

Indian troops resume offensive against Hizbul Mujahideen

JAMMU, India, Aug 10: Indian security forces have resumed offensive operations against the Hizbul Mujahideen, a frontline Kashmiri militant group which called off a unilateral ceasefire earlier this week, a senior police official said, reports Reuters.

"Yes, we have a launched our operations against the Hizbul Mujahideen following their announcement of calling off the ceasefire," Inspector General of Police Ashok Bhan told Reuters late yesterday. "They will be treated like any other outfit now."

He did not specify what kind of action was being taken.

Nine killed in grenade attack in Kashmir

SRINAGAR, India, Aug 10: A combined grenade and landmine attack by suspected Muslim militants killed at least nine people in the Kashmiri summer capital Srinagar today, police officials said, reports AFP.

The attack, which occurred just after midday (1230 BST) near a branch of the State Bank of India in central Srinagar, was followed by a heavy exchange of fire between militants and the security forces.

A senior police official said at least nine people had been killed, most of them security personnel.

One journalist was also killed.

According to eyewitnesses, the militants initially launched a grenade attack in the area.

Some 15 minutes later, when security reinforcements and journalists had rushed to the area, a large explosive device, believed to be a landmine, was triggered, causing most of the casualties.

The attack came just two days after the main Kashmiri militant group, Hizbul Mujahideen, called off a ceasefire in the region.

Suharto under city arrest

JAKARTA, Aug 10: An Indonesian court on Wednesday put former president Suharto under city arrest ahead of his trial on charges of corruption, reports AFP.

The move freed the former strongman from the more-confining house arrest he had been under since May 29 as state investigators questioned him, the Detik.com online news service said. Suharto was first placed under city arrest in April, before the house arrest order came into force.

The latest decree was signed by Lalu Mariyun, the head of the South Jakarta district court where Suharto will stand trial, possibly before the end of the month.

It is aimed at facilitating the trial process, after prosecutors on Tuesday formally filed corruption charges against Suharto.

The head of the panel of judges in the case said the trial of the former dictator could open before the end of August.

Suharto, now 79 and in failing health, is charged with stealing \$71 million dollars from the state during his iron-fisted 32-year rule.

West Bengal heading towards president's rule: Mamata

CHAMAITALA (WB), Aug 10: Railway Minister and Trinamool Congress chairperson Mamata Banerjee today accused the CPI (M) of playing with fire and said West Bengal was heading towards President's rule, reports PTI.

They (CPI-M) are playing with fire and have even employed known dacoits to dampen the growing popularity of the Trinamool Congress, Banerjee said at a well-attended party rally here in Midnapore district.

In a fiery speech, Banerjee exhorted her party supporters to have faith in her and said I know the CPI (M) has called a meeting here on August 11 to foment further trouble so I have to come back to Gurbeta after three or four days.

Coming a new slogan CPI (M) Quit Bengal, she said Jyoti Basu, you came to power when the state was under President's rule. Similarly, you will be voted out of power in next year's election which will be held under President's rule.

Lankan defence budget enhanced

COLONBO, Aug 10: Parliament has approved an additional 28 billion rupees (\$358 million) in defence spending this year for the military campaign against Tamil Tiger rebels, a government minister said Thursday, reports AP.

On Wednesday, Defence Minister Anuruddha Ratwatte told Parliament that the government needed more money to pay for the fighter aircraft, weapons and ammunition which it had bought in the past four months to stall a rebel advance on northern Jaffna.

The lawmakers approved the additional spending after a brief debate.

During the ceasefire, Indian forces said they had halted their offensive against Hizbul Mujahideen, whose cadres account for about half the militants active in Jammu and Kashmir.

The Hizbul Mujahideen, citing New Delhi's refusal to agree to tripartite talks with both Kashmiris and Pakistan, called off its 15-day-old unilateral ceasefire on Tuesday and ordered its fighters back into action against Indian troops.

Unprecedented talks had been held a few days earlier between Indian officials and commanders of the Hizbul Mujahideen in Srinagar, the summer capital of India's only Muslim-majority state, to thrash out the modalities of the ceasefire.

However, he said India was ready to meet fresh violence in kind. "If anyone should attack us we'll back," he said.

India and Pakistan accused each other of derailing the peace process after Hizbul Mujahideen ended its truce, which had raised hopes for peace in the troubled Himalayan region.

