

## BJP won't hold talks with Pakistan on Kashmir

NEW DELHI, Aug 20: The BJP yesterday said there was no question of having talks with Pakistan on resolving the Kashmir issue, reports PTL.

There should be no talks with Pakistan as long as it continues to aid and abet cross-border terrorism in Jammu and Kashmir, party Vice President JP Mathur told reporters here.

On All Party Hurriyat Conference (APHC) wanting to talk to India and Pakistan on Jammu and Kashmir, he said they are doing what they want to their own.

Mathur said there was no question of third party mediation as far as Jammu and Kashmir was concerned.

## McCain's skin cancer removed successfully

PHOENIX, Arizona, Aug 19: Two malignant cancer spots were removed from Senator John McCain's skin in a five-and-a-half hour operation Saturday, with preliminary assessments showing that the cancer has not spread, his personal physician said, reports AFP.

"I am pleased to report that he is out of surgery and doing very well... He is in excellent spirits," said general internist John Eckstein of the Mayo Clinic in Scottsdale, Arizona.

McCain will probably be released from the hospital "in the next two to three days," he said at a press conference attended by McCain's wife, Cindy.

## Clinton sets up AIDS fund for hardest-hit countries

LAKE PLACID, New York, Aug 20: US President Bill Clinton signed a bill Saturday setting up an international fund to fight AIDS in the most vulnerable countries, warning the disease poses a security threat as well as a health emergency, reports AFP.

"Fighting AIDS worldwide is not just the right thing to do, it's the smart thing to do in our tightly connected world, infectious disease anywhere is a threat to public health everywhere," Clinton said in his weekly radio address.

"AIDS threatens the economies of the poorest countries, the stability of friendly nations, the future of fragile democracies," said Clinton, who was celebrating his 54th birthday in this upstate New York resort town.

The new fund set up by the bill, the AIDS Trust Fund, will be coordinated through the World Bank and will offer grants for prevention, care and education to countries hardest hit by the disease, particularly in Africa, where AIDS is now the number one cause of death.

## 34 bodies retrieved from river in Bhopal

BHOPAL, Aug 19: Divers battling heavy rains pulled 34 bodies from a swollen river in central India Saturday, after the bus they were traveling in was swept away by flood waters, officials said, reports AP.

The passenger bus plunged into the Banas River in central Madhya Pradesh state Friday night, but news of the deaths did not reach the state capital until Saturday, said government spokesman Raghuraj Singh.

There were an estimated 70 people on board and only a few managed to swim to safety, so casualty figures were expected to climb.

## Chavez sworn in for six year term

CARACAS, Aug 20: Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's fiery 46-year-old populist president vowed a social revolution to turn around the nation's economy as he was sworn in Saturday for a six-year term, reports AFP.

In a fervent three-hour speech, the former paratrooper vowed to oversee a socio-economic revolution in Venezuela, which is experiencing a deep recession and soaring crime.

"I swear before God, I swear before the Venezuelan people, I swear before you, I swear before this revolutionary Bolivarian constitution..." Chavez said, evoking South America's 19th-century independence leader Simon Bolivar.

## Encephalitis claims 15 lives in Nepal

KATHMANDU, Aug 20: Encephalitis has claimed 15 lives in two southwestern districts of Nepal over the last month, health officials and reports said today, reports AFP.

The Bardia district health office said three out of the ten encephalitis patients admitted to the district hospital died while undergoing treatment while five died at a zonal hospital.

A report from Kailali district said seven people succumbed to the disease.

The chief of disease control at Bardia hospital, Balkrishna Sharma, said 290 patients were struck by malaria after the onset of monsoon in mid-June.

# Lankan polls campaign off to a violent start

### Opposition accuses police of frame up

COLOMBO, Aug 20: At least one man was killed in an election campaign-related clash as political parties braced for more violence ahead of Sri Lanka's October polls, officials said today, reports AFP.

Unidentified men attacked members of the leftist JVP, or People's Liberation Front, while they put up posters at Colombo's Kirulapane area on Saturday, police said.

They said one of the victims died in hospital Sunday.

The JVP accused the ruling People's Alliance party of carrying out the attack and said several of their offices had been attacked and torched by supporters of President Chandrika Kumaratunga's government.

The main opposition also accused the government of violence ahead of the October 10 election.

Opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe told reporters here Sunday that his United National Party (UNP) was prepared to join with other political parties to press for free and fair elections.

"The main issue is going to be democracy at this election," Wickremesinghe said, adding the government was relying on a smear campaign against the opposition.

"The government has no achievements to show the people so they will resort to violence. We know that they are going to unleash more violence but we are prepared for that," Wickremesinghe said.

The UNP and several other parties had also called for a neutral monitor for the elections amid fears of ballot rigging.

On Friday, the European Union (EU) said it would consider a Sri Lankan request for an independent mission to monitor upcoming elections.

An European Commission panel had already visited Sri Lanka for a preliminary study on the feasibility of such a mission, the EU said in a statement issued here.

