

Chandrika prays for peace on birthday

COLOMBO, June 29: Sri Lanka President Chandrika Kumaratunga marked her 55th birthday today with prayers for peace in her embattled country. The government said in a statement, reports AFP.

Kumaratunga was spending the day with her son Vinukti and urged her well-wishers not to send flowers but instead donate money to the welfare of government soldiers fighting Tamil Tiger rebels, her office said.

Ugandans vote on referendum

KAMPALA, June 29: Ugandans began voting today in a referendum to decide whether to go back to multi-party politics after 14 years of severe restrictions, reports AFP.

Voters are being given the choice between adopting meaningful multi-party politics or retaining the current system in which decisions at all levels are made by the National Resistance Movement (NRM), an entity that in theory includes all Ugandans.

In the capital Kampala voting was delayed due to heavy rain, with a handful of voters still waiting at All Saints cathedral in the city centre to cast their votes 90 minutes after polling stations were due to open at 7:00 a.m. (10:00 BST).

Blair losing popularity

LONDON, June 29: British Prime Minister Tony Blair's popularity rating has slumped but his ruling Labour Party still has a commanding lead over the opposition Conservatives, a newspaper poll showed today, reports AFP.

A Mori poll for The Times showed satisfaction with Blair had fallen eight percent to 39 percent in the past month, while the number of voters dissatisfied with him had risen 10 percent to 52 percent.

Pakistan denies Chinese help in missile plant

WASHINGTON, June 29: Pakistan's embassy in Washington on Wednesday branded reports that China was helping its government to build a new missile plant as "completely baseless," reports AFP.

The denial followed a report in the Far Eastern Economic Review of June 22, which said US officials were concerned Beijing may have resumed work on an M-11 missile plant it started building in Pakistan in 1990.

"The Embassy of Pakistan categorically rejects the recent media reports," said a statement sent to journalists here.

"These reports are completely baseless. It is also regrettable that these false reports have been used to mislead the US Senate and criticize Pakistan."

Elian returns to Cuba

Bitter custody battle ends

HAVANA, June 29: Elian Gonzalez and his family arrived back in Cuba late Wednesday to a low-key welcome which is likely to set the tone for his reintegration into Cuban society, reports AFP.

Hundreds of Elian's former classmates from his hometown of Cardenas waved Cuban flags and chanted his name as the private Lear jet carrying the young boy and his family landed at Jose Marti International Airport.

Relatives poured onto the tarmac and took turns hugging the boy in emotional scenes that were carried live on Cuban television, as a band played the national anthem.

But as expected, the public celebrations were short-lived, with Elian, his father Juan Miguel, wife Nery, and their infant son Hianny, climbing into a white Lada after a mere six minutes in the public eye.

The family was taken to an undisclosed location for a reunion with other family members before settling into a complex in the Havana neighbourhood of Miramar, according to Cuban authorities.

Police threw a cordon around the mansion in the seafloor area of the city, preventing all but residents from getting in or out late Wednesday.

The mansion, which was chosen in April to be a transit point for Elian as he reconciled with Cuba life, has its own pool, park and therapy room.

There the young boy will be shielded from the glare of the international spotlight while he concentrates on his studies, according to a plan mapped out by Cuban officials in consultation with Elian's father.

"We hope that in just two or three weeks he (Elian) will be completely ready to begin second grade," according to official statements broadcast on television here.

Given the "rapid progress" Elian has already made, the transition period will be shorter than previously expected, authorities indicated.

"Our dedicated teachers will help him become a model child ... at the same time a normal citizen, and a symbol, an example for all the children of our country."

After a tempestuous 220 days, buffeted by the elements, the media and competing political groups, the youngster could be back in his own home as early as August, according to the timetable mapped out by officials.

Cuban authorities have been at pains to ensure that this transition is a smooth and easy one, without any of the media circus which attended Elian when he was in the care of his Miami relatives.

In marked contrast to the huge orchestrated rallies held in Havana and other Cuban cities in recent months, Cuban officials discouraged any public show of emotion for Elian's homecoming.

They urged people to celebrate "in their own homes or with neighbours without taking to the streets on a wave of enthusiasm," which would be inappropriate at this time.

"We have achieved our objective of bringing this child back to his homeland," an official statement broadcast on television said. "But this is not the time for bragging, boasting or self-congratulation."

