

International

Suu Kyi barred from going outside Yangon

New stand-off with the junta

YANGON, Aug 26: Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was today in a new stand-off with the junta on a road outside Yangon after defying a travel ban which restricts her to the capital, sources said, reports AFP.

Members of her National League for Democracy (NLD) said the Nobel laureate has been facing off the military authorities since Thursday afternoon when her car was stopped at Dallah township.

She had been on her way to a meeting of the party's youth wing in the nearby town of Kawhmu, they said.

The NLD has not been in contact with her since then and has no more information on the situation in Dallah, about 32 km from Yangon, they said.

NLD chairman U Aung Shwe said Aung San Suu Kyi was merely attempting to carry out

"legitimate party organisation work."

"As a private citizen she is entitled to travel along that road and should not be stopped from doing so," he told AFP.

A senior spokesman for the military regime confirmed that Aung San Suu Kyi and a group accompanying her had been halted at Dallah and told to remain there or return to Yangon.

The opposition leader had been travelling without proper security arrangements and was stopped for her own safety, he said in a statement.

"Due to threats by armed insurgent separatist forces, travel by prominent persons to some parts of the country is at present inadvisable," he said.

"As a prominent citizen of Myanmar, the government will take all necessary action in protecting her from these threats while also safeguarding

her human rights, as much as possible including the right to freedom of movement."

Although she is no longer under house arrest as she was between 1989 and 1995, Aung San Suu Kyi is confined to Yangon and her movements are closely monitored.

Attempts to test these restrictions in 1998 resulted in a dramatic 13-day stand-off with her military escort which ended when she returned to Yangon amid fears for her health.

She had been camped out in a minibus on a bridge north-west of the capital, after being blocked from attempting to travel to meet provincial supporters. It was her fourth failed bid to travel outside Yangon in just over a month.

The episode was seen as emphasising her political impotency and the stalemate into which Myanmar has sunk.

No radiation leaks from Kursk: Russian PM

MOSCOW, Aug 25: Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov said today that radiation levels around the crippled Kursk nuclear submarine remained normal and should not be a future cause for concern.

"Radiation levels in the area where the Kursk suffered its accident remain normal," news agencies quoted Kasyanov as saying while on a visit to the central Russian town of Sarov.

"I am constantly getting briefed on the situation, receiving information from ecological services on the scene -- the situation does not cause us any concern," Kasyanov said.

A meteorologist in the Northern Fleet's port base of Murmansk earlier this week reported that radiation levels along the Barents Sea shore had risen slightly following the Kursk accident.

The submarine has two nuclear reactors which navy officials said had both been shut down immediately after the August 12 tragedy that killed all 118 crew members on board.

Some environmentalists have expressed concerns that the accident severely damaged the craft, and some of the nuclear material on board may soon begin leaking into the sea.

Russian Atomic Energy Minister Yegor Adanov also stressed Friday that there will be no catastrophe involving the Kursk nuclear reactors, no matter how the situation develops.

Meanwhile, an investigation into what caused the catastrophic accident continued with no clear conclusions reached so far.

Defence Minister Igor Sergeev said investigators were mulling at least 10 theories as to what might have gone wrong on Russia's most modern nuclear vessel.

"Right now we are looking at more than 10 versions of the Kursk catastrophe, but I lean towards the theory that it crashed with a foreign submarine," Sergeev told Interfax.

"But we cannot yet dismiss any of the possibilities," Sergeev added.

India expels Pak diplomat

NEW DELHI, Aug 25: India expelled a member of the Pakistan High Commission on Thursday, accusing them of "activities incompatible with his official status," reports AP.

No further details about the activities were given, but the phrase usually is an accusation of spying. India and Pakistan regularly expel each other's diplomats on such charges.

A statement released by the foreign ministry said Pakistan's Deputy High Commissioner in New Delhi was called to the External Affairs Ministry and asked to withdraw Malik Mohammad Rafique from India by Aug 31.

No official comment was immediately available from Pakistan.

Court summons delivered to Suharto

JAKARTA, Aug 25: State prosecutors today delivered a written summons to former Indonesian president Suharto ordering him to appear in court next week to face charges of massive corruption.

