

International

C'wealth chief
to visit
Pakistan

LONDON, May 3: Commonwealth Secretary General Don McKinnon will soon visit Pakistan to convey the organisation's concern at the lack of progress towards the restoration of democratic rule by the military regime, the grouping said Tuesday, reports AFP.

The eight-member Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) said it was concerned by the failure of General Pervez Musharraf, who seized power in a coup last year, to set a timetable for local and national elections for new democratic bodies.

It said McKinnon "would visit Pakistan for the purpose of appraising the military regime of the Commonwealth's concerns," noting that as yet Musharraf had "given no timetable for provincial and parliamentary elections."

"The Group expressed concern about the proposed exclusion of political parties in the local government elections and at the continued suspension of the Constitution," it said, adding that Pakistan's foreign minister, Abdul Sattar, would be invited to CMAG's next meeting to clarify the situation.

Musharraf toppled the government of prime minister Nawaz Sharif in a coup last October and has so far refused to commit himself to a date for a return to civilian rule, saying a number of reforms have to be introduced first.

The 54-nation Commonwealth barred Pakistan from taking part in its councils in response to the military coup, and on Tuesday it warned that it would "keep the situation under review and recommend further measures if there was no speedy progress toward the restoration of democracy."

Gunmen kill four
Shiite Muslims
in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, May 3: Gunmen on a rampage killed four Shiite Muslims in separate incidents in Punjab and southern Sindh provinces ahead of meetings called by the army to curb sectarian violence, police and witnesses said on Wednesday, reports AP.

"We condemn these anti-Islamic, anti-religious and anti-Pakistan acts," Javed Jabbar, a special advisor to Pakistan's army chief said Wednesday. "The government does not just condemn it, but it has taken several measures to control violence, including banning of the display of weapons."

"The government plans tough action against people who are involved in violence and those who fan it," said Jabbar. "We plan to strike at its roots."

A lawyer and former Shiite leader, Malik Ibrar Hussain, was gunned down early Wednesday as he walked to the court in Toba Tek Singh in eastern Punjab province.

Two men with kalashnikov rifles opened fire on Hussain killing him immediately, said a Shiite Muslim leader Ishar Bokhari.

Hussain was the secretary general of the local chapter of Tehrik-e-Jaffria Pakistan, a group seeking Shiite Muslim law in Pakistan, said Bokhari.

Late on Tuesday in the Sindh provincial capital of Karachi, two men with automatic weapons walked into a health clinic and opened fire killing two patients and the doctor, a Shiite Muslim, Dr Sibtan Dosa, said police.

Angry demonstrators responded by setting several vehicles on fire. The police cordoned off the area.

US launches
satellite to
monitor
hurricanes

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla., May 3: A \$250 million satellite rocketed into space early Wednesday to reinforce the United States' ailing network of orbiting weather stations before the onset of hurricane season, reports Reuters.

Riding atop a Lockheed Martin Atlas 2 rocket, the GOES-L satellite lifted off from Cape Canaveral in a brilliant flash of fire and smoke at 3:07 am EDT (1307 BST).

The slender gold, silver and white booster streaked comet-like through the Florida night sky, arcing out across the Atlantic in a spectacular sky show visible for hundreds of miles.

Meteorologists were eagerly awaiting the launch of the GOES-L satellite, which was delayed a year by rocket engine problems. Watching over the hurricane-prone east coast of the United States in an ageing satellite that could fail at any time.

"There's really no way to predict how much longer it will continue to give good data, and that's why we're anxious to get GOES-L launched," NASA's Martin Davis, project manager for the GOES satellites, said at a preflight news conference.

Forecasters want the new satellite in orbit and ready to replace its six-year-old predecessor when it fails, so there is no gap in their coverage.

Hurricane season starts June 1 and we need this (satellite) up there," said Gerry Dittberner, GOES programme manager at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Perched 22,300 miles above the equator, GOES satellites can detect the formation of tropical storms and then track their course and strength as they march across the Atlantic.

Lanka may seek India's help
Tigers claim capture of key Jaffna road

NEW DELHI, May 3: Sri Lanka said today it may seek Indian naval assistance to withdraw some 35,000 troops threatened by an advance of Tamil Tiger rebels on the Jaffna peninsula in the north of the country, reports Reuters.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Lakshman Kadirgamar said foreign military intervention on the ground to push back the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam was unlikely, but he could not rule it out.

