

Battles between Christian-Muslim leave 11 dead in Maluku

JAKARTA, July 16: Fierce street battles between Christians and Muslims in the Maluku islands have intensified leaving at least 11 people dead, hospital officials said Sunday, reports AP.

One of those killed was a pregnant mother sheltering inside her house when a mortar round crashed through the window of her home and exploded on Saturday, said Risad, an official from the Protestant Church Hospital in the region's main city of Ambon.

He said four Christians and seven Muslims were killed, and hundreds of houses and a church were burned as fighting continued through Saturday night and into Sunday.

Risad said that despite the declaration of a state of emergency in the region, the military were incapable of stopping the violence.

"Please tell the United Nations to help us," he said in a phone interview from Ambon. "They are the only ones who can stop this."

Ferry collision kills 5 in strait of Gibraltar

MADRID, July 16: At least five people died and 18 were injured today when two ferries crossing the strait of Gibraltar collided near the southern Spanish port of Algeiras, Spanish national radio reported, says AFP.

The accident happened in thick fog around 6.30 a.m. (10:30 BST).

All the casualties were Moroccan on the Ciudad de Ceuta, which was on its way to the Moroccan port of Tangiers. Its passenger deck was hit full on by the Ciudad de Tanger, going in the opposite direction.

Both ferries were towed into Algeiras.

The cause of the accident was not immediately known but poor visibility was believed to be a factor by investigators.

Around two million north African immigrants work in Europe and half a million vehicles transit the strait of Gibraltar every year taking immigrant workers home on holiday or bringing them back to work.

Blast kills 2 in Philippine market

COTABATO, Philippines, July 16: A powerful bomb believed to have been planted by Muslim rebels today ripped through a crowded market in the southern Philippines, killing two people and wounding 33 others, the military said here, reports AFP.

Many of the injured were in a critical condition, they said.

The bomb exploded at 8:00 a.m. (6:00 BST) at the public market in the predominantly Christian town of Kabacan in North Cotabato, local army spokesman Captain Noel Detyato said.

Ordinance experts said the explosive was a mortar rigged to a timing device and similar to those used in previous bombings by the separatist group the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), he said.

"It could be the handwork of Muslim rebels following the call for Jihad (holy war) by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)," Detyato said.

Two Hezbollah men killed in clash with Amal

MARJAYOUN, Lebanon, July 16: Two members of the Shiite fundamentalist Hezbollah were killed and at least one more wounded in an overnight armed clash with the rival Shiite Amal movement in the former Israeli-occupied zone of southern Lebanon, police said today, reports AFP.

The reason for the clash which occurred in the village of Markaba, in the central part of the border zone, was not immediately known.

It was the first such deadly clash since Israel's unilateral pullout from southern Lebanon on May 24 after 22 years of occupation.

Hezbollah and Amal -- both of which fought against the Israeli occupation -- are the main groups currently controlling the area.

The Lebanese army has not yet deployed in the south to maintain law and order, despite international pressure to do so.

Tokyo's hawkish governor wants to become PM

TOKYO, July 16: Tokyo's outspoken Governor Shintaro Ishihara said today he would run for the next general election if he was asked to return to the ruling party and become its chief, reports AFP.

Asked if he was interested in returning to the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) which he left in 1995, the 67-year-old hawkish politician and novelist said he would if he could become prime minister.

"I will return to the LDP if I can be the prime minister because it is a benefit for the public," Ishihara told a debate programme on Asahi Broadcasting Corp.

Gen Musharraf bows to rightwing groups

Military govt to incorporate Islamic laws in constitution

ISLAMABAD, July 16: Twice in as many months, Pakistan's military government Saturday bowed to pressure from rightwing Islamic groups, this time agreeing to incorporate Islamic laws in the country's provisional constitution, reports AP.

Last month the army government, led by Gen Pervez Musharraf, who is considered a moderate, buckled to pressure from radical Islamic leaders to stay away from the country's controversial blasphemy laws.

