

Shelling damages mosque, home in S Lebanon

TYRE, Lebanon, Apr 24 : Shelling from the Israeli-occupied zone of southern Lebanon damaged a mosque and a house near the port city of Tyre early today, police said, reports AFP.

Two shells struck the Had-datha mosque and a neighbouring house, the police said, adding that there were no casualties.

The police said some 20 shells in all were fired at areas on the edge of the western sector of the occupied zone, following attacks on two Israeli positions, Blatt and Shamaa, which were claimed by the Shiite Muslim Hezbollah movement.

In northern Israel, a military source said an Israeli army post in south Lebanon and four positions of the allied South Lebanon Army (SLA) militia came under mortar attack early Monday.

There were no reports of casualties in the attack.

Gunmen kill Afghan leader in Peshawar

PESHAWAR, Apr 24: Three unidentified gunmen shot dead a former Afghan guerrilla commander in Pakistan's northern border city of Peshawar, police said Monday, reports AP.

Mohammed Siddique, 50, died on the spot when gunmen opened fire with automatic weapons in the Lalazar neighbourhood late Sunday. The gunmen fled.

No group has claimed responsibility for the attack. No other details were immediately available.

Siddique was a commander of Hizb-e-Islami, an Afghan guerrilla group, which was in the forefront during the armed struggle against Afghanistan's ousted communist regime and former Soviet Union troops.

Jakarta to make decision on Suharto probe

JAKARTA, Apr 24 : The Indonesian government will make a decision in August on the case of former president Suharto, currently under a graft probe, Attorney General Marzuki Darusman said today, reports AFP.

"In August, there will be a political decision on the Suharto case," Darusman was quoted by the Detikcom online news service as telling journalists on the sidelines of a private seminar here.

Darusman said that with the political side of the case settled by the expected statement, the legal process against the former president could then proceed as it should.

But without explaining what would constitute a "political decision," he added that the case against Suharto could not yet be settled socio-politically, but that it had also to go through a legal process.

'Trial of troops for murder in Aceh should continue'

BANDA ACEH, Indonesia, Apr 24 : A state prosecutor today said the trial of 24 Indonesian soldiers accused of murdering 58 civilians in Aceh province should continue, as the charges were valid and the court had the necessary authority, reports AFP.

Prosecutor AS Nuraini argued at the Banda Aceh state court against defence lawyers' arguments on Saturday that the charges in what has become known as the Bantaqiah massacre were incomplete.

Reading the prosecution's comment on the defence plea, Nuraini said that the charges had been prepared "in a careful and concise manner," and were all legally justified.

Estrada pledges to campaign against corruption

MANILA, Apr 24 : Philippine President Joseph Estrada said today that he plans to mount a campaign against graft to refute allegations that his government is fostering corruption, reports AFP.

"Our economic fundamentals are now in place," he said in a speech to finance department employees.

"So we will focus on fighting graft and corruption this year. We will charge all corrupt officials, big and small, but especially the big ones."

Vajpayee appeals for aid

Scattered rains bring some relief to drought-hit India

NEW DELHI, Apr 24 : Scattered overnight showers eased drought conditions affecting 50 million people in northwest and central India today, a day after Premier Atal Behari Vajpayee appealed for public relief funds, reports AFP.

Narottam Patel, water resources minister in the western state of Gujarat -- where more than half the total population of 42 million have been affected by the crisis -- said the situation had improved.

"There has been some relief with between 30-35 centimetres (12-14 inches) of rain in the Ambaji region since yesterday," Patel told AFP over telephone from the state capital Gandhinagar.

"This little change in the atmosphere has had a tremendous psychological effect ... people think there will be rain soon. Even I am praying for that."

Rain was also reported in the adjoining desert state of Ra-

jasthan on Sunday. Showers fell near Pokhran, the site of India's 1998 nuclear tests, for the first time in eight months.

Vajpayee, in an address to the nation on state-run television and radio networks late Sunday, called for public donations to help tide over the worst-affected regions.

"Large areas of Gujarat and Rajasthan, and some other parts of the country, are in the grip of a severe drought. Crops have withered away, water resources have dried up, there is no fodder for cattle."

