

Fiji coup leader meets army chief to resolve crisis

SUVA, June 1: Coup leader George Speight and 19 of his men met Fiji's martial law chief here today and a military spokesman said a "major breakthrough" had been made in the bid to resolve the crisis, reports AFP.

It was the first face-to-face meeting between Speight, who seized parliament and took Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his cabinet hostage on May 19, and armed force chief Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama.

"We have had a very major breakthrough," said military spokesman Eroni Volavola after the meeting between Speight and Bainimarama.

He declined to elaborate on the breakthrough but said "I think we can safely say that within the next 24 to 36 hours you will start to see a lot of very positive things coming out of parliament."

The development came after a group of 30 unarmed soldiers went into parliament to present

Speight with proposals to end the crisis, which began May 19 when Speight claimed power in the name of indigenous Fijians.

When Speight said he wanted to make his counter proposals, he was urged to go to the Queen Elizabeth Barracks, headquarters of the Fiji Military Forces who currently rule the country under martial law.

While this happened inside parliament a group of Speight supporters attacked an unarmed police post down Ratu Sukuna Road from parliament, hospitalising three men, witnesses said.

The latest turn in the two-week-old drama came when the military, unarmed, went into parliament and presented a tabua or whale's tooth to Speight. This is of particular significance in Fijian culture and usually proceeds key discussions.

Security sources say this particular presentation also came with the implication that

the military were pleading for the release of Chaudhry, Fiji's first ethnic Indian prime minister, and the other hostages.

Speight adviser Joe Nata told AFP from the barracks that the two sides were "in the last stages of negotiations." He said, however, that the hostages would not be released Thursday night.

Speight's appointed "interim deputy prime minister" Ratu Timoci Silatolu said Speight and Bainimarama met one-on-one while a committee of the Great Council of Chiefs and Speight's men stayed outside the room in the officer's mess. Silatolu said the hostages might be freed Friday.

Numerous statements of imminent release have been made in the last fortnight, however, only to be dashed.

Earlier in the day Speight held a press conference and urged the military to return to their barracks.

"They should return to camp

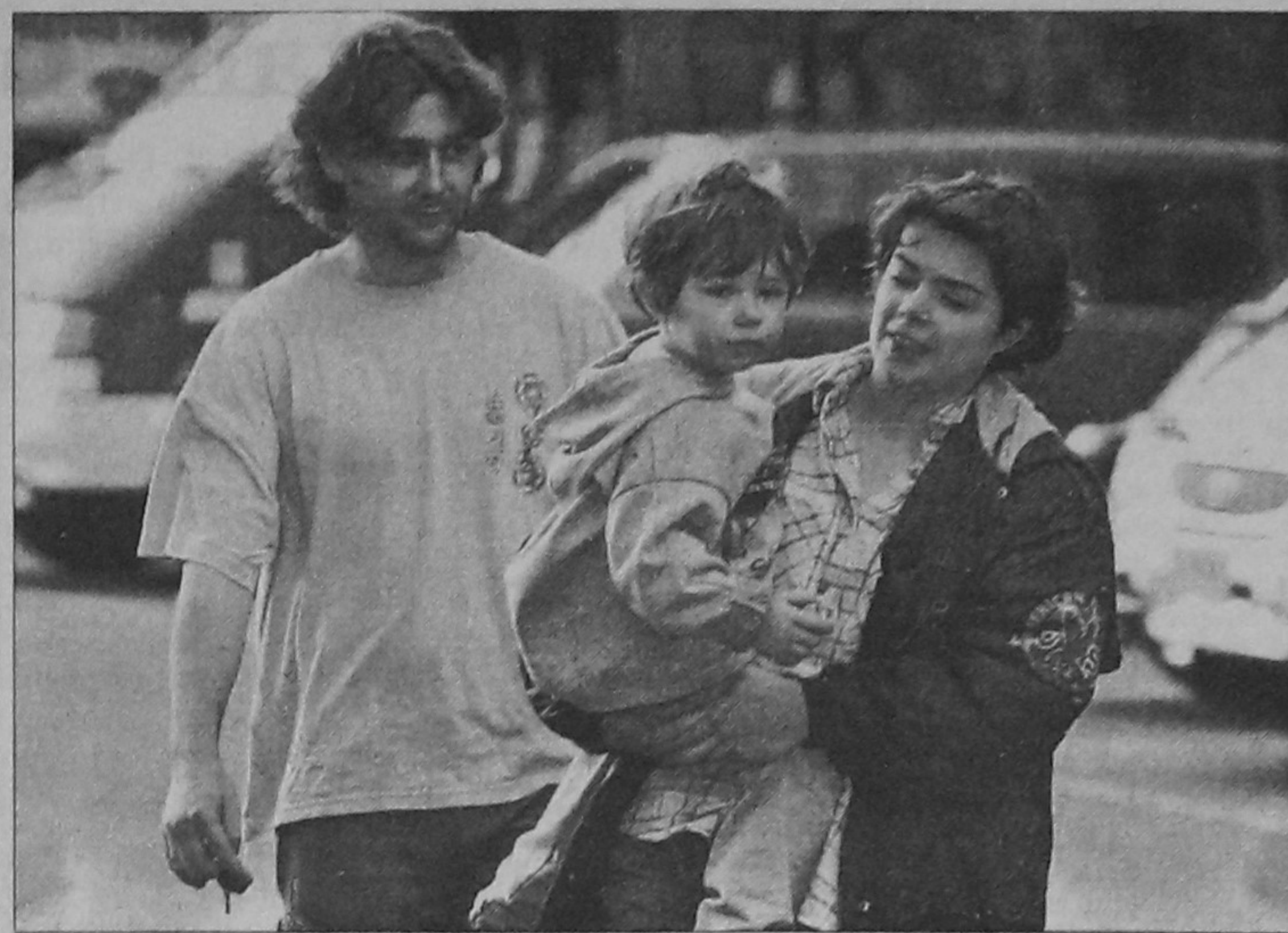
and let the Great Council of Chiefs and us continue from where we left off... before they surprised us with the imposition of martial law," he said.

