

Sanctions imposed on Fiji

Military storms maximum security prison

SUVA, July 17: The first sanctions to be imposed against Fiji were announced today as the Pacific nation's new president was sworn in to replace the elected government, overthrown in a race-based coup, reports AFP.

The New Zealand government announced a raft of sanctions, including the halving its development aid to Fiji.

It also published a list of 300 people involved in the coup, who it said would be banned from entering the country, and ended a series of military and student exchanges.

But Foreign Affairs Minister Phil Goff stressed the measures were "limited" and said New Zealand had stopped short of announcing economic sanctions as they might lead to more violence.

"If we were to fire off a series of sanctions today to find that the new (government) line-up had

effectively excluded (coup leader George) Speight and all of his supporters, that would actually work to the detriment of moderate forces in Fiji who may commit themselves to the restoration of constitutional democracy and the rights of Indo-Fijians," he said.

Also on Monday US Defence Secretary William Cohen was to discuss the imposition of sanctions with Defence Minister John Moore and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer in Sydney.

Fiji has already been suspended from the Commonwealth.

On May 19 failed businessman Speight and a handful of special forces soldiers seized parliament in Fiji's capital Suva, capturing Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry and his government.

Speight claimed to be acting in the name of ethnic Fijians and demanded a new government in which power was reserved for indigenous islanders.

Chaudhry, the country's first

ethnic Indian leader, was finally released last Thursday after the army, which declared martial law during the crisis, agreed to the bulk of Speight's demands.

These included an amnesty for him and his men and the replacement of the 1997 multi-racial constitution with plans for an apartheid-like state where ethnic Fijians would have a permanent hold on power and be favoured financially at other minorities' expense. Chaudhry was deposed by the army soon after he was taken hostage.

Goff said New Zealand still considered the Chaudhry administration to be the legitimate government but saw no realistic prospect of it being reinstated.

The reduction in aid would cut New Zealand's provision from five million New Zealand dollars (2.4 million US dollars) to 2.5 million, no new programmes would be announced and existing ones frozen, Goff said.

Future possible sanctions included an extension to the ban on sporting links currently in place until August 31, said Goff, adding such measures could follow once the government line-up was announced.

The list of "banned" Fijians would also be made available to other countries should they wish to use it, he said.

The sanctions came as Fiji's new president Josefa Iloilo, the former vice president, was due to be sworn in.

Meanwhile, soldiers and police Monday stormed Fiji's maximum security prison, with many injuries reported, local radio said.

Prisoners at the Naboro Maximum Security Unit have been holding up to 30 wardens hostage since last week.

Radio FM96 said soldiers had stormed into the prison on Monday, and it reported "lots of blood all over the place" following the drama.



Syria's new President Bashar al-Assad (C) acknowledges the MPs applauding upon his arrival yesterday at the Parliament Chamber in Damascus. In his first speech to Parliament after taking oath of office, Bashar said Syria wanted to recover the "whole of the Golan" back to the frontier in force during June 1967 when the strategic heights were captured by Israel. —AFP photo

Filipino rebels massacre 21 Christians in S Philippines

ILIGAN, Philippines, July 17: Guerrillas from the largest Muslim separatist group in the Philippines have rounded up and massacred 21 Christians in a remote southern village, the military said today, reports AFP.

The bodies of the victims, most of them with their hands tied behind their backs, were found Monday at Sumugod in the town of Bumburan in Lanao del Sur province, an army spokesman said.

The massacre happened on Sunday night, spokesman Major Johnny Macanas said.

He added the killings were carried out by 100 heavily armed members of the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).

The victims were led to a mosque and then "strafed and executed," he said.

"This is condemnable, deplorable and un-Islamic," Macanas said.

Gunman shoots Pak journalist, his son

KARACHI, July 17: A senior Pakistani journalist is fighting for his life Monday after he and his son were shot outside his office by an unknown attacker, police and doctors said, reports AFP.

Police said a gunman on a motorcycle opened fire on Abdul Hafeez Abid and his son left the Ummat daily office in the southern city of Hyderabad around midnight Sunday.

