

Heliborne assault Six militants killed in Kashmir

SINAGAR, India, May 15: Six Muslim separatist guerrillas were killed in an Indian heliborne assault on mountainous rebel strongholds in the disputed state of Kashmir, a police spokesman said here today, reports AFP.

He said military helicopters were deployed for the Sunday night assault which was jointly conducted by the Indian air force and paratroopers of the Security Force (BSF) in the rugged mountains of Budgam district.

Helicopter gunships dropped BSF troops on the higher reaches of Budgam for the attack, the spokesman said, adding that the six slain rebels were Muslim guerrillas from adjoining Pakistan.

He said the attack was the first heliborne assault by Indian forces against Islamic guerrillas in Kashmir since 1989 when Muslim insurgency erupted in the northern state bordering Pakistan.

Two militants were killed on Friday on the foothills of the mountains which led to the joint operation on the higher reaches, the officials said. "A combing operation is still continuing and troops from the (mountain) base are climbing to flush out remaining militants from the dark and dense forests," he said.

Anti-US protest 91 students arrested in Seoul

SEOUL, May 15: Police detained 91 leftist students who converged near the US Embassy today in a protest against the US military presence in South Korea, reports AP.

During the brief rally, American officials insisted the embassy urged people to move away from the windows. "Duck and cover," an official warned over the intercom. In the waiting room of a consular office, some 30 people crouched on the floor until the protest ended.

The students tried to march to the embassy, but police quickly rounded them up. Police said the demonstration was illegal and were considering filing charges.

The students demanded that the US pull out its troops from South Korea and apologise for allegedly condoning the suppression of a pro-democracy uprising in the southern city of Kwangju 20 years ago.

About 37,000 US troops are stationed in South Korea under a defence treaty designed to ward off any threat from communist North Korea.

Leftist students usually mark May with anti-US protests because the nine-day Kwangju uprising started on May 18, 1980.

The South Korean military crackdown in Kwangju left 200 people dead and 1,800 others injured or wounded.

South Korean leftists argue that the US military commander in Seoul, who had operational control of the South Korean army, condoned the crackdown.

The United States has denied the accusations. The size of anti-US protests in South Korea has dwindled in recent years.

US nuclear lab partially destroyed by fire

LOS ALAMOS, New Mexico, May 14: The site of the historic "Manhattan Project," a US effort started in 1943 to develop the first nuclear bomb, was partially destroyed by a week-old wildfire here, an official said Sunday, reports AFP.

The historic V Site complex (TA-16) from the Manhattan Project has been lost, said the Los Alamos Nuclear Laboratory spokeswoman Kathy Delucas.

Two old white large wooden structures where we machined high explosives for the first atomic bombs on the site have been burned by the raging fire, intentionally set by the National Forest Service on May 4 to clear brush.

The "Fat Man" and "Little Boy," the two bombs dropped on Japan in August 1945, were manufactured there.

Only one of the V Site's three buildings was unaffected by the out-of-control forest fire.

The high-bay building where the Trinity high-explosive assembly was configured remains intact, she said. Trinity was the code-name for the plutonium device that became the first nuclear test explosion on July 16, 1945 in New Mexico.

An estimated 1,600 hectares of the nuclear laboratory's 112-square-km property has been scorched, officials said.

Firefighters continued to fight the flames Sunday at several locations on the property, but "no permanent structures, scientific facilities, or facilities that handle radioactive or hazardous materials have been burned," she said.

Only five trailers, five storage sheds, two cargo containers and a pickup truck have been destroyed, according to the laboratory.

Sierra Leone rebels free 139 UN peacekeepers

FREETOWN, May 15: Sierra Leone rebels have freed 139 UN peacekeepers who were Monday on the far side of the border in Liberia after more than a week in captivity, a spokesman for the UN mission said here, reports AFP.

David Wilmhurst, spokesman for UNAMSIL in Freetown, said 15 of the freed hostages, who had been among hundreds of UN forces taken in rebel strongholds, were in the Liberian capital Monrovia and 124 were in the border town of Foya.

Wilmhurst said the release of the hostages followed "a meeting that took place last night (Sunday) in Monrovia between the head of this mission, special representative Oluwemi Adeniji and Liberian President

Charles Taylor. Taylor, known as a longtime backer of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels, was mandated by west African leaders to work for the release of around 500 UN peacekeepers captured by the Sierra Leone rebels early this month.

Wilmhurst said he did not know what physical state the freed men were in or what nationality they were.

