

Ethiopia, Eritrea sign peace accord in Algiers

ALGIERS, June 18 : Eritrea and Ethiopia signed a peace accord today in Algiers, ending a two-year-old war between the Horn of Africa neighbours, an AFP correspondent at the scene reported.

The accord, brokered by the Organisation of African Unity (OAU), was signed by Eritrean Foreign Minister Haile Woldemariam and Ethiopian Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin, in the presence of African President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, at the People's Palace in the Algerian capital.

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

It also calls for the withdrawal of Ethiopian troops from areas deep inside Eritrea, beyond disputed border regions which were at the root of the fighting that broke out in May 1998.

Under the 15-point OAU plan, the two countries would end all armed air and land hostilities immediately after signing the document, (and) guarantee free movement and access of the peacekeeping mission.

The UN peacekeepers would be charged with monitoring the cessation of hostilities and the redeployment of Ethiopian troops, ensure observance of the security commitments agreed by the two parties, and to monitor the Eritrean temporary security zone provided for in the accord.

The deal also stipulates that Eritrea remain "at a distance of 25 km from redeployed Ethiopian positions."

The plan said Ethiopian redeployment would be carried out within two weeks of the UN deployment, although no date has been announced yet for the peacekeepers to move in.

Earlier, Eritrean authorities said Saturday they were repatriating Ethiopians living in the country, on the eve of the expected signing of a peace deal with Ethiopia to end their bloody two-year war.

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," an Eritrean foreign ministry statement said.

Insisting it was intervening to stop violence against Ethiopians sparked by the one-month-old surge in hostilities between the Horn of Africa neighbours, the statement admitted some young Eritreans had "rashly and emotionally taken the law into their hands."

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, it may need it, the statement added, saying authorities here reserved the right to repatriate Ethiopians "on a case by case basis."

There was no immediate reaction from Addis Ababa.

The announcement coincided with the arrival in Asmara of UNICEF Executive Director Carol Bellamy, who issued an appeal for donors to send urgent funds to the troubled Horn of Africa region.

"It's crucial that donors from the international community step forward," said Bellamy, who is on a five-day visit to the embattled region and a 24-hour tour of Eritrea.

"One third of the population of this country is facing a very serious humanitarian crisis. I hope that there will be a response of the international community."

Also in Asmara, a UN official released estimates on the human cost of the latest round of fighting, saying some 1.1 million Eritreans had fled combat zones in the past four weeks.

