

40 missing as river sweeps away Indian bus

BHOPAL, India, Aug 19: At least 40 people were missing in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh yesterday after a flooded river swept away a bus, police said, reports Reuters. They said 10 people had been rescued after the bus carrying 50 passengers was washed away when the driver tried to take it over a flooded bridge.

Earlier, Press Trust of India (PTI) news agency said 50 people were feared drowned in the bus carrying 60 passengers.

The accident took place around 100 km (60 miles) from Shahdol town, which is about 370 km east of the state capital, Bhopal.

PTI said incessant rain was hampering rescue efforts.

Drowning accidents in remote rural parts of India are common during the monsoon rainy season, when swollen rivers disrupt transport and cause flooding.



An Indian model displays an ethnic outfit by Indian designer Ritu Kumar during a show as part of Indian Fashion Week in New Delhi on Friday. Leading Indian and foreign designers are participating in the fashion event billed as one of the biggest ever in India.

— AFP photo

Colombian army suspends 41 troops for killing 6 children

BOGOTA, Aug 19: Colombian Defence Minister Luis Fernando Ramirez has admitted that the shooting deaths of six children, and the wounding of four others may have been the result of human error by army personnel, reports AFP.

Ramirez made the statement Friday after the Colombian army announced it had suspended 41 soldiers and officers over the shootings at the village of Pueblo Rico, northwest of Bogota.

"I want to reiterate that it is not a case of human rights violations, but one of human error," he said at a press conference Friday.

Lockerbie trial to resume on Tuesday

BRUSSELS, Aug 19: The marathon trial of two Libyans accused of the Lockerbie bombing resumes Tuesday in Camp Zeist, the Netherlands after a mid-summer break, with the verdicts still months away and no clear indication of how the judges might rule, reports AFP.

Since it opened May 3, the trial -- being conducted under Scottish law -- has heard in excruciating detail how Pan Am Flight 103 was blown out of the night sky over the sleepy Scottish market town of Lockerbie.

All 259 people on the New York-bound Boeing 747 flight from London were killed, along with another 11 people on the ground, in the most notorious mid-air bombing in civil aviation history.

Abdel Basset Ali al-Megrahi, 48, and Al-Amin Khalifa Fhimah, 44, have both pleaded not guilty to charges of murder, conspiracy to murder, and intentionally destroying an aircraft.

Blair's son in trouble again

LONDON, Aug 19: The teenage son of British Prime Minister Tony Blair was in trouble again today after some high-spirited antics in an Italian hotel in the small hours of the morning were splashed across the British press, reports AFP.

Just weeks after hitting the headlines for being arrested while drunk and incapable in central London, Euan Blair, 16, was reprimanded by hotel staff for horsing around at 5 a.m. in a hotel on the island of Ponza off the coast of Naples.

Blair junior and two friends were reportedly riding around in the hotel lift and running through corridors after a night at a disco. They disturbed guests and the hotel owner had to cut the power to the lift to get them to go to bed, newspapers reported here, citing hotel officials.

"He and the others were just having a good time, but people couldn't sleep and someone intervened and that was that," a spokesman for the Bellavista hotel was quoted as saying by The Daily Telegraph.

International

Pakistan pins high hope on Mori's visit

ISLAMABAD, Aug 19: Pakistan will roll out the red carpet Sunday for Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, hoping he will loosen economic sanctions imposed after the country's 1998 nuclear tests, reports AFP.

Mori will be the first Japanese leader to visit Pakistan since Toshiki Kaifu came in 1990, and many here are excited over reports in the Japanese media that he will mark the occasion by easing the sanctions.

But Japanese officials here and in Tokyo have made it clear that the resumption of non-humanitarian aid will depend on Pakistan's willingness to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Prime Minister Mori is to again urge India and Pakistan to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty as soon as possible, Kazuhiko Koshikai, Mori's deputy press secretary, told AFP in Tokyo during the week.

"And Prime Minister Mori is to call on the two leaders to hold dialogue and make an effort to ease tensions which are threatening peace and stability in the whole of Asia."

Mori, who is also visiting India, Nepal and Bangladesh, will ask India and Pakistan to cool down tensions along the unofficial border in divided Kashmir and show their commitment to peace by inking the CTBT.

But with shelling and skirmishes in the divided Himalayan territory a daily occurrence, and with a sharp rise in militant attacks since the breakdown of a ceasefire by a guerrilla group this month, Mori may be asking too much.

