

The World

Eritrea withdraws from disputed border area

Ethiopia claims victory

ASMARA, May 25 : Eritrea withdrew its troops early today from a disputed area along the border with Ethiopia, a senior Eritrean official said, following two weeks of renewed fighting that both sides said left tens of thousands dead, reports AFP.

But Ethiopia quickly claimed it had captured the area, around the key town of Zala Anbesa, some 130 km south of the Eritrean capital Asmara, "completely annihilating" Eritrean forces in the zone.

A senior Eritrean official told AFP the pullback from Zala Anbesa began at midnight at the request of the Organisation of African Unity.

The withdrawal also concerned the Alitina region, to the east of Zala Anbesa, officials said.

"We started the implementation at midnight (5:00 BST Wednesday)," said Yamane Gebreab, the top advisor to President Isaias Afewerki. "We've been asked specifically by the

OUA and we have accepted the appeal," he said.

But Gebreab insisted the move was a redeployment, not a defeat.

"We have taken up new defense positions out of the disputed area. There is no ceasefire, we will defend it from our new positions," he said.

The war is not over until Ethiopia decides to stop this war, we are not negotiating with Ethiopia, this was an appeal on both sides."

Gebreab denied that Eritrean forces had been overrun in Zala Anbesa, saying the government had taken journalists to visit the area on Wednesday because "we knew Ethiopia would claim that redeployment was not an Eritrean decision."

In Addis Ababa, however, the Ethiopian government spokesman said, "Ethiopian air and ground forces have liberated the town of Zala Anbesa after completely annihilating the Eritrean army that was on the verge of collapsing yesterday."

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Ethiopian forces raised the Ethiopian flag over Zala Anbesa at midnight," the spokesman said in a statement.

On Wednesday, Eritrea's foreign ministry informed the United Nations in New York that it had agreed to pull its forces back to positions they held before the war with Ethiopia first broke out in 1998.

It also said Eritrea was ready to resume peace talks under auspices of the OAU in Algiers, where indirect negotiations between the two sides broke down on May 5.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan late on Wednesday welcomed Eritrea's acceptance of the attempt by the Organisation of African Unity to bring to an end the border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

The United States remains strongly supportive of the OAU and its current chair, Algerian President (Abdelaziz) Bouteflika," acting State Department spokesman Philip Reeker said in a statement.

The border war between the former allies first broke out on May 6, 1998, and continued sporadically amid mediation efforts by the OAU. The latest

talks broke down on May 5 and Ethiopia launched a new offensive on May 12.

Ethiopian forces quickly advanced across the border, moving well beyond the disputed zones in some areas. Eritrea and Ethiopia claim to have inflicted heavy losses on the enemy during the fighting, with death tolls reported in the tens of thousands on each side.

US supports OAU initiative

Meanwhile, the United States said Wednesday it remained "strongly supportive" of the attempt by the Organisation of African Unity to bring to an end the border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

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A demonstrator ducks to avoid a canister of teargas fired by police yesterday in Colombo to break up an anti-government rally. Some 2,000 demonstrators led by the Marxist People's Liberation Front, or JVP, defied tough emergency laws to protest against curtailing civil liberties in the name of national security.

— AFP photo

Lanka police fire teargas to break up demonstration

COLOMBO, May 25 : Police fired teargas and water cannons to break up a rally by thousands of protesters who defied tough emergency laws and demonstrated in the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo, reports AFP.

The demonstrators, led by the Marxist People's Liberation Front, or JVP, shouted anti-government slogans and massed in Colombo's Lipton Square, where they were attacked by police, witnesses said.

About 2,000 people took part in the lunch-time protest, which was against emergency regulations introduced on May 3. Under the regulations the government has banned all political rallies and imposed tight censorship.

Two journalists killed in Sierra Leone as UN counts its dead

FREETOWN, May 25 : Two Western journalists and four government soldiers were killed Wednesday in an ambush by rebels in Sierra Leone, as the United Nations paid homage to its dead peacekeepers, reports AFP.

Miguel Gilmore, a Spaniard from AP television, and Kurt Schork, an American from the Reuters news agency were killed in an ambush about 80 km northeast of Freetown, the UN spokesman here said.

David Wimhurst said the ambush by rebels from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) occurred between 1:00 p.m. and 2:00 p.m. local time, about two km east of Rogberi Junction.

In the same attack, two other journalists, Greek national Yannis Barakis and South African national Mark Chisholm, were injured in the leg and hand respectively, the spokesman for the UN force, UNAMSIL, added.