The document was handed to the Suharto family, and the 79-year-old former strongman's lawyers, at his Jakarta home by Mughtar Arifin, the chief prosecutor handling the Suharto case, an AFP reporter said.

"They (the family) gave a good response. Basically I don't think there is any problem," Arifin told reporters when he emerged from the sprawling Suharto bungalow.

Asked what would happen if Suharto failed to appear, Arifin hinted there could be a postponement.

"If you are summoned by the court of course you have to appear. But it depends on his condition... we'll see how it goes," he said.

Suharto's lawyers say he is too ill to face trial on August 31 -- the opening date set by the attorney general's office.

Gulf Air engines 'were fine' before take-off

CAIRO, Aug 25: The Gulf Air engineer who made a routine maintenance check on the Airbus A320 that crashed Wednesday near Bahrain told AFP today there was nothing wrong with the plane's engines before it took off, reports AFP.

"We did all the routine maintenance and found no technical problems whatsoever," said Bahraini Ismail Ghdoon, 36, who has worked as Gulf Air's resident engineer in Cairo for the past six years.

Bahraini government officials originally said the plane crashed into the sea with one of its engines on fire, but the country's civil aviation department has since dismissed that report as "pure speculation."

"The engines were fine. There was no problem there," said Ghdoon. "I signed the maintenance report, and the captain signed it to show his acceptance, and the plane took off without any sign of a problem."

Putin orders 20% pay rise for army

MOSCOW, Aug 25: Russian President Vladimir Putin has authorised a 20 per cent increase in the wages of the armed forces, police and justice ministry personnel, Interfax cited the Kremlin as saying Thursday, reports AFP.

The pay rise, which will take effect from December 1, will also apply to customs and prison officers as well as the tax police.

The low level of salaries has often been linked to widespread low morale in Russia's armed services and was much criticised in the wake of the Kursk submarine.

Ordinary soldiers in the Russian armed forces earn about 35 dollars a month, with the monthly wage for officers being 70 dollars on average, according to Ministry of Defence figures.

50 Sudanese pupils drown as ferry capsizes in Nile

KHARTOUM, Aug 25: Fifty Sudanese school children died when an overloaded wooden ferry boat capsized in the fast-flowing Blue Nile River in eastern Sudan, the regional governor told Omdurman radio today, reports AFP.

The small, over-driven ferry sank in midstream on Wednesday, killing the pupils, aged 10 to 17, who were crossing from the east to the west bank of the wide swollen river, Sudan state governor Younis al-Sherif said.

He said 17 other passengers survived the accident, adding that "none of the bodies has yet been recovered" from the high, swiftly running waters of the river, which joins the White Nile at Khartoum to form the Nile River.

The official SUNA news agency said the boat was overloaded, as it also carried 30 bags of sweet potatoes and 10 bags of sorghum.

Recovery teams and divers are still trying to recover the bodies from the river at Sinja town, about 350 km southeast of the Sudanese capital, Sheriff said.

But there is little chance of finding any of the bodies in the fast-flowing Blue Nile, which spans more than a kilometre (over half a mile wide) in places at Sinja.

SUNA said the boys and girls, from primary and



US President Bill Clinton (R) jokes during an impromptu question-and-answer session with the President-elect of Mexico Vicente Fox (L) as they walk through the Rose Garden for a closed-door meeting in the Oval Office on Thursday at the White House. Fox is on a two-day visit to the US to outline his vision for a free flow of people and goods across the Mexico-US border. — AFP photo

New army chief plays down discord, vows offensive against Tigers

COLOMBO, Aug 25: Sri Lanka's new army chief Lionel Balagalle took command today playing down discord over his controversial appointment and vowing a united front against Tamil Tiger rebels, reports AFP.

Balagalle, who was named head of the army overlooking another senior field commander, told reporters here that despite "divergent views and opinions" the military leadership was united in battling Tiger guerrillas.

"We are working together. There is no unhealthy situation in the army," Balagalle told reporters shortly after inspecting an honour guard.

"Whatever our opinions and views, finally, we come together."

He said the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) were training its cadres in the north of the island, but indications were that the rebels had suffered heavy losses in recent battles.

"We know they are doing a lot of training. The kind of pressure they are undergoing is seen in the heavy losses they

have suffered," Balagalle said.