Kadirgamar told Reuters in an interview in New Delhi that Sri Lanka had not yet formally requested India's help in pulling out its troops, but it was a contingency plan that would be a humanitarian exercise.

"It possibly could come it could be on the cards," he said, adding that he saw no reason why India should not respond

positively to such a request. It was the first time Sri Lanka has confirmed speculation that it may seek India's help. Calls for such intervention have grown in recent days with the rebels' advance towards Jaffna town, which they lost to the government in December 1995.

An Indian foreign ministry spokesman in New Delhi yesterday declined to comment on whether a formal request had been made.

AP adds from Colombo: Tamil Tiger rebels said today they gained control of a crucial sea supply route in their battle to break the military's main defence line and recapture Jaffna.

The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have brought a 12-kilometre stretch of the road between Elephant Pass and Kilali

under their control, the clandestine rebel radio, Voice of Tigers, said.

There was no immediate government comment. If true, the capture of the stretch along the Jaffna lagoon will greatly help the rebels in moving their ammunition and weapons supplies using the sea route in their final assault on Jaffna.

The Sri Lankan army had used the Elephant Pass-Kilali road as an alternative supply route during the battle for Elephant Pass. The rebels took control of the Elephant Pass over the weekend, forcing 10,000 troops to withdraw further north toward Jaffna.

"The fighting formations of the Tigers are continuing to press on with the offensive into Jaffna," said the radio, monitored in the government-held

town of Vavuniya. The LTTE has code-named their attack as "Jaffna offensive-Unceasing Waves."

Jaffna's fall would be a major political and military setback for the government as it could harden the Sinhala nationalist opinion in the country's south ahead of parliamentary elections that have to be held by August.

The National Movement Against Terrorism an ultra-nationalist Sinhala organisation, accused the government and the main opposition United National Party of conspiring to get Indian navy support to evacuate Sri Lankan troops from Jaffna.

"With that move the entire northern province will come under the military and political dominance of the murderous Tiger terrorist group," it said in a statement.

Two foreign hostages killed in clash with
Philippine troops, claim kidnappers

JOLO, Philippines, May 3: Two foreign hostages died during a pre-dawn clash Wednesday between military troops and Muslim rebels who are holding 21 people, including 10 foreign tourists, on Jolo island in the southern Philippines, guerrilla leaders said, reports AP.

Military officials said they had no knowledge of any hostage fatalities, and said the claim may have been propaganda by the extremist Abu Sayyaf rebels.

The clash apparently occurred when the hostages were being transferred to another location, officials said.

Troops seized the bamboo hut where the hostages had been

held, but found no one inside. No bloodstains were evident inside the hut, and medicines brought by a doctor on Monday were left behind, police said.

Meanwhile, 13 of a separate group of 27 hostages who had been held by other Abu Sayyaf rebels in neighbouring Basilan province were rescued Wednesday, Defence Secretary Orlando Mercado said.

"It is confirmed that 13 have been rescued from the 22 children hostages in Basilan," Mercado said in a live radio interview monitored in this southern city.

"The military believes that as they (the rebels) retreat, the others will also be rescued," he

said, adding he was hoping the Abu Sayyaf guerrilla group would not harm the rest.

Of the 27 Filipinos, 22 were schoolchildren. The five adults included a Roman Catholic priest.

The rebels offered Wednesday to release all their captives if the military halts its pursuit of them.

Troops overran their mountain stronghold over the weekend but found no hostages.

On Jolo, fighting between soldiers and Abu Sayyaf rebels continued Wednesday after heavily armed guerrillas attempted to escape from an encirclement by the military. At

least two soldiers were killed and six injured, officials said.

Commander Robot, and Abu Sayyaf leader, claimed in a telephone interview with the local ABS-CBN radio network that a white foreign man had been accidentally shot in the fighting and a white foreign woman had died of a heart attack.

He apologised to their families and said it was not the rebels' doing.

Another rebel leader, Abu Escobar, later repeated the claim in a call to another radio station and said the rebels would proceed with a previous threat to behead two foreign hostages if the military does not pull back from the rebels' hide-out.

Col Ernesto de Guzman, chief of staff of the military's Southern Command, said the troops would stay put.

"We will not move in and we will not move out," he said.