Taylor had close links with rebel leader Foday Sankoh, who has disappeared since a bloody shoot-out outside his Freetown residence on May 8 during a peace march after a crisis was triggered by the hostage-taking.

"We knew there was a plan by President Taylor to get our people out into Liberia. At that

time we understood the first number would be 13, overnight it mushroomed to 139," Wilmhurst said.

"Obviously we're very pleased with this development. It's very positive. It shows the crisis around our detained personnel is now breaking," Wilmhurst said.

He said 347 peacekeepers were still being held by the rebels, most of them Zambians, and said he hoped they would be released as soon as possible.

Wilmhurst said arrangements were being made to travel to Monrovia and Foya "to handle the whole return of our personnel and to ensure they are brought back safely."

Wilmhurst said UNAMSIL had no contact with Sankoh, who had become a member of

the Freetown government under a peace pact signed in July last year.

There has been some speculation that Sankoh may be dead, but Freetown has also seen rumours that he has gone back into the bush or is held by government forces.

In their eight-year campaign against various governments, the RUF rebels have killed tens of thousands and intentionally mutilated and dismembered many more men, women and children in a bid to gain power through intimidation. Last July, they signed a peace deal giving rebel leaders top government posts and amnesty for war atrocities. The UN peacekeepers were sent to Sierra Leone to oversee that peace accord.

World leaders pay tribute to Obuchi

TOKYO, May 15: US President Bill Clinton and Chinese President Jiang Zemin led tributes to Japan's former prime minister Keizo Obuchi, who died on Sunday, six weeks after a stroke had put him into a coma, reports AFP.

Clinton said he and his wife Hillary were "deeply saddened" by the loss of one of the United States' "closest friends."

"Japan has lost a strong and vibrant leader. The United States has lost one of our closest friends," he said in a statement.

Jiang and Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji sent a telegram to Obuchi's family expressing their sadness for his death.

The Chinese leaders emphasised Obuchi's strong contribution to the development of friendly ties between the two countries.

French President Jacques Chirac also sent a message of condolence, saying he heard the news with "great sadness and emotion."

In Japan, leaders on all sides paid their tributes.

Obuchi's successor Yoshiro Mori said: "Facing this news about a leader who loved Japan so much, I cannot help feeling anything but deep sadness. Together with the Japanese people, I express my deepest condolences."

In Europe, the president of the European Commission, Romano Prodi, expressed his "sincere condolences."

"Mr. Obuchi and his government gave a new impulse to EU-Japan relations which will mark the beginning of a new era in our relations," Prodi said.

South Korea's President Kim Dae-Jung, who described Obuchi as a "great politician" and as one of his "most respectable, closest friends," emphasised his contribution to the peace and prosperity of Japan, Asia and the world.

Mahaithir paid tribute to Obuchi as a "truly dedicated leader and fully committed to ensuring the enjoyment of peace and prosperity not only for Japan but across the globe."



An elderly couple pray for former Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi at the entrance of Obuchi's home in Tokyo yesterday.

Mothers rally in US for tighter gun laws

WASHINGTON, May 15: Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators joined in Mother's Day rallies across the United States Sunday to call for stricter gun laws, with organisers hoping the events will propel voters to the ballot box in November, reports AFP.

The protests, dubbed the "Million Mom March," were inspired by anger over gun violence against children, including several recent shootings in US schools.

Amid chants of "save our kids" and waving placards reading "freedom from gun trauma," hundreds of thousands of mothers took to the streets in the US capital.

Press reports early Monday estimated that the number of participants who packed Washington's Mall -- the grassy park space in front of the US Capitol building -- reached as many as 750,000.

"Our votes are our power and we will use that force in the November elections" for presi-

dent and for congress, said Donna Dees-Thomases, who spearheaded the movement leading to the march.

About 65 parallel rallies were held in cities across the United States. A total of 4,000 people joined two separate rallies in Los Angeles, where demonstrators said 144 children had died in gun violence over the last year.

In Chicago, at least 3,500 people marched downtown in Grant Park, as did 400 people in the southern Illinois college town of Champaign. Some 5,000 protesters turned out in Denver, Colorado, for example, while more than 3,000 women in Oakland, California -- many with husbands and children in tow -- braved rainy weather to protest.

"I wanted to be with other mothers who feel strongly about gun control," said Gwen Myer, 33, who went to the march with her husband, Rob and their one-year-old daughter, Ruby. "Since our daughter

was born, I've taken the issue more seriously," she said.