He added that the military was facing manpower shortages in keeping up a fresh offensive to capture new territory.

"We need more men to hold the territory that will be taken," he said, adding that he agreed with estimates that another 20,000 troops were urgently needed for the 120,000-strong army.

Tamil Tiger rebels are outnumbered by the military more than 10-1, but the Tigers have been able to use a band of highly motivated fighters led by suicide bombers to cause major damage to military positions.

The government has come under criticism over the appointment of Balagalle, overlooking the top commander who defended the northern town of Jaffna against a rebel onslaught between April and May.

The nationalist Sihala Urumaya, or Sinhalese heritage party, slammed President Chandrika Kumaratunga, who is also the commander in chief of armed forces, for naming Balagalle as the new army chief.

Barak warns of 'tragedy' if peace deal not struck

JERUSALEM, Aug 25: Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak has warned that a "tragedy" will ensue if there is no peace deal with the Palestinians, according to an interview with him published Friday in the daily Yediot Aharonot, reports AFP.

"I do not know if there will be an agreement, but I am sure that one is essential. The alternative is a tragedy, and there is no need to spell out in detail what might happen," he said.

On the question of Jerusalem, the main stumbling block that scuppered last month's Camp David summit, he called on Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat to accept ideas on Jerusalem put forward by US President Bill Clinton.

"If he is ready to see in them a basis for discussion, we are prepared to discuss on the basis of these ideas," he said, referring to a proposal for limited Palestinian sovereignty over some parts of east Jerusalem.

He complained that there was a lot of misunderstanding on the Arab side about the area of Jerusalem's Old City known to the Jews as the Temple Mount, and the Arabs as the

Noble Sanctuary, which stands on the site of the Jewish Temple destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD.

"Most Arabs do not know that the Temple lies underneath the site. Arafat has created the impression in the Arab world that we are demanding sovereignty in order to dig down to the Temple. But in fact, Jewish law forbids this. We want an accord under which we can be certain that no one will dig, including the Muslims," he said.

Barak rejected accusations from the Israeli right that he had made too many concessions on Jerusalem, saying he had not yet made any concession, but was simply looking for a way "to avoid a tragedy erupting" if negotiations were stuck.

He said repeated his call to Palestinians to show flexibility.

"We have to move forward resolutely towards an agreement, but if there is no flexibility and open-mindedness on the other side, there will be no agreement," he said.

Fierce fighting near Kabul, opposition claims gain

KABUL, Aug 25: Fierce fighting erupted near the Afghan capital today as opposition forces claimed success with a series of raids from positions at Bagram, sources and reports said, reports AFP.

Opposition spokesman Mohammad Habel said repeated attacks were launched at dawn from the Bagram area, 50 km north of Kabul, and several villages had been captured.

"Heavy fighting is going on. We have captured a number of villages around Bagram. The Taliban are trying to gain more territory from us and we are trying to undermine this," he said.

A Taliban spokesman quoted by the Afghan Islamic Press (AIP) said the opposition had attacked around the town of Domizal along both the Old and New Roads, but had failed to gain any ground.

"The opposition attacks continue and we are defending. Opposition forces have launched at least five attacks but so far made no advance," he said, adding that three Taliban soldiers had died.

Taliban fighter jets were bombing opposition positions in the area, where forces loyal

to anti-Taliban commander Ahmad Shah Masood have control of a key airbase, AIP said.

The area saw intense fighting in July when the Taliban launched several unsuccessful drives against the airbase, which is out of use but remains strategically important.

In recent weeks the annual summer round of fighting has shifted to the northeast, where the Islamic militia have captured a string of opposition-held towns and are now threatening Taloqan, the capital of Takhar province.

Habel said Friday's clashes were an attempt to relieve pressure on Taloqan, which straddles a key supply route to Tajikistan in the north.

Abdullah, a senior aide to Masood, said opposition fighters broke down the Taliban's frontlines in the Shokhi district of Kapisa province south of Bagram.

He said they also took the key area of Kohbacha to the southeast of the Bagram military airbase.

The Taliban left behind a number of tanks and military trucks, as well as dead bodies and injured soldiers, Abdullah said.

