

International

Fiji president suspends govt

SUVA, May 27 - Fiji President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara today dismissed the civilian government being held hostage by armed coup plotters leaving himself as sole authority of the South Pacific nation, reports AFP.

Speaking at a press conference here, the Fiji president said he had sacked the elected government of Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and appointed a caretaker administration.

The leader of the caretaker government appointed by Mara - acting prime minister Ratu Tevita Momoedonu - immediately resigned, leaving the president as Fiji's sole authority.

Parliament would be suspended for the next six months, Mara said, adding that his actions were allowed under Fiji's constitution.

On May 19 part of Fiji's business group seized the Fiji Parliament and took Chaudhry and more

than 30 government politicians prisoner. There was no immediate reaction from Speight to the latest announcement.

Mara's moves came in a day when Speight's men provoked a shoot out on the main road outside Parliament, wounding two government soldiers and a cameraman from Associated Press Television. None of their injuries were life threatening.

Mara said it was "highly likely" that Speight and six others would be given immunity from prosecution.

In another development the head of the Fiji Military Forces Frank Bainimarama said they understood the feelings of the soldiers but did not support the means being adopted in the current crisis.

But only a "handful" of special forces were involved.

"There is total support for His Excellency the President," Mara told a press conference that he had been trying to make contact with Chaudhry

for two hours Friday. This was unsuccessful.

"Therefore I was looking for and I think I have found a constitutionally alternative viable route through the crisis," Mara said.

There was a section in the constitution providing for the removal of a minister who is unable to perform his functions.

"I think there can be little doubt now, given the existing hostage crisis, that the present Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry is not only absent from duty, but is also unable to perform the functions of his office."

He was obliged to appoint an existing minister as caretaker prime minister, and several had avoided being taken prisoner.

Momoedonu was approached and told he would be appointed briefly and would then be expected to resign to give Mara a clean slate and "enable me to provide unfettered executive authority."

A caretaker prime minister would be appointed by Monday along with a Council of Advisers. He said Speight, who was not a member of parliament, could not be caretaker, while former Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka would continue to have a place in advising the government.

He termed it a move that "will release all the ministers who are under arrest from their responsibility and possibly remove the grounds under which they are being held hostages."

"They are no longer ministers. I am the only person who is governing the country."

Speight is also demanding Mara's resignation before he released the hostages.

"Some of the steps I have taken may be considered by the hostage takers and they may review their thoughts about whether they should be kept under or released."

"They want to remove me, I cannot consider that is possible under the present circum-

stances. I have been given a responsibility by the Council of Chiefs to carry on and I am carrying on."

He said he was slow in acting because he wanted to be sure he was acting within the constitution and he was still within it. "I want to make absolutely certain that I stayed within the constitution. It will be on the edge but I am still within it."

Mara said he believed the Commonwealth and the world would react "very badly" to his moves.

He said two thirds of Fiji's trade was with Australia and if that was cut "that is two thirds of our life blood."

Bainimarama in a separate earlier press conference said the army was loyal to the president and the GCC.

He denied there was any significance in the failure of the army to fire at those firing at soldiers.

"The dissident group used the protection of the crowd and the army can do nothing."



Visiting US Undersecretary of State Thomas Pickering (L) hugs Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar before a meeting in Islamabad yesterday. Pickering urged both India and Pakistan to reduce violence in Kashmir and open talks to resolve their disputes. — AFP photo

Israel closes northern border for one month

METULLA, Israel, May 27 - The Israeli army today closed a zone along its northern border in an apparent bid to prevent any flare-up following its evacuation from South Lebanon, reports AFP.

Military officers distributed a statement declaring the area a "closed military zone" which it said would be closed for a month to civilians and journalists.

The move mirrored that undertaken by UN peacekeeping troops on the Lebanese side of the frontier, who barred Lebanese from approaching the internationally-recognized frontier.

Following Israel's withdrawal from south Lebanon on Wednesday, crowds of Lebanese supporters had gathered at the border fence to taunt, threaten and insult Israelis for the 22-year occupation.

