

India set to buy advanced jet trainers from UK aerospace

NEW DELHI, Aug 8: India is in the final stage of negotiations to buy Hawk advanced jet trainers from British Aerospace, India's defense minister said Monday, two days after the air force lost its 55th MiG fighter jet in three years, reports AP.

"All technical and other aspects of the advanced jet trainer purchase have been gone into and negotiations on prices should be finalised soon," George Fernandes told the private Star News channel.

Between 30 and 45 Hawk-100 trainers worth 18 billion rupees (dls 429 million) would be purchased, Press Trust of India quoted unnamed air force sources as saying. Assembly lines would also be set up in the southern city of Bangalore by the state-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited to manufacture the trainers, PTI reported.

The Indian Air Force has been beset by frequent flying accidents.

Fernandes told Parliament last month that the air force had lost 54 Soviet-made MiGs, four other aircraft and 21 pilots in the past three years. Another crash took place Saturday, when a MiG-21 jet crashed after takeoff at New Delhi's international airport, killing its pilot.

The IAF has nearly 800 jet fighters, more than half of which were built by the Soviet Union in the 1950s. It also has in its fleet the French Mirage and British Jaguar fighter aircraft.

Last September, a government committee recommended changes in training, design, procedures and organisational structure in response to the high number of accidents. Trained in old aircraft, pilots are often expected to immediately adapt to flying the much faster MiG-21.

Iran authorities close major reformist paper

TEHRAN, Aug 8: Iran's courts today ordered the closure of the Bahar daily, a reformist newspaper close to President Mohammad Khatami, sources at the paper told AFP.

They said the ban on Bahar, the last surviving reformist paper after a widespread crackdown on the press, was imposed after numerous complaints, in particular over Tuesday's edition of the daily.

Tuesday's paper carried a statement attributed to Khatami's brother Mohammad-Reza saying the order by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to block any liberalisation of the press code was a "plot against parliament."

Khamenei on Sunday issued a shock decree forbidding parliament from debating a motion to liberalise press restrictions imposed by the previous conservative-led legislature during its final days in office.

Britain summons Belgrade's top diplomat

LONDON, Aug 8: The British Foreign Office summoned Belgrade's top diplomat here today to demand access to two British policemen arrested in Montenegro on suspicion of spying and get explanations over their detention, reports AFP.

The pair were transferred to the Yugoslav capital Belgrade on Tuesday where a military court will decide whether the two would be charged with spying and planning terrorist attacks.

A Foreign Office spokeswoman said minister of state Keith Vaz would use the meeting with Rade Drobac, the senior Yugoslav diplomat in London, to ask on what basis the two men would be charged, if at all.

The minister will also press for British consular staff to be given immediate access to the pair, the spokeswoman told AFP.

The Yugoslav authorities are under obligation to officially inform us. The whole point is that we have not been informed and that is what the minister will be discussing," she said.

Fund embezzlement Former mayor convicted in China

BEIJING, Aug 8: A former mayor of a city in eastern China has been convicted of embezzling funds from a state-owned company and accepting hundreds of thousands of dollars in bribes, local media said Monday, reports AFP.

A court in the eastern province of Anhui recently convicted 67-year-old Zhou Yude, who was mayor of Ma'anshan city in Anhui for 13 years until 1993, the official Xinhua news agency said.

He embezzled more than 5.5 million Hong Kong dollars (700,000 US\$) of funds and took 500,000 Hong Kong dollars of bribes from 1993 to 1996 while he was chairman of a large state-controlled enterprise, the Hong Kong Huangshan Company, Xinhua said.

Zhou was arrested in April 1999 charged with economic crimes. He has protested his innocence.

Lanka postpones vote on new constitution

COLOMBO, Aug 8: The government postponed a vote on a new constitution aimed at ending the 17-year civil war today, saying 10 opposition members had been abducted from the country to prevent them from voting for the draft, reports AP.

"There is no conducive atmosphere for the vote, so we have decided to postpone it indefinitely," Labour Minister Johan Seneviratne announced in Parliament after debate was halted following a meeting of all party leaders.

"Our information is that the 10 members of Parliament have been abducted and flown out of the country to prevent them from voting," Seneviratne said.

The new constitution, which would give greater rights to the country's Tamil minority and autonomy in the regions where they predominate, was seen as a possible solution to the 17-year

Before the startling disclosure was made, the government was coming under increasing pressure to dump the new constitution amid protests by nationalist Sinhalese groups and senior Buddhist monks, who argued

against granting concessions to the Tamil minority and say autonomy will lead to a disintegration of the country.

A Buddhist monk said Monday night he would fast unto death to protest the new constitution. The majority Sinhalese are mostly Buddhists, and monks have great influence in Sri Lanka.

The draft constitution, introduced last Thursday, was the first case of a Sri Lankan government attempting to placate the Tamil minority to sap support from the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

The guerrilla group has fought for independence for Tamil areas in a war that has cost more than 62,000 lives and has rejected the constitution, saying it will accept only independence.

Kumaratunga was believed to be 12 votes short of the 150 she needed to pass the constitution. Her own party has only 114 members, but she had the backing of some moderate Tamil political parties.

