

International

Japanese PM keen to ease strained ties with India

NEW DELHI, Aug 23 : Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori today voiced his strong desire to improve bilateral ties with India -- strained since New Delhi's 1998 nuclear tests, reports AFP.

"I would like to make India-Japan relations much better than they are now," Mori said after a welcoming ceremony to mark the start of the official leg of his three-day India visit.

Following the welcome at the presidential palace, Mori -- the first Japanese premier to visit India in 10 years -- held talks with Foreign Minister Jaswant Singh and was scheduled to meet Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee later in the day.

While the talks are sure to include the sticky issue of nuclear non-proliferation and Japanese sanctions, both sides

have made it clear that they want to make bilateral relations forward, especially in the economic sphere.

That desire was underlined by Mori's decision to kick off his visit Tuesday in the southern city of Bangalore, India's infotech capital, where the prime minister toured some flagship software firms and unveiled a series of initiatives to enhance IT cooperation.

Tokyo, which was India's largest aid donor, responded to the 1998 nuclear tests by freezing developmental assistance and halting fresh yen loans. The same sanctions were imposed on Pakistan, which followed India's tests with underground blasts of its own.

Japan has cited the signing of the nuclear Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) as a prerequisite for lifting the sanc-

tions against both countries.

Mori's efforts to push India over the CTBT are unlikely to bear any fruit, with Indian leaders expected to reiterate that a decision on signing the treaty will only be made once a national consensus has been formed.

Despite the differences, some observers predict the search for a broader relationship will result in the launch of a security dialogue.

Earlier, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori today began the official leg of his three-day visit to India.

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Sharif's brother allowed to attend appeal

KARACHI, Aug 23 : A Pakistani court today agreed to allow ousted prime minister Nawaz Sharif's brother to attend appeal proceedings against Sharif's conviction for hijacking and terrorism, reports AFP.

Shahbaz Sharif, a former Punjab chief minister who is on remand pending corruption trials, was among Sharif's co-accused who were acquitted in the same case related to events on the night of the October coup.

Nawaz Sharif was sentenced to life on April 6 for trying to stop a jet carrying then-army chief General Pervez Musharraf and some 200 passengers from landing in Pakistan on October 12.

Arafat, Clinton to meet in Sept

GAZA CITY, Aug 23 : Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat will hold a summit with US President Bill Clinton during the UN General Assembly in New York next month, a top Arafat aide said today, reports AFP.

"There will be a meeting between Arafat and Clinton on September 6 on the sidelines of the UN meeting in New York," Tayib Abdel Rahim told reporters.

Arafat and Clinton have not met since their abortive three-way summit with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak in July at the US presidential retreat of Camp David.

15 Malaysian students die in accident

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 23 : Fifteen schoolchildren have been killed -- some of them burnt to death -- in a horrific road accident in the east Malaysian state of Sarawak, a report said today says AFP.

The children were on their way home from afternoon school Tuesday when their van was hit by an articulated truck at Limbang near the border with Brunei, the official Bernama news agency said.

Limbang police traffic chief Inspector Marzuki Muhamad said the truck collided with a car before skidding into the opposite lane and ramming the school van.



Local residents watch a damaged taxi after it was hit by a collapsing roof torn off from the strong winds of typhoon Bilis yesterday in Panchiao, Taipei county. Typhoon Bilis left at least 11 dead and injured 7 people.

— AFP photo

11 killed as Typhoon Bilis ravages Taiwan

TAIPEI, Aug 23 : Typhoon Bilis cut a deadly swathe of destruction across Taiwan today, killing at least 11 people, before roaring onto mainland China, reports AFP.

Seven women and one child died when they were buried alive overnight by a mudslide which demolished a workers' hut in which they were sheltering from the ferocious winds and torrential rain.

Rescuers who pulled the bodies from the landslide at the mountainous town of Jenai in the central county of Nantou said they believed two more people were still trapped.

Elsewhere, three more people died. Lin Mao-tsai, 27, was crushed by a collapsing mud wall at Paili, near Taipei; Lin Hsueh-ying, 47, was electrocuted by torn wires at her apartment in nearby Panchiao; and Tu Chung-yi, 63, was hit by a wooden door blown off its frame in northern Taoyuan county.

Rescuers also kept up a search for Chen Yi-chieh, a doctor, and six students who disappeared separately while hiking in mountains in central and eastern Taiwan.

Taiwan Governor Chang Po-ya said a total of 79 people were injured, 14 of them seriously.

The 20-mile-wide (32 km) eye of Bilis -- the strongest typhoon in Asia this year -- scored a direct hit on Taiwan, slamming into the eastern county of Taitung at 10:30 p.m. (20:30 BST) Tuesday.

The "super typhoon" -- a highest level category five hurricane -- easily enveloped the entire 400-kilometer long island of 22 million people.

Uprooted trees, cut power supplies, ripped roofs from buildings and tossed cars clean across streets.