He said the overnight fighting was very far from where the hostages are believed held.

The 21 hostages were kidnapped April 23 from a Malaysian diving resort and brought to a bamboo hut in the hills of Talpa on Jolo, about one hour away by boat.

The hostages have pleaded to the government to halt military operations in the area.

In announcing their threat Tuesday to behead two of the foreign tourists, Escobar said the troops had moved so close to the rebel hide-out that the kidnappers could see them.

Nur Misuari, the government's hostage negotiator, said the rebels have refused to begin formal talks unless the troops are moved from the area. He also urged a halt to the military operations.



Philippine scout rangers unload ammunition supplies from a C-130 plane yesterday after arriving at the airport on Jolo island in the southern Philippines. Two soldiers were killed and several wounded after fighting broke out between the army and the Abu Sayyaf rebels at a village around one kilometre away from the rebel camp. — AFP photo

'Worst enemies of
the press'

NEW YORK, May 3: The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) advocacy group today named its annual 'Ten Worst Enemies of the Press,' including 'repeat offenders' in the leaders of Cuba, China, Tunisia, Yugoslavia, Peru and Malaysia, reports Reuters.

CPJ said Foday Sankoh, leader of Sierra Leone's Revolutionary United Front who is now part of the West African nation's government, was the worst offender. His rebel soldiers executed eight journalists during a three-week occupation of the capital, Freetown, in January 1999.

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei was No 2 on the list, cited for influencing the judiciary to ban 16 pre-reform newspapers in the space of a week late last month.

President Slobodan Milosevic of Yugoslavia at No 3 was on the list for the second consecutive year for a crackdown on independent Serb newspapers and broadcasters in early 2000, said CPJ, which releases the names on World Press Freedom Day, May 3.

"These enemies of the press

use methods that range from outright torture and murder to more subtle techniques aimed at keeping uncomfortable truths from being told," CPJ executive director Ann Cooper said in a statement. "In Yugoslavia and Iran, threats are so severe that independent media are in grave danger of becoming extinct in the near future."

The New York-based non-profit organisation, which seeks to safeguard press freedom around the world, named Kazakhstan president Nursultan Nazarbayev and Angolan President Jose Eduardo dos Santos among its 'enemies of the press.'

Describing what it termed "repeat offenders," CPJ said Cuban president Fidel Castro was named for the sixth time on the annual list, China's President Jiang Zemin for a fourth year and Tunisia's President Zine Abidine Ben Ali for a third.

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and Peru's President Alberto Fujimori were each listed for a second year.

Pakistani women
arrive in Delhi
on peace mission

NEW DELHI, May 3: With a desire for Indo-Pak peace in their hearts and determination of will in their nerves, a group of Pakistani women has ventured on a mission which many have tried but failed in the past, reports PTI.

The 50 women, belonging to a cross-section of society, arrived here yesterday to an euphoric welcome reciprocated by the activists of Women's Initiative for Peace in South Asia (WIPSA).

This is an initiative for peace taken by the people. Common people of the two countries do not want wars but peace and this is what we have come here to demonstrate, said the delegation leader and Pakistan's noted human rights activist Asma Jahangir after reaching Delhi by the bus from Lahore.

Asserting that there was no animosity between the people of the two South Asian neighbours, Asma said the enemies of peace are those forces who want to run their shops.

She expressed the hope that the government of the two nations would ultimately bow to the people's desire for peace.

CNN's S Asia
channel from
July 1

NEW DELHI, May 3: Cable News Network (CNN) has announced the launching of a new channel for South Asia from July 1 by rescheduling its most popular programmes for prime time viewing and offering some locally produced region specific programmes, reports PTI.

The channel will feature region specific programming for India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and other South Asian countries during prime-time viewing hours, beginning 2030 hrs BST everyday.

The new schedule will comprise regional news every hour and world news every half-hour, besides special programming strands on science and technology and network's feature programming. Locally produced new shows will also be developed for the South Asia region.

The launch of the South Asia channel demonstrates our long-term commitment to the increasingly important South Asia region, CNN senior vice president Rena Golden said here yesterday.

It's part of our global reach, 'regional touch' policy, she added.