After Islamic groups threatened to launch street demonstrations the army government rescinded plans to make it more difficult to lay charges under the blasphemy laws, which carry the death penalty for insulting Islam or its prophet.

This time the army agreed to take Islamic clauses, which were in the constitution the

army suspended after seizing power late October, and incorporate them in a provisional constitution currently in effect in Pakistan.

The provisional constitution is an abbreviated version of the country's constitution, but it also gives the army sweeping powers and makes it illegal to challenge the army's rule in Pakistan.

Musharraf issued an ordinance late on Saturday incorporating the Islamic provisions, culminating weeks of protest speeches by rightwing Islamic leaders in Pakistan.

These provisions govern such issues as punishments, settling of disputes, Haddood ordinance, which effectively says a woman needs four male witnesses to prove rape.

According to the state-run news agency, the army incorporated the Islamic provisions "in

order to dispel any doubts which were being created in the minds of the public by vested interests," an apparent reference to Islamic groups, who had been stirring up public sentiment against the government over this issue.

The army's seeming reluctance to stand firm against rightwing Islamic groups has human rights organisations and moderate Pakistanis worried.

In recent weeks Islamic groups have stepped up their campaign against groups like the Human Rights Commission calling them purveyors of western values.

The Human rights Commission of Pakistan has expressed its concern about statements by religious leaders, who have called for a ban on human rights groups and aid organizations, particularly those offering assistance to women and mi-

nority religious groups.

One of the most radical of the religious leaders, Fazl-ur Rehman, who met last week with Musharraf, accused these groups of seeking to lure Muslim women away from a traditional way of life.

Rehman supports a type of Islamic government like the one in effect next door in Afghanistan, where the Taliban rulers there deny women the right to work and severely limit girls education. In Afghanistan girls are educated only until eight years old and only in the Quran, the Muslim holy book.

Islamic scholars say that the Taliban style of government in Afghanistan is more in keeping with tribal traditions than a reflection of Islamic teachings.

However, Rehman and most of the rightwing religious leaders in Pakistan adhere to a similar line of thinking.

Bal Thackeray threatens nationwide violence after prosecution order

BOMBAY, July 16: India's most feared militant Hindu leader Bal Thackeray warned today of nationwide violence if he was prosecuted over anti-Muslim riots which followed the 1992 razing of a mosque by Hindu zealots, reports AFP.

The warning came as supporters of his Shiv Sena (Shivaji's Army) party went on the rampage in Bombay, the capital of the western Indian state of Maharashtra, to enforce a city-wide shut-down to protest at the proposed prosecution.

Thackeray wrote in his party newspaper Saamna (Encounter) on Sunday that his arrest would trigger unprecedented violence.

"Not only Maharashtra, India could burn. This is a landmine which will have ignited," Thackeray said. "This is a call for a religious riots and everybody should prepare for the consequences."

Chagan Bhujbal, deputy chief minister of western Maharashtra state, said on Saturday his government had given the green light to authorities to prosecute Thackeray, whose Shiv Sena party was blamed for the 1992 carnage.

More than 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed in countrywide rioting that erupted following the December 6, 1992 destruction of the 16th-century Babri Mosque in the northern town of Ayodhya.

The sectarian violence was

followed by a string of bomb attacks in Bombay on March 12, 1993. More than 300 people died in the blasts, blamed on a Muslim backlash over the rioting.

Thackeray, a self-confessed admirer of Adolf Hitler, said Bhujbal had "ignited the fuse of a landmine."

"By taking this step, the government has proved that it is a crime to take a nationalist stand and oppose anti-national elements," Thackeray said, referring to India's minority Muslim community.

Bhujbal has chosen to re-gurgitate an eight-year-old issue. I am not prepared to go to jail because of this man. If one governs in such a vengeful manner one should be prepared for the consequences as well."