Heatwave in S Europe: 4 killed in Greece

ATHENS, Aug 25: Amid a persisting heatwave in southern Europe today, fires raging in Greece killed four people and authorities declared a state of emergency in Arcadia, in the southern Greek Peloponnese region, reports AFP.

Greek Interior Minister Vasso Papatheou early Friday said the situation was "very serious" in Arcadia, where fires were being fought on three fronts, and in the northwestern region of Epirus where two women and an elderly couple died.

Major fires were also reported in Italy, Bulgaria, Croatia and Corsica while in Kosovo Pristina was without water supplies on Thursday.

Speaking after a cabinet meeting in Greece, Papatheou said the fires in Epirus and Arcadia were the worst among 78 blazes ravaging the country, adding that "the atmospheric conditions favour the propagation of the fires."

The firefighters struggling to contain the blazes since last weekend were "harassed," she said, adding aid that had been requested from abroad was not forthcoming due to the fires

raging in other European countries.

The Greek fire brigade announced early Friday that seven firefighters had been slightly injured and a fire engine had been burnt in the Mainalo mountains in Arcadia.

In Epirus, Christoforos Kyritsis, 80, and his 78-year-old wife Maria were found dead late Thursday in the yard of their home in the village of Agia Marina near the border with Albania.

Early Friday, firefighters announced that two women were killed in a fire in the village of Rizo. As a major blaze roared through the region, a woman was reported missing.

Thirteen villages in Epirus were under threat. Four were evacuated and 600 people had left their homes.

In Arcadia, a fire raging for five days threatened the hydroelectric plant in the town of Megalopolis. Firefighters said several houses had gone up in flames on Thursday.

A state of emergency was declared in Arcadia where 600 firemen with 100 vehicles and 15 aircraft were battling the flames.



People from a residential area in Hyderabad crowd a boat yesterday as they move to safer and drier places in the flood-ravaged southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Military helicopters spearheaded a massive rescue and relief operation in the state, where nearly 100 people have died in the past three days in floods triggered by torrential downpours. — AFP photo

Military spearheads flood rescue efforts in Andhra

HYDERABAD, India, Aug 25: Military helicopters spearheaded a massive rescue and relief operation today in the flood-ravaged southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, where nearly 100 people have died in the last three days, reports AFP.

State Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu, who admitted that his administration had been caught completely unaware by the torrential downpours that triggered the flooding, voiced concern over the possible spread of disease.

"Several people have no access to safe drinking water and the danger of diseases spreading will increase as we begin the difficult job of clearing livestock carcasses and debris," Naidu told reporters.

The state government says 94 people have been killed by the flooding since Tuesday, while unofficial figures put the toll at around 115.

The floods, which have inundated vast swathes of Andhra Pradesh including the state capital Hyderabad, hit as India was still struggling to respond to widespread flooding in the northeast earlier this month which left five million people

homeless.

Naidu said his state government had been given no opportunity to prepare for the cyclonic rains produced by a low-pressure depression, which formed about 100 km off the coast over the Bay of Bengal.

"The depression formed very suddenly and we were not warned about the amount of rainfall it was going to bring," Naidu said.

Army and air force helicopters flew continual sorties Friday, plucking terrified residents from their rooftops in low lying areas, and dropping food and medicines to groups of stranded villagers.

Tens of thousands have been rendered homeless by the floods, which have submerged huge areas of farmland and damaged 400 roads, including the national highway linking the eastern city of Calcutta with the southern city of Madras.

Naidu said the government was still calculating the estimated cost of the damage.

In Hyderabad, which has been amongst the worst affected areas, some 35,000 people have already been shifted to tempo-

rary shelters, following an extensive evacuation operation involving helicopters and army boats.

The city's top civil administrator, Rajeshwar Tewari, said thousands remained trapped in waterlogged residential colonies and were completely dependent on helicopter drops for food and water.

Hyderabad recorded over 24 centimetres (9 1/2 inches) of rainfall in just 24 hours -- the wettest day in recent history.

Many of the deaths in the city were the result of house collapses, as the running floodwaters undermined residential structures.

All the state capital's schools and colleges remained closed for the third straight day Friday.

As many as 13 districts in Andhra Pradesh have been severely affected by the flooding, with Guntur, Kurnool, Prakasam, Khammam and Rayalaseema among the worst hit.

