

## India among top 10 to have highest number of kidnappings

WASHINGTON, May 12: India is among ten nations reported to have the highest number of kidnappings for ransom, according to a control Risks Group, reports PTI.

Out of the 1,789 kidnappings for ransom reported worldwide in 1999, nearly 17 were from India, says a Hiscox Group study reported in The Wall Street Journal.

Other in the list included Columbia, which topped to list with 979 kidnapping for ransom cases, Mexico with 402, former Soviet Union with 105, Brazil with the Philippines with 39, Nigeria with 24, India with 17, Ecuador and Venezuela 12 each and South Africa with 10.

There were believed to have been more kidnappings but many victims did not report their experience, the agency said.

The latest case, says The Wall Street Journal involves 21 foreign tourists and resort workers kidnapped by a Muslim guerrilla group from a Malaysian diving resort and held in the Philippines, adding in 1993, four engineers were kidnapped for ransom in Chechnya and beheaded.

Several companies have also produced kidnap and ransom insurance for their employees but have asked them not to advertise the fact lest the information make them a target.

If an executive sitting in a bar in a high-risk country lets it slip that he is covered by a corporate insurance policy against kidnapping and ransom, he may possibly be making the biggest mistake of his life, said Rob Davies, a senior special risks underwriter at Hiscox.

Hiscox has about 60 per cent of the 110 million-dollar annual global market in premium income for kidnap and ransom insurance.

## 26 killed in Kashmir bus accident

JAMMU, India, May 12: At least 26 passengers were killed early today and more than 30 injured after a bus plunged down a gorge in the Indian state of Kashmir, police said, reports AFP.

A police spokesman said the accident occurred near the town of Doda, some 190 kilometres (118 miles) from the Kashmir winter capital Jammu.

The dead include three women and two children, he said. "More than 12 of the wounded are critically wounded and nine of them have been flown to Jammu for emergency medical treatment."

"We have recovered 26 bodies but the toll may rise," he said.

He said rescue teams and local villagers were at the site to look for bodies and transport the injured to nearby helipad from where they were being flown to hospital.

Highway accidents are frequent in Himalayan Kashmir, which is filled with narrow mountain roads and hairpin bends.

## Heavy fighting between Ethiopian, Eritrean troops

NAIROBI, May 12: Violent clashes broke out today between Ethiopian and Eritrean troops along their disputed border on the second anniversary of the start of the conflict, both sides said, reports AFP.

Two days ahead of general elections planned in Ethiopia, Addis Ababa launched a new two-pronged offensive shortly after midnight Thursday, the Eritrean embassy in Nairobi charged in a statement sent to AFP.

The Ethiopian government spokesman confirmed "heavy fighting" along the border's central and western frontiers, adding later that it had spread eastward.

It was the first reported bout of fighting along the ill-defined border since February and followed a breakdown in indirect peace talks held in Algiers last week.

The reported offensive came just as the UN Security Council had been expected to make a last-minute appeal to Ethiopia and Eritrea later Friday to avoid a renewal of a war that one diplomat said would be deadlier than the conflict in Sierra Leone and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) combined.

Hundreds of thousands of troops from both sides face each other across the 1,000-kilometre border in an on-again off-again war fought using murderous World War I-era methods.

Tens of thousands of troops have already been killed since the war first erupted in May 1998, five years after Ethiopia granted independence to Eritrea, a former province that assured access to Red Sea ports.

The statement from the Eritrean embassy noted that earlier this week Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi had told a visiting UN Security Council mission that Ethiopia was "going to war and that it will resolve the conflict very soon."

In New York, Britain's ambassador to the United Nations, Jeremy Greenstock, said late Thursday that he had drafted a council resolution "urging the two parties to come back to talks" rather than drift to war.

## Tamil Tigers poised to recapture Jaffna

### Lanka buys jets, arms from Israel, Pakistan

LONDON, May 12: Sri Lanka's Tamil Tiger rebels appear set to recapture their former stronghold of Jaffna, lost five years ago, after overwhelming government troops in a lightning advance, reports Reuters.