Bilis' screaming winds -- gusting at up to 300 km per hour -- and unrelenting rains destroyed at least 1,688 hectares (4,170 acres) of farm land, mainly orchards.

Damage to crops was initially estimated at 372 million Taiwan dollars (12 million US), agricultural officials said.

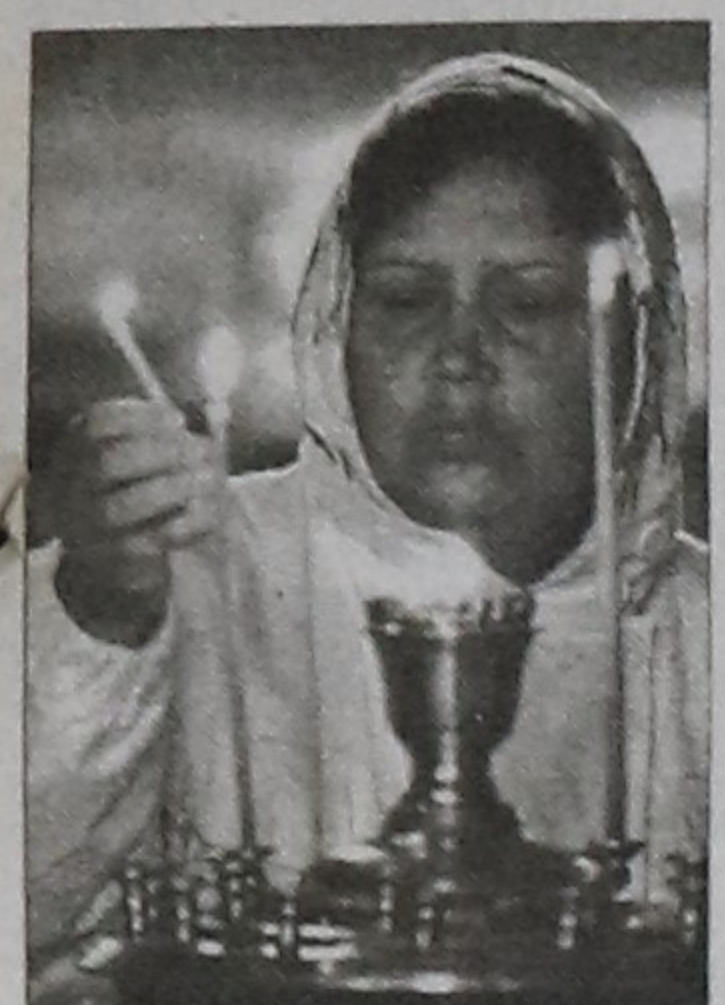
Domestic and international airlines cancelled flights while road and rail traffic was suspended in many areas.

Several hundred Chinese fishermen were given permission to take temporary shelter on land as massive waves of up to nine metres (30 feet) were whipped up by the force of the gale.

Ten fishing boats were destroyed by a fire sparked by snapped electricity wires in Taitung county.

A manhunt was on for four prisoners, all convicted robbers and serving sentences of between 13 years to life, who used the chaos caused by the typhoon to escape from their cell, also in Taitung.

To further add to the chaos, an earthquake measuring 5.7 on the Richter scale jolted the island on Wednesday morning. Taiwan lies on a fault line and tremors are a frequent occurrence, particularly since a quake measuring 7.6 on September 21 last year, which killed 2,400 and left 100,000 homeless.



A woman lights a candle in remembrance for the victims of the Kursk nuclear submarine disaster, in the church of St. Nicolas in Murmansk yesterday. Russian President Putin declared August 23 as a day of national mourning, but cancelled all official ceremonies, in accordance with the relatives' requests. — AFP photo

Russians mourn for Kursk crew as bereaved families grill Putin

Radiation levels normal in Barents Sea

VIDYAYEVO, Russia, Aug 23 : As Russia observed a day of national mourning for the lost Kursk submarine crew, President Vladimir Putin abruptly returned to Moscow today after facing a grilling from bereaved relatives in which several women fainted, reports AFP.

The under-fire president had earlier been expected to attend a memorial service on the Barents Sea at the site where Russia's most modern nuclear submarine and its 118-man crew went down under mysterious circumstances on August 12.

Putin's failure to quickly accept Western aid in the rescue mission has come under intense scrutiny, and the new Kremlin chief flew to this Arctic port late Tuesday to explain to grieving families that all had been done to attempt to save the crew.

Rescuers abandoned their mission on Monday but some relatives still refuse to give up a glimmer of hope -- if only because none of the bodies have yet been recovered from the Arctic waters.

"We are unable to accept that everyone is dead when not even a single body has been brought up," said Tatyana Baibarina, whose son Roman was aboard the Kursk.

"We are against holding the memorial ceremony," added Tatyana Nikitina, mother of sailor Igor Fedorichev. "Until the bodies have been raised, we think they are alive."

Access to the overnight meeting between Putin and relatives was tightly restricted.

Russian television showed only brief footage of Putin -- dressed all in black and looking subdued -- facing questions from visibly upset family members.

