

International

'Bashar most capable to lead Baath'

Ruling party opens congress

DAMASCUS, June 17: Syria's ruling Baath Party opened a historic congress here today to elect the son of late president Hafez al-Assad, Bashar, to its leadership, saying he was the best candidate for the job, reports AFP.

Doctor Bashar al-Assad is the most capable to assume the responsibilities of the party," Suleiman Qaddah, assistant secretary general of the party, told the opening session of the ninth congress.

"We are with you, oh commander, and we will continue the mission with you," he added, recalling also that the Baath has already chosen Bashar as its sole candidate to the presidency.

Bashar, 34, a novice politi-

cian trained as an eye doctor, is expected to be named secretary general of the party, one of the nation's two pillars along with the army, to replace Assad who died Saturday aged 69.

He attended the opening session sitting among the audience flanked by Syrian Defence Minister Mustafa Tlass, one of Assad's closest companions during his 30-year iron rule of Syria, and Assem Kanso, a Lebanese Baathist who has had historically close ties to the Assad.

Eleven members of the party's decision-making ruling council, known as the regional command, took seats on a raised platform.

They included caretaker

president Abdel Halim Khaddam, who also holds the title of vice president along with Zuhair Masharqa, who was also present on the platform.

Qaddah opened the forum calling for a minute's silence in memory of Assad, whose seat on the tribune was left vacant.

The 900 or so delegates then sang the Baath party anthem, without music since the country is in the second week of a 40-day mourning.

Qaddah then gave a lengthy tribute to Assad, singling out the achievements of his 30-year rule, and stressing his accomplishments as an "Arab national leader".

Behind Qaddah a huge ban-

ner carried a message attributed to Assad that said: "All our congresses are important, they look into the mistakes of the past and try to overcome them, and look ahead to the future."

Baath party assistant secretary Abdullah al-Ahmar, a towering figure in the hierarchy, was unanimously elected as chairman of the congress -- the first to meet in 15 years.

Visibly moved, he stressed the absence of Assad and paid tribute to him.

"This is the first time we have met without Hafez al-Assad... he was a central figure for our unity," he said.

The congress is meeting at the Palace of Congress on the southern fringes of Damascus.



Lebanese and Syrians march in Beirut Friday in support of Syrian heir apparent Bashar al-Assad who is expected to succeed his father to the presidency and leadership of the ruling Baath Party. President Hafez al-Assad, 69, died on June 10 after ruling Syria with an iron grip for 30 years.

— AFP photo

Wahid leaves Pakistan

ISLAMABAD, June 17: Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid left for Bahrain today after a 24-hour stay in Pakistan, officials said, reports AFP.

Wahid held talks with Pakistani ruler General Pervez Musharraf and President Muhammad Rafiq Tarar on Friday.

He said his "very fruitful" meetings with the Pakistani leaders heralded a "new era" in relations between the two Muslim countries.

The two sides focused on ways to enhance economic relations, especially in the rural sector and Pakistan's developing technology industry.