"In village after village, hunger stalks men, women and children," Vajpayee said, adding that the federal aid package offered so far was not enough to tackle the spreading crisis.

"Given the severity of the drought and the large number of people and cattle who need to be provided with food and fodder, these funds are inadequate."

"You can help meet the shortage by contributing money, no matter how small the amount, to the prime minister's national relief fund," Vajpayee said.

Gujarat minister Patel said Vajpayee's offer for relief trains carrying water were discussed at a top-level meeting in Gandhinagar on Sunday, but added that the proposal would not be immediately taken up.

"We are in the process of identifying places to source water from and railway delivery points in the affected northern parts of the state," he said.

"We think we can manage the situation without trains, with just water tankers and new tubewells."

Patel said the state's water requirement was 20 litres (42 pints) per capita daily. Sixteen of Gujarat's 27 districts have been affected by the drought.

"We are currently able to supply 20 litres of water per person every day in the villages."



Women villagers walk past the carcass of a dead cow on their way to fetch water from a well, Saturday in Babute Ki Dhani, Rajasthan. Large areas of India's western states of Gujarat and Rajasthan have been affected by a severe drought, with already scant water resources drying up, leaving no fodder for cattle. — AFP photo

Battles rage as Tigers claim more territory in Jaffna

COLOMBO, April 24 (AFP) - Heavy fighting raged in northern Sri Lanka Monday as Tamil Tigers claimed they had captured more territory after taking the key Elephant Pass army garrison that guarded the entrance to the Jaffna peninsula.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said over their clandestine Voice of Tigers radio that military lines at Soranpattu, just north of Elephant Pass, had been smashed by the rebels on Sunday.

There was no immediate reaction from the defence ministry to the latest rebel claims. However, a defence ministry spokesman said security forces were carrying out ferocious attacks against rebel positions in the area.

The Tigers said they captured a large haul of weapons, including artillery guns, tanks, armoured cars, vehicles and radio communication equipment from the Elephant Pass camp that was taken on Saturday.

The defence ministry, however, said that troops had taken most of the equipment from Elephant Pass with them and had destroyed anything that

had to be left behind.

The LTTE said it had lost 35 of their cadres in the latest fighting and placed military losses at over 1,000 killed -- a figure the defence ministry disputes.

The ministry said Sunday 79 government soldiers had been killed and 625 wounded in Saturday's battles. The ministry also said 162 Tigers had been killed in counter-attacks since Saturday.

Hundreds of volunteers, including Buddhist monks, queued outside hospitals here Monday to donate blood for the treatment of soldiers wounded in the latest fighting.

The rebel radio said that residents in areas held by them were also queuing up to donate blood to treat Tiger cadres wounded in the fighting.

The radio monitored in the northern town of Vavuniya said that the guerrillas were celebrating their latest success by displaying rebel flags and portrait pictures of Tiger supremo Velupillai Prabhakaran.

The ministry said that troops had pulled out of the southern sector of the sprawling Elephant Pass complex in a

tactical retreat designed to ensure a better defence of Jaffna.

Government forces captured the peninsula from the Tigers in December 1995 after nearly five years in which the rebels ran the area as a de facto separate state.

Intense battles continued over the weekend as troops traded artillery and mortar attacks with Tiger guerrillas, officials said. Air force planes were deployed to bomb Tamil Tiger positions in the region.

Sri Lanka's main opposition party has called for an emergency session of parliament.

Oslo peace bid suffers setback

Meanwhile, the Sri Lankan army's setback at the hands of Tamil Tiger rebels has dimmed the prospects of Norwegian-backed peace talks getting off the ground soon, political analysts here said today.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) captured the strategic base of Elephant Pass over the weekend after a month of heavy fighting and have escalated attacks against government forces in the Jaffna peninsula.

10 hostage-takers killed in Philippines' rescue effort

ZAMBOANGA, Philippines, Apr 24 : At least 10 Muslim rebels have been killed in the southern Philippines as government soldiers pressed on with an offensive to rescue 27 civilian hostages, officials said today, reports AFP.

Abdul Aziz Balamo, chairman of a government committee handling the month-old hostage crisis on Basilan island, said at least 10 Abu Sayyaf rebels had been confirmed killed while many others were believed wounded.