Bombay's police control room said Shiv Sena activists had fanned out across the city of 12 million people on Sunday to enforce a shut-down.

"They are forcing shopkeepers to down shutters and are deflating tyres of public buses. People are being hauled out of cars to bring traffic to a standstill," a police spokesman said.

Although he held no official post, the 73-year-old Thackeray was the uncrowned monarch of a coalition government between the Sena and Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's BJP party in Maharashtra, which was routed in assembly elections.



Villagers look at the flames leaping out of the ground from a fire caused by underground gas leaks Saturday in Asansol, a coal belt in the eastern Indian state of West Bengal. Local residents have been complaining that the improper filling of abandoned underground coal mines keep the grounds above ablaze for days, causing health risks and even loss of life.

— AFP photo

Strong quake hits northern tip of Philippines

MANILA, July 16: An earthquake measuring 6.9 on the Richter Scale rocked an isolated island north of the main Philippine island of Luzon today, but there were no immediate reports of damage or casualties, reports AFP.

The tremor struck at 11:21 a.m. (9:21 BST) and its epicentre traced at 33 kilometres south-east of Batanes Island off Luzon, state seismologists said.

A quake with a magnitude of 6.9 is considered strong.

'Kashmir rebels killed Buddhist monks'

SRINAGAR, India, July 16: A truck driver arrested over the murder of four Buddhist monks in Indian Kashmir today told police the killers were Muslim separatist rebels who had also kidnapped a German tourist, reports AFP.

The truck driver, Nazir Bakshi, told interrogators that a German tourist had hitched a ride Wednesday near the Kashmir town of Panzila in the state's northern Ladakh region.

"He says the man told him he was German and had been trekking in Himachal Pradesh," an adjoining state, a police official said on condition of anonymity.

"The driver gave him a lift because the region is remote and hitchhiking is a common practice," the official told AFP.

Rebels kill 10 in Assam

GUWAHATI, India, July 16: At least ten sleeping villagers, including two women, were hacked to death today by tribal separatist guerrillas in India's northeastern state of Assam, officials said, reports AFP.

A police spokesman said a group of about 12 militants of the Karbi National Volunteers (KNV), armed with machetes, spears and guns, stormed a village in Karbi Anglong district, 370 km east of the state capital Guwahati, before dawn on Sunday.

"All the victims were sleeping when the militants attacked the village. It was a selective killing targeting non-tribal families in the village and most of the bodies bore injuries with crude weapons like spears and machetes," the official told AFP.

"One person was admitted to a hospital with serious injuries."

This was the second major attack by rebels from the Karbi tribe, who have shot dead 20 people in the district during the past three months and torched more than 500 huts.

"The KNV wants to drive out all non-tribals from the district in a bid to establish a tribal majority area so that they can press their demands for more autonomy and other rights," a senior Assam police official in Guwahati said, requesting anonymity. "The attacks on the non-Karbhis are nothing but a

clear sign of ethnic cleansing, having the potential to turn into an ethnic riot."

The KNV says its fighting for greater autonomy and the right to self-determination. Police and paramilitary forces Sunday fanned out in the area in pursuit of the killers.

"More than 500 soldiers have cordoned off the area and we are sure by tonight we will be able to nab some of the militants," the police spokesman said.

More than 10,000 people have died in separatist-linked violence in oil- and tea-rich Assam since India's independence in 1947.

Apart from warring tribal groups fighting a bitter and long-running battle for land rights in the area, Assam has been wracked by violence by a rebel group representing the state's dominant Assamese community, which wants non-locals to leave the state.

It mainly targets trading communities from other parts of India and illegal immigrants from nearby Bangladesh.

Assam, the largest of India's seven northeastern states, last month joined forces with other local administrations to restore peace in the region, also known as the "Seven Sisters."

Violence in the sprawling and remote north-east has claimed about 50,000 lives since Indian independence.

