

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 being 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 enclosing it in a lead container, officials in the area added.

Neighbouring homes in the village of Mit Halfa, 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, Fadi Hassan Fadi, a 61-year-old agricultural worker, died Monday night on the way to a hospital in the surrounding Qalyubia 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 AP.

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

Somjit Chandrarangsi, manager of Lao Aviation in the Laotian 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.

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.

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 directorate said in a revised final official count.

Under Zimbabwe's constitution, Mugabe appoints a further 30 members to the 150-seat chamber, which will give his party a comfortable majority.

But the MDC, set up just nine months ago, is now set to pose the stiffest challenge.

The MDC score in the race for the 120 seats up for election this weekend is the strongest challenge yet to the ruling party and gives it the power to block constitutional amendments, whose approval requires a two-thirds vote.

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.



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

Japan's PM shapes new govt

TOKYO, June 27: Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, snarling after Japanese voters slashed his ruling bloc's majority, today chose a new right-hand man as he shaped a future government, reports AFP.

Voters on Sunday wiped out his Liberal Democratic Party's parliamentary majority but left it hanging to power with its coalition partners: the Buddhist-backed Komeito and the Conservative Party.

Each of the LDP's two allies will get one lawmaker in the 62-year-old leader's 18-minister cabinet, the Japanese press said.

The burly rugby-playing fanatic is scheduled to formally announce the new line-up on July 4 immediately after parliament meets to reappoint him as prime minister.

The gaffe-prone leader chose a close ally, 56-year-old LDP deputy secretary-general Hideaki Nakagawa, to take the most-trusted post of chief cabinet secretary.

"I declined an offer from the prime minister this morning (to stay on) and I expect him to appoint my successor by the end of the day," outgoing Chief Cabinet Secretary Mikio Aoki told a news conference.

Mori told reporters he had decided on Nakagawa as a replacement, with backing from top members of the LDP, which has been in power with just one 10-month break since 1955.

"I talked with Mr Aoki this morning and Mr Aoki said he wanted to return to party business," said the prime minister.

Finance Minister Kiichi Miyazawa and Foreign Minister Yohei Kono are almost certain to survive.

The prime minister has said wants to keep both ministers to help out when Japan hosts the July 21-23 Group of Eight summit on the southern island of Okinawa.

Economic Planning Agency director general Taichi Sakaya is also to stay on, the press said. Mori plans to create a minister for information technology (IT), fulfilling a campaign promise to develop the Internet as a new engine for the world's

second-biggest economy.

"Mr. Mori has clearly stated the need for a minister specialised in IT during the election campaign," said Mori's deputy press secretary, Kazuhiko Koshikawa.

The incoming chief cabinet secretary, Nakagawa, could also take the IT post, said the Nihon Keizai Shimbun.

But Japan's press urged Mori to implement fundamental changes to appease voter discontent, attacking the survival of old porkbarrel politics and factional horse-trading.

"We can't see any signs that the ruling parties are taking seriously the voters' judgement," cried an editorial in the influential newspaper Asahi Shimbun.

The LDP got just 233 of the total 480 seats in a new slimmed-down lower house of parliament, compared with its pre-election strength of 271 in a 500-seat chamber.

Komeito slumped from 42 seats to 31 and the Conservative Party from 18 to seven.

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 cowsheds damaged, causing 20 million rupees (290,000 dollars) in damage.

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

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.

"With the civil emergency, things can be said to be under control but snipers are still firing sporadically ... in the Batumerah area," said Malik Selang, secretary of the Maluku chapter of the Indonesian Council of Muslim Scholars.

The government of President Abdurrahman Wahid declared a state of civil emergency in Maluku and North Maluku provinces on Monday.

It gives the local governor wide powers to take measures to stem the violence, including ordering the military to make sweeping raids, ban meetings and put areas off limits to the public.

"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 governor 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 Maluku, and from North Maluku province, deputy military spokesman Colonel Pangli 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.

Push for Kashmir's autonomy poses stiff challenge to Delhi

Pak FM rejects call for self-rule

NEW DELHI, June 27: The push for autonomy in the troubled Indian state of Kashmir has thrown down a potent political challenge the Central government can ill afford to ignore, analysts said today, reports AFP.

The Kashmir state assembly adopted Monday a resolution proposing full autonomy for the Muslim-majority state, except in matters related to finance, defence and communications.

The resolution was pushed through by Kashmir's ruling National Conference Party despite the intense opposition of the coalition government in New Delhi, led by Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's Hindu nationalist BJP.

With the passing of the resolution, the ball now lies in New Delhi's court, and the government faces some difficult choices.

"This is a resolution, not a bill, so it does not carry the force of law, and there is no requirement for the central government to place it before parliament," said eminent constitutional lawyer K.K. Venugopal.

"But it raises a very sensitive issue in a very troubled state and the government will have to deal with it politically, and extremely carefully."

"If it was any other state, it could have been rejected out of hand, but this is Kashmir," Venugopal said.

The National Conference ar-

gues that autonomy is the only path towards a long-term resolution of the Muslim separatist insurgency in Kashmir, which has claimed more than 25,000 lives since its launch in 1989.

New Delhi and the Hindu and Buddhist minority communities in Kashmir see autonomy as a first step towards outright secession.