6 suspected Maoist rebels killed in Nepal

KATHMANDU, May 27 - Police gunned down six suspected members of a Maoist rebel group that is trying to overthrow the Himalayan kingdom's constitutional monarchy, a police official said today, reports Reuters.

The rebels, including a woman, were killed in an hour-long gunbattle on Friday at Urma village in Kailali district, about 500 km (312 miles) west of the capital Kathmandu.

"Six bodies have been recovered from the site of the clash. One has been identified as a local Maoist leader," police official Ramkaji Bantawa told Reuters.

There was no immediate comment from the rebel group.

More than 1,300 people have been killed in Maoist-related violence across Nepal since the start of its campaign in early 1996.

Foday Sankoh to be put on trial

FREETOWN, May 27 - Rebel leader Foday Sankoh, whose fighters have captured hundreds of UN peacekeepers and plunged Sierra Leone into bloody conflict, will be put on trial, President Ahmed Tejan Kabbah told the BBC Friday, reports AFP.

"Sankoh has done something wrong, he is going to be tried and if he is found wanting in any way, he is in violation of our laws. I don't see that he can claim any rights under that agreement (the Lome peace accord)," said Kabbah.

The president said Sankoh would be tried "pretty soon... we're in the process of putting together that evidence, we hope to accelerate that process, we do not want to deny justice or delay it."

AI concerned at Russian threats to Afghanistan

MOSCOW, May 27 - Amnesty International is concerned that there will be an escalation of the war in Afghanistan following Moscow's threats to bomb suspected terrorist camps, the London-based human rights organisation said in a communique released here today, reports AFP.

Moscow accuses Afghanistan's Islamic government, the Taliban, of training guerrillas fighting Russian federal troops in separatist Chechnya.

Amnesty said it was "concerned there will be a further escalation of war Afghanistan resulting in more human rights violations following this week's warning from Russia's Defence Minister (Igor Sergeev) and other senior officials that Russia will resort to aerial bombing of Afghanistan to crush suspected Chechen armed opposition training camps."

It said the warning evoked memories of "massive human rights violations during the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989 which resulted in the death of thousands of defenceless women, men and children and an exodus of one fifth of the population."

Nepalese king appoints HR Commission

KATHMANDU, May 27 - King Birendra of Nepal has appointed a Human Rights Commission following recommendations by the prime minister, chief justice and opposition leader, state radio announced today, reports AFP.

Differences of opinion between Prime Minister G.P. Koirala and opposition leader Madhav Kumar Nepal, delayed the appointment for more than 18 months, a Nepal Communist Party source said.

The Human Rights Organisation-Nepal (HRO-N), Amnesty International and the UN Human Rights Commission have been pressurising the government to appoint the commission, sources said.

The body is expected to help protect those caught in the crossfire during clashes between police and Maoist insurgents throughout the country.

Iranian MPs urged to heal economy, support Islam

TEHRAN, May 27 - President Mohammad Khatami called on the new parliament at its inaugural session today to help heal Iran's sick economy and establish "social justice" while supreme leader Ali Khamenei urged them to thwart the enemies of Islam, reports AFP.

Khatami also asked in his speech for "all the MPs," those who back his reform efforts as well as minority conservatives, to pitch in, and to help avoid "artificial political crises."

"We must be able to act 'in a climate of trust, away from artificial crises which have done us harm both inside Iran and abroad,'" he said.

Since the moderate Khatami's own election three years ago, the country has been racked by conflict between dominant conservatives and resurgent reformists, who won a large majority in February parliamentary elections.

The parliament must "help the government correct the country's administrative bureaucracy and cooperate perfectly to heal Iran's sick economy and establish social justice," said Khatami, whose powers are limited in realms such as foreign affairs.

Another virus spreading through e-mail systems

WASHINGTON, May 27 - A new and dangerous computer virus in spreading through e-mail systems using Microsoft Outlook, the FBI said, reports AP.

Anti-virus industry sources were reporting that a number of corporate e-mail systems had already been infected, and some shut down, the FBI's National Infrastructure Protection Centre said Friday night.

