



Leslie Cheung salutes the crowd Friday after being recognised as "Asia's Biggest Superstar" at the 2000 CCTV-MTV Music Honours, an event in Beijing paying tribute to the top artists of Greater China and abroad. — 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 concern 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 lead.

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 elevate 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 com-

rade, 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 rule, and stressing his accomplishments as an "Arab national leader".

Behind Qaddah a huge ban-

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Baath party assistant secretary Abdullah al-Ahmari, 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.

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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



A protester helps another bloodied protester up off the ground after clashing with riot police at Maehyangi, 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 back-door 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."

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The United Nations stood be-

side them in its support for the US-led 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 do 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 en-

emies 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 Phinehas Kaurima.

"These companies are for

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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.

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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 Tarakikinikini said here today.

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.

Tarakikinikini also explicitly

spelt out military sympathy for the indigenous Fijian cause

admitted that camps for displaced Fijians had been set up in the country.

Forces commander Commodore Voreqa 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.

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

government.

"We found some of the names on the 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."

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 Algiers, 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.