"The EU will take a decision in the coming weeks on whether to send observers, following receipt of a formal invitation... accompanied by proposed terms of reference."

Meanwhile, Sri Lanka's main opposition today accused the government of trying to frame its leaders on murder charges and arrest them ahead of crucial parliamentary elections in October.



Indian opposition leader and Congress President Sonia Gandhi sprinkles petals on her husband and slain former premier Rajiv Gandhi's memorial in New Delhi yesterday. The nation marks the assassinated leader's 56th birth anniversary. — AFP photo

## Taliban won't extradite Laden

KABUL, Aug 20: Afghanistan said on Saturday it would not extradite Saudi-born militant Osama bin Laden despite US demands that he stand trial on charges he masterminded the bombing of two of its embassies in 1998, reports Reuters.

Information and Culture Minister Qudratullah Jamal accused the United States of trying to wipe out Afghanistan's ruling Taliban movement, which is striving to set up a pure Islamic state.

"We will not expel him. American hostility is with our government. The Clinton administration wants to annihilate the Afghans," Jamal told Reuters.

Earlier this month, the United States said the United Nations could impose an arms embargo and other new sanctions on the Taliban to press them to hand over bin Laden, who faces charges of planning the attacks in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

The bombings on August 7, 1998 killed 226 people. The vast majority of the victims were Kenyans and Tanzanians.

The United States retaliated by launching cruise missiles on suspected bases of bin Laden. More than 70 cruise missiles were fired on the southern province of Kandahar, a few fell near Kandahar, the Taliban seat of power, on August 20, 1998.

Bin Laden has denied any involvement in the bombings. The Taliban said the United States was looking for an excuse to attack it.

"We want to act on the basis of what Islam orders us and that is the reason for American enmity," Jamal said.

Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Muttawakil repeated the Taliban's readiness to hold talks with Washington to resolve the bin Laden issue but vowed not to bow to American pressure.

"Negotiations should not be halted," Muttawakil said. "But our willingness alone is not enough to resolve the issue. Let us see what the other side has to say, whether it wants to solve it by force or through talks."

"Why should a country bow to another country when there is no proof for the allegations and there is no extradition treaty?" he said.

## Indian court drops charges against Veerappan aides

BANGALORE, India, Aug 20: A southern Indian court has dropped terrorism charges against 51 associates of a bandit holding a movie star hostage for the past three weeks, a court official announced today, reports AFP.

India's most-wanted bandit, Veerappan, listed the release of 51 prisoners, held for more than eight years in Karnataka state's Mysore jail, as one of the conditions for the release of the actor.

Rajkumar and three of his relatives were abducted from the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu by Veerappan last month. Rajkumar's abduction triggered violence by the actor's fans and fanned ethnic tensions in the actor's home state, Karnataka.

The 74-year-old actor belongs to Karnataka's dominant Kannadiga community, while Veerappan, 53, is a Tamil.

Judge Rajendra Prasad in his 64-page verdict allowed the withdrawal of charges for offences under an Indian terrorist act.

The court said it dropped the charges "keeping in mind the broader interest of public."

R.R. Gopal, the official mediator in the crisis, is likely to meet Veerappan in his second mission on Sunday.

Gopal who met Veerappan earlier this month, will be carrying the responses of the Karnataka and Tamil Nadu governments.

## Negotiators resume talks with Abu Sayyaf

ZAMBOANGA, Philippines, Aug 20: Philippine negotiators renewed contact with Abu Sayyaf hostage takers in an island jungle today as they shrugged off Libyan threats to end its mediation role after the collapse of latest efforts to free 28 hostages, reports AFP.

"We are still working" with the Abu Sayyaf guerrillas, chief negotiator Roberto Avenajado told reporters.

"There are certain things that at the moment we can't tell you," he said at a press conference to present three released Malaysian hostages.

"We are frustrated but not defeated. I still see the light at the end of the tunnel," he said.

Avenajado said he spoke by telephone to Abu Sayyaf leader Ghalib Andang, alias Commander Robot, Sunday and "he told me exactly what went wrong."

A full report would be sent to President Joseph Estrada by Monday morning, and "we will go on with our policy of negotiations," he said.

## 16 die as train catches fire near Nairobi

NAIROBI, Aug 20: At least 16 people died when a goods train carrying gas exploded and caught fire early today at Athi River town, 30 km southeast of here, radio reports said, reports AFP.

The independent Nation radio said its television crew, which reached the scene of the fire early in the morning, counted 16 bodies burnt beyond recognition.

More than 37 other people were seriously injured and were rushed to hospitals around Athi River and in Nairobi. Three were admitted to intensive care units.

## Bodo tribal leader killed in Gauhati

GAUHATI, India, Aug 20: A top pro-India Bodo tribal leader was shot and killed by suspected militants fighting a separatist war in India's remote northeast, police said Sunday, reports AFP.