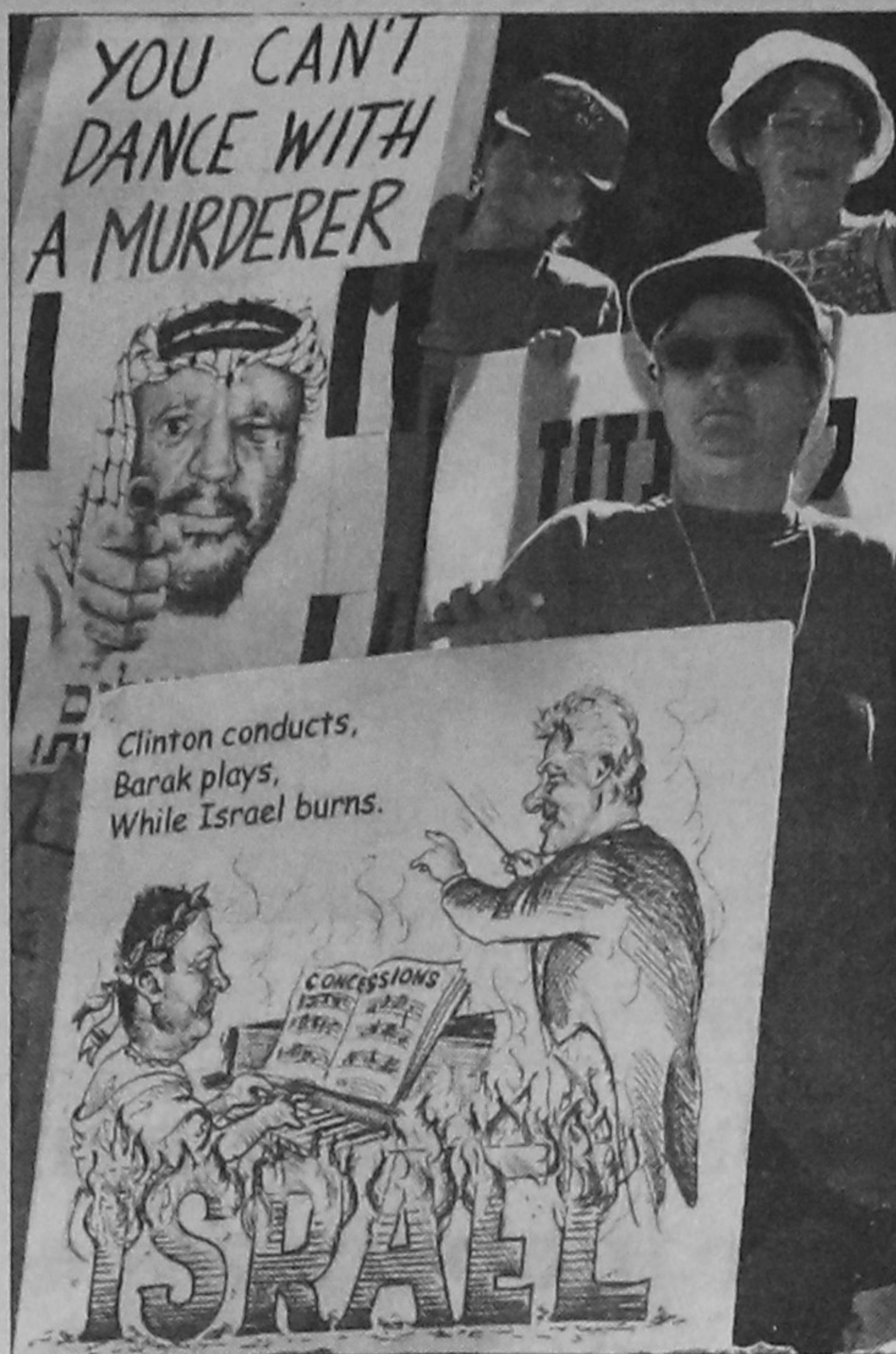
The figures, compiled by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), represented a significant increase on the previous estimate of 750,000 people.

Heading off possible concern over the fate of Ethiopians in the country, Eritrea renewed an invitation to the United Nations and the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) to investigate the situation of Ethiopians here and of Eritreans in Ethiopia.

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

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

The new plan allows for the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force in a security zone which will extend along the border 25 kilometres (15 miles) into Eritrea.



Right-wing Israelis protest land transfer to the Palestinian Authority in front of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak's office in Jerusalem yesterday during a Security Cabinet meeting on Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. Israelis and Palestinians concluded talks Saturday near Washington, DC with no tangible outcome regarding Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and a framework accord.

— AFP photo

Fears of LTTE suicide attacks rise ahead of peace moves

COLOMBO, June 18 : When Sri Lanka's peace moves reach a crucial stage, politicians must run the gauntlet of suicide bombers who have kept alive and fueled the island's seemingly unending Tamil separatist bloodshed, reports AFP.

As President Chandrika Kumaratunga seeks consensus with the country's main opposition to conclude talks by her 55th birthday on June 29, the authorities fear the separatist Tamil Tiger rebels could strike again.

Kumaratunga was about to present her peace package to parliament in July last year when a Tamil Tiger suicide bomber assassinated a co-author of the draft plan and moderate Tamil leader, Neelan Thiruchelvam.

The country is once again at a decisive stage with its controversial power-sharing plan first unveiled by Kumaratunga on August 3, 1995 ready to be finalised soon.