New Delhi had said it was ready for unconditional talks with Hizbul Mujahideen but had ruled out Pakistani participation in the process. India accuses Pakistan of stoking the decade-old rebellion in Kashmir, a charge Islamabad denies.

The dialogue process was then halted in its tracks by the outfit's decision to call off its truce.

Indian Defence Minister George Fernandes said today that New Delhi was leaving the door open to further talks with Hizbul Mujahideen.

"It all depends on them," he told Reuters on the sidelines of a business conference. "If they are prepared to talk we are also prepared. Yes, yes."



-- AFP photo

Wahid delegates power to Megawati

JAKARTA, Aug 10: Indonesia's President Abdurrahman Wahid bowed to intense pressure on Wednesday and pledged to hand responsibility for the day-to-day running of the government to his vice president, Megawati Sukarnoputri, reports AFP.

"I will charge the vice president with executing the daily technical tasks, drawing up the cabinet working agenda and to establish the focus and priority of the government," Wahid told the national assembly.

"The president will deal with the macro aspects and strategic concerns. The vice president will deal with day-to-day policy and coordination," he told reporters.

"But the important thing is that the president remains the sole person responsible for everything," he said.

In a speech read out by cabinet secretary Marsilam Simanjuntak, Wahid said Megawati, 54, the daughter of the country's founding president Sukarno, would be accountable to the president for the implementation of the tasks she carried out.

That delegation of powers, he said, was within the constitutional framework of the president.

The 60-year-old Wahid made

the announcement in reply to sharp criticism by the MPR members, who flayed him relentlessly Tuesday for letting the government drift, and accused him of failing to accelerate economic recovery.

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BRIEFLY



Iranian President Mohammad Khatami receives Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez at Saad-Abad palace in Tehran yesterday. The Venezuelan president is visiting OPEC nations to extend a personal invitation to a rare summit in Caracas. -- AFP photo

Chavez arrives in Iraq: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez arrived in Iraq Thursday, becoming the first head of state to visit the country since the 1991 Gulf War, AFP reports from Al-Munziriyah, Iraq.

Chavez arrived overland from Iran on the sixth leg of his high-profile and controversial tour of fellow OPEC nations to extend a personal invitation to a rare summit in Caracas next month. Iraqi Vice President Taha Yassin Ramadan and Oil Minister Amer Rashid were among the high-ranking welcome committee for Chavez at the border town of Al-Munziriyah, 190 km north-east of Baghdad, an AFP correspondent said.

Quake rocks Mexico: A strong earthquake rocked Mexico's Pacific coast Wednesday, sending frightened residents scrambling from their beds and into the streets, but doing little damage, AP reports from Mexico City.

The 6:42 am quake's offshore epicentre was 30 miles from Lazaro Cardenas, a port about 340 kilometers southwest of Mexico City. The quake, which toppled bookshelves and scattered goods from supermarket shelves, was followed by two aftershocks. It swayed buildings in Mexico City and led officials to close the capital's airport for 10 minutes as a precaution, but no significant damage was reported.

It was the third attack attributed to ETA since Tuesday, as a bloody trail of bombings and shootings have left dead and injured from the capital Madrid to the heart of the separatist movement in the Basque country.

Master sergeant Francisco Casanova Vicente, 47 and the father of two children, was shot at three times in his car by a masked gunman in the Berriozar neighbourhood of Pamplona at about 3:20 p.m. (1920 BST). He died from two shots to the head.

The defence ministry said it believed ETA carried out the attack, which came just a few hours after Spain's top anti-terrorist officials, led by Interior Minister Jaime Mayor Oreja, held an urgent meeting to analyse 24 hours of terrorist bloodshed across the country.

Spain "should not contaminate itself with the desperation which the terrorist group ETA suffers from," Oreja said.

ETA's aim was to make Spain ungovernable, he added, calling on Spaniards to face up to the wave of violence with "democratic resistance".

The soldier's death brought the toll from the mayhem that began Monday night to six dead and eleven wounded.

Children as young as three and five were caught up in the violence, which appears to mark another deadly chapter in ETA's heightened campaign since it ended a self-imposed 14-month ceasefire in December.

But the government has vowed to stand firm, with Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar sending a defiant message to ETA on Tuesday.

This "brutal, terrible and savage campaign ... will not make us give in and we must fight harder than ever," he said in a broadcast to the nation.

