

International

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 PTI.

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 that 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. 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 AFP.

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 the 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 Kirulapone 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 in October.

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

Divers assess damage on sub, begin rescue effort

MURMANSK, Russia, Aug 20: British and Norwegian divers assessed damage Sunday on the Kursk nuclear submarine as a last-ditch Western effort to save any of the 118 sailors who survived their week-long ordeal on the bottom of the Barents Sea got under way, reports AFP.

Divers equipped in suits resembling those of astronauts went down to the stricken Russian nuclear submarine, submerged under 108 meters (355 feet) of Arctic water, early Sunday but were not expected to resurface until 14:00 BST.

The crew had first dropped down a video camera that according to preliminary reports cited by Russia's RTR state television showed that the only escape hatch thought to be functioning on Kursk -- confirming the worst fears -- was also damaged and no longer water-proof.

Igor Babenko, the deputy chief of the Northern Fleet press service, said any decision about lowering a high-tech British rescue vessel to the sunken submarine will be reached only after the divers report what they have found.

"It is too early to speak about when the (British LR5) will be lowered," Babenko said.

The mission, although high-tech, will also depend on the most basic of devices. Rescuers will bang on Kursk's hull to determine which sections of the sub's hull are filled with water and which still have air.

Russia's government has been preparing the nation for the worst, warning that Kursk's 118 crew members were, in all probability, already dead.

Despite Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov's caution that the chances of anyone surviving last Saturday's accident which left the Kursk stranded on the sea bed were only "theoretical,"

Even where they find air, the divers will still have to test the oxygen pressure to determine if anyone could have survived in the submarine since last Saturday's still-undetermined catastrophic accident.

Mikhail Motsak, head of the Northern Fleet's navy command, told RTR that shortly after the accident desperate survivors banged on the hull in Morse code.

Britain's Royal Navy said late Saturday that it was intent on going ahead with the mission aboard a mini-submersible despite the grim Russian predictions of what rescuers might find if they manage to dock with the Kursk.

The plan is for the three-man LR5 mini-submersible to dock with the Kursk, open the rear escape hatch and attempt to recover any survivors. Since Tuesday, Russian rescue teams have repeatedly failed to dock with the submarine.

There were 118 crew members aboard Russia's most prestigious nuclear submarine when it went down on August 12, sparking an explosion that registered 3.5 on the Richter scale.

The accident, according to investigators, killed dozens on the spot. And the casualties quickly mounted.

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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 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 Khost and a few fell near Kandahar, the Taliban seat of power, on August 20, 1998.

Bin Laden has denied any

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 us from our government. The Clinton administration wants to annihilate the Afghans," Jamal told Reuters.

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Bin Laden has denied any

involvement in the bombings. The Taliban said the United States was looking for an excuse to attack it.

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

Foreign Minister Wakil Ahmad Mutawakil 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," Mutawakil 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'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 offenses 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 Aventajado 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.

Aventajado said he spoke by telephone to Abu Sayyaf leader Galib 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 northeast, police said Sunday.

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

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.

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

fragile balance between them.

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Next few weeks to determine fate of peace process: Barak

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.

"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, 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."