

Thousands protest US immigration detentions

MIAMI, Aug 6: Some 5,000 Hispanic and Haitian immigrants marched Saturday in support of the millions of immigrants in the United States who lack legal documentation and sometimes are confined in detention centres, reports AFP.

The demonstration urged amnesty and US documentation for the estimated seven million undocumented immigrants, who hail from all over the world, though the majority are from Central America and the Caribbean.

In many cases they are not illegal aliens but rather asylum-seekers who are detained by the Immigration and Naturalisation Service (INS) while their legal status remains in limbo.

The march was organised by the Panamerican Coalition, a grouping of immigrants from 14 countries, as well as Fann Aysen Nan Miyami and the Haitian-American Grassroots Coalition.

Miami, which has been called the unofficial capital of the Americas, was an apt location for the march: its 2.4-million-strong population includes some 1.4 million Hispanic Americans, about half of them of Cuban descent, as well as some 500,000 Haitians and African Americans.

Two Red Cross workers and driver missing in Georgia

TBILISI, Aug 6: Two Red Cross workers, from France and Italy, and their driver were reported missing Saturday after travelling to Georgia's border with the war-torn Russian republic of Chechnya, their office said, reports AFP.

The missing people were named as Sophie Prokofiev from France, Natalie Zelino from Italy and Georgian driver Yuri Darchevy, local police told the ITAR-TASS news agency Sunday. Private television channel NTV had earlier reported the Italian woman's name as Natasha Dzimin.

The International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) said the workers had not been in contact since late Friday when they left in the direction of the Pankissi gorges, in the mountainous region of Akhmeta.

They were trying to make contact with a number of Chechens believed to have taken refuge there.

Georgian security ministry spokesman Lezhava Bichko said the workers were more likely to have been involved in an accident than having been abducted by terrorists.

But the defence ministry said late Saturday that the Red Cross Toyota vehicle had been found abandoned in the area.

Police in the Akhmeta region have refused to rule out any explanation, including kidnapping and a road accident.

45 troops killed in Congo

KIGALI, Aug 6: Rebels in the northern Congo said Saturday they repulsed attacks by government forces backed by combat jets and heavy weapons, killing 45 government troops, reports AP.

The Congolese Liberation Movement, one of three rebel groups which have waged a two-year civil war against the government of President Laurent Kabila, said its losses were light, with just two killed since Wednesday.

Spokesman Olivier Kamitatu said in a satellite telephone call that rebel lines about 560 miles northeast of the capital, Kinshasa, had held off attacks by government troops, which bombarded them with heavy weapons loaded on gunboats on the Oubangui River. He said the government also received support from Zimbabwean troops, which struck rebel positions with Russian-made Sukhoi-25 and Antonov aircraft.

There was no independent confirmation of the rebel claims, and the Congolese government blamed the rebels for provoking the clashes.

Five die in China boat capsizes

BEIJING, Aug 6: A wooden boat overloaded with passengers capsized in a river in eastern China, killing five people, state-run news media reported, reports AP.

The boat, designed to hold six, was carrying 21 people, including the captain when it sank Saturday in Suqian, Jiangsu province, Xinhua News agency said.

Some 200 rescuers were sent to the site to save the victims, but one man and four women, including a 13-year-old girl, drowned, Xinhua reported late Saturday.

Boat captain Sun Changdeng fled the scene and was being pursued by police, said a local official who gave only his surname, Song.

The passengers, most of them farmers, were trying to get from the south to the north bank of the river when the boat sank about 150 meters (495 feet) short of their destination, the report said.

Hiroshima marks 55th anniversary of atomic inferno

HIROSHIMA, Japan, Aug 6: Hiroshima today marked the 55th anniversary of the atomic inferno, that obliterated the western Japanese city, with silent prayers and a plea for nuclear disarmament, reports Reuters.

About 50,000 people, including ageing survivors of the blast and Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, gathered at Hiroshima's Peace Park for a memorial ceremony near the spot where a US bomber dropped an atomic bomb on August 6, 1945.

Paper cranes symbolising peace were draped at numerous spots around the park while incense burned in prayer alters and tears flowed freely as people remembered the atomic bombing.

In a solemn ceremony attended by black-clad survivors of the blast, school children in their uniforms, Hiroshima residents and others, the names of 5,021 were added to the list of the dead, bringing the total to 217,137.

