

'Love Bug' bites computers worldwide

WASHINGTON, May 5: The "Love Bug" computer virus which spreads through e-mail has affected more than three million computer files worldwide, Trend Micro, an Internet security firm, reported today, says AFP.

The virus, which emerged Thursday as an "ILOVEYOU" e-mail greeting, reportedly started in Manila, quickly ripping across Asia, Europe and North and South America.

Analysts believe it caused the most damage in the United States, where more than 2.5 million computer files were affected by 1530 BST according to Trend Micro, a leader anti-virus software provider.

The US Federal Bureau of Investigation launched a probe "to determine the origin of the virus," the agency's National Infrastructure Protection Center said Thursday in a statement.

The NIPC said that by late Thursday "new variants of this worm have been discovered."

Trend Micro estimated early Friday that 3.08 million computer files were infected worldwide by the "ILOVEYOU" virus.

Outside the United States,

Europe had some 321,000 computer files infected, Asia 127,000, South America 55,000, Australia 25,000 and Africa 17,500.

The virus is "spreading much more rapidly" than previous destructive viruses, said Sandi Morgenthau, a spokeswoman for Trend Micro, speaking from the Japanese firm's North American headquarters in Cupertino, California.

The virus is unleashed when the reader opens an e-mail attachment promising a "LOVE LETTER-FOR-YOU." It then spreads through the address book of each victim.

Embedded in the message are the words "Manila, Philippines," giving rise to suspicions it originated in the Philippines, and the phrase "I hate go to school."

Analysts Thursday were already trying to count the cost of "LOVE."

Peter Tippet, a scientist with ICSA.net, a firm in Reston, Virginia, which tracks the cost of damage done by viruses said "ICSA.net anticipates damages exceeding one billion dollars

before this problem is over."

The hidden program is known as a "worm" virus, because it replicates and then sends itself to all the e-mail addresses listed in the user's Microsoft Outlook address book.

It also infects video, picture and sound files as well as crucial operating system files in a snowballing effect, experts said, comparing it to the "Chernobyl" and "Melissa" viruses, which paralyzed millions of e-mail servers last year.

The NIPC said that "variants of this worm are believed to use subject lines of 'love' and 'Susi-tikim shi vakara kavos puodukui,'" the NIPC said.

"These variants may behave differently than the original worm and impact different files," it added.

Various companies are offering information on how to get rid of the virus on their websites.

The computer networks at the US Congress and British and Danish parliaments and hundreds of American, German, French, Spanish and Swiss companies have fallen victim.

It also hit banks, brokerages and financial institutions and some media outlets across Asia and Australia.