The virus is carried in e-mail with the subject "Resume - Janet Simons" and once opened, spreads to everyone in a user's e-mail address book. It also attempts to delete a number of files on the user's system.

Anti-virus industry sources are reporting that a number of corporate e-mail systems have already been infected, and some shut down, according to a statement issued Friday night by the FBI's National Infrastructure Protection Centre.

The FBI is advising computer users to not open any e-mail with this subject line, to deactivate the executive summary feature in Microsoft Outlook, and then delete the e-mail

without opening it. The anti-virus industry is working on software patches to stop the virus, the FBI said.

The warning said the virus could spread over the next three days, with a potentially rapid surge in activity as business opens overseas on Monday and in the United States on Tuesday, after the Memorial Day holiday weekend.

The Symantec AntiVirus Research Center said the virus was "extremely fast-spreading computer worm that uses Microsoft Outlook to e-mail itself as an attachment."

"Symantec said the e-mail message containing the virus reads: 'To Director of Sales/Marketing, attached is my resume with a list of references contained within. Please feel free to call or e-mail me if you have any further questions regarding my experience. I am looking forward to hearing from you.'"

Sincerely, Janet Simons." Earlier this month, the spread of a computer virus that

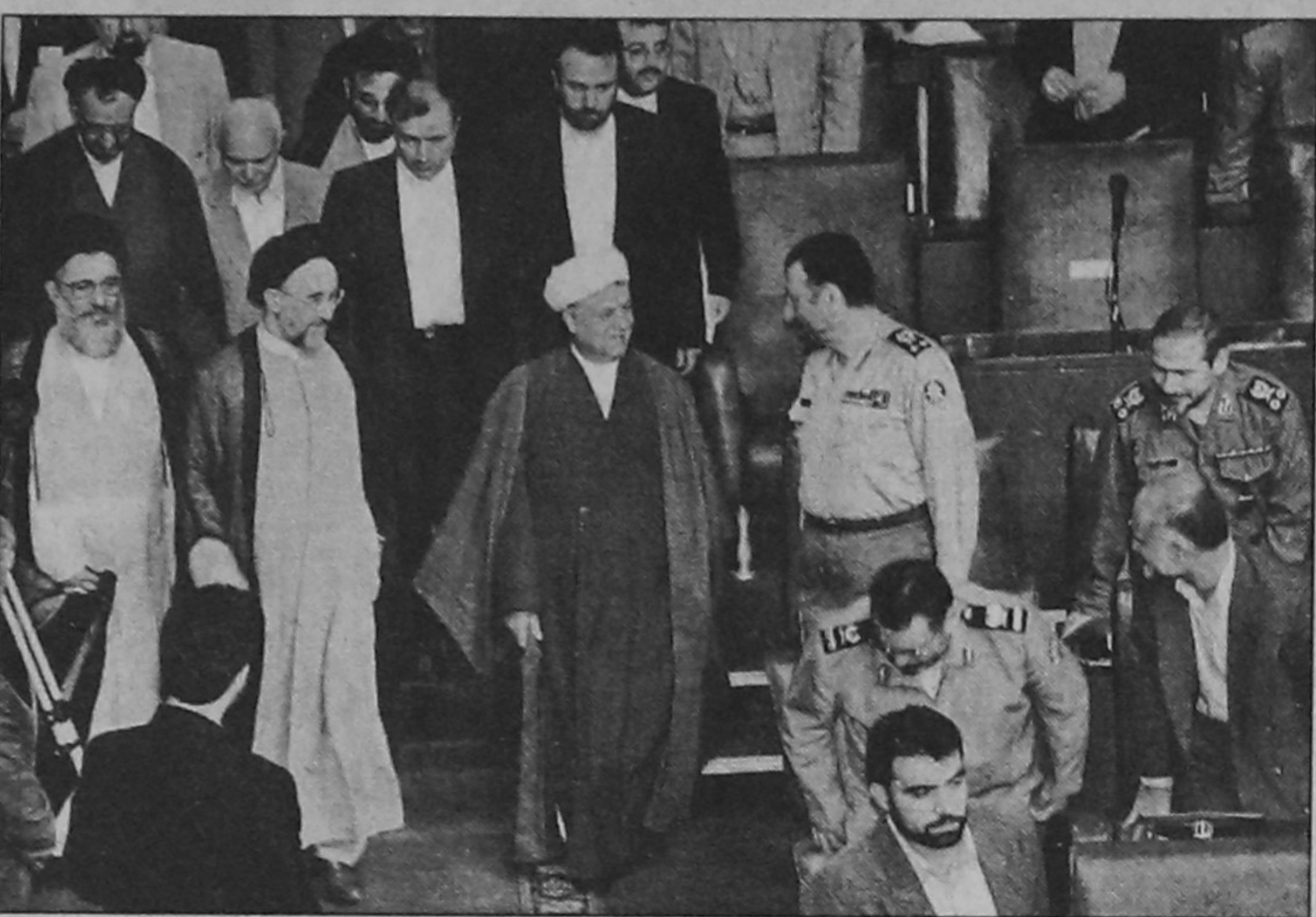
could have done more damage than the "Love Bug" was slowed by US companies that had strengthened their defenses against attacks from the Internet.

