

Chernobyl N-plant to close Dec 15

KIEV, Ukraine, June 6: Fourteen years after the world's worst nuclear accident, Ukraine President Leonid Kuchma ordered the Chernobyl nuclear power plant closed, drawing praise from US President Bill Clinton, who dispensed 80 million dollar in American aid to entomb the plant forever, reports AP.

This is a hopeful moment," Clinton said in this former Soviet republic, the last stop in a week-long European tour before returning to Washington late Monday night. "It is also a moment when we remember those who suffered as a result of the accident there."

The April 26, 1986 accident spread radioactive material over much of Europe. The Ukrainian government has blamed the disaster for at least

8,000 deaths, including 31 killed immediately, many more killed in the massive cleanup operation and others who later died of cancer and other radiation-related illnesses.

The plant will close on December 15, Kuchma said. The US Energy Department said it will help find replacement sources of electricity.

Earlier, in Moscow, Clinton used an address to the Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament, to criticise the Kremlin's crackdown in Chechnya. And he paid a nostalgic visit to former Russian President Boris Yeltsin at his dacha on the outskirts of Moscow.

"Yeltsin looked good," Clinton told reporters on Air Force One on the way to Kiev. "He's in good spirits, happy. He and his

wife and daughter were there. We all just had a nice visit. It was like old times."

The money Clinton pledged will help contain radiation from the destroyed reactor, with 2 million dollar earmarked for improving safety at Ukraine's other nuclear power plants. It comes atop about 200 million dollar the United States has already spent to improve nuclear safety in Ukraine.

The new money will go toward repairing a cover, or sarcophagus, which was built not long after the disaster but now is considered unstable.

"America will stand by you as you fight for a free and prosperous future," Clinton told tens of thousands of people, many waving Ukrainian and American flags.



US President Bill Clinton (L) toasts with Ukraine President Leonid Kuchma (R) after signing an agreement to close the Chernobyl nuclear facility by December 15, 2000 at Maryinsky Palace in Kiev on Monday. — AFP photo

Court rejects case against the Time

JAKARTA, June 6: An Indonesian court today rejected a multi-billion dollar criminal defamation case filed by former president Suharto against the US magazine Time, reports AFP.

Judge Sihol Sitompul, who heads a panel of three judges hearing the case at the Central Jakarta district court, ruled that Suharto's defamation suit could not be accepted for lack of supporting evidence.

"The panel of judges deems that in the reports of the Time Magazine, there are no elements of libel as has been alleged by the plaintiff. Therefore the charges of the plaintiff should be all rejected," Sitompul said reading the verdict.

Suharto, who is currently under house arrest, sued Time for 27 billion dollars over a cover story the magazine ran in

May of last year which claimed his family was sitting on a fortune of some 15 billion dollars.

The report also alleged that Suharto had hurriedly transferred some nine billion dollars from a bank in Switzerland to another in Austria shortly after he fell from power in May of 1998 amid mass protests.

Endang Sumarti, a member of the panel of judges, said that the picture of Suharto on the cover of the May 24 1999 Time issue -- which showed his face in an 18th century wig on a US dollar bill with multiple zeros and the words Suharto Inc., stamped on it -- was "within the bounds of reasonable fairness."

Sumarti said that following the expert testimonies of journalists called to the witness stand, the picture of Suharto could not be construed as depicting him in control of a large business conglomerate as Suharto's lawyers charged.

Quake death toll rises to 103 in Sumatra

Rescue efforts intensify

BENGKULU, Indonesia, June 6: Frightened residents avoided their shattered homes and doctors performed emergency surgeries in the parking lot of a ruined hospital as the death toll rose to 103 today in Sumatra, an Indonesian island ravaged by a massive earthquake, reports AP.

The search for victims intensified, despite rumbling aftershocks from the Sunday night quake. Police feared the number of casualties could rise further once authorities reach remote areas, including a tiny island closest to the epicenter.

Among the hardest-hit communities was Bengkulu town on Sumatra's southwest coast. An emergency government task force said 64 bodies had been recovered from rubble there. Many of the victims had been sleeping when their poorly built homes collapsed, crushing them.

The quake cut off communications and electricity, and

closed the area's main airport. In Bengkulu, tens of thousands of the 250,000 residents spent Monday night outdoors, too afraid to return to damaged homes in case another big quake struck. More than 300 aftershocks have been recorded since the initial quake hit.

"We're too scared to go indoors again. What can we do now? Everything has gone," said Zohr Mahyuni, whose house was reduced to a pile of rubble.

More than 100 badly injured patients -- some two or three to a bed -- were being treated in the parking lot of the devastated Young General Hospital. Doctors performed emergency operations under plastic sheeting. Twelve patients had died from quake-inflicted injuries.

