

40 workers of Sharif's party arrested

KARACHI, Aug 11: Pakistani police today arrested dozens of activists of former prime minister Nawaz Sharif's party here ahead of its planned Independence Day public meeting, party sources said, reports AFP.

Ejaz Shafi, a central leader of the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) said at least 40 party workers had been arrested from different parts of Karachi.

But police said two local party leaders had been detained.

"We have detained two provincial vice presidents of PML, Nihal Hashmi and Tariq Khan, under the detention law for 30 days," a senior police official told AFP.

Kulsoom Nawaz, the wife of Sharif, is scheduled to address a public meeting at the PML office in Karachi on Pakistan's Independence Day on August 14.

"I strongly condemn the arrest of my party workers which indicates that the government may not allow our public meeting even inside the PML house," she said.

PML is the founder party of Pakistan and it is our right to celebrate Independence Day.

Political rallies and meetings at public places have been banned by the military-led government.

"We have no orders to stop the PML meeting inside the house but they will not be allowed to bring out any political rally," a police official said.

Palestinians have right to own state, says Putin

MOSCOW, Aug 11: Russian President Vladimir Putin told visiting Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat today that Moscow has always supported the creation of an independent Palestinian state, reports AFP.

"You know Russia's position, which was always highlighted by respect for Palestinian rights, including the right to an independent state," ITAR-TASS news agency quoted Putin as saying.

"We have been very carefully following the peace talks between you and the prime minister of Israel, under the patronage of Bill Clinton," Putin said in reference to last month's failed Camp David summit.

"This is a very difficult process," Putin said, speaking at the start of talks with Arafat.

The report made no mention of Putin reacting to Arafat's bid to declare an independent state on September 13, a deadline agreed by both sides for a comprehensive peace deal, even if no agreement with Israel is reached.

The United States and Israelis have strictly warned against such a move.

Moscow, whose ties between Israel have warmed in recent years, has refrained from offering the Palestinians unconditional support, warning of the risk to regional stability of such a unilateral move.

Putin's special representative for Middle East policy, Vasily Sredin, described as "understandable" Arafat's wish to establish a Palestinian state by next month.

But he said: "A Palestinian state must emerge from the talks. Only this can its strength and authority, as well as the stability and security of all countries of the Middle East be ensured," cited by the Interfax news agency.

Arafat, an old friend of the Soviet Union, is also seeking to secure a greater Russian role in the peace process to counterbalance Washington's dominance.

He was scheduled after his talks at the Kremlin with Putin to hold further discussions with Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov.

Diabetes risk higher in children of older mothers

PARIS, Aug 11: Children of older mothers face an increased risk of developing diabetes, according to a study published in Saturday's issue of the British Medical Journal (BMJ), reports AFP.

The risk increases by 25 per cent for each five-year rise in maternal age, meaning that a 45-year-old mother is more than three times likelier to have a child who develops type 1 diabetes than a woman who gives birth at the age of 20, it said.

The study was carried out among 1,375 families in the Oxford area, in England's southern Midlands, in which one child or more had diabetes.

It found that the risk was highest among first-born children of older parents. Subsequent children were progressively less at risk.

The risk was also linked to older fathers, although this was smaller than with older mothers.

Several other disorders are linked to advanced maternal age, most notably Down's Syndrome, which is caused by flawed genes.

However, there is no sign of genetic abnormalities in this case, say the researchers, from the University of Bristol.

They suggest that among older mothers, the uterus influences the development of the immune system on the foetus, "possibly increasing predisposition" to diabetes later in life.

Troops on alert in northeast India ahead of Independence Day

GUWAHATI, India, Aug 11: More than 50,000 federal troops today fanned out across India's troubled northeast to prevent further militant violence ahead of Independence Day next week, reports AFP.

Officials said the move followed two bomb attacks on trains earlier this month, which claimed 12 lives.

More than 12 separatist rebel groups in the seven northeastern states have already announced a general strike on August 15 to protest against New Delhi's alleged "colonial and repressive" rule over the tea- and oil-rich region.

