

International

Pakistan to buy 50 Chinese combat aircraft

LONDON, June 2: Pakistan is currently negotiating the purchase of up to 50 latest Chinese combat aircraft, a defence weekly has reported, says PTI.

The purchase of Chinese CAC F-7MG fighter aircraft, the first since 1992, would boost Pakistan's conventional capability and replace two squadrons of ageing Shenyang F-6 aircraft, the Jane's defence weekly said quoting Pakistan Air Chief Marshal Pervaiz Mehdi Qureshi.

The F-7MG fighter, an improved version of the F-7, made its debut flight in 1993 and appeared for the first time at the China air show in November 1996.

Pakistan cannot afford to scale down its conventional war capability, despite having gained nuclear equilibrium with India in May 1998, said Qureshi while addressing a course at Pakistan's air war college. Weaker conventional weapons capability could invite aggression, he said.

Lankan troops, Tigers trade mortar attacks

COLOMBO, June 2: Government forces and Tamil Tiger guerrillas traded mortar bomb attacks as 15 rebels were killed in confrontations with army patrols in the northern peninsula of Jaffna, the government said today, reports AFP.

Army patrols operating ahead of government defence lines killed 15 members of the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in four separate clashes on Thursday, the government said in a statement.

Three government soldiers were also wounded during the clashes, it said.

The government information department director, Ariva Rubasinghe, said the Tigers had withdrawn their fighters and mortars from an area near the eastern town of Batticaloa following pressure from local residents.

The Tigers had forced some 10,000 Tamil civilians near Vavuniatu, in the district of Batticaloa, to move away so they could target a local army camp, Rubasinghe said.

However, the rebels could not achieve their aim as troops stood ground courageously amidst LTTE mortar fire, Rubasinghe said in a statement.

There was no rebel reaction to the military statements.

The government announced on Tuesday that troops equipped with new weapons had been able to stop the "rolling onslaught" by the LTTE, who are attempting to re-take the town of Jaffna.

76 whales die in Mexican coast

MEXICO CITY, June 2: Seventy-six whales died after beaching themselves on Mexico's southeastern coast, officials said, reports AP.

A group of 98 whales worked their way onto the shores of a nature reserve in the Yucatan peninsula on Wednesday, Ramiro Rubio, the director of the reserve, said Thursday.

Authorities launched a rescue effort and were able to bring 22 to deeper waters but 76 died, said Rubio.

Officials were taking samples from the animals and the water to determine what might have led to the beachings.

This particular species, known as false killer whales, is prone to beaching itself, Rubio said, who heads the Ria Lagartos Biosphere.

Officials buried the corpses to prevent any damage their decomposition might cause to the ecosystem.

Stay against screening of Jinnah's sought

KARACHI, June 2: A petition by two sons of Pakistan's first Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan has been filed in the Sindh High Court seeking an injunction against the screening of the film "Jinnah" which is set for release in both English and Urdu today throughout the country, reports PTI.

Ashraf Liaquat Ali Khan and Akbar Liaquat Ali Khan, citing some portions of the film in the English version as being found to be offending to the personality of the Quaid-i-Millat, prayed to the court to issue a permanent injunction restraining the distributors from releasing or screening the English version of the film until it was brought in conformity with the Urdu version.

The Mandviwala Entertainment and the Quaid project, US, have been cited as defendants.

Adjourning the case, Justice Sarwana asked the Mandviwala Entertainment to seek instructions from the other defendant, the Quaid project.

The petitioners prayed to the court to issue a mandatory injunction directing the other defendant to make necessary amendments to the English version.

The counsel representing the Mandviwala entertainment, Mehndo Mandviwala, opposed the prayer and said the film had been approved by the censor board and a committee including some well-known persons had also unanimously approved it.

Hostages to be released by Monday: Fiji coup leader

Gunshots heard inside parliament

SUVA, June 2: Gunshots were heard today inside Fiji's parliament, where the country's prime minister and his government have been held since May 19, soldiers manning barricades outside the complex said, reports AFP.

The shooting came as coup leader George Speight held talks with military chief Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama, who declared martial law Monday, in another part of town.

One man was rushed away from the parliament building in an ambulance, Radio Fiji said he was a Speight supporter.

Speight earlier said he expected the Pacific island nation's two-week-old political crisis to be resolved and his hostages to be released by Monday.

Fiji's powerful Great Council of Chiefs, a congress of traditional leaders, is to meet Monday to hand down its decision on the stand-off between Speight and the new military

rulers.

Speight said he would like to resolve the issue of Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and about 35 members of his government still being held captive with the new leadership.