Four unidentified gunmen entered the home of Bineswar Brahma, president of the Bodo Literary Association, on Saturday night in Gauhati, the capital of Assam state.

## BRIEFLY

**Blast kills 2 Spanish guards:** Two Spanish civil guards were killed Sunday in a bomb attack on their patrol car at Saliente de Gallego, in northeast Spain, attributed to the armed Basque separatist group ETA, a local government official said, AFP reports from Madrid.

The bomb, attached to the bottom of the car, exploded as the two guards were getting into the vehicle at 6:10 a.m. (10:10 BST) to begin their morning patrol in the Huesca province. A woman guard in her 20s died instantly and the other guard died within three hours in hospital. Their identities have not been released.

**7 hurt in Belfast violence:** Seven people were injured during a day of violence in Belfast linked to a feud between rival loyalist paramilitary groups, a police spokesman said, AFP reports from London.

Three people suffered gunshot wounds and a fourth was injured by flying glass when gunmen attacked drinkers in a bar on the Protestant Shankill Road during a parade by loyalist groups. The wounded were taken to hospital but their injuries were not life-threatening, a hospital spokeswoman said.

## Chechens vote for Duma

MOSCOW, Aug 20: Federal troops stepped up security across Chechnya today as elections got under way in the war-torn republic for a seat in Russia's State Duma lower house of parliament, reports AFP.

Separatist guerrillas had threatened to sabotage the vote, which includes 13 pro-Moscow candidates.

Moscow news reports said that 60 per cent of Russia's military had already cast their votes.

Russian President Vladimir Putin loyalist Amin Osmayev and the local head of the pro-Moscow Unity party Lecha Magomedov are seen as the two front-runners in the poll.

# Uneasy calm prevails in India's 'Shangri La'

### 4 villagers slain in Kashmir

LEH, India, Aug 20: As the cycle of killing and terror returns to Indian-administered Kashmir, the people of the Buddhist-dominated region of Ladakh continue in their efforts to distance themselves from the violence that surrounds them, reports AFP.

Often referred to as the "last Shangri La" or the "Jewel in the Indian Himalaya," Ladakh sits uncomfortably in the militant-wracked state amid the high-altitude war zone of the Trans Himalaya, with China to its east and arch foe Pakistan to its north. Yet both Buddhists and Muslims in this mountainous and heavily militarised part of northwestern India are determined not to allow either last year's bitter conflict with Pakistan, fought around the heights of Kargil, or the Kashmir insurgency, to disturb the fragile balance between them.

Relations between the two communities have traditionally been strained and today undercurrents of bitterness and resentment still remain amid an uneasy prevailing calm.

Buddhists, fearing for the survival of their culture in the Muslim majority state, began agitating in the late 1980s for autonomy as Kashmir again became the battle-ground for India's proxy war with Pakistan-backed militants.

The formation of the Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council (LAHDC) in 1995, which granted limited administrative autonomy to the region, went some way to easing tensions between the two sides.

But many Muslims in Ladakh now believe they are discriminated against by the Buddhist-dominated autonomous government.

As one Muslim trader in the regional capital Leh put it: "Muslim people here want calm but Buddhist people don't want Muslims here."

There is controlled resentment here. On the surface it appears fine but underneath there is resentment.

Meanwhile, suspected Muslim militants shot dead four Hindu villagers in Indian Kashmir, police officials told AFP today.

Police said the attack occurred overnight in Indeh village in the Kashmiri district of Udhampur, some 120 km north of the state winter capital Jammu.

"Five gunmen entered the village and knocked on a Hindu called Mir Chand's door. When he answered the knock, they shot him at point-blank range."

# Next few weeks to determine fate of peace process: Barak

JERUSALEM, Aug 20: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak said today the next few weeks would determine the fate of peace talks with the Palestinians, as the United States pursued efforts to overcome the key stumbling blocks to an accord, reports AFP.

"We will know in several weeks if Yasser Arafat is open to a peace accord or if we are heading towards an impasse," Barak told a weekly Cabinet meeting.

"At present we have no indications that the Palestinians have studied our proposals made at Camp David summit, particularly on Jerusalem," he said, according to a statement from his office.

The peace talks at Camp David broke down after two weeks on July 25 over the fate of Jerusalem, the issue at the heart of the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

US Middle East envoy Dennis Ross is currently in the region to try to narrow the gaps enough to hold a second summit, with the two sides facing a self-imposed September 13 deadline for a final comprehensive accord.

In addition to Jerusalem, which both Israel and the Palestinians claim as their capital, they must find solutions to the fate of millions of Palestinian refugees and the Jewish settlements in the occupied territories as well as water and security issues.

Turning to Syria, Barak said: "The door is always open to peace negotiations with Syria if the authorities in Damascus are ready for serious dialogue."

The negotiations broke down in January over the Golan Heights, the strategic plateau Israel captured in the 1967 Arab Israeli war -- along with the West Bank, Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem.

But Barak added: "We will not take any steps that could be interpreted as a manipulation of the Palestinians."

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