

JERUSALEM, June 22 : The secular, leftist Israeli party Meretz pulled out of the governing coalition yesterday to show its rejection of a plan for resolving the crisis with another coalition member, public radio reported, says AFP.

Education Minister Yossi Sarid, Trade and Industry Minister Rami Glick and Agriculture Minister Haim Oron handed their letters of resignation to Prime Minister Ehud Barak at his Tel Aviv area home at 10:30 p.m. (1930 GMT).

Zehava Gal-On, leader of the Meretz members of parliament, said: "We are ready to pay the price out of a sense of responsibility toward the government and the person who heads it, and toward peace."

Sarid told reporters after leaving Barak's home that he had told him "the resignation (was) for the good of the coalition." He has said previously he was ready to leave the govern-

ment but continue to support its peace process initiatives.

"We can't make new concessions to Shas, but we don't want to throw a monkey wrench (spanner) into the works of the peace process, and we take responsibility for the government's fall," Shas bete noire Meretz leader Sarid said after his party's 10 members of parliament made the decision earlier Wednesday.

The withdrawal of both Meretz and the ultra-orthodox Jewish party Shas would bring down the government. Without them, Barak's coalition would hold only 43 of the Knesset's 120 seats and have only 24 ministers.

On Tuesday, Shas, which has 17 MPs, resigned effective Thursday afternoon. Its withdrawal alone would have left Barak with a minority government after only 11 months in power.



Members of the State Assembly of India-controlled Kashmir debate on a greater autonomy proposal in Srinagar yesterday. The debate, which could set the troubled state on a collision course with the Central government started Tuesday backed by Kashmir's ruling National Conference Party which wants full autonomy for the Muslim-majority state except in matters related to finance, defence and communications.

Fiji talks conclude with no deal to end hostages' ordeal

Families await release of hostages

SUVA, June 22 : Talks aimed at ending Fiji's political crisis ended today night without a deal to free the country's prime minister and other hostages held in parliament, a spokesman for the military said, reports AFP.

Military chiefs, who have been running the country since declaring martial law on May 29, had been optimistic of wrapping up an agreement with coup leader George Speight on an interim civilian government.

But spokesman Colonel Filipo Tarakimint said differences over the composition of the new administration had prevented a deal.

"We have come to agreement on some (members of interim government) but until we get the total agreement, those preliminary agreements, so to speak, are not certain," he said.

There were also differences over how long a term the interim government should serve, he said.

Speight took prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry and most of his government captive after storming parliament on May 19. He claims to be acting in the name of indigenous Fijians and has demanded the exclusion of ethnic Indians, who make up more than 40 percent of the population, from political power.

Chaudhry was elected last year as the country's first ethnic Indian premier.

Meanwhile, families of 31 hostages being held in Fiji's Parliament have been advised that a release was likely to take place later today.

A "national trauma recovery team" at a media briefing Thursday said the release was imminent.

Coup plotter George Speight seized the hostages including Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, his cabinet and government, on May 19.

Their release was expected to follow the signing Thursday of an agreement between Speight and the martial law rulers on a new interim civilian government.

Speight left parliament in the morning for further talks with the military which were expected to lead to the signing of the accord.

His only comment was: "Hopeful, that is a good way to feel."

He declined any other reaction.

Sources close to the families told AFP the release was likely to take place Thursday afternoon.

'N Korea still a threat'

US expects resumption of missile talks with North

INCHON, South Korea, June 22 : A senior US military commander today highlighted the continued North Korean military threat as commemorations started for the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the Korean War, reports AFP.

South Korea has sought since last week's historic summit between the leaders of the North and South, to turn events for Sunday's anniversary into calls for peace and reconciliation.

But Rear Admiral William D. Sullivan, commander of US Naval Forces in Korea, told US veterans and their families: "We face a dangerous unpredictable enemy across the border."

He added: "Our job today is to deter a war on the Korean peninsula."

