

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.

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.

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."

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

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 Thursday.

The two Koreas agreed to revive the liaison offices after a six-year hiatus 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.

New law bars Sharif, Benazir from leading their parties

ISLAMABAD, Aug 10: Former Pakistani prime ministers Nawaz Sharif and Benazir Bhutto are barred 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.

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 Detikcom 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 Maryun, 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 571 million dollars from the state during his iron-fisted 32-year rule.

West Bengal heading towards president's rule: Mamata

CHAMKAITALA (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 daocots 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 Garbeta after three or four days.

Coining 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

COLOMBO, 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.



A file photo dated August 1 shows Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid (L) chatting with Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri after their arrival in Yogyakarta for a high-level meeting. President Wahid promised on Wednesday to hand over responsibility for the day-to-day running of the government to Megawati, adding that she will be accountable to him for the implementation of tasks she carries out.

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 establishing the focus and priority of the government," Wahid told the national assembly.

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 presiden-

tial system.

Immediately after the announcement Defence Minister Juwono Sudarsono expressed optimism at the power sharing plan.

"I think there is going to be a clear understanding about the mechanism between the two," he said.

"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."

The minister was cautious however when asked if he had confidence in Megawati's abilities.

"I think she will be up to it ... it remains to be seen," he said.

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.

Wahid's leadership and management style during the first nine months of his five-year term as Indonesia's first democratically-elected president have been the target of rising criticism.

The major factions in the assembly spent the last two days lobbying for a transfer of authority to Megawati, saying it was the only way Wahid would be given a "second chance."

A leader of the Golkar faction in the assembly, Slamet Yusuf Effendi, told AFP that Megawati's Indonesian Democratic Party for Struggle (PDI-P), and key Muslim factions had been lobbying for the power sharing arrangement.

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.

Spanish soldier shot dead

MADRID, Aug 10: A Spanish soldier was shot dead Wednesday amid a surge of attacks attributed to the separatist Basque group ETA which have left two dead in as many days, despite government pledges not to yield to the violence, reports AFP.

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.

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.

Assam Flood Control Minister Promode Gogoi told AFP that flooding, triggered by rains on Wednesday, had caused the Brahmaputra river and its tributaries to burst their banks at several new places, swamping nearby land.

"An estimated 300,000 hectares of area under paddy cultivation has been totally damaged in the floods which is a heavy loss to the state and people," said Gogoi.

At least 54 specially-constructed flood-control embankments were breached by the force of the floods in Assam this year.

Gogoi told AFP that a "lack of resources" had hampered relief and rescue work in Assam, where the death toll had reached 90 --

many of them victims of water-borne disease.

Patrick Fuller, Information officer with the International Federation of the Red Cross in New Delhi, said the situation in Assam remained particularly worrying.

"The monsoon is far from over, and the real danger is if we see more flash floods like the ones that came down from Bhutan recently, as these are what cause the most displacement of population," Fuller said.

He added the longer people remained marooned on highways without access to clean drinking water, the higher the risk of water-borne disease because people would have no choice but to drink contaminated water.