The journalists and soldiers were travelling on board two military trucks which were targeted by the attackers, he said.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan later paid tribute to the two journalists, describing them as "professionals".

Planes collide in Paris: One killed

PARIS, May 25 : One person was killed and another injured early today when a passenger plane carrying Spanish football fans collided with a cargo plane on a runway at Paris' Charles-de-Gaulle Airport, reports AFP.

The accident happened just before 3:00 a.m. (7:00 BST). The cargo plane's co-pilot was killed and its pilot was injured.

The pilot was taken to a hospital in the area but his life is not thought to be in danger, hospital sources said.

The MD89 passenger plane, owned by Air Liberte, had some 150 people on board, many of whom were returning to Madrid after Wednesday night's European Cup final in Paris.

None of the passengers were injured and all boarded another Air Liberte flight later Thursday morning to return to Madrid.

Russia begins to back-track on Afghan threats

MOSCOW, May 25 : As Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov told US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright that there were no plans to launch strikes on Afghanistan, political commentators in Moscow doubted Russia could so easily forget its last failed war, reports AFP.

During a NATO meeting in Italy Wednesday, Ivanov was quoted by a US official as saying that Russia did not envisage launching any strikes on Afghanistan and that the statement made by Kremlin spokesman Sergei Yastrzhembsky this week was a "misunderstanding".

Yastrzhembsky said Russia "might possibly carry out preventative strikes if there is a serious threat to its national interests" or to those of its satellite countries and accused the Afghan Taliban militia of training guerrillas fighting federal troops in Russia's separatist Chechnya region.

A senior military official said Russia, along with Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, had mapped out contingency plans for the strikes and was ready to blitz them if political masters gave the green light.

Fresh sectarian violence in Indonesian town

JAKARTA, May 25 : Angry Muslim mobs today burned Christian homes in the third day of sectarian violence in the town of Poso on Indonesia's Sulawesi island, police said.

The situation in the area around Poso, where riots first broke out on Tuesday, is "deteriorating" police First Sergeant Sabaruddin told AFP by phone.

The violence was triggered by rumors circulating on Monday that some residents from Tentena, a town south of Poso, were planning to attack Muslim residents.

Pakistan denies preparations for fresh nuclear tests

ISLAMABAD, May 25 : Pakistan has rejected reports that it is preparing to conduct further nuclear tests and reassured the international community that its moratorium on testing remains, officials said Thursday.

The rejection was issued by a Foreign Office statement late Wednesday night and coincided with a warning by the US to Pakistan after press speculation that Islamabad was preparing for additional testing.

"Pakistan continues to abide by its unilateral moratorium on further nuclear testing," the statement said.

The statement was issued shortly after US State Department spokesman Philip Reeker said Washington was not convinced of the accuracy of the reports, but delivered a warning in the form of a reminder.

"We didn't consider these reports highly credible, but we did take the occasion to remind the government of Pakistan of the serious consequences another test would have for bilateral

relations," Reeker said.

He said the United States remained deeply concerned about the possibility of fresh nuclear tests by Pakistan or its arch-rival India.

On Tuesday Pakistani foreign minister Abdul Sattar welcomed a call by the recent Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty Review Conference for the observance of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

Sattar said the call was a "positive contribution to reinforce the no-test norm".

At the same time US national security adviser Sandy Berger said despite the reports which also indicated India might be ready for another test -- Washington had no solid indication there would be any tests.

Pakistani Foreign Office spokesman Iftikhar Murshed has said his country would act in its national security interests if India carried out further nuclear tests, leaving open the possibility of a matching response.

Fiji chiefs back coup

Mahendra will be forced to resign, president tells UN

SAVU, May 25 : Fiji's traditional chiefs today came out in favour of a racially-motivated coup, calling for ethnic Indian Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry to be replaced by an indigenous Fijian, former prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka announced, reports AFP.

Provincial health officer Nelsa Amin left for the coastal town of Patikul, around where the Abu Sayyaf hideout is located, to drop off four boxes of food and medical supplies.

The Philippine government had been trying to set up a humanitarian corridor proposed by European diplomats to ensure the medical needs of the hostages are taken care of.

Thursday's mission heralds the opening of this corridor, said Abdusakur Tan, governor of the province of Sulu which includes Jolo island.

Rabuka, himself a chief and the leader of two coups in 1987,

shortly after President Bill Clinton visited South Asia in March and was not linked to reports of possible nuclear testing, the State Department said.

It is possible that there is arms smuggling to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) through Thailand, Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai told reporters.