"The northeast was never a part of India and so the question of celebrating the Independence Day does not arise," the rebel groups said in separate statements.

Army, police and paramilitary soldiers have intensified security in vulnerable areas.

Militants in the past have staged bomb attacks on oil installations passenger trains, and bridges in the run-up to Independence Day.

"Security forces are all geared up to thwart attempts by militants to attack vital installations," Assam state police chief P V Sumant told AFP.

"We are taking no chances and have put the troops on high alert." An army commander said on condition of anonymity: "We are fully prepared and have launched aerial surveillance with helicopters to guard important bridges, railway tracks, and oil installations."

Among the prominent groups which called for a boycott are the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), the National Socialist Council of Nagaland (NSCN), and the People's Liberation Army (PLA) of Manipur.

The ULFA is fighting to secure independence for oil-rich Assam. The NSCN is campaigning for an

independent tribal homeland carved out of the adjoining state of Nagaland, while the PLA is fighting for a similar cause in Manipur state.

Insurgency in the far-eastern region has claimed several thousand lives over the past 50 years. In Assam, tribal Bodo and ULFA militants blew up two trains, including a passenger train, killing 12 soldiers earlier this month.

"Reports suggest that small groups of armed militants have started penetrating into parts of Assam to create violence as part of their campaign to get publicity before August 15," a top intelligence official said.

Jurists face violence worldwide

GENEVA, Aug 11: Hundreds of lawyers and judges faced intimidation and violence worldwide, and at least 16 were killed between January 1999 and February 2000, a report published Friday by the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ) said, reports AFP.

"412 jurists suffered reprisals in 49 countries for carrying out their professional duties," the ICJ said.

The report covered only 49 countries as "some countries with strong totalitarian tendencies evade scrutiny" since not enough information is available.

"16 jurists were killed, 12 disappeared, and 79 were arrested, prosecuted, or even tortured," the ICJ said.

Over 300 other jurists were "physically attacked, verbally

threatened, or professionally sanctioned."

It lamented that harassment and persecution of judges and lawyers had not gone down since 1998. "The situation remains bleak."

The commission singled out Colombia, China, Malaysia, Egypt, Pakistan, and Russia as dangerous countries for jurists to work in.

Colombia, in the middle of a civil war, led the grim statistics, with eight lawyers and judges killed, 10 kidnapped and 14 intimidated.

Two internationally renowned lawyers were assassinated in Sri Lanka in 1999, amid a civil war.

"In Egypt, military courts continue to try lawyers, with little guarantee of due process," the ICJ said.

The report also accused governments in Belarus, Egypt, Tunisia, Sudan, Azerbaijan and Iran of persistently harassing jurists "through detention and unreasonable regulation of their activities."

"In Guatemala and Mexico, judicial authority has been severely undermined by an immunity for state officials, particularly the military."

"In Venezuela at least 230 judges were suspended during 1999, and some of them were dismissed on corruption allegations."

Russian authorities spend so little money on the justice system "that it undermines public confidence in the administration of justice and provides fertile ground for corruption."

Police in Russia regularly

harassed lawyers, while investigators denied access to legal council."

There was an exception to the rule in Russia, where former president Boris Yeltsin suspended state prosecutor Yuri Skutarov in April 1999 for his alleged involvement in a sex scandal.

Skutarov had been investigating corruption within the Kremlin itself.

The report said governments in Pakistan -- run by a military junta -- Peru, and Ecuador stacked the judiciary in their favor.

It said the independence of judges and lawyers was seriously threatened in Malaysia where "important political or economic issues are at stake."

Japan will lift sanctions if Pakistan signs CTBT

ISLAMABAD, Aug 11: Japan will lift its sanctions against Pakistan once it signs the treaty banning nuclear tests, Ambassador Sadaaki Numata said today ahead of a landmark visit here by Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, reports AFP.