Sullivan spoke at the unveiling of a plaque honouring US navy personnel who served in the three-year Korean War which broke out on June 25, 1950, when the communist North invaded South Korea.

Fifty three US navy veterans and their families took part in the ceremony in Freedom Park in Inchon. The port west of Seoul was where US-led forces conducted a decisive landing on September 28 1950 that forced the Soviet-backed North Korean army to retreat.

Retired rear admiral William Thompson, who now works for the US Navy Memorial Foundation, told the ceremony: "The amphibious landing operation was the most masterly and audacious strategic stroke in all history."

Meanwhile, the United States expects to resume missile talks with North Korea shortly, following receipt of a pre-arranged diplomatic signal from Pyongyang related to the easing of US sanctions against the Stalinist nation, a State Department official said today.

Prospect of free & fair polls in Zimbabwe a joke: Expert

US watching situation warily

HARARE, June 22 : State-inspired violence in Zimbabwe has demolished any prospect that parliamentary elections at the weekend will be "free and fair," a growing number of experts have said, reports AFP.

That concept is "a joke," human rights monitor David Chubb told a press conference in Harare last week.

The opposition is accusing the government of rigging thousands of applications for postal votes and the state this week reduced the number of monitors from the quasi-independent Electoral Supervisory Commission from 16,000 to 4,000 -- just one at each polling station.

It also withheld accreditation from more than 200 of the approximately 500 international observers here.

Ruling party stalwarts are meanwhile beating up and intimidating opposition supporters around the country, destroying their identity cards to prevent them from voting.

Party militants are also warning rural people they will be able to read their votes in the computers, from hidden cameras in the polling stations, from satellites, and even from the ultraviolet light used to highlight ink put on a finger to prevent double-voting.

But even if the elections were to be free and fair, the constitution gives President Robert Mugabe an advantage that would be totally unacceptable in most countries around the world.

Candidates are standing in 120 constituencies in a first-past-the-post system -- there are no second rounds. But once they are elected Mugabe has the constitutional authority to appoint a further 30 members of parliament.

Nine human rights organisations in Zimbabwe accused the state and the ruling party last week of mounting a terror campaign to smash the opposition.

Earlier, the United States is watching warily as Zimbabwe heads to the polls for legislative elections this weekend, in a campaign that Washington decries as violent and rife with irregularities.

Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's refusal to allow most international observers, diplomats and non-governmental organisations to monitor the balloting has only dimmed the Clinton administration's view of the chances for a fair vote.



Fijian military Commodore Frank Bainimarama (centre) walks out from talks with rebel leader George Speight in an attempt to end the Fijian coup-crisis yesterday. Talks ended without a deal to free the country's prime minister and other hostages held in Parliament. — AFP photo

Autonomy plan for 8 provinces Sri Lankan govt likely to seek Tamil's response

COLOMBO, June 22: In a softening of its stand, the government is expected to seek the Tamil rebels' response to a proposed new constitution that would offer wide autonomy to all the eight provinces in a bid to end the 17-year-old ethnic conflict, a newspaper report said Thursday, reports AP.

The draft proposals, now being discussed by the government and the opposition, will be handed to the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The Daily Mirror newspaper quoted DM Jayaratne, the general secretary of the governing People's Alliance, as saying: "Jayaratne was not available for comment. But the government is expected reach the LTTE through Norway, which has been trying to broker peace between the government and the guerrillas."

On Friday, a statement by the president's office said the

LTTE will have to give up arms, before it can be considered to be part of a proposed council that would govern the northeast region after the new constitution is adopted by parliament.

Until now the government strategy has been to win over the moderates among the 3.2 million Tamils and marginalise the LTTE.

The government is expected to present a legislation on the proposed new constitution to parliament this month-end.

The LTTE says it won't accept anything less than a separate nation for the Tamil minority. It accuses the Sinhalese of widespread discrimination against the Tamils in education and jobs.