The only good that came out of it, he said, was the removal of President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara.

Outside the dangerous area around parliament and government house, in Suva's Veitoti district, people were attempting to make life look almost normal Thursday.

However many shops remain closed and at the Department of Immigration officials were being overwhelmed with applications for passports, from Indians and native Fijians alike.

Some 43 per cent of Fiji's population are of Indian origin, descendants of migrant agricultural workers, and their relative prosperity is looked on with jealousy by some indigenous Fijians, who make up 51 per cent of the 800,000-strong Pacific nation.



The parents and their child who was released by an armed man who took 46 children and adults hostage in a child care centre on Wednesday, leave a psychological care centre in Wasserbillig, Luxembourg. The man is still holding 27 children and three teachers hostage.

— AFP photo

6 Pak women fall victim to 'honour killing'

ISLAMABAD, June 1: Six Pakistani women were strangled, axed or stabbed to death in incidents of "honour killings" by close relatives suspecting sexual misconduct, a newspaper reported today, says AFP.

The murders all took place on Wednesday in the central Punjab province, The News said.

Ghulam Hussain hacked his mother-in-law Zahooran to death in Bahawalpur district over her alleged sexual liaison with a neighbour, while Abida Bibi was killed for "immodesty" by four men in the same area, the report said.

An unnamed youth strangled his young sister Zakria Bibi in a village near the town of Toba Tek Singh after a claim to have seen her in a "compromising condition" with her alleged lover, who escaped, it said.

In Multan city a man, identified only as Ismail, killed his sister Aslan for an alleged extra-marital relationship, the report said.

A man named Basharat stabbed his wife Bankhan Bibi and mother Manzooran Bibi to death in a village near Pakpattan town, it added.

Quoting a recent report by the non-governmental Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, the newspaper said more than 1,000 honour killings took place in Pakistan last year.

Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf last month vowed tough action to curb the widespread problem of honour killings of women by close relatives.

"Killing in the name of honour is murder and will be treated as such," Musharraf told a national convention on human rights.

Such actions "do not find any place in our religion or law," he said.

