

Lankan air bombardment of LTTE targets to blunt advance on Jaffna

COLOMBO, May 7: Sri Lanka's air force bombed Tamil Tiger guerrilla positions to blunt a rebel advance on the northern Jaffna peninsula, state media reported today, reports Reuters.

The state-run Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation reported the air force had bombed around Elephant Pass, the peninsula's gateway which the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) overran last month.

India's air force chief is due to fly to war-torn Sri Lanka today, but officials have said it was a routine, scheduled visit and not linked to calls for New Delhi's intervention in the fight against the separatists.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee will meet heads of Indian political parties on Monday to help formulate a response to the escalating military conflict in Sri Lanka.

India has ruled out military

involvement in Sri Lanka but has left the door open to humanitarian assistance.

Sri Lanka's government had not yet sought any humanitarian assistance, Indian officials have said.

Indian Air Force officials have also denied reports that the southern air command had been put on alert but said transport aircraft could have been redeployed in southern bases as a precaution.

Between 1987 and 1990, India lost more than 1,000 men during a peacekeeping campaign by its army after a peace accord brokered between the Tigers and Colombo by New Delhi failed. India had deployed its troops to disarm the guerrillas.

Military officials have said troops were strengthening defences to ensure the LTTE were

unable to push forward their artillery guns to bring the key Palali airport at the northern tip of the peninsula within firing range.

Rebels rained artillery and mortars on troops, wounding four soldiers on Saturday.

Some 458 rebels have been killed between April 27 and May 4 in the fighting in Jaffna.

There was no comment on the latest fighting from the LTTE, which has pledged to retake Jaffna, their former stronghold they lost to the government in 1995.

More than 400,000 ethnic Tamils live in Jaffna, considered the cultural capital of Sri Lanka's minority Tamils.

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees said earlier in New Delhi she was concerned that the military conflict in Sri Lanka could lead to a fresh flight of people.

The government has armed itself with wide powers and introduced censorship of the foreign media as it faced possibly its biggest crisis in the 17-year war against the LTTE rebels.

The laws involve the Public Security Act, which grants authorities powers to seize property and vehicles, stop the sale and distribution of newspapers seen contravening national security interests, and to shut down printing presses.

Rallies, demonstrations and strikes are banned.

The new laws were put in place after the government said the country would mobilise on a war footing to fight the rebels.

A state of emergency is already in place in Sri Lanka.

The LTTE have been fighting for a separate homeland for minority Tamils in Sri Lanka's north and east since 1983.



Philippines President Joseph Estrada (C), in combat military uniform, salutes an honour guard while accompanied by Armed Forces Chief General Angelo Reyes (R) during his visit to the southern military headquarters in Zamboanga yesterday. Estrada awarded medals to soldiers wounded in battle against Muslim rebels holding foreign hostages and checked the progress of military operation against the kidnappers holding two groups of hostages on the southern Philippine islands of Basilan and Jolo.

— AFP photo

13 soldiers killed in Philippines

ZAMBOANGA, Philippines, May 7: Islamic extremists today killed 13 soldiers and mutilated some of the corpses in an ambush on the southern island of Basilan, military officials, survivors and doctors said here, reports AFP.

An army special forces unit looking for one of two sets of hostages held by the Abu Sayyaf in the southern Philippines came under attack from about 100 guerrillas near the town of Lantawan at 7 a.m. (1500 BST), said Brigadier General Narciso Abaya.

A soldier and a government militiaman who were both wounded in the attack told AFP they were informed at least two soldiers were beheaded by their attackers.

Doctors at a nearby hospital said the eyes of some of the dead soldiers had also been gouged out.

The casualties were airlifted to the provincial hospital here as President Joseph Estrada visited this southern city to pin

medals on soldiers wounded in previous clashes with the Abu Sayyaf.

Corporal Jobert Balajadia, whose right foot was shattered by sniper fire, told AFP he was among a company of special forces troops who were pinned down by Abu Sayyaf fire along a wooded stretch of road.