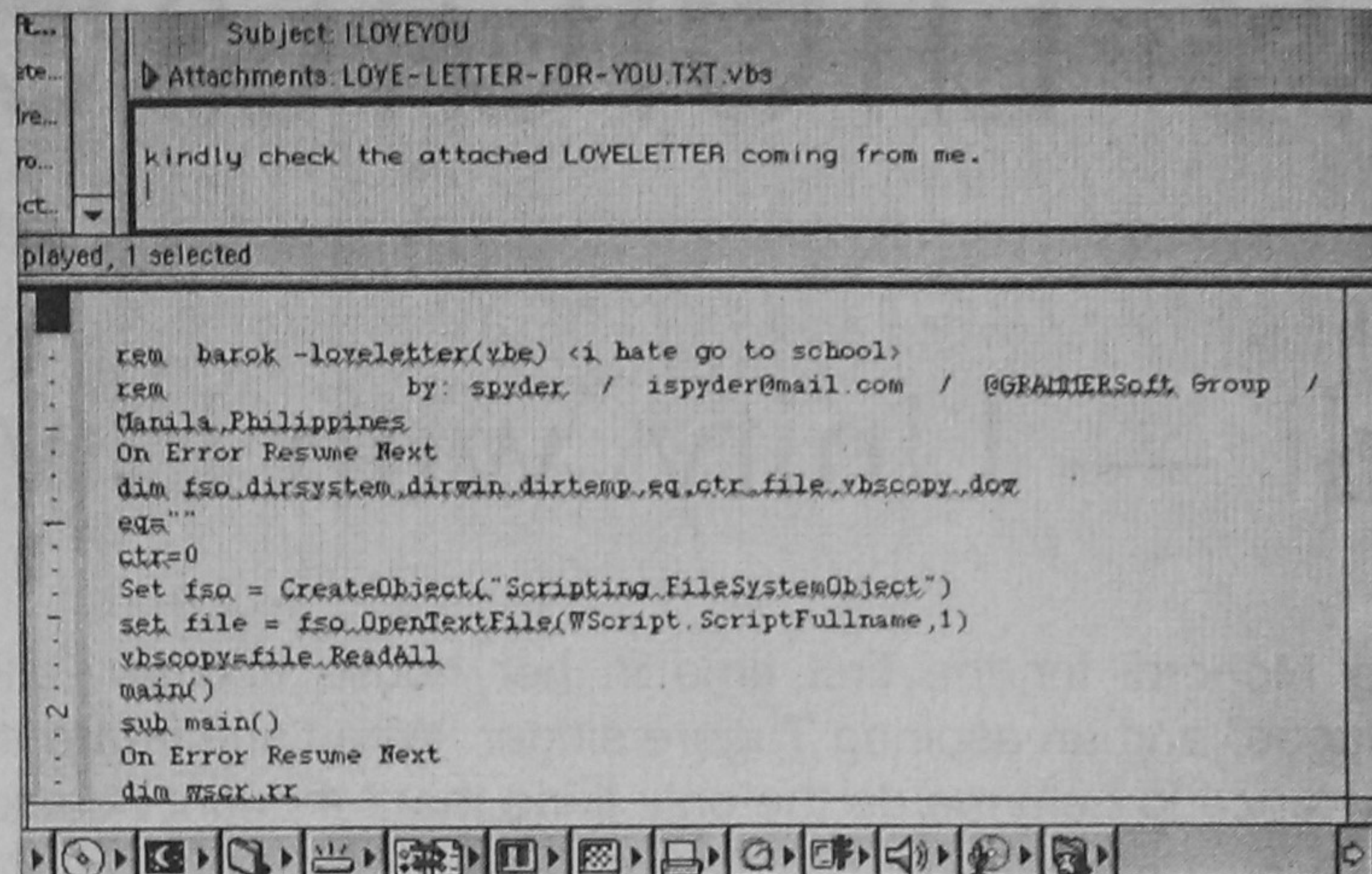
In the United States, the "ILOVEYOU" virus was first detected by a US federal computer virus monitoring unit, at 5:18 a.m. (1518 BST) Thursday.

In Washington, the White House, Pentagon, State Department and Congress were all hit by the e-mail attack, which can destroy or overwrite 15 different types of files.

White House spokesman Joe Lockhart said Thursday that "operations at the White House were not materially affected." He added that computer security people "responded quickly this morning."

The virus forced the Pentagon to shut down some of its computer systems. Ken Bacon, defense department spokesman, said the agency had been hit with an onslaught of the messages.

Pentagon personnel had been urged "to avoid any contact, intimate or otherwise, with the love bug virus," he told reporters, to laughter, at a regular briefing.



The "ILOVEYOU" computer virus cyber greeting as it appeared as an e-mail message on a computer in Hong Kong yesterday. The virus, which reportedly originated in Manila and quickly ripped across Asia, Europe and North and South America, has affected more than one million computer files worldwide and is estimated to have caused in excess of 100 million dollars in damage.

45pc of water in Delhi unsafe for drinking

NEW DELHI, May 5: An alarming 45 per cent of New Delhi's ground water is contaminated and unsafe for drinking, a junior minister told the upper house of parliament today, reports AFP.

Junior Minister for Environment and Forests Babu Lal Marand said a government-sponsored survey had thrown up grim results.

