

OIC urges US to lift sanction on Sudan, Iran & Libya

KUALA LUMPUR, June 28: The head of a global Muslim grouping has called on the United States to end its economic sanctions against three member states, saying they pose a "direct threat" to Islamic security, reports AFP.

Ezzeddine Laraki, secretary-general of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), says the sanctions also impede economic and social development in Sudan, Iran and Libya.

Laraki, in his political report to foreign ministers of the 56-member OIC meeting here, says unilateral imposition of the sanctions "constitutes a direct threat to the common Islamic security."

They are also aimed at destabilising the region and undermining the development

process," he says in a copy of the report obtained by AFP Wednesday.

The US imposed sanctions on Sudan in 1997 on the grounds that it supported terrorism and threatened neighbouring countries. Laraki says the US D'Amato Law is unjust and will impede the development and investment planning of Iran and Libya, adversely affecting economic stability.

Under the law which took effect in August 1996, the US imposed sanctions on foreign companies which deal with Libya or Iran in the field of oil and natural gas and have investment contracts exceeding 40 million dollars in one year.

Laraki urges the OIC and the European Union to reject the law.

He says Israel is continuing development of its nuclear program and terms this "a major threat to the security of Islamic countries."

Laraki urges OIC members to work together to support the concept of nuclear weapons-free zones.

The secretary-general also describes French rule of Mayotte island off east Africa as "unjustified." He says the international community recognises the Comoros as an integrated territory of four islands including Mayotte.

Laraki says he hopes negotiations with French authorities will bring positive results.

Turning to Bosnia, Laraki says the OIC plus great hopes on the role of the International Court of Justice in prosecuting war criminals in the Balkans.



Secretary General of the Organisation of Islamic Conferences (OIC) Dr. Azzeddine Laraki (front row, 3rd R) and the chairman of the 27th Session of the Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers Syed Hamid Albar (front row, 2nd R) and other delegates pose for a group photo at the Palace of the Golden Horses in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Islamic Foreign Ministers stressed unity to face economic and political challenges but remain divided on candidates to lead the 56-member OIC. — AFP photo

US Congress leaders agree to ease sanctions on Cuba

WASHINGTON, June 28: The White House gave a tentative nod Tuesday to a deal by top legislators easing the US economic embargo on Cuba and allowing it to import food and medicine from the United States, reports AFP.

After more than five hours of talks that began late Monday, Republican leaders of the House of Representatives agreed early Tuesday to ease export restrictions on Cuba in legislation that would also relax US sanctions against Iran, Libya, North Korea and Sudan.

The leaders had reached "an agreement in principle," House Appropriations Committee chairman Bill Young said before the meeting broke up early Tuesday.

The full House still has to approve the deal, in a vote the bill's sponsor, Republican Representative George Nethercutt, said could come as soon as this

week. The Senate overwhelmingly approved a similar measure last year, and last month the Senate Appropriations Committee again passed the measure by voice vote.

The White House gave a cautious welcome to the accord, with spokesman Joe Lockhart indicating that Clinton would be unlikely to oppose it.

"We haven't seen the details of the agreement," he told journalists. "We are not opposed to allowing things like food and medicine to go to Cuba as long as it benefits the people and not the Castro government."

That's a long-standing policy, and it is consistent with the statements the president has made over the last year.

An easing of the embargo against Cuba has been vehemently opposed by critics of the communist rule of President Fidel Castro.

BRIEFLY

NZ PM sacks minister: New Zealand's Minister for Maori Affairs, Dover Samuels, was sacked Wednesday after becoming embroiled in a scandal over an alleged sexual relationship with an underage girl. AFP reports from Wellington.

Prime Minister Helen Clark said Samuels could not be effective in his job while "allegations, controversy and public debate swirl around him."

Red Army hijacker in Tokyo: Japanese police took former Red Army militant Yoshimi Tanaka into custody Wednesday for the first time since the hijacking of a Japan Airlines passenger jet in 1970, AFP reports from Tokyo.