"Two members of my unit were beheaded," while his company commander was among those wounded, he added.

Balajadia said the soldiers set up an ambush position overnight Saturday but decided to cross the road when the Abu Sayyaf unit they were tracking did not arrive. The Abu Sayyaf then sprung their trap.

Balajadia said he hid by a nearby riverbank and waited for four hours before he was rescued.

Abaya, the area commander, told reporters he believed the soldiers also inflicted casualties on the Abu Sayyaf during the ambush.

Vajpayee convenes meeting of Opposition today

NEW DELHI, May 7: Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee has convened a meeting of leaders of all political parties in parliament on Monday to discuss the situation in Sri Lanka, PM's Press Advisor H K Dina said last night, reports PTI.

Vajpayee is expected to discuss with them New Delhi's stand on the evolving situation in the context of reported Sri Lankan's pleas for assistance from India in the face of LTTE advances in Jaffna peninsula.

The Prime Minister has already held consultations with NDA allies in Tamil Nadu and the State Chief Minister M Karunanidhi.

India has ruled out military intervention in the conflict in the island republic but could consider humanitarian assistance as and when it was sought.

Bihar minister resigns

PATNA, May 7: A senior member of the Rabri Devi cabinet Jaiprakash Narayan Yadav resigned last night following issuance of non-bailable arrest warrant against him in connection with the racket providing B Ed degrees by a minority institution, reports PTI.

Yadav sent his resignation letter to chief minister Rabri Devi who forwarded it to Governor VC Pande for acceptance in the evening.

Yadav, a close associate of RJD President Laloo Prasad Yadav, is likely to surrender before the court of special vigilance judge, SP Rai, on Monday.

Rai had issued non-bailable arrest warrants against Yadav and 41 others after the State Vigilance Investigation Bureau prayed for it after instituting the FIR on Wednesday.

Newspapermen go on strike in India today

NEW DELHI, May 7: The newspaper and news agency employees unions yesterday asked their affiliates all over the country to go on a day-long strike tomorrow accusing the managements of causing inordinate delay in the finalisation of the wage awards for journalists and non-journalists, reports PTI.

In a statement here, the National Coordination Committee of Newspaper and News Agency Employees Unions charged the Indian Newspapers Society (INS), the representative body of the managements, with seeking to confuse the people on facts by claiming that at the lowest level, the tentative proposals (given by RK Manisana Singh Wage Boards) give 101 per cent increase in basic pay.

Stating that the INS was comparing the basic wages of employees in 1988 and the proposed hike in 1998, the committee said, the comparison should be between the 1998 wages and the proposed increase which works out to merely 43 per cent at the lowest possible level.

If INS has any proof that these wage increases are beyond capacity to pay, they should bring it to the Wage Boards' notice and wait for their decision instead of moving court, it said.

Putin: From spy chief to Kremlin chief

MOSCOW, May 7: From Cold War warrior to Kremlin chief, Vladimir Putin has enjoyed a meteoric rise to power in Russia, reports AFP.

A political nobody when plucked from obscurity nine months ago to become Boris Yeltsin's last prime minister, Putin transformed himself from a grey, humourless spy chief into the man of the moment.

Preaching a gospel of strong state power, economic growth and national renewal, the former KGB spy quickly won many converts among ordinary Russians tired of the corruption, poverty and drift in Boris Yeltsin's twilight years.

Putin's vigour, drive and mental alertness stood in stark contrast to an ailing and greatly diminished Yeltsin, who stood down on December 31 before he fell down, as one cruel critic put it.

The snap resignation hurled Putin into the Kremlin as acting head of state, allowing him to consolidate a lead in opinion polls rooted in the mud and blood of Chechnya.

Indeed, Putin's ruthless crackdown in the renegade republic was instrumental in the astonishing ascension of the 47-year-old, who transformed the self-styled war against "Islamic fundamentalists" and "terrorists" into a crusade for the nation's very soul.