Like much of the town, the hospital's badly cracked walls and caved-in roof were testament to the severity of the tremor, which was centred be-

neath the Indian ocean, only 100 km to the west.

"We got all patients and staff out immediately after the quake. It's unsafe inside," said physician Budi Mulana. "We are finding things very difficult. We have only two days supply of medicines left."

Blood supplies also were running low, and medical equipment was lost under the debris.

Hundreds of homes in Bengkulu were damaged or destroyed, police and witnesses said. Major buildings had cracked walls. Smaller structures collapsed. Telephone services and roads in some parts of the region remained cut off today.

"The walls of my house fell in. I pulled my three boys from the rubble. They are hurt, but they are alive, thank God," said one patient, who goes by the single name of Suharto.



A woman cries in front of her damaged house in Manna town, Bengkulu, yesterday. A massive earthquake measuring up to 7.9 on the Richter-scale and several powerful aftershocks hit the Indonesian island of Sumatra early Monday, killing at least 103 people and leaving hundreds injured. — AFP photo

Solomon Islands PM agrees to resign

SYDNEY, June 6: Solomon Islands Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu has agreed to resign to head off the threat of civil war in the tiny Pacific island nation, his government announced today, reports AP.

After a day of talks with cabinet colleagues and leaders of the rebel group behind an attempted coup on Monday, Ulufa'alu "indicated his willingness to resign if his resignation is the price of peace," Minister for State Alfred Sasaoka told AFP. Parliament will be reconvened around June 16 to accept his resignation and consider who will succeed him.

Ulufa'alu's decision came as a gunbattle erupted between rival armies on the outskirts of the Solomon's capital Honiara. At least four fighters were wounded in the three-hour battle between the Malaita Eagle Force (MEF) and the Isatabu Freedom Movement (IFM) for control of Honiara's Henderson Field international airport, local radio reported.

MEF rebels led by Honiara lawyer Andrew Nori kidnapped Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu on Monday and seized key installations including a government communications centre and the entire police armoury.

They then sealed off the airport, set up roadblocks and cut telephone links in a coup attempt believed inspired by last month's revolt in neighbouring Fiji.

As Tuesday's gunfight went on, Ulufa'alu was escorted by armed guerrillas to the cabinet meeting.

Another 20,000 people, mostly Malaitian settlers on the Solomon's main island of Guadalcanal where Honiara is located, have been forced to flee their homes.

Anwar trial resumes today

KUALA LUMPUR, June 6: The sodomy trial of Malaysia's jailed ex-deputy premier Anwar Ibrahim is due to resume Wednesday after the appeal court Monday rejected his attempt to make Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad testify, reports AP.

Sankara Nair, one of Anwar's lawyers, said they had been notified the trial would resume Wednesday. It was adjourned on May 4.

He told AFP the defence would apply for an adjournment until Malaysia's highest court, the federal court, rules whether the premier must give evidence for the defence.

"We will apply for a stay of proceedings when the trial starts tomorrow," Sankara said.

Anwar, sacked by Mahathir in September 1998 and subsequently detained, was jailed for six years in April 1999 for abusing his official powers to cover up allegations of sexual misconduct.

He faces up to 20 more years if convicted of sodomy.

Anwar says he was framed by a high-level conspiracy because he intended to expose corruption and was seen as a political threat to the premier.

Moscow rejects Chechen peace plan

MOSCOW, June 6: Moscow dismissed today a peace plan presented by a rebel Chechen envoy to Washington, saying that Russia would accept only the surrender of separatist forces in the southern Russian republic, reports AP.

President Vladimir Putin's top spokesman on Chechnya, Sergei Yastrzhembsky, said: "On the whole we're not particularly interested in the contents of these initiatives. All this is a pointless effort."

"It's well known which separatist initiative is acceptable to Russia -- surrender," he added, cited by ITAR-TASS.

Ilias Akhmadov, "foreign minister" to Chechen leader Aslan Maskhadov, on Monday presented a two-page peace proposal to Washington seeking an immediate ceasefire and opening up of political dialogue.

He said the text was forwarded to US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who is currently on a Middle East visit.

Military solution to Fiji crisis ruled out

SUVA, June 6: Fiji's martial law chief today ruled out any military solution to the country's hostage crisis as Commonwealth foreign ministers prepared to discuss a possible suspension of the Pacific nation, reports AP.

"There will be no military solution, the military will not go in," Commander Voreqe Bainimarama said after coup leader George Speight warned the military against storming the besieged parliament complex.

"That's it, we are not going to budge," Bainimarama said. He added that he will accept no new demands from Speight, who claims to be acting in the name of indigenous Fijians who make up around 51 per cent of Fiji's population of 800,000.

Speight threatened Monday to shoot his 31 hostages, including ethnic Indian Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, if the military attempts to force its way into parliament where they are being held.