The virus, dubbed "NewLove," infected thousands of computers around the world, but failed to become an epidemic like the Love Bug that reached millions three weeks ago.

Safeguards put in place on corporate e-mail systems against the earlier virus stopped NewLove's spread. The FBI said the virus shared some characteristics with the Love Bug and have launched a search for the creator.

The Love Bug arrived in e-mails with an "ILOVEYOU" subject line that enticed millions of recipients to open the attachment that activated the virus. Once news of the threat spread, infected e-mails were easily detected and deleted.

Estimates of the damage caused by that virus range up to \$10 billion, mostly in lost work time.



Iran's Chief Justice Ayatollah Mahmud Hashemi-Shahrudi (L), Iranian President Mohammad Khatami (2nd L), former Iranian president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (3rd L), who resigned his seat last week before even taking it up, Iran's new Army Chief Mohammad Salimi (2nd R) and Chief of Revolutionary Guardians Yahia Rahim Safavi (R) attend the inaugural session of Iran's new parliament yesterday in Tehran. Khatami called on the new parliament to help heal Iran's sick economy and establish "social justice." — AFP photo

Pakistan to consolidate nuclear capability to deter aggression

ISLAMABAD, May 27 - Pakistan on Friday said it would consolidate its nuclear capability to deter aggression, an official statement said, reports AFP.

The decision was taken at the first meeting of the recently set up National Command Authority (NCA) chaired by military ruler General Pervez Musharraf, the statement said.

Described as the apex decision-making body for the command and control of strategic forces, NCA consists of cabinet ministers, chiefs of the three services and senior Pakistani scientists.

At its inaugural session it "resolved to consolidate Pakistan's nuclear capability to deter aggression," the official Associated Press of Pakistan quoted an official spokesman as saying.

At the same time the NCA reaffirmed Pakistan's "nuclear policy of responsibility and restraint, consistent with its obligations

as a de facto nuclear power," the spokesman said in a statement.

He said the meeting discussed a number of policy issues including proposals relating to command, control and restructuring of strategic organizations.

NCA was established in February when officials said it would be responsible for policy formulation and would "exercise employment and development control over all strategic nuclear forces and strategic organizations."

Friday's meeting decided the NCA would meet frequently to deliberate on major policy issues related to the country's nuclear capability, the spokesman said.

The meeting came ahead of Sunday's second anniversary of Pakistan's nuclear weapons tests in reaction to similar blasts by arch-rival India on May 11, 1998.

The new nuclear states,

locked in a 52-year-old dispute over Kashmir, which has triggered two wars since they gained independence in 1947, have not signed the global Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.

Pakistan has declared a moratorium on further nuclear tests.

General Musharraf on Thursday said Pakistan was not preparing to conduct fresh nuclear tests. But he said "if India does it we should not be stopped."