Abid was hit three times in the stomach, leg and neck and is in a critical condition at a government hospital. His son was also injured but was out of danger, doctors said.

The Ummat on Monday blamed an unspecified ethnic "terrorist" group for the attack, apparently in reference to radical elements of the Muttahida Qaumi Movement political party, which represents the Mohajir settler community of migrants from India.

"It is the responsibility of the police to arrest those responsible... He has been writing against the terrorism of an ethnic group," daily Ummat reported.

Abu Sayyaf frees German hostage

JOLO, Philippines, July 17: Muslim extremists today freed an ailing German teacher among dozens of hostages they are holding on the southern Philippine island of Jolo, reports AFP.

Renate Walzer, 57, was immediately flown out of the island to Zamboanga city aboard a military helicopter after the Abu Sayyaf guerrillas released her.

Walzer, clad in a dark green blouse and printed trousers, alternately waved and broke down as she was escorted to the military aircraft after being examined by a doctor at a military camp.

She walked to the helicopter with chief government negotiator Roberto Avenajado by her side, an AFP correspondent saw.

The German teacher, whose high blood pressure has been a source of concern during her nearly three months of captivity, was helped aboard the aircraft by an Avenajado aide.

Another oil pipeline blast kills 16 in Nigeria

WARRI, Nigeria, July 17: Another oil pipeline exploded at the weekend in southern Nigeria, killing at least 16 people, officials said today, reports AFP.

The latest explosion occurred overnight Sunday at Isie-Ijalla, in the oil-rich Delta State, barely a week after a similar incident killed more than 250 people at Adeje village, also in the state.

The victims were scavenging for fuel from a burst pipeline operated by the state-owned fuel marketing company PPMC when the explosion occurred, the official in the governor's office told AFP by telephone.

Around 10 other people were seriously injured in the fire, and have been taken to hospitals in Warri for treatment, he said.

Nazi slave compensation accord signed

BERLIN, July 17: The United States, Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Russia, Ukraine and Belarus signed an agreement in Berlin today to compensate the victims of forced and slave labour under the Nazi regime, reports AFP.

The text of a second agreement between the United States and Germany was scheduled to be signed later Monday.

The ceremonies had been thrown into doubt Monday morning after the US lawyer acting for the victims, Ed Fagan, posed further conditions for the conclusion of a final compensation accord.

Japan to lift sanctions on India, Pakistan

TOKYO, July 17: Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori is likely to announce the lifting of two-year-old economic sanctions on India and Pakistan during his visit to the nations in late August, a report said today, reports AFP.

Business leaders and Mori's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) persuaded the government over the issue in a bid to repair relations in particular with India, which is becoming one of the world's largest markets, the Yomiuri Shimbun newspaper said.

Tokyo also feared further deterioration in the Pakistani economy could fuel activities among Islamic fundamentalists and cause political instability.

Imposed sanctions, including a freeze on new non-humanitarian grants and loans, after India and Pakistan carried out a series of nuclear tests in May 1998.

An LDP official said in late May the party would call on the government to lift the sanctions.

Previously, Tokyo had demanded India and Pakistan sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) if they wanted the sanction to be removed.

According to Japanese media reports Mori will tour India, Pakistan and Bangladesh in late August.

But a foreign ministry official said no concrete decision had been made, both on the trip and the sanctions.

Bashar takes oath of office

DAMASCUS, July 17: Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, took the oath of office before Parliament today, at the start of a seven-year mandate as head of state, reports AFP.

Assad, 34, was confirmed in office last week after receiving 97.29 percent of the votes in a national referendum in which he was the only candidate.

After taking the oath of office, with his right hand placed on the Koran, he received a standing ovation from the members of parliament, before embarking on his first speech as president.

The ceremony was broadcast live on state television. Assad succeeds his father, Hafez al-Assad, who died June 10 after a 30-year rule.

He is Syria's 16th president

since the country became independent in 1946.