The government failed to deny a rebel statement, issued in London late on Thursday, that rebel forces were only one km from the administrative centre of the city, hub of the battle-scarred Jaffna peninsula.

Nor was there any immediate prospect of negotiations to ease the conflict or the plight of civilians caught up into.

Refugees said food and power were short in the town and that both rebel and government forces were ordering away or evacuating civilians to get them clear of the fighting.

The International Committee of the Red Cross voiced concern about the humanitarian consequences and urged both sides to protect the 500,000

civilians on the Jaffna peninsula.

But there was little first-hand information from the city itself as the government, which has already imposed strict censorship and banned journalists from travelling to the war zone, prohibited all live radio and television broadcasts.

The statement from the London office of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said the rebels had made "spectacular military gains", advancing close to the city centre and overrunning two major military bases around Chavakachcheri, east of the town.

The onslaught raised the spectre of an exodus of civilians by boat to India, where there are already some 100,000 refugees.

A Sri Lankan government statement issued earlier in the day said air force jets had pounded LTTE targets at Thanankillap and Ariyalai east of Jaffna, and Pooneryn

to the south.

Indian newspaper reported today that Sri Lanka has acquired new fighter jets from Israel and is awaiting a shipload of arms from Pakistan to fight advancing Tamil Tiger guerrillas, reports Reuters.

The Hindu said Sri Lanka, which is fighting the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the northern Jaffna peninsula, had already bought seven Israeli Kfir jets and 24 containers of arms and equipment.

"The presence of Israeli Kfirs in meant to build the depleted stocks of the Sri Lankan Air Force," the Hindu said. "With the Sri Lankan army losing ground, its airforce, which already has a handful of Kfirs is under pressure to deliver."

The Hindu said that a Pakistani ship, with multibarrelled rocket launchers and 1,600 rockets was on its way to Sri Lanka. "Besides, Pakistan has already flown in ammunition supplies to Colombo."

## UNSC expresses solidarity with peace force in Sierra Leone

UNITED NATIONS, May 12: Members of the Security Council expressed solidarity with the UN peacekeeping force in Sierra Leone late on Thursday after UN Secretary General Kofi Annan urged them not to fail that country, reports AFP.

"The plight of the Sierra Leone and its people has become a crucial test of that fundamental solidarity between peoples, rising above race and above geography, which is the most basic guiding principle of this Organisation," he said.

Annan led speakers at a formal emergency session in paying tribute to the approximately 500 members of the UN Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) who are held by rebels there, and demanding their release.

But while the French ambassador, Jean-David Levitte, said "tonight is the time for solidarity," the debate was not free of disagreement — even recrimination.

Several developing countries, notably Bangladesh, Ja-

maica and Namibia, called for a revision of UNAMSIL's mandate, permitting it to use force to carry out the council's decisions under Chapter Seven of the UN Charter.

Annan said he was "not necessarily opposed" to this, but cautioned the council to make sure the force had the means to carry out any new mandate. Demanding "the immediate and unconditional release of all United Nations personnel" held by the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), Annan said that RUF leader Foday Sankoh would be held accountable for their safety.

"These are soldiers who came to Sierra Leone not as enemies, but as friends and peacemakers," Annan said. "The force had been attacked 'by one of the parties that had pledged to cooperate with it, before it had been properly deployed,' he said.

UNAMSIL had to be strengthened, he said, adding that reinforcements were on their way, including units with

artillery and helicopter gunships.

When all the promised extra troops had arrived, Annan said, they would probably exceed the limit of 11,100 authorised by the Security Council.

Only three of the eight countries with troops in UNAMSIL, and only seven African states, including Sierra Leone, took part in the debate.

The representative of Bangladesh, Anwarul Chowdhury, hit back at those who blamed the debacle of UNAMSIL on ill-trained and badly equipped troops.

If developing countries stopped providing troops, he said. "There would be no peacekeeping in the world tomorrow, except in a few choice areas of strategic importance" to powerful nations.

Algeria's ambassador, Abdallah Baali, said that unless the UN reasserted its authority, it would be seen as "a hollow man, unable to command respect."