From the 303 ground water samples collected by the Central Ground Water Board and the Central Pollution Control Board about 45 per cent were found unsuitable for drinking, Marand told parliament.

The minister added that ground water samples taken from congested neighbourhoods such as Kirti Nagar, Najafgarh, Alipur, Mehrauli and Shadara in New Delhi showed "serious contamination."

Marand ticked off the New Delhi administration for failing to provide safe drinking water.

"Providing safe water is planned, financed and implemented by the state government," said Marand, adding that it could rope in the Central Pollution Control Board to combat water contamination.

Lockerbie trial enters 3rd day

CAMP ZEIST, Netherlands, May 5: Police who investigated the Lockerbie bombing recalled today their initial suspicions that a militant Palestinian group might have carried out the mid-air attack, reports AFP.

In testimony on the third day of the trial of two Libyans, a former police chief said he had sought information on the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine - General Command (PFLP-GC).

Gordon Ferrie, a detective chief inspector at the time of the December 21, 1988 bombing over Lockerbie, southwest Scotland, also recalled the devastation around the crash site.

Some of the passengers of doomed Pan Am Flight 103 were still strapped to their seats.

All 259 passengers and crew of the Boeing 747 died when a bomb exploded in the hold, sending blazing wreckage raining down over Lockerbie and killing a further 11 people on the ground.

Abdel-Basset Ali al-Megrahi, 48, and Al-Amin Khalifa Fakhima, 44, deny the key charges of murder and conspiracy to murder.

The prosecution alleges they were Libyan secret agents who sent the bomb, packed in a suitcase, from Malta to Frankfurt and from there to London Heathrow airport and the New York-bound flight.

Defence lawyers have indicated they intend to incriminate two Palestinian groups, a tactic aimed at casting enough doubt to secure an acquittal for the Libyans from the three Scottish judges trying the case.

Both groups -- the PFLP-GC and the Palestinian Popular Struggle Front -- Thursday denied any responsibility.

Indian Railways suffered 444 accidents in '99

NEW DELHI, May 5: India's state-run railways suffered 444 accidents last year, junior railways minister Digvijay Singh told parliament here today, reports AFP.

Singh also said there were a total of 24,049 unannounced level crossings in the country out of which 3,205 were located in northern and eastern India.

India's antiquated railway network, one of the world's largest, carries 13 million people between 7,000 stations every day.

India has had three major rail disasters in the past four years which have left at least 800 dead and more than 2,000 maimed.

Albright warns Iran against treatment of Jews

WASHINGTON, May 5: Secretary of State Madeleine Albright warned Iran on Thursday that the outcome of its trial of 13 Jews on spy charges could have international repercussions, reports AP.

Albright, who has led US calls for a new dialogue with Tehran, said in a strong statement before the American Jewish Committee, "If you want to earn international respect, the way to begin is by respecting the dignity of your own citizens."

The 13 Jews face death sentences on charges of spying for Israel. Three have confessed, but the State Department has questioned whether the trial conforms with worldwide standards of due process.

"Governments from around the world are right in telling officials in Iran that what happens in the trials of the 13 Jews will have repercussions everywhere," Albright said.

Albright's overtures, which have included criticism of Iran's human rights record, have failed to stir the government in Tehran to accept the offer for dialogue.

In her speech, Albright assailed anti-Semitism as "a recurring curse." She said that from the former Soviet Union to the Middle East, from California to Central Europe, anti-Semitism persists.

This demands vigilance from all who love freedom," she said.



Israeli policemen check a crater caused by the Hezbollah Katyusha rocket attack on the northern Israeli town of Kyriat Shmona early yesterday. A similar attack the night before killed an Israeli soldier and wounded 27 people in the same town. Israel retaliated by air raids on power stations near Beirut and Tripoli as well as Hezbollah and Syrian targets in east Lebanon.

Lanka vows to defend Jaffna

COLOMBO, May 5: Thousands of Sri Lankan soldiers are defending the strategically important town of Jaffna and have no plans to withdraw in the face of a major Tamil rebel offensive, state media reports here said today, reports AFP.

