

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 apprising 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 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 or 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 an 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 its 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 Kilil

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-Kilil 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.

"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.

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.

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 Talipao 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 Misuri, 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.

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-reforms 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 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 list, cited for influencing the judiciary to ban 16 pre-reforms newspapers in the space of a week late last month.

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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 have 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.

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

The new schedule will compromise 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.

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