

International

Army revokes constitution

Speight can walk free: Fiji military chief

SUVA, May 30: Army commander Frank Bainimarama revoked Fiji's multi-racial constitution today a day after declaring martial law, but coup leaders refused to recognise his authority, citing splits in the military, reports AFP.

Bainimarama said the 1997 constitution allowing all races equal access to power under which captive Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, an ethnic Indian, won a landslide victory a year ago had been "wholly removed."

The Fiji Military Force (FMF) chief assumed executive authority Monday in a bid to restore order after coup leader George Speight seized parliament on May 19 in the name of indigenous Fijians and took Chaudhry and most of his government hostage.

In a series of decrees, Bainimarama ordered the South Pacific nation's existing laws stay in place, and that parts of the constitution relating to the operation of government be reinstated.

On Monday he clamped down on the coup plotters holding Chaudhry and others at gunpoint in parliament, saying that under martial law, movement in and out of the building would be restricted to essential supplies.

But the reality outside the complex Tuesday was markedly different - there were no soldiers or police within two kilometres and Speight's supporters were coming and going more freely than ever.

Bus loads of supporters also

entered unchallenged. Road blocks were set up around the capital, but mostly in non-sensitive areas, suggesting soldiers were attempting to avoid clashes with the rebel gunmen.

Suva's inner city was sealed off during the afternoon after the military said a group of men left parliament and began rampaging through a nearby residential area.

"They are beating up people. Go," a soldier manning a checkpoint told AFP reporters.

Speight, who has wide support for his anti-Indian stance from indigenous Fijians who resent ethnic Indian business success, Tuesday firmly rejected the new military government and refused to release his hostages.

He said the regime had no authority to govern because it did not have the united backing of the armed forces.

Meanwhile, Fiji coup leader George Speight will be granted an amnesty after the country's political crisis is over, military chief Commodore Frank Bainimarama, who declared martial law on Monday, said Tuesday.

Speight and a gang of armed men have been holding former prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry and some 30 other legislators hostage in parliament since May 19.

Bainimarama described Speight's actions as a "criminal act," but he said that he would nevertheless honour an offer of amnesty made to Speight by the country's president, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara.



Troops loyal to Fijian military commander Frank Bainimarama enforce a check-point on the approach to Parliament House in Suva yesterday where coup leader George Speight continues to hold former prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry and 30 others hostage. - AFP photo

Tobacco claims lives of 6 lakh Indians every yr

NEW DELHI, May 30: Tobacco claims the lives of 600,000 people every year in India, home to one-fifth of the world's 1.2 billion tobacco users, the World Health Organization (WHO) warned here today, reports AFP.

The WHO, which plans to observe Wednesday as a No-Tobacco Day, also said 55,000 Indian children are addicted to the product every year.

"India has 240 million tobacco users who represent nearly one-third of the 0.8 billion tobacco users in the developing world. The deaths account for 15 per cent of global tobacco deaths," it said.

The decision to smoke "is influenced by tobacco industry's promotion," WHO Director-General Gro Harlem Brundtland said in a message.

"What makes all this unacceptable and treacherous is that this dangerous and addictive product is sold to youth and adolescents as an assertion of their freedom to choose," she said.

Clinton begins Europe tour

LISBON, May 30: US President Bill Clinton arrived in Lisbon at the start of a week-long trip to Europe that will also take him to Berlin, Moscow, and Kiev, Ukraine, reports AP.

Air Force One landed at Lisbon's military airport under blue skies at 7:50 am (12:50 BST). He was met by Prime Minister Antonio Guterres and Foreign Minister Jaime Gama.

During his three-day stay in Lisbon, Clinton is to discuss the fight against AIDS, ways of boosting e-commerce and trade and security issues with senior European Union officials.

After resting at his hotel, he was due to spend most of Tuesday executing ceremonial duties.

He was to be met by Portuguese President Jorge Sampaio at Belem Tower, a monument to Portugal's 15th-century explorers on Lisbon's Tagus River, lay a wreath at the tomb of Luis Vaz de Camoes, Portugal's 16th-century national poet, and tour the Jeronimos Monastery, whose dates back to 1501 and is today a United Nations world heritage site.