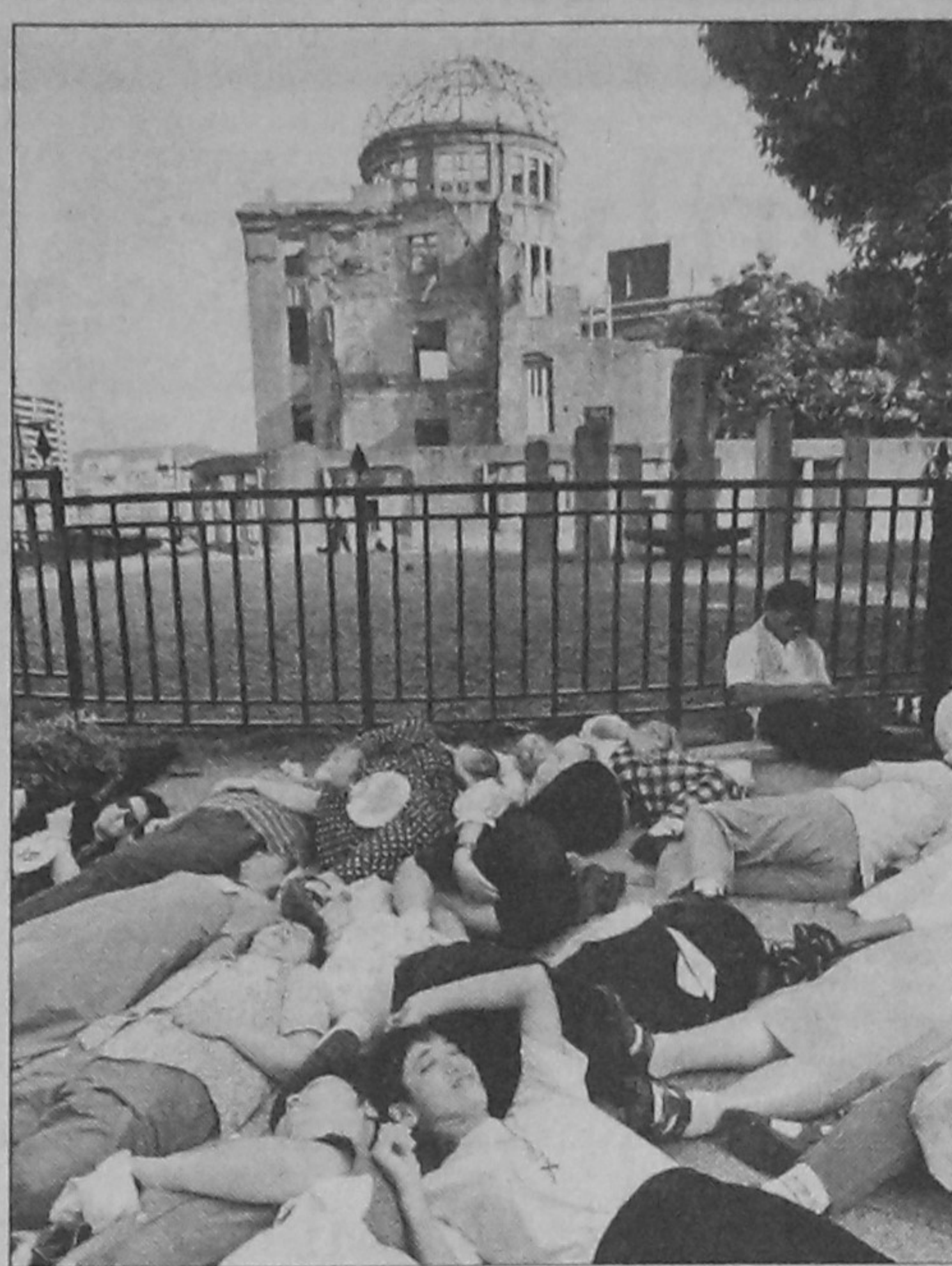
The new names are those of people who died recently and have been recognised by the city as victims of the bomb. A few thousands names of atomic bomb victims are added each year at the time of the anniversary.

The bomb dropped on Hiroshima killed some 140,000 people by the end of 1945, out of an estimated population of 350,000. Thousands more succumbed to illness and injuries later.

The city of Nagasaki was bombed three days after Hiroshima, leading to the surrender of Japan and the end of World War Two.

Hiroshima Mayor Tadatoshi Akiba called for the immediate end of nuclear weapons. He also urged that what many people consider the most important event of the 20th century not be forgotten in the 21st century.

We have to establish a way of expressing the memory of this event in the course of humanity and pass it on to the next generation," Akiba said.