The government and the opposition are yet to agree on how much administrative powers should be given to the proposed northeastern council.

'Israeli troop buildup poses new danger to ME peace'

RAMALLAH, West Bank, June 22 : Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat warned the international community today that Israeli troop reinforcements in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip constitute a new danger to the Middle East peace process, reports AP.

"We have informed the UN, the EU, America, Russia, China and Japan about this issue," Arafat told reporters in the West Bank town of Ramallah after a meeting with UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

Arafat was responding to information published Thursday in the Palestinian media that said Israel has reinforced its military positions near Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

"It is a danger not only to the Palestinian track, but to peace in the Middle East as a whole," Arafat added.

Arafat's Palestinian Authority has complained that Israel was preparing for a military confrontation with it by fortifying with sand bags, tanks, tear gas and rubber-coated steel bullets the troops that guard Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories.

Israeli security services have warned Prime Minister Ehud Barak that heavy clashes could erupt if peace talks fail ahead of a mid-September deadline for a final deal.

Meanwhile, US Middle East envoy Dennis Ross was expected in Jerusalem Thursday to prepare next week's visit to Israel and the Palestinian territories by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, a US diplomatic source said.

Albright, who arrives Tuesday, will be evaluating whether the Israelis and Palestinians have closed the wide gaps between them sufficiently to organise a three-way summit in the United States next month.

Ross was due to meet Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak late Thursday, Barak's office said. It was not immediately known when he would see Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.

Israeli public radio said he would also see Thursday the respective negotiators on so-called interim issues in the peace process, Oded Eran and Saeb Erakat.

The most pressing of these issues is a third Israeli withdrawal from the occupied West Bank, provided for in the Oslo accords of 1993, which is meant to take place by Friday.

The Palestinians said Wednesday that at the request of Washington they had agreed to a postponement of this withdrawal for two weeks.

William studies as royal guests dance

LONDON, June 22: Unlike many members of his family, Prince William will be rising early today, reports AP.

The elder son of Prince Charles and the late Princess Diana, who turned 18 on Wednesday, will be getting up, after an early night, to sit his final exam in Art History.

The house of Windsor's golden boy was not in attendance Wednesday as 700 guests danced and sipped champagne into the wee hours during a night of birthday celebrations at Windsor Castle.

One of the first songs struck up by the band at the lack-tie event, it was reported, was the favourite of the Queen Mother Elizabeth, whose 100th birthday falls on Aug 4 -- "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square."

The royal mega-party was held to celebrate five milestone birthdays in the year 2000 -- those of the queen mother and Prince William, along with Princess Margaret's 70th, Princess Anne's 50th and Prince Andrew's 40th.

The party in the State Apartments at Windsor Castle, which rises above the River Thames (40 km) west of London, began with a dinner for about 80 friends, including royalty from Spain, Belgium and Norway and ex-king Constantine of Greece, who now lives in north London.

The dinner guests were joined later by about 700 others for drinks and dancing, with three bands.

Among the guests was Sarah, Duchess of York -- the first time since the 1997 funeral of princess Diana that the ex-wife of Prince Andrew has been included on the royal guest list.

William, who finishes his studies at Eton College -- just across the river from Windsor -- later this summer, is writing the exams that determine university entrance.

7 killed in latest Ambon violence

JAKARTA, June 22 : An Indonesian warship today was preparing to evacuate some 600 Christians from a village on Halmahera island, as at least seven more people were killed in new eruptions of violence in the Maluku islands, reports AFP.

In North Maluku, a priest at the local synod said the Christians were being evacuated by a navy ship from Duma village on Halmahera to Tobelo district on the same island, 35 km apart.

More than 100 people were killed in Duma on Monday when thousands of armed Muslim fighters attacked the village.