He said Islamabad's reluctance to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) was the key obstacle to the resumption of normal bilateral ties and economic assistance.

"In the absence of actual signing of the CTBT it will remain very difficult for us to say there is absolutely no problem. That's a

political reality," the ambassador said.

Numata said he did not like the phrase "quid pro quo" but unless Pakistan signs the CTBT it would be "very difficult to persuade our public opinion that we can start (normal economic relations) as if nothing had happened."

Pakistan has been under international pressure to sign the treaty since it tested nuclear weapons in 1998 in response to tests by its rival India.

Military ruler General Pervez Musharraf has said he intends to sign the pact but only once he has achieved "national consensus" in

its favour.

Numata dismissed press reports in Japan this week that Mori, who is also visiting India, would partially lift the sanctions imposed on both countries after their tests.

Mori's tour of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh later this month will be the first since then prime minister Toshiki Kaifu visited the countries in 1990. He also will be the first Japanese prime minister to visit Nepal.

Hopes are high here that Mori's trip will unlock a flood of Japanese investment to reinvigorate the struggling economy.

UN soldier shot dead in E Timor

DILI, Aug 11: A Nepalese UN peacekeeper died late Thursday from a gunshot wound inflicted by a suspected anti-independence militia group in East Timor, a UN spokesman said. Three other Nepalese peacekeepers and a civilian were injured, reports AP.

Pvt Devi Ram Jishi, 25, was the second UN peacekeeper to die in fighting in East Timor, following the death of a New Zealand soldier who was shot in the head July 24 during a clash with militia who oppose East Timor's independence from Indonesia. He is survived by his wife.



Youth Chief of the National Justice Party, Mohamad Ezam Mohamad Nor (R) along with Keadilan party members pray outside the national mosque in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. Hundreds of supporters of jailed ex-deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim demonstrated outside the mosque against Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. --AFP photo

Landslides kill 36 in India

LUCKNOW, India, Aug 11: At least 36 people were killed and over 50 reported missing in the Himalayan foothills of northern India after a series of landslides triggered by heavy rains, officials said today, reports Reuters.

The landslides came after widespread monsoon flooding in the north and northeast of India. Bhutan and Nepal where some 300 are feared dead and several million have been washed out of their homes.

An official spokesman in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh said the Pithoragarh district, which is close to the border with Tibet, was the worst affected by landslides.

He said 26 people were killed

as houses collapsed under the weight of sliding mud and rocks, and five people died when they were carried away by the swollen Bhavra river in the neighbouring district of Nainital. Five people also died in landslides in Pithoragarh's Didihat area, he added.

Subash Kumar, a local divisional commissioner, said traffic on several main roads had been disrupted and relief operations were being carried out on a war footing.

Meanwhile, swollen rivers receded in the northeastern state of Assam, allowing authorities to step up relief efforts in remote villages which had been cut off for more than two weeks.

School violence hits record high in Japan

TOKYO, Aug 11: The number of school violence cases in Japan hit a record 31,055 for the year to last March, up 4.7 per cent from the previous year, a government report said today, reports AFP.

Violence between students led the list with 15,181 cases, the education ministry said in the survey covering elementary, junior high and high schools across the nation.

Vandalism totalled 10,722 cases, while 4,877 incidents were targeted at teachers, the report said.

"The number of violent behaviours is increasing among pupils, who easily get angry over minor things," said ministry official Hiroyuki Sasai.

US, UK condemn Kashmir blast

WASHINGTON, Aug 11: The United States yesterday condemned the car bomb blast which killed 12 people in Srinagar, the capital of Indian-administered Kashmir, as a "brutal attack," reports AFP.

"Clearly, we condemn this attack. It's a brutal attack. (It) does nothing to advance the settlement in the Kashmir dispute," State Department spokesman Richard Boucher told reporters.

The bombing, which was claimed by the radical Muslim Hizbul Mujahadeen, two days after it ended a ceasefire with India in the divided region, also injured 27 people.