The hostages, who include a Roman Catholic priest and at least a dozen schoolchildren, were seized from two schools on March 20 to force the government to ask the United States to free convicted terrorist Ramzi Yousef, serving a life term in a US jail for the 1993 World Trade Center bombing in New York.

Casualties on the government side since the operation began Saturday remained at three dead and three wounded. A ground force of about 500 soldiers were tasked to capture the camp and free the hostages.

"According to reports we received from our security force, the rebels have at least 10 dead,"

Balamo told radio station DZM.

Southern Philippines military commander Major General Diomedio Villanueva said the military used artillery against the rebel camp in the rugged Basilan hinterlands to flush the well-entrenched guerrillas out.

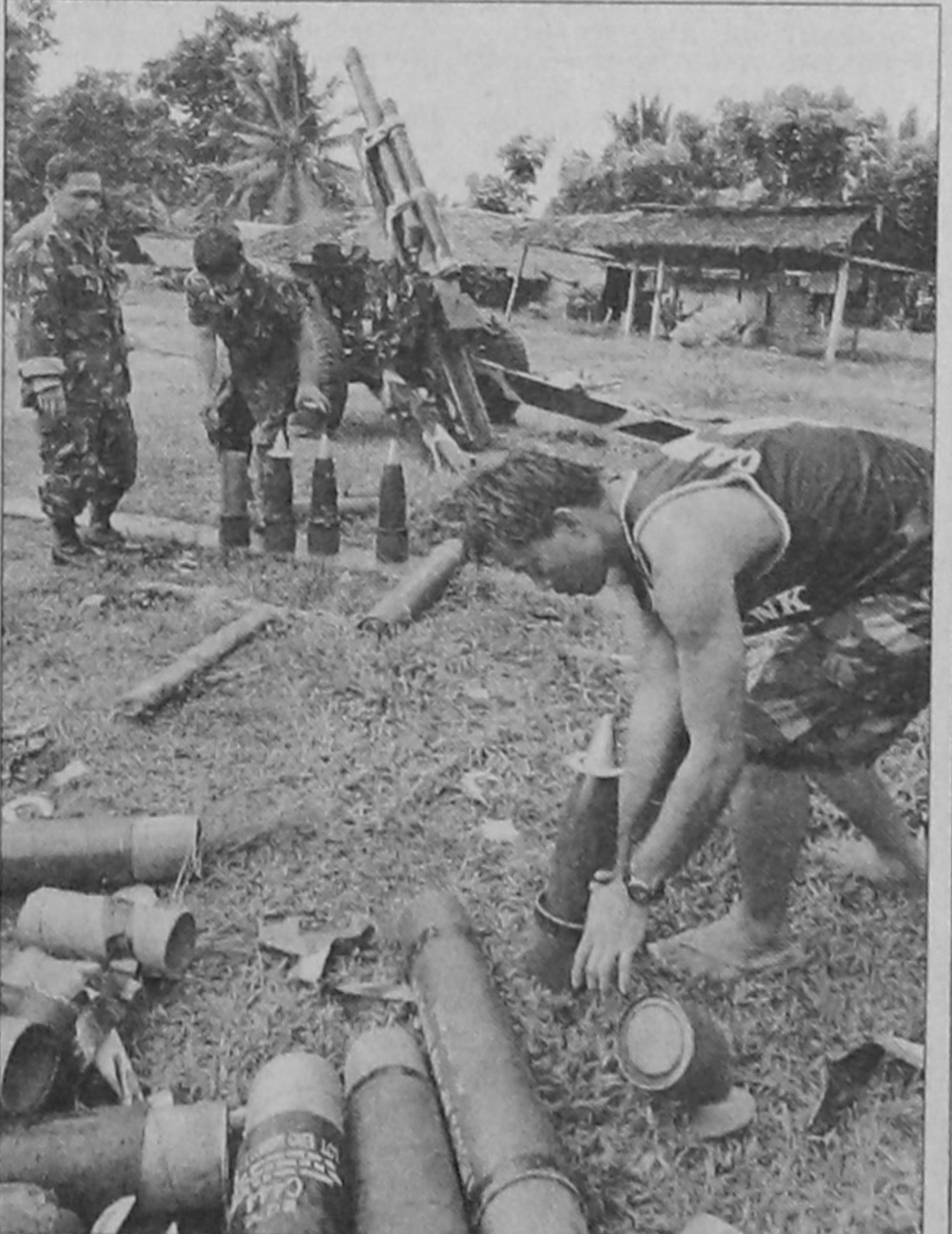
"Our objective now is to get the bunkers and position of the Abu Sayyaf rebels," Villanueva said. "Artillery is now directed towards enemy positions to dislodge them from their present hideout."