The NCA meeting coincided with the current visit of United States Undersecretary of State Thomas Pickering to Islamabad for talks on peace and security in the region and Pakistan-US relations.

Officials said Pakistan assured the US official its nuclear policy was based on "restraint and responsibility" and that it was committed to not exporting nuclear technology to any other country or entity.

Formal talks for release of hostages begin

BANDANG, Philippines, May 27 - Government negotiators and Abu Sayyaf leaders met in their first formal talks today for the release of 21 mostly foreign hostages being held by the Filipino Muslim rebel group, reports AFP.

The negotiators and the (Abu Sayyaf) met for the formal meeting to secure the release of the 21 hostages and study the demands of the rebels, "a close aide of top government negotiator Roberto Aventado told reporters.

The talks are being held in Bandang village near Talipao town where the rebels fled on Friday from Patikul with the hostages.

Talipao and Patikul towns, about 10 km apart, are coastal towns on Jolo island, where the hostages have been held since they were abducted from the Malaysian resort of Sipadan on April 23.

The Abu Sayyaf, who are fighting for an independent state in the southern Philippines, are holding nine

Malaysians, a German family of three, a French couple, two Finns, a South African couple, two Filipinos and a Lebanese.

Earlier Abu Sayyaf Muslim rebels holding 21 mostly foreign hostages agreed to meet Philippines government negotiators today, a day after abruptly cancelling their first round of talks for the release of the captives.

A convoy led by government negotiators and Islamic elders as well as dozens of journalists headed to a coastal village in southern Jolo island where the long delayed talks would be held, officials said.

"The meeting will proceed this afternoon," said a spokesman for a group of eight Muslim theologians, or *Ulamas*, who went to the rebels' jungle base to help lure them to the negotiating table.

Scheduled talks between the Abu Sayyaf and state negotiators were scrapped Friday when the guerrillas broke camp and fled with their captives to a new base after reportedly being unnerved by a large military.



Burmese pro-democracy activists take part in a demonstration in New Delhi yesterday against the military regime of Myanmar (the former Burma). Exiled supporters of Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi are actively campaigning in India for the restoration of democracy in their country. — AFP photo

Colombo brushes aside Tigers' truce offer

COLOMBO, May 27 - Sri Lanka's military today brushed aside a truce offered by Tamil Tiger guerrillas and vowed to defend the northern peninsula of Jaffna against a major rebel offensive, reports AFP.

The rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) said from their office in London they will observe a 12-hour truce in the Thienmarachi sector of the Jaffna peninsula today to allow civilians to leave the area.

The rebel offer was also announced over the guerrillas' clandestine Voice of Tigers radio late Friday.

"What ceasefire, we are not going to take note of what is said over Voice of Tigers," military spokesman Fernando said adding his headquarters had not been told of a ceasefire by any humanitarian agency either.

The LTTE statement said that the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) had requested Sri Lankan armed forces to cease "armed activities in Thienmarachi during this specified period."

The Tiger statement said they had approached the Inter-

national Committee of the Red Cross and other human rights organisations in the peninsula to help evacuate civilians to safe areas.

However, the ICRC denied they had been approached.

"We have not been approached either by the LTTE or the government to evacuate civilians," ICRC spokesman Harsha Gnanwardena said here.

Meanwhile, a top army general, Jaanaka Perera, said the military was pushing back the LTTE in the Jaffna peninsula,

Indian PM inducts 3 ministers to Cabinet

NEW DELHI, May 27 - Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee today said he was adding three more ministers to the jumbo-sized Cabinet of his coalition government, reports AFP.

Indian President K.R. Narayanan swore in Nitish Kumar and Arjun Sethi as cabinet ministers and appointed Braja Kishore Tripathy in a junior post in an independent charge.

Vajpayee described the expansion as "minor changes" and said Kumar would retain his earlier portfolio of agriculture. He did not specify the department allotted to Sethi.

Kumar, a firebrand politician, quit his cabinet job in

Suu Kyi vows to keep fighting for democracy

YANGON, May 27 - Aung San Suu Kyi today vowed to keep fighting for democracy in Myanmar, as riot police surrounded her party headquarters on the 10th anniversary of its nullified election victory, reports AFP.