Iranian, Chinese presidents hold talks

BEIJING, June 22 : Iranian President Mohammad Khatami met his Chinese counterpart Jiang Zemin today on the first day of a five-day visit that will take him to China's westernmost Muslim region of Xinjiang, reports AFP.

Jiang welcomed Khatami on the plaza outside of the Great Hall of the People in central Beijing as the two leaders reviewed honour guards under hot sultry skies.

Clinton honours Asian WW-II heroes

WASHINGTON, June 22 : President Bill Clinton awarded 22 Asian-American World War Two heroes the country's highest medal for valour Wednesday, hoping to soothe painful memories of wartime discrimination suffered by thousands of US citizens of Japanese descent, reports AFP.

In a ceremony on the White House lawn, Clinton presented seven frail old soldiers with the Congressional Medal of Honour for heroic heroism displayed half a century ago on World War Two battlefields.

Fifteen medals were also awarded posthumously and presented to surviving relatives of soldiers, following an army review, which found grounds, to upgrade previous decorations awarded to the men.

"Rarely has a nation been so well served by a people so ill-treated," said Clinton, recalling the discrimination faced by 120,000 Japanese-Americans interned in camps amid paranoia sparked by Japan's 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbour.

"They didn't give up on the country, when too many of their countrymen had given up on them," he told veterans, their relatives and members of Congress and the cabinet.

Clinton recalled the story of one Japanese-American soldier found dead on a battlefield with a letter in his pocket from his father, telling him his barn back in the US had been burned down by a hysterical patriotic mob.

"Americans of Asian descent did more than show us they were American, they made us more American," Clinton said, adding it was time to "break the silence" over their heroism.

The heroes, all but two of whom were of Japanese descent, mostly fought in the 100th Infantry Regiment and its successor 442 Regimental Combat team.



US President Bill Clinton (R) and three Asian-American men bow their heads in prayer at the beginning of a ceremony Wednesday at the White House in Washington, DC, prior to awarding them the Congressional Medal of Honour for their service in World War II. Clinton awarded 22 Asian-American World War II heroes the country's highest medal for valour, hoping to soothe painful memories of wartime discrimination suffered by thousands of US citizens of Japanese descent. — AFP photo

Russia to help Kyrgyzstan reinforce its borders

BISHKEK, June 22 : Russia agreed today to help boost Kyrgyzstan's border security to ward off an expected invasion by Islamic extremists into the Central Asian country, reports AFP.

"There is an acute need to act to strengthen Kyrgyzstan's borders and to provide them with effective, contemporary modern security equipment," said Kyrgyz Defense Minister Esen Topoyev.

His statement came during a visit by Russian Atomic Energy Minister Yevgeny Adamov to the tiny ex-Soviet republic, during which the two countries signed a deal to equip Kyrgyzstan's porous borders with modern technology.

"The visit of our Russian colleagues is connected with the extreme conditions in the south of Kyrgyzstan and the possible incursion of international rebel groups on our territory," said Topoyev.

Adamov's delegation was also to visit the country's borders and investigate the possibility of creating a joint military industrial plant.

"The main task is not to leave the Kyrgyz borders naked... We will ensure that Kyrgyzstan's border don't remain without technical means of security," said Adamov, adding that the question of finance would be decided later.

Russia, under new President Vladimir Putin, has been keen to bolster its position in Central Asia and has offered its assistance to combat the resurgent threat from Islamic radicals.

On a visit by Putin to Uzbekistan last month, Uzbek President Islam Karimov asked Moscow to defend his Central Asian state from the danger of Islamic extremism.

S Korean doctors go underground to avoid arrest

SEOUL, June 22 : Leaders of a general strike by South Korean doctors went underground today after prosecutors issued summons against them, reports said, says AFP.

Prosecutors have also sought an arrest warrant for one leader of the Korean Medical Association (KMA), which organised the three day old strike that has brought hospitals and clinics to a standstill.