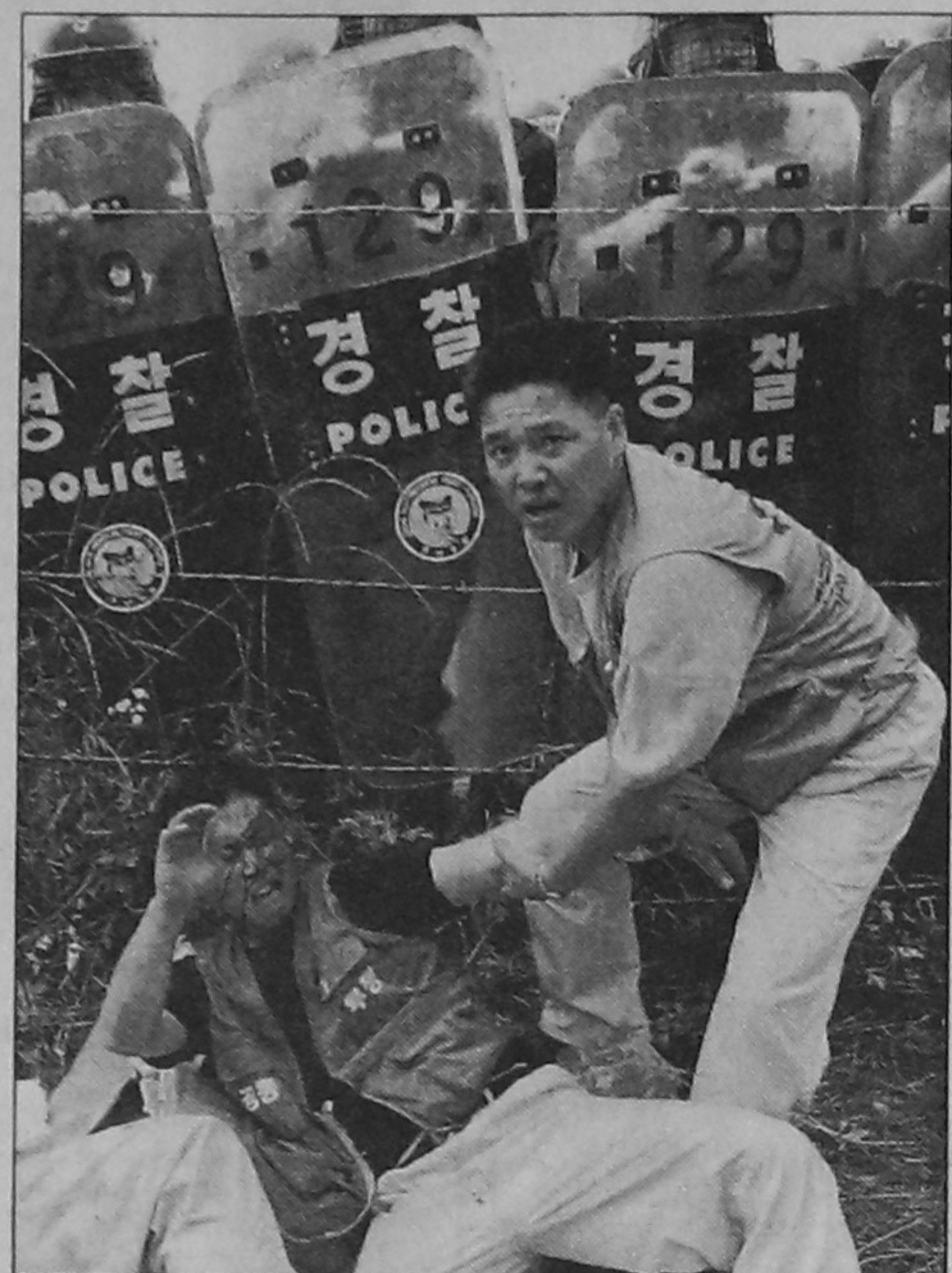
Potential arms sales from Pakistan to Indonesia were also raised, Wahid told reporters late Friday.

Russian media magnate freed

MOSCOW, June 17: Russian media magnate Vladimir Gusinsky was today enjoying his first taste of freedom in four days, after he was charged in a 10 million dollar fraud case and set free, reports AFP.

Political leaders welcomed the release of Gusinsky, whose detention revived deep concerns at home and abroad over freedom of speech under new President Vladimir Putin.

Gusinsky's Media-MOST group has been the only private press and broadcast outfit to repeatedly criticise Putin over the eight month war in Chechnya and flag graft in the domestic security service the president used to head.



A protester helps another bloodied protester up off the ground after clashing with riot police at Maehyangri, 80 km south of Seoul, in South Korea yesterday. Some 10 people were injured in the violent clashes involving scores of protesters and riot police, after the police foiled a rally against a US bombing range. The protesters clashed sporadically with the police around the Koon-Ni range in the western town, which has been used by US warplanes for bombing drills.

— AFP photo

Philippine rebels demand \$4.7m for release of 5 female hostages

JOLO, Philippines, June 17: Muslim rebels have demanded 200 million pesos (4.7 million dollars) in ransom for the release of five females among 21 mostly foreign hostages held in the southern Philippines, a source close to the government's negotiating team said today, reports AFP.

The ransom demand was relayed to an emissary of the government team engaged in backdoor talks with the Abu Sayyaf Muslim gunmen, while members of the official negotiating panel were still in Manila, according to the source, who asked not to be named.

"They are now demanding 200 million pesos as a package

for the five female hostages," the source told AFP in Jolo Island, where the three Germans, nine Malaysians, a Lebanese and two nationals each from France, Finland, South Africa and the Philippines are being held.