Another coup looming in Fiji

Observers warn

SUVA, July 16: Another coup is looming in Fiji as the leader of the May coup, failed businessman George Speight, realises he is effectively now very little and is being marginalised, diplomatic observers say, reports AFP.

Causing some surprise is the determination of deposed Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry to take back power even if he has not yet figured out how to.

Although he was always known to be a tough, uncompromising trade unionist, Chaudhry's strength so soon after emerging from being held hostage for 56 days, has raised eyebrows.

New President Josefa Iloilo was expected to name a new interim government Sunday, headed by prime minister-designate Laisenia Qarase and including two ethnic Indians.

"The names were all lined up on Friday, but now they're pulling out after they saw what Chaudhry said," one diplomat told AFP.

On May 19 Speight and special forces soldier Ilisoni Ligairi seized Parliament, taking Chaudhry and his government hostage. On May 29 the military declared martial law, abrogating the constitution and dis-

missing President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara.

Last Thursday Speight and Ligairi released his hostages after the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) named the new president and a vice president, Jose Seniloli.

On Saturday Chaudhry demanded his government's return to office, saying that any alternative would be condoning "an act of anarchy and unlawful seizure of a government elected by the people."

Chaudhry's bid has been boosted by a telephone conversation with Australian Prime Minister John Howard Friday who pledged support for the restoration of his government.

Sources however say Chaudhry is upset with New Zealand, whose Prime Minister, Helen Clark, is more circumspect at this stage.

Diplomats are worried at how Chaudhry will regain power, and there are concerns that the Fiji Labour Party may have suffered a mortal blow while its members were locked up.

The situation is creating a power vacuum in Suva with two crises still unresolved on the outskirts. Rebels still hold the Monasavu hydro dam and

Labasa, the main town on Vanua Levu, is in turmoil with rebels trying to control it.

A diplomat speculated on the possibility of Speight having enough real muscle to mount another coup and how it could happen given a lack of power focus in Suva.

There were fears Thursday when the GCC met, that rebels would try to seize the chiefs, prompting unprecedented security measures including blocking off a large part of the town.

Another coup could be aimed at prime minister-designate Qarase and the military command backing him up, observers said.

The naming of vice president Seniloli was seen as a victory for Speight as he was originally his nominee for president, but the post is little more than symbolic.

Speight and Ligairi were Sunday still sitting in Parliament with around 200 supporters. Authorities were making no real effort to get him out and on Saturday the rebels had a party to mark what former prime minister Sitiveni Rabuka called Speight's "self-perceived victory."

Rabuka, who staged two coups on May 14 and September 26, 1987, has been dismissive of

Speight's coup, saying it had little planning behind it, and no vision on how to move on.

Parliament, he says, has turned into Speight's own prison because he could never get out to take over the control of the state.

With very little leverage now in Suva, Speight and Ligairi are demanding the right to hold a "state funeral" for one of the rebels who died last week after a shoot out.

They want to bury him in the grounds of parliament, but symbolical of his diminished power, the Suva City Council says the area is not a designated cemetery.

One diplomat said the shadowy people behind Speight may now be realising they have not got anything out of their gamble and will now be seeking to mount a second coup, just as occurred in 1987.

"These people have a lot at stake, and they will not give up."

After Rabuka's military coup in May against the Indian-dominated government, then Governor General Ratu Sir Penaia Ganiula drew up an accord, which could have left the way open to the return to office of the deposed government.

Mahathir starts 20th yr in office

PM vows to keep tabs on religious groups

KUALA LUMPUR, July 16: Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, the country's longest-serving leader, is to start his 20th year in office today without any sign he will soon hand over the reins of power, analysts and politicians say, reports AFP.

At 74, the doctor-turned-politician has survived two recessions, a major split in his political party in 1987, and the sacking in September 1998 of his popular deputy, Anwar Ibrahim -- in to mention quadruple heart bypass surgery in 1989.

Mahathir led his National Front coalition to victory in November's polls and six months later returned unopposed as president of the United Malays National Organisation, the linchpin of the coalition.