Within four days of Kumaratunga unveiling her radical political package in 1995, the Tamil Tigers bombed her former office of the Western Provincial Council.

Kumaratunga herself narrowly escaped assassination when a woman suicide bomber carried out an attack here on December 18 last year, three days before presidential elections.

After a string of failed suicide bomb attacks, the rebels claimed success when they blew up Industry Minister C. V. Gooneratne on June 7 while he led a parade to drum up support for government troops battling Tamil Tigers.

A week later there was another bombing which was initially thought to be the work of a "Black Tiger" suicide bomber. Three people were killed and seven others injured in that attack.

Police say one of the injured is believed to be the bomber. Police warned last week that the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had sent about 25 suicide bombers to stage attacks in and around the capital.

Senior politicians and military leaders have been asked to scale down their public appearances or take tighter security measures to prevent attacks, a senior police officer said.

He said there could be more attacks as the Tigers faced military pressure in the north of the country where they failed to keep up a "rolling offensive" and dislodge government forces from the peninsula of Jaffna.

The Tigers are outnumbered more than 10 to one by government forces, but what they lack in manpower they make up with the die-hard determination of a elite band of Black Tiger suicide bombers.

The Black Tigers attracted international attention nine years ago when they were blamed for the assassination of former Indian premier Rajiv Gandhi.

A woman with explosives strapped to her body blew up herself and Gandhi during an election rally in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu on May 21, 1991.

However, the suicide bombers had carried out their first attack nearly four years earlier when a rebel known as

Captain Miller drove an explosives-filled truck into an army camp on July 5, 1987 and killed 40 soldiers.

The Tigers had announced that 147 Black Tigers had died up to July last year. Within rebel ranks it is a privilege to be a suicide bomber.

The perks include a final supper with Tamil Tiger supremo, Velupillai Prabhakaran, who considers them the "protective armour" of ethnic minority Tamils.

The Black Tiger success rate has suffered in recent months but that has not stopped them.

President Kumaratunga lost her right eye in the December 18 suicide bombing but 26 others were killed and over 100 wounded.

Eighteen days later on January 5, the Tigers struck again, this time opposite the office of the prime minister. The attack by a woman suicide bomber killed 11 others, including four security personnel assigned to protect Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike.

Tamil politicians say it is difficult to understand what drives young men and women to carry out suicide bombings. Unlike in the Middle East, the Tiger rebels are not motivated by religion to stage suicide bombings.

In fact, suicide is a sin according to Hinduism, the religion followed by most Tiger guerrillas.

"It is not religion or Tamil culture that is driving the Black Tigers," says former rebel-turned Tamil legislator Dharmalingam Sridharan. "It must be purely the political ideology."

Fiji crisis enters 2nd month with no sign of resolution

SUVA, June 18 : Hostages being held by gunmen in Fiji's parliament will today reach the end of their first month in captivity with no signs their release will come anytime soon, reports AFP.

Martial law authorities have given coup plotter George Speight a drafting role in a new constitution and are considering a number of his nominees for an interim civilian government.

Martial law spokesman Colonel Filipo Tarekikini at a press conference Saturday was explicit about how the Fiji army, the vast majority of whose soldiers are indigenous Fijians, felt about Speight.

They have made their case, they have stood up for indigenous Fijian aspirations, and we sympathise with that, but beyond that the country's path forward must be charted that will bring peace, stability and economic well-being to our people," he said. And he cited World

War II to demonstrate perceived disloyalty of ethnic Indian Fijians who make up 41 percent of the country's population.

Indigenous Fijians "are very conscious that in the Second World War they went off to fight and our Indian brothers back here were in a sugar strike trying to bring the economy down," he said.

On May 19 Speight and a small group of special services soldiers seized the parliament complex, taking ethnic Indian Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, his cabinet and a number of MPs hostage. Thirty-one hostages were named last week, but one of them was Saturday revealed to have not been in parliament at all. The gunmen lead by Speight has at various times said there were 31, 32 and 36 hostages.