Taiwan plans to test fire missiles

TAIPEI, May 30: Taiwan's new Defence Minister Wu Shih-wen said today the military planned to test fire its Patriot missile defence system as a counter to what he said was China's continued military build-up, reports AFP.

He did not go into details, but the Taipei-based China Times has quoted a defence ministry source as saying the Patriot missiles would be tested at a base at Chiupeng in southern Taiwan in September next year.

"A tactical test and evaluation team from the US would be present at the venue," the paper said.

Wu confirmed the new Taiwanese government under former pro-independence leader President Chen Shui-bian had held talks on the issue with Washington.

Students selling sex to pay fees in Australia

PERTH, Australia, May 30: A growing number of university students have turned to prostitution to help pay fees, a sex worker support agency said Tuesday, reports AFP.

The manager of the western Australian Phoenix support agency, Felicity Lewis, said students struggling to meet government bills for their courses were attracted by the pay and flexible hours.

"They don't want to end up with a huge debt," she said. "Sex work has always been a viable option and a lot more men, as well as women, have taken it up in the past 10 years."

She gave as an example a 23-year-old woman accounting student who earned between 300 and 600 dollars (171 and 342 US) for an average shift.

One brothel owner was said to have estimated that up to half of her workers were students.

Indian president calls on China to aid UN reform

BEIJING, May 30: Indian President K.R. Narayanan urged China today to help India push for reform of the UN Security Council to make the body more democratic, reports AFP.

Speaking to students at Beijing University on the third day of his state visit, Narayanan said China and India represented 40 per cent of humanity and the Security Council needed to be expanded to reflect this reality.

"There is a pressing need for the United Nations to be democratised and reformed reflecting the contemporary realities of the world," said Narayanan, whose post is largely ceremonial.

The United Nations Security Council should be expanded and made more representative so that the aspirations of all humanity can be effectively accommodated and realised."

Narayanan, who held wide-ranging talks with Chinese President Jiang Zemin on Monday, said China and India should push for the "democratic transformation" of the world body.

India has long been campaigning for a permanent seat on the five-member Security Council which currently groups Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States.

Narayanan added that India and China needed to work together to preserve their great civilisations and prevent the domination of Western culture.

"It is our deep-rooted cultures that can withstand the all-devouring uniformity of the globalised cultural patterns



Indian President Kocheil Narayanan (R) introduces his delegation of Indian officials to China's National Peoples' Congress Chairman Li Peng yesterday during meetings in Beijing. Narayanan, on a week-long state visit to China, urged China to help India push for reform of the UN Security Council to make the body more democratic. - AFP photo

that threaten to overwhelm us from the West," he said.

Referring to a long-running border dispute, Narayanan said it was "perhaps inevitable" the two countries would have some differences.

But he reiterated comments made with Jiang on Monday that both countries were committed to speeding up negotiations to find a "fair, reasonable and mutually acceptable settlement" of the dispute.

The two nations have com-

licting claims over stretches of land across the Himalayan state of Kashmir, currently divided between India and Pakistan, and the far eastern Indian state of Arunachal Pradesh.

Narayanan, who is due to meet parliament chairman Li Peng later Tuesday, arrived on Sunday for a week-long visit that will also take him to the northeastern city of Dalian and the southwestern city of Kunming.

Japan's leader plunges in poll, faces censure

TOKYO, May 30: Japan's struggling Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori crashed in the popularity polls and faced a resignation demand today, just weeks before a general election, reports AFP.

Approval for Mori's gaffe-prone, two-month-old administration slumped to 19 per cent in May from 42 per cent in April, according to the poll by the respected Asahi Shimbun newspaper.

It was the lowest support rate for any government in more than a decade, said the newspaper. Meanwhile the opposition scored a censure in the upper house of parliament, demanding the prime minister quit for having described Japan as a divine nation centred on the emperor.

Although the motion was expected to be defeated at a vote Wednesday in the upper House

of Councillors, it amounted to a symbolic slap in the face for the 62-year-old Mori.

"Without waiting for a dissolution and general election, Mori's cabinet must immediately resign," said a copy of the parliamentary motion received by AFP.