Meanwhile, Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said today the government would strictly monitor religious extremist groups after a July 2 arms heist by an Islamic cult sparked a security alert.

"It has become a security issue and if left unchecked, it can jeopardise national unity and prosperity," Mahathir was quoted as saying by the national news agency Bernama.



Picture dated December 10, 1999 shows Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad waving while answering questions after announcing the new parliamentary cabinet at his office in Putrajaya, Kuala Lumpur. Mahathir, the country's longest-serving leader, started his 20th year in office yesterday without any sign he will soon hand over the reins of power.

— AFP photo

BRIEFLY

Blasts in north-east Tehran:

Several homes were damaged in violent explosions which rocked a Tehran district that houses the intelligence ministry late Saturday, Iranian state radio reported Sunday, AFP says from Tehran.

Some 12 explosions shook the north-east of Tehran Saturday evening, the radio said, but no details were given on what caused the blasts or on any casualties. However, there were unconfirmed reports that the ministry had been attacked by units of the armed Iranian resistance and that several people had been killed or wounded.

PP leader assassinated in Spain:

A local official of Spain's ruling Popular Party (PP) was assassinated Saturday in the southern city of Malaga in an attack that bore the hallmarks of the Basque separatist group ETA, police in Andalusia said, AFP reports from Malaga.

Jose Maria Martin Carpena, 49, was shot six times by a helmeted man who approached and fired at him from close range as the councillor was getting into his car outside his home. The PP representative, an elected member of Malaga city council for the past four years, was killed in full view of his wife and daughter, aged about 12. The assassin then fled from the scene of the crime.

Mugabe announces 19-member Cabinet

HARARE, July 16: Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe announced on Saturday his new Cabinet, which included many young, new faces in the wake of last month's parliamentary elections, reports AFP.

All of the cabinet ministers are from Mugabe's ruling Zimbabwe African National Union - Patriotic Front (ZANU-PF), which scraped only a narrow majority in the elections.

There are 19 ministers in the cabinet -- 17 full cabinet ministers and 2 heads of department falling under the president's office.

Ten of the ministers are new. There is only one woman in the cabinet.

The new cabinet "reflects our new thinking and takes into account the need to reduce gov-

Camp David talks struggle towards decision time

THURMONT, Maryland, July 16: Middle East peace negotiators at the tense Camp David summit head into a new week today with a looming midweek deadline, when US President Bill Clinton leaves for Japan, reports AFP.

Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak and Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat are being urged to reach a permanent truce in their 50-year old conflict, Clinton, who is hosting the talks, departs Wednesday for a meeting of the Group of Eight leading industrialised nations plus Russia at Okinawa.

US officials are holding out hope that a breakthrough could be reached before then.

"Our objective is still to try to reach an agreement on the core issues of the final status

before the departure of the President Wednesday morning," said White House spokesman PJ Crowley on Saturday.

Clinton is not due to return to the United States until July 23.

Israeli officials have said Barak is prepared to stay on and pursue talks with Arafat at the secluded Camp David presidential retreat, in the Catskill mountains. The Palestinian leader's intentions are not known.

The Israelis badly want a deal, which Barak's spokesman believes will take two weeks.

"We cannot know exactly how long this summit will go on, as no target date was fixed, but I suppose that a total duration of two weeks represents a

reasonable period of time for the Israeli prime minister to be away," spokesman Gadi Baltansky said, adding that Israel would consider "extending the discussions by three or four days if no agreement is reached during President Clinton's trip to Japan."

"The main thing is to reach a good agreement," he said.

Barak's government majority in Jerusalem has crumbled over the negotiations and he dearly wants to take home an agreement -- not only for the future of Israel but also his own future as prime minister.

Meanwhile, about 100 Jewish settlers set up a rogue outpost on a hill near the West Bank town of Bethlehem in the night of Saturday to Sunday.