Speight Saturday held what he said was his last news conference. He said the media, particularly international jour-

nalists, were not presenting his side of the story accurately or fairly. Only local journalists would be allowed to talk to him in future, he said.

The military, who declared martial law on May 29, appear caught between their sympathy for Speight's cause -- while disagreeing with his methods -- and their international appearance.

Tarekikini revealed there would be room for Speight's nominees on a planned team to draw up a new constitution. This came a day after a Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) was assured the country would return to its 1997 multi-racial constitution.

The 1997 constitution was adopted under an indigenous Fijian-controlled government of then coup leader Sitiveni Rabuka and came into place with the then publicly stated unanimous support of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC).



US First Lady Hillary Clinton (R) and Anne Roosevelt (L), granddaughter of late US First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, unveil a portrait of Eleanor Roosevelt at Val-Kill in Hyde Park, New York Saturday. Hillary visited the Val-Kill Cottage home of Eleanor Roosevelt to announce that 150,000 USD in private donations had been raised to help preserve the nation's only historic site dedicated to a first lady.

— AFP photo

BRIEFLY

4 killed in Japanese avalanche: An avalanche killed four people and injured another four in central Japan today, as they were trying to rescue a man who had gone missing while collecting wild plants, police said, reports AFP.

The avalanche occurred when a rescue helicopter was approaching what was believed to be the body of the missing 52-year-old man at Mount Asakusa, some 200 km north of Tokyo, a local police spokesman said. The four were "hit directly by hard masses of snow rather than engulfed," the spokesman said, adding that the 1,586-metre (5,234-foot) mountain was dotted with lingering snow in this season.

10 Tamil Tigers killed: Sri Lankan troops killed at least 10 Tamil rebels, including three women fighters, in fresh attacks in the island's embattled northeast, the government said in a statement Sunday, AFP reports from Colombo.

Troops fired artillery at positions of the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in the Welikanda area in the east on Friday, the government's Special Media Information Centre (SMIC) said in a statement.

It said eight rebels, including three women, were killed in the attack while another 18 were injured.

2 killed in Malaysian jet crash: Two people, including a Singaporean, were killed Sunday when an aircraft belonging to a flying school plunged into the sea, the national news agency Bernama reported, AFP says from Kuala Lumpur.

The bodies of Singaporean pilot Faizol Mohamed Ibrahim, 29, and parachute jump master Sivalingam Shamugam, 42, have been recovered from the South China Sea off Mersing in southern Johore state, the police were quoted as saying.

Presidents of six Centam states hold 'positive talks'

GAMBOA, Panama, June 18 : Presidents from six Central American countries held "positive and productive" talks on Saturday on resolving trade and border disputes that have set back moves toward regional integration, Panama's leader said, reports Reuters.

Heads of state from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica were hosted by Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso for a day of talks with an open agenda on their way home from a two-day Latin American summit in Colombia.

"We made the invitation to talk about the problems of these countries," Moscoso told a news conference. "It has been very positive and productive," she added, saying the presidents would meet again in the coming months.

Guatemalan President Alfonso Portillo, who took over the rotating presidency of the Central American Integration System (SICA) from Panama at the talks, said the leaders had discussed economic integration at the two-and-a-half hour

meeting.

Salvadoran President Francisco Flores said the region would also seek solutions to long-standing border disputes that have stood in the way of regional integration among the tiny Central American nations.

Honduras and Nicaragua patrol boats exchanged fire in February in disputed waters in the Gulf of Fonseca — the Pacific inlet shared by El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua.

"We feel very positive that the Gulf of Fonseca is not going to be a source of problems," Flores said.

Nicaraguan President Arnoldo Aleman played down a spat between his country and Costa Rica over navigation rights on the San Juan River that defines part of their frontier.

Border tensions have also erupted between Nicaragua and Costa Rica and between Guatemala and Belize.