The hostages were abducted on April 23 from the Malaysian resort of Sipadan and taken across the sea border to Jolo by speedboat.

The five women being held are from Germany, the Philippines, France, South Africa and Lebanon. German housewife Renate Wallert, 57, is said to be seriously ill and in need of immediate medical treatment.

Hard drives containing US N-secret recovered

WASHINGTON, June 17: Parts of Los Alamos nuclear laboratories were being treated as a crime scene today, one day after US investigators recovered two missing computer hard drives containing highly classified nuclear secrets, reports AFP.

More than 60 agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have been dispatched to the nuclear laboratory to get to the bottom of the unexplained temporary disappearance of the hard drives, which contain vital data on how to dismantle nuclear weapons.

The hard drives, missing

from Los Alamos for several weeks, were visually identified, but investigators were still confirming the contents, according to an Energy Department statement Friday.

US media reported that the drives were found behind a photocopy machine in the lab. Officials could not say immediately whether the drives had been removed from the laboratory or just misplaced.

"The lab is very relieved that the hard drives have been located," said Los Alamos spokesman Kevin Roark. "We will continue to cooperate with the FBI and Energy Department officials."

Pak FM calls on US to lift sanctions

WASHINGTON, June 17: Pakistan's Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar yesterday called on the United States to lift sanctions imposed after his country matched India's nuclear tests with its own blasts in 1998, reports AFP.

Sattar, in Washington for the first talks specifically focused on nuclear security since the military coup in Islamabad last year, said the sanctions were unfair to Pakistan.

"Pakistan would very much like for the US to review the plethora of sanctions that are on the statute," he said in a news conference disrupted by Afghan activists.

"We feel strongly that some of these sanctions have been Pakistan-specific, these have singled out our country and that this is not consonant with friendly relations," he said.

"We hope that the United States government (and) the United States Congress, will review these sanctions and allow perhaps a more general, even-handed and balanced approach to this subject."

The US imposed a wide range of sanctions against India and Pakistan after the 1998 tests, restricting the provision of credits, military sales, economic assistance and loans to the government.

A smaller range of US sanctions were levied against Pakistan after the military, under General Pervez Musharraf, overthrew then

prime minister Nawaz Sharif last year.

Sattar was speaking before it emerged that India had successfully test fired a short-range surface-to-surface Prithvi (Earth) missile which in some models is nuclear capable.

He said he wanted to make clear that it was India which tested a nuclear device first -- and claimed Pakistan wanted to avoid a dangerous weapons build-up on the subcontinent.

"Pakistan has no desire to engage in any nuclear arms race. We have no ambitions to a global or regional role."

But... if the present situation is destabilized, Pakistan will be obliged to upgrade other deterrents in order to ensure its survivability and credibility," he warned.

Sattar described talks on nuclear security with US Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott on Thursday as "productive."

"I'm going back from Washington satisfied with the progress we have achieved toward better mutual understanding," he said.

State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said the talks focused on preserving security in South Asia while preventing proliferation of nuclear weapons and missile delivery systems.

Sattar and Talbott also discussed a proposed fissile cut-off treaty and the explosive divisions between India and

Pakistan on Kashmir.

The talks covered the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty which India and Pakistan have refused to sign, a proposed fissile material cut-off treaty and the security environment in South Asia.

Sattar, who described Pakistan's relations with the US as "troubled but friendly" also met Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and Under Secretary of State Thomas Pickering.

Thursday's talks on nuclear security were the first specifically focused on the issue since early 1999 when the two sides held their eighth meeting on nuclear security.

US officials have been pushing Pakistan to hold elections ever since Musharraf overthrew the government in October.

"We continue to believe that a detailed road map (to elections) should be presented and that the process should be carried out as quickly as possible," said Boucher.

Sattar also criticised sanctions against the Taliban government in Afghanistan by the US as counterproductive.

During his news conference he was heckled by several Afghan activists who were ejected from the room after claiming Pakistan was shoring up the radical Taliban.

As he left the event, at the National Press Club, he was forced to dodge more Afghan demonstrators.

BRIEFLY**Presidential polls in Poland Oct 8:**

Poland's third popular presidential election since the collapse of communist rule a decade ago will be held on October 8, the speaker of the country's parliament announced Friday, AP reports from Warsaw.