National television showed Tanaka smiling and bowing deeply to a media scrum after landing at Tokyo-Narita airport from Thailand, from where he had been extradited. "Tanaka had already been arrested by Japanese police in Bangkok on suspicion of hijacking the Japan Airlines flight," said a Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department spokesman.

China executes 17 more: Another seventeen convicted drug traffickers have been executed in China, lifting to at least 45 the number of people killed for narcotics offenses in the week surrounding international anti-drugs day, according to state media. AFP reports from Beijing.

Musharraf wants to meet 'clean' politicians to restore democracy

KARACHI, June 28: Pakistani military ruler General Pervez Musharraf must spell out his agenda before talks with the country's sidelined politicians can begin, party leaders said today, reports AFP.

Military officials have said Musharraf, who seized power in a coup in October and suspended parliament, wants to meet "clean" politicians next week to discuss Pakistan's return to democracy.

But political and religious leaders said no invitations had been received and demanded Musharraf set out his agenda for the talks, touted as his first serious consultation with political leaders since the coup.

"It is still premature to say with whom they want to talk

and what is their definition of clean politicians," said Raza Rabbani, the deputy secretary general of Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party.

"The decision for talks will be taken by the high command of the opposition's Grand Democratic Alliance," said a senior PPP official.

Powerful Islamist parties said they would present a unified front if the talks go ahead.

"Religious parties will meet collectively if such an invitation is extended to us," said Shah Faeed-ul-Haq, secretary general of the fundamentalist Jamiat Ulema-i-Pakistan (JUP).

The JUP heads the National Consolidation Council, an alliance of around a dozen reli-

gious parties including Jamaat-Islami and Jamiat Ulema-Islami.

Ghaffar Ahmed, a central leader of Jamaat-Islami, said the party's central committee will decide how to respond to any invitation to a meeting with Musharraf.

"So far we have not been invited for talks," he said.

Former cricket hero and Pakistan Justice Party leader Irfan Khan said "we will see what is the agenda" before deciding whether to participate.

Interior Minister Moinuddin Haider on Tuesday said Musharraf would start holding meetings with "clean" politicians next week but gave few details about what the talks would cover.

Musharraf has launched a major crackdown against corruption and has vowed to end the "sham democracy" of previous governments through far-reaching electoral reforms.

A Supreme Court ruling last month validated the coup but gave the general three years to complete his reforms and hold general elections.

It is unclear whether anyone from the former ruling party, the Pakistan Muslim League, will be invited to the proposed talks.

The PML is still being led by ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif, who is serving a life term for hijacking and terrorism and is also on trial for corruption.

Russia, India to boost military cooperation

MOSCOW, June 28: India and Russia yesterday agreed to boost their military cooperation and decided to upgrade the joint body for defence interaction to ministerial level, reports PTL.

Visiting Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes and Russian Vice Premier Ilya Kabanov agreed that the Indo-Russian joint working group on military-technical cooperation will be co-chaired by them for swift decision making, diplomatic source said.

Presently, the Indo-Russian defence working group is co-chaired by Defence Secretary TR Prasad and Russian Deputy Defence Minister Nikolai Mikhailov.

Fernandes, who arrived here on a five-day official visit on Monday, yesterday also had extensive talks with his Russian

counterpart Marshall Sergeyev. Welcoming Fernandes in his office, Sergeyev said that ties with India are a top priority of the Russian foreign policy and military cooperation will remain its important content.

In the Asia-Pacific region, two great powers — India and Russia — are striving for friendship and their strategic partnership ensures stability in South Asia, he said, adding that strategic partnership is based on the commonality of our fundamental national interests.

Expressing confidence that Russian President Vladimir Putin's forthcoming India visit would further strengthen Indo-Russian friendship, Fernandes said Russia and India share common security concerns and they should work jointly.