Mori has agreed with his ruling alliance partners to call a general election for June 25.

But he has weathered a storm of criticism for declaring at a pro-Shinto meeting on May 15 that "Japan is God's country," centred on the emperor, a statement reminiscent of Japan's wartime past.

Shinto became the national religion in the 19th century and elevated the emperor to the status of a living god in whose name Japan pursued military aggression across Asia.

His popularity had already been battered by a series of scandals since he took power

Elian likely to return home, resume life quietly

HAVANA, May 30: If the most famous child in Cuba returns to his homeland, he is likely to slip in quietly without the crowds, the cheers and the media frenzy of his time in the United States, reports AP.

Very few people are expected to get a glimpse of Elian Gonzalez, the first-grader lionized here as the "boy hero," the "symbolic child," the beloved "elfin prince." A national campaign that plastered the 6-year-old's face across billboards, placards and T-shirts will probably fade overnight.

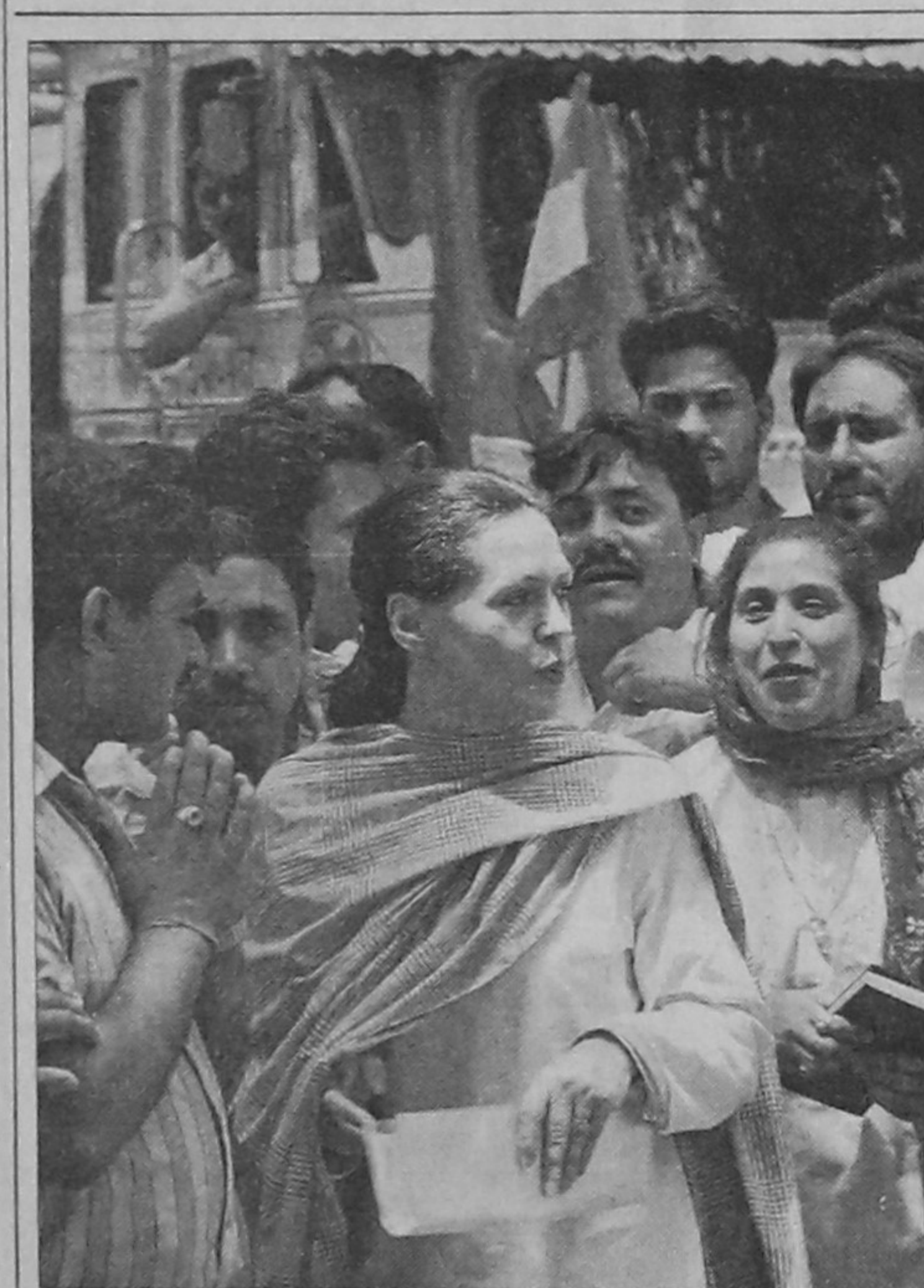
Months ago, President Fidel Castro promised there would be no street celebrations, no parades. Foreign correspondents have been warned they will be lucky to see Elian's plane if his father wins permission from US courts to bring his son home.