The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have mounted a drive to retake Jaffna, 400 kilometres north of here, but there had been a lull in fighting in the past three days, defence officials here said.

They said the guerrillas had escalated attacks against a key naval base at Kilali but had been beaten back. Sporadic long-range attacks continued in the region, they added.

The state-run Daily News said the government was receiving a wave of international and local support "for the objective of defeating terrorism" after the country was placed on a "war footing" on Wednesday night.

"The government has strongly refuted speculation that there would be a troop withdrawal from Jaffna peninsula," the Daily News said.

Ruling party legislators said President Chandrika Kumaratunga who is also the commander-in-chief of the armed forces made it clear to them at a meeting Wednesday that security forces will defend Jaffna.

However, as Tiger rebels advanced on the town following a spectacular capture of the main army garrison located at the entrance to the peninsula on April 22, diplomats here expressed fears of more fighting.

Official sources said that the main air base of Palaly located at the northern tip of the peninsula was outside the striking distance of rebel artillery guns. There has been no reaction from the Tamil Tigers to the government's latest moves to

assume wide ranging powers and the establishment of diplomatic ties with Israel in a bid to seek foreign military aid to battle the guerrillas.

The Tamil Tigers lost control of the Jaffna peninsula, which they had previously run as a mini-state, to security forces in 1995.

Their latest drive to retake the area was mounted on March 26.

As the situation remained precarious in the north, the government announced late Wednesday that it was placing the country on a "war footing."

Trade union action was outlawed with a ban on demonstrations, processions and any other work stoppage that is deemed harmful to national security, officials said.

The main opposition United National Party (UNP) in a statement slammed the government for using what it called

Israeli warplanes bomb Lebanon targets

BEIRUT, May 5: Israeli jets raided Lebanon today, striking at two power stations, a guerrilla arms depot and blowing a crater in the main highway between Beirut and Damascus, witnesses and security sources said, reports Reuters.

One civilian was wounded and a power station on the outskirts of Beirut was a "ball of fire," they said.

Israel confirmed its planes had fired on targets in Lebanon in retaliation for a rocket attack by Syrian-backed Hizbollah guerrillas on northern Israel on Thursday. Dozens of Katyusha rockets were launched across the border, killing a soldier.

"The Israeli Defence Forces will continue to take all necessary action against Hizbollah and those backing it in order to defend the northern border," a military statement said.

Hizbollah had said its offensive -- the heaviest barrage in nearly a year -- was in reprisal for a rocket fired from the direction of Israel's occupation zone in southern Lebanon.

It killed two women on Thursday.

The Muslim group declined to comment on Friday's Israeli raids, which took place hours before a UN envoy was to resume discussions in Beirut about Israel's plans to end its 22-year-long occupation of the south of the country.

Witnesses said missiles blew a crater in the Beirut-Damascus road near the village of Tenayel, 10 km from the Syrian-Lebanese border and just 100 metres from a Syrian intelligence post.

An Israeli army spokesman said warplanes bombed the road in the second of three sorties.

Earlier, warplanes had attacked the power station of Basim on the outskirts of Beirut and another station in Dier Amar, near the northern Palestinian refugee camp of Beddawi.

"Basim station is a ball of fire. They raided it at least twice," one witness said.

Israeli planes also flew

above Beirut where they broke the sound barrier. In the south, they raided the outskirts of Khirbit Slem, a village facing the western sector of the Israeli occupied zone.

The raids on Lebanon's infrastructure are the second this year. In February Israel destroyed three power stations, prompting strong Arab condemnation.

The attacks took place hours before UN envoy Terje Roed-Larsen was to hold a third meeting with President Emile Lahoud and Prime Minister Selim al-Hoss to discuss Israel's planned withdrawal from Lebanon by July.

The United Nations and Lebanon apparently disagreed when envoy Roed-Larsen met officials on Thursday.

Lebanon said Syrian-backed guerrillas had the right to keep fighting Israel if it did not hand over all territory claimed by Lebanon -- which is less than required under a UN resolution. Israel has vowed to retaliate for any cross-border attacks.