Indian Minister for Human Resources and Family Welfare Sumithra Mahajan (R) holds Aastha, India's billionth citizen born in a city hospital in New Delhi, as a nurse (L) lends a helping hand on Thursday. Aastha was born exactly when the national census commission's population clock, which runs on predictions from the 1991 census, clicked over one billion at 12:32 pm (1302 BST). — AFP photo

## Indonesian govt, Aceh rebels sign ceasefire

GENEVA, May 12: The Indonesian government and separatist Aceh rebels signed a three-month ceasefire in Geneva today aimed at ending over two decades of violence in the northwestern province, an Indonesian statement said, reports Reuters.

The ceasefire will come into effect on June 2 and will be regularly reviewed, said the statement from the Indonesian mission to the United Nations in Geneva.

The deal was signed at a secret location in or around Geneva, under a strict news blackout, by Indonesia's am-

bassador to the United Nations in Geneva, Hassan Wirajuda, and Zaini Abdullah, Minister of Health of the Free Aceh movement — which says it will not give up its demand for independence. Indonesia is offering greater autonomy for the province.

"This joint understanding is an early step of a hundred-step journey in the efforts to find a final solution to the Aceh problem. (It) — if it is implemented successfully — could help boost the confidence for the subsequent problem," the statement quoted Wirajuda as saying after the signing.

## BRIEFLY

**Quake jolts Turkey:** An earthquake hit the southern Turkish town of Osmaliye early today, damaging buildings and leading some people to hurt themselves as they fled their homes. State-run Anatolian news agency said the quake, measuring 4.8 on the Richter scale struck shortly after 6 am (0300 GMT). Reuters reports from Ankara.

A 13-year-old girl leapt from a third-floor balcony in panic, breaking her arms and legs in the fall.

**7 killed in Nepal bus accident:** Seven people were killed and 33 injured when a bus overturned in southern Nepal and plunged into a river, police said Friday, AFP reports from Kathmandu.

The accident occurred on Thursday at Gaugashipur in Jaleswore district, 190 kilometres south of Kathmandu, police said. At least 10 of the injured were in serious condition.

## India marks nuke anniversary

NEW DELHI, May 12: Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee said today India was a stronger nation two years after it carried out a stunning series of nuclear explosions, reports Reuters.

Vajpayee said India's nuclear programme was "defensive in nature" and the world had a better appreciation of the imperatives that led to the 1998 atomic tests.

"There was much criticism from some global powers at the time but the situation has changed dramatically in two years," he told lawmakers of his coalition government gathered to mark the second anniversary of the tests done in the Pokhran desert.

"Today almost the entire world has a better appreciation of our action," he said. India cited regional threat perceptions in explaining its first set of nuclear tests in nearly a quarter century.

Arch-rival Pakistan answered with tests of its own, prompting global outrage and sanctions on both countries.

Vajpayee said his government was aware of Pakistan's plans. "... We had full knowledge that had India not conducted nuclear tests in May 1998, our neighbour would have certainly done so." Tensions between the regional nuclear rivals have steadily risen and last year they



Sri Lanka's opposition legislators march toward the office of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike in Colombo yesterday demanding weekly sessions of parliament to discuss the ongoing fighting near Jaffna. Government forces are resisting a major offensive by Tamil Tiger guerrillas, who have vowed to retake the town of Jaffna in the northern part of the island. — AFP photo

## US begins investigation into Los Alamos fire

### Nuclear materials in lab safe

LOS ALAMOS, New Mexico, May 12: The US government was beginning to investigate today how a small fire set a week ago by rangers in New Mexico developed into a massive wildfire that has forced more than 20,000 people to flee three towns and is surrounding a nuclear laboratory, reports AFP.

The fire has already destroyed 7,200 hectares of forest and forced the evacuation of Los Alamos, White Rock and Espanola.

President Bill Clinton declared northern New Mexico a "disaster area," and said the probe would determine "what the real facts are and what the responsibility of the government is."

US Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt said late Thursday he would be visiting the site of the blaze to investigate and to see what more can be done to bring the wildfire under control.