Human rights activists say the killings are not regarded as murder by the police and men committing them generally escape punishment as the courts take a lenient attitude towards them.

Rights groups have been demanding the government take adequate legal and administrative steps to stamp out the practice.

One arrested in Delhi for cyber crime

NEW DELHI, June 1: A 24-year-old computer service engineer has been arrested by New Delhi police on charges of stealing 100 hours of Internet time, local newspapers reported today, says AFP.

The Times of India quoted a police officer as saying that the accused, whose name was being withheld, had activated the account of a former army officer, who had purchased the Internet access hours from state telecom giant Videsh Sanchar Nigam Ltd (VSNL).

The accused connected the modem and changed the password for the army officer's computer system. It was later found that the army officer's Internet time was consumed from 10 different locations between November 4 and December 22, 1999, said Dinesh Bhatt, chief of the Delhi police's economic offence wing.

When he had evidence from VSNL to show the connection was used illegally, he said.

In solving cybercrime, technical evidence is recognised by a recently passed Information Technology (IT) bill, Bhatt said.

The long-awaited IT bill was passed unanimously in May in both houses of parliament, making India a member of a select group of 12 countries which have cyber laws.

According to the bill, anyone found to be wrongfully accessing computer data will be guilty of committing a cyber crime.

The bill has a provision for slapping hackers with fines ranging from 200,000 rupees (\$5,972 dollars) to 10 million rupees as well as prison terms of up to three years.

Publishers of obscene literature on the Internet can also face jail sentences of up to five years and fines of 100,000 rupees.

According to IT experts, the number of Internet users in India will explode to two million over the next two years from the current level of 250,000.

Car bomb kills brother of Georgian minister

MOSCOW, June 1: A car bomb blast in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, killed the brother of the country's Defence Minister and seriously wounded his wife, a state security official today, a security ministry spokesman said, reports AFP.

Explosives equivalent to 200 grams of TNT blew up Gauram Tevzadze's jeep as it entered the city, the spokesman Pachuli Lengava said.

"It was an act of terrorism directed at Gauram Tevzadze," said Lengava.

Tevzadze died instantly. His wife and fellow passenger, Lashvili, the vice-director of the state property department of the city, were hospitalised following the attack.

Tevzadze, who's brother David is defence minister, was involved in collecting funds for the Georgian army. The press had accused him of buying food for the army at too high prices.

The accusations almost forced his brother to resign from his defence minister post.

Ex-HK governor MacLehose dead

HONG KONG, June 1: Hong Kong's longest serving British colonial governor, Lord MacLehose, who first raised the issue of handing over the territory with China, has died. He was 82, reports AFP.

MacLehose, who was governor of Hong Kong from 1971 to 1982, died in Britain on Wednesday, local newspapers reported.

In 1979, MacLehose took up the issue of Britain's 99-year lease of the New Territories with then Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping, paving the way for the handover to China in 1997 and an end to some 150 years of British colonial rule.

He was present at the handover ceremony. Hong Kong's post-handover Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa offered his condolences to Lady MacLehose and her family, saying "his death means Hong Kong has lost a good friend."

Tung said MacLehose had initiated a wide range of policies, including those on comprehensive public housing and new towns, the Independent Commission Against Corruption, the Mass Transit Railway, free basic education, and the opening up of the countryside for recreational use.

"They remain as a tribute to his vision and energy," said Tung in a statement.

A Chinese speaker, Crawford Murray MacLehose was first posted to Hong Kong in 1963 as a political adviser. He held several other diplomatic posts before becoming Hong Kong's 25th governor in 1971.

Rebels recapture town in Sierra Leone

FREETOWN, June 1: Forces loyal to Sierra Leone's President Ahmad Tejan Kabbah prepared today to strike back at rebels who inflicted a serious battlefield reverse with the recapture of the strategic town of Lunsar, reports Reuters.

Government forces retreated from Lunsar, 105 km northeast of Freetown in the early hours of Wednesday after running out of ammunition. Some loyalist fighters accused their leaders of not giving them adequate supplies.

"We are examining the reasons for the withdrawal and will of course counter attack," said one army officer who would not be named.