The streets of Yangon were quiet and there were no signs of large protests, witnesses said, but security was tight at National League for Democracy (NLD) headquarters.

The Yangon regime had erected barricades in front of the building, where members commemorated the anniversary of the landslide election victory which was overturned by the military.

Ethiopia determined to end war with Eritrea

ADDIS ABABA, May 27 - Ethiopia is determined to end its war with neighbouring Eritrea and focus its resources on development, President Negasso Gidada told today's government press, reports AFP.

"Ethiopia is determined to bring an end to the war with Eritrea and redirect its resources to development programmes," the president said Friday, three days before indirect peace talks are due to resume in Algiers and as fighting was continuing in southern areas of Eritrea.

Ethiopia's ambassador to Kenya told AFP on Friday that Ethiopia would continue fighting Eritrea until its neighbour no longer posed a threat to Ethiopia's security and said this meant "incapacitating" the Eritrean army.

Since an episodic border war resumed May 12, as much of the Horn of Africa was affected by drought, Ethiopia has taken control of all areas it lays claim to along the middle of its border with Eritrea, which has pledged to pull its troops from disputed areas along the eastern end of the frontier.

15 killed, 20 hurt in Indian lorry accident

HYDERABAD, India, May 27 - Fifteen people including eight children, were killed and 20 injured when a lorry overturned in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh today, police said, reports Reuters.

The lorry, carrying about 40 people, overturned while negotiating a sharp turn near Nellore, about 500 km (304 miles) southeast of the state capital Hyderabad, police spokesman Shujath Ali said.

The victims were sitting on the sand-filled vehicle, he said. The injured have been moved to Nellore district hospital.

Ethiopia determined to end war with Eritrea

ADDIS ABABA, May 27 - Ethiopia is determined to end its war with neighbouring Eritrea and focus its resources on development, President Negasso Gidada told today's government press, reports AFP.

"Ethiopia is determined to bring an end to the war with Eritrea and redirect its resources to development programmes," the president said Friday, three days before indirect peace talks are due to resume in Algiers and as fighting was continuing in southern areas of Eritrea.

Ethiopia's ambassador to Kenya told AFP on Friday that Ethiopia would continue fighting Eritrea until its neighbour no longer posed a threat to Ethiopia's security and said this meant "incapacitating" the Eritrean army.

Since an episodic border war resumed May 12, as much of the Horn of Africa was affected by drought, Ethiopia has taken control of all areas it lays claim to along the middle of its border with Eritrea, which has pledged to pull its troops from disputed areas along the eastern end of the frontier.

UK charity clears 2,500 mines from Georgia-Abkhazia border

MOSCOW, May 27 - The British anti-landmine humanitarian organisation, the Halo Trust, has cleared over 2,500 landmines from the Georgian-Abkhaz border, regional coordinator Richard Boulter said Friday, reports AFP.

The operation to clear the landmines from the Gali district and the Gumista river-bank in Abkhazia's Sukhumi district took two years, Russian news agency ITAR-TASS reported.

The areas were littered with mines during a 15-month conflict, triggered in 1992 when Georgia's Abkhazian province declared its independence.

PLANE CRASHES IN PHILIPPINES

A small plane with four people aboard crashed on a mountain in the northern Philippines and there were no signs of survivors, officials said Saturday. AP reports from Manila.

A report by the Air Transportation Office said the single-engine Cessna "apparently slammed into the slopes" of the heavily forested Susong Dalaga mountain at 4,800 feet (1,454 metres).

3 killed in Aceh

Three civilians were killed in an anti-rebel operation in Aceh, Indonesia's strife-torn province on the northern tip of Sumatra island, a military spokesman said Saturday. AP reports from Banda Aceh.

The victims were shot dead when Indonesian troops raided a rebel hideout on Friday in Krueg Sabie district in West Aceh, said the spokesman, Lt Col Widhagdo. He said all three were members of the separatist Free Aceh Movement.