"I personally would like the Great Council of Chiefs meeting to go ahead with all these issues resolved and in the right environment," he said.

Asked if that meant the hostages would be released and the crisis defused by Monday, he replied "yes".

However, Speight has repeatedly said in recent days that a release was imminent, only to contradict himself later.

Speight has been roundly condemned by the United States and neighbours Australia and New Zealand among others, for storming parliament and taking the elected government hostage on May 19.

"An unconstitutional change of government is taking place in Fiji," Speight told reporters.

ousting Chaudhry, the country's first ethnic Indian premier, and within a couple of years nations again would be "buddy-buddy" with the new leadership.

Bainimarama and Speight agreed Thursday that the Great Council of Chiefs could decide between continuation of the current military government or a new civilian regime with Speight's nominees in.

International outrage at the events in Fiji mounted Friday, as the United States finally acknowledged a coup was underway, after earlier saying the situation was too uncertain to make a determination.

State Department spokesman Philip Reeker declined to say whether Washington had judged the coup attempt

successful, but said the United States was now considering sanctions against Fiji.

Speight earlier told New Zealand's Independent Radio News that he believed Fiji would be able to resume international relations just as it did following former prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka's 1987 coups.

While threatening dramatic steps in concert with US allies in the region, Reeker noted the situation was still uncertain.

Two Indian diplomats also arrived here Friday to protest against Chaudhry's capture by the gunmen, who claim to be acting on behalf of indigenous Fijians demanding a new constitution that would ensure power stayed in Fijian hands.

Indian High Commission officials said Foreign Ministry secretary for economic relations, Sudhir Devare, and India's High Commissioner to Australia, C.P. Revindranadhan, would meet Indian nationals, discuss the security problem and plan for a possible evacuation.

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Coup leader George Speight (C) is watched by loyalist soldiers during a break in his meeting with Fijian strongman Commodore Voreqe (Frank) Bainimarama at a secret location near Suva yesterday as the hostage crisis enters its third week. Both Speight and Bainimarama have agreed to let the Great Council of Chiefs decide who should run the country. —AFP photo

32 killed in fresh fighting in Philippines

COTABATO, Philippines, June 2: At least 32 Muslim rebels were killed as the Philippine government pushed ahead with its offensive to capture territory belonging to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), a military official said today, reports AFP.

Five soldiers were also wounded in fighting on Thursday with the MILF, the largest Filipino Muslim separatist group, in the villages of Limbalod and Dunggwan in Maguindanao province, army brigade chief Colonel Hermino Esperon said.

MILF rebels hit the community hall of Carmen town in Maguindanao with a rocket-propelled grenade, causing damage to the building and a nearby police station but there were no casualties, police said.

The fighting came as government and MILF negotiators concluded on Thursday three days of peace talks in Cotabato.

about 80 km from the scene of the clashes.

Officials say the MILF has agreed to consider Manila's offer for limited self-rule, in a major shift from its struggle for an independent Muslim state in the southern third of largely Roman Catholic Philippines.

However, the guerrillas say they should not be pressured into signing an agreement by June 30, a deadline set by President Joseph Estrada.

In Thursday's clashes, the army used rocket-firing MG-520 helicopters and artillery to attack MILF defences on a rebel base, Camp Usman, as ground troops advanced.

Gun battles continued early Friday around the camp, on the boundaries of North Cotabato and Maguindanao provinces, but there were no immediate reports of casualties.

"We will continue our push to the site where they had set up their own government," Es-

peron said. "There is no other government in the Philippines not in accordance with the constitution."

Military officials have accused the MILF of establishing so-called "shadow governments" in areas where they have influence.

The army earlier this week captured Camp Busra, the MILF's second-largest training base, and pushed the guerrillas back from a major highway outside their main bastion of Camp Abubakar after a month of fighting.

Soldiers and guerrillas traded sporadic sniper fire on the perimeters of Camp Abubakar on Friday.

More than a hundred soldiers have been killed in clashes with the MILF this year in the main southern region of Mindanao. Officials say more than half a million civilians have been displaced.



US President Bill Clinton smiles after receiving the Charlemagne award outside the cathedral in Aachen, Germany, yesterday. —AFP photo

Clinton honoured

AACHEN, Germany, June 2: US President Bill Clinton was honoured today by the battle-scarred German border city of Aachen for his efforts to preserve peace and unity in Europe, even when that meant waging war in Yugoslavia, reports Reuters.

In a ceremonial break from a busy tour of Europe that will take him to Russia at the weekend, Clinton received the annual Charlemagne Prize, named after the eight-century European emperor who had his capital at Aachen, on what is now the Belgian-German frontier.

