

International

Gunmen kill 8 in Pakistani village

ISLAMABAD, May 26: Sixteen armed men stormed a house in the central Pakistani province of Punjab and shot dead eight members of a family in an apparent blood feud, news reports said today, says AFP.

The massacre took place late Wednesday at Bhola Androon in Shekhupura district, police told the Associated Press of Pakistan.

A search for the assailants is underway, they said.

Fresh violence claims 32 in Maluku

JAKARTA, May 26: A fresh outbreak of Muslim-Christian violence in Indonesia's North Maluku islands has left at least 32 dead and 52 wounded, the state Antara news agency and church sources there said today, reports AFP.

The church sources said the violence took the form of a savage sea-borne attack by Muslims early Thursday on Christians in the Galela and Tobelo subdistricts in the northern part of North Maluku's Halmahera Island.

Many residents in the two subdistricts had fled the area. Antara said, quoting an operations officer at the North Maluku Security Control Command, Major Puguh (eds. one name).

US space shuttle completes ISS mission

WASHINGTON, May 26: NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, Texas said that crew aboard the space shuttle Atlantis on Thursday completed on schedule the tasks they had to carry out on the International Space Station (ISS), reports AFP.

The shuttle will therefore be able to undock Friday from the station, which is under construction and at present comprises a Russian module, Zarya and a US module, Unity.

Seven astronauts are on board the Atlantis, including Russian cosmonaut Yuri Usachev.

They have changed four batteries on the Zarya and installed ventilators and smoke detectors, and replaced fire extinguishers.

ILO mission meets Suu Kyi

YANGON, May 26: A delegation of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) on a discreet first-ever visit to Yangon has met with Aung San Suu Kyi and high-ranking government officials, government and opposition sources said today, reports AFP.

Neither the ILO nor the Myanmar government have commented on the mission, but sources told AFP the ILO's three-man delegation met with opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the Myanmar junta's labour minister and other ministerial level officials.

The ILO mission was expected to discuss with the junta and the opposition implementation of ILO recommendations against forced labour, alleged to be widely practiced in Myanmar.

Diplomatic and business sources previously told AFP they expected representatives of the junta to take ILO officials to visit several jails and factories.

Though it has not made any official comment, Myanmar's ruling junta Wednesday had lashed out at the ILO as an unqualified organization controlled by big powers. o0252

Fiji threatened with sanctions, expulsion from C'wealth

President asks Mahendra to resign

SUVA, May 26: Fiji faced an international backlash today over its traditional chiefs' decision to back the overthrow of a democratically elected government, with the United States, Britain and Australia leading the condemnation, reports AFP.

The Pacific nation was threatened with sanctions and expulsion from the Commonwealth if democracy was not restored.

Fiji's traditional chiefs plan to sacrifice ethnic Indian premier Mahendra Chaudhry and replace him with an indigenous Fijian to appease coup leader George Speight, who stormed parliament a week ago.

They have also recommended a new constitution ensuring the country can only be ruled by indigenous Fijians, and a pardon for the rebels. Washington called the move "inconsistent" with Fiji's constitution and warned of sanctions.

The US position remains that any actions to resolve this matter should be in accordance with Fiji's constitution," said State Department spokesman Philip Reeker, warning that if they were not Washington would be legally forced to impose sanctions.

Those consequences would be "very substantial and very detrimental to Fiji's standing in the international community," he added.

"We continue to recognise the democratically-elected government of Fiji," said Australian Prime Minister John Howard also threatened sanctions and branded Speight a terrorist.

"Unless the course of action on which Fiji is now embarked changes very dramatically there will be consequences, and we will consider that in the appropriate way," he said when asked if Australia would apply sanctions.

Asked if Speight was a terrorist, Howard replied: "He has behaved like one. Fiji was suspended from the Commonwealth after two 1987 coups deposed an Indian-dominated government and was only re-admitted after its 1997 constitution restored political rights to the ethnic Indian population."

Meanwhile, Fiji's President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara has sent an envoy to captive Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, asking him to resign, a spokesman for an armed gang holding the premier hostage told AFP.

"The president's secretary Mr. (Joe) Brown arrived to see Mahendra Chaudhry," said Simone Kaitani.

He said a delegation from the influential Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) had arrived at the parliament, after an earlier meeting with non-council chiefs had given coup leader George Speight their support.

Another report says, the leaders of a racist coup in Fiji appeared poised for victory Friday after emerging triumphant in a dramatic showdown with the army outside parliament, where the nation's elected government has been held since last Friday.