Plans had called for Elian to live discreetly during his first

three months back in a specially prepared boarding school in Havana. Elian's Cuban family and first-grade classmates were to live there, too. But government sources now say privately that the boarding school plan, designed to help Elian readapt to life in Cuba, is being rethought.

After his time in Maryland and Washington, DC with his father, stepmother, half brother, Cuban teachers and classmates, Elian probably now would go directly to his former life in his hometown of Cardenas, 100-km east of Havana.

Family friends say Elian is catching up in his studies after five months of interrupted classes while staying with relatives in Miami. He recently learned to ride a bike and went swimming without fear, despite the boating accident that killed his mother and 100 others and left him adrift on an inner tube.



Congress (I) Party leader Sonia Gandhi (C) is surrounded by supporters as she flags off a convoy of water-tankers bound for drought-stricken areas of Rajasthan yesterday. The convoy, composed of ten trucks, carrying a total of 130,000 liters of water will head to Rajasthan, which is suffering from an acute water-shortage. - AFP photo

50 killed in violence in Maluku Islands

JAKARTA, May 30: At least 50 people were killed and scores wounded in the second Muslim attacks on two Christian villages in Indonesia's North Maluku Islands in five days, reports said today, says AFP.

The Jakarta Post quoted the deputy chief of the Galela-based Synod of Churches, Reverend Biso, as saying that 50 died and 102 were injured in the pre-dawn attacks on the two villages on Halmahera Island on Monday.

But area commander Brigadier General Mx Tamaela said the death toll in the Galela district villages of Makete and Duma at 44, the Post said. Tamaela said he had ordered

reinforcements of troops and marines to secure the villages.

The attackers mostly came from the island of Ternate and were investigating all the facts and the possibility of the alleged involvement of the Laksar Jihad," Tamaela was quoted as saying.

He was referring to some 2,000 radical Muslim militant "Jihad warriors" who have sailed from Java to the Maluku Islands in the past month to reinforce Muslim militants in a year of sectarian violence there.

Biso said the attackers used the same pattern as they did on May 25, when they swooped down on the sleeping villagers from the sea.

55 slain as Philippine seizes Muslim guerilla camp

COTABATO, Philippines, May 30: Government forces have overrun a key Muslim guerilla camp in the southern Philippines after three days of fighting which left 55 people dead, military spokesmen said today, reports AFP.

Camp Bushra, the second largest training base of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), was captured on Monday and soldiers raised the Philippine flag inside the camp. Major Johnny Macanas told reporters.

The three-day air and ground assault left 43 MILF rebels and four soldiers dead, he added.

The camp covers the mainly Muslim towns of Butig, Lumbatan and Binidayan in the southern island of Mindanao.

Russia accuses Bin Laden of backing rebels in its breakaway republic of Chechnya resume peace talks in this southern city. The 15,000-member MILF is seeking to establish an Islamic state

UK restores power-sharing govt in N Ireland

BELFAST, May 30: Northern Ireland regained a measure of self-rule today, giving the province's Protestant and Catholic leaders another chance to achieve a lasting peace, reports AP.

Britain handed back powers at midnight Monday to the four-party Cabinet and the Assembly created as part of the landmark 1998 peace agreement.

"We hope these institutions will take root," Ulster Unionist Party leader David Trimble told a news conference Monday at Stormont, the government's Belfast headquarters.

"Certainly, for our part we will do everything we can to maximise the opportunity here for people."