Thailand's largest opposition party staged a mass resignation yesterday in a bid to force the government to call an early election. The New Aspiration Party (NAP) said 50 of its 116 MPs, including leader Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, had quit and 41 planned to follow later in the day—the first of the new parliamentary session. — AFP photo

Thai opposition MPs resign en masse

Bid to force govt call early polls

BANGKOK, June 28: Thailand's largest opposition party staged a mass resignation today, in a bid to force the government to call an election, reports AFP.

The New Aspiration Party (NAP) said 50 of its 116 MPs, including leader Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, had quit and 41 planned to follow later in the day — the first of the new parliamentary session.

The leader of the second biggest opposition group, the Social Action Party (SAP), asked Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai to withdraw the budget bill which was due to be tabled later Wednesday.

SAP leader Suwit Khunkitti backed the NAP's view that the budget should not be passed so close to elections, which must

be held before November. "If this government fails to win the next election, the budget will be a fait accompli for the new government," he told parliament.

"For the sake of the nation, please withdraw the 2001 budget bill."

The resignations do not oblige the ruling coalition led by Chuan's Democrats to dissolve parliament.

But the opposition hopes its move will embarrass the government into calling an election before November when its parliamentary term ends.

"It is apparent now that our nation has been in a state of utmost decay... stemming from the inefficient and maladroitness of the government," the NAP said in a statement.

Mars may have twice as much water beneath its surface

WASHINGTON, June 28: The planet Mars could conceal two or three times more water beneath the surface than previously thought, according to a study appearing in the July issue of Geophysical Research Letters, reports AFP.

The theory is based on a comparison of the amount of deuterium, a heavier form of hydrogen, in a Martian meteorite discovered in the Antarctic, versus the amount found in the Martian atmosphere.

In evaporated water in the Martian atmosphere, the ratio of deuterium to hydrogen is five times greater than that found in water on Earth.

Hydrogen is lighter than deuterium, and scientists believed that over time, it escaped more quickly into the thin Martian atmosphere.

Vajpayee govt is "great harm" says Jyoti Basu

CALCUTTA, June 28: West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu yesterday accused the Vajpayee government of causing "great harm" to the country and said that BJP was trying to "divide the country on religious lines," reports PTL.

Lunching a frontal attack on the BJP in the state assembly, Basu said that Christians were attacked and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee had to apologise for it.

He said that demolition of the Babri Masjid was also a criminal act.

Basu also regretted the RSS functionaries were being installed at the helm of various institutions. He was replying to the discussion on budgetary demands of grants of the home (personnel) department in the assembly.

Playing Trinamool Congress for supporting the BJP, Basu regretted that some Congress legislators have joined TC in inside the house, they continued to function as Congress MLAs. "What can be more heinous act than this. These people have no character," Basu said.

Sewage-loving bug can help clean environment

PARIS, June 28: A bug found in sewage water has pointed the way to cleaning up tetrachloroethylene (PCE), a dangerous industrial compound that has become an environmental headache. The Journal Nature Biotechnology reports in July's issue, reports AFP.

PCE, a suspected cause of cancer, is a colourless liquid solvent widely used in dry cleaning and metal degreasing, and is also found in glues, paints, pesticides and printing.

It does not dissolve in water, nor does it degrade when in contact with the air, meaning that the substance has to be expensively destroyed either by chemicals or incineration to stop it polluting the environment.

Using an innovative way of cleaning up the hazard has been found by an international team of scientists from the University of Connecticut, South Korea's Jeonju University and the University of Milan.

Barak spells out limits of peace deal with PA

Albright pushes for Israel-Palestinian accord at summit

JERUSALEM, June 28: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak spelled out today the limits of a peace deal with the Palestinians ahead of a possible summit with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat and US President Bill Clinton, reports AFP.

Speaking on public radio, Barak denied press reports that he intended to hand over up to 92 per cent of the West Bank, and said the implementation of an agreement could only be discussed at a summit.

"I have very clear red lines," Barak said. "We will in no case return to the border of June 1967 (when Israel seized the West Bank and east Jerusalem from Jordanian control). Jerusalem will be united, there will be no foreign army west of the Jordan, and an absolute

majority of settlers will remain under our sovereignty in blocks of settlements."