"It adds to our disappointment over the ending of the ceasefire.

And we continue to believe that all sides should resume this dialogue in the interest of pursuing peace in Kashmir, and between India and Pakistan," said Boucher.

Britain also condemned the bomb attack, saying violence would not solve the region's problems.

In a statement, junior foreign minister Keith Vaz said he was "horrified" by the incident, adding: "Our thoughts are with the innocent victims of this latest attack and their families."

Vaz said the British government was "very disappointed" that the group had ended its ceasefire, but "will continue to encourage all parties to look for imaginative and constructive

ways to find a just and lasting solution through dialogue."

Amid rising tension in the region, Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee claimed the bombing was planned in Islamabad by Pakistan's military regime led by Pervez Musharraf.

Pakistan condemned the explosion and demanded an impartial investigation.

The United States on Tuesday called on all sides of the Kashmir conflict to talk peace, and bemoaned the "window" of opportunity closed when the two-week ceasefire was called off.

Hizbul leaders cancelled the ceasefire Tuesday, accusing India of failing to respond to their "ice-breaking" move in a productive and meaningful way.

BRIEFLY



A sand sculptor working on the beach of Zeebrugge on Thursday, before the official opening of the sand sculpture festival in Zeebrugge, Belgium. The theme of the 4th edition of the festival is "Adventurous Africa, in search of the secrets of the jungle." The sand sculpture festival lasts from August 11 to September 18 at the beach of Zeebrugge. --AFP photo

Explosive found in London hotel: A hotel in central London was evacuated Thursday after an employee found several explosive devices in a room, a police spokesman said, reports AFP.

Police did not say what quantity of explosives had been found, but said they explosive devices were not home-made. The stash was discovered Thursday afternoon in the Belvedere House hotel in London's upmarket South Kensington district. The police spokesman said that there was nothing to link the find to Northern Ireland terrorist groups. The building was evacuated as police bomb disposal experts worked to ensure the explosive devices were safe.

7 die in Italian road crash: At least seven people, including two children, died Friday in a road crash caused by a lorry overturning near Benevento in the south of Italy, police sources said, AFP reports from Rome.

The accident also left a dozen injured, according to a provisional toll. The crash happened on a main road between Benevento and Campobasso. The lorry, which was transporting tomatoes, overturned on the road, after which several cars crashed into it at high speed, fire-fighters at the scene said.

Tamil rebels acquire surface-to-air missiles from Taliban

COLOMBO, Aug 11: The surface-to-air missiles fired by Tamil Tiger rebels on the air force MiG-27 fighter aircraft earlier this week could have been acquired from the Taliban in Afghanistan, military officers said today, reports AP.

Links between the guerillas and the Taliban were first reported earlier this year. The Divan newspaper quoted intelligence sources as saying that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam had paid 20 million dollars to the Taliban for buying military hardware.

The military officials, who cannot be named under briefing regulations, say a deal had taken place between the two sides, but it is not known how much money changed hands.

The LTTE buys arms and ammunition from various sources and ships them in vessels owned by its front organisations or smuggles the consignments in fast moving boats from ships on the high seas.

The missiles pose a threat to the air force's MiG-27 aircraft, which are being used for the first time for attacking the rebel positions in northern Sri Lanka.

"We are trying to find out what type of surface-to-air missiles they have acquired, but surely we are more cautious now after knowing that they have some," military spokesman Brig. Sanath Karunaratne said Friday.

The government's top spokesman Ariya Rubasinghe, however,

said the missiles in the rebel hands are not going to deter the air force from carrying out bombing missions.

"We are going against the terrorists in a big way and this is not going to stop," Rubasinghe said.

On Wednesday, Sri Lanka's Parliament approved an additional 28 billion rupees (358 million dollars) in defence spending this year to buy more aircraft and new weaponry.

The government spend a total of 82 billion rupees (1.2 billion dollar) on defence during the current financial year (January-December).