However witnesses said several women lost consciousness and had to be carried out of the packed auditorium as they vented their frustration with Russia's ineffective rescue bid.

NTV television reported that the hostile treatment Putin received and possible future security concerns forced the president to change his plans and return to Moscow.

The Northern Fleet later an-

nounced that the Barents Sea ceremony had been cancelled entirely on the relatives' request.

"The relatives, during their meeting with Putin, asked to cancel all of the planned ceremonies," said Northern Fleet spokesman Igor Babenko. "They have been cancelled."

Yet a national day of mourning was still observed across the country as flags flew at half mast on state buildings, including Putin's Kremlin residence.

Earlier, radiation levels are normal at the site of a sunken Russian nuclear submarine in the Barents Sea, the Norwegian Radiation Protection Authority said Wednesday.

"We have had a team there working together with the Norwegian divers, and they have taken samples both inside and outside the sub. None of these shows any leakage from the nuclear reactors," spokesman Per Strand told AFP.

"This indicates that the reactors were shut down properly," he added.

Wahid unveils streamlined Cabinet

JAKARTA, Aug 23 : Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid today unveiled a new 26-member Cabinet to tackle a myriad of problems from separatism to economic woes and corruption, reports AFP.

Wahid retained Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab, but named academic Rizal Ramli as the new coordinating minister for the economy, replacing Kwik Kian Gie.

The new cabinet has two co-ordinating ministers, 16 ministers, five state ministers and three junior ministers.

The outgoing cabinet had 35 members.

Lanka receives new envoys from China, India, Japan after fiasco

COLOMBO, Aug 23 : Sri Lanka today received new envoys from China, India and Japan after a fiasco that forced an embarrassing postponement of the diplomatic ceremonies, officials said.

The new Indian high commissioner, Gopal Krishna Gandhi, China's ambassador Jiang Qizheng, and Japan's top envoy Soichiro Otsuka, presented their credentials to President Chandrika Kumaratunga, officials said.

The foreign ministry said the ceremony was originally scheduled for Tuesday. There was no official explanation for the unexpected postponement that seriously embarrassed the three top envoys.

Suharto's trial to open Aug 31

JAKARTA, Aug 23 : The corruption trial of former Indonesian President Suharto will open on August 31, the judge trying the case said today, reports AFP.

Judge Lalu Maryun told a news conference the trial would open at the Agriculture ministry for security reasons.

Suharto, who ruled Indonesia for 32 years, has been charged with causing losses of 571 million dollars to the state by funneling money from huge tax-free charity foundations he ran into the businesses of family and friends.

Typhoon Kaemi hits Vietnam : 9 killed

HANOI, Aug 23 : Nine people, including two Indian and one Thai tourist, were killed and four were injured when typhoon Kaemi hit Vietnam's coastline early this week, officials said today, reports AFP.

The two Indians drowned in Halong Bay when their boat sank off the coast of the northern Quang Ninh province. The Thai woman was found on another boat, a local official said, and two crew members of the boats also died.

Four other victims were killed on Monday in the central region, a meteorological department official said.



India's Congress Party chief and main opposition leader Sonia Gandhi (3rd from left) places a wreath on the body of Indian Power Minister P.R. Kumarangalam, as the minister's son (4th from left) and daughter (2nd from left) look on yesterday at the daughter's residence in New Delhi. Kumarangalam died yesterday after battling for his life for more than a week in the intensive care unit of a New Delhi hospital. — AFP photo

3 Indonesians to die: A court here has sentenced two Indonesian women and a man to death for the attempted smuggling of 3.5 kilograms (7.7 pounds) of heroin and 3.0 kilograms (6.6 pounds) of cocaine, reports said Wednesday. AFP reports from Jakarta.

The state district court in Tangerang, some 33 kilometres (20.5 miles) west of here, handed down the verdict on Tuesday on Meirika Pranola, 30, Rani Andriani, 25, and Deni Setia Maharwan, 28, the Kompas daily said.

AIDS deaths double in Nepal-India border dist

KATHMANDU, Aug 23 : Nearly 10 per cent of Nepal's AIDS-related deaths have occurred in the border district of Morang, according to health officials, reports AFP.

In the last year, AIDS had claimed the lives of 10 people in the district of Morang, an area which borders India, 290 km southeast of here, the Kathmandu Post said, quoting an official from the HIV/AIDS Co-ordination Section (HACS) in Morang.

Across the country, 141 people had died in the last year after contracting the virus.

Another 115 people in Morang are believed to be infected with Human Immune-de-

ficiency Virus (HIV) -- the virus that leads to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) -- again nearly 10 per cent of the 1,500 estimated to be HIV-positive across the whole country.

Last year the HCS in Morang reported 68 cases of HIV.

According to Usha Koirala, chief of the HCS, the upswing in the numbers is due to a lack of awareness about safe sexual practices.

He said that of those who were HIV-positive, more than 60 per cent had returned from India where they had had sex with a prostitute.

Many others were drug addicts, according to the HCS statistics.

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