

Vajpayee to discuss attacks on Christians with CMs

NEW DELHI, June 27 : The Indian government has called a meeting of state chief ministers to discuss violence against minority Christians, among other issues of internal security. Home Minister L.K. Advani said today, reports AFP.

"In this context (attacks on Christians), the Prime Minister's Office has convened a meeting with all the chief ministers in August," Advani told reporters.

He said the meeting would broadly discuss important aspects of internal security, such as communal clashes, terrorism and the role of Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence in internal violence.

A meeting of security agencies and civil servants will be held Wednesday to finalise an agenda for the chief ministers' meeting.

A series of attacks on Christians have heightened security concerns within the community, which constitutes just 2.5 percent of India's one billion predominantly Hindu population.

Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP party, which heads the ruling coalition government, has been criticised by Christian groups for not acting firmly enough to curb the violence.

3 die in Egypt after handling radioactive object

CAIRO, June 27 : A father and two children died, and five other children were seriously ill overnight Monday, after becoming contaminated near here by an object described as radioactive. Egyptian police said, reports AFP.

Officials from the electricity ministry and the Atomic Energy Authority of Egypt have since retrieved the undisclosed object from the family home after encasing it in a lead container, officials in the area added.

Neighbouring homes in the village of Mit Hafra, 10 km north of the capital Cairo, were evacuated overnight Monday but the authorities there insisted there was no danger to residents.

The family had inadvertently taken the object home with them from a sandy area where they had found building materials they planned to use to make home improvements, the police said.

The father, Faiz Hassan Faiz, a 61-year-old agricultural worker, died Monday night on the way to a hospital in the surrounding Galyubya area while his teenage son died en route to a medical center in Cairo, police said.

A teenage daughter died early Tuesday in a Cairo hospital where the five remaining children were in serious condition, they added.

The police gave few details of their symptoms other than to say that they had suffered from an extreme rash and fever.

Helicopter crash in Laos: 15 killed

BANGKOK, June 27 : A passenger helicopter crashed into a mountain in Laos killing at least 15 people, diplomats and airline officials said Tuesday, reports AFP.

The helicopter owned by national carrier Lao Aviation was travelling on a regular route between Xaysomboune and Xieng Khouang provinces when it crashed on Sunday.

Somjith Chandrarangsri, manager of Lao Aviation in the Lao capital of Vientiane, said it was assumed the cause of the crash was bad weather.

About fifteen people were aboard, none of them foreigners, and all were assumed to have died, he said. Authorities had not yet reached the crash site because of the hazardous terrain and bad weather, he added.

The helicopter crashed in an area where anti-government ethnic Hmong insurgents, who have stepped up resistance this year, are active.

Laotian authorities believe the crash site is at the side of a remote mountain north of Long Tieng about 150 kilometers (94 miles) north of Vientiane, diplomats said.

Foreign embassies and international organisations in Laos have issued warnings in recent years about Lao Aviation's safety.

BRIEFLY

Herb vendors clash with police: Riot police were involved in violent clashes with thousands of shopkeepers in the southwestern Chinese city of Chengdu during protests over new fees imposed by the local government, AFP reports from Beijing.

Up to 5,000 people, mainly shopkeepers from the Wukuan market, the nation's largest, gathered early Monday in the capital of Sichuan province to protest the fees, a witness said.

Pakistani drug dealer to die: An appeal court in the Gulf emirate of Dubai has upheld the death sentence against a Pakistani convicted of heroin trafficking. News reports Tuesday, AFP says from Dubai.

The Pakistani, identified only as S.A.A., was caught in a police sting operation trying to sell 10 grammes of heroin, morphine and codeine for 400,000 dirhams (108,992 dollars), the Gulf News said.

Barak's coalition to quit: An appeal court in the Gulf emirate of Dubai has upheld the death sentence against a Pakistani convicted of heroin trafficking. News reports Tuesday, AFP says from Dubai.

International

ZANU-PF wins majority

Mugabe monopoly on power goes as opposition surges

HARARE, June 27 : Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe's ruling ZANU-PF party has won parliamentary elections with 62 seats against 57 for the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), officials announced today, correcting an earlier tally, reports AFP. The small ZANU-Ndonga party won one seat.

Mugabe appoints a further 30 members of the 150-seat chamber, giving his Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front a comfortable majority.

The MDC's win, however, enables it to prevent the president and his party from amending the constitution.

Constitutional amendments must be approved by a two-thirds vote, which means that that opposition can block them now that it holds more than a third of the seats in the next parliament.

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In its 20-year virtual monopoly on power, Mugabe and his party have amended the constitution 16 times since the basic law was negotiated with Britain at independence.

The MDC has broken all records by becoming the first opposition party to have more than 20 seats in parliament after the 57 it won in the weekend parliamentary vote.

Opposition members had just three seats in the outgoing parliament.

Emboldened by the result, opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai immediately announced Tuesday that he would stand for president in 2002.

Mugabe's Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) won 62 seats against 57 for Tsvangirai's Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) of the 120 seats contested, the election director said in a revised final count.

The weekend elections were criticised by international monitors as neither free nor fair following months of brutal intimidation.

ZANU-PF, which has ruled with huge majorities since 1980, had 117 of the 120 electorates in the last two parliaments.

EU observer team head Pierre Schori condemned "high levels of violence, intimidation and coercion" during the campaign.

"The term free and fair is not applicable in these elections," said Schori, a Swedish former aid minister.

In London, British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook told the BBC: "The voters' rolls were rigged, the boundaries were rigged and there was systematic brutality intended to deter people from voting for change."

