

Heliborne assault

Six militants killed in Kashmir

SKINAGAR, 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 paramilitary Border 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 operation was conducted at a height of 13,000 feet.

High-altitude fighting followed in the forests of the Pir Panchal mountains, 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 inside 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 AP.

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 Wimhurst, 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.

Wimhurst 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 Oluyemi 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 this month.

Wimhurst 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," Wimhurst said.

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

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

Wimhurst 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."

Wimhurst 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."

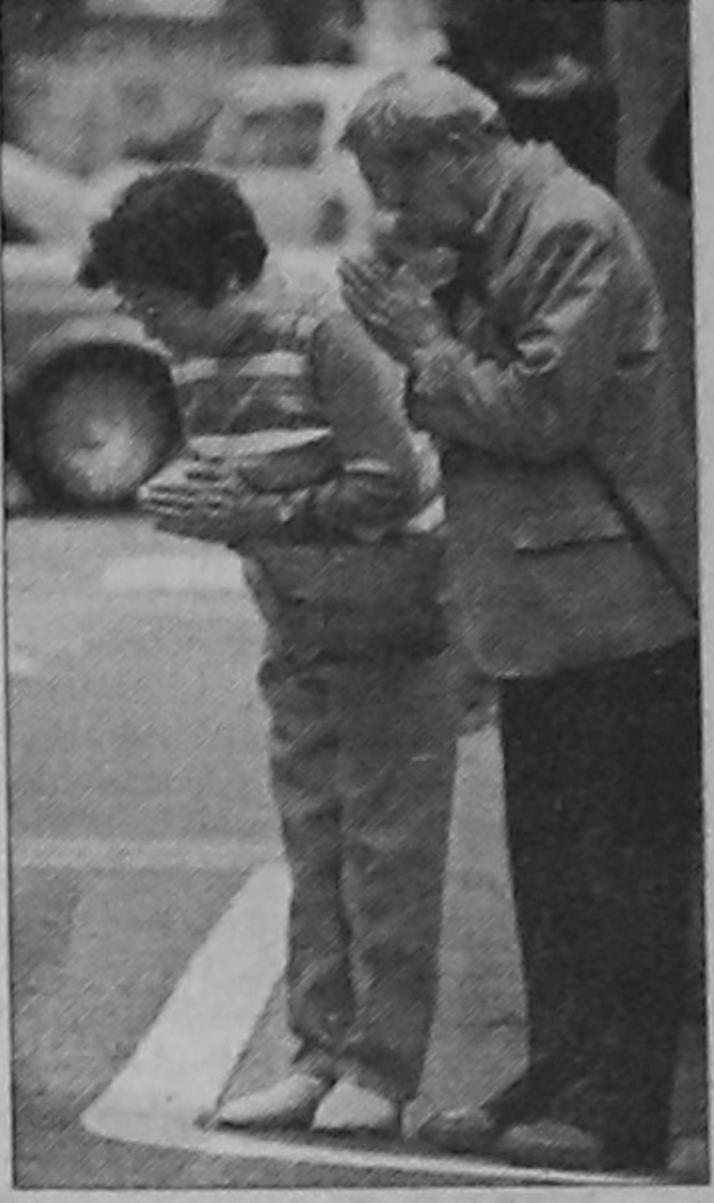
"Together with the Japanese people, I express my deepest condolences."

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.

Malathir 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.

Obuchi's official funeral June 8

TOKYO, May 15: Former Japanese prime minister Keizo Obuchi will be cremated in a private family service on Tuesday, officials at the former leader's office said today, reports AFP.

An official service, to be organised jointly by the government and Obuchi's Liberal Democratic Party, is to be held on June 8 with overseas mourners expected to attend. Chief Cabinet Secretary Mikio Aoki said:

Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori is expected to take charge of organising the service, to be held at Nippon Budokan Hall, a sports hall near the imperial palace in central Tokyo.

Some 4,000 to 5,000 people could attend, Aoki said.

Obuchi died Sunday at the age of 62, six weeks after suffering a massive stroke which plunged him into a coma. Obuchi's wife Chizuko and their son and two daughters were to gather with top officials Monday evening for a wake at Tokyo's Aoyama Cemetery.

Musharraf leaves for Turkmenistan

ISLAMABAD, May 15: Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf left today on a two-day visit to Turkmenistan aimed at enhancing political and economic ties, officials said, reports AFP.

Musharraf will have an in-depth exchange of views" with President Saparmurat Niyazov on regional and international issues including the situation in war-torn Afghanistan, they said.

The two sides are expected to discuss a proposed two-billion-dollar gas pipeline project from Turkmenistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan.

The 1,600-km pipeline from the Daudabat fields in Turkmenistan's south to the central Pakistani city of Multan is considered a vital outlet for the central Asian republic's gas reserves.

Turkmenistan has reportedly signed the deal with a consortium comprised of US firm UNOCAL, Delta of Saudi Arabia, Itochu of Japan, Gazprom of Russia, INPEX of Japan, Hyundai of South Korea and Crescent of Pakistan.

Philippine rebel group agrees to withdraw forces

COTABATO, Philippines, May 15: The Philippines' largest Muslim separatist guerrilla group said today it was ready to pull back from a key highway battleground to pave the way for renewed peace talks with the government, reports AFP.

The true offer, immediately rejected by local military officials, came three weeks after the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) quit peace negotiations fueling intense fighting which has claimed hundreds of lives.

MILF number two leader Muhammad Murad raised the peace prospect on the eve of President Joseph Estrada's state visit to China.

There was no immediate response from the government, but local military officials vowed to pursue their offensive to dislodge MILF forces from a 15-km stretch of the Narciso Ramos highway.

Rebel checkpoints on the major artery have constricted traffic and commerce on the southern third of the archipelago.

Murad said in a statement that the 15,000-member MILF was "voluntarily repositioning its combat troops now positioned along the Narciso Ramos highway to the defence perimeter of Camp Abubakar," the group's headquarters in central Mindanao.

The pullback would completely clear the highway of MILF forces "within 48 hours starting 6:00 p.m. today (1600 BST)," Murad said.

His offer came hours after the military said it had repulsed an attack by about 30 MILF fighters who staged a pre-dawn raid on an army outpost in a coastal area in nearby Pagadian city.

The MILF has said that a portion of the 184-km highway borders their camp and was part of their territory.

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.

"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-

"This is totally false," Samaraweera said.

The air force on Monday carried out bombing raids on

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

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.

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