The loss of Lunsar, on the highway to the rebels' northern base of Makeni and the diamond mines of the east, was a big blow for Kabbah's British-backed forces, only two days after they had taken the town.

It was also the most significant reverse since government forces went on the offensive to counter Foday Sankoh's Revolutionary United Front (RUF), which defied a 1999 peace accord last month by advancing towards Freetown and taking hundreds of UN peacekeepers hostage.

Sierra Leone's war since 1991 has been characterised by frequent flip-flops in control of key positions, while civilians have often borne the brunt of casualties and suffered mutilation at the hands of combatants.

Chinese jet makes emergency landing

TOKYO, June 1: A China Eastern Airlines jet carrying 90 people made an emergency landing at an airport in southwestern Japan today after developing engine trouble, reports AP.

Flight 541 from Shanghai landed safely at Fukuoka airport at around 12:35 pm (0935 BST) with one of its two engines shut down, said Japanese Transport Ministry official Munenobu Azuma.

All 13 crew members and 77 passengers aboard the flight were safe, he said.

The jet, a Boeing 737, was bound for Fukushima airport in northern Japan when its pilot found the right engine was malfunctioning, Azuma said.

The pilot reported the problem of Japanese aviation authorities before being granted permission to land in Fukuoka, 899 kilometres southwest of Tokyo, Azuma said.

Equality for women still a far cry

UNITED NATIONS, June 1: Five years after a major international conference pledged to seek full equality of the sexes, more women are working and more girls are going to school — but women remain underpaid, under-represented in governments and under threat of physical and sexual abuse, reports AP.

Two UN reports released Wednesday painted a mixed picture of progress since the 1995 UN conference in Beijing, concluding that equality for women remains a distant goal on issues ranging from the workplace to education, health, human rights and political decision-making.

"Available data show that women are making gains, but persistent disparities exist between men and women," said UN Undersecretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs Nitin Desai.

A 180-page report on "The World's Women, 2000" produced by the UN Statistics Division and a 21-page report by the UN Children's Fund on "Domestic Violence Against Women and Girls" were released ahead of Monday's opening of a five-day

ministerial conference to review progress on implementing the ambitious platform for action adopted in Beijing.

It called on governments to revise laws to ensure women's equal rights, to provide equal education for girls and to ensure the right of women to decide matters of sexual and reproductive health. Sexual abuse affects millions of girls and women worldwide — and remains under-reported.

In education, school enrollment figures show the gender gap closing in primary and secondary schooling. But the report said the gap is still wide in 22 African countries and nine Asian countries where enrollment for girls is less than 80 per cent of the enrollment for boys.

"It is unlikely this gap will be closed by the target date of 2005," Desai said.

The report also showed some interesting regional difference in women choosing fields traditionally dominated by men for higher education study: 78 per cent of women in the Caribbean chose science and engineering compared with 53 per cent in Western Europe and 38 per cent in southeast Asia.

While the statistical report showed women generally narrowing later, having fewer children, and living longer, it also found that they comprise two-thirds of the world's illiterates.

When it comes to work, the study found that at least one-third of women are part of the work force in all regions except northern Africa and western Asia.

But it also concluded that "women remain at the lower end of a segregated labour market and continue to be concentrated in a few occupations, to hold positions of little or no authority and to receive less pay than men."

In the five years since the Beijing conference, the report said, "women's participation in the top levels of government and business has not markedly increased."

During the first part of 2000, only nine women were heads of state or government. In 1999, women represented 11 per cent of parliamentarians worldwide compared to nine per cent in 1987, and in 1998, only nine per cent of the world's Cabinet ministers were women, compared to six per cent in 1994.

Two Lankan newspapers challenge govt censorship

COLOMBO, June 1: Two newspapers have challenged in court the government's order that shut them down for violating censorship regulations under an emergency decree, the editor of the media group said Thursday, reports AP.

"We have filed action on several counts," said Lasantha Wickremetunga, editor of Leader Publications, which publishes the Sunday Leader and its Sinhala language version, Irida Peramuna.

In a case filed in the Supreme Court on Wednesday, Wickremetunga said officials have no right to shut down the papers because Parliament has not yet approved laws that give the government expanded powers under a war status declaration.