Nuns from Asian and Pacific countries stage a "die-in" protest against nuclear weapons in front of the Atomic Bomb Dome, symbol of the 1945 atomic bombing in Hiroshima, yesterday. The city of Hiroshima marked the 55th anniversary of the atomic bombing, which devastated the Japanese western city and killed some 200,000 people. —AFP photo

The average age of atomic blast survivors is now 70, according to government figures.

Hundreds of survivors who were not strong enough to attend the ceremony watched from nursing homes in the city, clutching prayer beads as they watched proceedings on television.

Along the city's river banks, some elderly survivors had their

own private moment to remember as they stared out at waterways that, 55 years ago, were choked with charred corpses.

Several hundred anti-nuclear activists staged a "die-in" in front of the domed building near ground zero that miraculously survived the blast. The group members lay on the ground near the building and called for an end to nuclear weapons.

Veerappan demands \$12m for release of film star

BANGALORE, Aug 6: A dreaded forest bandit wanted for 130 murders in India has made six demands, including amnesty and a 12 million dollar ransom, for the release of a veteran movie star he has abducted, officials said Saturday, reports AP.

Veerappan, 56, who abducted actor Rajkumar on Sunday, made the demands in an audio cassette he sent through an emissary to governments of the southern states of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, where police have tried in vain for years to arrest him.

Chief Minister S M Krishna, the top elected official of Karnataka state, did not immediately describe the demands. But a senior official told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity that Veerappan's conditions included a ransom of 500 million rupees (12 million dollars), an amnesty from both governments

and a safe house in Tamil Nadu.

He also wants financial compensation for Tamil people affected in ethnic riots in 1991, recognition for Tamil as one of the languages used in government business in Karnataka state and the enforcement of a tribunal's decision on a river water dispute between the two states. The tribunal ordered Karnataka to release more water of the Cauvery River downstream into Tamil Nadu.

Krishna said Veerappan had given no deadline.

Veerappan, who like Rajkumar uses one name, has eluded police for 18 years. He is accused of killing at least 130 policemen, slaughtering elephants to sell their tusks, felling thousands of sandalwood trees and kidnapping people.

Rajkumar and three others were seized Sunday from the actor's vacation home while partying by Veerappan and his

gang.

A newspaper editor known to Veerappan has trekked into a forest as an emissary of the two governments to negotiate Rajkumar's release. R R Gopal, editor of the magazine Nakeeran, is the only journalist in Madras, the capital of Tamil Nadu state, to have interviewed Veerappan three times in the past eight years.

Veerappan reportedly suffers from asthma and has repeatedly offered to surrender in exchange for amnesty.

The government of Karnataka, where most of his crimes occurred, wants him tried.

Rajkumar, 72, has appeared in more than 200 Kannada-language films over five decades, and is politically powerful in neighbouring Karnataka state. Like many people in southern India, Rajkumar and Veerappan go by only one name.

Bomb rocks monks' meet in Lanka

COLOMBO, Aug 6: A meeting of top Buddhist monks was bombed today as they prepared to protest government plans to turn Sri Lanka into a de facto federal state, witnesses said, reports AFP.

Unidentified attackers targeted a meeting of 200 people led by the National Council of Buddhist but wounded themselves, witnesses said.

There were three people who were taking cover between two cars and one of them tried to throw the bomb, but his hand hit the door of one car and he missed his target," Buddhist monk Palitha told AFP.

He said the attack came as the monks were discussing protest action against government plans to press ahead with a bill to be voted on in parliament Wednesday despite mounting opposition across the country.

The Buddhist clergy have planned to march to parliament Tuesday, a day before the vote, to register their protest against President Chandrika Kumaratunga's statute proposals.

The state-run Sunday Observer said police could be involved in a conspiracy by unidentified extremists to attack the monks in an apparent bid to shift the blame to the government.

A political wag commented that to those so called Buddhists, a blooded rock could be a blessing at this time," the Observer said.

The influential clergy who command support among the 70 percent Buddhist population in the country have already held several peaceful protests against Kumaratunga's bill which she believes will deliver peace.

The National Joint Committee (NJC), which groups several Buddhist and other groups opposing the bill said Sunday's bomb attack was the work of people opposed to the monks' agitation.

Israel welcomes deployment of UN troops

KIRYAT SHMONA, Israel, Aug 6: Israel's leaders, from the prime minister down to border-town mayors, welcomed Saturday the deployment of UN forces along the Lebanese border with Israel, expressing hope that this will contribute to maintaining peace in the region, reports AFP.

Prime Minister Ehud Barak welcomed the deployment of UNIFIL (the UN Interim Force in Lebanon) and expressed hope that it will lead to security and stability on the border," said defence spokesman David Zisso.