Military ruler General Pervez Musharraf, who toppled prime minister Nawaz Sharif in a coup in October, has said he intends to sign the nuclear test ban pact only when he has achieved "national consensus" in its favour, which is unlikely

any time soon. Pakistan is an insecure country. Economically vulnerable dwarfed by a hostile neighbour on one side and volatile, war-torn Afghanistan on the other, its nuclear tests are still seen here as a great achievement.

And it firmly believes the sanctions are unfair. India was the first to test its bombs during the 1998 tensions and Pakistan has made a commitment not to resume testing unless India does so first.

"We feel they are unfair because we only responded (to India's tests) and that was very necessary to establish a deterrence and restore a strategic balance in the region," foreign office spokesman Riaz Mohammad Khan told AFP Friday.

"We stated in 1998 that if the sanctions are removed it will enable us to adhere to the treaty. It will be easier to explain to our people."

But the same pressures of public opinion apply in Japan, and Japanese Ambassador Sadaaki Numata said it was a "political reality" that Tokyo could not ease the sanctions until the CTBT was signed.

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

Numata dismissed Japanese press reports that Mori would partially lift the sanctions by providing loans to build irrigation facilities in Pakistan.

In 1997, Japan provided 491.8 million dollars in aid to India and 92.2 million dollars to Pakistan, making it their largest donor.

Pakistan's economy, weak at the best of times, is struggling even more than usual with crippling debt and chronic revenue shortfalls.



US President Bill Clinton (L), First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton (C) and their daughter Chelsea attend the Franklin, Essex, Clinton County Democratic Picnic where both the president and first lady delivered an address on Friday in Saranac Lake, New York. The Clintons are spending a few days of vacation in Saranac Lake.

— AFP photo

Release of hostages

Abu Sayyaf demands terms be renegotiated

JOLO, Aug 19: Plans for the release of 28 hostages held in a southern Philippines jungle collapsed today, with Libyan negotiator Rajab Azzarouq saying Abu Sayyaf guerrillas had demanded the terms be renegotiated, a pool reporter with the negotiators said, reports AFP.

Asked if talks would resume Sunday, an upset looking Azzarouq -- a leading negotiator in the four-month long crisis -- shook his head and said: "I'll return when they are ready."

The terms have to be renegotiated," he said.

Abu Sayyaf leader Ghalib "Commander Robot" Andang was insisting he free his cap-

tives in batches and did not accept the instruction from Philippine President Joseph Estrada that all 28 hostages walk out together, chief government negotiator Roberto Aventajado said.

The Muslim extremists are holding two Finns, two Germans, five French nationals, two South Africans, a Franco-Lebanese woman and 16 Filipinos.

Ismail, an official of a Muslim aid foundation run by a son of Libyan leader Moamer Kadhafi, is said to have 25 million dollars to offer as "regional development money" in exchange for the hostages. Officially no ransom has been paid.

Fresh rains submerge new areas in flood-hit Assam

GUWAHATI, India, Aug 19: Heavy overnight monsoon rains in the flood-ravaged northeastern Indian state of Assam have submerged fresh areas amid fears of an epidemic outbreak, officials said today, reports AFP.

The Brahmaputra and its tributaries have been showing a

"rising trend since midnight, with 77.4 millimetres of rain experienced during the past twelve hours," a statement from the flood control room said early Saturday.

The regional meteorological centre in its morning bulletin predicted "one or two spells of rain or thundershowers" in the next 24 hours.

"People were just beginning to come to terms after floods left a trail of destruction," Naraina Kalita, a government engineer, told AFP from Nalbari, 150 km west of Guwahati.

He added the river was again "in a furious mood" threatening to overflow its embankments.

"We are marooned with at least four feet (1.2 metres) of water inside our house. We are sitting on top of a dining table," Sunaina Chalha, a housewife in Guwahati told AFP by telephone.

Altogether 230 people have been killed in the last month by floods in India and neighbouring Bhutan and Bangladesh.

The flood waters had receded in recent days, although meteorologists warned of further heavy rains to come.

A seven-member team from the International Federation of the Red Cross is currently touring parts of Assam to assess the damage.

The situation is indeed miserable with people living in surroundings which are devoid of any sanitation and clean drinking water facilities", a visiting Red Cross member said on the telephone from Dibruri in western Assam.

Water-borne diseases have killed at least 20 people, fuelling fears of epidemics.

So far at least 12,000 people were treated by teams of doctors in Nalbari district," B. R. Sanal, the chief civil official in the flood-hit district said.

In Guwahati, the state capital, normal life was paralysed as heavy overnight rains flooded the streets and several low-lying quarters near the

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