Only Ricardo Alarcon, the president of the Cuban parliament, was on hand to greet the Gonzalez family at the airport on their return from the United States.

And if Cuban President Fidel Castro was savouring his victory over his old foe the Cuban exiles in Miami, he was savouring it in private.

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Aum cult member sentenced to death

TOKYO, June 29: A Japanese court Thursday sentenced to death the Aum Supreme Truth cult's "killing machine," Yasuo Hayashi, for unleashing Sarin gas in a murderous 1995 attack on the Tokyo subway.

The sentence at Tokyo District Court was the second death penalty handed out for the horrifying March 1995 attack, in which Nazi-invented Sarin gas killed 12 people and left thousands injured.

"He got the death penalty as sought by prosecutors," said the Tokyo District Court spokesman, who declined to be named.

Judge Kiyoshi Kimura said Hayashi, 42, must go to the gallows as one of five Aum disciples who released the nerve gas in packed subway cars during the morning rush hour.

"He has an extremely grave responsibility as an executor of the sect's organised crimes and cannot escape capital punishment," Kimura said, according to Japan Broadcasting Corp. (NHK).

Hayashi, wearing a tieless grey suit and white shirt, stayed calm when the death sentence was delivered, NHK television said.

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Six-year-old Cuban castaway Elian Gonzalez is carried by his paternal grandfather Juan Gonzalez beside his great-grandmother Ramona (L) upon Elian's arrival from the United States Wednesday at Jose Marti Airport in Havana.

House favours questioning Wahid

JAKARTA, June 29: Indonesia's parliament, the People's Representative Council (DPR), today voted in favour of questioning President Abdurrahman Wahid over the recent sacking of two ministers, reports AFP.

In a vote taken during a plenary session attended by 431 members of the 500-member DPR, an overwhelming 332 MPs voted in favour of summoning Wahid. Sixty-three were against the questioning while 36 abstained.

With the vote the legislature will exercise its interpolation rights -- the rights to question a member of the government, including the president, on a point of government policy.

The Indonesian Democracy Party-Struggle (PDIP) faction, the largest in the DPR, has spearheaded efforts to summon the president over the sacking of Laksamana Sukardi as investment and state enterprise minister and Yusi Kalla as industry and trade minister.

Israel counting on Clinton to bridge gaps with Palestinians

JERUSALEM, June 29: Israel is counting on US President Bill Clinton to bridge the yawning gaps between the Jewish state and the Palestinians in a three-way summit it hopes will take place in late July, an Israeli minister said today, reports AFP.

But as the talking gets tougher Israeli officials are warning of serious violence if the summit fails, and particularly if Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat goes ahead with a threat to declare an independent state without an accord with Israel.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright left the region early Thursday after failing to bring the Israeli and Palestinian positions any closer, and was due to brief the president later in the day.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak told Albright Wednesday that the only way to secure progress ahead of a mid-September deadline for a final peace accord with the Palestinians was through a summit.

Arafat rejected a US suggestion for a mid-July summit, stressing to Albright that more

negotiations were needed first. He did not rule out a summit later in July.

Communications Minister Benjamin Ben-Eliezer said that only a third party can save the peace process at this stage.

"The Israeli side has gone as far as it can with its position on borders, Jerusalem, settlements ... on the other side they have toughened their stance, bordering on impenetrability," he told public Israeli radio.

"We need a third party to move the cart and explain to the Palestinians that without flexibility on both sides it won't work," he added.

Israel and the Palestinians have set themselves a September 13 deadline for a final accord on their borders, the status of Jerusalem, and the future of Palestinian refugees and Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, but they are still far apart.

Ben Eliezer said he was well aware of the risk of a failure of a three-way summit, but added that "without risk there isn't even a chance."

Israeli security officials have

meanwhile warned Barak that failure of the summit could lead to an armed confrontation with the Palestinians.

"The army is preparing for the eventuality that there will be a serious escalation in violence," Lieutenant Colonel Sharon Grinker, an army spokesman, told AFP.

Reports said Thursday that if a summit fails and Arafat announces Palestinian statehood on September 13, Barak is likely to respond by annexing the territory it still occupies.

"If Arafat takes unilateral steps we will have to respond with unilateral steps," a senior official in Barak's office said.