Critics of the resolution accuse Kashmir Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah and the National Conference of using the emotive autonomy issue to boost the party's flagging fortunes in the state.

In Kashmir itself, public opinion as to the sincerity of Abdullah's championing of the autonomy issue is polarised.

Meanwhile, Pakistani Foreign Minister Abdul Sattar today rejected an autonomy proposal by the legislative assembly in the Indian-controlled section of Kashmir and derided the body as a puppet of New Delhi.

Sattar, speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a meeting of foreign ministers from the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, said the assembly had been created by a rigged election.

Its Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah was "a creature of the government of India who has been imposed upon the people ... in order to serve the aim and objective of the government of India."

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 Kumgang 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.

The talks followed an accord by South Korea's President Kim Dae-jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-il at a summit held 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.

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 historic announcement, meanwhile, unleashed a lively and probably lengthy debate over ethical and moral issues arising from the genetic blueprint, especially the right to own genetic data.

"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.

Eliau's Miami relatives file appeal to SC

MIAMI, Florida, June 27: Six-year-old Cuban castaway Elian Gonzalez could be free to return to his native island as early as Wednesday if the last attempt by his US relatives to keep him in the United States fails, reports AFP.

Attorneys for the boy's great-uncle Lazaro Gonzalez and family filed an appeal to the Supreme Court Monday, playing their last card in their attempt to prevent the shipwreck survivor from returning to Cuba.

"There is nothing else in this moment that could prevent Elian's very prompt removal from this country," said Kendall Coffey, a lawyer for Lazaro Gonzalez, at a press conference in Miami.

In the appeal, lawyers for the Miami relatives asked that an injunction prohibiting Elian from leaving the country be extended for two weeks, and asked the court to decide whether it will hear the case "no later than the week of July 10."

Australia to free 1,700 illegal immigrants

SYDNEY, June 27: Up to 1,700 illegal immigrants will be freed from Australia's overflowing detention centres after being declared bona-fide refugees, Immigration Minister Philip Ruddock announced today, reports AFP.

This amounts to just over a half of all illegal immigrants held in Australia and follows warnings by Ruddock that thousands more boatpeople are waiting in Indonesia to enter the country.

"(Ruddock) said 1,700 have satisfied the refugee status for a temporary protection visa of those that are still in custody," a spokesman told reporters.

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.

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 Ratu 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 Taramakini had earlier on Tuesday ruled out military action to free the 27 hostages.

However, a classified ministry of foreign affairs statement 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 Taramakini said attempts to end the five-week hostage crisis had "come against the wall."

The hostages have been held since May 19, when failed businessman Speight and a gang of special forces soldiers stormed the parliamentary complex and announced they were deposing Chaudhry, the country's first ethnic Indian premier, in the name of indigenous Fijians.

The military assumed power and declared martial law ten days later after Speight supporters went on a rampage through the streets of Suva.

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 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 ..."

Japan braces for volcanic eruption on Miyakejima

Thousands of people evacuated

MIYAKEJIMA ISLAND, Japan, June 27: Thousands of people were evacuated from their homes today as experts warned of a major eruption within hours on Japan's rumbling Miyakejima volcanic island, reports AFP.

The island's 813-meter (2,683-foot) Mount Oyama volcano may already be erupting beneath the sea, experts said.

A patch of sea bubbled and turned a milky white shade off the western tip of Miyakejima

island, home to about 3,900 people and lying about 150 km southwest of Tokyo.

A rush of 2,533 tremors rattled the volcano in the first 13 hours of the day and were now increasing in frequency and strength, a Meteorological Agency official said.

The strongest, measuring 4.0 on the open-ended Richter scale, struck at 11:44 a.m. (8:44 BST).

There is a possibility of a strong explosion near the

shore," Tsutomu Takeuchi, head of the Meteorological Agency's volcanic division, told a news conference.

"Also, we cannot rule out an eruption on the western side of the mountain," he said. The volcano which forms the island last erupted in October 1983.

Authorities moved 2,144 people from their homes on the eastern and western sides of the volcano to shelter in a school gymnasium and other public buildings in the safer area.

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 Wukouishi herbal medicine wholesale 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, newspapers reported 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.

NRP threatens to quit Barak's coalition govt

JERUSALEM, June 27: The National Religious Party (NRP) threatened today to quit Prime Minister Ehud Barak's fragile coalition ahead of planned summit in the United States aimed at brokering a peace deal with the Palestinians, reports AFP.

"The chances of our staying in the coalition if there is a summit are slim ... the NRP will not be able to stay if there is a summit," Yitzhak Levi, head of the right-wing NRP told Israeli public radio.

"If the guidelines for the summit are not coordinated with us, we will quit," he said.

Barak is scheduled to brief his coalition partners early this week on the Israeli negotiating position ahead of the summit, involving the US, Israel and the Palestinians. The NRP and other right wing members in Barak's coalition want the prime minister to tell them how far he is willing to go on concessions towards the Palestinians.

A diplomatic source told AFP that US middle East envoy Dennis Ross will brief the ministers in Barak's coalition during the meeting.

"We are out of the coalition the moment Abu Dis is transferred," Levi said Tuesday.