Despite the pomp of the award ceremony, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder warned Clinton against upsetting the global arms balance with US plans for a national missile defence, which he said should be debated within NATO.

"As this issue could have effects well beyond the USA, it is in the sense of the alliance that it be treated in a spirit of partnership," Schroeder said, welcoming promises from Clinton to take account of the scheme's impact on disarmament treaties.

Russia has warned that the proposed missile defence system could wreck existing arms control pacts.

In Berlin, US and German officials failed to end a legal dispute holding up payments from an industry-backed compensation fund to surviving Nazi-era slave workers which they had hoped to resolve before the end of Clinton's visit.

After flying in from Berlin with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright following a long evening of talks and dinner with Schroeder, the president attended a religious service at Aachen's 1,000-year-old cathedral before receiving the award.

Despite anger over the killing, both sides pledged to prevent further bloodshed.

"We hope we can find peace as the Achene are desperate for the fighting to end," rebel spokesman Ismail Syahputra said in a telephone interview. "We will control our men. We will now see if Indonesia's military leaders can control theirs."

An Indonesian military commander in Aceh said the security forces also would respect his agreement.

"We will obey the ceasefire," said Col. Syarifuddin Tippe. "We won't be taking any offensive actions."

Finding a lasting peace in Aceh is a major test for Indonesia, which has embarked on a painful transition to democracy and economic reform after years of corrupt authoritarian rule.

The world's fourth-most populous country is made up of hundreds of different ethnic groups and languages spread over thousands of islands. Pessimists worry it is in danger of eventually breaking apart.

East Timor, invaded by Indonesia in 1975, broke from Jakarta's rule last year after a UN-supervised ballot.

Solving Aceh's problems without granting full independence is a major challenge for current President Abdurrahman Wahid, who came to power last October.

Michael Scott Deeds was lost here. We're very interested in this," said Jerry Philbrook, a US military official stationed at the embassy.

Indian FM urges closer security ties in Asia

SINGAPORE, June 2: Indian Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh called for closer security ties between India and Southeast Asian nations to collectively tackle regional issues ranging from piracy to water resources, reports AP.

"Unlike other regions ... Asia lacks any over-arching security framework," Singh said Friday in a lecture titled "India and ASEAN: Security Paradigm for AD 2000."

"This is a shortcoming born, in part, of the overhang of a colonial past and in part of our Asian inability to construct accord out of divergence," he said.

Singh arrived in Singapore late Thursday for a three-day

official visit.

Since 1996, India has held a security dialogue with the 10 countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations within the context of the annual ASEAN regional forum.

In the forum, the ASEAN

Cuba upset at Elian ruling

HAVANA, June 2: Cuba was upset Thursday at a US appeals court decision barring an asylum hearing for Elian Gonzalez, but preventing the six-year-old boy's immediate return home to Cuba, reports AFP.

The Atlanta, Georgia, appeals court ruled Thursday that Elian had no right to an asylum hearing in the United States.

But the court also ordered that he remain in the United States pending a possible appeal in the next 14 days by Miami relatives who are opposed to his return to the Communist island with his Cuban father.

US Attorney General told reporters in Washington that Elian would be required to remain in the United States for at least 21 days if the relatives did not appeal.

The case could drag on considerably longer should lawyers for Elian's Miami great uncle Lazar Gonzalez pursue their court action.

In one of several official statements read on television, Cuba condemned the ban on Elian's immediate return to his homeland, saying it was a "concession to the Miami mafia," a reference to the Cuba-exile population in Florida, many of whom want Elian to stay in the United States.

"Generally under these circumstances, any ban on leaving the country is lifted," the statement said. "But in this case it has been extended..."

"This will never end," one Cuban statement said.

Luxembourg hostage drama ends

WASSERBILIG, Luxembourg, June 2: Police freed 25 children and three teachers from a Luxembourg kindergarten late Thursday after shooting and critically wounding a man who held them hostage for 28 hours, police said.

All the children, aged seven and under, and the teachers were unharmed after their ordeal in the town of Wasserbillig, on the border of Luxembourg and Germany, police said.

The shooting ended a tense standoff that began Wednesday

afternoon when Neji Bejaoui, a 39-year-old Tunisian origin with a history of mental disturbance burst into the kindergarten armed with a pistol, hand grenades and a knife.

Negotiations began soon afterwards, but Interior Minister Michel Wolter said the breakthrough came when the hostage-taker was lured out of the kindergarten building with a promise that he could appear on television.

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