Bashar al-Assad, told Parliament that it would be "impossible" for Syria to embrace Western-type democracy.

In a speech to MPs after taking the oath of office, Assad called for a "democracy specific to Syria, that takes its roots from its history, and respects its society."

"The liberation of the Golan is a key aim" of Syria, the country's new president, Bashar al-Assad, told parliament.

Syria's new president said that economic change must be brought about by "modernising the laws" and getting rid of bureaucratic obstacles.

"We must now move forward by regular steps towards economic change through a modernisation

of the laws, and the suppression of bureaucratic obstacles which prevent the inflow of investments," he told parliament in a speech after taking the oath of office.

"The private sector must be activated and given the best possible opportunities. We also have to ensure that the public sector is competitive in foreign markets," he said.

He also called for the establishment of an Arab common market.

Bashar held up the relations between Syria and Lebanon as a model for emulation.

"Relations between Syria and Lebanon can serve as a model for relations between Arab countries," Bashar told parliament in his first speech after taking the oath of office as president.

Clinton sees some progress at Camp David peace talks

ME summit in crisis: Israel

THURMONT, Maryland, July 17: US President Bill Clinton on Sunday said "some progress" has been made between Israelis and Palestinians at the Camp David peace talks, but that success in reaching a deal was still uncertain, reports AFP.

"There has been some progress but I can't say I know we will succeed," Clinton said in an interview with the New York Daily News, a transcript of which was released by the White House.

Clinton said the issues separating the two sides were the most difficult he had ever tried to help resolve, maintaining that neither peace negotiations over Northern Ireland nor the Dayton peace

talks over Bosnia were as difficult.

"It's so hard. My heart goes out to them... It's the hardest thing that I have ever seen," he said in the statement.

"This is really important," he said. "We might make it. I don't know. God, it's hard. It's like nothing I've ever dealt with," he said, saying this weekend's talks were harder than "all the negotiations with the Irish, all the stuff I've done with the Palestinians before this and with the Israelis, the Balkans at Dayton."

Israel and the Palestinians are struggling to reach agreement before a September 13 deadline for a permanent peace accord

Jordanians freed from Syrian jail: Lawyer

AMMAN, July 17: The Syrian authorities have released three Jordanian prisoners who had been held for several years on political charges, their lawyer told AFP today, adding he expected more releases this week.

Imad al-Sharqawi said the three men were released July 13 and would be returning home as soon as the paperwork had been taken care of.

He identified one of them as Khaled Awad who was released after serving a 12-year-term at the notorious Tadmor prison, in the central Syrian desert, "on political charges".

Awad's mother told Al-Arab Al-Yawm newspaper said the family was getting the 41-year-old ex-detainee an official travel document enabling him to leave Syrian territory.

Two more Aum members to die for gas attack

TOKYO, July 17: Japan sentenced two Aum Supreme Truth disciples to death by hanging Monday for spreading the deadly Nazi-invented Sarin nerve gas in Tokyo's subway in 1995, reports AFP.

The two men dropped plastic bags filled with the liquid on subway trains and then punctured them, releasing the gas into the air during the morning rush hour on March 20, 1995.

A third doomsday cult member, 41-year-old Shigeo Sugimoto, who drove a car in the gassing operation, escaped the gallows and was sentenced to life in jail.

over the razing of a historic mosque in northern India by Hindu zealots.

More than 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed in countrywide rioting that erupted in the wake of the December 6, 1992 destruction of the 16th-century Babri mosque in the 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.

Shiv Sena activists roam Bombay streets

BOMBAY, July 17: Bombay flying around," said one police spokesman. The Shiv Sena has been enforcing its call for shops and small businesses to close down since Saturday, when the Maharashtra state government gave the green light to prosecute party chief Bal Thackeray.

In the neighbouring town of Thane, shops and businesses remained shut and vehicles stayed off the roads in line with the Shiv Sena demand.

The Shiv Sena was blamed for the 1992 massacre of Muslims, triggered by communal clashes

BRIEFLY

Bomb blast in Philippines: A bomb exploded in the southern Philippines town of Matalam on Monday, but no one was hurt, a local official said, AFP reports from Cotabato.