The Israeli newspaper Yediot Aharonot said Barak would immediately annex all territory under Israeli control -- amounting to some 60 percent of the West Bank and 35 percent of the Gaza Strip.

The prime minister is determined to take a series of steps in response to a declaration of statehood by Arafat quickly, determinedly, and without a minute's delay," the top-selling daily said.

Disgraced Kohl testifies to parliamentary committee

BERLIN, June 29: For the first time since admitting to running one million dollars in slush funds, former German chancellor Helmut Kohl testified today before a parliamentary committee investigating the scandal, reports AFP.

Looking drawn but smiling as his testimony began, Kohl was appearing the day after an official report documented the destruction of a massive amount of government files in the chancellery at the end of his tenure.

He was sitting at a small table, flanked only by his lawyer, for the questioning from the all-party parliamentary committee.

Kohl has refused to name donors to illegal secret funds he ran while serving as chancellor and was not expected to budge from this position in his testimony Thursday.

The parliamentary committee investigating the scandal surrounding Kohl heard Wednesday that two-thirds of the chancellery data files were wiped out after his election defeat in 1998.



Former German chancellor Helmut Kohl (L) studies documents while sitting next to his lawyer Stephan Holthoff-Pfoertner (R) as they face a parliamentary investigating committee into the slush fund scandal in Berlin yesterday.

India trying to silence Kashmiris: Pak FM

KUALA LUMPUR, June 29: Pakistan's foreign minister accused India today of trying to silence the voice of Kashmir, saying it had barred two separatist leaders from attending an Islamic forum here.

Abdul Sattar told AFP it was expected that representatives from both sides of the divided Himalayan territory would attend a meeting of foreign ministers from the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

"We understand that the government of India did not permit passport travel facilities to Kashmiri leaders (from the Indian sector) to come," he told AFP.

"It is quite clear that India

doesn't want the world community, the OIC and the United Nations to hear the authentic representatives of the Kashmiri people. They want to prevent Kashmiri representatives from voicing their opinion to the world."

A foreign ministry statement in Islamabad earlier accused India of trying to hide its "policy of terror" by preventing Kashmiri militant groups from attending the conference.

"This high-handed action is a part of India's effort to keep the international community in the dark about the massive and large-scale repression being practised by the Indian oc-

cupation forces to quell the freedom struggle," it said.

The statement said Malaysia had formally invited a delegation of the All Party Hurriyat Conference to the meeting. The conference is an umbrella organisation of more than a dozen Kashmiri parties waging a separatist campaign in the Indian-controlled sector.

Officials from the Pakistan-controlled part of Kashmir are attending the four-day conference which opened on Tuesday.

Officials in Pakistan said the meeting was expected to adopt a declaration "to reaffirm its support to the cause of Kashmir."

BRIEFLY

Iran frees 450 Iraqi POWs: Iran freed 450 Iraqi prisoners-of-war late Wednesday which were captured during the 1980-1988 war between the two countries, the official IRNA agency reported, AFP says from Tehran.

The prisoners were released at the Khosravi border post in the western province of Kermanshah, the agency reported. The head of Iran's commission for POWs, Asghar Azizi, said the release brought the total number of Iraqi POWs freed in seven stages during the current year to 3,389.

Murder suspect commits suicide: Sid Ahmed Rezala, facing extradition to France on charges of murdering three women including a British student, has committed suicide in his Lisbon prison cell, Portuguese and French official sources said Thursday, AFP reports from Lisbon.

Algerian-born Frenchman Rezala, 21, was arrested in the Portuguese capital in January after a month-long manhunt, and his lawyers have been resisting court attempts to have him returned to France.

15 Russian troops die in Chechnya: Fifteen Russian troops were killed in fierce fighting with rebels in the troubled province of Chechnya yesterday, Interfax quoted an army spokesman as saying, AFP reports from Moscow.

Candidates wrap up campaigns for Mexico's landmark election

MEXICO CITY, June 29: With four days to go to presidential elections that will decide the fate of the world's longest ruling party, Mexico's two leading candidates concluded their campaigns with offers of social improvements, reports AFP.

Conservative Vicente Fox was his own firebrand self, amid thunderous cheers from tens of thousands of supporters, he said he would create "a new economic miracle," boosting growth, slashing inflation and generating 1.3 million new jobs.