However Chuan denied that the Tigers had set up bases in Thailand to run arms, and possibly drugs.

"This area may be the smuggling route ... but there is no Tamil base in Thailand," he said.

The Bangkok Post Thursday reported that a Thai army intelligence unit has photographed Tamil rebels transferring weapons on a Thai island 15 km from the tourist resort of Phuket.

Earlier this year, shipping

Tigers may be smuggling arms through Thailand

Fresh fighting in Jaffna

BANGKOK, May 25 : The Tamil Tiger rebels, who are engaged in a fierce civil war with the Sri Lankan military, may be smuggling arms through Thailand, the Thai government said today, reports AFP.

It is possible that there is arms smuggling to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) through Thailand, Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai told reporters.

The LTTE is fighting a drawn-out campaign for independence in the island's north and eastern regions.

According to the Thai foreign ministry, Thailand and Sri Lanka exchange regular intelligence information on Tiger activities here.

The Bangkok Post Thursday reported that a Thai army intelligence unit has photographed Tamil rebels transferring weapons on a Thai island 15 km from the tourist resort of Phuket.

Intelligence sources and reports say the LTTE is active in acquiring arms in the region, where they are available relatively cheaply and easily.

Another report says, renewed heavy fighting in Sri Lanka's northern peninsula of Jaffna left at least eight government soldiers and five Tiger rebels dead, the government said today.

Ground attack aircraft and artillery were deployed to pound positions of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) when the rebels mounted an attack against military defences at Sarasalai, the government said.

In the same area, a helicopter gunship crash-landed on Wednesday, killing the two gunners, but the two pilots were rescued by ground troops, the government said.

It said 46 government soldiers were wounded in the overnight fighting and that five guerrillas were killed when troops attacked a rebel hideout in the Atchchuvell area of the peninsula.

Strike cripples Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, May 25 : Indian Kashmir was paralysed for a second day Thursday by a strike called to denounce an alleged increase in the numbers of Kashmiris dying in state custody, reports AFP.

But relatives of the victims said the six young men had gone with a religious group on a preaching tour.

Locals said patrolling troops were preventing Sopore residents from coming out of their homes.

"It is an unofficial curfew here," one resident, Ghulam Ahmed, told AFP by telephone.

Some 100 people continued a two-day hunger strike at Kashmir's summer capital Srinagar's business district of Maimana against the alleged custodial killings.

"The fast is being observed to protest the spate of custodial killings across the Kashmir Valley in recent months," Yasin Malik said.

Police say the men were crossing over the Kashmir bor-

der into Pakistan for arms training when they were shot dead in a firefight.

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Lebanon says no guarantees to Israel

But Lebanese army commander General Michel Sleiman said earlier Beirut would give no security guarantees to Israel unless it withdrew further from Syrian and Lebanese lands.

Sleiman named the Syrian Golan Heights and Shebaa Farms as territories that Israel must leave. Shebaa Farms is a 250-square-km area near the Golan Heights that Lebanon and Syria claim as Lebanese territory.

An armed Shiite Hezbollah guerrilla speaks on his mobile phone as an Israeli soldier watches from across the border at Kfar Kila Wednesday after Israel completed its withdrawal from South Lebanon several weeks ahead of its self-imposed July 7 deadline.

— AFP photo

Israel, PA to reach accord on Palestinian state by year end'

CAIRO, May 25 : Israel and the Palestinians will reach an accord by the end of the year on declaring a Palestinian state, Israeli Parliament Speaker Avraham Burg said here, reports AFP.

"By the end of this year, there will be an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians on establishing a Palestinian state," Burg told reporters through an Israeli Hebrew translator at Cairo airport overnight Wednesday at the end of a two-day visit to Egypt.

"Israel will be the first state to recognise the Palestinian state," said the Israeli Knesset speaker who is a member of the

Prime Minister Ehud Barak's Labour Party and ranks third in the hierarchy of state.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat left Gaza City Wednesday for Rome, on the first leg of a tour that will also take him to Spain, his adviser Nabil Abu Rudeina said.

But Barak's office has said that "if a Palestinian state is created it will be the result of negotiations."

Burg said he was "completely convinced" that Israel would reach a final peace settlement with the Palestinians as it did with Egypt at the end of the 1970s.

"Israel and the Palestinians have chosen

peace as their path and a strategic choice," he said.

Meanwhile, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat left Gaza City Wednesday for Rome, on the first leg of a tour that will also take him to Spain, his adviser Nabil Abu Rudeina said.

He will discuss the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the role Europe could play to push them forward with Italian leaders, Abu Rudeina said.