He also argued it is illegal to close the papers arbitrarily for six months when Sri Lanka's emergency laws themselves have to be renewed each month by a Parliament vote.

"The law has been brought in to penalize us for revealing government corruption," Wickremetunga said, referring to new stories over the years about alleged corruption involving government ministers and officials.

The government put the country under war status in May after several military reversals while fighting Tamil Tiger separatists in the northern Jaffna peninsula.

The Public Security Ordinance allows the government to seize any property, ban the publication of newspapers and bar all public protests and demonstrations.

Three killed in Indian Kashmir

JAMMU, India, June 1: Indian police on Thursday killed three suspected guerrillas who had intruded into Indian-administered Kashmir near the border with Pakistan, officials said, reports Reuters.

"A police party found three people moving in a suspicious manner close to the International Border (IB) with Pakistan. On being challenged by a police patrol party, they tried to cross over the border and were fired upon," a police official said.

He said the incident occurred in Kathua district, 84 km (52 miles) south of Jammu.

Last week, police shut down the printing press used by The Sunday Leader and Irida Peramuna. It was a day after The Sunday Leader published a sarcastic front page report titled "War in Fantasy Land" that used the word "not" in every sentence to circumvent the censorship law.

The report used such sentences such as, "Heavy fighting was not raging," and "Tigers were not pounding Palali air base with heavy artillery and mortars."

Several former army and air force personnel have written letters to the court, saying the newspaper's report did not prejudice national security.

All news reports of the war must first be submitted to a censor, who routinely deletes statements by the rebels or other information that the government thinks will jeopardize the fighting or create distress among the public.

Also last week, the government closed down Udayan, the only Tamil language paper in war-torn Jaffna Peninsula, after it reported that civilians had been hurt and killed in air force bombing.

India resumes flight to Nepal

NEW DELHI, June 1: Indian Airlines today resumed its regular service to Nepal after a five-month suspension following a Christmas Eve hijacking, officials said here, reports AFP.

Indian Airlines flight IC 813, carrying 210 people, took off from New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport at 11:15 am amid tight security at the airport.

"It is an hour-long haul and the Indian Airlines Airbus 300 will return to Delhi carrying passengers from Nepal at 3:15 pm," said an airlines official.

"We will re-activate the Calcutta to Kathmandu flight service on Friday," he added.

As of today, 130 people had booked seats on the India Airlines Airbus 320 scheduled to fly out of the eastern port city of Calcutta on Friday.

India froze all flights to Nepal after an Indian Airlines Kathmandu-New Delhi flight with more than 150 people on board was hijacked on December 24 by five heavily-armed Pakistanis and forced to the southern Afghan city of Kandahar.

The hijacking ended on December 31 at Kandahar after India freed three pro-Kashmir militants in a swap for the hostages on board the plane.

It took over five months to resume the flights as India and Nepal bickered over the safety measures at Kathmandu airport.

Philippine govt presents peace proposal to Muslim rebels

COTABATO, Philippines, June 1: Muslim rebels said Thursday they will review a government-proposed political settlement of their separatist rebellion in the southern Philippines, but need more time than allowed by the government, reports AP.

Peace talks between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front resumed Tuesday, a month after the rebels withdrew from the negotiations to protest a military offensive against their camps in the southern Philippines.

The two sides failed to issue a joint communiqué as planned after two days of talks because of disagreements over when they will return to the negotiating table, rebel spokesman Eid Kabalu said.

The government negotiators ruled out an independent Islamic state, which the MILF has been fighting for since the 1970s.

Instead, they presented the MILF panel with a proposed political package consisting largely of a congressional bill that could expand an existing Muslim autonomous region in the southern Mindanao region.

"We gave it to them this morning. They are now studying it," said Edgardo Batanga, a

former army general and head of the government panel. "Kindly remember that we have a time frame to follow. Time is very important here."

During the talks, Batanga insisted on completing the negotiations by June 30, a deadline set by President Joseph Estrada.

Batanga said he proposed that the negotiators meet again by next Wednesday.

