

Fiji army asks C'wealth team to delay visit

SUVA, Fiji, June 9: Fiji's military said it had asked a delegation of British Commonwealth ministers to delay a visit to the troubled South Pacific country, reports Reuters.

On June 6, Commonwealth foreign ministers suspended Fiji from the group's decision-making councils after the military took control last month in response to a political hostage crisis, now in its third week.

"We've asked the delegation to postpone their visit due to start today (Friday) for about a week to allow us time to better appraise the situation," Colonel Filipo Tarakini said.

Tarakini said the government had not yet received a reply to its request, which was conveyed to the London office of the Commonwealth Ministers Action Committee (CMAG).

CMAG has called for a timetable to be set for the restoration of constitutional rule and for the release of Fiji's first ethnic Indian prime minister, Mahendra Chaudhury, and other government ministers held hostage.

The military government has proposed ruling Fiji under the command of Commodore Frank Bainimarama for up to three months to allow for establishment of a new civilian administration.

Rebel leader George Speight and his supporters want the military government disbanded immediately in favour of a civilian government run by indigenous Fijians before releasing the hostages.

AP adds: An "influential delegation of tribal chiefs met with Fijian coup leader George Speight today, but they went away with no word on a deal to free the hostages."

Meanwhile, US Ambassador Osman Siddique branded Speight a terrorist and said he should be brought to trial. That is unlikely to happen as Fiji's new military rulers have already promised Speight and his supporters immunity from prosecution.

"I don't think he should get immunity. He is a common criminal, a terrorist and justice should be served to him," Siddique said.

The chiefs, from Fiji's economically powerful western provinces, want Speight to bring an end to the three-week standoff by releasing his hostages.

Although the chiefs carry little political power, they believed their economic muscle could be decisive in persuading Speight.

They spent about two hours at Speight's camp in the parliamentary complex where he

seized the hostages on May 19, but no progress in ending the standoff was reported.

"It was a good meeting, a great meeting," Speight said later without elaboration.

"A lot of the basis on which our economy relies is based in the western division — sugar, tourism, mining, pine," the delegation's leader, Ratu Osea Gavid, said before the meeting.

"Altogether, if you add that up it comes to about 1 billion dollars (US 500 million dollar) in foreign exchange" each year, he said.

The chiefs, all dressed in traditional skirts, gave no details of their presentation as they left parliament but they were understood to support Speight's view that a civilian government and not the army should be installed as an interim administration to guide Fiji back to democracy.

The chiefs then went to visit Fiji's military rulers, who seized power only after Speight had thrown Fiji into crisis, after their meeting with the rebels.

In a statement released after the meeting, the military said the chiefs had presented a proposed solution to the crisis and the army had noted it.

"No decision was reached, nor was one expected," the military said.

Fresh legal blow to Suharto

JAKARTA, June 9: An Indonesian court today rejected a bid by former President Suharto to free him from house arrest and to end a prolonged corruption probe into his wealth, a court official said, reports AP.

The decision by the South Jakarta district court was the second ruling in three days to go against the ex-dictator, who turned 79 on Thursday.

Last month, Attorney-General Marzuki Darusman banned Suharto from leaving his Jakarta home in a bid to compel him to cooperate with the investigation.

Darusman invoked the house arrest order after Suharto repeatedly failed to show up to questioning sessions by prosecutors.

Suharto's lawyers filed the lawsuit last Friday, demanding that the house arrest order be overturned and that the corruption probe be cancelled.

The lawyers and family members contend that Suharto, who has suffered a series of strokes, is too ill to be questioned over allegations that he used charitable foundations under his control to steal millions of dollars in state funds during his 32 years in power.

Illegal immigrants stage protest in Australia

CANBERRA, June 9: Up to 500 illegal immigrants refused to return to an outback Australian detention centre today after a night in the cold, protesting about conditions and calling for asylum, immigration officials said, reports Reuters.

About 520 men, women and children broke out of the Woomera detention centre in South Australia on Thursday, injuring three guards in the process, and walked five km into the nearest town where they have camped in the supermarket carpark.

The Woomera camp, about 350 km northwest of Adelaide, is the largest of Australia's three detention centres, housing about 1,400 people mainly from Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan while they await assessment on their cases.

No attempts have been made to remove them from the carpark and negotiations between the group and immigration officials to get them to return to the centre were continuing.

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All previous Abu Sayyaf kidnappings have ended with money being paid to the rebels -- normally under the guise of "board and lodging" expenses for the captives.

A government negotiator said Friday they would enquire about the ransom in their next round of talks with the rebels.

"We will ask them if they want that. So far there is no talk about that. Hopefully, we can take it up if that is one of their demands," said Parrouk Hussin, a peace campaigner in the five-member government panel of negotiators.

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