Opposition hails polling results

Earlier, Morgan Tsvangirai, head of Zimbabwe's opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), said today his party had done "exceptionally well" in parliamentary elections after garnering nearly half the seats in unfinished counting.

Death toll from Nepal's floods, landslides rises to 43

KATHMANDU, June 27 : The toll from floods and landslides in various parts of the country since the monsoon began in mid-June has reached 43, police and newspapers said today. reports AFP.

At least four more people died in flash floods and landslides in various regions since Friday, giving a total of 43 dead and three missing.

Home Minister Govinda Raj Joshi told parliament on Monday more than 600 families had been affected with 380 houses and crows damaged, causing 20 million rupees (290,000 dollars) in damage.

"The government has been providing necessary relief material and money in natural disaster relief funds to help those affected by the flooding," he said.

"With the civil emergency, things can be said to be under



Members of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) celebrate on the streets of Harare for their victory in the 58 seats in Zimbabwe's general elections yesterday.

— AFP photo

Shooting continues despite emergency in Ambon

Military to rotate 1,200 troops

JAKARTA, June 27 : Occasional gunfire and explosions continued to be heard in the embattled Indonesian city of Ambon today despite the imposition of a state of emergency aimed at halting Muslim-Christian violence which has left more than 4,000 people dead in the past 18 months, reports AFP.

"We all heard it only from the media, there was no public announcement made here (about the state of emergency)," said a source at Ambon's Roman Catholic cathedral who declined to be identified.

He said occasional gunshots and explosions continued to be heard in the city, the capital of the Maluku islands, before dawn Tuesday.

"The conditions today (Tuesday) seem to be better. The supermarket at the Pasar Lama area has reopened," a Muslim local journalist said.

The journalist said the government was holding a closed-door meeting Tuesday with the region's military and police chiefs at a military complex in downtown Ambon.

Meanwhile, the Indonesian military will replace two army battalions which have spent almost a year in the riot-torn eastern islands of Maluku, a military spokesman said today.

Two 600-strong battalions, from the East Java-based Brawijaya military command, will be pulled out "as soon as possible" from Ambon, the capital of the Malukus, and from North Maluku province, deputy military spokesman Colonel Panggih Sundoro told AFP.

Both the warring Muslim and Christian communities in Ambon and in North Maluku have accused Brawijaya troops of siding with the other side in the conflict.

Scientists head back to labs as ethical debate unfolds over genome

WASHINGTON, June 27

Scientists returned to the laboratories today to finish off the task of mapping out the human genome after announcing to the world they had compiled a working draft of the code for making a human being, reports AFP.

The talks followed an accord by South Korea's President Kim Dae-Jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il at a summit June 13-15.

The two Korean leaders then agreed to arrange meetings for separated relatives around August 15, the 55th anniversary of the end of World War II which freed Korea from Japanese colonial rule.

"Today we are learning the language in which God created life," said President Bill Clinton at a White House ceremony.

But he added: "We must guarantee that genetic information must not be used to stigmatise or discriminate against any individual or group."

Press commentators in Europe on Tuesday echoed the expressions of awe and caution as they observed the first rays of the century of biotechnology.

"History may recall that the world-wide announcement of Monday, June 26 2000... coincided with the beginnings of a major row in Europe on the patentability of fragments of genomic data," the French daily Le Monde said.

The centrist British daily The Independent said private firms could not be trusted to exploit "the full potential of the genome."

It suggested that big biotech firms would focus on ailments affecting rich countries, such as obesity or heart disease, rather than diseases that afflict the Third World.

Red Cross talks on family reunions open in DPRK

SEOUL, June 27

South and North Korean Red Cross officials today opened four-day talks in the North's eastern Mount Kumkang resort on reunions for families separated for more than half a century, officials said.

"The talks would focus on arranging the exchanges of visits by the separated families and relatives," Kim Yong-Il, a South Korean unification ministry official dealing the family reunions issue, told AFP.

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"They will invite the wrath of the people on them," he cautioned.

After presenting the ultimatum on Tuesday, the island's martial law authorities had told reporters they would set up a new government without the plotters if the deadline was not met.

But less than an hour after the ultimatum was announced, rebel spokesman Ratuo Timoci Silatolu said it was unacceptable pressure and that the coup plotters would not sign. Instead they would present a fourth draft for future negotiations, he said.

Military spokesman Colonel Filipo Tarakinkin had earlier on Tuesday ruled out military action to free the 27 hostages.

However, a classified ministry of foreign affairs statement to Fijian diplomatic posts on Monday warned the military had "not at this stage ruled out the option of a military intervention to free the hostages."

The ultimatum had followed yet another breakdown in talks between the rebels and the military on Sunday, after which Tarakinkin said attempts to end the five-week hostage crisis had "come against the wall."

Despite Speight being widely identified as the coup leader earlier, a special forces soldier playing a key role in the coup attempt claimed on Tuesday elite Counter Revolutionary Warfare (CRW) soldiers inside the seized parliament would obey only to his orders, rather than Speight's.

CRW founder Ilisoni Ligairi told the Fiji Times the CRW became involved on my orders and would not react on anyone else's orders ...

Fiji coup plotters reject military ultimatum

SUVA, June 27

Fiji's lengthy coup crisis remained resolutely deadlocked today after rebel leader George Speight flatly rejected a 24-hour ultimatum from the military to sign an agreement on an interim civilian government, reports AFP.

Speight also issued a thinly veiled warning that any action against him would endanger the lives of 27 hostages, including the deposed prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry, being held in parliament.

Asked what his options were if the military decided to use force to end the political crisis, Speight said they were "obvious."

"They will invite the wrath of the people on them," he cautioned.

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Thousands of people evacuated