Family members believed to those of the defendants enter the Scottish court at Kamp van Zeist yesterday on the first day of the Lockerbie trial. Three Scottish judges presided over the case against two Libyan defendants suspected of bombing Pan Am flight 103 on 21 December 1988 over Lockerbie in Scotland. — AFP photo

Lockerbie trial begins

CAMP ZEIST, Netherlands, May 3: Two alleged Libyan intelligence agents pleaded innocent at the opening of their trial today on charges of blowing up Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland, in 1988, claiming Palestinian terrorists were responsible, reports AP.

In a statement read by the clerk of the Scottish court, the defence alleged that other terrorist organisations, including a Syrian-based Palestinian group, set the bomb that killed 270 people in the world's worst act of air terrorism.

The plea came within minutes after Scottish High Court judge, Lord Ronald Sutherland, opened the proceedings against defendants Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi and Lamen Khalifa Fhimah, who surrendered for trial last year following nearly a decade of sanctions against Libya.

If convicted of murder or endangering the safety of a commercial aircraft, al-Megrahi and Fhimah face a mandatory life sentence in a Scottish prison.

The defence statement named Mohammed Abd Talb, a Palestinian serving a life sentence in Sweden for earlier bombings in Denmark and the Netherlands, as one of 10 other alleged conspirators. Talb was an early suspect in the case, but investigators abandoned that line of inquiry.

The defence also said the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine — General Command, led by Ahmed Jibril, and a group identified only as PPSF were behind the Lockerbie bombing.

Prosecutor Colin Boyd called a British air traffic controller as the first witness to testify. Richard Ellis James Dawson, 52, a 33-year veteran of the British Civil Aviation authority, was on duty at Heathrow



File pictures of two Libyans -- Al-Amine Khalifa Fhimah (L) and Abdel Basset Ali El-Megrahi (R) -- who went on trial in connection with the December 21, 1988 bombing of a Pan Am Boeing 747 flight over Lockerbie, Scotland. — AFP photo

Airport on the night the plane crashed in flames into the Scottish town.

Dawson described routine procedures for departures from Heathrow and radar control technology allowing controllers to track the aircraft.

Earlier, members of the court rose as the judges, wearing a white wig and dressed in flowing ivory robes with embroidered red crosses, were led into the chamber by a sentry bearing a silver mace, the ceremonial staff symbolizing authority in Scottish courts.

"It is time for justice. We want to hold the government responsible, not these guys," Bruce Smith, an American whose British wife, Ingrid, was killed in the crash, said as he walked into the courtroom. "I am convinced that they have a good case against the Libyan government. This should be the start, not the end."

The sleek, state-of-the-art courtroom, built over the past year at a cost of 12 million pounds (dhs 18 million) to British taxpayers, provides

computer monitors for all judges, lawyers, defendants, and clerks to view exhibits and follow the court transcript in real time.

Wireless headphones were available for the defendants so that they could listen to the proceedings via simultaneous translation in Arabic.

For more than 11 years, investigators have pursued a trail of evidence across Europe and the Mediterranean to the defendants.

The proceedings, expected to last about a year, follow the largest international murder investigation on record, with officials interviewing 15,000 witnesses in more than 20 countries and sifting through 180,000 pieces of evidence since the blast.

All 259 passengers and crew members — including 189 Americans — heading home — were killed along with 11 residents of Lockerbie some 38 minutes after the New York-bound jumbo jet took off from London's Heathrow airport at 6:25 pm on that Dec 21, 1988.

Mugabe launches party's
election manifesto

C'wealth ministers meet over Zimbabwe crisis

HARARE, May 3: Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe on Wednesday refused to order war veterans off the white-owned farms they are occupying and said those whites who did not like this were free to leave the country, reports AFP.

"Let no one think we will call on the war veterans to withdraw unless we obtain our land," Mugabe said as he launched his ruling ZANU-PF party's election manifesto.

He said that although his government did not have plans to kick out any whites, Britain was preparing to evacuate some 20,000 nationals from the country. Those willing to go were free to do so if they were not comfortable with the land reform process, the president said.

"The 20,000 that the British want to leave the country are free to leave and we will assist them by showing them the various ways out of the country," Mugabe said.

In London, Commonwealth foreign ministers met Tuesday

to discuss the Zimbabwe crisis, and are expected to call on President Robert Mugabe to act to end political violence and call free and fair elections.

But the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) is expected to stop short of recommending sanctions against the southern African nation over violence and the illegal seizure of white-owned farms.