Barak said 150,000 settlers in such blocks under Israeli sovereignty would be "an immense historical success."

Nearly 200,000 Jewish settlers, who strongly oppose giving large amounts of land to the Palestinians, currently live in some 150 settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

Referring to press reports on how much land Barak would be prepared to hand over, Barak said, "It is all speculation. I have not promised 92 per cent. I have not given up the Jordan Valley."

Barak told US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright late Tuesday that Israel wanted to take part in a summit which would draw up a long-delayed framework agreement for a fi-

nal accord intended to be signed by September 13.

Albright is in Israel and the Palestinian territories to assess the chances of a summit succeeding. The Palestinians say the gaps between the two sides are so wide they cannot be bridged.

Barak is also facing opposition to a summit from within his own coalition. The head of the National Religious Party, Yitzhak Levy, which has five seats in parliament, reiterated a threat Thursday to pull out if a summit were held.

Meanwhile, US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright headed into a second day of intense meetings here Tuesday, continuing a push to bring Israeli and Palestinian leaders together for a summit at which a final peace deal can be forged.



Activists display placards as they shout slogans against an autonomy resolution passed by the Kashmir State Assembly, during a demonstration in front of Jammu and Kashmir House in New Delhi yesterday. The resolution, calling for full autonomy of the Muslim majority state, except in matters related to finance, defence and communications, found few supporters outside the confines of the troubled Indian region. — AFP photo

UN predicts independence for E Timor by late 2001

UNITED NATIONS, June 28: East Timor should hold elections and even gain full independence by late 2001, just more than two years after an orgy of violence followed its vote to leave Indonesia, the UN's administrator for the territory said Tuesday, reports AFP.

Sergio Vieira de Mello told the United Nations Security Council he had discussed dates for the polls with East Timorese leaders including resistance figurehead Xanana Gusmao.

"I feel safe in predicting that elections, and possibly independence, will take place next year at some point between 30 August and the beginning of December 2001," he said.

"The elections will in all likelihood be for a constituent assembly," de Mello said.

He proposed that a coalition government should be set from July up to "render the transition to government less sudden and help the concept of governmental responsibility assert itself."

The National Council for Timorese Resistance had agreed to take the posts of internal

administration, economic and social affairs and infrastructure, he said.

The United Nations would retain control of finances, justice security and constitutional and electoral affairs.

East Timor's vote for independence in August last year set off a wave of militia violence that many observers believe was orchestrated by the Indonesian military.

The territory's capital, Dili and other major towns, were razed to the ground, an unknown number of people were killed and hundreds of thousands fled for their lives to refugee camps across the West Timor border.

The United Nations has attempted to rebuild the territory from scratch since October, when it took over day-to-day running of its administration from an Australian-led multinational peace force sent to restore order.

Indonesia annexed East Timor, a former Portuguese colony, in 1976 and has been accused of a catalogue of human rights violations.

'Autonomy no solution to Kashmir issue'

ISLAMABAD, June 28: The spokesman of Ministry of Foreign Affairs has reiterated Pakistan's long-standing position, based on resolutions of the UN Security Council (UNSC), that the State of Jammu and Kashmir is a disputed territory and its final disposition has to be made in accordance with the will of Kashmiri people, reports PPL.

In a statement here Tuesday the spokesman said that Kashmiri people are sovereign who would decide their fate through the democratic method of a free and impartial plebiscite conducted under the auspices of the United Nations.

He dismissed as farcical the adoption of the so-called autonomy resolution by the puppet State Assembly of Indian held Kashmir. He emphasised that the Kashmiri people are

waging their valiant freedom struggle for the exercise of their fundamental right to self-determination and not for internal autonomy or the division of political power. By their repeated boycott of Indian Parliamentary and State Assembly elections, the people of Kashmir have clearly demonstrated that they don't wish to participate in such fraudulent exercises, he added.