But some critics see Putin less as an "Iron Man" than the "Man in the Iron Mask," placed in power to protect a powerful Kremlin clique after Yeltsin's departure and ensure Russia remains a kleptocracy.

Some have even suggested this cabal organised, or at least deliberately failed to prevent, a wave of apartment bombings in Russia last September which has served to justify the seven-month ground war in Chechnya.

No evidence to support this conspiracy theory has ever been produced.

The grandson of Lenin's

cook, Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin was born, appropriately enough, in Leningrad on October 7, 1952 to a war veteran and his wife.

A shy, taciturn boy, he took up judo and enrolled in the KGB in 1975 after studying law, taking his sandy hair, piercing blue eyes and lean looks to Germany 10 years later, working for foreign intelligence.

No 007 he, Putin returned home in 1990 to become a reservist with the rank of lieutenant-colonel, an inconspicuous end to a mediocre spy career.

He emerged from the shadows to become a senior town hall official in the newly renamed Saint Petersburg, under his former law professor Anatoly Sobchak, then the reformist city mayor.

Brought to the Kremlin in 1996 following Sobchak's election defeat despite a financial scandal that had placed him under a cloud, Putin rose to become a deputy administration chief before Yeltsin picked him to head the FSB domestic intelligence agency, the main successor to the KGB.

Seeing Putin as the best way to defend their interests, the powerful Yeltsin clique, known derisively as "The Family," persuaded Russia's first president to step down, in what analyst Andrei Piontkovsky code-named "Operation Papa, swallow the pill."

But despite four months running the country and a nationwide election campaign, Putin remains an enigma to his countrymen.

Respected by many, feared by some, he has offered only broad outlines of his plans for the country.

"Putin is in the unique position of being in no danger of breaking his promises -- he made none," commented Eric Kraus, chief strategist at Nikoll Capital Markets Research.

The core beliefs he outlined Saturday include a strong, centralised state, economic revival and a war on corruption, which



Former Russian President Boris Yeltsin (R) wipes away a tear as he and President Vladimir Putin (L) leave the Kremlin Palace in Moscow after the swearing-in ceremony yesterday. Putin took the oath of office yesterday.

— AFP photo

could prove popular with the millions whose living standards have plummeted in the decade since the collapse of Communism while a select few made millions.

But the presence of so many former secret servicemen in the new president's inner circle has fuelled fears that Putin is a neo-Bolshevik, an autocrat ready to impose yet another wave of reform from above.

Those concerns were heightened last week when the Kommersant business daily leaked what it said was an internal Kremlin memo suggest-

ing Putin planned to broaden the role of the FSB to curb internal dissent and increase his authority.

Many observers believe he will rein in Russia's powerful regional governors, keep state-run media on a short-leash and revamp the government apparatus. And they question Putin's commitment to democratic values.

Others suggest Putin has been forced to build a power base on the security apparatus to secure some room for manoeuvre with Russia's "oligarchs."

Indian population to reach one billion this week

NEW DELHI, May 7: India is set to mark the birth of its billionth citizen this week amid fears that depleting natural resources will be inadequate to sustain the population boom, reports AFP.

According to the official count, based on the 1991 census, the one-billion ceiling will be breached at around 12:55 p.m. (1325 BST) on May 11. United Nations experts say the milestone was reached months ago.

Various studies forecast that India will have surpassed China as the world's most populous nation by 2040.

All this is cause for great alarm, experts say, warning that the country's foodgrain stocks and water resources will not sustain the projected growth.

Michael Vlassoff, country head of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), said India's current drought crisis pointed to a very bleak future.

"Water is the key and the

most important of future constraints. The water table is going down and it is a perennial problem."

India's grain bowl, comprising the northern states of Punjab and Haryana, are fully irrigated and cultivated and there is nowhere agriculture can be expanded.

"Nutritional levels are stagnating. If not going down," Vlassoff said.