At the main event in Washington, some marchers carried pictures of family members killed in gun violence. Linda King, a Washington resident, lost her son last August to a stray bullet.

"I'm here for tougher gun laws," she said. "Please stop the killing."

Her loss mirrored that of Ann Coakley of Boulder, Colorado, whose daughter was killed by accident three years ago.

"This movement is to show people what kind of tragedy this is," said Coakley. "There are too many guns in the US... They are too easy to get."

The marchers are demanding new legislation on registering and licensing gun owners, mandatory safety locks on guns, a one-gun-a-month purchasing limit for individuals and extensive background checks on buyers.



US First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton (C) leads the 'Million Mom March' on Sunday in Washington, DC. Mothers, grandmothers and others gathered in the capital city and 60 other US cities demanding stronger gun safety measures to protect their children from gun violence.

Lanka sends commando units to Jaffna

NEW DELHI, May 15: The Sri Lankan military rushed hundreds of commandos to Jaffna City today, and warplanes bombed positions held by rebels poised for an assault on the besieged northern city, said military officers in Colombo, reports AP.

Nearly 600 soldiers from the elite anti-terrorist commando units were flown to Jaffna to flush out rebel fighters who may have infiltrated into the city of half-a-million people and threaten military installations, the officers said on condition of anonymity.

"We are determined to defend Jaffna," Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera said in Colombo.

Some 40,000 Sri Lankan troops have been retreating for the last three weeks since they lost Elephant Pass, the cause-

way linking the Jaffna Peninsula and its half-million people with the mainland.

"The rebels claimed to be on the outskirts of Jaffna City," a town rich in Tamil history and culture, which the army captured in 1995.

"The terrorists and their lackeys are spreading all sorts of rumours that they are already in Jaffna, but let me tell you that the city is fully under our control," Samaraweera said.

Samaraweera was reacting to a statement by opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe of the United National Party that the rebels already have occupied the main administrative complex of Jaffna.

"This is totally false," Samaraweera said.

The air force on Monday carried out bombing raids on

suspected rebel positions around Jaffna, mainly directed against rebel artillery.

The fear of a final assault on Jaffna has prompted thousands of residents to flee to Valikamam West, 14 kilometres northwest of city.

Some were making their way across the stormy Palk Straits to the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, 35 kilometres away. Indian naval ships reportedly were trying to force the refugee ship to turn back.

Sri Lanka's 3.2 million Tamils share a language, culture and family ties with the 55 million residents of Tamil Nadu in India.

The Tamils claim they face discrimination from Sri Lanka's Sinhalese majority, which controls the government and the military. The government denies the charge.

Israeli cabinet okays transfer of villages to Palestinians

JERUSALEM, May 15: The Israeli cabinet today approved the handover of three villages near Jerusalem to the full control of Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority, the office of Prime Minister Ehud Barak announced, reports AFP.

The villages involved are Azariyah, Suwaha and Abu Dis, which for the most part fall into so-called Zone B of the West Bank, where the Palestinians have civilian authority but Israel maintains security control.

Several members of Barak's fragile coalition had threatened to revolt if the land handover went ahead, protesting that it would lead to the division of Jerusalem.

The cabinet approved the transfer by 15 votes to six, with ministers from the ultra-Orthodox Jewish party Shas, the

National Religious Party and Russian immigrant Israel B'Alia all voting against.

NRP leader Yitzhak Levy, who holds the housing portfolio, announced that his party, which has five seats in parliament, would quit the coalition in the next few days.

Barak is due to make a speech later Sunday during the opening of the summer session of parliament, where MPs may be asked to vote on the land handover in a confidence motion.

It is not clear how Shas, the third biggest party with 17 seats in parliament whose support is crucial for Barak and his peace policies, would vote in the Knesset.

Meanwhile, an Israeli army officer and five Palestinians including four policemen were injured in an exchange of gun-

fire with live rounds in this northern West Bank town today, witnesses and army sources said.

An Israeli border guard was also wounded in a similar shooting incident near the West Bank town of Ramallah, an Israeli army source told AFP.

It was the first time the two sides had exchanged fire in four days of violent clashes between Palestinian demonstrators and Israeli troops across the West Bank and Gaza Strip which have left scores of Palestinians hurt, mainly by rubber bullets.