About 90 percent of the estimated 19,000 clinics across the nation remained closed for the third day on Thursday. State-run hospitals, which are only providing emergency care, have been swamped by patients.

Florida man executed

The state of Florida executed a convicted murderer late Wednesday, 24 hours after a Federal Court had granted him a stay just 10 minutes before he was to die by lethal injection, a prison spokesman announced, AFP reports from Miami.

Thomas Provenzano was given the lethal drugs at 6:52 p.m. (4:52 BST) at the state prison in Starke, Florida and was declared dead eight minutes later, the spokesman CJ Drake said. "The execution started late because of a legal issue the Florida Supreme Court had to resolve and then went without incident," Drake said.

12 Kosovo Albanians jailed: A group of 12 Kosovo Albanians, accused of terrorism, were sentenced Wednesday each to 23-months in prison by a Serbian court in the eastern Serbian town of Pozarevac, the independent news agency Beta reported, AFP says from Belgrade.

However, the 12 were immediately released since they had already spent the same period of time in detention, the agency said. The Albanians were previously sentenced to 14 years in prison each, but the Serbian Supreme court revoked the verdict.

Spain struggles to stem influx of illegal immigrants

MADRID, June 22 : Spain, struggling with the growing problem of illegal immigration, has called for tougher European Union measures to confront increasing numbers arriving across the Straits of Gibraltar -- or drowning on the way, reports AFP.

As investigators began seeking traffickers behind the deaths of 58 would-be Chinese immigrants in Britain, Spain this week was continuing the fight against what it is coming to see as its number one problem -- illegal immigrants from North Africa.

Thirty-six immigrants from Morocco and Algeria were discovered Tuesday in a van near Mijas in southern Andalusia.

Near ZALA ANBESA, Ethiopia, June 22 : Fluttering red ribbons warned of the deadly danger lurking beneath the soil of what was once a no-man's land just south of the border between Ethiopia and Eritrea, reports AFP.

Each of the ribbons, attached to roadside rocks, the stems of plants, or metal rods protruding from the ground, indicated the presence of a landmine.

The ruins of Zala Anbesa, having been occupied by Eritrean forces between May 1998 and May 2000, are now back in the control of the Ethiopian army, whose soldiers have begun to remove the explosive devices that proliferate in an area a few kilometres south of the town, between former frontlines.

According to the local government, some 77 civilians in the area have been killed by landmines, artillery, or gunfire.

Mines have been planted in some 3,500 hectares (8,600 acres) of arable land, affecting the work of almost 50,000 farmers, according to the same source.

At several points on the road leading to Zala Anbesa, hundreds, perhaps thousands, of unearthed mines lay carefully arranged on the verge, sorted by their intended target: tanks, cars and men.

China tells Albright US should skip arms sales to Taiwan

BEIJING, June 22 : Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan today told his United States counterpart Madeleine Albright that the US should stop selling arms to Taiwan and not include the island in its plans for an anti-missile defence system, the foreign ministry said, reports AFP.

Tang pointed out that Taiwan is the most important and sensitive issue at the core of the Sino-US relationship. Zhu Bangzao, the ministry's spokesman said at a regular briefing.

"He said the US should stop exchanges and contacts between the two sides, stop arms sales to Taiwan and shouldn't include Taiwan in its planned theatre missile defence system."

The US and Japan are considering a regional anti-missile defence system, chiefly aimed at protection against possible North Korean strikes.

However, if Taiwan were to be included in the system, it could potentially limit China's ability to intimidate Taiwan through missile diplomacy.

Tang also told Albright that China hopes the US Senate will pass a bill giving China permanent access to the US market -- or permanent normal trade relations -- without additional conditions attached.

The US Senate could vote for the bill in July, ahead of its recess in August. The House of Representatives passed the bill in May, after intense lobbying by the Clinton administration.

China says the passage of the bill is part of a deal it struck with the US in November last year, paying the way for Chinese membership of the World Trade Organisation.