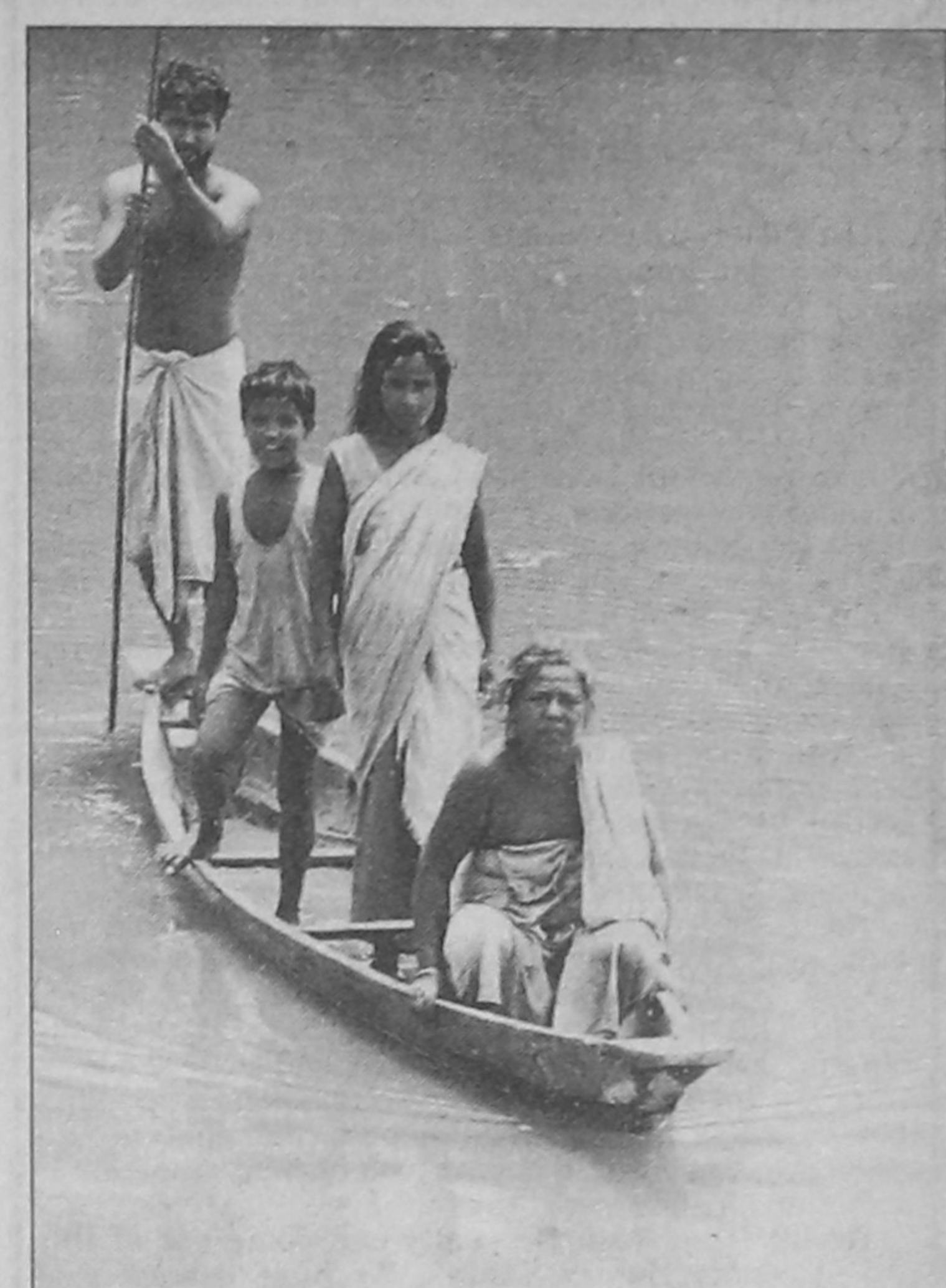
Meanwhile, mudslides on Thursday cut off Kohima, the state capital of the adjoining mountainous state of Nagaland from the rest of India.

"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 motorboats, he added.

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



Inhabitants of flood-affected Nalbari in India's northeastern state of Assam make their way along flood waters in search of safe and dry places on Wednesday, after their homes were submerged following flash floods. Monsoon downpours have caused floods in Assam which have left at least 35 people dead and over 1.5 million homeless. --AFP photo

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-

sile-related items an help to Iran, North Korea and Libya, the report said.

"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 occasions our concerns about reports that Chinese entities have provided assistance to missile programmes in Pakistan," he said.

The United States resumed nonproliferation talks with China in July and while there was prog-

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

House of Representatives Intelligence Committee Chairman Porter Goss, a Florida Republican, accused the Clinton administration of playing down the proliferation problem because it wants to improve relations with China and North Korea.