UNFPA will conduct a joint event with the Indian government on Thursday to mark the passing of the one-billion mark.

India was the first country in the developing world to initiate a state-sponsored family planning programme in 1952 and, on the surface, official figures suggest no small measure of success.

Since independence in 1947, the fertility rate has been cut from six births per woman of child-bearing age to 3.5, while the birth rate has declined from 40 per 1,000 in the 1960s to 28

in 1995-96.

But underlying realities show a country struggling to rein in a population which, at current growth rates, will top two billion some time in the latter half of the next century.

A declining death rate has seen India's population grow by two percent annually since the 1960s.

According to the US-based Worldwatch Institute, India's population is already running ahead of its natural resource base.

"The government of India, overwhelmed by sheer numbers, is suffering from demographic fatigue ... its leaders worn down and its fiscal resources spread thin," said Worldwatch president Lester Brown.

India's population currently grows by 30 a minute, 1.815 per hour and 1.3 million per month. The annual growth figure of 15.7 million is close to the population of Australia.

Cloned pigs to provide organs for humans

MELBOURNE, Australia, May 7: Organs from cloned pigs will be transplanted into humans within five to 10 years, a leading transplant researcher said today, reports AFP.

Professor Ian McKenzie, director of Melbourne's Austin Research Institute, said advances in cloning techniques coupled with the ability to stop organ rejection put pig transplants within reach.

The major obstacle is getting rid of antibodies which cause rejection within minutes to hours and Australia is a leader in this, he said.

Austin researchers hold the patent for a gene involved in the process, and recently worked out how to move enzymes around inside cells to genetically remove the one sugar -- galactose -- which triggers rejection.

The work going on with cloning of pigs helps enormously in this and I think it could be happening within five years," McKenzie said.

He was to tell the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons conference in Melbourne on Monday that the first pig-to-human transplants were likely to be in pancreatic islet cells which produce insulin.

This may be followed by heart and kidney transplants which have already been performed in baboons.

McKenzie said patients on transplant waiting lists were likely to embrace the advances.

"It's easy for you and I who are healthy to make rules for other people but if you're being dialysed or you're in hospital awaiting a heart transplant and can't move, the situation changes a bit," he said.

Flood kills one in Oklahoma

TULSA, Oklahoma, May 7: Floodwaters poured into several eastern Oklahoma towns this weekend, killing a woman, filling homes and businesses and affecting hundreds of families in a four-county area, reports AP.

"This is the worst flood we've had in over 30 years and I've been here a lot longer than that," B. J. Pope, Creek County emergency management director, said Saturday.

Tulsa reported 6 inches of rain fell Friday and Saturday, closing several roads there, and the Oklahoma Highway Patrol reported at least three state highways were closed by floodwaters, mudslides or washed-out bridges.

Emergency workers evacuated people from flooded homes in Kiefer, Sapulpa and several other towns. A mobile home park was swamped Saturday morning in Kiefer, where a creek topped its banks after the town received more than 8 inches of rain from Friday into Saturday. Pope said some roads still had up to 9 feet of water over them Saturday afternoon, and a nearby creek was still rising.

Marilyn Cory, 53, was killed after the car she was driving to work early Saturday was caught up in floodwater, Tulsa police said. Cory was found by rescue workers a few hours after her car got stuck.

About 100 families in Sapulpa might not be able to return to their homes Saturday night, said Tom Halowell, who was running a Red Cross station at a church.

Palestinians, Israel resume talks

JERUSALEM, May 7: Israel and the Palestinians resumed a round of negotiations Saturday despite smouldering Palestinian resentment over Israeli proposals for a permanent peace agreement, reports AP.

Israeli negotiator Oded Eran met his Palestinian counterparts Yasser Abed Rabbo and Saeb Erekat at an undisclosed location to avoid contact with the media. US embassy spokesman Larry Schwartz said.

Also present at the talks were US peace envoy Dennis Ross and the US ambassador to Israel, Martin Indyk.