In a clear sign that the balance of power in the crisis had tilted decisively in favour of coup leader George Speight, President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara sent an envoy to the building to formally ask Mahendra Chaudhry, Fiji's first ethnic Indian premier, to step down.



Visiting United States Undersecretary of State Thomas Pickering (L) consults with US Ambassador to Pakistan William B Milam (2nd L), during talks with Pakistani Foreign Secretary Inam-ul-Haq (2nd right) in Islamabad yesterday. Talks are to focus on bilateral ties, nuclear non-proliferation, terrorism, Afghanistan and the Kashmir dispute between Pakistan and India. —AFP photo

Syria, Lebanon pledge to respect UN role as Barak offers peace

UN forces start patrolling in South Lebanon

BEIRUT, May 26: Syria and Lebanon have pledged to respect the United Nations' role in Southern Lebanon, as Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak held out the hand of peace to Beirut.

In Lisbon late Thursday, Syrian Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara signalled that his country was opposed to any military escalation at Lebanon's border with Israel, telling AFP that Damascus "supports the UN and its role" in Lebanon.

Al-Shara made the comment on the sidelines of an informal ministerial meeting of European, in response to a question on the possible deployment of UN peacekeepers following the withdrawal of Israeli troops.

UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has recommended the UN Security Council boost the number of peacekeepers in Lebanon from 4,513 to 7,935 to help calm the situation.

Beirut vowed Thursday to swiftly restore its authority in the areas vacated by Israeli troops earlier this week.

Meanwhile Barak, while holding out the hand of peace, warned that both Beirut and Damascus would be held responsible for any attacks against Israel and would have to face the consequences.

"Israel extends her hand in peace with the hope of a better and joint future, better for the children of both peoples," Barak said. "Let us exploit this hour. Let us speak peace. Israel was not Lebanon's enemy."

He said the two countries had a "chance to turn the page" -- but it depended on Beirut and Damascus, one of the main sponsors of Hezbollah, which has 35,000 troops in Lebanon and acts as power broker.

In Beirut, UN special envoy Terje Rød-Larsen confirmed early Friday that he had received assurances during a meeting with Lebanese officials

that Beirut would comply with a UN decision on the delineation of the disputed land border.

His meetings had included Lebanese President Emile Lahoud and Prime Minister Salim Hoss.

His comments followed a pledge Thursday by Hoss that the government would swiftly restore its authority in southern Lebanon.

"We pledge to work for security and stability in this region, so that it may return to prosperity," Hoss told huge crowds in Khiam, site of a notorious jail run by Israel's proxy militia.

"All the services of the state will swiftly resume in this part of the homeland and will be placed at the service of the people," he promised.

As Hoss spoke 100 Lebanese paramilitary police returned to Christian villages where some residents suffered reprisals after Israel's pullout overnight Tuesday.

Another report says, United Nations peace troops in southern Lebanon have started patrolling in the former Israeli-occupied border zone, a senior officer told AFP today.

Ethiopia wants Eritrean army 'incapacitated'

OAU calls for fresh talks in Algiers

NAIROBI, May 26: Eritrea's army must be incapacitated before Ethiopia considers its political objectives in its war with Eritrea fulfilled, the Ethiopian ambassador said here today, reports AFP.

"Ethiopia would incapacitate the military machines of Eritrea for the better security in the sub-region," Tashome Toga told a news conference.

But Tashome stressed his country remained committed to an Organisation of African Unity (OAU) peace plan aimed at ending a two-year-old conflict.

The ambassador was speaking as Eritrea announced it would pull troops out of the last of areas disputed by the Horn of Africa neighbours, around the remote eastern border settlements of Bade and Burie, in line with the OAU plan.

The OAU said the withdrawal should end the fighting, which flared up dramatically May 12, and called for indirect peace

talks to resume Monday in Algiers.

Ethiopia continued to announce victories Friday, saying its forces had captured several towns in southern-central areas of Eritrea.

"We cannot believe that Eritrea has been baptised overnight," said Tashome, pointing out that the withdrawal call had been put to Asmara in 1998.

"We don't believe them. There is no way we can trust them," he said. "We must change their behaviour."

"Ethiopia would not stop the fighting until it makes sure that Eritrea is not a threat to (our) national security," the ambassador said.

"We cannot afford to be diverted from our development agenda."

Asked when Ethiopia would be ready to follow suit in the troop withdrawal process and leave the indisputably Eritrean town of Barentu, 170 kilomet-

ers (105 miles) west of Asmara, in line with the OAU plan, the ambassador declined to go into specifics, saying that this would be done "once our political objective is achieved."