Witnesses in Jenin said the two sides opened fire as clashes erupted during a demonstration by hundreds of Palestinians to mark al-Nakba, or the "catastrophe" of the founding of the state of Israel on this day in 1948.

Iraq's biological weapons are real threat: US expert

KUWAIT, May 15: Although Iraq's military machine has been reduced to a Museum piece, "the threat of the country's biological weapons to its neighbours remains real and unabated, an American expert said Sunday, reports AP.

"Since December 1998, there has been no meaningful inspection of Iraq's capability of weapons of mass destruction," Anthony Cordman, told a seminar on the future of Kuwait-Iraqi relations. Cordman is co-director of Middle East Studies at the Washington-based Centre for Strategic and International Studies.

The bad news here is that one way or another, you face

problems with biological weapons capabilities which may be at least as lethal as nuclear weapons, which could be used in covert actions or in programmes which are very difficult to trace," Cordman said.

United Nations arms experts ordered by the UN Security Council to eliminate Iraq's nuclear, chemical and biological weapons and, long-range missiles left Iraq in December 1998 ahead of US-British airstrikes launched as punishment for Baghdad's failure to cooperate with inspections.

Cordman also said it would take Iraqi President Saddam Hussein a minimum of 12 billion dollars to simply reabilitate and modernise the decade-old military equipment he has.

US sanctions imposed on Iraq for its 1990 invasion of Kuwait are lifted. The 1990 invasion led to the 1991 Gulf War.

Assuming Iraq was efficient, such modernization job would take at least three to five years, he added.

In his opening speech on Saturday, Kuwait's foreign minister, Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmed Al Sabah, said Baghdad must comply with all Security Council resolutions before any resumption of ties could be considered.

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Taliban regime to wipe out poppy cultivation

KANDAHAR, Afghanistan, May 15: Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia need international help to eradicate poppy cultivation, the leader of the Islamic regime's fight against drugs has said, reports AFP.

Mulla Abdul Akhundzada also confirmed that Afghanistan, which became the world's leading producer of opium in 1999, had agreed with Pakistan and Iran a joint operation to wipe out the refining laboratories in the border area in the far south of the country.

Despite the fact that opium growing in the south has reached its peak, the chief of the High Commission for the Drug

Control of the Islamic Emirate told AFP that the Taliban need international assistance.

"We are cracking down heavily on poppy farms and we will continue to do so," stressed Akhundzada at Kandahar, despite a United Nations estimate that placed the Afghan opium harvest at a record 4,600 tonnes last year.

The mulla, a close aide to Taliban leader Mulla Mohammad Omar, disputed the figure as based on false "projections" by the UN office for drug control and crime prevention (UNODC).

But he admitted that total opium output last year had been "important" due to favourable weather.

He also said the time it took to eradicate drug farms would depend on the level of international funding, without specifying a precise figure. He added that his previous demand for 1.6 billion dollars had been "an estimate."

Some countries, particularly those like the United States which imposed sanctions on the Taliban for their perceived harbouring of Islamic terrorists, are reluctant to hand over aid, pointing to the Taliban's 10 percent tax on the harvest.

The UNODC has already begun trying a programme to encourage other crops, such as wheat, grapes or cumon.



Dutch Prime Minister Wim Kok (L), Queen Beatrix (2nd L) and the mayor of Enschede, Jan Mans (R), visit the disaster area in the eastern Dutch town of Enschede on Sunday, where a huge explosion ripped through a fireworks warehouse on Saturday, killing 20 people.

BRIEFLY

Shiite leader killed in Karachi: A prominent Shiite Muslim leader was gunned down Monday by assailants outside his home in southern Karachi, AP reports from Karachi.

The killing of 48-year-old Saddam Jaffri, the president of the Voice of Shiite Federation, a small Shiite Muslim lobbying groups, is the latest in a series of religiously motivated killings in Pakistan. The combatants are members of well-armed religious groups that have emerged in recent years.

Prosecutors question Suharto: Three Indonesian prosecutors today grilled former Indonesian president Suharto for a third time over allegations of corruption during the autocrat's 32 years in power, AFP reports from Jakarta.

Suharto was questioned for two and a half hours at his Jakarta house by officials investigating the alleged misuse of funds from several charitable foundations he once controlled.

Cairo building collapse toll 16: Sixteen bodies have been dug out from the rubble of a Cairo apartment building which collapsed early Sunday, and two people were rescued alive, rescue services said Monday, adding that this was the final toll, AFP reports from Cairo.

Police had earlier said that five people were still missing and being sought.