A Palestinian official, who asked that his name not be used, said there was a strong chance of a summit meeting Sunday between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Barak's spokesman Gadi Baltinsky said he could not rule out the possibility that the two leaders would meet soon.

At their last meeting, Barak offered to hand over three Palestinian neighbourhoods just outside Jerusalem to full Palestinian control, the official said, but the handover has been delayed due to opposition inside Barak's coalition.

Journalist shot dead in Spain

MADRID, May 7: Spanish journalist Jose Luis Lopez de la Calle, a reporter for the daily El Mundo, was shot in the head and killed Sunday morning in Andoain, in Spain's Basque country, Basque regional police said, reports AFP.

The attack took place at 9:45 a.m. (1345 BST) in Andoain, the journalist's hometown and a stronghold of Basque separatist activity in the suburbs of San Sebastian, police said.

Details about the shooting were not yet known, as there were no witnesses.

A neighbour found the victim's body lying in the street after hearing several gunshots. No one has claimed responsibility for the attack, but investigators suspect members of the Basque separatist group ETA, which has sent explosive-rigged packages to two journalists in Madrid and Sevilla in recent months.

El Mundo, a liberal-leaning daily, is close to the centre-right government of Spain's prime minister Jose Maria Aznar.

Lopez de la Calle wrote for the paper's "Basque edition" and was a member of "Forum d'Er-mua," an association opposed to political violence.

Last February, his house was showered with Molotov cocktails launched by unknown assailants.

Fire destroys Bahrain's largest cinema

MANAMA, May 7: A pre-dawn blaze has destroyed Bahrain's largest cinema, which is popular with the expatriate Asian community, and damaged another movie theatre next door, newspapers said today, reports AFP Sunday.

Gulf Daily News said it took 18 fire engines more than three hours to put out Saturday's fire. Four parked cars were damaged but the live-in cinema staff escaped unhurt as they were out for prayers at the mosque.

Al-Nasr cinema, which can seat around 1,000 people, was completely gutted and will have to be demolished, while a wall of the Al-Hamra next door was damaged by the fire, it said.

An information ministry official told AFP an investigation had been launched to determine the cause of the fire.

Until last year, Bahrain was often hit by arson attacks, with the Asian community a frequent target, in a wave of unrest which began in December 1994 and which claimed at least 38 lives.

The Shiite Muslim-led opposition's key demand has been the restoration of parliament, which Bahrain's former emir, Sheikh Issa bin Salman al-Khalifa, suspended in 1975.

But the troubles have eased since the death of Sheikh Issa in March 1999, and the accession of his son, Sheikh Hamad bin Issa al-Khalifa.

BRIEFLY



Female walrus Moko (L) plays the alpenhorn while Piko blows a small bugle during an attraction at the Hakkeijima Sea Paradise aquarium in Yokohama city, Tokyo, yesterday. The five-year-old walruses, each weighing 300 kilograms, made their debut last month to show their talent of musical performance and became an idol in the aquarium.

— AFP photo

3 mercenaries killed in Kashmir

Indian troops killed three foreign mercenaries today in a border region in the troubled state of Kashmir, an army spokesman said, AFP reports from Jammu.

Colonel Gulshan Kumar said three mercenaries were shot dead near Paloni village in the frontier region of Samba, about 50 kilometres south of the state winter capital Jammu. Kumar did not specify their nationalities.

Indonesia quake death toll 34

Rescuers today found more victims of an earthquake that hit isolated Indonesian islands last week, taking the death toll to 34, reports Reuters from Jakarta.

The earthquake measuring 6.5 on the Richter scale shook central Sulawesi's coastal town of Luwuk and the neighbouring islands of Peleng and Banggai on Thursday, forcing hundreds of people to flee the area.



A Chinese policeman checks the identification papers of a foreign journalist outside the US embassy in Beijing yesterday. China marked the first anniversary of NATO's bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by demanding that the United States carry out a new investigation into the attack.

— AFP photo