Under Poland's democratic constitution, the country elects a president every five years. The early favourite is President Aleksander Kwasniewski, who already has launched his campaign for a second term. An ex-communist who defeated incumbent Lech Walesa for the post in 1995, Kwasniewski has become Poland's most popular politician, with poll approval ratings of 70 per cent.

Several leaders to visit Indonesia:

Several world leaders including Libya's Muammar Gaddafi and Iranian President Mohammad Khatami will visit Indonesia next week to mark a Eid-e-Miladunabi celebration, the Antara news agency reported yesterday. Reuters reports from Jakarta.

Antara quoted Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab who said Pakistan military ruler Pervez Musharraf, Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohammad and Sultan Hassanali Bolkiyah of Brunei would also attend the June 22 event marking the birth of the Prophet Mohammad (SM).

Killer of family executed in Herat:

A man convicted by a Taliban court of killing five members of a family was publicly executed in the western city of Herat, the state-run Radio Shariat reported yesterday, AFP reports from Kabul.

Thousands of people thronged the city's sports stadium to watch the victims' heir execute Ghulam Ghaus on Friday. Herat Governor Mulla Khairullah Khairkhiwa and other Taliban officials were also present.

UNSC orders all foreign forces to quit Congo

Ugandans start withdrawing from Kisangani

UNITED NATIONS, June 17: The Security Council voted unanimously Friday for a resolution ordering all foreign forces out of the Democratic Republic of Congo, but without setting a deadline, reports AFP.

The resolution demanded that Rwanda and Uganda withdraw all their forces "without delay" and said other countries should reciprocate at each stage of the withdrawal.

The resolution was adopted in the presence of foreign ministers and other officials from the six African countries and rebel groups involved in the DRC conflict.

Rwanda and Uganda support rebels opposed to President Laurent Kabila of DRC, while Angola, Namibia and Zimbabwe back his three-year-old regime.

The six countries signed a ceasefire agreement in the Zambian capital, Lusaka, on July 10 last year, and the rebel groups signed it in August.

Friday's vote concluded two days of meetings between council members and the political committee which was set under the Lusaka accord.

Before closing the final public session, the French ambassador to the United Nations and this month's council president, Jean-David Levitte, told the African participants to "take three words home with you: peace, peace and peace."

The United Nations stood beside them in its support for the Lusaka peace accord, he said, but the success of the agreement depended on their political will.

British Ambassador Jeremy Greenstock was blunter when speaking to reporters afterwards.

"We are fed up to the back teeth with parties saying they will implement agreements and not doing so," he said.

But diplomats said that in private council consultations, Britain and the United States had opposed demands for set-

ting a deadline on the withdrawal of Rwandan and Ugandan forces.

They were unhappy with putting the onus on Kabila's enemies rather than his allies, the diplomats said.

On Thursday, US Ambassador Richard Holbrooke said insistence on the withdrawal of Rwandan and Ugandan forces must not detract from those countries' legitimate security concerns.

Meanwhile, Ugandan troops began withdrawing from the northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) city of Kisangani on Friday, a Ugandan military spokesman told AFP today.

The pull out will take seven days to complete, said army spokesman Major Philinus Katirima.

"These companies are for mopping the airport and maintaining security situation in Kisangani until deployment of UN forces," he added.

Fiji coup leader to help draft new constitution: Military

'Speight should be declared int'l criminal'

SUVA, June 17: Fiji's coup plotters will help draw up a new constitution, martial law spokesman Lt-Colonel Filipo Tarakuniki said here today, reports AFP.

He said coup leader George Speight had submitted a list of potential members of a civilian government and the military found a few of them acceptable.

He said Speight's name was not on the list. Tarakuniki also explicitly spelt out military sympathy for the indigenous Fijian cause proclaimed by Speight.

Just 24-hours after a Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) delegation was assured that the country would return to its 1997 multi-racial constitution, the military seemingly changed its stance.

Tarakuniki said a new constitutional review team would include members of Speight's coup plotters.

"It will have to include members of Speight's group," he said. "What matters is the final result. Where we are starting from is not the relevant issue."

Tarakuniki said Speight's cause had to be given a "fair hearing". On May 29 Fiji Military

Forces commander Commodore Voreqe Bainimarama declared martial law, citing as one reason the European Union's threat that if any member of the Speight group was in a new government the country's export sugar preferences would be abolished.