Indonesia to support Palestinian statehood

JAKARTA, Aug 8: Indonesia would support the Palestinian leadership if it unilaterally declares independence next month, but would rather see further negotiations for a peace agreement with Israel, Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab said Tuesday, reports AP.

At a summit at Camp David last month, Israel and the Palestinians failed to reach a final deal that would resolve their 52-year-old conflict.

The US-sponsored talks collapsed over the future status of Jerusalem, which both sides claim as their capital.

US negotiators are expected to resume talks with the two sides later this month in a bid to determine if they are ready for another round of formal talks.

Meanwhile, Palestinian leaders say they are determined to declare statehood on Sept 13, the deadline for completing a peace agreement.

Suharto formally charged with corruption

JAKARTA, Aug 8: Indonesian prosecutors formally filed charges of corruption against ex-President Suharto on Tuesday and said that if the former dictator is found guilty he may spend the rest of his life behind bars, reports AP.

State attorney Umbu Laga Lozara told journalists after lodging 3,500 pages of case documents with the South Jakarta District Court, that the man who ruled Indonesia for 32 years with an iron fist will be prosecuted for embezzling the equivalent of about dls 570 million of state funds.

"Suharto has been charged with corruption," he said as dozens of police officers stood guard around the courthouse. "If he is found guilty, he can be imprisoned for 20 years or life."

But Indonesia's current President Abdurrahman Wahid has offered to pardon Suharto if he returns the stolen money.

The South Jakarta District court chief judge Lalu Mariyun said the trial will start before the end of August.

He said five judges will preside over the trial that will see 130 witnesses called. Suharto prosecuted by a team of eight state attorneys.



An Indian soldier searches a civilian's vehicle as security is stepped up in Srinagar, the capital of Indian Kashmir, yesterday. The Hizbul Mujahideen militant group in Pakistan has threatened armed conflict unless the Pakistani government is included in peace talks over Kashmir between the Indian government and Muslim militant groups who have been waging a separatist campaign in the Himalayan state since 1989.

Floods in India, Bhutan leave 173 dead

the past four days have also claimed more than 50 lives and left hundreds homeless in Bhutan, a government minister said Tuesday.

"At least 40 people have been washed away in flash floods at Pasakha in southern Bhutan, while some bodies may have drifted to the Indian side in West Bengal," Bhutan Trade Minister Lympo Khandu Wangchuk told AFP by phone from Phuntsholing, 180 kilometers south of Bhutan's capital Thimphu.

Denying Indian press reports that up to 180 bodies had been recovered, Wangchuk said most of the dead were labourers engaged in road construction, who had been camping alongside the river Varsha in Pasakha, east of Phuntsholing.

Heavy rains since Thursday triggered mudslides in many parts of central and southern Bhutan, leading to severe disruption of road links in the landlocked kingdom.

"We are trying our best to restore the communication network," said Wangchuk, who admitted that relief workers had been unable to reach hundreds of homeless villagers.

The flooding, triggered by heavy rains that caused the mighty Brahmaputra river and its tributaries to burst their banks, has killed 26 people in the eastern state of Bihar, 10 in neighbouring West Bengal and seven in Arunachal Pradesh.

Flash floods and landslides in

PML hints at cooperation with PPP in ousting army

KARACHI, Aug 8: Ousted Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Pakistan Muslim League (PML) yesterday hinted at cooperation with Benazir Bhutto's Pakistan People's Party (PPP) in opposition to the military regime, reports AFP.

Central PML leader Raja Zafarul Haq said he was looking forward to more meetings like one Sunday when the PML and the PPP cooperated in opposition for the first time.

Leading figures from the rival parties met in the eastern city of Lahore during the All Parties Conference (APC) attended by about 40 political groups allied against the military.

"I am happy to meet those leaders from the PPP with whom we have worked in the suspended parliament and I am looking forward for more such meetings," Zafarul Haq told AFP.

"It was a major development

because after a very long time political leaders have met and reached some kind of consensus for joint efforts to bring the country out of this political crisis."

It was the biggest political meeting in Pakistan since General Pervez Musharraf toppled Sharif in a coup in October.

A joint APC declaration released late Sunday night called for general elections and rejected Musharraf's ambitious plans to devolve power to local and district assemblies.

Zafarul Haq said politicians had to cooperate against the military takeover but stopped short of saying the PML and the PPP, both former ruling parties, were forming an alliance.

"We are in favour of more regular meetings among the political leaders so that we can understand each other and resolve our differences," he said.



--AFP photo

Fiji rebels kill soldier, policeman

der," he told Reuters.

"We believe it is George Speight supporters with weapons who are moving around in that area," Tarakini said.

The security men were investigating reports of shots being fired at an ethnic Indian family from a van full of armed men in a rural area when the attack took place, Tarakini said.

Two soldiers were wounded, one of them seriously, by the gunmen, who were believed to be supporters of jailed coup leader George Speight, said military spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Filipo Tarakini.

An army officer and a police corporal, an ethnic Indian, were hit in an initial volley of shots from the rebels. The soldier died of a second gunshot received some time later, Tarakini said.

Speight triggered Fiji's festering crisis when he stormed parliament on May 19 in the name of indigenous Fijian rights, taking ethnic Indian prime minister Mahendra Chaudhry and most of his cabinet hostage for 56 days.

While Tarakini doubted the

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