Three MG-520 rocket-firing helicopters were also pounding bunkers surrounding the Abu Sayyaf's four square-kilometer (1.6 square-mile) main camp, where the hostages are being held.

Soldiers were under instructions to consider "the safety of the hostages and give them the best chance to survive," Villanueva said.

The troops' advance has been bogged down by the rough jungle terrain, where the Abu Sayyaf are believed to have scattered landmines.

"The boys are slow the past few days because of the terrain and the on-going search for explosives or mines," Villanueva said.



Philippine Army troops prepare to load ammunition on a 105mm howitzer canon yesterday as government troops continue to pound the mountain hideout of Abu Sayyaf, a Muslim extremist group in the jungles of Basilan to free the 27 hostages. At least 10 Muslim rebels have been killed in the offensive, officials said. —AFP photo

Gunmen seize 20 hostages from Malaysian island

KOTA KINABALU, Malaysia, Apr 24 : Heavily armed gunmen have abducted at least 20 people, including foreign tourists, from a resort island off Malaysia's eastern Sabah state and fled by boat, police said today, reports AFP.

Sabah police said gunmen armed with rocket launchers and M-16 automatic rifles took the hostages late Sunday on the popular diving resort island of Sipadan, whose sovereignty is hotly disputed by Malaysia and Indonesia.

Philippine Defense Secretary Orlando Mercado told CNN television in Manila that the hostages including two French nationals, three Germans, two South Africans, one Lebanese, two Finns and two Filipinos.

Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad

7 Serbs on trial for plot to kill Milosevic

NIS, Yugoslavia, Apr 24 : Seven Serbs went on trial here today charged with forming a terrorist group called the Serb Liberation Army and plotting to assassinate Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic, reports AFP.

The seven, from the southern Serbian town of Krusevac, were also indicted by the military court on charges of plotting to kill General Nebojsa Pavkovic, now the army chief of staff, and opposition leader Vuk Draskovic.

They were accused of "forming a terrorist group and participating in enemy activities against the state," a charge often laid against Kosovo Albanians alleged to belong to the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA).

If convicted, the defendants -- one army lieutenant and six civilians -- could face jail sentences of up to 20 years.

Ranging in age from 26 to 64 years, the seven were arrested in December and detained pending trial in a military court in the southern town, Nis.

Authorities said the group collected arms, equipment and propaganda material for an all-out Serb uprising against Milosevic.

Newspapermen to observe All India Action Day May 8

NEW DELHI, Apr 24: Journalists and non-journalists belonging to newspapers and news agencies will observe May 8 as All India Action Day against the Indian Newspaper Society (INS) and newspaper management's alleged sabotage of the Manisana Singh Wage Board's functioning, reports PTI.

Both journalists and non-journalists will undertake strikes, dharnas and demonstrations on May 8 to protest against an alleged conspiracy of newspaper managements particularly INS, to sabotage the Wage Board right at the moment when it is in the process of finalising its recommendations. National Coordination Committee of Newspapers/News Agencies Employees' Unions in a statement said here yesterday.

The committee said that agitational programme was drawn in a meeting of the representatives of newspapers and news agencies employees' unions on April 22 night.

The unions also decided to hold demonstrations in front of INS office here on April 28 and May four, the statement said.

US foreign policy makers fail to draw the right lessons from Vietnam War: Kissinger

WASHINGTON, Apr 24 : Those who currently make US foreign policy have failed to draw the right lessons from the Vietnam War, says former secretary of state Henry Kissinger in Newsweek magazine's current edition, reports AFP.