The estranged brother of Sri Lankan President Chandrika Kumaratunga, Anura Bandaranaike, pushes police barricades yesterday to stage a demonstration in Colombo protesting draconian public security laws that has banned public demonstrations and strikes.

— AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Voting begins in Iran: Polling stations opened in Iran on Friday for the second round of parliamentary elections with 66 places at stake in the 290-seat chamber, Reuters reports from Tehran.

In February's first round, reformers close to President Mohammad Khatami won over 100 seats but annuls and wrangling over the count in Tehran have cast a pall over the vote. More than 11,000 polling stations have been set up in 52 constituencies for Friday's runoff, state television quoted the interior ministry official in charge of the elections as saying.

25 killed in Nigeria unrest: Twenty-five people have been killed in renewed fighting between residents of two feuding towns in southwest Nigeria, newspaper reports said, Friday, AFP reports from Lagos.

Dozens more have been injured and are being treated in hospital after fighting broke out in the early hours of Thursday between residents of the towns of Modakeke and Modakeke, according to the reports in the Punch and Nigerian Tribune. The feud between the two towns -- both dominated by the ethnic Yoruba group -- revolves around local politics and land ownership rights.



Former Indian prime ministers Chandrashekar (L), V. P. Singh (C) and Deve Gowda (R) share the dais during a convention on Thursday in Calcutta to explore ways to strengthen democracy in India. The three were also scheduled to meet West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu to discuss the possibility of forming a new political front at the centre.

— AFP photo

Annan seeks to bolster Sierra Leone force

UNITED NATIONS, May 5: Secretary-General Kofi Annan telephoned African leaders to put pressure on Sierra Leone rebels holding 92 UN peacekeepers and sought to organise a rapid-reaction force to reinforce his 8,700 troops, reports Reuters.

"Ideally one would want to see a rapid-reaction force go in to assist," Annan said on Thursday, adding that the force would have to be well-trained and well-equipped within a week.

Rebels of the Revolutionary United Front over the past four days began surrounding and capturing UN troops, mainly Kenyans and Indians, in Makeni and Magburaka in central Sierra Leone and Kailahun in the east.

The United Nations has lowered the estimated number of dead from seven to four Kenyan soldiers and said 92 peacekeepers, in the country to reinforce a truce and disarmament, had now been taken hostage.

Annan told reporters he was trying to get reinforcements as soon as possible and had asked the United States, Britain and France for help in at least logistics but had no commitments.

Speaking after the Security Council condemned the violence in a formal meeting on Thursday, Annan said today Sankoh, the leader of the Revolutionary United Front, was being told firmly to stop his fighters from harming the UN troops.

"He is already isolated and it is going to get worse," Annan said. The African leaders "told him to take action. They told him to release them. They've tried to impress on him the seriousness of the situation."

Philippine rebels declare truce

JOLO, Philippines, May 5: The biggest Muslim rebel group in the Philippines declared a unilateral ceasefire today while the government re-established contact with another Islamic group holding 21 mostly foreign hostages, reports Reuters.

The Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) said in a statement the ceasefire would take effect at 6 am on Saturday (0400 BST).

There was no immediate government reaction to the rebel announcement, which comes after some of the worst fighting in years in the Mindanao region, 800 km south of Manila, where most of the Philippines' five million Muslims live.

"The Moro Islamic Liberation Front hereby unilaterally declares a 48-hour truce in Mindanao effective 0600 hours 6 May 2000 to give all concerned

a chance to resolve peacefully the Mindanao problem," the MILF said in a statement faxed to Reuters.

The other group fighting for Muslim self-rule is the fundamentalist Abu Sayyaf, which is holding two separate groups of hostages on islands off Mindanao.

It has the 21 mostly foreign nationals kidnapped on Easter Sunday from a Malaysian diving resort on southern Jolo island and eight to 10 Filipinos on nearby Basilan island.

