

International

Megawati takes centre stage as new Cabinet sworn in

JAKARTA, Aug 26 : Members of Indonesia's much-maligned new Cabinet today pledged to work closely with their newly-empowered vice president to tackle the country's many problems, as President Abdurrahman Wahid retreated from centre stage, reports AFP.

The vice president, Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of the country's founding president Sukarno and leader of the party with most seats in parliament, was entrusted last week by Wahid with running the day-to-day affairs of state.

And on Saturday she presided over the swearing-in of the controversial new 26-member cabinet at the state palace, as Wahid stood on the sidelines.

"The ministers are ready to assist the vice president in doing her jobs," Law and Legislation Minister Yusril Iliza Mahendra told journalists after the ceremony.

Mahendra also said Megawati, 53, who for 10 months held a largely ceremonial position, had told him she was happy with the change.

"She told me she accepted the draft of the presidential decree on her new powers one day before it was signed by the president," Mahendra said.

"I think she's happy about that ... but she said to me 'don't give me too much authority,'" he said.

Reservations have been expressed over Megawati's untested administrative skills, but Mahendra said the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDIP), which she heads, had set up a team to help her.

Adding to her burden is the harsh reaction the new cabinet received when it was announced on Wednesday, with the press dubbing it a team of "Wahid cronies" and the markets plummeting in reaction to the president's choice of economic

ministers.

Ryaas Rasyid, the new minister for the empowerment of state apparatus, said Megawati had told him her new tasks seemed a bit too much -- but that he had assured her of the cabinet's support for her.

"If she was prepared to be president last year why can't she accept some of the presidential authority. I think [she has] no problem with that," he added.

The PDIP won last year's elections and has the largest bloc of seat in parliament, but Megawati was defeated by Wahid in the presidential race in October, largely because of her inability to forge alliances with other parties.

Under the new work arrangement she formulates the cabinet agenda and priorities of the government, chairs cabinet meetings and evaluates the ministers' performance.

Megawati is empowered to sign decrees on government policies -- but only after they have already been approved by the president.

Wahid, 60 and hampered by blindness and his inability to move without assistance -- the legacy of two strokes -- made the change and brought in the new Cabinet in response to a chorus of criticism from the country's highest legislative body.

The People's Consultative Assembly had charged that his 10-month-old government had failed to live up to expectations, and that he was spending his time travelling abroad instead of attending to urgent domestic problems including the bloody sectarian crisis in the Malukus and the economic crisis.

He has said that responsibility for decisions would rest jointly with four people -- the president, the vice president and two coordinating ministers.



Indonesian Vice President Megawati Sukarnoputri (R, front), stands beside President Abdurrahman Wahid (L, front) before a group photo after the new Cabinet's swearing-in ceremony at the Merdeka state palace, Jakarta yesterday. — AFP photo

3 Maoists, 2 Nepalese cops killed in gunbattle

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KATHMANDU, Aug 26 : Two policemen and three Maoist rebels were killed in a six-hour gunbattle at Jarayokot village, 302 km northwest of here, police said today, reports AFP.

Three policemen and two children were also injured in the confrontation on Wednesday, police said. The police seized an ammunition cache after the rebels fled.

Meanwhile, three Nepal Communist Party-Maoist (NCP-M) activists, including a 15-year-old girl, surrendered to police in the remote northwestern district of Bajura, police said Saturday.

The Maoists surrendered because of intimidation by their seniors, whom they accused of acting like "Hitler" and leading a comfortable life while the local people did not have enough to eat.

Family reunions

Seoul proposes Red Cross talks on Sept 5

SEOUL, Aug 26 : South Korea today proposed inter-Korean Red Cross talks on September 5 to discuss ways of continuing the reunions of families separated by the decades-old division of Korea, reports AFP.

"I propose the second inter-Korean Red Cross talks to take place on September 5" at the border truce village of Panmunjom, South Korea's Red Cross head Jang Choon-Shik said in a message telephoned to his Northern counterpart, Jang Jae-On.

South Korea suggested the two sides send five-member delegations to the talks.

The two Koreas successfully exchanged visits by 200 members of separated families earlier this month.

Arafat was accompanied by

Clinton in Nigeria to encourage revival of democracy

ABUJA, Aug 26 : US President Bill Clinton arrived here today for a two-day visit during which he is expected to encourage Nigeria's democratic revival and hear new appeals over the country's massive debt burden, reports AFP.