In the Newsweek essay, timed to coincide with the 25th anniversary of the US pullout from Vietnam -- also published ahead of next month's controversial US congressional vote on whether to grant permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) to China -- Kissinger takes swipes at current US foreign policies.

He worries that other leaders will be "tempted by the Clintonian concept of riskless global gratification and the belief that

the hard-headed pursuit of economic self-interest will ultimately produce global reconciliation."

And he warns current White House aspirants that ignoring his call for a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy will invite disaster.

"Our political leaders may skirt these issues during the presidential campaign that is about to begin. But the winner will not be able to escape them once he enters the Oval Office" of the White House, says Kissinger.

His own realpolitik philosophy made him an evil icon for many antiwar protesters in the 1970s, but who won a Nobel Peace Prize for negotiating the US-Vietnam ceasefire in 1973.

It will take years to resolve fate of Jerusalem: Israel

JERUSALEM, Apr 24 : Israel warned today that the future of Jerusalem, the Holy City fought over for centuries, would not be settled by a September deadline for a peace accord with the Palestinians and could take years to resolve, reports AFP.

"If we don't achieve a full accord on the question of Jerusalem, it is possible to reach an understanding on certain aspects and to declare that the others will be re-examined in a few years," said Oded Eran, the country's chief negotiator with the Palestinians.

"This time lapse could enable us to reach a formal accord more easily because the issue would prove less sensitive for the two sides," Eran told Israeli radio.

His comments sparked a

warning by a Palestinian legislator that peace would be impossible without agreement on Jerusalem.

The future of Jerusalem, claimed by both Israel and the Palestinians as their capital, is one of the most emotive issues to be tackled if the two sides are to reach a comprehensive peace accord by the September deadline laid down in an interim agreement last year.

Eran was echoing comments by Israeli cabinet minister Haim Ramon, who said on Sunday that agreement with the Palestinians over Jerusalem -- sacred to Christians, Jews and Muslims -- was impossible at the moment.

"Our position is clear: keeping Jerusalem united under Israeli sovereignty," Ramon said.

BRIEFLY

5 die as plane crashes in Auckland:

Five people were killed and another seriously injured when a light airplane crashed in New Zealand's Southern Alps yesterday, police said, AFP reports from Auckland.

The area is a tourist attraction and this weekend has been the scene of a Warbirds airshow at Wanaka. Dunedin police spokeswoman Jo Galer said the six-seater plane crashed into a hill on the northwest side of a pass at the southern end of the Dunstan Range in Central Otago.

3 Falungong followers held:

Three leaders of the outlawed Falungong spiritual group have been arrested for taking protection money from practitioners in eastern China's Shandong province, according to a report Monday, AFP reports from Hong Kong.

Tan Weijun, Li Weihua and his wife Li Fang were arrested in Weifang for collecting some 300,000 yuan from Falungong followers, the China-backed Ta Kung Pao newspaper said. The trio were alleged to have spread rumours and collected money from believers in several towns in Shandong, promising "Heavenly protection" from Tan.

Publication of 12 reformist journals suspended in Iran

TEHRAN, Apr 24 : Iran has suspended the publication of eight newspapers and four political magazines close to reformist President Mohammad Khatami "until further notice," the official news agency IRNA reported today, reports AFP.

The press court late Sunday announced the suspension of two newspapers and a bi-monthly close to the liberal reformist movement.

But on Monday the court decided to muzzle a total of eight dailies, three weeklies and a bi-monthly, all also close to Khatami's government.

The decision also followed the sentencing to prison of two reformist journalists.

The suspended dailies are Gozarch-a-Rouze, Bamdad-e-Emrouze, Aftab-e-Emrouze,

Peyman-e-Azadi, Fath, Arya, Asr-e-Azadegan and Azad, which are joined by the weeklies Hajar, Aban and Arzesh and the bi-monthly Iran-e-Farda.

In a communique published by IRNA, the court said it decided to shut down the journals so as to "dispel the worries of the people, of the Guide of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and of the clergy."

It said "enemy elements" had infiltrated the journals where "they formed bases ... and are attacking the values of the revolution."

"These journals are suspended until further notice to prevent them from committing new offences, from affecting society's opinions and arousing concern among the people," the court communique said.