The far more staid Francisco Labastida, of the long-ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), pledged at a largely lacklustre mass meeting that he "could bring in 'safe change'"



Kashmir Chief Minister Farooq Abdullah (R) talks to leading animal rights activist Maneka Gandhi at a function in Srinagar yesterday. Abdullah and Maneka announced that trade of famous Kashmiri Shahtoos shawls, made from the hair of rare Tibetan antelopes will be stopped in troubled Kashmir, six years after being banned by the Indian government.

— AFP photo

Gunfire, explosions rock strife-torn Ambon

JAKARTA, June 29: Gunfire and home-made bomb explosions rocked the eastern Indonesian city of Ambon, residents said today, as a state of emergency aimed at stemming sectarian violence entered its third day.

"I can still hear sounds of gunfire and explosions but in general the situation has improved," Hukom, a volunteer for the Indonesian Red Cross, told AFP.

Hukom, who like many Indonesians goes by one name, said a 20-year-old youth and a 40-year-old woman were shot and killed by snipers on Wednesday.

The state Antara news agency said tension remained high as sounds of explosions

from grenades, home-made bombs and gunfire from standard military weapons was heard in several areas of Ambon early Thursday.

Soldiers were also seen firing randomly at residents' houses from armoured cars, Antara said.

There were no immediate reports of casualties on Thursday. Violence between Muslims and Christians has left more than 4,000 people dead in the past 18 months, with more than 100 people killed and hundreds wounded since June 21 in Ambon, the capital of Maluku islands.

The upsurge in attacks led the authorities to impose a state of civil emergency followed by a curfew in the provinces.

Talks continue to free 21 Indian UN troops in Sierra Leone

FREETOWN, June 29: General Vijay Jetley the Commander of UN forces in Sierra Leone, said Wednesday talks were continuing to secure the release of 21 Indian peacekeepers still detained by the RUF, reports AFP.

"We continue to hold negotiations with RUF Field Commanders including Brigadier Issa Sesay", Jetley told reporters.

"We are in daily contact with the hostages, sending them logistical support regularly every second day and our doctors are visiting them to assess their health," he said.

"We are having discussions with people on the ground and they too seemed eager to get the current situation behind them," he said.

Jetley denied media reports that a number of villages in the northeast of Mile 91 had been burnt down by rebels.

Japan closes nuclear power reactor

TOKYO, June 29: Japan's Tokyo Electric Power Co. Inc. (TEPCO) shut down a nuclear power reactor today after discovering a radioactive water leak, but there was no danger, an official said, reports AFP.

Water had been found dripping during a regular morning inspection at the plant in Kashiwazaki-Kariwa, 250 km north of Tokyo, said TEPCO spokesman Kazumori Iinuma.

Operators began shutting down their No. 2 reactor manually at 1:00 p.m. (10:00 BST) after discovering 100 cubic centimetres (six cubic inches) of radioactive water, he said.

Military zone declared around Fiji's parliament

Speight issues fresh warning on hostages

SUVA, June 29: Fiji's martial law authorities were preparing to set up a cordon around the Parliamentary Complex where 27 political hostages are being held captive, local radio reports say, according to AFP.

Coup plotters have held Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry, his cabinet and ruling MPs hostage in Parliament since June 19.

On Wednesday a deadline imposed by the military on the plotters to sign an accord to end the drama passed without signatures.

Radio FM96 said the military had a decree ready for implementation Friday which would see parliament sealed off

from the outside.

Until now coup supporters have had easy access into parliament enabling them to take in large amounts of food.

In the first week of the coup the area was sealed off, but coup leader George Speight and his followers tore down the barricades.

State run Fiji Broadcasting Commission said staff and students at the nearby Pacific Theological College had been told to evacuate.

The exclusive Domain Road area, which is home to the United States and French ambassadors, the British high commissioner and the deputy New Zealand high commissioners, was also evacuated.

When an AFP correspondent drove through the area a short time ago there were no obvious signs of activity.

Meanwhile, Fiji coup leader George Speight today warned the country's military that its plans to cordon off parliament would endanger the lives of 27 hostages being held inside.

Moves to seal off the complex, which were underway on Thursday night, would anger his supporters, Speight told reporters.

Asked if that anger could be taken out on the hostages, who include deposed prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry, he replied: "That