The rebels had fired the surface-to-air missiles when the air force jets attacked their hide-out in Mullaitivu area, 280 kilometers northeast of Colombo. None of the aircraft was hit, but the rebels used the missiles after a gap of nearly 18 months, Brig. Karunaratne said.

The air force bought an unspecified number of MiG-27 aircraft after the guerillas launched a big offensive in May to recapture its former capital, Jaffna.

The rebels have been fighting for a separate homeland for the minority Tamils since 1983. More than 62,000 people have been killed in the fighting.

The Tamils accuse the majority Sinhalese of widespread discrimination in education and jobs. The Tamils comprise 14 million of the island nation's 18.6 million people.

NASA will send two robots to Mars in 2004

WASHINGTON, Aug 11: The US space agency NASA will send two robots to separate regions of Mars in 2004 to seek out past or present traces of water, NASA associate administrator for space science Ed Weiler said here, reports AFP.

"To have two rovers driving over dramatically different regions of Mars at the same time, to be able to drive over and see what's on the other side of the hill, it's an incredibly exciting idea," he told a press conference Thursday.

Last month, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration announced it was sending one rover to the red planet, but after checking its budget, it decided there was enough money

for two.

The robots will be launched within two weeks of each other in May and June of 2003 atop Delta II rockets from Kennedy Space Centre, at Cape Canaveral, Florida.

If all goes well, the two spacecraft will touch down on Mars, after a seven-and-a-half-month space flight, on January 2 and 20, 2004.

The robots will touch down in two separate regions of the planet in a similar fashion to the Pathfinder rover landing in 1997: a parachute will slow its descent and inflatable balloons will make for a soft if bouncy landing.

Although they will be under remote control from Earth, the rovers are capable of more auton-



Iraqi President Saddam Hussein (R) drives his car with his Venezuelan counterpart Hugo Chavez in Baghdad on Thursday. Chavez arrived in Iraq from Iran, hitting out at US criticism of his trip as the first head of state to visit Iraq since the 1991 Gulf War. --AFP photo

Lanka set for polls

COLOMBO, Aug 11: Sri Lanka's ruling party is gearing up for early parliamentary elections following the resignation of Prime Minister Sirima Bandaranaike, political sources said today, reports AFP.

Bandaranaike's decision to step down on Thursday has paved the way for an early dissolution of parliament to give the ruling party every possible advantage in polls which must be held by November 9, officials said.

The 225-member parliament's six-year term expires on August 24, but speculation is mounting that the legislature may be dis-

solved ahead of that date. Bandaranaike was replaced as prime minister by Plantations Minister Ratanasiri Wickremarajasinghe.

Close aides and relatives said Bandaranaike was not keen to give up her premiership and would still hold onto her seat in parliament as well as her position as leader of the ruling party.

Bandaranaike, 84, said in a letter to her president daughter Chandrika Kumaratunga that she was stepping down so that the ruling People's Alliance, which she leads, could have a strong replacement to run their polls campaign.

Chavez hits out at US

BAGHDAD, Aug 11: Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, on a groundbreaking visit to Iraq, has attacked US "meddling" and called for the international sanctions imposed against Saddam Hussein's regime to be lifted, reports AFP.

Chavez emerged late Thursday from a meeting with Saddam, vigorously rejecting US criticism of his visit.

"We condemn and we regret the meddling in our internal affairs," Chavez told a press conference.

The first head of state to visit Iraq since the 1991 Gulf War received an ecstatic reception when he arrived Thursday, overland from Iran so as to avoid breaking an international air embargo.

He said his meeting with Saddam had concentrated on "the means to reinforce the role of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and to sign cooperation agreements between Venezuela and Iraq."

Chavez added that he had invited Saddam to attend the upcoming OPEC summit in Caracas.

Venezuelan Vice President Jorge Valero, accompanying Chavez, said that Saddam had not confirmed his participation at the summit, citing security concerns.

Those same concerns have made the Iraqi leader a virtual prisoner in his own country since the Gulf crisis.