"The MILF will not agree to that," Kabalu said. "This is not a joke. It cannot be done that way. They want to dictate the outcome of the negotiation. On our part we want a negotiated solution, otherwise the problems will come out again."

Asked whether the rebels were just stalling for time, Batanga said he was granted observer status at a meeting of the influential Organisation of Islamic Conference later this month. Kabalu said it would have no effect on the talks.

"That will just be moral support and political pressure, but substantially, with or without them, what means much more is how you contain the situation on the ground," he said.

Kabalu said they were surprised that what the government submitted was merely the proposed amendment to a law

that created the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. The amendment has already been passed by the Philippine House of Representatives.

The House bill and a Senate version would have to be reconciled before it is signed into law by the president.

The current autonomous region covers four Mindanao provinces, which are among the poorest in the country. The proposed new law will call for a plebiscite to ask residents in 10 other southern provinces whether they want to join the autonomous region.

Most are unlikely to join because they are dominated by Christian majorities resulting from migration to the region in recent decades.

The governor of the autonomous region is Nur Misuari, leader of the Moro National Liberation Front, a former rebel group which signed a peace accord with the government in 1996, accepting autonomy rather than independence.

The MILF, which splintered from the MNLF in 1978, rejected that accord.

The peace talks resumed a day after the military overran Camp Bushra, the MILF's second largest camp and its training centre.

Ethiopia ready to end war with Eritrea

ADDIS ABABA, June 1: Ethiopia said Wednesday it was ready to end its war with Eritrea but would keep troops on the border, Ethiopian diplomats told AFP, a claim that was received with scepticism and contempt in Eritrea.

"As far as Ethiopia is concerned, the war is over today," Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi told diplomats at a meeting in the Ethiopian capital.

The prime minister said Ethiopia believed it had recovered all territories previously occupied by Eritrea, but would keep troops on Eritrean soil north of disputed areas until redeployment agreements had been signed.

"We want a cessation of hostilities which will guarantee that the vacuum will not be filled by Eritrea. We want the international community's guarantee for that," Meles said, according to diplomats who attended the meeting.

In Asmara, Eritrean presidential spokesman Yemane Ghebremeskel sharply criticised Meles' statement, saying the Ethiopian prime minister could not "arbitrarily decide where to redeploy."

Meles' statement came as the two sides entered a second day of indirect peace talks in Addis Ababa.

giers, brokered by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU).

Earlier Wednesday, Eritrea confirmed that Ethiopian troops had withdrawn from some undisputed areas deep inside its territory.

Presidential spokesman Yemane named the vacated towns as Barentu, Tesseney and Areza, respectively 165 and 275 km west and 65 km southwest of Asmara.

"We are not saying this is an end to the war. We continue to ask for a ceasefire," the spokesman said.

The Eritrean foreign ministry had accused its neighbour of duplicity in claiming to have made the troop withdrawals.

"Ethiopian troops did not withdraw from Barentu and other areas they still occupy in western Eritrea despite their false assertion (Tuesday)," an earlier statement said.

Ethiopian troops took Barentu, which lies in undisputed Eritrean territory, shortly after launching an offensive on May 12.

One of the cornerstones of the OAU peace plan is the withdrawal by both sides to positions held before the war, which first broke out in May 1998, to be followed by the neutral demarcation of a mutually agreed border.

In Algiers, the OAU's chief mediator, Ahmed Ouyahia, called the indirect talks "laborious."

"The resumption of fighting has brought about more suspicion on both sides and therefore negotiations are laborious," said Ouyahia, who represents the current OAU chief Algeria's President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

Ouyahia is mediating between Ethiopia's Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin and his Eritrean counterpart Haile Woldensae.

Barak meets Clinton

LISBON, June 1: A two-hour meeting between Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and US President Bill Clinton on the Middle East peace process ended at 11:50 a.m. (1650 BST), a White House official said, reports AFP.

The meeting, arranged at the last minute, took place in a Lisbon hotel where Clinton was staying following an EU-US summit in nearby Quetz.

The meeting reportedly dealt with the ramifications of Israel's abrupt withdrawal from southern Lebanon last Wednesday after a 22-year occupation.