

## The World

# Eritrea withdraws from disputed border area

## Ethiopia claims victory

ASMAR, 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 Alitena region, to the east of Zala Anbesa, officials said.

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

OAU and we have accepted the appeal," he said. But Gebreab insisted the move was a redeployment, not a defeat.

"We have taken up new defence 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."

"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 OAU appeal and urged Ethiopia "also to respond positively to the OAU appeal in order to bring about an immediate end to hostilities."

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.

"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.

## Pak court rejects defence petitions in Sharif case

KARACHI, May 25 : A Pakistani court today upheld state prosecutors' right to present an appeal for deposed Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's life sentence to be replaced by the death penalty, reports AFP.

Defence lawyers had presented a petition that the appeal was inadmissible. The three-judge bench of the Sindh High Court also rejected another defence petition opposing the admissibility of a prosecution appeal against the acquittal of Sharif's brother Shabbaz and five others.

Sharif was convicted in April by an anti-terrorism court on charges of hijacking and terrorism. His brother and five other accused were acquitted in the case, but they remain in custody on corruption charges.

The defence lawyers argued before the bench that the prosecution had not been authorised by the government to file the appeals.

Sharif, who was ousted in a military coup last year, has lodged an appeal against his conviction, which is to be heard by the same bench.

## Humanitarian corridor opens for hostages in Philippines

JOLO, May 25 : A food and medical mission was dispatched today to the Muslim rebel camp where 21 mostly foreign hostages are being held, to establish a humanitarian corridor for the captives, 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.

## 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.

"Another nuclear test in South Asia could lead to a serious escalation of tensions in the region and would threaten to undermine global non-proliferation norms," Reeker said.

But, he also added that both Islamabad and New Delhi had assured US officials the suspension of their tests -- which followed a tit-for-tat exchange of nuclear explosions in 1998 -- remained policy.

The US comments come as Washington's third highest-ranking diplomat, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Pickering, toured South Asia.

Pickering is in New Delhi and was expected to travel onto Islamabad on Thursday before heading to Sri Lanka for a brief stop.

His trip was arranged

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

On Tuesday Pakistan's 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 Mursheed 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

SUVA, 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.

The chiefs, who wield enormous influence in the Pacific nation, agreed to all of coup leader George Speight's demands, including a pardon for all those involved in the coup.

Speight and a group of special forces troops have been holding Chaudhry and his ministers hostage in parliament here since Friday.

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

said the outcome was "the least damaging of all the bad solutions".

Asked if this gave the message that anyone could overthrow any government they were unhappy with, he admitted: "That was the message ... I am disturbed about it."

The chiefs had also called for the immediate release of all the hostages and demanded a pardon for all those who had taken part in the coup, Rabuka said.

Among the demands were that all high posts in future governments, including prime minister and deputy prime minister, were to be filled by indigenous Fijians.

The chiefs resolved to support the president, Ratu Sir

Kamisesa Mara and that a caretaker government should be established to replace Choudry's administration.

Meanwhile, Fiji's Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry will be forced to resign as soon as he is released by coup plotters, and a caretaker government will be appointed, President Ratu Sir Kamisesa Mara has told the United Nations.

Documents obtained by AFP Thursday revealed Mara is convinced the year-old government led by Chaudhry, Fiji's first ethnic Indian premier, must go.

But Mara has been told this scenario was unacceptable to the UN and the Commonwealth, sources here said.

## 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.

Schools, banks, shops and courts remained shut across the northern Himalayan state in response to the protest called by the All Party Freedom Conference, an amalgam of two dozen separatist groups fighting for self-determination in Kashmir.

Thousands of local people took to the streets in the northern apple-growing Kashmiri town of Sopore to exhumate the bodies of six civilians they claim were killed in cold blood in custody.

"We want Freedom" and "God is Great," they cried.

Police say the men were crossing over the Kashmir bor-

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

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 summer capital Srinagar's business district of Malsama 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.



US space shuttle Atlantis crewmembers-- US Susan Helms (L), Russian Yuri Usachev (R) and US James Voss (top C) wave to the camera Wednesday as they finish up replacing the forth and final battery block in the Zarya module on the International Space Station. — AFP photo

## BRIEFLY

### Red Army hijacker faces extradition:

A Thai criminal court decided on Thursday to extradite former Japanese Red Army hijacker Yoshimi Tanaka to face trial in Japan, AFP reports from Bangkok.

"There is enough evidence under the Extradition Act (between Thailand and Japan), so the court decides to extradite the suspect to be prosecuted in Japan," the Thai judge said in his ruling. Yoshimi Tanaka, 50, is wanted by Japan over the 1970 hijacking of an airliner to North Korea and for other alleged offences.

### Surinam votes for parliament:

Thousands of Surinamese head to the polls Thursday to choose from among 24 political parties 51 new members of the National Assembly, which in turn will pick the South American country's next president, AFP reports from Paramaribo.

"The people want a government they can trust, transparent laws and an end to 20 years of corruption," the head of opposition coalition Democratic Alternative 91 Winston Jessurun told AFP Wednesday, a day of reflection ahead of the vote.



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 Winhurst 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 the 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 MD80 passenger plane, owned by Air Liberté, 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 Liberté 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 preventive 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 Sabudin told AFP by phone.

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

## 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.

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

news publication Lloyd's List reported that the Tigers were operating a base at a Thai island near Phuket after being pushed out of Myanmar in 1996 due to diplomatic pressure on the Yangon junta.

The report said the base had been established in Thailand after the Tigers were forced out of neighbouring Myanmar. The LTTE is fighting a drawn-out campaign for independence in the island's northern and eastern regions.

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

Thailand last year pledged to help Sri Lanka cut arms flows to the rebels through Southeast Asia.

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 Sarasala, 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 Atchchuvelli area of the peninsula.

## UN races against time to prevent violence in S Lebanon

BEIRUT, May 25: The United Nations raced against time today to prevent any deterioration in volatile South Lebanon after Israel withdrew the last of its troops and warned of war if its frontiers came under guerrilla attacks, reports Reuters.

UN Middle East envoy Terje Roed-Larsen arrived in Beirut on Wednesday night for crucial talks with Lebanese officials on plans to secure a safe border with Israel, which ended its 22-year occupation of the South on Wednesday.

His mission came amid a stern warning by Israel to Lebanon and Syria, the main power broker in Lebanon, that it would consider any attack on its territory from Lebanon "an act of war".

Israel withdrew the last of its troops from Lebanon on Wednesday to end a 22-year occupation, but the Lebanese army has not moved into the liberated area.

The Beirut government has left Hizbollah guerrillas to take over positions abandoned by Israel and its local South Lebanon Army militia allies.

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 guerilla 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 peace track, this calendar 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

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

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat has vowed to declare an independent state in September, even if the peace negotiations fail to result in an accord with Israel by then.

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.

The two sides (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.

During his one-day stay in Rome Thursday he will have talks with President Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, Prime Minister Giuliano Amato and Foreign Minister Lamberto Dini.