He said the destruction had spread Wednesday to 396,800 hectares (992,000 acres), a 13 per cent increase over the area on fire

Koreas to reopen border liaison offices Monday

SEOUL, Aug 10: North and South Korea will reopen their liaison offices at the truce village of Panmunjom, a point of contact on the heavily fortified inter-Korean border, on Monday, reports AFP.

The South and the North agreed to reopen their liaison offices on Monday and exchanged lists of staff members of the offices. South Korea's ministry of unification said in a statement on Wednesday.

The two Koreas agreed to revive the liaison offices after a six-year standstill when their ministers met here last week to discuss ways to keep up the momentum of reconciliation brought on by a landmark inter-Korean summit in June.

The two Koreas agreed to revive

New law bars Sharif, Benazir from leading their parties

ISLAMABAD, Aug 10: Former Pakistani prime ministers Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto are debarred from leading their political parties under a new law issued by the military regime Wednesday, reports AFP.

The law amends a 1962 Political Parties Act so that any person who has been disqualified from being elected to parliament or has been convicted of a criminal offence cannot hold any office in a political party.

The amendment, which has been made through an ordinance signed by President Muhammad Rafiq Tarar and released by the official Associated Press of Pakistan, takes effect immediately.

The law automatically debars Sharif, who is president of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML), and Benazir, who heads the Pakistan People's Party (PPP), from their political positions, legal sources said.

Sharif, ousted by the military

in a coup in October last year, was convicted on charges of hijacking and terrorism in April and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Benazir was convicted of corruption in absentia in 1998 during Sharif's government and has been living in London in self-imposed exile.

Law Minister Aziz A. Munshi asserted that the law was not

directed against any particular parties or politicians.

It is a measure to prevent criminalisation of politics," Munshi said on state television.

He said it was "highly improper" that politics should be guided by those who have been disqualified or convicted on criminal charges.

Military ruler General Pervez Musharraf said last week the two former prime ministers have "no place" in Pakistani politics.

Sharif's imprisonment has sparked demands within the PML for election of a new leader of the party, but loyalists of the deposed prime minister have so far blocked such a move.

Floods leave 5 million homeless in India

GUWAHATI, India, Aug 10: At least five million people have now been rendered homeless in the eastern Indian states of Assam, Bihar and West Bengal following devastating floods, government officials said today, reports AFP.

In the worst-hit Indian state of Assam, tens of thousands of stranded villagers had been without food or medical supplies for nearly a week.

"Almost four million people have been left homeless. They are marooned on highways and embankments. Some are sleeping in the open with nothing but the sky over their heads," said Ronojit Phukan, a state flood control official.

We are battling to provide food, drinking water, clothes and medicines to villagers who have lost their homes overnight. We are handing out plastic sheets so that people can protect themselves against the rain," Phukan added.

Meanwhile, mudslides on Thursday cut off Kohima, the state capital of the adjoining mountainous state of Nagaland from the rest of India.

"There have been landslides at six places in Nagaland where several concrete buildings have caved in. Surface communication has also snapped," Nagaland Government Spokesman Keto Sema told AFP by telephone from Kohima.

Nearly 1.5 million people, spread over hundreds of villages in northern Bihar, had been affected by the floods, which had damaged crops and public property worth several million rupees, said a government official.

The air force and army had carried out rescue operations in the state with helicopters and motor boats, he added.

This week, 29 people died in the eastern state of Bihar, 10 in neighbouring West Bengal and seven in Arunachal Pradesh.

China helped Pak missile programme, says CIA

WASHINGTON, Aug 10: China increased assistance to Pakistan's ballistic missile programme, while Russia provided "substantial" missile-related technology to Iran in the second half of 1999, an unclassified CIA report to Congress said yesterday, reports Reuters.

"Chinese entities provided increased assistance to Pakistan's ballistic missile programme during the second half of 1999," the semiannual report on proliferation activities said.

North Korea also helped Pakistan in the missile area, and the South Asian country acquired nuclear-related equipment and materials from sources in Western Europe, the report said.

Chinese firms provided mis-

ses, "the missile issues remain unresolved," Boucher told a regular media briefing.

"We have had discussions

many times with the government of China about our concerns of

missiles and weapons of mass

destruction and export activities

of Chinese entities," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said.

"We have raised with senior

Chinese officials on numerous