Tarakuniki said Saturday the military had received a list Friday from Speight proposing members of the new interim

William's cousin arrested for possessing drugs

LONDON, June 17: Prince William's cousin has been arrested and cautioned for possessing drugs, The Sun newspaper reported here today, reports AFP.

Nicholas Knatchbull, son of Lord and Lady Rosemary and great grandson of Earl Mountbatten of Burma, was arrested on Thursday with a quantity of cannabis, believed to have a street value of 35 pounds (\$6 dollars).

government. "We found some of the names on that list are acceptable to us, a few of the names, and we are looking at that as we draw up a list of ministers in the interim administration."

He denied that this meant the new government would be unacceptable to the world community.

"We have about 700,000 people in this country and out of that there is a very limited pool of people we can rely on to serve in a cabinet," he said.

Speight's group could not provide a full cabinet and nor could the military, he said. Meanwhile, New Zealand's Foreign Affairs Minister Phil Goff said today he wants Fiji's coup leader, George Speight, declared an international criminal.

Goff said on his arrival back in New Zealand from Fiji that he had instructed his officials to look at ways of bringing Speight to justice in international courts.

"We will be investigating whether there is any action we can take should they set foot outside Fiji to bring them before any international court of justice for their act of terrorism," he said.

Eritrea repatriating Ethiopian nationals

ASMARA, June 17: Eritrean authorities said today they were repatriating Ethiopians living in the country and had intervened to stop local violence against the Ethiopians during hostilities between the two neighbours, reports AFP.

With International Red Cross cooperation, Ethiopia was "finalising the necessary arrangements to expedite the voluntary departure of Ethiopians who have decided of their own free will to return to Ethiopia," a foreign ministry statement said.

The two countries were expected on Sunday to sign a peace deal two years of border war.

The ministry statement here said young Eritreans had rashly and emotionally taken the law into their hands after hearing of Ethiopia's latest aggression.

This had occurred after they had been "provoked and taunted by some Ethiopians."

The government had taken the necessary legal steps to ensure the safety and security of Ethiopians that may need it," the statement added.

The foreign ministry statement here also warned that

Eritrea might, "when it finds it unavoidable, also have to take appropriate legal steps to repatriate Ethiopians residing in Eritrea on a case by case basis to their state of origin."

Eritrea also renewed an invitation to international organisations such as the United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity to investigate the situation of Ethiopians in Eritrea and that of Eritreans in Ethiopia during hostilities.

Earlier this month the Eritrean government officially admitted that camps for displaced Ethiopians had been set up in the country.

At the start of the Ethiopian-Eritrean war, many of the Ethiopians living in Eritrea had been working at the Red Sea port of Assab, half of whose population of 40,000 was then Ethiopian.

Eritrea agreed a revised OAU peace plan last weekend after 12 days of indirect talks in the Algerians, but Ethiopia gave its firm acceptance only last Wednesday.

The new plan allows for the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force in a security zone which will extend along the border 25 km into Eritrea.



The Leaning Tower of Pisa is framed between the drills used to try to put the Tower straight again Friday. The Tower opened again for a few hours yesterday after years of restoration works. Italian ballerina Carla Fracci was the patroness of the symbolic reopening.

5 Filipino child hostages freed

ZAMBOANGA, Philippines, June 17: Five Filipino children held hostage by Muslim rebels since March were freed today after they were swapped for relatives of one of the guerrilla leaders, the military said, reports AFP.

Military Southern Command chief Major General Diomedio Villanueva said the swap was made early Saturday in the town of Patikul on Jolo island south of here.

The release was unrelated to another hostage crisis in Jolo where Abu Sayyaf Muslim rebels are holding 21 hostages from Germany, France, Finland, South Africa, Lebanon, Malaysia and the Philippines.

Kuomintang elects Lien as new chairman

TAIPEI, June 17: Taiwan's Kuomintang (KMT) congress today elected Lien Chan as new chairman amid violent protests from party members demanding the expulsion of former chairman Lee Teng-hui, reports AFP.

Lien, KMT acting chairman and former vice president, garnered 94.8 percent, or 1,597 of 1,684 votes cast in the 1,992-member party congress, which opened today.