This is the second time in six months that Britain has ended its direct rule and returned

power to local hands.

The Ulster Unionists' narrow approval Saturday of a return to Catholic-Protestant power-sharing cleared the way for Britain to restore the administrative authority it suspended in February, just 11 weeks into its existence.

Britain's top minister for Northern Ireland, Peter Mandelson, had pulled the plug on the power-sharing administration - started in December - after the Irish Republican Army refused to make any disarmament commitments.

The IRA broke the impasse three weeks ago, promising to begin putting its weapons "beyond use" - a euphemism for disarming - if power-sharing resumed.

On Saturday, Trimble narrowly managed to persuade his

badly divided party to give the IRA a chance to live up to its pledge.

After the vote, Trimble warned the IRA that it must deliver.

Seamus Mallon, leader of the province's major Catholic party, the Pacifist Social Democratic and Labour Party, warned of disastrous consequences if the newly-restored administration wasn't able to survive.

"I think the toleration of people on the ground wouldn't wear its again," said Mallon, the most senior Catholic in the newly-restored Cabinet.

"The credibility factor would be destroyed if there was another cessation of the institutions, and I believe the political process would have suffered very substantially if that was the case."

Ethiopia-Eritrean peace talks open

ALGIERS, May 30: Ethiopia and Eritrea opened indirect peace talks in Algiers today in a bid to end the latest three-week round of fighting in the simmering border conflict between the Horn of Africa neighbours.

An AFP correspondent saw the countries' foreign ministers head into closed-door talks, which opened a day behind schedule because of the late arrival Monday evening of Ethiopian Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin.

The negotiations opened shortly after Ethiopia announced its forces had withdrawn from southwestern areas of Eritrea.

Asmara however called on

Addis Ababa to supply details on its troop redeployment in Eritrea and allow independent observers to verify positions.

The talks had originally been scheduled to open Monday, the same day that Ethiopia brought its war to the Eritrean capital Asmara for the first time in two years by bombing the city's airport.

Mesfin will negotiate with his Eritrean counterpart Haile Woldease through an intermediary, Ahmed Ouyahia, who is Algeria's justice minister and the special representative of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, current president of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), which is sponsoring the talks.

Laos announces security alert after bomb blast

HANOI, May 30: The Lao authorities announced today they planned to step up security across the country after investigations showed a weekend blast at the capital's Morning Market was a bomb attack, reports AFP.

"(Government) spokesmen said that initial investigations suggested that the explosion was caused by persons who wanted to destroy the peaceful atmosphere of Vientiane," the official KPL news agency said.

They said that the act gives

warning of the need for Lao people and authorities to set in place security measures at tourist and shopping sites as well as in each village," the news agency said.

It was the first admission by the secretive Lao authorities of a serious security threat to tourists.

A string of attacks by suspected Hmong rebels through the 1990s on roads through the mountains north of Vientiane have gone unconfirmed by the authorities.

Hostage takers in Philippines financed by Bin Laden

BERLIN, May 30: Muslim rebels in the Philippines who are holding 21 people hostage are receiving financial support from suspected terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden, one of their leaders told German television network ZDF Monday, reports AFP.

The network released a statement saying Galib Andang, who leads the Abu Sayyaf insurgents under the alias "Commander Robot," made the admission to a ZDF journalist.

Among the hostages being held by the rebels on the southern Filipino island of Jolo are a German couple and their son.

Bin Laden, a wealthy Saudi dissident believed to be living in Afghanistan, is suspected by the United States of having created a terrorist network known as Al-Qaeda.

Israeli-Palestinian talks to move from Stockholm

JERUSALEM, May 30: Closed-door negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians aimed at forging a peace deal by a September deadline are to be moved from Stockholm, an Israeli government official said today, reports AFP.

"The talks are not going to be in Stockholm," the official said, without disclosing where they would be held and when they would resume.

BRIEFLY

German boy jailed for murder

A 15-year-old German schoolboy was sentenced to seven and a half years in prison on Monday for stabbing his teacher to death after betting his classmates he would commit the crime, Reuters reports from Dresden.