Commonwealth foreign ministers were to meet in London later Tuesday to discuss taking action against Fiji and the neighbouring Solomon Islands, where a copycat coup was staged on Monday.

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group could recommend Fiji's suspension following the May 19 coup.

"The options for the Commonwealth are first and foremost that we could decide to suspend Fiji," said Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer.

Downer told the BBC sanctions were also under consideration, but said: "Frankly we don't want to destroy the Fijian economy and damage those people such as the Fiji Indians who have nothing to do with this coup."

"We want to focus as much as we can on getting Speight to release his hostages and secondly to ensure a return to democratic government in Fiji."

Three soldiers, including a

colonel, left parliament here meanwhile and returned to barracks, Speight later claimed they remained his supporters.

Bainimarama earlier Tuesday warned that serving military officers in parliament had until 3:00 p.m. (0900 BST) to return to barracks, otherwise they would be removed from the military.

The military confirmed that Lieutenant Colonel Villame Volavola was back in barracks. He had been named as housing minister in Speight's government.

Two army engineers also returned to barracks.

Still with Speight are Colonel Ilisoni Ligairi, the retired commander of the Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit, the head of the Fiji Intelligence Service, Colonel Metuisela Mui, and a discharged engineer, Major Josefa Savua.

Speight called a press conference to deny the three had defected.

UN women's conference

Education, credits are weapons against inequality

UNITED NATIONS, June 6: UN Secretary General Kofi Annan and US First Lady Hillary Clinton set the tone Monday for a week-long conference on women, emphasising credits for small businesses and education as weapons against inequality, reports AP.

Annan drew attention to threats to women's development including AIDS, violence, and trafficking in women and children, which have increased since the Fourth World Conference on Women was held in Beijing in 1995.

He said the education of girls and women was as important a weapon against these evils as it was against poverty and economic inequality.

Both he and Hillary also stressed gains made since Beijing, which the First Lady described as "one of the most mov-

ing and meaningful experiences of my life".

That conference identified 12 priority areas for action which will be assessed here this week.

A total of 205 speakers were due to take the floor in plenary session, including the representatives of 179 governments, the heads of UN agencies and a few of the 1,200 non-governmental organisations taking part in numerous meetings outside the UN General Assembly hall.

"Beijing was important because women broke centuries of silence and spoke out on issues that matter most to us, our families and our societies," Hillary told one such meeting.

Addressing members of the microcredit summit campaign, she recalled that since Beijing, governments had passed laws to raise the legal age for marriage, ban female genital mutilation

and outlaw domestic violence.

"Rape is now recognised as a crime by international war tribunals, while more women are getting microcredit, running their own businesses and owning property in their own names," she said.

More than 20 of the 31 delegates due to address the first plenary session were women with ministerial rank, and Annan said the increasing number of women decision-makers was another sign of progress.

He also pointed to the worldwide mobilisation against so-called "honour killings", in which women are killed by family members, to new health strategies and to the greater availability and use of family planning.

Above all, he said, "more countries have understood that women's equality is a prerequisite for development."

Education, he said, "is both the entry point into the global economy and the best defence against its pitfalls."

Educated girls were better informed how to protect themselves against HIV-infection, and less likely to turn to prostitution because of the lack of job prospects, he said.

"AIDS is taking a devastating toll on women and girls," Annan said.

In the worst-hit cities of southern Africa 40 per cent of pregnant women were HIV-positive, more than one child in ten had lost its mother to AIDS, and grandmothers and young girls had to care for orphans or sick relatives, he said.

Clinton agreed that "the face of AIDS is increasingly female," but said it was not exclusively an African problem.

Pinochet loses immunity

SANTIAGO, June 6: A Chilean appeals court stripped Augusto Pinochet of his parliamentary immunity on Monday in a victory for Chileans seeking to put him on trial for crimes against humanity, reports AP.

Some 3,000 Chileans disappeared or were murdered during Pinochet's iron-fisted 17-year dictatorship that began in September 1973.

Efforts to call him to account for the deaths and disappearances have so far failed and Pinochet has denied any wrongdoing.

The lifting of his immunity was decided by a vote of 13 to nine, "Ruben Ballesteros, chief judge of the appellate court, announced at the Palace of Justice."

Lawyers for Pinochet have said they intend to appeal to the Supreme Court which could take until mid-July to rule.

Chileans opposed to Pinochet were seen dancing in the streets here when the decision was announced, shouting "to prison, to prison."

The ruling was welcomed by those who had opposed the dictator or lost loved ones during the Pinochet years.

"The ruling lifting his immunity is historic," said Viviani Diaz, president of a foundation representing families of missing or detained persons blamed on the Pinochet regime.

Pinochet, 84, had enjoyed parliamentary immunity since March 1998 when he stepped down as commander in chief of the military and became a senator for life, a post affording immunity under Chile's constitution.