Four hundred UN troops moved into positions along Lebanon's border with Israel Saturday, completing in just a few hours a mission they were first tasked with 22 years ago and also paving the way for a Lebanese force to follow.

Zisso said Barak considers that the deployment of UNIFIL troops will "constitute an important phase towards ending the tragedy" of the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon, "which cost the lives of a large number of Israeli soldiers".

Rally in Indonesia in support of Islamic laws

JAKARTA, Aug 6: Thousands of Indonesian Muslims held a peaceful rally in the Javanese city of Yogyakarta in a show of support for efforts to impose Islamic law in the country, reports said today, reports AFP.

The rally, held at a sports stadium in Yogyakarta, Central Java, on Saturday was attended by some 5,000 Muslims, including women and children, the Jakarta Post said.

Although the rally had earlier sparked fears of violence against non-Muslims and their property, and prompted many downtown shops, schools and businesses to close, no violence was reported.

The rally was held to coincide with the opening of a three-day first congress of the Indonesian Mujahideen, which groups Muslims in favour of Islamic law.

The group is not linked to an extremist group which has been sending Islamic "jihad" warriors to the Maluku islands to support Muslims in 19 months of sectarian warfare there.

Several traditionalist Muslim

leaders addressing the rally were quoted by the daily as drumming up support for the enactment of Islamic law in Indonesia.

They also pressed for legislators in Jakarta to pass an amendment to the constitution that would require all Muslims in Indonesia to practice their religion.

Legislators are due to open the first annual session of the People's Consultative Assembly (MPR), the nation's highest legislative body, in Jakarta on Monday and organisers have said that one item on the agenda would be discussion on amendments to the constitution.

Indonesia, one of the world's largest Muslim-populated nations, has since its birth in 1945 guaranteed the freedom to choose and practice a religion.

But since the government of former president Suharto, who rose to power in 1967, Jakarta has recognised only five major religions - Islam, Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Buddhism and Hinduism.

Wildfires rage in 11 western US states

LOS ANGELES, Aug 5: Wildfires continued to rip through 11 western US states Saturday as US firefighting crews, boosted by international and military reinforcements, fought to tame the worst blazes seen in decades, reports AFP.

"Overnight we held our own," said Michelle Barrett, a spokeswoman for the National Interagency Fire Centre (NIFC).

"Nothing terrible happened overnight but we still have an uphill battle in front of us," she said early Saturday.

"It's a little better than what we have had in the last few days," she said.

Crews were working Saturday to tame the 62 wildfires burning in 11 western states, which have already seared a total of 302,341

hectares.

On Saturday, new large fires were reported in the Northern Rockies, Eastern Great Basin, Western Great Basin, Rocky Mountain and Northwest Areas, the NIFC said.

For the year, fires have burned a total of 1.6 million hectares across the country, the NIFC said.

The western fires have erupted in Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wyoming -- usually getting started when lightning has struck extremely dry vegetation.

The National Interagency Coordination Centre mobilised aircraft and crews such as the 3rd Battalion 5th Marines, who



An Indian army officer helps a young child and his mother onto a boat in a flooded area of Bihapara in Assam on Saturday. Monsoon downpours have caused flash floods in Assam which have left at least 40 people dead and over 1.5 million homeless. —AFP photo

Pak rival parties join opposition meeting

LAHORE, Pakistan, Aug 6: Bitter rivals -- the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) and the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) -- joined an opposition front meeting here today to condemn the military-led government, party sources said, reports AFP.

The All Parties Conference meeting marked the first time the PML and the PPP, led by former prime ministers Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto respectively, have cooperated in opposition since October's coup.

The conference was organised to mount pressure on the military government under General Pervez Musharraf and demand an early return to civilian rule.

Pakistan's supreme court has validated the coup in October last year and given Musharraf until October 12, 2002, to hold general elections.

Musharraf drew fire from

politicians Friday for declaring that two-time prime ministers Benazir and Sharif -- both convicted of corruption -- had no place in politics.

Benazir, who currently lives in exile in London, ruled from 1988 to 1990 and was succeeded by Sharif. She was again elected in 1993 but was sacked in 1996 leading to elections in which Sharif retook power.

Sharif was ousted by Musharraf in October and is now serving several prison terms for hijacking, terrorism and corruption.

Protesters threw vegetables and staged a mock funeral of Grand Democratic Alliance (GDA) convener Nawabzada Nasarullah Khan outside the meeting.

The GDA umbrella group of opposition parties organised the meeting.

