keep the boy in the country while their legal custody battle is settled, the family's attorney said.

"What the United States government has decided... is both unfair and dangerous to this child," said Jose Garcia Pedros, who added that the INS also rejected their request for a psychological evaluation of Elian.

The latest upheaval threw even more doubt over where and for the first time in four months.

Until the breakdown, the Miami family had insisted Gonzalez meet them on their own turf to settle the matter, but the vehement demonstrations against the boy's return have sparked fears for the father's safety.

A small band of hard-line Cuban-Americans were camped outside Lorenzo Gonzalez's modest home in Miami's Little Havana Thursday. They were armed with a sign reading "Papa, stay here!" and a steady determination to see the ordeal to the end.

"I've been here 24 hours a day for the past five days, and I'm willing to form a human chain (around the house) and get arrested if that's what it takes," said protester Bienvenido Comas.



A lone Indonesian palace guard pushes back Muslim protesters holding a banner that reads: "The Indonesian state is based on belief in God" during a mass rally in Jakarta yesterday. More than 5,000 Muslims staged a massive rally in front of the palace to protest a presidential proposal to lift a decade-long ban on communism. — AFP photo

Human rights violations in Chechnya Russia suspended from Council of Europe

STRASBOURG, Apr 7: The parliamentary assembly of the 41-nation Council of Europe voted Thursday to suspend Russia because of its alleged human rights violations in Chechnya, reports AFP.

A text adopted by a two-thirds majority called on the ministerial council, the Council's executive organ, to invoke the procedure to suspend the Russian delegation because of what it called a lack of substantial and demonstrable progress in rights issues.

A separate amendment which was voted to suspend Russia's voting rights and rights of representation provoked the walkout of almost all the 18 members of the Russian delegation.

The Europe-wide human rights watchdog also appealed to members to invoke the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg over Russia's alleged failure to comply with the Human Rights Convention.

The Council of Europe has been increasingly critical of Russia over Chechnya. A Council fact-finding mission last month alleged war crimes had been committed by both sides.

UN human rights chief Ravindra Kumar also said earlier this week that serious human rights

abuses had been committed by Russian forces in the break-away republic.

The Council motion on suspension of Russia — a member since 1996 — considerably hardened an earlier recommendation by Britain's Lord Judd who had led the fact-finding mission and who had asked

for Russia to be given till May 31 to conform to Council demands on Chechnya.

Earlier the Council had put 10 conditions on the Russian delegation's continuing participation in Strasbourg, including an immediate ceasefire in Chechnya and the establishment of an unconditional political dialogue with elected Chechen leaders.

It was the first time in the half-century of its existence that the Council had voted suspension of a member.

In 1969, Greece withdrew from the Council before the assembly could vote to suspend it over its military dictatorship.

The Turkish delegation withdrew twice voluntarily, first in 1981 following a military coup, then in 1995 over treatment of Turkey's Kurdish parliamentary deputies.

Thursday's debate produced a clash of opinions. Leftist Conservative Member David Atkinson said: "The assembly is left with no choice but to vote for suspension of the Russian Federation."

"If the Council of Europe does not act today, it would no longer be taken seriously by the international community," he urged.

LTTE kills 9 in fighting with police

COLOMBO, Apr 7: At least nine people were killed when Tamil Tiger guerrillas fired on police rushing to rescue villagers under attack in eastern Sri Lanka today, officials here said, reports AFP.

Gunmen of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) opened fire at farmers and then ambushed the policemen, the officials said.

At least four police officers were among the dead. The attack in the village of Aralaganvila came as heavy fighting raged in the north of the country where the rebels are trying to block a key highway.

Japan-DPRK talks end in vain

PYONGYANG, Apr 7: North Korea and Japan failed today to iron out huge differences in historic talks held in Pyongyang aimed at normalising diplomatic relations, but the foes agreed to meet again in Japan, probably at the end of May, reports Reuters.

A joint statement issued today morning gave no reason for why an agreement had not been reached, but the talks had been dogged from the start by numerous difficulties, including North Korea's demands for an apology from Japan for its actions that colonised the Korean peninsula from 1910-1945.

"While recognising the need to improve and develop DPRK (North Korean)-Japan relations, the two sides solemnly discussed various issues on the realisation on normalising relations between the two countries, including how to liquidate the past," the statement said.

"We verified that it is important to continue these talks and

have agreed to hold the next round in Tokyo around the end of May," the statement added.

Since the talks began on Wednesday, both North Korea and Japan had acknowledged that progress would be difficult, but expressed determination to improve their thorny relationship.

Despite the difficulties, a diplomatic source close to the negotiations said the North Korean side appeared enthusiastic about improving relations with Japan and that North Korea has expressed hopes that ties could be normalised by the end of this year.

At the start today's talks, North Korea accused Japan of harsh colonial rule of the peninsula from 1910-1945, but voiced hope that the two countries would work towards improving bilateral ties.

Despite the rough road ahead, an full of confidence, chief North Korean negotiator Jong Thae-who told the Japanese side.

Jong's Japanese counterpart

Kojiro Takano said: "We are at the foot of the mountain, but I will work towards pushing our relations to the top."

Jong and Takano toured a North Korean mountain together on Thursday as part of efforts to build trust between the two sides.