Doomsday cult leader gets life term in Japan

TOKYO, June 6: A former doomsday cult leader was sentenced to life in prison on Tuesday for the 1995 nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway that killed 12 people and sickened thousands, reports AP.

Yoshihiro Inoue, 30, was one of five Aum Shinri Kyo agents accused of spreading sarin nerve gas in subway trains as they converged on Tokyo's central government district during morning rush hour.

A spokesman at the Tokyo District Court confirmed the sentence, but provided no further details. Prosecutors in December decided to pursue the death penalty against Inoue, who had admitted to all 10 charges of murder and other

crimes. Prosecutor Koichi Ueda called the ruling unexpected and said the prosecution may appeal, news media reported. The Tokyo Public Prosecutors office declined to comment on the reports.

Inoue was a close advisor to former cult guru Shoko Asahara, now on trial for masterminding the gassing and other crimes.

In deciding against the death penalty, presiding judge Hiromichi Inoue accepted the defense's argument the defendant had been brainwashed by the cult and couldn't refuse orders to take part in the gassing, national broadcaster NHK reported.

BRIEFLY

Two die in Laos bomb blast:

Two people were believed killed Tuesday when a bomb exploded at the central bus station in Vientiane, the capital of Laos, said witnesses, AP reports from Vientiane, Laos.

The witnesses said the 6:30 am (2330 GMT Monday) explosion occurred in a parked bus at the station near the morning market, according to foreign residents who insisted on anonymity. The bus was supposed to go from Vientiane to a village just north of the capital.

14 killed in violence in Algeria:

Fourteen people, including 10 Islamic militants, were killed and three wounded over the past 48 hours in Algeria, the Algerian press reported Tuesday, AFP reports from Algiers.

Ten Islamic extremists were killed and one captured on Monday in an army bombing operation in the Mizana forest, some 100 km east of the Algerian capital, the daily Le Jeune Independent said. Algerian fighter jets raked the area over the past few days and the army fired heavy artillery into the heavily wooded area, the paper said. Four people were killed Sunday in a fake roadblock in Ben Allal.

Partition will lead to 'Balkanisation of India', says Lanka

COLOMBO, June 6: Sri Lanka Monday warned that a partition of the tiny Indian Ocean island, as demanded by Tamil rebels, would lead to a "Balkanisation" of neighbouring India which has close cultural links with minority Tamils, reports AP.

Media Minister Mangala Samaraweera said he was surprised by remarks attributed to a powerful partner in India's coalition government who called for the partition of Sri Lanka along the lines of the Czech and Slovak republics.

Muthuvel Karunanidhi, chief minister of southern Tamil Nadu state whose DMK regional party is the Indian government, said that, alternatively, Colombo should offer more rights to Tamils.

"Partition of Sri Lanka will be the Balkanisation of India," Samaraweera said in response to Karunanidhi's call. His remark referred to the often disastrous practice of dividing an area to small antagonistic states.

Sri Lanka's nationalists made even stronger objections to Karunanidhi's remarks. The radical Silaha Urumaya, or National Heritage Party, asked him to allow Kashmiris to have their own state before trying to divide Sri Lanka.

"Why doesn't the Indian government agree to split up Kashmir or agree to negotiate with terrorists as they are telling us to do," Silaha Urumaya leader Tilak Karunaratne said.

Sri Lanka's media minister

Samaraweera said Karunanidhi's allegation that the Colombo government had not presented an adequate political plan to end the decades of bloodletting was wrong.

The government has offered most extensive devolution of power that has been offered since independence (from Britain) in 1948," he said.

Karunanidhi had compared Sri Lanka's majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils to an unhappy couple.

"We must ponder how long can a husband carry on with an unwilling wife," Karunanidhi told a rally in Tamil Nadu, home to 55 million Indian Tamils.

"Rather than continuing with the unhappy marriage, the two can split on the lines of Czechoslovakia which divided itself into Czech and Slovak republics without a drop of blood," Karunanidhi said.

"And, if Colombo does not wish to split the country the Czech way, it must concede more powers and rights to the minority Tamils to rebuild the marriage afresh," he said.

The suggestions came a week after US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Thomas Pickering said Washington was opposed to partition of Sri Lanka and warned that a division of the island could have long-term implications for India.

Pickering said they should not "lose sight" of the possibility of a separate Tamil state in Sri Lanka triggering separatist tendencies in Tamil Nadu, which is separated from Sri Lanka by a narrow strip of sea.



Elephants enjoy a wide array of tropical fruits and vegetables during an elephant banquet to mark Thai Elephant's Health Day yesterday in Chonburi. Elephants have a long and glorious history in Thailand, and during Thai Elephant's Health Day the tuskless received health check-ups and were tagged with a tracking chip for conservation purposes. — AFP photo