The heavy rains abated for a while Friday, but state meteorologists warned of further storms ahead.

Rift rumours ease after Wahid meets Megawati

JAKARTA, Aug 25: Fears of a rift between Indonesia's leaders eased today after a meeting between President Abdurrahman Wahid and his vice president at which they formalised a future working arrangement, reports AFP.

Wahid called on vice president Megawati Sukarnoputri late Thursday shortly after she denied rumours she was thinking of quitting because of objections over the president's new cabinet lineup, announced on Wednesday.

The two-hour meeting at Megawati's residence came at the end of a day in which resignation rumours and a poor reception to the country's new economic team played havoc with the stock market and the currency on Thursday.

But both the market and the rupiah stabilised Friday, despite many foreign investors remaining on the sidelines, brokers said.

The Jakarta Stock Exchange composite index closed morning trade up 3,125 points at 485,778, in a slight rebound from Thursday's four-percent plunge.

The rupiah was trading at 8,365-8,385 to the dollar at noon, a substantial recovery from its intra-day low of 8,520 on Thursday.

Chinese courts convict 151 Falun Gong members

BEIJING, Aug 25: Chinese courts have convicted 151 leading members of the Falun Gong spiritual movement since it was banned last year, a Chinese religious official visiting the United States was quoted Friday as saying, reports AP.

The figure given by Ye Xiaowen, however, did not include as many as 5,000 Falun Gong adherents human rights groups estimate have been sent to labour camps in the government's 13-month crackdown on the group.

Ye, China's most senior official in charge of religious affairs, said 22 of the 151 Falun Gong adherents were sentenced to up to five years imprisonment, the official newspaper China Daily reported.

3 Maoist rebels, 3 cops killed in Nepal gunbattle

KATHMANDU, Aug 25: Maoist rebels attacked two police stations in Nepal, killing three policemen and losing three of their own in gunbattles police said Friday, reports AP.

In a four-hour exchange of fire Thursday, two policemen and three guerrillas were killed in Jarayot village about 200 kilometres (125 miles) south-east of the capital, Kathmandu, a police spokesman said on customary condition of anonymity.

Three policemen and two rebels were also injured in the gunbattle, the spokesman said.

In another rebel attack Thursday, one police officer was killed and four were injured in a rebel attack on a police station in the Rudrapur village, about 240 kilometres (150 miles) west of Kathmandu. Police said the rebels fled with guns, ammunition and communication equipment from the station.

The rebels, who are active in 29 of Nepal's 75 districts, alleged repression of people by the police and demand an end to the nation's constitutional monarchy and the feudal system in parts of Nepal.

Landmine blast kills 5 in Assam

GUWAHATI, India, Aug 25: Suspected separatist rebels in the northeast Indian state of Assam triggered a landmine explosion Friday, killing five people, including two policemen, and injuring four others, reports AFP.

A police spokesman said the attack on a three-vehicle security convoy in Kokrajhar district -- 270 km west of the state capital Guwahati -- was carried out by the United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA).

As well as two members of the paramilitary Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF), the explosion killed three militants captured by police during a raid.

Kohl personally created hidden party accounts

MUNICH, Germany, Aug 25: Disgraced former German chancellor Helmut Kohl personally set up a system of hidden accounts while leader of his Christian Democratic Union Party (CDU), the Sueddeutsche Zeitung claimed in a report to be published today, reports AFP.

Quoting "reliable sources," the paper alleged the first account was created by Kohl in 1973, the year when he took the reins of the party. Until 1982, the account was only used by senior CDU officials, the paper said.

Vietnam to pardon 10,000: The Vietnamese government is to grant an amnesty to more than 10,000 prisoners to mark national day on September 2, officials said yesterday, AFP reports from Hanoi.

Some 50 foreigners will be among those being granted an amnesty in a decree to be signed by President Tran Duc Luong this week, said an official with the central amnesty committee.

4 Chinese held for drug trafficking

Philippine police have foiled a 16 million dollar drug smuggling attempt and detained four Chinese suspects including two from Hong Kong, an official said yesterday, AFP reports from Lucena.

BRIEFLY



Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee (R) and former Israeli prime minister Shimon Peres shake hands prior to their talks at the former's residence in New Delhi on Thursday. — AFP photo

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