Public prosecutors said that the boy, who was identified only as Andreas S by the court, was found guilty of murder after a trial held behind closed doors and would be held in a young offenders' jail. The schoolboy entered the classroom at an elite school in the eastern town of Meissen last November wearing a mask and stabbed his 44-year-old history teacher Sigrun Leuteritz 20 times.

Quake shakes Taiwan

A moderate earthquake shook central Taiwan on Tuesday, seismologists said. There were no immediate reports of damage or casualties, AP reports from Taipei.

The 4.3-magnitude quake struck a mountainous area 18 km east of Sun Moon Lake, a popular resort and the island's largest natural lake. The Central Weather Bureau said. A 7.6-magnitude quake devastated the region in September, killing about 2,400 people and destroying thousands of homes. Since the earthquake, more than 12,000 aftershocks and minor tremors have rattled Taiwan. Most have been harmless.

India seems moving towards nuclear weaponisation

BOMBAY, May 30: A new government order that allows India's foremost nuclear body to effectively watch over itself has aroused concern among scientists about heightened secrecy and the possibility of increased weapons stockpiling, reports AP.

India's premier nuclear institute, the Bhabha Atomic Research Center (BARC), will no longer be monitored by the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board, which will henceforth be exercised through and Internal Safety Committee structure to be constituted by the director (of) BARC for the purpose.

Chidambaram, a key scientist behind India's nuclear weapons tests in 1998, did not answer questions faxed to his office Monday. His office said no answer could be expected before Thursday.

Meanwhile, Suhas Sukhatme, current chairman of the regulatory board, told the AP he could not answer weapons-related questions. He said that when the board was

set up, "there was a fuzzy line about what we could and could not oversee."

He said he was "in agreement" with the new order since, "the fuzziness is removed and clarity has been established."

"The principles of good safety management as laid down by us will have to be followed by the BARC," he said.

"The public need by totally reassured that there is nothing shady going on."

But this did little to comfort senior scientists worried about lack of transparency and tightening of secrecy around India's nuclear programme.

Analysts estimate India has enough plutonium to produce 85 to 90 nuclear weapons, and Pakistan has sufficient highly enriched uranium for 40 nuclear warheads. Both conducted nuclear tests in May 1998, shocking the world and bringing economic sanctions from the West.

Gopalakrishnan, who

chaired the regulatory board for three years, said the need to develop more fissile material may have prompted the decision to further limit supervision of BARC.

"It's very definite they plan to go full steam with weaponisation and more laboratories may need to come in ... and they don't want someone to be snooping around," he told the AP in a telephone interview from the southern city of Hyderabad.

Sukhatme, of the regulatory board, said that in other parts of the world, regulators do not have control over weapons facilities and said he saw no real contradiction in the BARC watching over itself.

But senior scientists within the regulatory body, formed in 1983, are upset about reduction of its powers.

Scientists fear safety will be the casualty of an internal committee implying less transparency.

One senior scientist said the regulator should always be from the outside.

A top nuclear scientist, who spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity, confirmed the new order was to maintain secrecy since weapons related activities could be scaled up.

India has pledged "no first use" of nuclear weapons, which it says are needed for "minimum deterrence" against a Pakistani of Chinese first strike.

While the scientific community is lobbying for more nuclear power plants to meet the country's energy needs, there is growing criticism about India's aging nuclear reactors.

In a December 1995 report submitted by Gopalakrishnan to the government, of some 132 safety lapses in various nuclear facilities, 50 pertain to the BARC.

Gopalakrishnan cannot elaborate on his report since he is bound by India's Official Secrets Act and a petition is before

the Supreme Court to make the entire report public.

Buddhi Kota Subbarao, a retired naval engineer, who worked on India's nuclear submarine programme and has argued for more autonomy for the regulatory board before the Bombay High Court, said the new order goes totally against the concept of nuclear safety.

In Europe and in the United States, regulatory bodies check civilian nuclear plants as well as monitor the surroundings of weapons facilities.

"The person executing cannot be the regulator. The concept of a regulator is to check excesses," said Subbarao.

Gopalakrishnan added there should be a clear demarcation between nuclear regulation and nuclear development. "This is as if we've set the clock back 25 years and we're standing where Russia stood - totalitarian control and little concern for the public," he said.