The US leader, accompanied by his daughter Chelsea and a 1,000-strong delegation, was greeted on arrival by his Nigerian counterpart Olusegun Obasanjo.

The president was given a 21-cannon salute. He and Obasanjo inspected a guard of honour. Traditional Nigerian singers and dancers took part in the welcoming ceremony.

Clinton's two-day visit is seen as a possible economic watershed for Nigeria, which is staggering under \$30 billion

dollars of debt, only four percent of which however is owed directly to the United States.

Since coming to power in May 1999 following democratic elections, Obasanjo has led a vociferous campaign for relief on the country's debt payments, either through a write-off or a rescheduling of its debts.

With its first civilian government in more than 15 years, Nigeria, home to one in four sub-Saharan Africans, has begun seeking international respectability and the help it needs to resuscitate an economy that ground practically to a halt under military rule.

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Pakistan expels Indian embassy staffer

ISLAMABAD, Aug 26 : Pakistan today ordered the expulsion of an Indian embassy staffer on spying charges in an apparent tit-for-tat move, reports AFP.

The government of Pakistan has decided to ask for the recall of PC Dey, an official of the Indian High Commission (embassy) in Islamabad, a foreign office statement said.

"He has been found to be engaged in activities incompatible with his official status," it said.

On Thursday India expelled a Pakistan embassy staffer, Malik Mohammad Rafigh on similar charges.

Pakistan rejected the Indian charges as "baseless."

Islamabad said Saturday that Indian Deputy High Commissioner Sudir Vyas was summoned to the foreign office to receive the government's decision and that Dey had been asked to leave Pakistan within a week.

Egyptian Gulf Air victims' bodies arrive in Cairo

CAIRO, Aug 26 : The bodies of 56 Egyptians who died in the Gulf Air crash off Bahrain arrived back in Egypt Saturday on a special flight, accompanied by 164 grieving relatives, witnesses said, reports AFP.

Meanwhile, the Palestinian leadership late Friday hit out at what it called an Israeli "public relations exercise" aimed at releasing Israel from its obligations.

Israel is carrying out a public relations exercise to cover up its intransigent attitude and its refusal to apply accords reached

with the Palestinians as well as international resolutions concerning the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

Another seven bodies have been kept in Bahrain because of doubts over their identities and will be flown home later.

Junta preventing food, water from reaching Suu Kyi

US deplores Myanmar's treatment of opposition leader

YANGON, Aug 26 : Myanmar's junta is preventing food and water from reaching opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi as her showdown with the authorities outside Yangon enters a third day, her party said today, reports AFP.

The National League for Democracy (NLD) said "Aung San Suu Kyi and her entourage were fast running out of supplies and they appealed for help from the local people in the township where the group was halted Thursday."

"We demand that the blockade be immediately removed and the NLD leaders be allowed to proceed to their desired destination," the NLD's central executive committee said in a letter of complaint sent to the regime.

"If the health of those being

blocked be impaired by lack of food and water ... this is the entire responsibility of those who have stopped them."

Aung San Suu Kyi sparked the stand-off Thursday when she travelled outside Yangon in defiance of a ban which confines her to the capital.

It was her first attempt to travel outside Yangon since a dramatic 13-day confrontation on a bridge north-west of the capital in August 1998 which ended amid fears for her health.

The Myanmar government said the Nobel laureate was travelling without property security precautions and had been stopped for her own safety.

Every effort was being made to "ensure the comfort and safety" of the party, it said in a statement.

"Until safety conditions im-

proved, Daw San Kyi is visiting Dallah, a small but charming town which is just ten minutes by boat from Yangon," it said.

Meanwhile, the United States on Friday accused Myanmar of infringing the rights of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi who triggered a new standoff with the military by travelling outside the capital, Yangon.

State Department spokesman Philip Reeker put the ruling generals on notice that Washington held them responsible for the welfare of the Nobel laureate and supporters accompanying her.

The United States deplores the government of Burma's refusal to allow Aung San Suu Kyi and other National League for Democracy leaders to travel freely in their own country.

Health Minister Dr Ram Baran Yadav said inter-country cooperation for the fight against pernicious diseases in the region was necessary.

"Health is an issue for everyone's concern, so people need to take the initiative," Rafet said after a three-day ministerial meeting of World Health Organisation (WHO) member countries here Friday.

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