"I think in the short term, we are going to be ordering a lot more people in," he told CNN.

He said his department would investigate how a small controlled fire set by the National Park Service May 4 to clear underbrush in Bandelier National Monument, south of Los Alamos, burned out of control.

Park Superintendent Roy Weaver assumed responsibility for the fire and on Thursday was suspended with pay pending an investigation by the US Park Service, CNN said.

There are allegations that Weaver ignored a weather forecast faxed to the park before the controlled burn was set that warned of strong winds, which coupled with a severe drought in the area increased the potential for fire.

Ironically, national parks regularly use controlled burns to limit brush growth in the forests that can fuel wildfires.

Despite concern that the wildfire could damage the Los Alamos National Laboratory, which conducts nuclear research, US officials said the lethal materials stored in the facility were perfectly safe.

Energy Secretary Bill Richardson, whose office oversees the nuclear weapons laboratory, described how flames had come within yards of a plutonium store — but insisted that there was no danger of radiation leakage.

"All the lab buildings are secure," he told reporters here. "We are monitoring this extremely carefully but our lab buildings are secure."

Los Alamos laboratory spokesman Jim Danneskiold said the plutonium at the site is stored in concrete bunkers "built to withstand all kind of potential destruction, including a plane crash, bombings and of course a fire."

There are allegations that Weaver ignored a weather forecast faxed to the park before the controlled burn was set that warned of strong winds, which coupled with a severe drought in the area increased the potential for fire.

Ironically, national parks regularly use controlled burns to limit brush growth in the forests that can fuel wildfires.

## 11 labourers shot dead in Bihar

PATNA, India, May 12: At least 11 labourers dredging sand from a river bed in eastern India were killed today when attackers shot at them, police officials said, reports Reuters.

Four were wounded in the attack, suspected to be part of an internecine war between government contractors in the eastern state of Bihar, they said.

The incident occurred at Balughat of Lakhisarai district, 175 km (110 miles) north-west of the state capital Patna.

Rivalry among government contractors often leads to violence in the state. But today's killings were the worst in recent history, police said.

"The labourers were dredging and loading sand on trucks on the bed of river Kiul when a dozen attackers fired at them," Director-General of Police KA Jacob told Reuters.

Government contractors are builders registered with the state government to build roads, bridges and supply construction materials.

The dredged sand is used for construction and a truck load sells for more than 1,000 rupees (\$23).

## Philippine kidnappers demand ransom

MANILA, May 12: Muslim guerrillas have demanded a ransom for 21 mostly foreign hostages held in the southern Philippines, Foreign Secretary Domingo Siason said today, reports AFP.

Siason said the Abu Sayyaf asked for "reimbursement for cost of board and lodging," the unofficial term used by the Muslim rebel group for a ransom.

Asked if the unspecified amount would be paid, he said: "That's up to the people on the ground to determine."

Earlier Friday, government negotiators denied reports that the extremist guerrilla group had demanded a \$50,000 - 70,000 pesos (1,207 - 1,690 dollars) ransom for each captive.

Chief negotiator Ghazali Ibrahim and former Libyan ambassador to the Philippines Rajab Azzarouq said the hostage-takers had not sought expenses for "board and lodging" during their first meeting with the group's leaders on Wednesday.

Nearly all previous Abu Sayyaf kidnappings have ended with payments for "board and lodging."

"They never uttered those words," said Ibrahim. Azzarouq said: "I'm assuring you they did not mention it to me. We were talking about their grievances."

The hostages from Malaysia, Germany, France, Finland, South Africa, the Philippines and Lebanon were snatched from a Malaysian resort island on April 23 and taken by boat across the sea border to this southern Philippine island.

The focus of the negotiators' efforts has been to convince the separatists to release German hostage Renate Wallert on humanitarian grounds.

The 57-year-old teacher suffers from high blood pressure and is feared to be susceptible to a stroke.

Siason said he told the ambassadors of France, Germany, Finland, Malaysia, South Africa and Lebanon on Thursday night that the government was expecting the gunmen to free Wallert and Frenchman Stephane Loisy, who has a urinary tract infection, but that he could not give them a "specific time frame" as the situation was "very fluid."