Britain's Foreign Secretary Robin Cook, speaking ahead of Tuesday's meeting, said he would urge the CMAG to send a strong message to Mugabe that violence and intimidation must stop, the rule of law be restored and that elections take place quickly.

The CMAG, which monitors human rights and democracy in Commonwealth states, comprises ministers from eight nations — Australia, Bangladesh, Barbados, Botswana, Britain, Canada, Malaysia and Nigeria.

It has the ultimate power to recommend Zimbabwe's suspension from the Commonwealth, as it did with Pakistan following last October's military coup. But ministers, including Cook, would like to avoid such drastic action while Zimbabwe holds out the possibility of legislative elections.

In Harare, the Zimbabwean cabinet held a weekly meeting Tuesday amid mounting speculation that Mugabe would at last set a firm date for polling, which has twice been postponed.

"What I want from today is a clear statement that they (Commonwealth ministers) share entirely Britain's concerns about the breakdown of the rule of law in Zimbabwe and the atmosphere of intimidation that surrounds the forthcoming elections, if indeed they take place," Cook told the BBC.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said: "It is very important to the Commonwealth that the elections go ahead as scheduled and that Commonwealth observers are at those elections."

BRIEFLY

75 militants surrender in Assam:

Seventy-five militants laid down their arms before local administration officials in India's strife-torn northeastern state of Assam Wednesday, a government official said, Reuters reports from Guwahati.

The militants laid down their arms at Goalpara nearly a month after a record surrender by 532 militants before government forces at Sibsagar on April 4. "Of these, 54 belonged to the ULFA (United Liberation Front of Asom)," Goalpara's deputy commissioner KN Buragohain told Reuters by phone.

The 15-member council, meeting in a special session, called the behaviour of the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) "criminal" against a UN mission trying to keep the peace in the West African country.

The United Nations increased the number of hostages from 15 to 20 peacekeepers and other personnel. The hostages, seized Monday and Tuesday, are mainly from India and Kenya and include a helicopter crew from Russia.

Eight peacekeepers were captured in the central city of Makeni after the United Nations refused to return 10 former fighters who have surrendered their weapons to a UN disarmament centre.

Another 12 were taken in the eastern city of Kailahun, including three helicopter crew, two UN civilian staff and seven soldiers and officers belonging to the UN Mission in Sierra Leone, known as UNAMSIL, UN officials said.

20 UN peacekeepers, staff
kidnapped in Sierra Leone

UNITED NATIONS, May 3: The UN Security Council and Secretary-General Kofi Annan sharply condemned on Tuesday hostage-taking and other rebel attacks against UN forces in Sierra Leone and demanded captives be freed immediately, reports Reuters.

The 15-member council, meeting in a special session, called the behaviour of the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) "criminal" against a UN mission trying to keep the peace in the West African country.

The United Nations increased the number of hostages from 15 to 20 peacekeepers and other personnel. The hostages, seized Monday and Tuesday, are mainly from India and Kenya and include a helicopter crew from Russia.

Eight peacekeepers were captured in the central city of Makeni after the United Nations refused to return 10 former fighters who have surrendered their weapons to a UN disarmament centre.

Another 12 were taken in the eastern city of Kailahun, including three helicopter crew, two UN civilian staff and seven soldiers and officers belonging to the UN Mission in Sierra Leone, known as UNAMSIL, UN officials said.

In a third incident at Magburaka, two UN peacekeepers were reported to be wounded in an exchange of fire between the RUF and troops from a Kenyan battalion. UN officials said that incident occurred during an attempt by the RUF to seize peacekeepers' weapons.

Over the weekend, a Nigerian UN peacekeeper was critically wounded in a shooting by rebels and sent home for treatment.

The council condemned "in the strongest terms the hostile and destructive actions of the RUF" and demanded it released the captives immediately," said Chinese ambassador Wang Yingfan, in his month's council presidency.

He said Foday Sankoh, leader of the RUF and now also a member of the government, should immediately give instructions to his followers to end the attacks.



North Korean delegate Kim Ryong Song (L) and South Korean delegate Yang Young-shik (R) shake hands after holding the 3rd preparatory talks ahead of the first-ever summit of their leaders at the Peace House building in the southern side of the border village of Panmunjom between the two Koreas yesterday. — AFP photo