North Korea's Rodong Shimbun newspaper said today that Japan should make a formal apology for its actions during the colonial period, reiterating what has become a standard Pyongyang line.

The misfortune and pain Japan inflicted on the people of Korea is immeasurably huge," the paper said.

Few had expected this round of talks to end successfully, citing a number of long-standing issues dividing the nations.

North Korea has repeatedly demanded an apology and compensation for the colonial period, while Japan has its own agenda, including the alleged abduction of Japanese nationals by North Korean agents.

BRIEFLY

5 BSF men killed in Manipur:

Armed militants gunned down five BSF personnel and injured eight others in an ambush in Churachandpur district of Manipur on Thursday, PTI reports from Imphal.

Official sources said the militants opened fire at a BSF party at Singhat area, about 150 kms south of here, from roadside jungle killing four BSF personnel on the spot, one of the injured died on way to hospital.

Mine blast claims 7 in China:

Seven people died in a coal mine explosion in northeastern Jilin province, the latest in a spate of mining accidents in China, the official Xinhua news agency reported Friday, AFP reports from Beijing.

Two others narrowly escaped death in the third gas explosion in the province in recent months, the report said, without providing details of the blast which occurred in Liaoyuan in the early hours of Wednesday.

US suspends land reform aid to Zimbabwe

WASHINGTON, Apr 7: The United States on Thursday suspended assistance to Zimbabwe's land reform plan due to government inaction against farm squatters and condemned attacks on property and political demonstrations, reports Reuters.

Zimbabwe's future and reputation are threatened by this display of political intolerance," State Department spokesman James Rubin said in a statement released earlier Thursday a bill allowing the seizure of farms without compensating their white owners.

Stressing that Washington supported "rational, sustainable and equitable land reform in Zimbabwe, Rubin lamented that Harare had done nothing to remove squatters who have illegally occupied farms across the country.

"The United States government has joined other donors in suspending assistance to Zimbabwe's land reform programme," Rubin said, noting that Washington had committed more than one million dollars to it.

"That programme has broken down in recent weeks as war veterans and their supporters illegally occupied hundreds of commercial farms in clear violation of Zimbabwean law," he said.

US, British raids kill 14 civilians, Iraq claims

BAGHDAD, Apr 7: US and British warplanes attacked residential areas in southern Iraq on Thursday, killing 14 civilians and wounding 19, the Iraqi military said, in the highest reported casualty figure since August, reports AP.

The official Iraqi News Agency, quoting an unidentified Air Defence spokesman, said 18 waves of planes carried out 24 combat missions.

The American and British criminals added another crime to their barbaric acts... when their ravens bombed residential areas and civil installations," the agency said.

The number of deaths reported Thursday was the highest since Aug 17, when Iraq said 19 civilians were killed and 11 were wounded during attacks in northern and southern Iraq. On Tuesday, authorities reported that strikes had killed two people and injured two in the south.

The agency's report did not specify the nature of targets hit Thursday or their location.

Most population does not have access to safe blood: WHO

GENEVA, Apr 7: Most of the world's population does not have access to safe blood largely because of a lack of commitment by governments, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said Friday, reports AFP.

Between five and 10 per cent of HIV infections worldwide are transmitted through the transfusion of infected blood or blood products, the WHO said. An estimated 5.6 million new HIV infections occur every year.

Some 80 per cent of the global population has access to just 20 per cent of the global supply of safe blood, while nearly 20 per cent of the whole blood supply is not screened for all transfusion-transmissible infections, it said.

Marking World Health Day Friday -- this year with the theme of safe blood -- the WHO is calling on the international community to help ensure safe donors give blood regularly, and all donated blood is tested before transfusion.

"Despite all the technological marvels that humanity is experiencing, reliable and safe blood supply is still out of reach for untold millions of people around the world," WHO director-general Gro Harlem Brundtland said in a press release.

"The primary reasons for this are lack of commitment and support on the part of many

governments, resulting in chronic shortages of safe blood donors in developing countries, as well as absence of quality control and testing of blood products," she added.

Although a diagnostic test for the HIV antibody became available commercially about 15 years ago, many countries still cannot guarantee 100 per cent testing of donated blood, WHO said.

Unsafe transfusion and injection practices cause an estimated eight to 16 million hepatitis B virus infections each year, while about a quarter of the world's 500,000 deaths from pregnancy-related causes are associated with loss of blood, the WHO said.

The WHO said fewer than 70 of its 191 member states meet the organisation's recommendations for a national blood programme, and even fewer test adequately for diseases which can be transmitted in blood, or store it safely before use.

"Individual countries should develop a national blood policy and create relevant legal framework to support that policy," the WHO's expert Yasuhiro Suzuki said.

"On top of that there should be either one specific organisation with an overall responsibility or a coordinated national blood programme," he said.



Cuban-American women make a human chain around Elian Gonzalez's Miami relatives' home (background) on Thursday after they heard that negotiations between the government and the lawyers for Elian's Miami relatives broke down. INS has repeatedly said they would transfer the temporary custody of the boy from his great uncle to his father if the father came to US soil. Juan Miguel Gonzalez, the father of Elian, arrived in the US earlier Thursday. — AFP photo