Local officials said a convoy carrying food and medicines would go to an area near a rebel camp on Jolo island, 960 km south of Manila.

Talks between government emissaries and the fundamentalist Abu Sayyaf guerrillas broke off on Tuesday when rebels and troops clashed near the camp where the hostages are held.

held.

An aide of the chief government negotiator, regional governor Nur Misuari, said Misuari's emissaries and guerrilla representatives restored contact. Earlier, he scotched media reports that Misuari might drop his mediation efforts.

The hostages are 10 Malaysians, three Germans, two French nationals, two South Africans, two Finns, one Lebanese and a Filipino.

Army spokesman Colonel Hilario Atendido said there had been no reports of fighting on Jolo overnight but troops would hold their cordon round the camp to prevent a break-out by the rebels with their hostages.

The rebels split their hostages into small groups and have tried repeatedly to break through the encircling troops, Philippine officials said.

Lawmakers' observation: Allowing illegal foreign migrant workers to be better for US

WASHINGTON, May 5: Allowing hundreds of thousands of illegal foreign migrant workers to remain in the United States legally would be better than allowing the abuse the workers endure now, lawmakers say, reports AP.

"They are raped, they are robbed, they are bribed, they are pillaged in a way that is unthinkable, and ought to be unthinkable in this country," Sen. Gordon Smith, a Republican from Oregon, told the Senate Judiciary subcommittee on Immigration Wednesday.

"It happens because they have no safe and legal way to come here and to go home."

Under the bill introduced by

Smith and Sen. Bob Graham, a Democrat from Florida, undocumented workers who can prove they worked at least 150 days as agricultural labourers within the past year could immediately gain legal status as temporary non-immigrants.

Those who do farm work for at least 150 days annually in five of the next seven years would be eligible to apply for legal permanent residence.

Legal status would allow the workers to complain about abuses without fear of being deported.

House members are working on their own bill.

"It makes no sense to let

crops rot in the fields or never get planted when there is a waiting pool of labour," said Rep. Sanford Bishop, a Democrat from Georgia. There are more than 600,000 illegal migrant workers in the US, officials said.

Not everyone likes the idea, however.

The proposal would give farmers too much control over already exploited migrant workers who are in the country legally, said Cecilia Mono, spokeswoman for the National Council of La Raza, which fights to reduce poverty and discrimination against Hispanic Americans.

Space travel reduces bone density: Study

LONDON, May 5: Space travel is definitely bad for astronauts' bones and can reduce their bone density after a month of weightlessness, according to French research published today, reports Reuters.

Laurence Vico and his colleagues at St Etienne University called for more research into the effects of microgravity after their study of 15 cosmonauts from the Russian MIR station showed bone loss continued throughout the duration of space missions.

"Bone loss was especially striking in four cosmonauts," the scientists said in the study reported in The Lancet medical journal.

They measured the bone mineral density (BMD) in the radius, one of the bones in the forearm, and the tibia in the lower leg of cosmonauts who had spent one, two and six months in space when they returned to Earth and again after a similar period on Earth.

The BMD loss was significant in the tibia, which is a weight-bearing bone, but barely changed in the radius.

"Our results indicate the need to investigate not only different bones, but also different areas of the same bone since not all sites of the skeleton are similarly affected by space conditions," they added.

Without gravity the body isn't bearing any weight so there is no need for calcium which makes strong bones and it is drained into the bloodstream.

For the future Vico and his colleagues said scientists should try to determine if the loss of bone density was only on weight-bearing bones on longer missions and the recovery potential after returning to Earth.

In addition to being useful for astronauts, they said the research could also benefit patients suffering from brittle bone disease or osteoporosis.

European Space Agency scientists announced plans in December to study the physiological effects of weightlessness on 30 volunteers.

The male volunteers will spend three months in bed to look into the effects of weightlessness that astronauts may encounter on the International Space Station or during a long manned journey to Mars.

The volunteers will lie at an angle with their feet slightly above their heads to simulate weightlessness, during which the head and chest tend to fill with body fluids because of lack of gravity.