Also present at the summit were Presidents Carlos Flores of Honduras and Miguel Angel Rodriguez of Costa Rica.

10pc increase in defence spending in Pak budget

ISLAMABAD, June 18 : Pakistani Finance Minister Shaoukat Aziz said today he had not slashed the defence budget and the reduction reflected in this year's outlay was due to shifting of military pensions to the civilian administration budget, reports AFP.

The military spending for the fiscal year to June 2001 has actual been increased by about 10 percent, Aziz clarified in his post-budget press conference.

The national budget unveiled by Aziz in a late night broadcast on Saturday showed the military government capped defence spending at 133.5 billion rupees (2.57 billion dollars) against 143.4 billion (2.75 billion dollars) for the outgoing fiscal year to June 30.

Philippines evacuates 66 from Solomon Islands

MANILA, June 18 : A Philippine air force plane today evacuated 43 Filipinos and 23 other foreigners from the troubled Solomon Islands, the foreign department here said, reports AFP.

The C-130 aircraft took off from Honiara on Sunday with 43 Filipinos, 16 Papua New Guinea citizens, five Malaysians and two Chinese. Foreign Undersecretary Benjamin Domingo told reporters here.

The Papuans were offloaded at Port Moresby as the aircraft refuelled for the last leg of its flight to Manila, he added.

Israel test-fires missiles

LONDON, June 18 : Israel has test-fired cruise missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads, fueling fears of an escalation in the Middle East arms race, the Sunday Times reported, citing Israeli defence sources, reports AFP.

The tests took place in May off Sri Lanka, the sources said, and hit targets at sea at a range of about 930 miles (1,500 kilometres), the Times said.

Israel has never confirmed nor denied it has nuclear weapons and refuses to submit nuclear sites to international inspection.

'2500 Pak militants waiting to cross into Kashmir to wreak havoc'

SRINAGAR, India, June 18 : About 2,500 armed and trained militants are waiting to cross into Indian-administered Kashmir from Pakistan to wreak havoc in the divided state, a senior Indian Army official charged today, reports AFP.

General John Ranjan Mukherjee, Kashmir's top army official said the Pakistani Army was helping the border crossers by firing on Indian positions across the disputed frontier for them to sneak into India.

"The Pakistani Army abets infiltration of terrorists by trading artillery, mortar and small arms fire while the terrorists stay in army posts next to (border) and thereafter infiltrate into India," Mukherjee said.

"Our figures show at least 2,500 terrorists are waiting to infiltrate across the LoC (Line of Control)," he said, referring to the de facto Kashmiri border. "As per our information there are 123 (militant) train-

ing camps, of which 42 are in Pakistan. 70 in Pakistan-occupied (Pakistan-administered) Kashmir and 11 on the Afghanistan border."

"The Pakistani strategy is to keep the pot boiling, to try to bleed India through a thousand cuts to continue international attention and force international intervention in Kashmir," he said.

India blames arch-rival Pakistan, which administers part of disputed state of fueling a Muslim militant campaign in its territory which has claimed more than 25,000 lives since 1989.

Islamabad denies the charge but extends moral and diplomatic support to the unrest.

The two neighbours have fought two wars over Kashmir apart from a de facto battle in the state last year.

Mukherjee said "Pakistan's Inter-service Intelligence is attempting to spread its tentacles all over the country and the aim is Balkanising India."

He cited as proof a new mili-

tant group, Jash-e-Mohammed (Army of the Prophet), headed by Pakistani cleric Maulana Masood Azhar, which he claimed had recruited 5,000 people so far.

Azhar and another militant, Mushtaq Zargar were released from Indian prisons to secure the freedom of 128 Indian Airlines passengers in December. The plane was hijacked after it left the Nepal capital Kathmandu.

Jash-e-Mohammed is a new radical militant outfit which has recently staged several suicide bomb attacks in Kashmir.

"The extent of indoctrination is evident by the efforts to Talibanise the Kashmiris," Mukherjee said.