"What the bad news is for the administration is they've rose-colour glassed this as usual and I think they've been caught out at it by this report," Goss said. The administration says China is improving its proliferation record and "I don't think there is any evidence to support that," he said.

Texas executes two convicts

AUSTIN, Texas, Aug 10: A man said to have the mental capacity of a 12-year-old was one of two prisoners executed Wednesday night in the Texas death chamber, marking the first multiple execution here in three years, reports AFP.

Oliver David Cruz, 33, was put to death by lethal injection for the 1988 rape and murder of Air Force linguist Kelly Elizabeth Donovan. In his final statement, Cruz apologised to the family of his victim, saying he hoped they could "forgive me for what I did."

Psychology tests showed Cruz was mildly retarded and illiterate, with an IQ as low as 63 in one exam, prompting widespread calls for clemency and renewed attempts to ban the execution of mentally impaired prisoners.

11 killed as two US planes collide

BURLINGTON TOWNSHIP, New Jersey, Aug 10: Two small planes collided over a neighbourhood in southeast New Jersey, killing at least 11 people and sending part of the wreckage plunging onto a house, setting it on fire, reports AP.

No injuries were reported on the ground.

At least eight of those killed were aboard a Piper Navajo that took off from Lakehurst Naval Air Engineering Station, said Ariene Salac, spokesman for the Federal Aviation Administration. A ninth body was discovered among the plane's wreckage Wednesday afternoon.

Investigators at the crash site found a flight manifest from the shuttle that listed nine people on board, said State Police Maj. Barry Roberson.

Lakehurst spokesman Lawrence Lyford said he did not know the identities of any of the occupants.



Police try to disperse protesters on Wednesday during a demonstration against the killing of Jose Maria Korta in San Sebastian. More than 100 people clashed with a group of ETA supporters during the rally. Mass silent protests took place throughout Spain in protest following the recent wave of violence by the Basque separatist group ETA, in which five people died in 24 hours. --AFP photo

Fires blazing across western US get worse

LOS ANGELES, Aug 10: The roaring fires engulfing huge stretches of land in 12 western states Wednesday multiplied and spread, laying waste to dozens of houses and apartment buildings and forcing hundreds of people to evacuate, reports AFP.

Emergency reinforcements from the US military and from Canada and Mexico had joined exhausted US firefighting crews but could not stop the fires from multiplying to 70 separate blazes, up from 66 the day before, said spokesman Ed Waldapfel of the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC).

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

Hundreds of people were evacuated from parts of the Rocky Mountain range in Montana, where some 50 houses and 20 apartment buildings were burned to the ground.

Though six fires were successfully extinguished since Tuesday, 10 new ones had broken out in Wyoming, Oregon, Washington, Montana, Idaho and Utah.

But he sought to focus on the positive accomplishments of the approximately 20,000 firefighters, a thousand of them military personnel, who have been working with little rest for many days running, often in highly dangerous conditions.

He said 75 large fires had been extinguished over the past eight

days, and noted that for every large fire brought under control, hundreds of smaller ones had been put out too.

Ongoing hot weather and high winds were expected to continue making the exhausted crews' work hard. NIFC spokeswoman Mary Apple noted that crew members were working 14 days straight but were then required by law to take two days off.

In some Montana communities, grateful residents brought cakes to the firefighters to show support, Apple said.

And other forms of support will arrive soon: 400 professional Canadian firefighters are expected in coming days, and a 500-strong US Army battalion that has undergone a crash

course in firefighting is to come from Fort Hood, Texas, to the scenes of the fires this weekend.

Already two Army battalions are involved in the firefighting, a total of some 1,000 soldiers, about half of them Marines.

Tuesday, President Bill Clinton came to review the state of struggle, surveyed the forests on fire in Idaho, and promised to unlock 150 million dollars in federal aid.

"That money will help. It is a great help. Funds for firefighting in one agency are almost depleted," said Apple.

Since the beginning of this year, the fires have destroyed some 1.7 billion hectares -- nearly double the area that burns on average in the same period each year.