The Eritrean military presence in Barentu is "part of the military operation," he said.

Meanwhile, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) has called on Ethiopia and Eritrea to resume indirect talks in Algiers on Monday aimed at ending a two-year-old border war.

The call follows Eritrea's signed pledge to withdraw from the last of areas disputed by the Horn of Africa neighbours, around Bade and Burie, on the east of their common border.

An OAU statement said Eritrea had agreed to attend the new meeting.

The last round of talks in Algiers collapsed on May 5, with each side blaming the other for the breakdown.



Indonesian students attack a military vehicle, shattering its windows and metal frame before setting it alight on one of Jakarta's main avenues yesterday. Bands of students rampaging through the capital stoned and burned military and police cars in apparent revenge for a police attack on anti-Suharto demonstrators the previous day. —AFP photo

Chechens kill 66 Russian troops in clashes

MOSCOW, May 26: Chechen fighters have killed at least 66 Russian soldiers in two separate clashes southeast of the rebel republic, chief Chechen spokesman Movladi Udugov told AFP in an interview early today.

A Chechen attack early Thursday on a Russian army base of 250 soldiers in Bet-Mohk, a village in the Nohai-Yurt region, left 46 Russians and two Chechens dead.

Eighty Chechens took part in the attack. One of the dead men was the commander in charge of the operation, Aslambek Khadzhiuradov, Udugov said.

Arthur C Clarke gets Knighthood

COLOMBO, May 26: Science fiction guru Arthur C. Clarke was presented with the "award of Knight Bachelor" by the British High Commissioner Linda Duffield at a ceremony here today, reports AFP.

Clarke, 82, was honoured with a knighthood in 1998 but he asked for the investiture ceremony to be postponed until he was cleared of charges of paedophilia in his adopted homeland of Sri Lanka.

He was to be knighted by Prince Charles who was the chief guest at Sri Lanka's golden jubilee celebrations here in February 1998, but the ceremony was put off indefinitely.

Clarke was due to travel to London earlier this year, but post polio syndrome prevented him from an overseas journey, his friends said.

About 60 prominent Sri Lankans attended the official ceremony at Westminister House, the residence of the British High Commissioner Duffield.

5 shot dead at NY fast food restaurant

NEW YORK, May 26: Two gunmen walked into a Wendy's fast-food restaurant in New York on Wednesday night, tied up seven employees, shot five dead and wounded the other two in a robbery, police said on Thursday, reports Reuters.

Police Commissioner Howard Safir told reporters that the gunmen, who were still at large Thursday afternoon, were known to one or more of the employees of the restaurant on Main Street, Flushing, in the borough of Queens.

A spokesman for Wendy's International based in Dublin, Ohio, said the company was increasing its reward for information leading to the arrest of the gunmen to \$50,000 from \$25,000. The NYPD said it was also offering a reward of \$10,000 as officers pursued leads in a massive manhunt.



A group of New Delhi women carrying earthen pots shout anti-government slogans during a protest in New Delhi yesterday over the shortage of water and electricity in the Indian capital and surrounding areas. There has been a severe scarcity of water along with occasional power cuts in Delhi since the beginning of the summer. —AFP photo

Vajpayee to reshuffle cabinet today

NEW DELHI, May 26: Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee will reshuffle his council of ministers tomorrow, reports PTL.

A few new faces are expected to be inducted and there may be change in the portfolios of some of the ministers, official sources said.

The present strength of the union council of ministers is 71 comprising 27 cabinet ministers, six ministers of state with independent charge and 38 ministers of state.

Biju Janata Dal chief Naveen Patnaik, who was minister for mines and minerals, resigned from his post to become chief minister of Orissa while Janata Dal (U) leader Nitish Kumar had quit when he staked claim for chief Ministership of Bihar after the assembly polls.

Sri Lankan govt's call to ex-soldiers Rejoin armed forces

LONDON, May 26: Sri Lanka urged retired officers to rejoin the armed forces as troops in northern Jaffna braced for the intensified attacks Tamil Tiger rebels threatened if they did not surrender by today, reports Reuters.

The Sri Lankan Defence Ministry in a statement issued in Colombo appealed to the country's youth to join and "assist" the armed forces and asked retired officers to rejoin for six months of voluntary service.

The statement also urged other ranks, below 50 years of age, and those who retired from the police, to re-enlist.

Those who returned would be posted in non-operational areas, allowing the government to shift serving soldiers on security duty in Colombo and elsewhere to the combat areas.

