

## International

# 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 weeklong 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 criticize 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

# 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 Mahyum, whose house was reduced to a pile of rubble.

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 to day.

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.

Like much of the town, the hospital's badly cracked walls and caved-in roof were testament to the severity of the temblor, 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.

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.

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## 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 AFP.

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 Sasaako 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 rebel armies on the outskirts of the Solomons 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 gunfire went on, Ulufa'alu was escorted by armed guerrillas to the cabinet meeting.

Another 20,000 people, mostly Malaitan settlers on the Solomons' 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 AFP.

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 AFP.

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 AFP.

"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.

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 Vilimale 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 Ligai, the retired commander of the Counter Revolutionary Warfare Unit, the head of the Fiji Intelligence Service, Colonel Metuisela Mua, and a discharged engineer, Major Josefa Savua.

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

Commonwealth foreign ministers were to meet in London later Tuesday to discuss taking action against Fiji and the neighbouring Solomon Islands, where a coup had been 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."

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## Kosovo Serb goes on trial for war crimes

KOSOVSKA MITROVICA, Yugoslavia, June 6: A Kosovo Serb went on trial amid heavy security here today, at the start of the first war crimes hearing in this ethnically divided town, where tensions have risen following an upsurge in anti-Serb violence, reports AFP.

The trial of Miroslav Vuckovic began at 11:20 a.m. (1520 BST), with the defendant facing a charge of genocide described by one UN official as "grotesque" and likely to inflame tensions in this ethnic powderkeg town.

Vuckovic is accused of killing an ethnic Albanian woman while torching homes during Belgrade's crackdown on the province's ethnic Albanian majority last year.

Although Vuckovic is charged with the death of only one person, under Yugoslav law -- one of the legal codes in place in Kosovo -- the combination of killing and driving people from their homes can lead to genocide charges.

Another defendant, Bozorg Bisevac, was to be tried in absentia for the same offences, said UN spokesman Michael Keats.

## 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 AFP.

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

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 percent 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.

## 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 AFP.

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.

"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.

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 a unhappy couple.

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