The spokesman noted that the so-called autonomy resolution had been categorically rejected by the APHC leadership, the representative forum of people of Kashmir.

A PFI report from Islamabad says, Japan has asked India and Pakistan to settle the Kashmir issue through talks in the spirit of Simla Agreement and Lahore Declaration.

Military to run Fiji for next two years

SUVA, June 28: Fiji's military law authorities said today a deadline imposed on coup plotters to sign an agreement had expired and they would form a military government to rule for the next two years, reports AFP.

Military spokesman Colonel Filipo Tarakinkini said the military would run the country for the next 24 months, review the constitution, operate a "normal" government and prepare for general elections.

He said the military was prepared to include ethnic Indians in the interim government. The military authorities were drawing up a list of new government ministers.

nessman George Speight and a gang of special forces soldiers have held hostage ethnic Indian Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and 26 members of his government. They claimed to be acting in the name of indigenous Fijians.

"The door remains open for Speight and his group (however) events have taken them since 19th May. I hope they will begin to realise that," Tarakinkini said.

He said the hostages had to be put in context. "Thousands of people have been taken to prison and we are taking most pragmatic steps we can," he said without elaborating.

ZANU-PF to discuss working relations with opposition

HARARE, June 28: Zimbabwe's ruling party was to hold a strategy meeting today in the wake of general elections which have ushered a credible opposition into parliament for the first time in history, a party spokesman said.

Chen Chimutengwende, deputy spokesman of the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front and information minister, told AFP the 36-member politburo would discuss the outcome of the elections, which ZANU-PF won by a slim margin.

The party's supreme decision-making body is expected to discuss strategies for working with the opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), which trailed behind ZANU-PF by just five constituencies of the 120 contested seats in the week-

end vote.

"The way forward is to appoint a new cabinet, swear in new MPs and the work of government starts," he said.

Meanwhile, Zimbabwe's main opposition was to hold a top-level meeting today to map out a strategy to deal with the government of President Robert Mugabe which narrowly beat it in weekend parliamentary elections, party officials said.

It will be the first meeting of the 30-member executive committee of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) since the announcement of the election results which gave the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF) a lead of just five seats.

"Yes, we are meeting today to discuss the way forward, that is the agenda," a member of the

executive told AFP.

Violence impaired choice: C'wealth

Earlier, the campaign leading up to parliamentary elections in Zimbabwe at the weekend was marred by violence and threats which impaired voters' freedom of choice, the head of the Commonwealth observer team said Tuesday.

"Incidents of violence and threats have impaired the freedom of choice of the electorate," the head of the team, former Nigerian president Abdulsalam Abubakar told a press conference in Harare.

Abubakar, who ushered in democracy in his own country, refused to give an immediate judgment on whether the elections had been free and fair.

Martial law still possible in riot-torn Maluku

Fragile calm in Ambon

JAKARTA, June 28: The state of civil emergency in Indonesia's strife-torn eastern Maluku Islands could be upgraded to martial law if the security situation there continues to deteriorate, a minister said today, reports AFP.

"There is still a possibility (for the imposition of martial law) if the situation runs out of control," Human Rights Minister Hasballah Saad told palace journalists before a cabinet meeting in Jakarta.

"But I am still trying, if possible, for just the use of civil emergency," Saad said.

Martial law, he said, would depend on the necessary conditions to justify a decision to allow the military to take full control in both provinces, where fighting between Muslims and Christians has raged

for 18 months.

"For now, we are not pushing for the imposition of military emergency... we have imposed civil emergency to minimise (the violence)," the minister said.

A state of civil emergency extends the power of the military to carry out raids and security checks on groups suspected of fanning the violence.

Meanwhile, a fragile calm returned to the eastern Indonesian city of Ambon today, the second day of a state of civil emergency, as Human Rights Minister Hasballah Saad warned martial law could be imposed if the situation deteriorated.

The situation in Ambon has improved since the civil emergency status was imposed.