Indonesian students raise their fists and shout slogans as they rally along one of Jakarta's main avenues yesterday to mark the second anniversary of the shooting of four students that fuelled the riots that help topple former president Suharto. Some 800 attempted to march to the Presidential Palace, but they were intercepted on their way by security forces. — AFP photo

## Plan to expand US visa programme

WASHINGTON, May 12: President Bill Clinton called Thursday for raising the limit on temporary visas for foreign skilled workers to 200,000 a year in the next three years to meet the needs of the booming high-tech industry, reports AFP.

The request sent to Congress for 2001-3 boosts the number for H-1B visas from the current 107,500 for 2001 and from 65,000 for both 2002 and 2003.

The president's proposal represents a balanced approach of a reasonable increase in the number of H-1B visas, significant provisions to protect and prepare the US workforce, and measures of fairness and equity for certain immigrants already in the US. White House economic advisor Gene Sperling said in a letter with the proposal.

The Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS) estimates that 40 per cent of H-1B visas go to those holding a Master's degree or higher.

Clinton's proposal preserves that proportion for 2001 and slightly increases it in 2002-3, while significantly increasing the number of visas available to professionals with no more than a Bachelor's degree.

The US House of Representatives is currently considering a number of bills to address the shortage of high-tech workers while protecting US workers.

"The first and primary policy for increasing the availability of high-skilled workers must be focused on increasing the education and training of US workers," said Sperling's letter.

"However, at times US businesses need additional access to the international labour market to maintain and enhance our global competitiveness," it said.

## Drug abuse can lead to brain haemorrhage

LONDON, May 12: Doctors should examine cases of brain haemorrhage in young adults for evidence of damaged blood vessels linked to drug abuse, British scientists said today, reports Reuters.

The scientists studied 13 young haemorrhage patients who had abused drugs and found nine out of 10 had underlying blood vessel problems. Three of the study group, with an average age of 31, were not well enough to undergo examination.

There is very good evidence that amphetamines actually cause inflammation of blood vessels in the brain, "one of the scientists," Andrew McEvoy, told Reuters.

"Obviously that can cause aneurysms (blood filled sacs) to develop and lead to brain haemorrhages."

Cocaine caused blood vessels leading to the brain to spasm, restricting blood flow and potentially causing a stroke, he said.

McEvoy said stimulants also raised blood pressure — which doctors traditionally thought to be the main cause of brain haemorrhages.

Doctors treating haemorrhage patients who have taken drugs should refer them to a hospital's neurological or neurosurgical department so they can be operated on if necessary, McEvoy said.

Brain haemorrhage patients who had abused drugs were found to have higher mortality rates than those who did not use drugs.

"Especially with cocaine use we found that young adults who you would expect to do better than older patients actually did worse," McEvoy said.

The higher death rate may be due to dehydration and malnourishment among drug abusers, as well as their secretive nature which often leads them to wait longer before seeking treatment, he said.

## Father hires goons to kill his son

JAMSHEDPUR, May 12: A father, unable to bear any longer the torture by and wayward life of his alcoholic and drug-addict son, employed professional killers and paid them Rs 50,000 to eliminate him, reports PTI.

The incident came to light about a week after the killing when the goons, hired for the purpose, confessed to the police after their arrest, East Singhbhum SP R K Mishra said yesterday.

Sanju Jha, a home guard who was killed on May 2 near a Kali Temple at Baghera here, used to come home drunk, often accompanied by prostitutes and beat up his parents. His wife had left him out of disgust, Mishra said.

Sanju's father, a Telco employee, had hired Sushant Sahu and Rakesh Singh, to end the trauma he and his family had been facing for years.

To mislead the police, he had lodged an FIR alleging that the victim's brother-in-law and some other persons were involved in the incident, Mishra said.

Police had nabbed four persons named in the FIR but released them today after the arrest of the real culprits, the SP said.

Now the father, both the killed and another person who played the role of the middleman have been arrested and have confessed their crime, he said.