First woman dist governor in Iran

TEHRAN, Aug 6: A woman has been appointed a district governor for the first time since the 1979 Islamic revolution, the officials Islamic Republic News Agency reported Saturday, says AP.

Interior Minister Abdolvahed Mousavi Lari appointed Rahmat Ruhani Sarvestani as governor of Sarvestan, a district near Shiraz, the capital of the southern Fars province.

The status of women in Iran has improved since the election of reformist President Mohammad Khatami in 1997. He appointed a woman as one of his vice presidents.

Women can hold public office in Iran, a role that is barred to them in many predominantly Muslim states.

About 58 per cent of first-year students at Iranian universities were women in 1999, according to official figures.



Swedish members of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon deploy at the Lebanese-Israeli border on Saturday, finally completing the mission the force was tasked with 22 years ago. Some 400 UN troops set up 13 new positions along the 82-km border. —AFP photo

Preparation for declaration of Palestinian state

GAZA CITY, Aug 6: The Palestinian Authority began preparing diplomats Saturday for the declaration of a state, perhaps unilaterally, and the possibility of a resulting escalation of tensions with Israel, reports AP.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's Cabinet insisted in a meeting Friday that the declaration will be made Sept 13 even if a final peace accord with Israel is not reached in time.

The Cabinet secretary-general, Ahmed Abdel Rahman, told 22 diplomats in the opening of a two-week course in Gaza Saturday that they may be required to act under difficult circumstances if the declaration is made without Israeli approval.

Israel has warned that it might annex parts of the West Bank and Gaza Strip if the Palestinians make a unilateral declaration, a move that could deteriorate into violence.

"This course is part of a plan of the PLO and the Palestinian Authority to prepare for the establishment of a Palestinian

state," Rahman told the veteran diplomats at the training session.

The emissaries will also be called on the gain support from countries like the United States, Canada and western European nations who have not yet given their final approval for a declaration.

"Of course our diplomats will be ready for any emergency situation," Ahmed Soubeih, general director of the diplomatic training center, said after the training. "We don't expect any confrontation. We hope that the Israelis will be the first to recognise our state."

Arafat committed to declare a state on Sept 13 after Israel and the Palestinians agreed that they would complete the peace process by the deadline. Arafat aides had suggested before the Cabinet meeting Friday that the declaration could be put off until November.

"We will be ready to carry the burden of the next phase," Haela Abu Hasira, who will serve as ambassador in Gabon, told Israeli Channel Two TV of the

uncertainty of the outcome of the declaration of statehood. She did not elaborate.

The Palestinian Authority has 59 embassies fully operating and about 27 delegations and missions located around the world, Soubeih said.

Arafat traveled to Turkey Saturday to meet leaders there as part of his campaign to win international approval for a declaration.

The United States supports the establishment of a Palestinian state but only as a result of the peace process. The negotiations faltered last month when a summit brokered by US President Bill Clinton at Camp David between Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak failed.

When asked if a Palestinian ambassador would open an embassy in Tel Aviv in the near future, Abdel Rahman replied: "That's a simple mission. It will happen when Israel recognises the declaration of Palestinian state."

BRIEFLY



Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat (L) shakes hands with Turkish Prime Minister Bulent Ecevit during their meeting on Saturday in Ankara. Arafat arrived in Ankara Saturday in a bid to secure Turkey's support for the Palestinian stance in the peace process with Israel, Turkey's main ally in the region. —AFP photo

Tutu gets freedom award

Desmond Tutu, who led in the fight against apartheid in South Africa, has received the second International Freedom Conductor Award. AP reports from Covington, Kentucky.

"When you stand out in a crowd, it is because you stand on the shoulders of others," Tutu said Saturday after accepting the award. Tutu won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for his efforts to end the racial separation policies of the former South African government.

The award is given by the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. The award recognises people who reflect the spirit of the "conductors" of the Underground Railroad, a network that helped slaves in the southern United States escape to freedom in the North.

Recipients of the award are contemporary individuals who exemplify the ideas of freedom and human rights worldwide, center officials said.

Vietnamese FM in DPRK

Vietnam's Foreign Minister Nguyen Dy Nien has held talks with North Korean officials to forge a new era of friendship between the two socialist allies, AFP reports from Seoul.

Nien met his north Korean counterpart, Paek Nam-Sun, "in a friendly atmosphere" Saturday on the first day of a three-day visit, the North's official Korean Central News Agency said in a dispatch. Nien's trip represents North Korea's broader diplomatic drive following its celebrated participation in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in Bangkok last month.