The attack followed a deadly blast in the nearby southern town of Kabacan which killed two people and injured 33 others on Sunday. Matalam mayor Oscar Valdesio said one of two mortar shells rigged to timing devices went off outside a grocery shop mid-morning, while police disarmed the other explosive device.

Australian scientist dead: One of Australia's greatest scientists, Sir Mark Oliphant, who campaigned against nuclear weapons for 50 years after helping to develop them, has died at the age of 98, his family said Monday, AFP reports from Sydney.

Oliphant passed away peacefully at his Canberra home last Friday after a short illness, and his funeral was held on Monday. He achieved lasting fame as a leader of a team of British scientists who travelled to the United States in 1943 to assist with the Manhattan project, the team which developed the atomic bomb.

Iranian cleric released: Mohsen Kadivar, a leading Islamic thinker and philosopher close to President Mohammad Khatami was released from Tehran's Evin prison Sunday after 18 months in detention, the official IRNA news agency reported Monday, AFP says from Tehran.

The cleric was freed on the order of the conservative Special Court for Clergy (SCC) after serving his full sentence on charges of disseminating anti-Islamic propaganda. Kadivar had questioned fundamental constitutional principles of the Islamic republic in his writings, notably the system known as "Velayate-Faqih," under which supreme authority in the state is held by a religious leader.



Lara Dutta, the current Miss Universe, speaks to reporters at a press conference in Bombay yesterday upon returning to her home country for the first time since winning her crown on May 12. Dutta said she planned to campaign for the empowerment of women in India during her one year tenure. —AFP photo

Wahid rules out foreign troops for Maluku

JAKARTA, July 17: Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid today indicated that the country will not seek foreign military assistance to help restore security in the riot-torn Maluku Islands, reports AFP.

Wahid, addressing governors from across the country meeting in Jakarta, said that UN Secretary General Kofi Annan had telephoned him several days ago to ask him about the security situation in the Maluku.

"We are working it all out. If we are overwhelmed, then we will cry out for logistic and equipment assistance," Wahid said he told Annan.

Christian leaders in the Maluku have called for UN military intervention in the sectarian conflict that has plagued the Maluku since January 1998.

Some 4,000 people have been killed and hundreds of thousands of people displaced in the violence there.

The calls were made amid allegations that Indonesian soldiers were taking part, actively or passively, in the bloody conflict which has pitted Christians against Muslims in the islands.

Divided Korean families poised to be reunited with their loved ones

SEOUL, July 17: More than 100 North Koreans separated from relatives in the South for half a century are poised to be reunited with their loved ones, officials said today, reports AFP.

The Korean Red Cross said here that out of a list of 200 North Koreans desperately seeking news about long-lost relatives in South Korea, more than 100 had confirmed relatives living in the South.

North and South Korea exchanged lists of 200 names of people living either side of the world's last Cold War frontier who are taking part in a program to be reunited with their families.

South Korea's Unification Ministry said it expected further confirmations of relatives would be made soon.

"The number of the separated family members whose whereabouts are confirmed will be increasing as the government's integrated information centre on the separated families will begin operating Monday," a ministry official said.

Among those who now look set to be reunited are former member of parliament Ju Young-Kwan,

whose brother Ju Young-Hoon had applied from the North.

The Korean Red Cross Society will finalise the list of 100 southern side separated family members on July 26 to present it to the North.

The exchange of family visits will be the first concrete follow-up to last month's historic inter-Korean summit.

During the summit, South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il agreed to arrange meetings for families separated by the division of the Korean peninsula in 1945 and the ensuing 1950-53 Korean War.

In return, South Korea will repatriate communist prisoners to the North.

Seoul says around 7.6 million South Koreans have had no news of their families or relatives across the border.

South Korea has expressed the hope family reunions could continue on a regular basis, saying future Red Cross talks should lead to the establishment of a "reunion house" at the inter-Korean border.