"The foreign terrorists are sent for a period of two years. They are paid 200,000 Indian rupees (4,597 dollars) prior to induction and 300,000 (6,896 dollars) on their return (to Pakistan)," he said.

"The funds are provided from Islamic countries and narcotic trade."

'Mugabe to prevent opposition from gaining seats in polls'

Harare accuses US of meddling in its internal affairs

LONDON, June 18 : Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe will block the country's opposition movement from garnering seats in parliament during next weekend's parliamentary election, the Sunday Telegraph reported, citing a close aide of the president, says AFP.

Mugabe's electoral campaign manager Professor Jonathan Moyo told the weekly that the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) would never allow the Movement for Democratic Change to take up a single seat in parliament.

"We will never accept the MDC in parliament," Moyo was quoted as saying. "They're British-backed racists whose very existence is provocative. For us to accept them would be the same as Jews accepting a Nazi party."

It's a political party with its roots in the donor purse run by Rhodesians who tortured and

killed Zimbabweans during our liberation struggle," he said.

Moyo did not say what would happen if the MDC, as is expected, won seats in the 120 electoral districts it is contesting in the polls to be held next Saturday and Sunday, but said: "It's as likely as me suddenly being beamed to Jupiter."

Mugabe earlier Saturday acknowledged that his party is facing a major challenge in the vote, which is being held against a backdrop of violence against the opposition party that has left at least 30 dead in recent weeks.

Mugabe appoints 30 of the 150 members of parliament, which means the opposition must win 76 seats to gain power, while ZANU-PF need only 46 to retain its majority. It had 147 seats in the outgoing parliament.

Meanwhile, Zimbabwe has accused the US Senate of violating the UN Charter and of try-

ing to influence Zimbabwe's upcoming parliamentary elections, the Zimbabwean foreign ministry said Sunday in a statement.

"Attempts to tinker with the political process in Zimbabwe to produce a result preferred by certain elements in the United States and elsewhere constitute a violation of principles of the United Nations Charter, and negate the very principle of democracy," a foreign ministry spokesman said.

The spokesman referred to the passage through the Senate Foreign Relations Committee earlier this month of a measure to suspend bilateral aid to Zimbabwe because of what it called President Robert Mugabe's heavy-handed tactics.

The bill approved by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee would also require US representatives at multilateral lending institutions to vote against loans to Zimbabwe.

'Christians converting Hindus at gunpoint'

GUWAHATI, India, June 18 : A radical Hindu outfit allied to India's ruling party today has alleged that tribal separatist rebels and missionaries in the country's north-east were forcibly converting Hindus to Christianity, reports AFP.

The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, National Volunteer Corps), said hundreds of Hindus were being converted at "gunpoint" in parts of two remote states, Tripura and Arunachal Pradesh.

"Christian missionaries, with the help of the National Liberation Front of Tripura and the National Socialist Council of Nagaland, are converting Hindus at gunpoint," RSS chief Kupahalli Sitarajam said, referring to two rebel groups.

Sudarshan said Christian missionaries in turn were inciting ethnic tensions among tribes by urging them to revolt and seek separate homelands out of existing states, thereby fomenting militancy in the troubled region.

"This is a systematic design

by Christian missionaries to aid and abet terrorism and convert non-Christians into their faith," the RSS chief said.

"The activities of the missionaries have got a boost after the Pope gave an open appeal to indulge in conversion during his visit to India," he claimed.

More than 30 per cent of the total 30 million population of India's seven sister northeastern states are Christian.

Church leaders, however, denied the charges.

"This is all rubbish and the figment of their imagination. Our religion does not subscribe to any forcible conversions," a church leader here said.

The Vishva Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council) said it had evidence to prove that missionaries were helping militants in the region.

"Our investigations indicate that militants are being aided by Christian missionaries and that in the name of preaching they are also indulging in largescale conversions," Madhab Gangurde, a VHP official, told AFP.