The call, which follows one to reservists to sign up, came as some 30,000 troops prepared for more Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) assaults in the war-torn Northern Jaffna peninsula.

The LTTE has given until Friday to the troops to surrender or face a "bloodbath" in the peninsula, the scene of fierce fighting for the past few weeks as the Tigers mounted an offensive to recapture the stronghold

they lost to the army in 1996.

Sri Lanka has said it would never withdraw troops from Jaffna.

Diplomatic efforts, led by Norwegian peace envoys, are continuing and US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Pickering is due in Colombo on Monday for talks with Sri Lankan leaders.

The LTTE has been fighting for a separate homeland for minority Tamils in Sri Lanka's north and east since 1983.

Military officials said by phone that while the two sides exchanged artillery and mortar fire, there was little other action on the war front on Friday.

BRIEFLY

Polls in Venezuela postponed:

Sunday's general elections in Venezuela have been postponed, Venezuela's Supreme Court chief justice Ivan Rincon said Thursday, AFP reports from Caracas.

Presidential, parliamentary and local elections have been beset by serious technical problems in the lead up to Sunday's vote, he explained.

Polish tourist shot dead in SA:

Disappointed hawkers shot dead a Pole spending his honeymoon in South Africa and raped his bride after driving her around in the boot of a car, police reported Thursday, AFP reports from Harburg.

The attack brought swift condemnation from Free State Safety and Security Minister Casca Mokotlane, who said the attacks "negate all values by which human beings live." Police said seven men selling clay figurines at the Sterkfontein Dam approached the couple shortly before sunset on Wednesday, and that when they did not buy anything one of the hawkers pulled out a gun, shot the 26-year-old man, and shoved his wife, also 26, into the boot of the couple's hired vehicle.

Narayanan's trip to help heal Sino-Indian ties

NEW DELHI, May 26: A state visit to China by Indian President K.R. Narayanan next week will help heal ties, bruised by New Delhi's nuclear tests and its charges of Chinese help for Pakistan's nuclear programme, experts say, reports AFP.

Narayanan will pay a week-long visit beginning Sunday on an invitation by President Jiang Zemin, who toured India four years ago.

The trip is to be the highlight of ongoing events marking 50 years of diplomatic ties between the world's most populous countries.

India sees this trip as a positive move to improve relations with China especially after what happened in the past two

Anti-Suharto protesters burn army vehicles in Jakarta

JAKARTA, May 26: Bands of anti-Suharto Indonesian students rampaged through central Jakarta today, stoning and burning military and police vehicles, reports AFP.

The action was apparently in revenge for Thursday's police attack on students protesting against the country's former ruler.

An AFP reporter saw at least five vehicles, one sedan, one mini-van, a navy bus and two utility vehicles burning in the streets. There were no immediate reports of casualties.

Hundreds of onlookers gathered to watch the students as they formed human roadblocks, allowing only cars

without military or police plates to pass through.

A police intelligence officer said the students were ordering the occupants of vehicles with military or police plates out of their cars, stoning the vehicles and burning them.

"Some of the students rescued the people in the cars and took them to safety," he said.

Shortly before midday there was confusion on Diponegoro boulevard in the plush Menteng area, with crowds of hundreds mulling around, students manning a barbed wire roadblock which halted traffic on the thoroughfare and the vehicles still lying on the road.

Jet hijacker failed to open parachute in Philippines

MANILA, May 26: An armed man who tried to escape after hijacking a Philippine Airlines (PAL) Airbus plunged 6,000 feet (1,818 metres) to his death after he failed to open his homemade parachute, officials said today, reports AFP.

He allegedly also had difficulties getting out of the rear exit door of the A330-300 jet.

A controversy arose from the aftermath of Thursday's bizarre hijacking when the plane's crew initially told reporters after their ordeal that they had pushed out the hijacker after he apparently had an attack of nerves in taking the plunge.

"I don't think it was strapped on well," Abner Royo, an officer on duty at the police station in

Real town told AFP by telephone, referring to the homemade parachute.

Asked if the PAL crew faced possible criminal charges, Royo said he "cannot say, I don't know the situation."

A local official in the town said a plane circling and then "saw something fall" from the sky, adding that the parachute was recovered in another area from where the body fell.

The airline identified the hijacker as Augusto Lacandola. Police said the body was en route to Manila for autopsy.

PAL spokesman Rolando Estabillio disputed reports that the hijacker, who was armed with a pistol and a grenade, was pushed out the plane against will